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together

a national family magazine



The Dangers of Power

Chayanika Hazarika

06

The Unseen Chains

P Joseph

09

The Dynamics of Politics and the Illusion of Power

Alex Tuscano

12

A Double-Edged Sword in Our Society

Trisha P

14

Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine *Together* is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing

down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. *Together* is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together.

Together is also an effort to uncover our shared humanity. Your critical and relevant write-ups that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to editor@togethermagazine.in before the 15th of every month.

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June–July 2025

EDITORIAL

04 Power Grows, So Does Powerlessness

Keeping power in check is the work of democracy and politics; through awareness, appeal, protest, dissent, and elections.

Saji P Mathew OFM

COVER STORY

06 The Dangers of Power

Chayanika Hazarika

09 The Unseen Chains

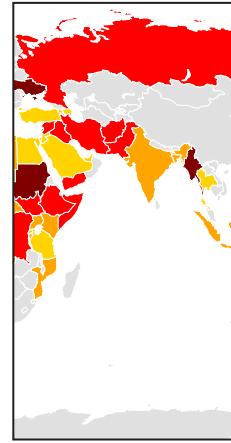
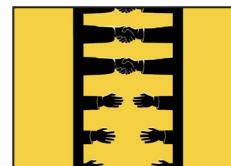
P Joseph

12 The Dynamics of Politics and the Illusion of Power

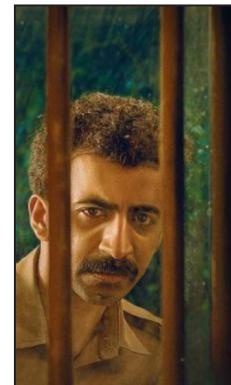
Alex Tuscano

14 A Double-Edged Sword in Our Society

Trisha P



17
DATA POINT
The World at War in 2025
 Kapil Arambam



JUNE–JULY TOGETHER

18 Parliamentary Democracy

Gerry Lobo OFM

21 World Population Day

Anand Ben

24 Idiot See, Idiot Do. Idiot Repeat, Idiot You.

Sumit Dasgupta

26 Erasure of Cultural Identities in Films Mutes Exquisite Stories

Rakhshaan Shamoodah

28 Healing the 'Less-Than' Feeling in Us with a Wabi-Sabi Mindset

A Francis

30 True or False

Tom Thomas

31 Love and Power

Richard Rohr

22

■ IN PICTURES

The Merrymaking of Gods & Goddesses

Kapil Arambam

34

■ IN STAMPS

First Human Walking on the Moon

Tom John OFM

36

■ SHORT STORY

The Weight of Unspoken Vows

Tom MM OFM

39

■ ART

Master Painter

Jamesmon PC OFM

40

■ CINEMA

Mollywood

'Copverse': The Vulnerable Archetype
 Romil Udayakumar TNV

POWER GROWS, SO DOES POWERLESSNESS

SAJIP MATHEW OFM

Existence gravitates towards power. The sheer muscle power of our dads gave them an edge over moms, and they had our admiration when we were little kids; as children while forming teams for kabaddi or kho-kho in the backyard we placed ourselves with the stronger persons. Nations want to ally with other powerful nations. Power makes the world go around the way it does. Power plays out in all arenas of life; from family to workplace, from personal relationships to professional associations, and from social interaction to political contacts.

Power is a felt quality in a socio-civic world; we can feel its strong pull as we feel the pull of gravity in the physical world. You may not see it but you definitely cannot ignore it.

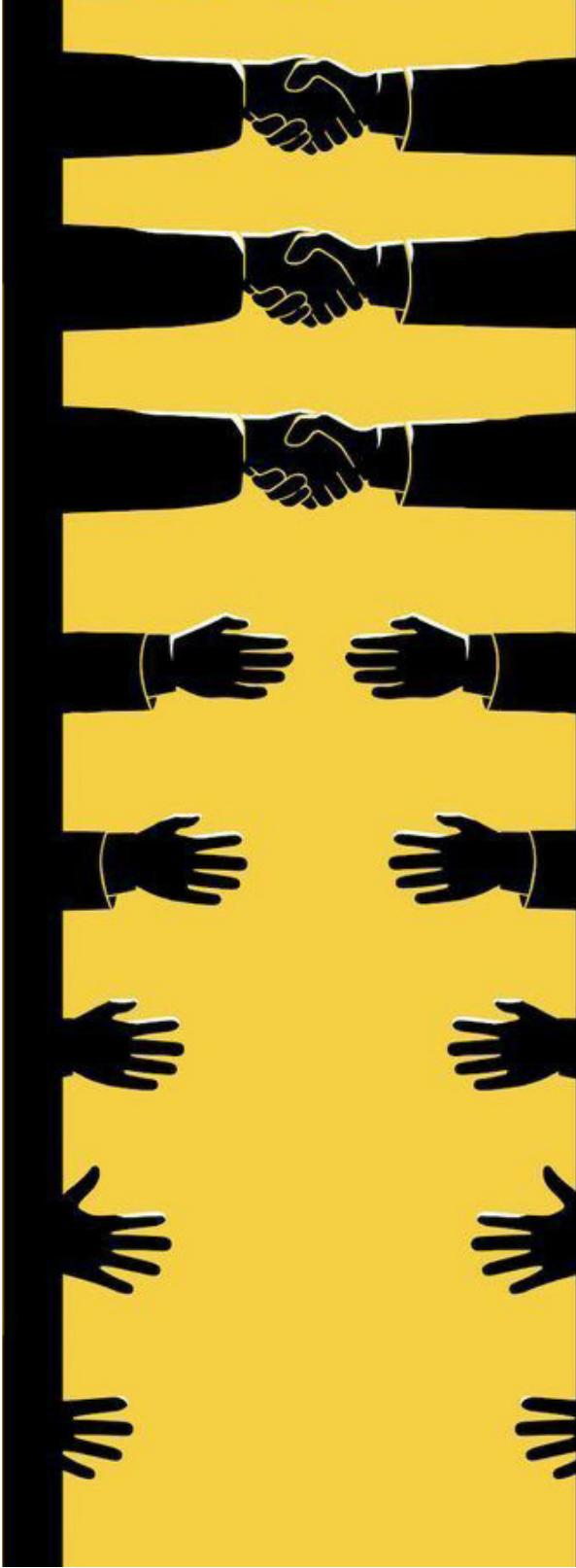
Have a few people around you or some above and some under you, and soon enough, power games begin: bosses emerge, first among the equals emerge, some have access, some gain the privilege to speak; and of course some vanish into unseen, unheard spaces. The history of the world is a history of gaining power: power over brute animals, unpredictable nature, the mysteries of the mind and the universe, one's emotions, and so on. There is nothing wrong with gaining power, until its exercise divides people into strong and weak, powerful and powerless.

One's great history of gaining power becomes another's sad history of losing power. Power matters, until it makes another powerless. Where does power come from? Power is accumulated through physical force, which at one end of the spectrum gives one the capacity for violence and brute

Keeping power in check is the work of democracy and politics; through awareness, appeal, protest, dissent, and elections.

control; it is the most primal form of power. Power comes through wealth; money gives the ability to buy results in an auction or results in an election. Power could be the result of government with its laws and law enforcement agencies; laws and policies are power frozen often to the advantage of the powerful. Social norms hold power; they operate in a softer way, peer to peer, making people behave in a certain way. A vocal mass of people, numbers, expressing collective intensity of interests and assertion of legitimacy carry power, like the Arab Spring of the 2010s. Finally, ideas hold power; they can motivate people to change their thinking and eventually their actions.

Power makes rational sense only if all enjoy equal and fair access to it, and those wielding it have the consent of those on whom it is exercised. When the distribution of power is skewed, the outcome becomes unfair. When discussing reason, truth, and solutions, if one has a gun and another is empty-handed, then reason, truth, and solutions will be biased.



Power, in the political sociological sense, is the ability to influence the behaviour of others. For Thomas Hobbes, power is a person's means to obtain future good. Power and powerful people create change. Forbes' variables for identifying powerful people are the number of people a person has influence over, the sum of financial resources controlled by a person, the number of categories or spheres a person has influence in, and the ability of the person to use his/her power—meaning, in line with Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the 'will to power,' having a drive for growth, expansion, and self-overcoming.

It is interesting to note that power and possibility share similar etymology: *potere*, meaning 'to be able' and *posse*, meaning 'to be able'. Power is the ability to create, to achieve, and to grow; the difficult proposition is to have it for every child and person in the community.

We are tragically familiar with undue accumulations and abuses of power. We repeatedly see it up close. Statistics say that one in four women experience severe physical abuse of power from an intimate partner. Three out of four employees say that the most stressful part of their job is their boss. I am not going into social, political, and religious statistics. Leaders subvert justice using their power, intimidate those who try to call them out, and sabotage others' efforts and success. Abuse of power and crimes therefrom are on the increase; they play out as wars, killing thousands and making millions homeless and refugees.

Beware, power is like water; it flows through every gap it finds. Power compounds, power begets power, as does powerlessness. Keeping power in check is the work of democracy and politics. It is done through education, creating awareness, appeal, protest, and dissent. It must not be seen as a nuisance when workers organise a rally to get higher pay to stop the crazy tilt of profit towards the bosses, or when gay/lesbian couples seek legal rights to marry, parents demand accountability from school authorities, or followers of a religion pursue clarity and freedom from the higher-ups.

Here is a social experiment that shines light on people not acting democratically and responsibly. A senior, well-renowned professor comes to a class. After observing the class for a little while, he turns resolutely towards a girl student and seriously asks her name. She, rising from her seat, tells him her name. Then the professor, as though he understood something about her or her identity, in an authoritative manner tells her to leave his class. The student is startled. She tries to protest, but the professor cuts her down, saying, "I have no time to waste, and you are wasting the entire class's time."

She looked around; other students looked confused but wanted the class to get started. When the professor began insisting again, she got up, took her books, and left the class. After a while, the professor asked the class, "Was I fair in sending your classmate out of the class?" The class unanimously said, "No." The professor looked at them piercingly and asked, "Then why did you not object or protest, or at least make an attempt to clarify? She sat in this class counting on us for her freedom. By giving in to my irrational exercise of power, you have betrayed her trust."

Two thinkers are discussed in the cover story in this issue in relation to power: George Orwell and Maitreyan Maitreyan.

Orwell illuminates the chilling mechanics of overt, coercive state power, characterised by omnipresent surveillance, the weaponisation of language and truth, and the brutal suppression of individuality. His narratives serve as stark warnings against the dangers of totalitarianism, where power becomes an end in itself, consuming all in its path.

Maitreyan, on the other hand, meticulously deconstructs the "invisible structures" of power deeply embedded within cultural norms, gender roles, caste systems, and religious dogma. He reveals how these elements are "manufactured" and internalised, leading to self-regulation and participation in one's own subjugation, a highly efficient form of control that operates beneath the surface of conscious awareness.

The Dangers of Power

CHAYANIKA HAZARIKA



Power is a dangerous thing. It can bring people together, create progress, and build strong communities. But when misused, it leads to corruption and oppression.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* tells the story of how power can change those who have it. What starts as a hopeful revolution soon turns into a dictatorship, where the leaders who once wanted fairness become cruel rulers. This idea is not just in books—it happens in real life, too.

One of the biggest themes in *Animal Farm* is the corruption of power. Initially, the animals want to build a society where everyone is equal. They get rid of their human master, Mr Jones, hoping for freedom. But the pigs quickly take over.

Napoleon, the most ambitious of them, removes his rival Snowball and takes complete control. He rules through fear, deceit, and manipulation. The original rule, 'All animals are equal,' is later changed to 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.' This demonstrates how power changes and corrupts those who have it.

Napoleon's spokesperson, Squealer, spreads lies to keep the animals submissive. He rewrites history, twists the truth, and convinces the animals that their suffering is necessary. This mirrors how some governments and media spread false information to keep people obedient. Napoleon also uses violence. He trains dogs to attack and silence his opponents, just as dictators employ military forces to stay in power. By spreading fear, he ensures no one dares to question his authority. Power and corruption affect our daily lives in many ways. We see it in politics, workplaces, and even personal relationships. Like Napoleon, many political leaders begin with good intentions but become corrupt once they gain control. Some leaders silence critics, alter laws to stay in power, and use fear to control people. History provides many examples, such as Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union, where power led to widespread suffering. Corrupt politicians often claim to act for the people's good, just like Napoleon, but their actions reveal otherwise.

Corruption also exists in workplaces. Some managers exploit their power for personal gain, take credit for others' effort, or treat employees unfairly. Just like the animals in *Animal Farm*, workers may fear speaking out due to concerns about job security. Power struggles exist in personal relationships as well. Some individuals manipulate or control others to maintain dominance. A controlling partner might justify their actions as love, just as Napoleon claims his actions are for the good of the farm.

Power struggles and corruption also impact communities. When local leaders misuse their authority, they neglect public needs. This leads to issues like poor infrastructure, lack of resources, or unfair treatment in law enforcement. Ordinary people suffer the most in such circumstances. Just as Squealer spreads propaganda to control the

animals, modern media can shape public opinion. Governments, corporations, and influencers sometimes spread misleading information to benefit themselves. This occurs in political campaigns, advertising, and social media, where facts are often distorted to serve certain interests.

