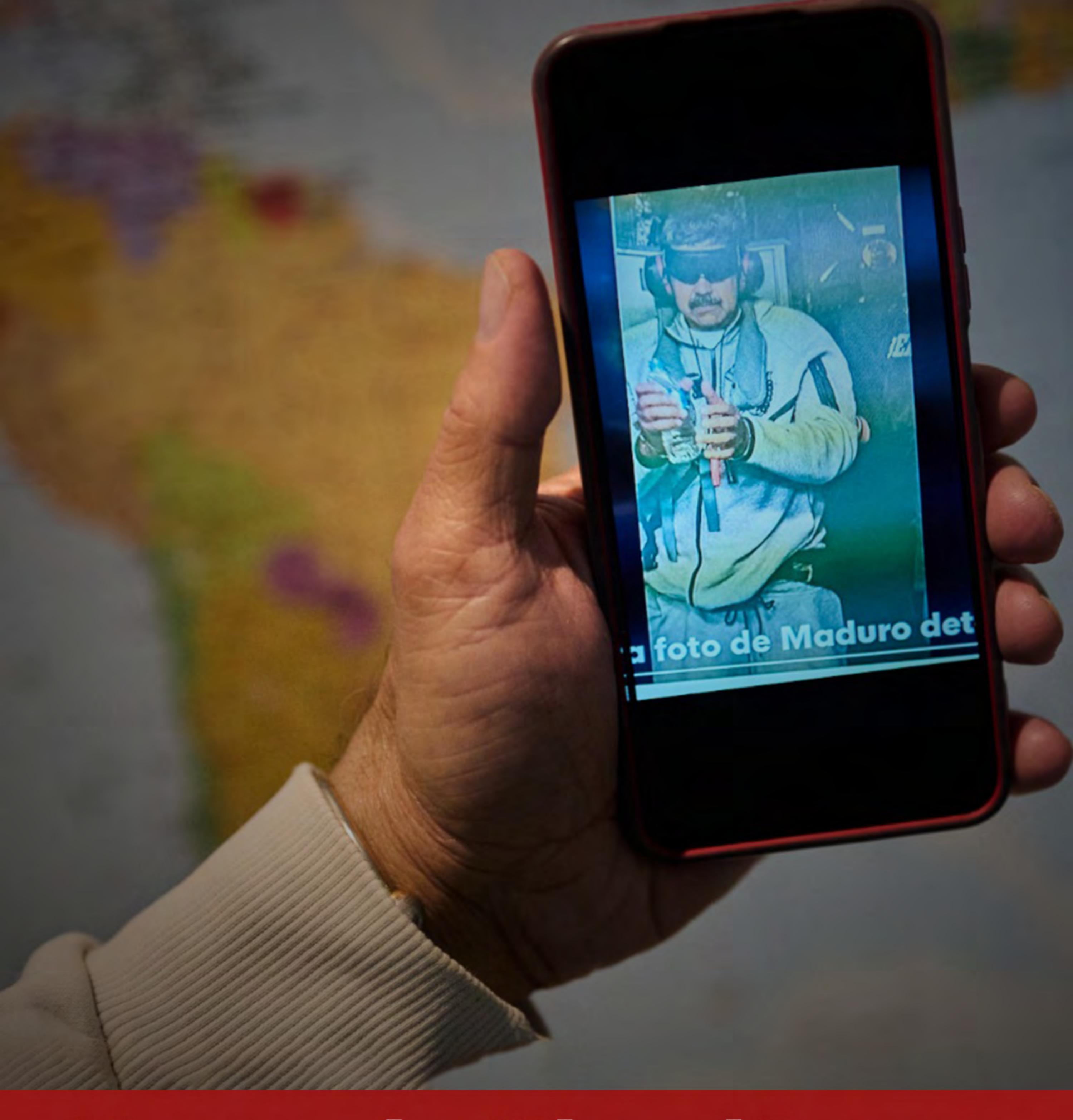


 *The Indian* **EXPRESS**

January 2026 Issue

# PLUS +



# Venezuela, Oil, and Power

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*US President Donald Trump, a long-time critic of the 2003 invasion of Iraq who entered office pledging to act as a peacemaker, upended that stance with the announcement of US military strikes on Venezuela and the capture of its president, Nicolás Maduro. Trump justified the operation by invoking the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, a more than two-century-old policy warning external powers against interference in the Western Hemisphere.*

*He also declared that Washington would assume control of Venezuela's oil sector, and that US energy companies would invest billions of dollars to revive the struggling Venezuelan oil industry.*

*This month's issue examines what Maduro's capture signals about the return of US interventionism, how it reshapes China's position in the region and beyond, and why history – from the Monroe Doctrine to modern energy politics – continues to frame events in Caracas.*

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## The return of US interventionism

– *Anil Sasi*

“If you break it, you own it.” The words of former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, one of the American architects of the 2003 Iraq War, would come to mind after the audacious capture of Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro by America’s elite Delta Forces on January 3.

US President Donald Trump, a big critic of the US invasion of Iraq and someone who promised to be a peacemaker when he took office around one year ago, has clearly upended that commitment. At a briefing on January 4, he justified the operation as being in line with an over 200-year-old foreign policy agenda set under the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which warned European powers not to interfere in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere.

This Doctrine, which Trump has now rebranded as the “Don-roe Doctrine,” has been relegated to foreign policy sidelines for years now, with most administrations in Washington DC having sought to distance themselves from it. Trump’s move, which he first signalled in the new US security strategy last month, marks a worrying reassertion of the doctrine.

But this tallies with his actions over the past year, when the US demonstrated increasing willingness to use military force around the globe. Just in the last week, Trump ordered airstrikes on Syria and Nigeria. He threatened an intervention in Iran after widespread demonstrations in Tehran. Earlier in 2025, Trump had targeted nuclear facilities in Iran, attacked drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean, the Houthi rebel forces in Yemen, militants in Somalia and Islamic groups in Iraq.

## But why Venezuela?

Not a tough question to answer. Venezuela is home to the largest proven crude reserve on Earth, but the actual oil output from the South American nation is minuscule. The South American country is estimated to be sitting on over 300 billion barrels worth of crude — about a fifth of the world’s global reserves, according to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA). However, it produces only about 1 million

barrels of oil per day – about 0.8% of global crude production. Chevron is an American company, and the only foreign oil major with exposure to Venezuelan crude.

Trump clearly has oil on his agenda. He said that the US would take control of Venezuela's reserves and field American companies to invest “billions of dollars” to “refurbish” the country’s oil industry. “We’re going to have our very large United States oil companies – the biggest anywhere in the world – go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure, the oil infrastructure,” Trump said at a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida.

“Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world. Any politician, journalist or commentator who leaves this crucial fact out of the equation of why Trump illegally invaded Venezuela is willingly distorting the truth. Just call it what it is. Straight up theft,” Youssef Kobo, founder of Antwerp-based training and advocacy body ASATT-EU, said in a post. Analysts also pointed to Trump’s action as a means of diverting attention from the Epstein Files.

## The Monroe Doctrine

Named after former President James Monroe, this Doctrine is one of the most consequential American foreign policy agendas of the last

century. Initially a largely symbolic document, it stated American opposition to new or expanding European involvement in the Americas after centuries of colonial rule.

Progressively, the US extended this tenet to consider South and Central America a strategic backyard that should be under the sphere of American influence. This went on to become a significant element of American foreign policy intervention in the region for decades, which was increasingly criticised by academics and policy wonks for being used as an alibi to justify meddling in Latin America.

