

# OUR OPINION, THEIR OPINION

**"The goal of social justice and all round development can't be achieved through ideas but actions."**  
**Mchiel Albert**

## On death of eight elephants

Time has come to rethink about safety methods to save wild lives. The death of eight wild elephants, knocked down by a speeding train in Assam has raised the necessity to reconsider and reconstruct the existing process no doubt. A large herd of elephants - about a 100, according to reports - was trying to cross the tracks when the Rajdhani Express mowed them down. It happened on a stretch of forest demarcated as elephant habitat and close to an elephant corridor. Though the train was brought to a halt after the herd was sighted, it hit the elephants. It is being argued that greater caution during the harvest season, which sees an increase in elephant movement in the region, could have averted the mishap. The accident happened early in the morning when the fog had reduced visibility. Animals, including elephants, are often killed in accidents on railway tracks and roads. The rise in the number of these incidents needs to be seen in the context of expanding human activity and conflicts with the wild.

Natural habitats of the animals are shrinking, leading to fragmented movement and a marked change in traditional migratory routes. More roads and tracks are being laid and the change in weather patterns is leaving an impact. While all this is true, the responsibility to ensure these human-driven shifts do not make the animals' lives unsafe rests with the governments and society. Humans have an emotional bond with elephants as they are revered in religion, literature, and across cultures. The animals have lived in human environments for hundreds of years, tamed and domesticated. When they die in their habitats to accommodate human convenience or due to human oversight, it must serve as a distress call. The incident in Assam is particularly disturbing and should be investigated for lapses that may have caused it. All incidents involving trains and the disruption of the wild should be probed to ensure efficient corrective mechanisms. Effective protocols should be activated to deal with situations that may lead to accidents. Hundreds of miles of railway tracks run through forests in India - the country requires a system that collates real-time information about the presence of elephants and other wild animals on and around the tracks, and ensures prompt follow-through action. Community participation can be key; people living in nearby areas can be involved in mitigation efforts led by government agencies and departments. The Railways have announced plans to use AI to supplement the monitoring measures. This is a welcome initiative that can help realise the larger vision of coexistence.

## Rethinking children's online safety

As India debates children's digital futures under the DPDP Act, Australia's social media ban reignites questions on whether regulation alone can protect young users without strong family, school and community engagement

Australia has become the first country in the world to enforce a nationwide ban on the use of social media by children under the age of 16. The legislation follows several reported deaths and suicides among teenagers linked to cyberbullying and online harassment. Mothers of the victims mounted sustained campaigns, urging legislators everywhere to act against what they see as a growing digital menace. The Australian government has stated that the law is the outcome of extensive consultations with young people, parents and carers, aimed at protecting Generation Alpha from being drawn into what it describes as a purgatory created by predatory algorithms.

Globally, there is no single consolidated figure for children under 16 holding social media accounts. However, multiple studies indicate very high usage. Estimates suggest that up to 95% of teenagers aged 13-15 are active on social media, with a significant proportion of younger children aged 8-12 also using these platforms, despite minimum age requirements, often set at 13. According to the Pew Research Center, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat are among the most popular platforms across age groups. In the UK in 2024, nearly 80% of children aged 8-12 reportedly used social media, and some estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of preschoolers aged 3-5 remained active online. In the US, usage among teens aged 13-17 is near-universal at 95%, with more than a third reporting that they are online "almost constantly", according to NIH researchers.

Australia's legislation, one of the toughest directed at technology companies, includes penalties of up to A\$49.5 million for non-compliance. It clearly places responsibility on social media platforms, rather than on teenagers or parents, to take reasonable steps to prevent children under 16 from managing accounts. Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, expressed concern over what it described as a rushed legislative process that did not adequately consider existing industry safeguards or the voices of young people. Other platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat

have argued that a blanket ban is ineffective and potentially counter-productive. X (formerly Twitter) raised concerns about the possible impact on young people's rights, including freedom of expression and access to information. Industry groups have also cautioned against unintended consequences. The Digital Industry Group Inc. (DIGI) warned that removing children from regulated platforms could push them into "darker, less safe corners" of the internet with limited moderation and safety controls. Despite these reservations, tech majors have indicated that they will comply with the law by taking reasonable steps to verify users' ages, using registered account details and behavioural signals to assess whether users meet age requirements.