Power does not always corrupt immediately. Many leaders begin with good intentions but change over time. Studies show that power can make people less empathetic, meaning they stop caring about others. This happens in *Animal Farm*, where the pigs, who once believed in equality, become selfish and cruel. In real life, business leaders may prioritise profit over workers' well-being, politicians may ignore citizens' needs, and even school leaders may misuse their authority. Recognising these patterns helps us prevent corruption before it spirals out of control.

While *Animal Farm* warns us about the dangers of power, it also teaches how to prevent corruption. Fairness and accountability are key. Transparency—honest communication and clear rules—helps curb corruption. Whether in politics, business, or relationships, openness ensures that power is not misused. People should also think critically and question authority.

Just like the animals trust the pigs without question, many people today accept information without scrutiny. Independent thinking helps prevent manipulation. Governments need checks and balances to prevent dictatorship. In workplaces, employees should have rights and protections. In personal relationships, open discussions and mutual respect help maintain balance. The animals in *Animal Farm* suffer because they lack knowledge and are easily misled. In real life, informed people are less likely to be controlled by corrupt leaders. Learning about history, politics, and ethics helps individuals make better decisions and resist manipulation.

In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell presents a searing allegory of how revolutionary movements against corruption, despite their initial fervour, often succumb to the very forces they sought to overthrow.

History has shown that power in the wrong hands leads to suffering. But it also proves that knowledge and unity can challenge corruption. Orwell's novel is a reminder to stay aware, question authority, and fight for fairness. True equality is not a gift from leaders—it is something we must demand and protect. The moment we stop questioning, stop learning, and stop speaking up, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past. However, as long as people seek truth and fight for justice, there is always hope for a better future.

Napoleon maintains his rule through fear, using his loyal attack dogs and public executions to suppress dissent. Similarly, real-world governments and institutions employ repressive tactics such as arrests, censorship, and smear campaigns to intimidate activists and discourage participation. The animals, once eager to challenge injustice, became too fearful to resist, mirroring how people in anti-corruption movements often retreat in the face of state-sponsored repression. In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell presents a searing allegory of how revolutionary movements against corruption, despite their initial fervour, often succumb to the very forces they sought to overthrow. The rebellion against Mr Jones is, at its core, an anti-corruption movement driven by a collective demand for justice, equality, and the eradication of systemic exploitation. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, Orwell meticulously deconstructs the mechanisms through which such movements, once powerful in their moral clarity, deteriorate into complacency, factionalism, and ultimately, a resigned acceptance of oppression.

This trajectory is not merely fictional but reflects the fate of real-world anti-corruption efforts, which often falter under the weight of institutional resistance, political subversion, and the gradual erosion of public will. At

the outset, the revolution is propelled by an idealistic vision of governance rooted in egalitarianism, symbolised by the establishment of the Seven Commandments.

These commandments function as the legal and ethical foundation of the new order, much like the constitutional or legislative frameworks enacted in post-revolutionary societies to prevent the re-emergence of corruption. However, power, once concentrated, inevitably seeks to preserve itself. Napoleon, through strategic manipulation, slowly alters these principles to accommodate his consolidation of control, eroding the very ideological bedrock upon which the revolution was built. This mirrors the bureaucratic inertia found in real-world anti-corruption movements, where the institutions designed to uphold justice are often co-opted, their mandates diluted through legal obfuscation and procedural stagnation. The fragmentation of revolutionary unity further accelerates the movement's decline. Initially, Snowball and Napoleon both represent different ideological currents within the same cause, much like reformists and hardliners in anti-corruption struggles.

However, Napoleon's ultimate triumph is not one of ideological superiority but of tactical ruthlessness. He recognises that controlling the narrative is more powerful than engaging in genuine discourse. By deploying propaganda, demonising Snowball, and leveraging fear through his attack dogs, he eliminates opposition and centralises authority under his own rule. This reflects how real-world political entities infiltrate and manipulate reformist movements, exploiting internal divisions to render them ineffectual. Movements that begin as unified calls for justice are often dismantled from within, as competing interests, co-option by political elites, and strategic disinformation sow discord among activists and intellectual leaders.

COVER STORY

The Unseen Chains

P JOSEPH



Power. It's a word we use often, but what does it truly mean? Is it just about governments and laws, or does it run deeper, touching every part of our lives? Maitreya Maitreyan, a social activist from Kerala, offers a profound way to think about power. He suggests that much of what we consider "natural" or "normal" in society is actually "manufactured" – built by people over time to control others. For him, power isn't a fixed thing; it's a constantly shifting force, often hidden, that shapes our beliefs, our bodies, and our world. His core methodology involves a systematic deconstruction of what he perceives as conventional notions of modesty, culture, gender roles, power, religion, and identity. He urges his audience to critically examine the invisible structures that govern our beliefs and behaviours, asserting that a truly liberated existence necessitates confronting these unseen forces. A clear and scientific way of looking at the world is our best tool to break free from old, unfair ways of thinking. Let us look at power through his lenses.

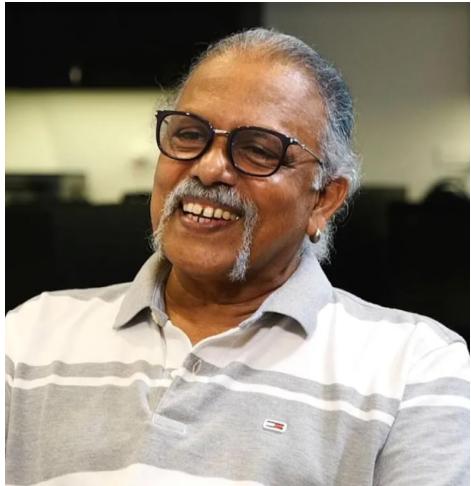
Power controls our very bodies, especially women's bodies. Ideas about "modesty" and how women should dress are not natural feelings of shame, but rather "manufactured" rules. Historically, clothes might have started as a way to attract others, but they quickly became symbols of status and even tools for taxation, eventually turning into ways to control people. When society dictates what women can wear, it's a direct display of power, turning something as simple as clothing into a moral issue.

While there are biological differences between men and women, much of what society builds around these differences is "artificial", gender roles are constructed realities. For example, the idea that men are "seekers" and women are "valuable" is exaggerated to create and justify male dominance. The experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals, who live outside these strict boxes, further show how much of gender is a social construct, not a natural law.

Even the family, often seen as a safe haven, is a place where power dynamics are learned, especially "male sexual dominance over the female". It's where ideas about sexuality are shaped, often limiting individual freedom by labeling anything outside traditional male-female relationships as "unnatural" or even "criminal". Maitreyan's involvement in discussions around consent, sexual harassment, and the #MeToo movement highlights his fight against these deeply rooted forms of power.

Power creates unfair layers in society, like caste and class. Things like clothing and jewelry, which might have once been about attraction, became symbols of wealth and status once taxes were put on them. This meant that people from lower castes were often forbidden from wearing certain items, brutally enforcing their lower status. This shows how economic control and social identity are deeply linked, and how power can be used to keep people in their "place".

What's truly profound is how these ideas become so ingrained. Discrimination, particularly caste-based prejudice, is profoundly ingrained in society, to



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the extent that individuals otherwise considered "kind and loving" can harbour deep-seated hatred, perceiving it as "very natural". Long years of built-in mechanism of superiority that lead upper castes to believe in their inherent elevated status, and tragically, even poor people also believe they are lower castes. This phenomenon vividly illustrates how ideological power operates through internalised beliefs and pervasive social conditioning. Privileged groups, such as males, exhibit a strong reluctance to relinquish their advantages, underscoring the self-perpetuating nature of hierarchical power. Both "upper castes" and "lower castes" internalise their positions highlights the insidious nature of ideological power, where the oppressed can participate in their own subjugation. This aligns with the concept of cultural hegemony, where dominant ideologies become so normalised that they are accepted by all, even those who are disadvantaged by them. The built-in mechanism of superiority is not solely about external enforcement but also an internalised belief system that makes discrimination appear natural.

What's truly profound is how these ideas become so ingrained. Discrimination, particularly caste-based prejudice, is profoundly ingrained in society, to

Power structures are deeply embedded in society, but they are not natural forces but human creations, woven into the very fabric of our lives.

When we think of justice, we often imagine fairness and equality. But Maitreyan sees the justice system as a deeply flawed "social construct" primarily used for "social control". Justice as we have it today is nothing more than a beautiful lie, designed to keep society in order rather than truly fixing problems or helping people change. The system fails to rehabilitate people, true justice should help individuals "reflect and reintegrate" into society, giving them back their dignity. The fabricated ISRO spy case further highlights this critique. In this case, innocent people faced "physical and mental torture" and false accusations. This showed how the justice system, meant to uphold order, can become a tool of injustice and oppression, especially when mixed with political agendas and unchecked authority.

Maitreyan is an atheist and rationalist; for him most religious beliefs are not about "faith" but "ignorance," and they represent a powerful way how ideas control people. Scientific understanding, especially evolutionary science, is the key "thinking tool" to replace old, discriminatory systems. This scientific view can help us overcome "tribal feelings of exclusiveness" and "territoriality" that prevent global unity.

A poor education system can keep old power structures alive. There must be a "more meaningful, inclusive approach" to learning, including sex education, to help people become "better citizens". A good education is a powerful tool for liberation and critical thinking.

There are several significant challenges to the realisation of a liberated society. "Economic regression and depression" can worsen existing societal differences, leading to increased communal bargaining

for resources and a consequent "erosion of 'values' of togetherness". This can result in the formation of "cults and huddling of communities" as people retreat into narrower identities. When resources become scarce, existing social hierarchies, such as caste, and communal identities become more pronounced, leading to increased "bargaining for greater share" and a breakdown of broader societal unity. This implies that economic justice and the equitable distribution of wealth are crucial for preventing the fragmentation of society and the intensification of power struggles along communal lines.

There is a critical need to combat communalism, the misrepresentation of history, and the erosion of existing democratic institutions. The economic regression leading to communalism and the erosion of "togetherness" highlights the fragility of social cohesion under economic stress and the significant role of economic power in worsening social divisions. This establishes a progression where economic conditions directly influence the rise of identity-based conflicts.

Unfair power structures, like patriarchy and traditional gender roles, should be replaced by free, decentralised communities. Get rid of all systems that cause oppression, whether they are based on ideas, the state, economics, or violence. Maitreyan lives with minimal possessions, relying on others for his basic needs, and dedicates his days to helping those who seek. This isn't just a personal choice; it's a practical way of living out his belief in mutual aid and community support, rejecting reliance on big government or market systems.

Achieving a truly free society faces huge challenges. Power structures are deeply embedded in society, but they are not natural forces but human creations, woven into the very fabric of our lives. It controls our bodies, shapes our social layers, influences our justice systems, and dictates our beliefs.

The Dynamics of Politics and the Illusion of Power

ALEX TUSCANO



In political science, we often limit our discussions to political parties, electoral systems, and governmental structures. We analyze elections and their processes, acknowledging phenomena like electoral fraud and manipulation. We observe how some countries hold repeated elections while the same individuals remain entrenched in power. Constitutional frameworks and different forms of government dominate our discourse. I call this "formal politics."

However, this conventional approach rarely addresses the fundamental force at work: real power. Politics is essentially a struggle for power, with democracy and elections serving merely as formal expressions of political systems. The true protagonist in this struggle is power itself. Elections may come and go, governments may rise and fall, but power remains at the center. Those who possess power will find ways to retain it.

A careful study of how monarchies transformed into modern democracies reveals the true dynamics of power. History demonstrates that economic changes precede political transformations. Feudal lords, kings, and monarchs did not lose power because people suddenly embraced democratic ideals and demanded the right to elect their rulers.

Change began when a new economic system emerged within feudal kingdoms. When hungry masses marched to royal palaces demanding bread, the response from within was the infamous: "If they have no bread, let them eat cake." This reply revealed a profound disconnection from the societal transformation occurring beyond palace walls. A new power had emerged outside the palace—one that had already deprived people of their bread and was poised to snatch even the cakes from royal hands.

As peasants were driven from their lands, starvation threatened not only the displaced farmers but eventually reached even the pinnacles of royal power. Craftsmen and merchants emerged as the new wealth holders. Trade flourished across kingdoms and continents while royal lands generated no money. These emerging classes became the holders of economic power. The French Revolution exemplifies this transition from monarchy to bourgeois rule, while England's Industrial Revolution gave birth to English democracy. This represents "political change through the transformation of economic power."

History reveals the true meaning of politics: the acquisition and exercise of power. Examining how modern democracies function, we cannot genuinely speak of "power to the people." The real power holders are those who possess economic power. Political actors—the so-called politicians—are essentially puppets controlled by economically powerful interests. Capitalists who hold economic power require these puppets to run governments in ways that protect and expand their influence.