Most recent administrations in DC had moved away from this policy. Trump has now conclusively reversed that stance, building on his earlier attempts to support the current right-leaning Argentinian administration and oppose the left-wing government in Brazil.

Between 1898 and 1994, the US government intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times, ostensibly to protect its interests and counter Communism.

## MAGA pushback

There could be a twist on Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, which was predicated on

America ending its “never-ending wars” and not putting fresh boots on the ground anywhere.

With Trump now claiming that a team that includes US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth will work with Venezuelans to take control of the beleaguered nation, there is a possibility of that country seeing a protracted American involvement. “We are going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition,” Trump said at the conference, even though he did not clarify what exactly “running the country” meant.

This could be a bitter pill for some of Trump’s supporters, just like his reluctance to release the Epstein files. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, a former Trump loyalist who recently parted ways with the president after accusing him of abandoning his political base, was among the first to condemn Trump’s actions on X.

“Americans’ disgust with our own government’s never-ending military aggression and support of foreign wars is justified because we are forced to pay for it and both parties, Republicans and Democrats, always keep the Washington military machine funded and going,” she said. “This is what many in MAGA thought they voted to end. Boy were we wrong.”

Republican Congressman Thomas Massie of Kentucky, a noted Trump critic, drew a contrast between the legal justification being offered for Maduro's arrest (on charges related to weapons and cocaine trafficking) with Trump's explanation at the presser that the operation was to reclaim confiscated US oil and stop fentanyl production.

## How will this end?

It's not yet clear if the US will become an occupying force or install a leader approved by it in Caracas. At one point during the conference, Trump seemed to suggest Venezuela's Vice President and current interim President, Delcy Rodriguez, had agreed to help the US run the country. But Rodriguez gave a live address to the nation shortly after Trump's press conference to denounce what she called the US attack on her nation.

The big question going forward is whether the government that's left in Venezuela — which is everybody except Maduro — will be able to maintain its grip on power. Or will there be divisions and lead to some form of regime change? While the US doesn't have troops on the ground currently, it will be tough to organise a political transition or a hostile takeover of a foreign country, unless that is the case. Especially if it's Venezuelan oil and other resources that Trump is after.

Then there are question marks over the role of the opposition at this pivotal moment.

This also brings back the relevance of the Presidential elections held in Venezuela in July last year to choose a president for a six-year term beginning on January 10, 2025, where Maduro ran for a third consecutive term while Edmundo Gonzalez led the main opposition political alliance.

After the 2024 elections, most news outlets and the opposition provided strong evidence showing that Gonzalez won the election by a wide margin, but Maduro claimed victory and hung on to power.

Earlier, in June 2023, the Venezuelan government had barred the then leading candidate María Corina Machado from participating. Machado, who went on to win the Nobel Prize subsequently, is currently in exile, and had backed Gonzalez in the 2024 elections. It is unclear what role Machado could have going forward, especially after Trump dismissed her chances of leading the country during the press conference.

The next few weeks will set the stage for how events unfold in Venezuela.





# What the takeover could mean for global energy markets

– *Sukalp Sharma*

Oil is no stranger to conflict. Unsurprisingly, it has emerged as the key factor in America's capture of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro. Soon after Maduro's capture, US President Donald Trump said Washington would take control of Caracas's oil sector and that American majors would pump in billions of dollars to revive the struggling Venezuelan oil industry and fix its broken oil infrastructure.

This is what he didn't say: It will take several years of work to fix the infrastructure – debilitated by years of sanctions and economic crises – and boost output. And American oil companies have made no comment yet on such a long-term commitment.

Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves, but accounts for less than 1% of global production. This is one of the reasons why experts and industry insiders don't expect a major change in prices in the near term. The market is also well-supplied and global demand is relatively subdued.

Notably, the recent US blockade of Venezuela and seizure of Venezuelan oil tankers did not have a significant impact on international oil prices. If the US does succeed in effectively controlling Venezuela's oil industry, more of its oil is likely to flow globally, potentially having a bearish impact on oil prices. But this is something to see over the long run.

As for India, the country appears to be well-shielded from any direct impact in the near term, as Indian refiners do not import Venezuelan crude. With the upward pressure on international oil prices also expected to be muted, given an oversupplied market, it is unlikely to create a major pain point for India, which is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its oil needs.

However, India stands to gain if Trump can get Caracas to agree to his terms going forward, as that could potentially make the Venezuelan oil industry sanctions-free and open for business.

## Venezuelan oil reserves: Massive potential, low realisation

Venezuela has the largest oil reserves globally, estimated at over 300 billion barrels or a fifth of the proven oil reserves all over the world. The world's largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia, is second to Venezuela in terms of proven oil reserves. But Venezuela produces around 1 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude, while global output is over 100 million bpd.

The relatively insignificant oil production by Venezuela, despite massive potential, is a result of a combination of factors that include US sanctions on the country's oil and gas sector constraining its energy exports, apart from a severe economic crisis in Venezuela and a debilitating lack of investment in the country's oil and gas infrastructure. Trump now wants the American oil majors to get into the game so that more Venezuelan oil can be pumped into the global market – including the US – and to the benefit of American corporations.

According to experts, if Trump's intentions for Venezuela's oil industry turn into a concrete plan that is implemented, Venezuela could emerge as a significantly larger oil supplier than it is now. It could also open up the country's oil sector for more investments, not just from American companies, but from other countries' corporations, as well.

More oil supply in the international market should translate into downward pressure on oil prices in the long run. To be sure, any or all of these effects would take a few years to be tangibly felt, as billions of dollars would need to be pumped into ageing and ill-maintained Venezuelan oil and gas infrastructure.

“They (Venezuela) were pumping almost nothing by comparison to what they could have been pumping and what could have taken place...We’re going to have our very large United States oil companies — the biggest anywhere in the world — go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure, the oil infrastructure, and start making money for the country,” Trump said at a press conference on Saturday.

## **The Indian oil industry is watching**

How the situation evolves over the next few weeks and months would be crucial from India’s perspective as well. If the US and Venezuela’s new leadership can negotiate an easing or suspension of sanctions, it could open the doors for Venezuelan oil to flow more freely in the international market, including to India.

It could also pave the way for ONGC Videsh, the overseas investment arm of the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), to recover over \$500 million worth of stuck dividends from its shareholding in two Venezuelan oil and gas

projects, and create opportunities for more Indian investment in Venezuela's oil and gas sector.

India – specifically private sector refining giant Reliance Industries (RIL) – was a regular buyer of Venezuelan crude prior to the imposition of US sanctions on Caracas in 2019. Following the sanctions, oil imports from Venezuela stopped within a few months. As per India's official trade data, Caracas was New Delhi's fifth-largest supplier of oil in 2019, providing close to 16 million tonnes of crude to Indian refiners.

In October 2023, the US eased sanctions on Venezuela's petroleum sector, authorising oil exports without limitation for six months. This led to RIL and a few other Indian refiners restarting oil imports from Venezuela. But imports then stopped as the sanction waiver was not extended by Washington after its understanding with Caracas on the conduct of free and fair presidential elections in Venezuela broke down. A few months later, RIL was able to restart Venezuelan oil imports after obtaining a sanctions waiver from the US. But in the summer of 2025, the company halted oil imports from Venezuela after the Trump administration threatened higher tariffs on countries buying Venezuelan crude. No Venezuelan oil has imported into India for months now.