The ban has sparked debate across the world. A senior fellow at the Cato Institute has expressed concern that age-verification systems could adversely affect older users who are unwilling or unable to verify their age due to privacy concerns, a desire for anonymity, or fear of data breaches. A psychology professor at the University of Sydney has questioned whether platforms can realistically enforce the ban without raising serious privacy issues, particularly since self-reported age data has long proved unreliable.

Others point to the complexity of implementation. A sociology professor at Rutgers University noted that while the intent behind the legislation is positive, enforcement will be extremely challenging. UNICEF Australia has emphasised that the law will not fix the broader problems youth face online. The Australian Human Rights Commission has voiced "serious reservations", urging lawmakers to explore less restrictive ways to keep children safe online without limiting their rights to education, expression, privacy and leisure.

Adding to the debate, an Australian teenager has legally challenged the law, claiming it infringes on constitutional rights to political communication. Australia's online safety regulator clarified that the measure is intended to delay access to social media, not impose an absolute ban. Australia's decision has created a

ripple effect globally. The European Commission has been working on an age-verification mobile application to check whether users are over 18, with countries such as Spain, France, Greece, Denmark and Italy testing similar approaches. The European Parliament has passed a resolution calling for a minimum age of 16 to ensure age-appropriate online engagement. Denmark and Norway are developing legislative frameworks to restrict access for those under 15, while the Netherlands has advised parents to discourage the use of platforms like Instagram and TikTok before the age of 15. In the US, a bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill proposing a minimum social media age of 13. In Asia, Malaysia is considering legislation for users under 16, while China has implemented a "minor mode" with device-level restrictions. India does not impose an outright ban, but the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, requires verifiable parental consent for processing the personal data of users under 18. Concerns about children's mental health in the digital age continue to grow.

In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, American psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that prolonged screen time on smartphones and the internet has displaced the play-based experiences central to childhood, exposing young people to higher risks of anxiety and depression. If the aim is to restore a healthier childhood, the solution cannot lie in age restrictions or bans alone. A more effective approach requires a multi-pronged strategy. Technology platforms must take greater responsibility for designing safer products, systems and processes that prioritise child safety and wellbeing. Equally important are coordinated efforts by families, communities, caregivers and schools to impart socio-emotional skills and digital literacy, foster open communication, model healthy technology habits, set clear rules supported by parental controls, protect privacy and establish robust reporting mechanisms. Together, these measures can help build digital resilience, trust and wellbeing — outcomes that no single legislative ban can achieve on its own.

**Archana Datta**

## Venezuela oil blockade is strangulating Cuba



Trump's blockade of Venezuela's oil exports has been interpreted in various ways. Trump's expressed reasons for targeting Venezuela are multi-fold. He says that Maduro is complicit in sending drugs into the US and as a short-term measure, US forces have been sinking boats that were ostensibly transporting narcotics. Trump also says that Venezuela had stolen American oil. This seems to be a reference to the nationalisation of US oil companies' assets in Venezuela that had been taken over by that country when Hugo Chavez was its leader. The US is seizing vessels of Venezuelan oil as a response to that grievance. The question of compensation for that takeover is still unresolved. Of course, there is the question of Maduro destroying democracy in his country and the new Monroe Doctrine with its Trump corollary enunciated in the National Security Strategy 2025 justifies Trump's endeavour to remove Maduro from power. Maduro's stance is that these are mere fig leaves for Trump's eyes on Venezuela's oil, its reserves being the largest in the world. Whatever be the truth in these allegations and counter-allegations, Trump's objective in taking steps to thwart oil exports of Venezuela seem to

lie elsewhere. Successive US administrations have worked for the economic collapse of the Communist regime in Cuba. Although impoverished, that dictatorship has managed to survive. It is now clear that Trump, while working for the collapse of Maduro's regime, is using this opportunity to simultaneously work for the collapse of the Cuban dictatorship, making it a classic case of "killing two birds with one stone."