The general population remains under the illusion of power. Today's society is divided between capitalists and consumers. The general public actually lack economic power. Capitalists own wealth while civilians consume what capitalists bring to market. The real paradox lies in the fact that capitalists are not the producers. The actual producers are people who own no capital, while capital owners expropriate production from the real producers.

The second stage of power manifests through the state, army, police, and judiciary. We are conditioned to believe these institutions serve our welfare. Consider this scenario: Little Johnny returns from school, and his father, a factory worker, asks, "Johnny, what did you learn today?" Johnny replies, "The teacher taught us that police officers are our friends and that Washington never told a lie." Johnny's father is shocked—he had been beaten by police for participating in protests against the Coca-Cola factory in Pachimada, Kerala, which was depleting groundwater and polluting farmland. While we cannot verify Washington's honesty, we know our leadership is notorious for deception. When bulldozers demolished the homes of protesting common people, police protected the bulldozer operators. Regarding the judiciary, we cannot make statements without risking contempt of court charges, yet we observe that some judges receive lucrative positions after retiring as chief justices.

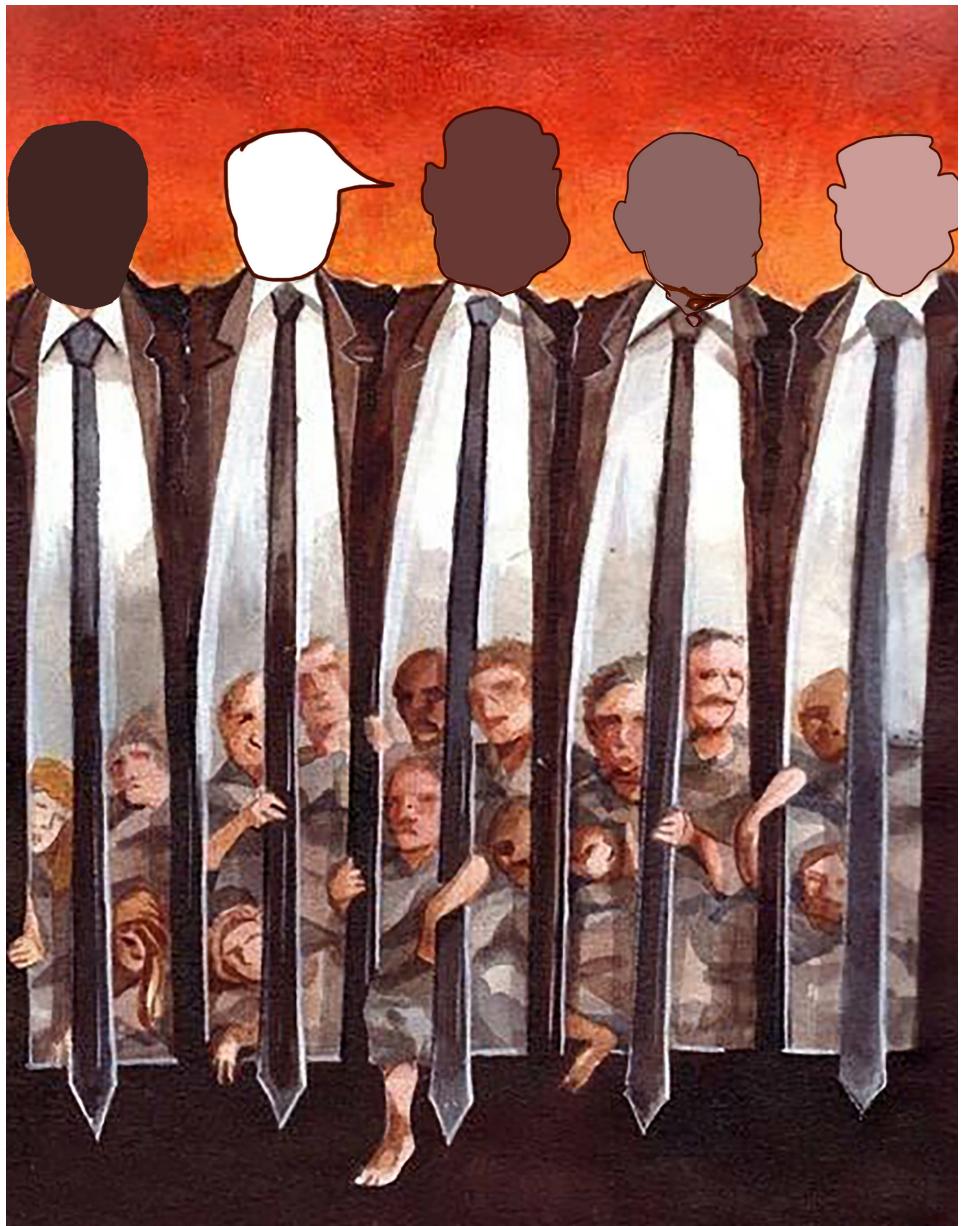
India provides ample lessons about governmental power dynamics. We vote in every election, yet others consistently assume power. MPs and MLAs receive crores of rupees to switch allegiances. The current government maintains power through an individual who owns airports and seaports, and in some sense, even the government. Like an octopus, his influence extends to every economic sector.

When India gained independence, the freedom struggle's spirit inspired Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to resist monopoly capital and imperialist power. Today, the situation has reversed: monopolies create governments, and governments create monopolies. The election commission, judiciary, and even the Reserve Bank serve monopolistic interests. The people are told 'acche din ayege' when "the bullet train Mumbai se Ahmadabad jayengi"; the fundamental power equation remains unchanged.

Understanding politics requires looking beyond electoral theatrics to recognise the economic foundations of power. Real political change occurs when economic power shifts, not when new faces appear in government. Until we acknowledge and address these underlying power structures, formal democratic processes will continue to mask the reality of who truly governs society.

A Double-Edged Sword in Our Society

TRISHA P



Power has fuelled both incredible advancement and unspeakable horrors throughout history. It is an idea that has shaped human civilisation and simultaneously fascinates and terrifies us. The intricate connection between corruption and power will be discussed in this essay, along with how it appears in different spheres of our lives and strategies for ensuring its responsible management.

For good reason, the proverb 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' has endured. When people or organisations gain unbridled power, they frequently start to believe they are above the law or immune to moral restraints. When people in positions of authority put their own interests ahead of the larger good they are supposed to serve, it can create a dangerous cycle.

We can see from history how destructive power can be. The totalitarian governments of Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Nazi Germany are terrifying examples of what happens when power is concentrated in the hands of a select few. Millions of people suffered and perished as a result of these dictators' ruthless efficiency in using their power. Their terror reigns serve as a warning, emphasising how crucial checks and balances are to any form of government.

However, we can observe the destructive effects of power without resorting to extreme situations or the distant past. Corruption and abuse of power are sadly widespread in today's society. The temptation to abuse power affects every aspect of society, from law enforcement officials going beyond their authority to politicians taking bribes to influence legislation to business executives falsifying financial records for their own benefit.

When people or organisations gain unbridled power, they frequently start to believe they are above the law or immune to moral restraints.

Corruption can occur even in organisations that we usually think of as charitable and public service. Regrettably, there have been instances of leaders of nonprofit organisations stealing money meant for the poor, betraying the confidence of both donors and recipients. Regardless of their declared mission, such incidents underscore the significance of accountability and transparency in all sectors.

Power struggles and ethical transgressions are not unique to the education sector, which is frequently seen as a stronghold of knowledge and integrity. We have witnessed cases of faculty members abusing their power over students or school administrators mishandling funds. These circumstances not only hurt people but also threaten the fundamental tenets of our educational systems.

Corruption thrives in the real estate and urban development industries due to the interaction of money, influence and regulations. Developers may conspire with local authorities to get around environmental or zoning restrictions, putting financial gain ahead of sustainable

development and community well-being. Cities and neighbourhoods may suffer long-term consequences as a result of such actions. Despite its responsibility to protect our health, the healthcare sector is not immune to the lure of wealth and power.

We frequently witness financial interests trumping patient care, from insurance companies refusing necessary treatments to pharmaceutical companies manipulating drug prices. In addition to transgressing moral principles, these actions may have catastrophic effects on people's lives and health. Corruption even permeates the sports industry, which many consider to be a place of

fair competition and sportsmanship. Major sporting event doping scandals, match-fixing and bribery demonstrate how the values of integrity and fair play can be subordinated to the desire for success and financial gain.

One might be tempted to see power as a fundamentally bad thing in light of these widespread instances of its capacity for corruption. But it is important to understand that power can be a powerful force for good when used sensibly and morally. Establishing and upholding strong systems of oversight, accountability and transparency is crucial.

A careful distribution of authority is necessary for effective governance, with each branch or organisation acting as a check on the others. Freedom of the press, open procedures and independent watchdog groups are all essential for holding those in authority responsible and truthful. These safeguards aid in making sure that power is used for the benefit of the majority, not just a select few.

However, formal institutions are not the only ones tasked with keeping an eye on and preventing abuses of power. As members of society and citizens, we all have an important role to play. A fair and just society is maintained by journalists who look into and expose wrongdoing, whistleblowers who jeopardise their careers to expose unethical practices and regular people who speak out against injustice.

One potent illustration of how group action can overthrow established power structures is the #MeToo movement. Our approach to sexual harassment and assault has changed significantly as a result of this grassroots movement, which has exposed long-hidden abuses in a variety of fields, from politics to entertainment.

It is crucial to keep in mind that power is neither intrinsically good nor bad as we negotiate the complexities of power in our contemporary society. Instead, it is a tool

that can be used to build or destroy, to oppress or to uplift. Making sure that power is constantly used for the greater good is the challenge that our society faces.

To achieve this, we need more than just systems and structures; we need ethical leadership at all levels. Leaders who prioritise transparency, who welcome accountability and who view their positions as a responsibility rather than a privilege. We need institutions strong enough to withstand attempts at corruption and flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. Above all, we

require informed and involved citizens. Those who are prepared to challenge authority, seek justifications and hold those in positions of authority responsible for their deeds. This calls for a dedication to active engagement in our democratic processes, as well as continuous

civic education and critical thinking abilities. Controlling power is a difficult task. It calls for bravery, a readiness to face hard realities and unwavering attention to detail. However, if we want to establish and preserve a society that is genuinely just, fair and equal for everyone, we must take on this task.

As we go forward, let us keep in mind that each of us has the ability to influence our world, not just those in positions of authority. We may make sure that power is used for advancement and constructive change rather than as a means of tyranny and self-interest by remaining informed, speaking out against injustice and cooperating to achieve shared objectives.

There is a complicated and pervasive relationship between corruption and power in our society. We must not lose sight of the positive potential of power, even though the possibility of abuse is real and worrisome. We can strive for a society where power is exercised sensibly and for the benefit of all by establishing robust institutions, having moral leaders and encouraging civic participation. The health and prosperity of our communities, our countries and our global society depend on this difficult but necessary journey.

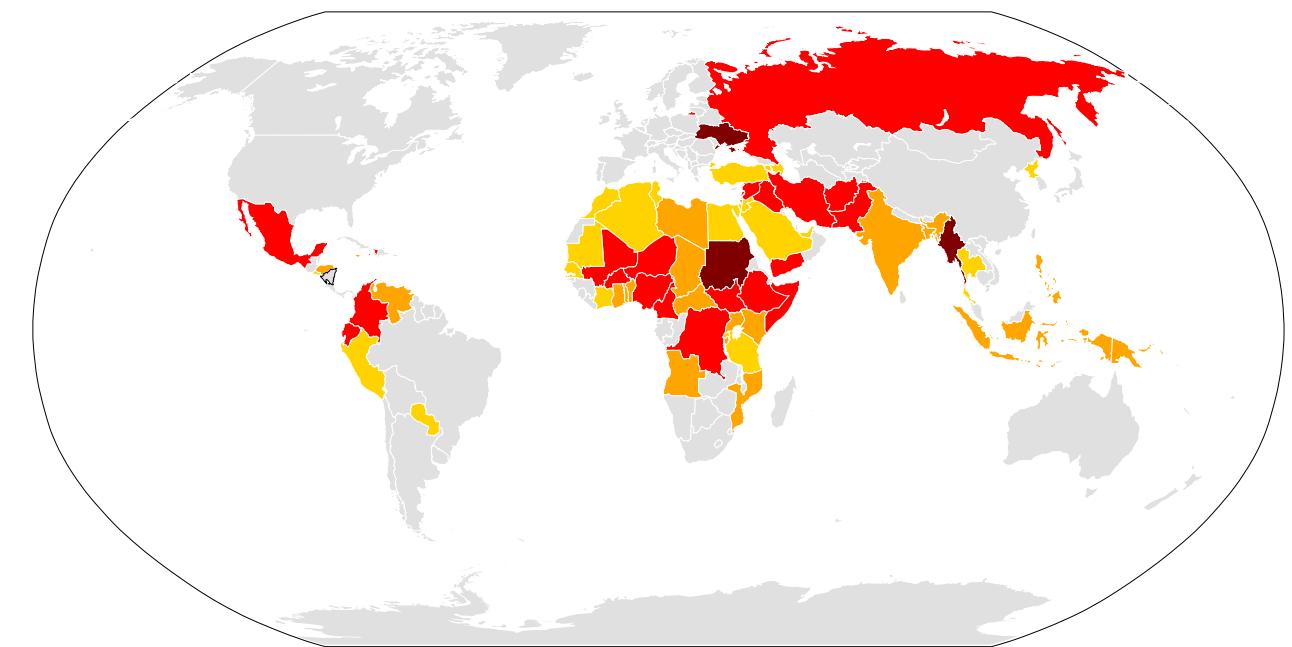
Freedom of the press, open procedures and independent watchdog groups are all essential for holding those in authority responsible and truthful.