As for ONGC Videsh's investments in Venezuela, the company in 2024 sought special approvals

from the US to operate two Venezuelan oil projects — San Cristobal and Carabobo 1 — where it holds a participating interest and has pending dividends worth over \$500 million. But the approvals are yet to come.

ONGC wants to operate projects in Venezuela under the so-called “Chevron model”, which allows foreign oil companies to operate in the country after receiving specific approvals from the US. The model is referred to as the Chevron model in the oil industry because the US major Chevron was the first to operate in sanctions-hit Venezuela through this route.

Given Washington’s sanctions on the Latin American country’s oil and gas sector, companies cannot use American banking channels, services, and US dollars for these projects, unless they have a specific license from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury. The specific license for this type of operation usually gives foreign companies major control over finances, operations, production, and marketing of oil from Venezuelan projects, despite Venezuela’s state-owned oil major Petróleos de Venezuela, SA (PDVSA) being the majority shareholder. ONGC Videsh holds 40% stake in the San Cristobal project and 11 per cent in Carabobo 1.





## Why Venezuela oil may be a **hard sell**

– *Anil Sasi*

**V**enezuela may not be the great prize for foreign oil companies that it is being made out to be. And even American petroleum majors are not exactly salivating at the prospect.

To crowd in investor interest after the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, US Energy Secretary Chris Wright is set to meet US oil-industry executives to discuss the American administration's plans to revive Venezuela's energy sector at the Goldman Sachs Energy Conference in Miami. A follow-up meeting is likely in the White House on Friday, where executives from American oil companies such as Exxon, Chevron and ConocoPhillips are likely

to be briefed on the Venezuela opportunity.

US President Donald Trump said Tuesday that Venezuela would supply between “30 million and 50 million barrels of oil to the US”.

While Venezuela holds the world’s largest oil reserves, it accounts for less than 1% of global production. The potential on paper aside, there are multiple hurdles in the Trump administration’s plans to expand the country’s vast but struggling oil sector.

## **Multiple interests in Venezuelan oil**

Venezuelan oil is currently going to primarily one buyer — China. From the middle of 2024 to December 2025, Beijing has substantially jacked up its purchases of Venezuelan oil, alongside its stockpiling of Iranian crude. The big challenge for those who plan to enter the upstream business is to find a buyer in the oil market now, amid a significant oversupply and sluggish forward price trends.

Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A. or PDVSA, the state-owned oil and gas company of Venezuela, is now partly run by that country’s still powerful military. This entity controls most of the production and much of what happens with that oil amid continued American sanctions. Then there are substantial Russian and Chinese interlinkages

in the Venezuelan oil value chain. Russian oil major Rosneft is said to own several floors in PDVSA's Piso 8 Torre Oeste headquarters in downtown Caracas.

Chevron is the exception of sorts, having been operating in Venezuela under a sanctions waiver and producing about 20% of the country's oil. PDVSA accounts for much of the rest. Other companies, such as Exxon and ConocoPhillips, had to, in the past, book losses and flee Venezuela after their assets were appropriated.

## Investment guarantees

There will be many questions before any of them head back, such as who is really running Venezuela? Who will provide the security guarantees for investments? What happens to Chinese interest and the \$19 billion or so debt owed by the Venezuelans to them? And if a US re-entry into Venezuela's oil sector is underway, what happens to the other major players, given that there are some Europeans interests there as well?

“The operation by Trump (in Venezuela) seems to have taken everybody by surprise, including some of the big oil companies. The upstream sector is particularly sensitive to taxation terms and the industry would want long-term investment guarantees if they are to invest in Venezuela,” a

senior executive with a Japanese shipping major, who has worked previously with a European oil company, told The Indian Express.

The reality of greenfield investments is going to be way more complicated than a lot of people realise, another industry player said, citing the state of infrastructure in Venezuela as a matter of particular concern.

“Because you’re going to have to repair and restore a lot of infrastructure that has taken a lot of damage over the years, especially the last couple of decades. So whether it’s pipelines, infrastructure, even talent — engineers and people who really need to extract the oil out of the ground — they’re all in short supply. Also, the West Texas Intermediate (an oil price benchmark) is at \$58 a barrel, while Brent crude is in the \$60 a barrel range. These are not exactly high prices that incentivise companies to make big capex investments,” the person quoted above said.

## Muted impact

According to S&P Global Energy, its broader forecast “remains unchanged by Venezuela developments”. “Also unchanged is the crude price outlook, which calls for Dated Brent to average \$60/b. However, there could be a more discernible impact on the heavy sour crude oil market. Venezuela accounts for 1% of global crude

oil production but roughly 9% of the world's 9 million b/d of heavy crude oil production," S&P Global Energy said in a note.

Venezuelan crude is heavy, perhaps twice as heavy as the normal Middle Eastern barrels, and has high sulphur content. This is distinctly different from the kind of grade of oil/shale that American refineries are typically used to. So, only certain kinds of refineries around the world can handle this type of crude. The big test will be of how the riches below the ground translate into material gains above the ground, especially as oil companies weigh the long-term implications amid a realisation that Trump could be gone in three years.

The US and China are the world's largest markets for heavy crude oil. "Global heavy crude/heavy residual feedstock markets are currently narrowly balanced. Higher supply would be bearish for heavy sour crude differentials and high-sulfur fuel oil (HSFO) cracks. Lower supply would be modestly bullish," S&P noted.

If sanctions were removed, Venezuelan oil production could grow, S&P said, but it would require at least several billion dollars or more of fresh investment to boost marketed production to 1.5 million b/d (barrels per day) in the next 12-24 months – an increase of roughly 500,000 b/d from recent levels (including blended

diluent). “To expand output even more – to 3 million b/d, for example – would require much greater spending on infrastructure in addition to upstream development costs, and it would take many years. Investment terms – including confidence they will endure – and the oil price environment need to be conducive to such investments,” it said.

Add to that the fact that America’s track record, when it comes to regime change and nation-building in oil-producing countries, is not exactly outstanding.





## Maduro's capture has a China fallout

– *Anil Sasi*

The United States administration's pursuit of its own version of vigilante justice in Venezuela has sent reverberations across multiple national capitals.

This includes Bogota and Mexico City, after American President Donald Trump suggested potential US military action against Colombia and warned Mexico to get its act together.

In Copenhagen, the threat of Trump's intention to take over Greenland now appears more real than earlier, especially after Katie Miller, the wife of Trump's influential advisor and deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, put an altered image of

the Danish autonomous territory on her X feed late Saturday, just hours after the US military operation against Venezuela, with a single word above it: “SOON.”

The biggest impact of American interventionism, though, is likely to be felt some 14,000 km away – in Beijing.

## **The Venezuela-China relationship**

The extraction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro poses a potential fallout for China, a close ally of Caracas and the main importer of Venezuelan crude.

Since the Hugo Chavez era, China has cultivated the dispensations in Caracas to emerge as Venezuela’s most dependable partner. Beijing has staunchly backed the Nicolas Maduro administration, and this relationship has helped China expand its influence and presence in a region that is in close proximity to the US and has been traditionally considered within its sphere of influence.

An economic partnership that started with oil has now diversified to cover Venezuela’s gold, rare earths and other mineral assets, but has also progressively morphed into a political alliance of sorts.

China's carefully cultivated ties to Venezuela could now be in jeopardy after the late-night raid in Caracas on Saturday (January 3). Given that Trump has earlier gone after China's growing influence in Panama over the control of the vital canal that divides the two Americas, there is a pattern to this trend.