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was a direct and dangerous confrontation between the US and the USSR. The US government's Office of the Historian says that President Kennedy was receiving diverse advice from the Pentagon and the State Department. One view was that Russian missiles should be destroyed by air strikes and then Cuba should be invaded. The other view favoured diplomatic warnings both to Cuba and the Soviet Union. Kennedy chose a middle path and ordered a naval "quarantine" of Cuba to foil USSR attempts to put missiles on the island which is a mere 90 miles from the US coast. The term "quarantine" was used to distinguish it from "blockade" which would have implied a state of war. Simultaneously, Kennedy wrote to Khrushchev that the US would not permit

such weapons' delivery to Cuba. The USSR backed off, pulling the world back from the brink of a nuclear war. The missile-carrying Soviet ships turned back and US forces boarded some ships on which nothing offensive was found. In the 63 years since then, the Castro siblings' era has ended and the US efforts to eradicate communist rule in Cuba have continued. Now, another blockade threatens to deliver the final blow to the communist regime in Cuba.

Continued US sanctions against Cuba have reduced Cubans to bare survival mode. Cuba produces its electricity from oil and gas and Venezuela has been helping by giving oil with considerable subsidy on its price. Since 2019, as part of its economic blockade of Cuba, the US has been blacklisting such vessels as have been found to be supplying oil to Cuba. The resultant clandestine trade has created a marriage of convenience between Russia and Iran, both of whom have been using the so-called shadow fleet to sell oil in spite of sanctions from the US. The buyers have been mostly China and India. Thus, when Trump started blacklisting ships for carrying Venezuelan oil, the shadow fleet started carrying Venezuela's oil to Cuba and China.

The tanker named Stripper, that was seized by the US on December 10 for carrying Venezuelan oil had, shortly before being captured, offloaded 50,000 barrels for Cuba and was taking the rest to China. Cuba had been selling part of the subsidized oil to China and receiving hard currencies in return to sustain its needs.

The relentless US economic pressure on Cuba has created

such a dire situation that on the same day that the Stripper was seized, the Communist government swallowed its pride and had issued Decree-Law No. 113. Cuba's news outlet Razones de Cuba had said on 10 December 2025 that the move begins a "partial and controlled dollarization of the Cuban economy."

In October 2004, Fidel Castro had personally announced on state TV that neither Cubans nor foreign tourists would be allowed to buy anything in Cuba with US dollars. Two decades later, the new law permits holding of bank accounts in dollars for up to 80 percent of earnings from foreign trade and 100 percent in some other cases like remittances. They can use these dollars to make purchases at home or abroad. People's World, a Marxist organisation based in the US reported on 19 December, 2025 that it worried this measure may be "unsettling to Cubans" as it could be seen as dependence on the US but it admits that Cubans face an emergency due to falling incomes, food and other shortages and rising death rates.

On December 16, Trump extended the coercive measures by imposing a total blockade of all oil leaving Venezuela. Consequently, another large Tanker Centuries, that was not one of the blacklisted tankers, was seized by US forces. It was carrying more than 1.8 million barrels of oil bought by a China-based trader.

The Cuban government's official news outlet Cuba Información had termed the seizing of tankers "an act of piracy." It said that this is intensifying "the United States' policy of maximum pressure and economic strangulation" of Cuba. It admitted

that it would have a direct impact on Cuba's energy system. Though China is the buyer of 80 percent of Venezuela's oil exports, yet, this represents only 4 percent of China's oil imports. China has voiced strong condemnation of the seizures and may even take the matter before the UN, but it can easily arrange that quantity from alternative sources. It is unlikely that China will escalate this matter at this juncture. The two countries are continuing intense dialogue over trade disputes and the US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent had said in November that Trump and Xi Jinping may meet four times in 2026; China may not jeopardize that for the sake of Venezuela or Cuba. The Russian bear has its paw stuck in the Ukraine War and is not likely to come to Cuba's aid except by making the right noises in the Security Council. If oil supply to Cuba is substantially disrupted by US seizures and its hard currency source from China, in lieu of a part of subsidized Venezuelan oil, also dries up, that might push it towards a breaking point. Cuba is already suffering shortages and inflation and when oil scarcity leads to shutting down of electricity generation and other essential services, it will become unsustainable and even ungovernable. The US efforts at an invasion of Cuba in 1961 ended in the Bay of Pigs fiasco. It appears that like the implosion of the USSR, mundane issues of bread, water and electricity may cause the collapse of the Communist regime in Cuba too. It is ironic that the US steps against the dictator in Caracas may hasten the downfall of another dictator, 1300 miles away, in Havana.