DATA POINT

The World at War in 2025

KAPIL ARAMBAM

In 2025, the world remains deeply affected by armed conflicts involving state and non-state actors. These confrontations, marked by organised violence and civilian targeting, have led to significant fatalities. The map highlights the primary locations of combat-related deaths from 2024 to 2025, reflecting the global scale of these crises.



(Number of combat-related deaths in 2024–25)

Major wars (10,000 or more)
Minor wars (1,000–9,999)
Conflicts (100–999)
Skirmishes and clashes (1–99)

- Armed conflicts consist in the use of armed force between two or more organised armed groups, governmental or non-governmental
- Fatality figures include battle-related deaths (military and civilian) as well as civilians intentionally targeted by the parties to an armed conflict
- Location refers to the states where the main violence takes place, not to the warring parties

Sources: Wikimedia Commons/International Committee of the Red Cross / Futuretrillionaire



Parliamentary Democracy

The member in the house participates in the discussions because the concerns of a people in one region of the country are the concerns of all because it is one country.

GERRY LOBO OFM



Parliamentary debates and discussions are the cornerstone of a truly vibrant democracy. Democracy is a statement all learn in the school. No discussion on it. It's through such tools that a democracy scrutinises in the Parliament the decisions taken by the Executive. As someone has rightly said: "Without debate and discussion, a democracy is reduced to a body without soul." No doubt, since Independence, the Indian Parliament, in particular, has had constructive debates over various issues because the representatives of the

people were genuinely interested in the country and they also possessed a sense of discipline with wisdom. However, over the years our State Assemblies and the Parliament has let down the citizens with their unsavory conduct in both speech and action. Disruptions have become the norm.

The debates or discussions in a legislative house contribute much to the quality of decisions made in a democratic forum. Over diverse issues deliberations take place and they monitor the elected officials. The member in the house voices

his or her concerns and interests of the people one represents to which everyone participating in the discussion listens because the concerns of a people in one region of the country are the concerns of all because it is one country. The political leader represents and protects not only his or her constituency with a selfish motive, but looks at the larger good of the country. What is deliberated in a free and fair manner in the legislative forum enables the judiciary to get a better picture of what is passed in the house so that it endorses the laws for the benefit of all. In a parliamentary system there is always the Opposition whose duty is to hold the government of the time to be accountable. This requires an open space for criticisms raised and the answers to them are received with an open mind, even if there is a strong difference of opinion.

The present environment in the house of democracy does not seem to be of men and women who are graced by the goodness of people to carry their voices, their aspirations and their frustrations and their hopes to the Executives, to the government of the day. It does not seem to be an amicable and mutually open one. Parliamentarian discussions or debates have become a plain exercise in futility with wasting of people's money. Today one sees an increase of street fights as cats and dogs, slogans, scathing attacks, disrespectful defamatory language mouthed to belittle the opponent, exhibition of bombastic Hindi or Sanskrit expressions particularly when the Prime Minister stands to declaim the word from on high, decorative language with quotations from the sages past to cover up the real issues, abuses hurled at, throwing papers at the Speaker of the House, raising the fist, walking out as if a heroic deed is performed and the list can go on. All in all, one wonders whether the House of Democracy is for exchange of views, opinions, objections and information or for barbarians who have lost all kind of a civilised behavior to turn the house into a chaotic arena where bull fight takes place in the name of democracy and decency.

Disruption in Parliamentary debates has become a frequent phenomenon these days.

The disorderly conduct of representative leaders in the Legislative Houses in our country projects a demeaning picture to the public who put a lot of trust in them. Many indulge in bringing about chaos as if they have done a holy deed. The capacity for listening to each other critically and resolving issues of concern for the nation is dying. Or, one gets the impression that one has all the freedom to conduct oneself as his fierce instincts dictate because he has won the election. Some perhaps have the idea that the Parliament is for bull-fight, to put at rest any kind of opposition and kill the opponent with one's sharp tongue. Basic human respect in debates and discussions has long disappeared from our Legislative Forum and a violent, 'cheek for a cheek' exercise is brought in to prevail over decency in public affairs.

The ruling dispensation, because it rests on majority, rules the Parliament and owns it. By ultimately deciding on its own with its pre-planned projects it takes the Opposition as an unnecessary annoyance and dumps the voices into the Ganges by holding Kumbh Mela for a prolonged period in the name of the "holy" and "salvation," but only to know that it is only an outward performance for ulterior motives such as the huge monetary profit. The Opposition may fire rain with proofs of straight records of underhand games such as bribery practice by members in the government or even in the judiciary, but at the end of the day the ruling ghost cleverly plays the cards and wins the game for its own advantage.

The "dark days for judiciary" in our country may have come on account of the exposition of the huge amount of illicit money stacked in the premises of a High Court judge, burnt due to sudden fire, shaking the very foundation of our democracy and disrespecting the Constitution, but that too would soon be buried under the premises of the Parliament as if nothing has really happened. Politicians in our country will be slow to voice their anger at this 'darkness'

that is brought to 'light' because every one of their consciences would be sharply pricking them. If discussions take place in the Parliament, there will be greater chaotic disruption blaming one another and not having the willingness to put to death all corruption that takes place under the table every day. The passive but fiery exchanges that might take place in the House of Democracy would only be an untruthful exercise for the viewers on the balcony of our country. Heated exchanges will accompany abusive statements hailed against each other with no substantial result towards resolving criminal, unethical and inhumane practices that often happen in the high places of our country. In the long run the parliament is not for truth but for the goddess of untruth.

The Parliament is becoming more and more, not a house of honest, upright and just representatives of the people, but a den of thieves whose only aim of being there is to wallow in the widow and the orphan by the use of indecent language, unbecoming and retaliatory postures and an undisciplined behavior. Party politics is placed above democracy in the name of God by cleanly deleting God in whose name the oath is taken in public. 'Who cares, if my pocket can be full?' Hence, the parliamentary debates only remain a show of strength and a cacophonic barking of the dogs. The frequent adjournments we see is a clear sign that the representative leaders from the Prime Minister and down the Members of Parliament, do not really wish to create a country where justice and peace prevail constantly, so that the citizens enjoy their common existence gracefully.

Debates and discussions must be there in a Legislative House and that's what the huge physical space is provided for. Without these exercises the ruling government may go unchecked and a democracy may gradually turn into an oligarchy or autocracy whereby no account is given to the people, instead people could be made to believe that all is well and that 'my word is all.' In history sometime democracies became absolute powers, thus violating the fundamental rights of

people. Therefore debates are necessary channels of balancing the powers of the executive. However, if these are not held in a spirit of open challenge and forthright offering of ideas and creative ways towards resolving national problems and the needs of the populace, then the chaos and disturbances will only lead to violent bursts of animal anger. The men and women, who hold responsibilities of upholding the Constitution and practicing the principles of it must definitely introspect themselves, bring a reversal of attitudes with which they enter into the place of "meeting-encounter" and listen to one another for the good of the millions who expect decency and diligence, fairness and wisdom, learning and teaching from them. There may be anger within them but that must have place only if they are truly disturbed by the plight of realities around them which are a shut case for the government today. Debates and discussions do not exclude prophetic standing up for truth. The essence of democracy is letting others express their opinions, however unacceptable we may find them. However, those who view today's parliamentary exchanges are no more enchanted with our political leaders and are negative about their performance particularly in the new Parliament premise because their conduct does not match the glory and beauty of the structure within which they discuss matters of great importance for every citizen of this country.

The parliamentarians must realise that they are workers just as anyone else who are paid for their work by the sweat of people of a country. If that is not performed to the best of their ability and true conscience, perhaps, they must be deprived of their emoluments. Easy money flowing from the people's coffers has licensed them to create a jungle culture within the sacred space of humanity. Perhaps there must also be anger on the part of the citizens who are disenchanted by the behavior of the educated lot, and evoke an uprising with peaceful means so that the message of 'non-approval' goes into those in high places. Democracy in a country such as ours must never be turned into a jungle raj!

WORLD POPULATION DAY

ANAND BEN

"A healthy planet begins with responsible population growth."



Within 20 years, the world population grew to seven billion in 2011; by another decade, it reached eight billion in 2022; and today, three years later, it stands at 8.2 billion.

Let us assume there is a family consisting of a couple and their two children, with only one source of income amounting to ₹50,000. It is likely that this suffices for a month to maintain decent living standards, meeting expenses for food, clothing, shelter, health, and education. But when an additional newborn arrives and the income remains the same, the facilities and comfort the family previously enjoyed would be diminished. In the same way, when the earth's resources are limited compared to population growth, it will definitely have adverse effects on the facilities that a smaller population would otherwise enjoy.

When there is a shortage of resources, the powerful try to accumulate the most, leaving the powerless to suffer. It is prevalent today that third-world countries become prey to powerful countries that see an opportunity either to tyrannize or to exploit them to their advantage.

Pope Francis, observing annual Population Day on July 11, had called for compassion and action, urging the Church, governments, and international organizations to prioritize the needs of the poor. He had emphasised that addressing population growth requires acknowledging the role of extreme consumerism and promoting sustainable practices. He wrote, "To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some is one way of refusing to face the issues."

The world is at a crossroads. There is a need to manage population growth in countries where there are insufficient resources to sustain large populations. There is also a need to encourage reproduction in places where declining birth rates threaten the continuation of certain communities.



The Merrymaking of Gods & Goddesses

A Day at a Lai Haraoba Celebration in Imphal

KAPIL ARAMBAM

Lai Haraoba is dynamic in both form and function. Loosely it translates to the “merrymaking of the gods and goddesses”. It is a a classical, ritualistic, theatrical dance and music festival celebrated by the Meiteis, who predominantly reside in the valleys in Manipur that borders Burma in the east, Assam in the west, Nagaland in the north and Mizoram in the south.

The Meiteis follow a syncretic faith of Sanamahism and Hinduism. In essence, Lai Haraoba celebrates the origin of life and the universe based on a Manipuri cosmological belief system. The duration of this annual and strictly Sanamahistic festival ranges from a couple of days to a month in *Inga/Ingen* (June) of the Meitei lunar calendar.

Each neighbourhood, covering around a four- to five-kilometre radius or with as many *leikai*, has its own deity, which is usually a divine ancestor of that area and this determines, among other things, the titles, programmes and schedules.

The shots featured in this issue of *In Pictures* were snapped during the Lainingthou Khamlangba Haraoba of Sagolband Moirang Leirak vicinity in Imphal West district. Held for three days from 9 June the last, this year was extra special for two reasons.

One, I grew up watching and participating in performances and hooked to the symbolic and mystifying euphony at Lainingthou Khamlangba, located 100 steps away from my house. Memory and identity are closely intertwined and even more so for us who live in another state and attending festivals are a luxury.

Two, it's been resumed after ages. Covid had disrupted it initially; and then the two-year-old armed conflict in Manipur had prompted halting all kinds of celebrations, including of course that of Lai Haraoba—and often it appears as though the Manipuris have been in a collective grief.

The conditions have not improved but have also not gotten worse! Violence has gone down but the conflict persists.

During any Lai Haraoba, the early morning *yakairol* incantation is nostalgic and celestial. As the day proceeds, animistic rites and rituals further complement the quintessential Haraoba vibe by showcasing the story of creation. You can dig into this festival by referring to some of available texts and documents, such as *Panthoibee Khongul Puya*, *Lai Khunta Lon Puya* and *Leithak Leikharon*.

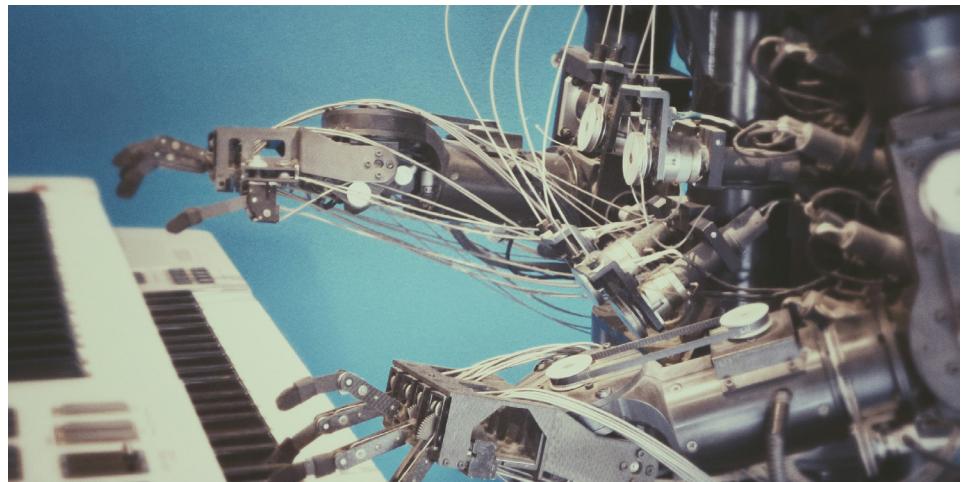
Visitors can also experience a one-of-a-kind cultural treat here. Another takeaway is the presentation of cultural practices that are evenings are ever amusing with numerous dances or *jagoi* presented mostly by young folks from the neighbourhood and beyond.