## **Chinese investments in Venezuela**

China's response to the Maduro episode does reflect some of its anger, and Beijing has talked about US hegemony and expressed outrage against America's action. Beyond that, however, it's been guarded in its response so far, even though the US audaciously kidnapped a sitting president of a sovereign country from his bedroom and flew him to face trial in Manhattan. That man happened to be one of the staunchest China allies in that region, and a man whom Beijing has invested in substantially.

There are already reports of Chinese companies operating in Latin America bracing for greater uncertainty, as Washington moves to reassert its dominance in the western hemisphere, according to analysts quoted by the South China Morning Post.

Chinese academics see a Trump-style Monroe Doctrine aimed squarely at countering China's growing influence in the Americas. The 1823

principle, named after then US President James Monroe, asserted its dominance in the Western Hemisphere and warned European powers against attempting colonisation in the Americas.

In the last decade or so, China's footprint in both Central and South America has grown markedly, with a string of investments in areas such as strategic minerals, energy and port infrastructure.

China is Venezuela's largest external economic partner, with trade dominated by the oil that China imports against machinery, electronics, and consumer goods that it exports to Venezuela, often through "loans-for-oil" deals. Data from Trading Economics show that China exported \$4.8 billion to Venezuela in 2024, with oil comprising a huge chunk of Venezuelan exports to China.

The oil supply from Venezuela to China is indirect, given the longstanding sanctions on Venezuela, and so is difficult to quantify. Most of the shipments going from Venezuela are on tankers under flags of third countries such as Malaysia, Panama or Liberia, primarily to get around the sanctions.

Now that Maduro is gone, managing these shipments would be a problem. Also, trade experts estimate that Venezuela owes China well over \$19 billion for goods that come in from China under oil-for-cash deals, and Beijing

would want its money back. That, again, looks difficult now. Bloomberg reported that China has asked its major lenders to report their exposure to Venezuela after the capture of Maduro.

## The Taiwan question

The bigger question, though, is whether the American action in Venezuela potentially emboldens Beijing to take over Taiwan.

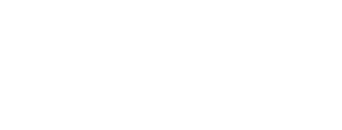
On the surface, this would seem more plausible now, given that China can justify any such action by citing what the US did in Venezuela. So can Russia, in Ukraine.

But some experts have said that the American action could actually have the opposite effect. The night strike showed that the US is prepared to act unilaterally in situations where it feels that its interests are being compromised. Suddenly, with the Venezuela excursion, the Americans have showcased their military power to the fullest.

While there may be disagreements with the manner in which Maduro was kidnapped, there is little doubt that the entire exercise was a tactical success from an American standpoint and showcased US military and strategic might, which could effectively deter China and others from undertaking any misadventure, at least for now.

The other problem for Beijing is that, as it did in Venezuela, it has been expanding its sphere of influence to Africa and the Americas over the last couple of decades. The US action in Venezuela sends out a signal that if the Americans decide to limit this influence, they are fully capable of doing so.

Now, that could be a concern for countries that have aligned with China in recent years, especially as the trade war and tussle for control over strategic assets are getting more evident between the world's two biggest economies. The entire framework of Chinese overseas lending under its Belt-and-Road initiative also comes under a cloud after the Venezuela episode.





# How the Monroe Doctrine became a global idea of power

– *Nikita Mohta*

When Jay Sexton, Professor of History at the University of Missouri, worked on the Monroe Doctrine over a decade ago, it was, he recalls, “a dead letter.” However, the recent invocation of the doctrine by President Donald Trump following his capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has given Sexton his “five minutes of fame,” he says, laughing, during an interview with [indianexpress.com](http://indianexpress.com).

The two-century-old doctrine has its origins in the autumn of 1823, when President James Monroe convened his cabinet to deliberate on how to respond to what was perceived as a

national security crisis. In his book *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011), Sexton notes: “The Monroe administration feared that European powers were seeking to recolonize the newly independent states of Spanish America, an act that might endanger the United States itself. The cabinet’s deliberations resulted in Monroe’s December 2 message to Congress, the textual basis of what later became the ‘Monroe Doctrine.’”

In that message, the President declared that the Western Hemisphere was no longer open to European colonisation or intervention, actions the United States would deem a threat to its security. The doctrine has since assumed a central place in the American foreign policy psyche. Its meaning, purpose, and application, however, have been reshaped repeatedly by successive political regimes.

Alex Bryne, lecturer in History at De Montfort University, says his initial response to the Trump administration’s recent invocation of the doctrine was one of confusion. “As a scholar of the Monroe Doctrine, the President’s invocation of the doctrine does not seem to be particularly relevant to the US invasion of Venezuela. There is no external, non-American threat that the United States is seeking to combat in Venezuela. It was a Venezuelan leader who was deemed to

be a threat, so the US disregarded Venezuela's sovereignty on the basis of national interest alone..." he tells [indianexpress.com](http://indianexpress.com) in an email interview.

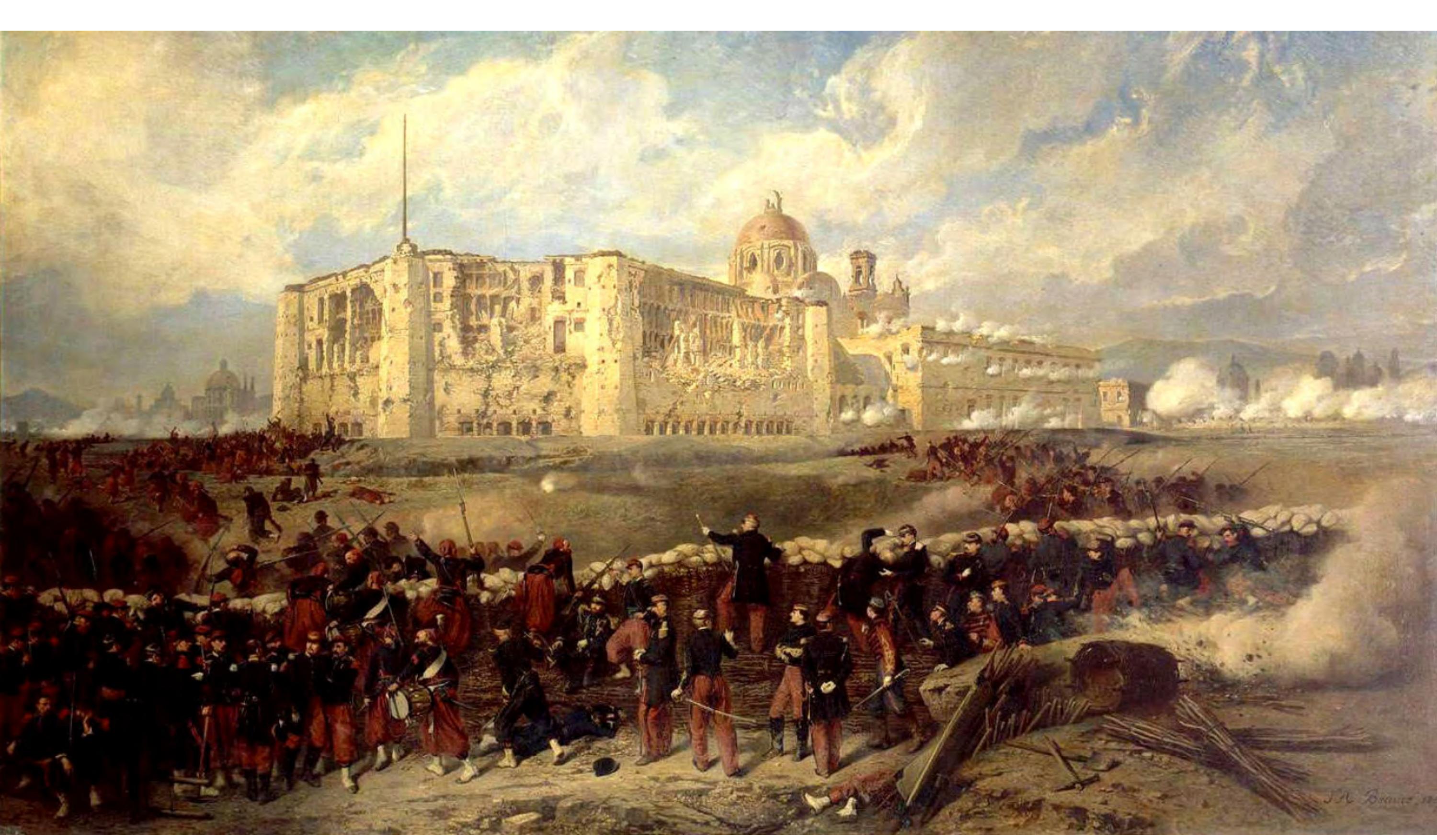
The confusion is shared by academics and experts across the globe. What is the Monroe Doctrine? What was the geopolitical context at the time of its drafting, how has its meaning evolved, and what are its absurdities?