**RN Prasher**

## A year of perfect signals for Rahul Gandhi and Congress

As 2025 draws to a close, Rahul Gandhi finds himself confronting perhaps the most unsettling phase of his political career. The Congress leader has weathered many storms before, but the developments of this year carry the potential to force a serious internal reckoning within the grand old party -- one that strikes at the very heart of its leadership structure.

Rahul Gandhi may never have imagined that a routine foreign trip and his absence from a Parliament session could trigger turbulence not from political opponents, but from within his own party. His frequent overseas visits have long been a point of criticism, but this time the consequences have gone beyond predictable BJP attacks and entered the far more dangerous territory of internal comparison and open questioning. Gandhi travelled to Germany on December 17, even as Parliament was in session, for a three-day visit at the invitation of the Progressive Alliance -- a network of 117 progressive political parties worldwide. Predictably, the Bharatiya Janata Party accused him of engaging with elements holding an "anti-India agenda".

The Congress and its allies rushed to defend him, insisting that foreign travel was no crime and that global outreach was part of opposition politics.

That defence, however, missed the larger point. Rahul Gandhi's physical absence from Parliament created a political vacuum, and nature -- especially politically oriented -- abhors a vacuum. Into that space stepped Priyanka Gandhi Vadra inadvertently.

Priyanka's presence during the Winter Session did not go unnoticed. The buzz around her has always existed, but this time it was sharper, louder, and more consequential. Her conduct inside and outside Parliament sent subtle but unmistakable signals. Unlike her brother, she appeared relaxed, approachable, and politically agile in her interactions -- even with BJP leaders.

Her decision to attend the customary tea hosted by the Speaker after the session ended was particularly striking. While Rahul Gandhi and several opposition leaders had earlier chosen to boycott such gatherings, Priyanka participated without hesitation. Images and videos of her sharing tea and laughter quickly went viral. Seated next to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, alongside Speaker Om Birla and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, she looked every bit the insider -- comfortable, confident, and visible.

This optics mattered. And all took the necessary notice.

Soon after, the Congress leaders began saying the quiet part out loud. Lok Sabha MP Imran Masood, known to be close to Rahul Gandhi, publicly described Priyanka Gandhi as a potential prime ministerial candidate and compared her to Indira Gandhi.

If that was not enough, veteran leader Digvijaya Singh delivered a far more direct message. On December 27, during a meeting of the party's Working Committee, Singh shared a black-and-white photograph of a young Narendra Modi seated on the floor near L.K. Advani at a public event in Gujarat, reportedly from the 1996 swearing-in ceremony of Shankersinh Vaghela as Chief Minister.

Singh's accompanying message was unambiguous. He praised the organisational strength of the RSS and BJP, noting how grassroots workers could rise to occupy the highest constitutional offices.

"This is the power of the organisation," he wrote, signing off with "Jai Siya Ram".

For a Congress leader of Singh's stature, this was nothing short of a political grenade lobbed at the party's high command. The message echoed the long-suppressed frustrations articulated earlier by the G-23 group and later by Ghulam Nabi Azad, who had openly questioned Rahul Gandhi's leadership and hinted that Priyanka Gandhi might be better suited to steer the party.

That Singh chose this moment was no coincidence. The Congress was simultaneously celebrating its 140th Foundation Day. At the party headquarters in Delhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi stood together, smiling for the cameras and greeting workers. The public display of unity, however, could not conceal the undercurrent of discontent. Remarks like Singh's inevitably lingered in the air, unspoken but deeply felt.

The larger question now confronting the Congress is unavoidable: Will 2025 finally force a genuine course correction? Among supporters and political observers, there is little disagreement that the party is in deep trouble. And increasingly, the blame is being laid not at the door of Mallikarjun Kharge, the nominal president, but squarely at Rahul Gandhi and his leadership style.

Electoral failures continue to pile up. The Bihar Assembly elections and the much-hyped SIR activism have exposed the party's strategic emptiness. Rahul Gandhi launched the SIR campaign with dramatic rhetoric, alleging massive "vote chori" after a fiery press conference in Delhi. The campaign was meant to be backed by sustained ground mobilisation in Bihar. Instead, it collapsed spectacularly.

**Deepika Bhan**