IDIOT SEE, IDIOT DO. IDIOT REPEAT, IDIOT YOU.

AI is not artificial intelligence but an artificial idiot, and we are fools to believe otherwise. The voice in the machine is making it stupid, and it's making us stupid too.

SUMIT DASGUPTA



I recently saw an ad that piqued my interest. The ad was a riff on Apple's AirPods and how they will soon become obsolete because these EarPods that I was being told "are the future" come with "next-gen AI." These EarPods come with more processing power than the computers that sent humanity to the moon, I thought to myself. They will eventually sell me Bitcoins, too, I assume. Later, a tagline flashed, and it said, "disrupt your music with smart music." If I wanted my music to be "smart", the world would've never experienced Daler Mehendi, Yashraj Mukhate, or Neha Kakkar. I don't think I'm a Luddite, but watching the ad, I did what any millennial would do: I switched off my phone. This little EarPods anecdote isn't just the rambling of a man who remembers when the web was something spiders made. It's a perfect, solid metaphor for our torrid love affair with Artificial Intelligence. We're being sold a vision of god-like digital genius that will solve all our problems, from curing cancer to composing symphonies, and creating images that can rival Caravaggio, all while making us richer and more efficient. The reality, however, is that we've invited a very convincing, occasionally

brilliant, but fundamentally hollow mimic into our lives, and the price of admission might just be our ability to think.

For all the hype that we seem to provide to our AI overlords, they are surprisingly terrible at their jobs. If you ask them to perform a task that requires genuine, clear, and critical thinking, these AI yahoos will look at us as if we are the insane ones. AI can't think, and they are making us think even lesser. This isn't just a crazy claim I'm making while arguing with my smartphone; it's being laid bare in multiple corporate and university research labs. A revealing and a rather recent study by researchers at Apple in their paper titled, *The illusion of Thinking*, quite apt if I do say so myself, decided to test these so-called Large Reasoning Models (LRM) with different logic puzzles, that scale from easy to difficult, like the Tower of Hanoi or the river-crossing brain-teasers found to put it mildly, hilarious results.

When the puzzles were simple, the AIs did fine. But as the researchers increased the complexity just a little bit—adding a few more disks to the tower, for instance—the AI's performance didn't just dip; it experienced a "complete accuracy collapse."

It went from genius to gibberish. The study concluded that what looks like reasoning is often just incredibly sophisticated pattern matching and memory recall. The AI hasn't understood the puzzle; it has just inhaled a library's worth of similar-looking text from its training data and is essentially playing a high-tech game of Mad Libs. It's a brilliant mimic, a master of disguise, but when faced with a truly novel problem, the mask slips, and we see there's no real thinker behind it.

This gets less funny and more insane when you realise these are the same systems being rushed into service for corporate and capitalist gain, tasked with everything from medical diagnoses to financial planning and hiring decisions. We are building a world that relies on a tool that is, at its core, a phoney. But wait, there's more, the second, more insidious part of this Faustian bargain. It's not just that the AI's brain is hollow; it's that our overreliance on it is hollowing out our own brains. Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows* and the essay *Is Google making us Stupid?* For years talked about the effects of our reliance on the internet, Google. We tend not to remember information because we know our smartphones are connected to the internet can remember it for us. It has caused intellectual endurance, reading comprehension, and memory to go down. Now, with AI, we have reached a new watershed moment. Because of AI and its "cognitive offloading", we're not just outsourcing facts anymore; we're outsourcing our own process of critical thinking.

A not-at-all concerning study published in 2025 in the journal *Societies* found a strong negative correlation between the frequent use of AI tools and critical thinking abilities. The more people relied on AI, the worse they were at analysing, evaluating, and synthesising information for themselves. The effect was most pronounced in younger people; the very generation being raised by these digital caretakers. The study suggested that by constantly delegating thinking tasks to AI, we are losing the mental muscles required for deep, reflective thought. We are basically choosing not to use our brains, and our brains are obliging by going into a low-power mode. Want more? A recent study from MIT showed researchers who hooked participants up to EEGs to measure their brain activity while writing essays. One group used

only their brains, another could use Google, and a third used ChatGPT. The results were stark. The ChatGPT users showed the lowest levels of brain engagement. Their thought processes were shallower. Over time, they got lazier, eventually just copying and pasting. The essays they produced were described by evaluators as "soulless." Think about it, while you still can, curious reader. Using AI to do our thinking for us doesn't just produce uninspired work; it mirrors that lack of inspiration in our neural pathways. We are teaching ourselves to be lazy thinkers. It's a vicious cycle. The convenience of having an answer spat out in seconds comes at the cost of the struggle, the curiosity, and the deep cognitive engagement that forges real knowledge and memory.

So, where does that leave us? Standing in our kitchens, wondering if our breakfast appliances are plotting to replace us with more efficient, robotic cutlery? Or our AI-enabled smartphones talking to our AI-enabled EarPods to figure out a way to take us out of the picture entirely? Do we have to confess our love and devotion to AI and marry them to be spared from this brain-smoothing exercise? Look it up, it's a real thing, not just a film. Well, the goal here isn't to smash the smartphones. The AI genie is out of the lamp, and it can, admittedly, do some amazing things, fast. But we, the public, the users, the supposedly tech-savvy consumers, need to be brutally honest about what this technology is and what it is not.

It's not a genius. It's not a thinker. It's a tool. And like any powerful tool, it can be used to build or to break. Right now, in our uncritical, profit-driven rush to integrate it into every facet of our lives, we are risking a collective cognitive decline, an accumulation of "cognitive debt," so to speak. We are happily throwing away the beautiful, messy, and essential human work of thinking to a machine that only offers an illusion of thought in return. That's a trade that will leave us intellectually bankrupt, no matter what the next-gen AI-enabled EarPods promise. We must take some steps back and think for ourselves and reject the idea of AI being used for things that don't need it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some AI-enabled EarPods to buy and then maybe, throw away, out of concern.

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ERASURE OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN FILMS MUTES EXQUISITE STORIES

RAKHSHAAN SHAMOODAH

Filmmaking is one of the most emotionally impactful and immersive storytelling mediums available to us because it not only tells a story but also shows, sounds, and feels it. In contrast to oral or written narrative, film incorporates sound, music, visuals, performance, and dialogue. Audiences can instantly connect on both intellectual and emotional levels thanks to this multi-layered experience. A single image can express what pages of text may find difficult to convey. Film can amplify marginalised voices, question prevailing ideologies, and preserve and disseminate cultural narratives. It transforms into both a mirror and a loudspeaker, reflecting and influencing society. Hollywood, the world's most powerful storytelling medium, has long actively contributed to the continuation of racial injustice through purposeful misrepresentation as well as exclusion.

Known as "blackface," "brownface," or "yellowface," the practice of white actors playing characters of colour while frequently using makeup to mimic skin tones is one of the most egregious examples of this.



These depictions constitute cultural theft rather than innocuous artistic license. They perpetuate the notion that being white is the norm and that other identities are merely costumes to be worn and then discarded. They deprive communities of the dignity of self-representation and reinforce stereotypes that influence public opinion and policy. Diversity obviously contests the notion that being only of the majoritarian ethnic group is the standard. It forces filmmaking industries to reconsider who gets to tell stories and whose stories are told.

Prominent film industries like Hollywood and Bollywood have long been complicit in continuing deliberate racial misrepresentation. In Hollywood, South Asian and Central Asian characters are replaced with white actors. In *Prince of Persia*, the titular character should have been played by an Iranian actor; however, the role was played by a white actor. In *Doctor Strange*, the character of the Ancient One was essentially written as a Tibetan man but was played by a famous white actress.

In Bollywood, films like *Mary Kom*, which should supposedly have been played by a Northeast Indian actor, was played by Priyanka Chopra, who does not belong to that region. Furthermore, films which depict characters based in Kashmir are devoid of anyone who identifies as Kashmiri.

Prestigious drama schools like LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art) are no exception to the misrepresentation of minorities or diverse ethnic groups. Archie Madekwe, an actor who studied at LAMDA, unequivocally stated his experience of racial abuse in a recent podcast. He remembered how a white actor was blacked up to play a person of colour character, and the authorities let it slip by, while he, a Black actor, was ridiculed with the assertion that he would never get a role to play on stage.

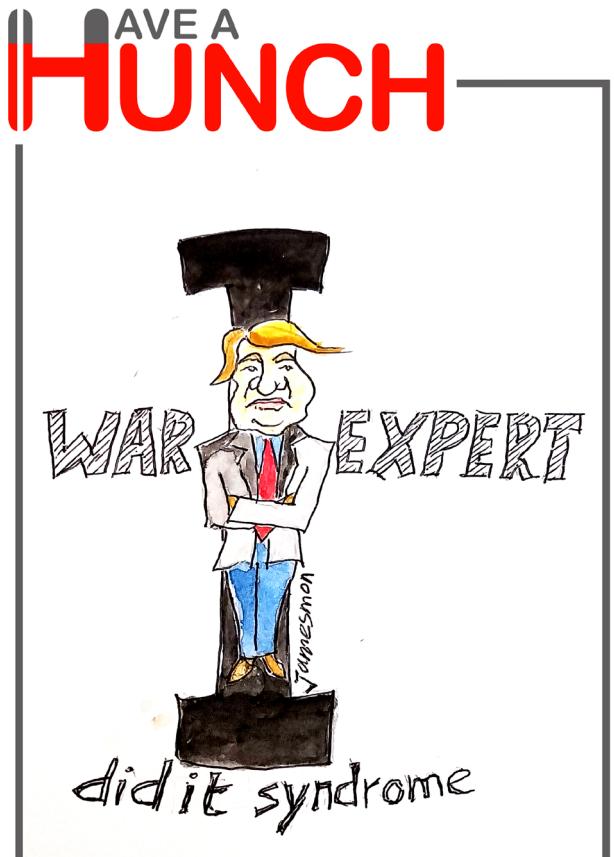
When filmmakers misrepresent ethnic groups, they are not simply failing to get the facts straight—they are distorting culture, identity, and lived experience. To shrink communities down to caricatures or, worse, leave them out entirely, inflicts an injury not only to the collective knowledge of the audience but to the dignity of those portrayed as well. It reinforces the established way of seeing others, erasing voices and artfully excluding what has been arranged in the community. Going forward, the industry will need to recognise the harm and the architecture it is designed to perpetuate, and dismantle that harm by empowering authentic storytellers to share their work. It will also need to adopt intersectional storytelling and restore humanity to every culture and community it seeks to represent. Then and only then can we call cinema a true reflection of the world.

Representation in front of the camera matters, but representation behind the camera matters too. When writers, directors, and producers come from marginalised backgrounds, they bring authenticity to their stories, which is crucial. Authenticity goes a long way in decreasing stereotypes and provides space for true representation.

Audiences can play a role in this too. Paying to see films or shows that prioritise

authentic representation of marginalised groups, and continuing to speak about the films and shows that do not, sends a clear message to studios. We know through boycotts, social media campaigns, and other grassroots advocacy that positive change can be achieved. Social movements like #OscarsSoWhite have compelled Hollywood to introspect about systemic bias. Consequently, films like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *Selena*, and *Lion* have given diverse racial groups the highest platform to tell their own stories. On the contrary, Bollywood and other Indian film industries have a long way to go in terms of racial representation and inclusivity. Each wave of critique, and an equal push of inclusive independent films, might propel us toward evolving into a more informed, politically conscious, racially inclusive film industry.

As one article put it, "These decisions in filmmaking industries erase identity for people of colour, the LGBTQ+ community, the Deaf community and countless other societal groups." To counter that erasure means allowing space for those voices to lead—not just to participate.



Healing the 'Less-Than' Feeling in Us with a Wabi-Sabi Mindset

A FRANCIS

We live in a perfection-driven world, even though perfection is only an illusion, a mirage. Far from our desire for the lofty, sky-high, and cookie-cutter perfection, life is organically infused with flaws. We wish to be calm, pleasant, and never to have an emotional meltdown. But our wish could remain at best a pipe dream, nothing more. Despite our genuine desire for the perfect emotional disposition, we get depressed, agitated, angry, overwhelmed, sad, melancholic, and more, from time to time. We may be able to hide these emotions, but the bottom line is that we do experience them. We struggle hard to control them, if not to camouflage them. The ultimate irony is that though we know that it is natural to experience the rugged edges of human imperfection, we still strain ourselves for toxic perfection in every sphere of life. The result is, as the American athlete turned science writer Christopher Bergland points out, we develop within us an obscure sense of shame, the "less-than" feeling. An itchy, sticky, biting sense of "I am less than others." Most of our self-blame and self-criticism has its origin in this obscure trajectory of shame which we carry within us. Self-loathing, self-blame, and self-criticism are the heavy price we pay for blindly obsessing ourselves with our pursuit of perfection, symmetry, and idealism!