## **Backdrop to the Monroe Doctrine**

European colonial expansion began in the fifteenth century, and by the seventeenth century, European powers maintained vast empires beyond the continent. In the American hemisphere, Spain, Britain, Portugal, and France held extensive possessions. After the American Revolution – a political conflict between the Thirteen Colonies and Great Britain – friction developed between North America and Europe over territorial claims, political systems, and trade.

According to Sexton, although Britain lost its most important North American colonies in the 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolution, its imperial rise lay ahead. "The British Empire was larger and more powerful in 1820 than it had been in 1776. During the

intervening decades, it tightened its grip on India; its resources and people poured into its settler colonies in Canada and Australasia; it acquired strategic way stations such as the African cape and Singapore; it increased its commercial and naval presence in distant markets in East Asia and in Latin America...and its political system weathered the ideological storm unleashed by the American and French revolutions,” he writes.



*French intervention in Mexico, 1861–1867 (Wikipedia)*

This expanding British empire cast a shadow over the young United States, which found itself entangled in British influence long after achieving political independence.

“There was an American conviction that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans conveniently divided the world into Old and New, Eastern and Western Hemispheres with distinct political systems: the Old World characterised by autocratic monarchies

and the New by republican states, linked to freedom and liberty,” notes Denneth M Modeste, academic and public official, in *The Monroe Doctrine in a Contemporary Perspective* (2020).

Against this backdrop emerged the American view that the Western Hemisphere was no longer a region where Europeans should find a favourable reception. As Modeste writes, “If a policy statement was required to promulgate this idea, it took the form of the Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed by United States President James Monroe on December 2, 1823.”

## Tenets of the doctrine

James Monroe’s annual message to the United States Congress outlined two core principles that together became known as the Monroe Doctrine. The first, the non-colonisation clause, sought to prevent European powers from pursuing future colonial expansion in the Americas. The second was the principle of non-interference, which warned European powers against imposing their political systems on the Americas or threatening the integrity of newly independent states. In return, the president pledged that the United States would refrain from involvement in European affairs.

In his book *The Monroe Doctrine and United States*

*National Security in the Early Twentieth Century* (2020), Bryne argues that the doctrine's meaning became increasingly contested as US power expanded following the Spanish-American War of 1898. As America assumed a more assertive international role, policymakers debated how the doctrine should be understood and applied.

“Through public addresses, congressional debates, academic publications and conference papers,” Bryne observes, Americans “fractured” the doctrine’s meaning.



James Monroe (Wikipedia)

Bryne identifies two competing interpretations of the doctrine. One framed the Monroe Doctrine as a justification for maintaining regional hegemony

in the Western Hemisphere. The other emphasised inter-American unity and political, economic, cultural, and military cooperation. Sexton adds, “The key to understanding the nineteenth-century Monroe Doctrine is the simultaneity and interdependence of anticolonialism and imperialism.”

An example of this changing meaning, Modeste notes, occurred during the Second World War when one of the doctrine’s foundational principles – the US commitment to not interfere in European affairs – was effectively abandoned as the country retreated from isolation and later entered the war against the Axis powers.

## **The many absurdities of the Monroe Doctrine**

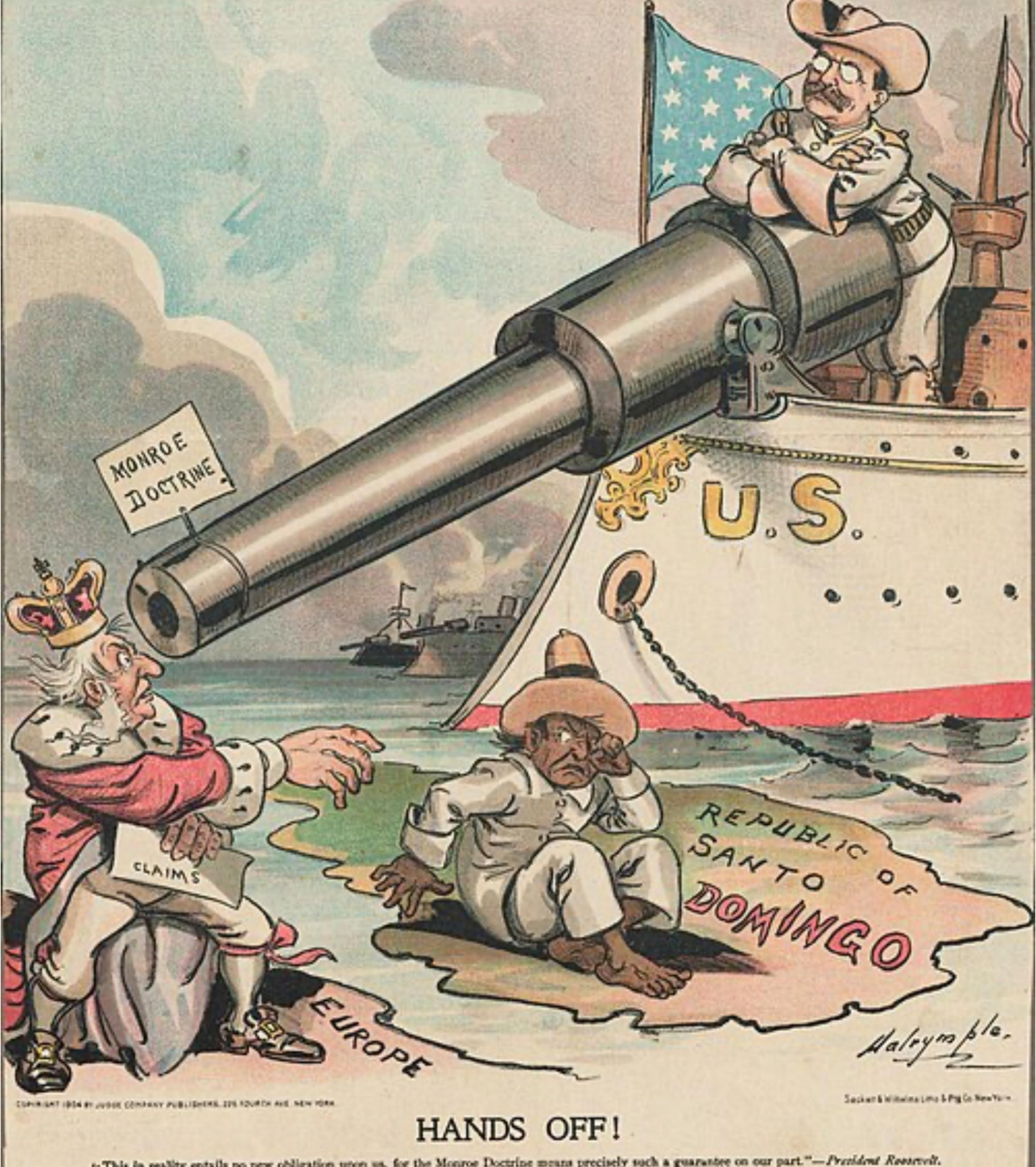
The doctrine has been invoked repeatedly over time. As decades passed, it acquired a semi-sacred status in American political culture, and by the turn of the twentieth century, it was widely regarded as a foundational historic document deserving reverence. “A mythology had solidified around it, one that claimed that the United States had been able to protect its national interests on the world stage because its leaders had adhered to the doctrine’s tenets since its enunciation,” writes Bryne in his book. Venezuela offers an early example of this mythology at work.

According to Bryne, the Venezuelan boundary dispute of 1895-1896 was central to reinforcing this narrative. When a border conflict erupted between Venezuela and British Guiana, President Grover Cleveland and his Secretary of State Richard Olney invoked the doctrine to challenge British influence in the Western Hemisphere, successfully pushing for arbitration. Standing up to the British Empire convinced Olney that adherence to the doctrine had given the United States a “practically sovereign” position across the Western Hemisphere.

The recent invocation of the doctrine, however, marks a shift. What Bryne terms the “Trump Corollary” suggests that the US intervention in Latin America no longer requires the presence of an external threat. “We have arrived at a time when the Monroe Doctrine really does equate to US imperialism without any pretence,” he says. “The Monroe Doctrine has long equated to US imperialism within Latin America, so its invocation will presumably raise tensions between many Latin American nations and the United States.”

One of the doctrine’s central problems, scholars argue, lies in its inherent ambiguity. “The original doctrine was vague and did not demand action on the part of the United States. It did not state that the United States should oppose European

colonialism in Latin America – it merely stated that the United States would view colonialisation as a threat to its interests...,” writes Bryne, noting that a wide range of ideas — from anti-colonialism to imperial ambition have since been attached to it.



“This in reality entails no new obligation upon us, for the Monroe Doctrine means precisely such a guarantee on our part.” — President Roosevelt.

Political cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt using the Monroe Doctrine to keep European powers out (Wikipedia)

This vagueness has allowed the doctrine to be repeatedly reinterpreted, most significantly by President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1904, Roosevelt established a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

that stated that the United States could intervene in the internal affairs of any Latin American country if that country was responsible for any wrongdoing. In essence, the United States began policing the Americas so that European nations would not interfere in the affairs of Latin American countries.

Sexton says, “And so Trump’s invocation really resembles that one, the Roosevelt Corollary, much more than it does the original.”

## **When there was a call for a Monroe Doctrine for India**

The Doctrine’s global appeal once extended beyond the Americas. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, seeking international support against British rule, argued for a similar principle of self-determination. In *The Wilsonian Moment* (2007), historian Erez Manela cites an appeal by Tilak for a “Monroe Doctrine for India,” arguing that colonial powers should withdraw to allow self-rule — an interpretation that overlooked the history of US intervention in Latin America but spoke more to the nationalist hopes of the era.

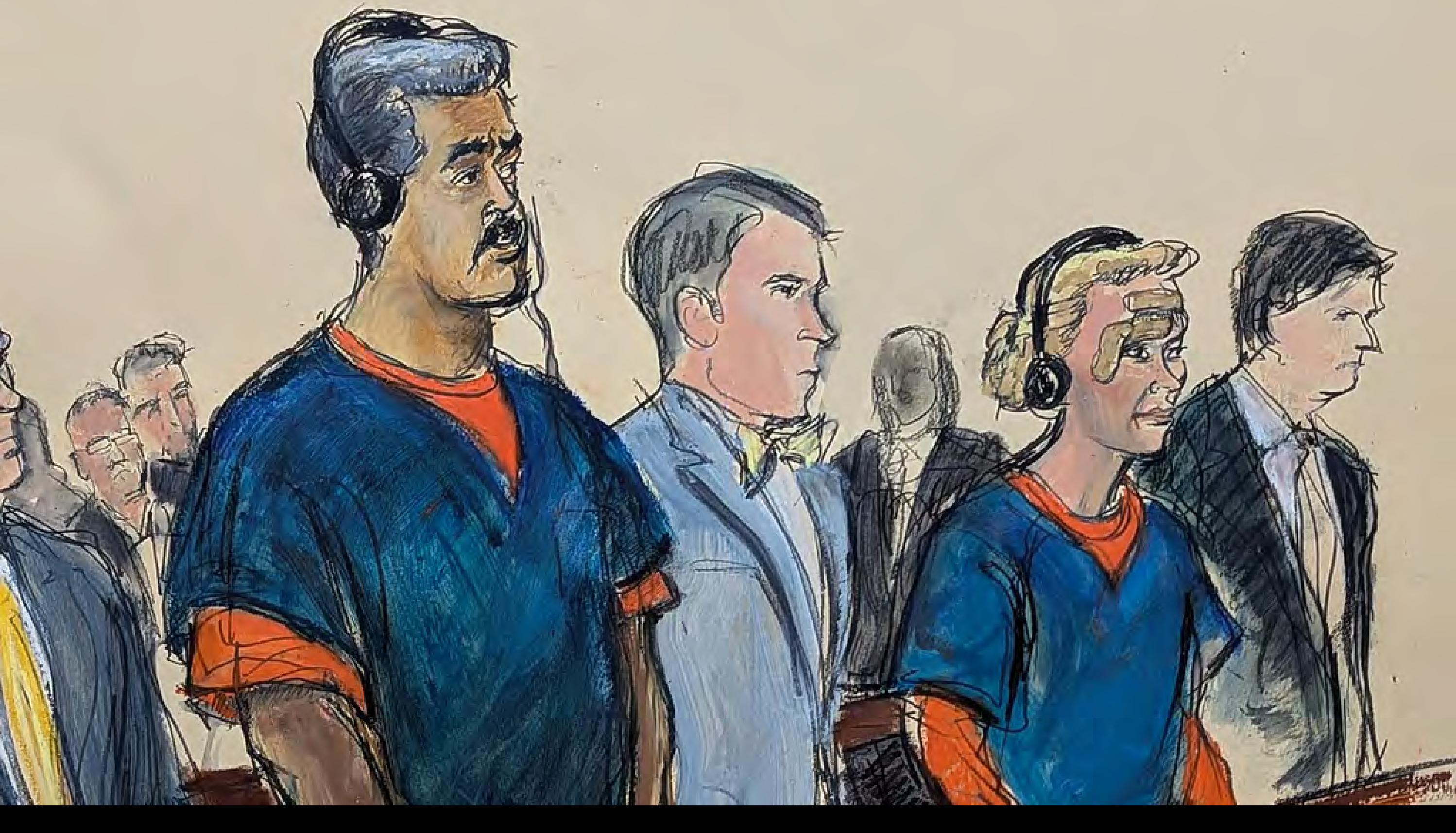
For Sexton, the doctrine’s revival today signals a return to an older world order. “Fundamentally, the doctrine is about dividing the globe into spheres of influence...this is a blast from the past.”