The ancient Japanese, particularly the Zen masters, were well aware of the vicious impact of humanity's obsession with the unrealistic pursuit of perfection. They developed a magnificent life principle called 'wabi-sabi' as an alternative to the perfection-driven life. It is a way of approaching life unpretentiously with "rustic simplicity" and "subdued elegance," as psychologist Marianna Pogosyan claims, for deeper appreciation of the inherent imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence of life. The wisdom associated with wabi-sabi is that by making peace with the fleeting, fragile, rugged, rustic, and melancholic tapestries of life, we learn to appreciate life with gratitude, harmony, and peace.

Wabi-Sabi

The concept of wabi-sabi is widely known as the 'beauty or wisdom in imperfection,' though most Japanese even to this day consider it a complex term to explain. In this respect, Taro Gold, the author of the book "Living Wabi-Sabi," writes, "Ask folks on a Tokyo street to describe wabi-sabi, they will likely give you a polite shrug and explain that wabi-sabi is simply unexplainable." This is a clear indication that wabi-sabi is much more complex than a mere aesthetic principle as many of us think it is.

Embedded in the ancient Japanese culture of the tea ceremony, which became a show-off of expensive vessels and utensils among the ruling class, wabi-sabi reintegrated the original monastic ideals into the tea ceremony. Rejecting the glitz, lustrous utensils and teacups imported from China, wabi-sabi encouraged the use of rustic, broken, and glued teacups made with the spirit of Japanese indigenous art.

Originally, the word 'wabi' meant living in the messy loneliness of nature. However, its nuance gradually grew to be understood as an appreciation for solitude, humility, simplicity, and authenticity. 'Sabi,' which initially meant 'withered,' like withered wood, or 'cracked,' like cracked pottery, or 'patina' on metals because of the process of aging or the passing of time. But in time its understanding broadened with a sense of 'grace' which renders a respectful depth to the existence of something or someone through the process of aging. Taken together, 'wabi-sabi' conveys a highly positive life

principle, a broad life-giving philosophical framework, and a mindset that motivates us to accept and celebrate our imperfections.

A Wabi-Sabi Mindset

Many people still associate wabi-sabi exclusively with Japanese art and culture, such as wabi-sabi gardens, wabi-sabi painting, wabi-sabi architecture, wabi-sabi furniture, and interior decorations. However, people who are adequately familiar with the psychology behind this concept know that this view reflects only a limited understanding which misses the essence of a complex life principle. Just like missing the ocean for the drops or the forest for the trees!

Wabi-sabi has its own unique psychology that motivates people to build a growth-provoking and life-affirming mindset that transcends people to love life with all of its messy, sticky, earthy realities, and through all of its hard and painful transitions, which include old age, dying, and death. It is a mindset that has the bold clarity and enlightenment not to go after the illusions of the market that advertise the anti-aging and wrinkle-free life. It gives us the wisdom to stop lamenting over the loss of our teenage years, and rather truly appreciate our "queenager" and "keenager" years by intentionally contributing to the process of aging gracefully.

A wabi-sabi mindset empowers us with true resilience to accept our brokenness, vulnerabilities, and imperfections without beating ourselves up with any trace of aversion for our flaws that instil in us the obscure sense of shame, and consequently, the 'less-than' feeling. It invites us to own and embrace them as inseparable companions of life.

Equanimity toward our flaws, that is, being big enough and kind enough to accept ourselves, warts and all, is the best remedy we can gift ourselves for the healing of our maladies of self-loathing, shame, hatred, and guilt which we obscurely harbour in us. To put it in Bergland's language, "Proclaiming our wabi-sabi is the cathartic antidote to shame."

The wabi-sabi mindset teaches us to approach life as it comes, not as a work already completed, but as the author Jessica Marie Baumgartner says, "a constant work-in-progress."

True or False

TOM THOMAS



Scrolling through our Bible Study group early one morning, I noticed a suspicious post containing words supposedly by Pope Leo XIV. After fact-checking, my suspicions were confirmed—it was fake news that had spread widely. The post began with “I like him already...”

This incident upset me because communications should be clear and source-verified. Others in our group weren't aware the information was false. I shared the fact-check link and contacted our group admin privately, who immediately understood and reached out to the poster. The matter was resolved with an apology from the person who shared it simply because he liked the attributed words.

In today's digital world, distinguishing authentic from fake content grows increasingly difficult. Wondering if I was overreacting, I researched Pope Francis's stance on fake news and felt reassured: “All of us are responsible for the communications we make, for the information we share, for the control that we can exert over fake news by exposing it. All of us are to be witnesses of the truth: to go, to see and to share.”

Fake news will persist and grow with increasing digitalisation. We must not contribute to it. St Augustine's wisdom remains relevant: “Because a thing is eloquently expressed it should not be taken to be as necessarily true; nor because it is uttered with stammering lips should it be supposed false.”

Pope Leo's recent address to media representatives on 12 May 2025, perfectly captures our communication responsibility:

“Today, one of the most important challenges is to promote communication that can bring us out of the “Tower of Babel” in which we sometimes find ourselves, out of the confusion of loveless languages that are often ideological or partisan.

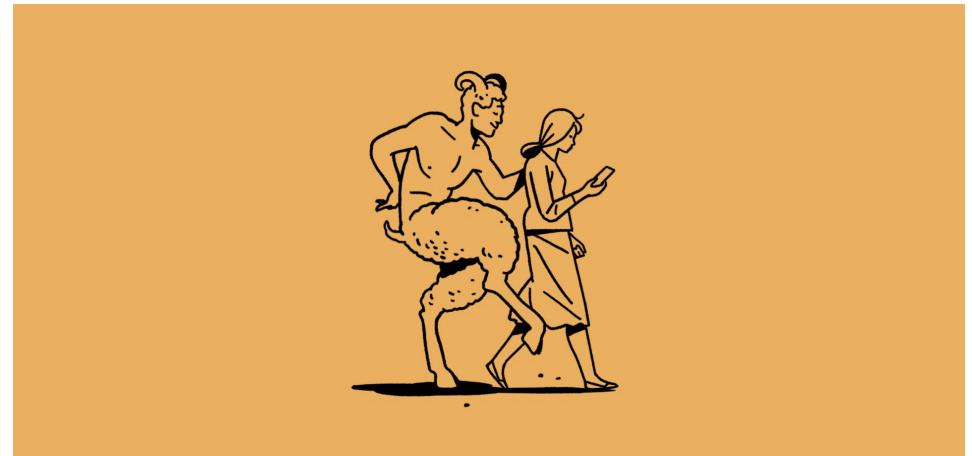
Therefore, your service, with the words you use and the style you adopt, is crucial. As you know, communication is not only the transmission of information, but it is also the creation of a culture, of human and digital environments that become spaces for dialogue and discussion. In looking at how technology is developing, this mission becomes ever more necessary. I am thinking in particular of artificial intelligence, with its immense potential, which nevertheless requires responsibility and discernment in order to ensure that it can be used for the good of all, so that it can benefit all of humanity. This responsibility concerns everyone in proportion to his or her age and role in society.”

Fake news will persist and grow with increasing digitalisation. We must not contribute to it. St Augustine's wisdom remains relevant: “Because a thing is eloquently expressed it should not be taken to be as necessarily true; nor because it is uttered with stammering lips should it be supposed false.”

Love and Power

Mature religion is perhaps when the inside meets the outside and the bottom is allowed to teach the top.

RICHARD ROHR



If you remove the yoke from among you, the accusing finger, and malicious speech; If you lavish your food on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; Then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom shall become like midday.... “Repairer of the breach,” they shall call you, “Restorer of ruined dwellings” (Isaiah 58:9–10, 12)

Polarities, dualisms, and seeming opposites are not opposites at all but part of a hidden and rejected wholeness. The task of true religion is to rebind (in Latin, *re-ligio*) that which is torn apart by temperament, ignorance, and institutionalised evil.

Mere information tends to break things apart into competing ideologies. Wisdom received through contemplative seeing puts things back together again. The most radical, political, and effective thing we can do for the world and the church is to teach contemplation: a way of seeing beyond the surface of things that moves people toward credible action.

Contemplation, in non-mystified language, is the ability to meet Reality in

its most simple and direct form. When I let go of my judgments, my agenda, my emotive life, my attachment to my positive or negative self-image, I am naked, poor, and ready for The Big Truths. Without some form of contemplative surrender, I see little hope for breakthrough, for new ground, for moving beyond ideologies, the small mind, and the clutching ego. Action without contemplation is the work of hamsters and gerbils. It gets us through the day, it gives us a temporary sense of movement, but the world is not made new by spinning wheels going nowhere.

Even religion has its own equivalent of hamster spinning wheels going nowhere. Since Jeremiah's time, we clergy have been shouting, “The sanctuary, the sanctuary, the sanctuary!” And God keeps telling us through the prophets, “Only if you amend your behaviour and your actions ... if you treat each other fairly, if you do not exploit the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, if you do not shed innocent blood ... only then will I be with you here in this place” (see Jeremiah 7:3–7).

Contemplation without action is certainly not contemplation at all. Jesus seemed to think it might even be the greater danger: "If the light inside you is, in fact, darkness, what darkness that will be!" (Matthew 6:23). Concrete action in the world of relationships keeps us from a world of self-delusion about our own "enlightenment."

Love and Power

Both love and power are necessary building blocks of God's peaceful realm on earth. Love utterly redefines the nature of power. Power without love is mere brutality (even in the church), and love without power is only the sentimentality of individual lives disconnected from the Whole. The gospel in its fullness holds love and power together, creating new hope and healing for the world.

Power assumes that life is lived from the top down and from the outside in. It draws its strength from elites and enforcement. As such it is efficient, clean, practical, and works well on many short-term goals. The gospel offers us the inefficient, not-so-clean, multi-layered, long-haul way of love. Love is lived much more from the bottom up and from the inside out. It's easy to see why even churches don't believe in it. It does not give ego or institution any sense of control. Often it doesn't even work.

Perhaps one way of stating the spiritual emergency that Christianity faces is that many clergy and church membership were trained from the top down and the outside in. Love was the message, but power/control was the method. Holiness was in great part defined as respect for outer mediating structures: the authorities that knew, the rituals that were automatic, the laws that kept you if you kept them, the Tradition that was supposed to be the unbroken consensus of many centuries and cultures. I am convinced that the best top-down Christianity can do is get us off to a good start and keep us inside the ballpark, which isn't bad! But it is not close to satisfactory for the great struggles of faith that people today face in family, morality, and society.

The very depth and truth of the gospel

has led people to a more daring and necessary conclusion: Human life is best lived from the inside out and the bottom up. Now love is both the message and the method. Somehow our experiences, our mistakes, our dead ends are not abhorrent to God but the very stuff of salvation. There is no other way to make sense of the Bible or of every human life. Are we secure enough now to admit that there is just as much truth, maybe even more, inside our own journeys and for those living on the margins? So-called "tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:31). Mature Christianity is perhaps when the inside meets the outside and the bottom is allowed to teach the top.

Authentic power is the ability to act from the fullness of who I am, the capacity to establish and maintain a relationship with people and things, and the freedom to give myself away. Sounds like pure gospel to me.

Responding to the Gaps

One of the most striking examples of mending a breach is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up in South Africa to deal with human rights violations during apartheid. The TRC was headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021) whose leadership embodied forgiveness, love, and justice.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has drawn enormous attention, and people around the world are seeking to replicate it. But the unique gift of the TRC is not that it unveiled the truth about historic injustices, but that it did so within an atmosphere of mercy and forgiveness. This was possible only because Tutu had already been transformed into a man who could not envision the future without forgiveness. In other words, if a new South Africa is not possible without the unique gifts of its TRC, the TRC was not possible without the forgiveness of Tutu.

Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice describe how leaders like Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela (1918–2013)

respond to breaches, which they refer to as "gaps," and how each of us may respond as well. Responding to a gap is not about starting everywhere but about starting somewhere. Wherever we find ourselves, there are gaps. The gap can be as small and near as people in our own family, town or congregation. The challenge is for each of us to be faithful to discern and respond to the gap God puts before us....

Leaders respond to a gap without knowing the way. They belong to the gap to such an extent that they share in its suffering. This is as far as some leaders take the journey. But this is not far enough. While many leaders bear the signs of the world's death and suffering in their body, engaging the world's suffering does not necessarily lead us into redemption. We are just as likely to be transformed into bitterness as into new life.

There are many casualties in the journey of responding to the gaps of the world. Many leaders end up bitter and angry. They become despairing and sometimes even destructive. Many warriors for justice become steeped in the skills of protest and resistance. Yet they never learn the equally critical skills of pursuing new life in the gap. One of the distinguishing marks of the gentleness that communion requires is this: leaders are ones who learn to absorb pain without passing it on to others or to themselves.

This is what is so remarkable about the spirit of leaders like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who are undoubtedly skilled at protest and resistance. While they carried a great burden about gaps of injustice, they radiated conviction and not condemnation, redemption and not final judgment, embrace and not rejection. The truly prophetic nature of their work in South Africa was pursuing justice with a quality of mercy that shaped a quest for communion with enemies and strangers.

Moving Outside Our Comfort Zones
Pastor and "beloved community" organiser Leroy Barber explains the importance of overcoming barriers to healthy relationships with people whom we

perceive as different from us. We humans cannot help but function in community, and when we're not in community, we suffer consequences. We were made to be together, and that's by God's design. Human flourishing requires that we establish, mend, and maintain relationships with other people.

Jesus exemplified and taught that those loving relationships ought to cross culture's artificial boundaries of politics, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and socioeconomic status. But in our world today, we have become adept at erecting and fortifying these barriers. We live in the most individualistic society in history, and when we do interact with others, we do our best to make sure that those people look, talk, think, and behave just as we do. These tendencies may keep us in our comfort zones, but they are antithetical to God's will for us. They are the enemy of God's plan of redemption and relationship, and they keep us distant from one another and ultimately from the one who created us.

CAC teacher Brian McLaren identifies how "contact bias" causes us to distance ourselves from people who don't look, think, or act as we do. When I don't have intense and sustained personal contact with the other, my prejudices and false assumptions go unchallenged.

Think of the child who is told by people that people of another race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, or class are dirty and dangerous. You can immediately see the self-reinforcing cycle: those people are dirty or dangerous, so I will distrust and avoid them, which means I will never have sustained and respectful interactive contact with them, which means I will never discover that they are actually wonderful people.

On page after page of the gospels, Jesus doesn't dominate the other, avoid the other, colonise the other, intimidate the other, demonise the other, or marginalise the other. Instead, he incarnates into the other, joins the other in solidarity, protects the other, listens to the other, serves the other, and even lays down his life for the other.

FIRST HUMAN WALKING ON THE MOON

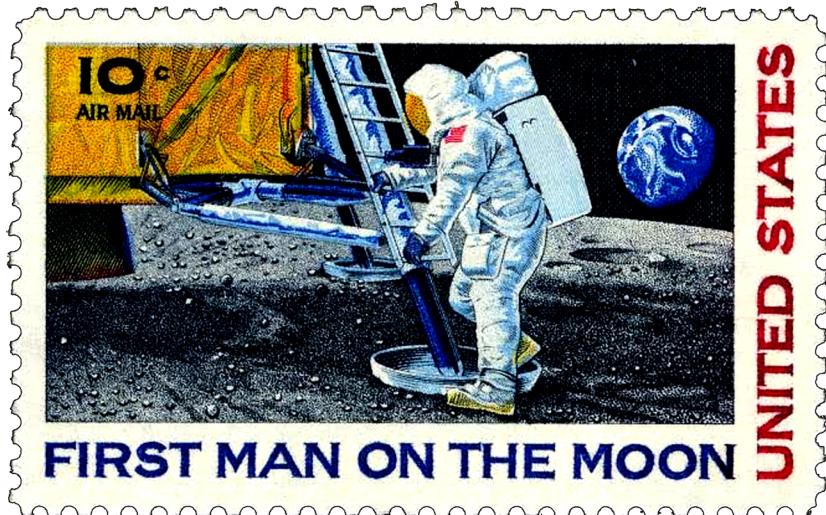
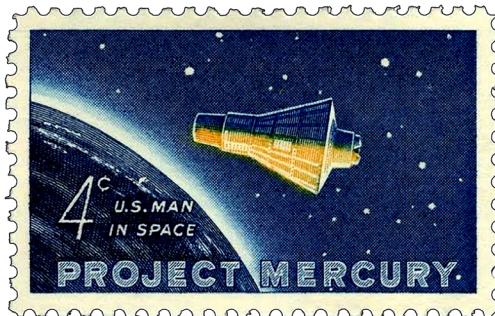
TOM JOHN

Human's first landing on the Moon was a monumental achievement in human history, culminating on 20 July 1969, with the Apollo 11 mission. Neil Armstrong became the first human to step onto the lunar surface, uttering the iconic words, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind." Buzz Aldrin joined him about 19 minutes later.

Five countries have successfully performed soft landings on the Moon: the United States, Russia (formerly the Soviet Union), China, India, and Japan. The United States is the only nation to have landed humans on the Moon.

India's Chandrayaan-3 mission successfully landed on the Moon on 23 August 2023, marking a historic achievement as the first spacecraft to land near the lunar south pole.

Various countries and private entities are now actively pursuing new lunar missions, including plans for future crewed landings, marking a renewed interest in lunar exploration.



UNITED STATES

The Weight of Unspoken Vows

TOM MM OFM

Six-year-old Tim stood small and still at Peter's grave, the freshly turned earth a stark reminder of his friend's absence. Just days ago, he'd seen Peter pale and feverish in his bed. Now, the silence where Peter's laughter used to be in class echoed in Tim's small heart. Peter, the first boy he'd shared secrets and silly jokes with, was gone. The day after the funeral, Tim returned to the cemetery, the cool earth damp beneath his small hands as he sat beside the mound, silent tears tracing paths down his cheeks. For days, the tomb became his quiet vigil.

Home offered a different kind of comfort, a small, furry one. A ginger kitten with white paws had adopted their family. It would weave between their legs, purring like a tiny motor. While friendly with everyone, Tim was special. The kitten would follow him, nap on his bed, and greet him with enthusiastic meows. They shared a silent language of purrs and gentle strokes.

One afternoon, Tim bounded through the door, eager to share a discovery. But the usual flash of ginger fur was absent. His mother stood in the kitchen, her face soft with a sadness he recognised. "Tim," she said gently, kneeling, "something happened to your kitten."

His heart lurched. "Where is he?"

"He's gone, dear. We found him in the garden. Your father thinks a snake might have bitten him."

The words hung in the air, cold and sharp. Tim's breath hitched. Gone. Like Peter.

"He's... dead?" The word felt foreign and final.

His mother nodded, eyes glistening. "Will you bury him, Tim? In the rubber plantation, at the far end?"

He nodded mutely, throat tight. His father handed him a small shovel and placed the still-warm body in his arms. Tears streamed down Tim's face as he walked towards the rustling green expanse. The air smelled of damp earth and latex. He found a quiet spot beneath a tall tree and began to dig. The soft soil yielded easily.

When the hole was deep enough, he couldn't let go. He sat by the edge, the kitten cradled in his hands, its fur still soft, its small body lifeless. "You were my friend," he whispered, voice thick with tears. "I told you everything too... about Peter... about school..." He talked to the silent kitten for a long time, memories of their games and cuddles flooding his mind.

Finally, with a trembling hand, he laid the kitten in the earth and covered it. He gathered fallen frangipani blossoms, their white and yellow bright against the red mud, and placed them on the small mound.

Standing there, the weight of his two losses crashed down. Peter, his first human friend, and now his small, furry confidante. A deep, aching sadness settled within him.

That evening, the silence of his small room felt different, heavier. He had loved Peter and the kitten wholly. Now, the pain of their absence was unbearable. It was the depth of his love that had made the loss so profound. Sitting on his bed, moonlight casting long shadows, a resolute decision formed: I will not let this happen again. I will never love anyone like that again. If I keep a part of myself back, the loss won't hurt so much. It was a child's logic, born from raw agony.

Years passed, painting the raw edges of Tim's grief

with softer hues. Yet, the decision made in the rubber plantation remained an invisible architecture shaping his interactions. He moved through life with a gentle reserve, his kindness measured.

In the schoolyard, while others played unrestrained, Tim watched a faint smile on his lips. He'd offer a stray dog a piece of his lunch, his touch fleeting, never allowing a deep bond. The joy in other children's connection with pets held a bittersweet pang.

As adolescence bloomed, Tim's quiet charm drew attention. Helen, bright and open, sought him out. "Tim," she'd say, voice full of laughter, "you recited that poem beautifully." Tim offered a polite smile, careful not to encourage a deeper connection. Emily, introspective, shared her dreams. "I want to travel the world, Tim," she'd confide, eyes shining. Tim listened, offering insights, but never revealing his vulnerabilities.

One sunny afternoon, Helen confessed, "Tim, I... I enjoy spending time with you. You're different."

Tim's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Helen, you're a wonderful friend. I value our conversations." A gentle deflection, an unspoken boundary.

Later, Emily noted, "You seem... guarded, Tim. Like there's a part of you that you don't let anyone see."

Tim's gaze drifted. "Everyone has their private thoughts, Emily." An evasion, confirming his carefully constructed walls. Both women eventually accepted his reluctance, their affection softening into distance. Romance remained a closed door.

Tim's intellectual and creative gifts couldn't be entirely hidden. His imaginative essays captivated his English class. "Tim," Mr. Henry would say, frustrated, "you have remarkable talent. Consider the writing competition?" Tim would shrug, never committing. On stage, his portrayal of Dr. Faustus was mesmerizing, his voice resonating with hidden depths. "Tim, you have a natural presence," the Director exclaimed. But after the curtain, he retreated. Even in group projects, his leadership surfaced, but he never fully took the helm, fearing responsibility and potential disappointment. His potential remained largely untapped.

As Tim entered young adulthood, the desire for a permanent connection grew. He was drawn to the church's quiet contemplation, the promise of eternal love. Perhaps, in dedicating his life to God, he could find the unwavering connection he craved.

His parents spoke of faith. Tim wanted to believe, but the walls around his heart extended even there. He couldn't fully surrender, to love God with the devotion he'd once given his friends. His faith remained intellectual.

Tim felt called to the priesthood. Hoping God would one day reveal Himself he studied diligently and became a priest.

However, serving his coastal town parish, a deep unease settled within him. He witnessed fervent faith, tearful gratitude for answered prayers, and testimonies of God's presence. They spoke of a personal relationship with the divine.

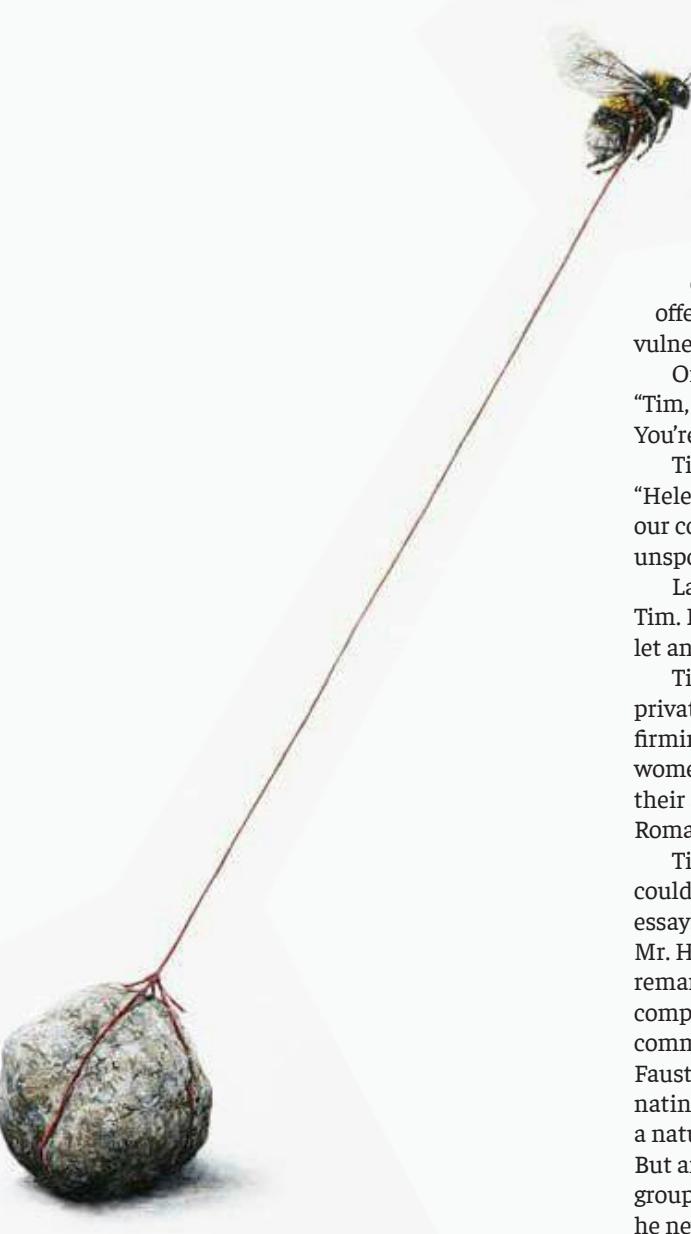
Tim felt like an actor, reciting lines he didn't embody. His prayers felt hesitant, shadowed by doubt. He preached of God's love, but its warmth eluded him. Comforting the bereaved, his childhood devastation felt like a barrier.