He argues that such thinking ultimately benefits US rivals. “What basis does the United States have to oppose the intervention by Russia on Ukraine or China on Hong Kong if it itself is doing exactly that same thing in Latin America? (sic)”

Looking ahead, Sexton warns of wider consequences: regional instability, renewed great-power rivalry, and domestic backlash in the United States. “So you might want to think about destabilisation, not of just international affairs, but the further destabilisation of US internal politics.”

As Henry Kissinger, secretary of state under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, once observed: “No single utterance of an American president, no statement of policy and strategic political philosophy, has had more influence on the history of the world and the history of a region than President James Monroe’s fundamental and seminal statement of 1823...”





# How an anonymous gambler made **nearly half-a-million** **dollars via Maduro capture bet**

– *Soumyarendra Barik*

**A**n anonymous gambler has sparked controversy after making \$436,000 from a wager on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's capture, placed just hours before the US announced the operation. The windfall has ignited debate about insider trading on prediction markets, platforms that remain largely unregulated despite handling billions in wagers. And raised question marks about the identity of this trader.

The trader, identified only by a blockchain code, joined Polymarket, a major opinion trading platform, last month and placed four positions

exclusively on Venezuela-related outcomes. From an initial stake of \$32,537, the account netted over \$436,000 when Maduro was seized by US forces on January 3.

According to Polymarket data, on Friday (January 2) afternoon, traders assessed Maduro's exit probability at merely 6.5 per cent. By midnight, odds had jumped to 11 per cent, then surged dramatically in the early hours of Saturday (January 3) – just before President Donald Trump announced on Truth Social that Maduro was in US custody. This sudden shift suggests traders potentially positioned themselves with advanced knowledge of the military operation.

Platforms like Polymarket and Kalshi operate in a sector called prediction markets, or opinion trading. These platforms allow users to wager on the outcome of future events. While there are some regulations on the sector in countries like the US, they are not as heavily regulated or scrutinised like traditional stock markets. In India, the government banned such platforms last year as part of a broader crackdown on the online gambling sector.

## What are opinion trading platforms?

Opinion trading platforms provide their users or participants a platform to trade or enter into

arrangements wherein the payout is dependent on the outcome of a yes/no proposition of happening or not happening of the underlying event.

In some cases, opinion trading platforms are designed in a manner so as to resemble an investment platform as they use terminologies such as profits, stop loss, trading, etc., terms closely associated with trades in securities.

These platforms allow participants to earn money by investing in their predictions on any sports, political, weather, or crypto events. Participants can bet on any event based on their predictions. If the predictions are correct, a participant makes money, and in case the prediction goes wrong, they lose.

For instance, in Maduro's instance, one of the most popular questions on Polymarket was whether he would be in US custody by January 31. The question was first floated on the platform on January 3, and initially, had less than 15 per cent people betting a 'yes' to it. However, within a few hours, the tide turned significantly, and the 'yes' bets surged past 99 per cent.

The opinion trading sector is regulated across countries like the US, UK and Australia. In the US, it is regulated by the Commodity Futures

Trading Commission (CFTC), one the country's two main stock market regulators.

Polymarket had earlier come under the scrutiny of the US Department of Justice for allegedly accepting trades from US-based users. At the time, the company was not registered with the CFTC and as a result, could not legally allow US-based users to wager on the platform. It was only registered in the US in late 2025.

## **India's crackdown on prediction markets**

It started with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) cautioning investors that no investor protection mechanisms were available on prediction markets. "Since none of the platforms providing opinion trading can qualify to be recognised as a stock exchange, and are neither registered or regulated by SEBI, any trading of securities on them is illegal (in case some of the opinions traded qualify as security)," SEBI had said in early 2025.

Then, in August 2025, the government placed a blanket ban on all online money gaming services, which impacted companies such as Probo and Opinio that offered opinion trading services. The law, called The Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025 the government will

prohibit any person from offering online games in India, failing which they could be imprisoned for up to three years, and penalised Rs 1 crore. Those promoting such platforms, such as social media influencers, will also face jail time of two years, and a penalty of Rs 50 lakh. The government will also prohibit banks and financial institutions from facilitating financial transactions on such platforms.

At its height, the opinion trading sector had garnered over 5 crore users in India, and had received more than Rs 4,200 crore in funding from over 35 investors which include Sequoia Capital (PeakXV), Elevation Capital, Accel Partners, Soma Capital and Y Combinator.





## Alarm bells in Mexico, Colombia, Cuba

– *Anagha Jayakumar*

Soon after the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, US President Donald Trump threatened action against two other Latin American nations – Colombia and Mexico – if they failed to reduce the flow of illicit drugs into the US. He added that Cuba, a close ally of Venezuela, “looks like it’s ready to fall” on its own.

It’s not just the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine, which asserts the western hemisphere as a zone of US influence, that’s behind these threats. A mixture of factors such as ideology, drugs, immigration and strategic partners is also behind Trump’s ire.

In a joint statement, the governments of Spain, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay said that the US actions “constitute an extremely dangerous precedent for peace and regional security and endanger the civilian population”.

## Colombia

Colombia has traditionally been a major ally of the US and its closest security partner in South America over the past 25 years. Since the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was passed in 2012, the US has been Colombia’s largest trading partner, accounting for 34% of the country’s total trade.

Colombia also comprised \$5.4 billion of the \$16 billion in US crude oil imports in 2023. Coffee and roses are also major Colombian exports. However, Colombia is best known today as the leading global producer of the illicit drug cocaine, as well as the coca plant from which it is derived. It accounts for over two-thirds of the total production of the drug, and the plant.

In the past, the US has helped Colombia with financial assistance to fight the war on drugs. This has yielded mixed success – while incidents of political violence have largely reduced and the country was able to demobilise extremist groups, production

of coca and cocaine has grown since 2013.

There were 1.6 million people of Colombian origin recorded in the US in 2021, or one in four South American immigrants. However, bilateral relations have been strained ever since Gustavo Petro became Colombia's first-ever leftist president, seeking to distance the country from the US.

While US president Joe Biden designated Colombia as a major non-NATO US ally in 2022, Petro has been unwilling to cooperate with US-backed drug policies, expressed an interest in joining the BRICS+ grouping, which is regarded as a prominent critic of Western hegemony, and decided to break ties with Israel, a major US ally.

Under Trump, these relations have devolved further. In January 2025, his administration threatened major repercussions against Colombia after initially refusing to accept US military aircraft carrying Colombian deportees. Trump's move to cut US foreign assistance, tariff announcements and the recent US military build-up in the Caribbean Sea have all earned Petro's consternation.

Over the weekend, Petro called the US attacks on Venezuela an “assault on the sovereignty” of Latin America that would lead to a humanitarian crisis.

## Mexico

The US and Mexico share a chequered history over centuries, but today, they share deep economic ties. Mexico was the US's largest trading partner in 2023, accounting for \$798.9 billion in total goods. The implementation of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020 has helped to boost bilateral trade.