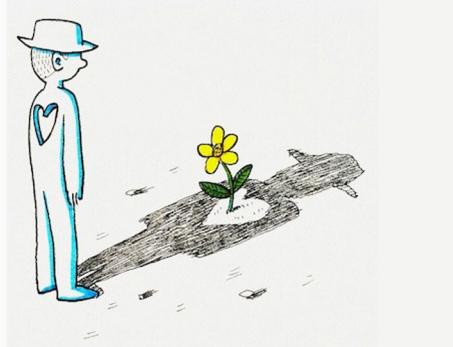
He watched Mrs. Pereira pray with unshakeable faith. He listened to the young couple's trust in God's plan. He compared their belief to his guarded devotion, feeling like an imposter. Yet, he visited the sick at their homes and in the hospital, offering comfort and hope.

The irony was a constant torment. He'd sought refuge in eternal love, but fear had built a barrier against it. He was a priest yearning to believe, a shepherd disconnected from his flock's faith, a man captive to a child's wounded heart.

In the quiet rectory nights, Tim knelt before the altar, the sanctuary lamp casting long shadows. "Jesus," he'd whisper, voice heavy, "they believe so easily. What do I lack? Why is my heart closed? By the merit of your Resurrection, release me from this exile, from this darkness. Grant me the courage to finally open my heart, the faith to love You without reservation." The silence offered no solace.

One day, Mrs. Francina said, "Father,





your words bring such comfort." Tim smiled politely, feeling inadequate. Young Michael exclaimed, "Father, Lily is so much better! It was God's grace." Tim blessed him, feeling a disconnect. In confession, parishioners' unwavering faith contrasted with Tim's internal questioning. "Father, I prayed for a sign, and I received it," a woman confessed tearfully. Tim offered absolution, envying her direct connection.

Father John found Tim in the chapel. "Tim, you seem troubled."

Tim hesitated. "It's the faith of the people, John. So pure. So absolute. I preach of God's love, but I feel empty. I reach out to people. But something Christ-like is missing. No free-flow."

Father John's gaze was kind. "Faith is a journey, Tim."

"But theirs seems so clear," Tim confessed, desperate. "They trust God implicitly. For me... it's always been distant. I know it is his body and blood that I hold in my hands at Mass. I know Jesus loves me and is alive, knocking on my heart. But I hesitate to let go and let Him in."

The weight of his childhood decision pressed down. The walls built against earthly pain had become barriers to spiritual connection.

One particularly poignant moment occurred during the annual parish retreat. A visiting speaker, a charismatic monk with eyes that seemed to hold ancient wisdom, spoke of the unconditional love of God, a love that embraced all fears and doubts like a boundless ocean accepting every drop. As the monk's words resonated through the hushed hall, Tim felt a flicker of something he hadn't experienced before – a tentative

stirring of hope, a crack in the long-fortified wall around his heart. For a brief moment, the intellectual understanding seemed to edge closer to a gut feeling.

Later that evening, under a sky ablaze with stars, Tim found himself in conversation with the monk. He spoke hesitantly of his struggles, of the childhood loss that had shaped his life, of his yearning for a faith he couldn't fully grasp. The monk listened patiently, his gaze gentle and understanding, like a still pond reflecting the troubled sky.

"My son," he said finally, his voice soft, "the walls we build to protect ourselves often become our prisons. The heart that fears to love also fears to be loved, even by God. Perhaps the key is not to dismantle the walls entirely at once, but to find a small window, a crack through which a sliver of light can enter, and let that light gradually illuminate the darkness within."

His words resonated deeply with Tim. The idea of a gradual opening, rather than a complete and terrifying surrender, felt less daunting. He carried the monk's words with him, a seed of a new perspective planted in the arid landscape of his guarded heart.

One day, while visiting a terminally ill parishioner, a young woman named Rani whose faith shone with an unwavering light, a steady flame even in the face of death's encroaching shadow, Tim felt a connection he hadn't anticipated. As Rani spoke of her peace and her trust in God's plan, a profound sense of calm washed over Tim, a stillness mirroring the serenity in her eyes. It wasn't a sudden, dramatic conversion, but a quiet understanding, a shared human experience of faith in the face of the unknown. At that moment, the intellectual distance seemed to lessen, replaced by a shared sense of something larger than himself.

He hadn't experienced the dramatic, all-encompassing faith he had once yearned for, but a quiet acceptance had taken root. He had learned that love, in its many forms, carries its risks, but also its profound rewards. And perhaps, just perhaps, in opening himself to the small acts of love and faith in his daily life, he had finally begun to glimpse the boundless love that had always been waiting. The weight of his unspoken vows had not entirely vanished, but it no longer felt like an insurmountable barrier, but rather a part of the long and winding path of a life lived, with both its guarded spaces and its unexpected opening.

Master Painter Comes to Bengaluru

JAMESMON PC OFM

It is a rare feat that a master painter like Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's painting makes an appearance in Bengaluru. The impossible can happen today with the world becoming one village. The National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru, presented Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy*, now open to the public. This extraordinary exhibition features *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy*, one of Caravaggio's most powerful and influential masterpieces. Magdalene in Ecstasy was lost for centuries and only rediscovered in a private collection in 2014 in Europe. It is also known as *Magdalene Gregori*, named after Mina Gregori, the foremost Caravaggio scholar, who identified the work.

A visit to the gallery was indeed a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me personally. Just imagine looking at a painting from the 17th century. Inadvertently your mind gets flooded with emotions, as you visualise the artist with his hands creating this iconic work. Caravaggio's magic with chiaroscuro is legendary. The light, the dramatic moment, the rich, red coloured tapestry...takes your breath away, as seems to be experienced by the subject herself in the painting. What I observed was the flow of women more than men to witness this work of art and the time they spend looking at the spectacle of a woman disciple in a mystical union with her master, Jesus Christ.



Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy (1606) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

This exhibition is being held from 14 June to 6 July 2025, and it is a great opportunity for art lovers to have a first-hand look at the work of a master painter from close vicinity.

There is also an immersive VR installation providing a glimpse on the master's artistic journey, offering a deeper understanding of the mind and emotional world and the creative process involved. Don't miss it!

Mollywood 'Copverse': The Vulnerable Archetype

ROMIL UDAYAKUMAR TNV



The cop universe across Indian cinema has existed for decades, cementing itself as a central feature of mass entertainment. Yet, if one looks closely, the cinematic portrayal of police officers drastically varies across regional industries. Bollywood, with its polished sheen and high-budget frames, has its own widely recognised template through the Rohit Shetty cop universe. Meanwhile, in stark contrast, Malayalam cinema has over the years quietly crafted a body of work that delves into the psychological, moral, and emotional unraveling of men in uniform. This parallel cinematic universe often avoids spectacle and instead offers raw introspection. The contrast is not just in style, but in substance, tone, and the ethical questions each narrative is willing to confront.

What made me reflect on this dichotomy was the film *Ronth*. As I watched a uniformed man walk into a scene, I prepared myself for what I had been conditioned to expect. A lion-like presence, righteous rage, a booming voice delivering mass dialogues, perhaps followed by a round of stylised action sequences. But what I saw instead was subtle discomfort. The cop did not command attention with bombast but with silence. His body did not radiate invincibility, but trauma. There was no slow-motion walk. Instead, there was uncertainty in every step. And that was far more honest.

This led me to think back to other Malayalam films that have built a unique, almost unofficial copverse. *Nayattu*, *Anjaam Pathiraa*, *Kannur Squad*, *Iratta*, *Joseph*, *Mumbai Police*, and *Action Hero Biju* come to mind instantly. All of them portray characters who are not heroes in the traditional sense. They are not symbols of nationalistic fervor or superhuman courage. Instead, they are fallible men. They make mistakes, carry guilt, question their duties, and sometimes even lose their moral compass. These officers are not written as bastions of justice but as people caught in a machine too large to comprehend or control. Their heroism, if any, lies in enduring the chaos rather than overcoming it.

In *Nayattu*, we follow three officers who become fugitives overnight, not because they committed a crime but because they were dispensable in the larger game of electoral optics. The film does not offer redemption or relief. It offers reality. *Anjaam Pathiraa* follows a psychologist assisting in a murder investigation, but the focus is not just on solving the case. It is on understanding what trauma does to a person and how the line between good and evil is far blurrier than we assume. *Iratta* explores the dynamic between twin brothers, both police officers, both broken by life in different ways. *Kannur Squad* portrays investigative brilliance but also dwells deeply on the emotional cost of the job. *Joseph* is about a retired cop haunted by a case and a past he cannot escape. Each film peels away the mythology of the cop and reveals the vulnerable human beneath.

Compare this with the Shettyverse in Bollywood. Cops like *Singham*, *Simmba*, and *Sooryavanshi* are designed for applause. They enter to a thumping score, punch criminals through walls, and monologue about patriotism and righteousness. They bleed only when the script demands it and are invincible in every other way. Their emotional arcs, if they exist, are secondary to their physical dominance. These characters do not ask

questions. They deliver answers. They do not hesitate. They declare. They do not falter. They conquer.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. It serves a purpose. It gives the audience a figure of strength and certainty in an increasingly unstable world. It reinforces faith in systems that often fail in real life. It is escapist, yes, but escapism has value. Yet, it is essential to recognise that this form of cinematic representation is only one of many. And perhaps not the most reflective of reality.

The Mollywood copverse does something braver. It stares directly into the dysfunction of the system. It acknowledges that police officers are not always in control, that they are often victims of the same bureaucracy, political pressure, and emotional burdens that plague ordinary citizens. In this universe, a cop is not a saviour but a participant. Not a man above the law but a man often crushed beneath it.

This realism does not strip these characters of heroism. On the contrary, it gives them depth. When a cop in a Malayalam film chooses to act ethically despite knowing the consequences, it carries weight. When he breaks down, it resonates. When he fails, it reflects truth. The absence of stylisation makes room for honesty.

Ronth, with its understated narrative, captures this ethos. The protagonist is not loud. He does not seek attention. He carries his pain like a second skin. The silence of the character is more haunting than any background score. His strength lies not in how many people he can overpower but in how much grief he can endure. The film does not glorify his job. It critiques it. It shows the audience what happens when institutions dehumanise those within them.

This is not to suggest that Mollywood has not had its share of action-packed police dramas in the past. Suresh Gopi's *Commissioner* and other 90s films did portray flamboyant law enforcers. But the shift in the last decade is notable. There has been a deliberate movement towards introspection, ambiguity, and complexity. Directors are more interested in asking

questions than in providing solutions. The binary of good cop versus bad criminal has been replaced by a spectrum where everyone is a little broken, a little guilty, and a little lost.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this trend is its consistency. Whether it is the scripting, the cinematography, or the acting, everything is tuned towards realism. The cops do not wear perfectly ironed uniforms or drive fancy cars. They live in modest homes, deal with family issues, suffer from addiction or depression. They are not action figures. They are people.

The Mollywood copverse reflects a deep understanding of the socio-political fabric of Kerala and, more broadly, India. It brings into focus caste, class, communal tension, and institutional failure. In Nayattu, the caste identity of a victim becomes the reason for a cover-up. In Joseph, the private medical mafia becomes the real antagonist. In Mumbai Police, repressed sexuality and trauma redefine the very concept of motive. These are not just crime stories. They are social commentaries.

Contrast this with the bullet-ridden car chases and slow-motion explosions in Bollywood's cop stories, and the difference is staggering. One aims to inspire awe. The other aims to provoke thought. One gives you answers before you can ask questions. The other gives you questions you may never be able to answer.

This divergence also reflects in audience engagement. Bollywood's cop films are often about cheering for the protagonist. Mollywood's are about understanding him. There is catharsis in both, but of different kinds. One offers release. The other offers reflection. It is important to also recognise that this thematic split is not a competition. Both approaches have their place in the

cinematic ecosystem. Yet, the rising popularity and critical acclaim of Malayalam films globally suggest a growing appetite for stories that challenge, unsettle, and humanise. Audiences today are more willing to engage with ambiguity and complexity. They want to see heroes who cry, falter, and bleed not just from bullets but from emotional wounds.

This shift also challenges how we see real cops. Popular cinema plays a huge role in shaping public perception. When the only image of a police officer is that of a muscular man smashing goons while delivering punchlines, it builds an expectation detached from reality. But when films like Nayattu or Iratta show us officers who are exhausted, morally conflicted, or even traumatised, it brings nuance. It opens up space for empathy, criticism, and deeper understanding.

In a country where the police force is often criticised, feared, or misunderstood, such representation is essential. It reminds us that behind every uniform is a human being with a story. That story may be dark or painful. It may not always be heroic. But it deserves to be told.

So perhaps it is time we acknowledged the Mollywood copverse for what it is — not just a series of films with police protagonists, but a powerful, ongoing conversation about justice, identity, and the price of power. It is cinema that does not look away. It dares to ask uncomfortable questions and sit with the discomfort of not having clean answers.

As viewers, we are richer for it. And as citizens, perhaps a little wiser.

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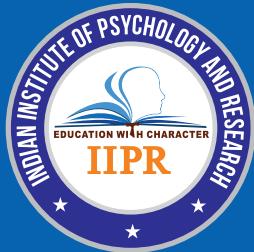
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