The 3,145-km border, however, has posed significant challenges, most notably the movement of undocumented immigrants and illicit drugs. Mexico also leads in the global production and trafficking of fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic drug, which has contributed to a rise in drug overdoses in the US, the report noted.

Trump's first presidential campaign succeeded in part because of his promise to erect a border wall between the US and Mexico, promising that Mexico would fund its construction. This was a bust. Subsequently, the two nations agreed to curtail the flow of illegal immigrants into the US with a stricter asylum programme.

On returning to the White House last January, Trump sought to revive construction on the wall. He also announced punitive tariffs against Canada, China and Mexico for failing to curb fentanyl trafficking. He also designated eight

Latin American criminal organisations have been designated as Foreign Terrorist Organisations, and threatened to launch drone strikes into Mexico to combat drug trafficking.

His proposal to allow American troops into Mexico to fight suspected Mexican drug cartels last April was rebuffed by Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum.

## Cuba

Unlike the other two countries, the US has historically had a troubled relationship with Cuba. Today, Cuba remains dependent on Venezuela for oil, and has received large-scale foreign investment from China and Russia. With the fate of the Venezuelan economy uncertain, Cuba may turn to Russia, building on their increased military and economic cooperation in recent years.

During the Cold War, a group of revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro seized control of Havana, the capital, and overthrew Fulgencio Batista's US-backed government. Following the Cuban revolution, the new regime sought to distance itself from the US – deepening ties with the Soviet Union, nationalising American-owned properties and placing tariffs on US imports.

The US responded in kind, imposing economic

sanctions and strict travel restrictions, despite recognising Fidel Castro as the new leader. During this period, the US attempted to invade Cuba to unseat Castro in the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion, failing to do so. This result proved to be a decisive point in the Cold War, pushing Castro closer to the Soviet Union and its leader, Nikita Krushchev.

Subsequent US administrations bolstered the American sanctions and trade embargo, with US President Ronald Reagan designating Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982. As a result, the Cuban GDP declined by 35% between 1989 and 1993.

It was only in 2008 that the first real efforts at normalising bilateral relations would be made, under President Barack Obama, who eased the travel restrictions and allowed Cubans in the US to send remittances back home. A full restoration of diplomatic ties in 2014 meant the removal of Cuba's terrorism sponsor designation. The two nations reopened their embassies and signed a series of bilateral agreements.

However, any progress thus made was completely reversed by Trump's ascent to the White House. In his first term, Trump doubled down on the goods embargo, and reintroduced sanctions on Cuba over its growing proximity to Venezuela. The first Trump administration sought to limit oil

exports from Venezuela into Cuba, banned Cuban officials from entering the US and redesignated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In his second term, Trump reversed Biden-era initiatives, which had restored Obama-era normalisation measures. Additionally, Trump introduced sanctions targeted towards Cuba's tourism industry, a major driver of the Cuban economy, which contributed 10% of GDP before the Covid pandemic. Since 2020, Cuba has been in an economic recession, with its GDP contracting 1.1% and inflation at 24% in 2024.

Trump said that the Cuban economy is in tatters and will slide further now with the ouster of Maduro, who provided the Caribbean island with subsidised oil. “It’s going down. It’s going down for the count.” Trump said of Cuba.





## India to open mission in Caracas

NEW DELHI, Oct 11—The Government of India will soon open a resident mission in Caracas, capital of Venezuela, a joint communique issued at the end of the visit to Venezuela of the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, has announced.

An indication of the plan for an Indian mission in Caracas—for Indo-Venezuelan commercial exchanges to begin with—was given by Mrs Gandhi herself at a banquet in her honour given yesterday by the Venezuelan President, Mr Raul Leoni.

The joint Indo-Venezuelan communique issued in the capitals of both the countries, said the two countries recognised the need and scope for co-operation between them in the commercial, cultural, technological and scientific fields.

It said: "The Prime Minister of India announced the intention of the Government of India to open in the near future a resident mission in Caracas. She also welcomed the prospect of the visit of the Foreign Minister of Venezuela to India."

The Prime Minister invited President Raul Leoni and Mrs Leoni to visit India at their convenience. The President has accepted the invitation.

The President of Venezuela and Mrs Gandhi have referred in the joint communique to the polarisation of wealth and economic power in the developed countries on the one hand and the stagnation and slow advance in the developing countries and said that determined efforts must be made to rectify the present pattern of international commerce.

The Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi being welcomed by the President of Venezuela, Mr Raul Leoni, at Maiquetia airport on Thursday.

# The 18 hours that Indira Gandhi spent in Venezuela

— *Adrija Roychowdhury*

As the clock struck 12.45 pm on October 10, 1968, the aircraft carrying Prime Minister Indira Gandhi landed in Venezuela's Simon Bolivar International Airport. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation, as it was the first time an Indian prime minister was visiting the Latin American country. Gandhi was greeted by Venezuelan President Raúl Leoni and his cabinet ministers. As soon as she stepped out of the aircraft, the military band played the Indian national anthem, followed by the Venezuelan one.

Gandhi's visit to Venezuela was part of a longer

Latin American and Caribbean tour, which had begun in Colombia on September 23. Her itinerary also included Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina. Although she spent only 18 hours in Venezuela, the visit was filled with warm interactions with the country's politicians and civilians. Upon her return to India, Gandhi said in the Lok Sabha that during her tour she realised "we knew less about South America than South America knows about us". The names of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, she stated, were widely known and quoted in each of the countries she visited.

Revisiting this episode offers perspective on a period when India was actively seeking to build diplomatic relationships with newly independent or post-colonial nations across the world, including in Latin America. Shared experiences of colonialism and parallel aspirations for political autonomy and economic development shaped these early engagements, setting them apart from Cold War-era alignments with the developed world.

## **Greeted with fanfare**

As Gandhi alighted from the aircraft, she was pleased to find an airport packed with locals who had come to get a glance of her. "The people of Venezuela, who found inspiration in India's struggle for independence, did not hold back

in expressing their expression for her leader,” according to *Indira Gandhi in Venezuela (1968-2013): 45th Anniversary of a Historic Visit*, a book published by the Indian Embassy in Caracas in 2013.

Gandhi appeared beaming in a green saree with black checks, shot with golden threads, a string of pearls around her neck and a watch on her wrist. Flags from both countries decorated the runway, as the crowd broke out in festive spirit. Gandhi is known to have requested the president to be allowed to break protocol and walk over to accept the bouquets offered by the Venezuelan people and children, as well as by the Indian communities residing there.

Before entering the official vehicle, Gandhi broke protocol once again, stopping to receive a bouquet from an Indian girl named M Rao, the daughter of a UNESCO official in Venezuela. In a spontaneous act of celebration, the Indians present at the airport broke out into the national anthem of India as she drove away to the capital city, Caracas.

At Caracas, her first stop was at the National Pantheon, which she visited accompanied by the foreign minister. She laid a wreath on the tomb of Simón Bolívar, celebrated as the liberator of the country from Spanish colonial rule. Here, too, she was met with an enthusiastic crowd

that applauded her and sought her autograph. “I come to build bridges of love between Latin America and my country,” she stated in her speech later that day. She said that she wished for closer ties between the people of India and Venezuela.

President Leoni, whose words followed Gandhi’s speech, pointed out that India and Venezuela shared common realities and motives. Venezuela, like India, he noted, was battling economic inequality within and beyond its borders. He pointed out that the fight against poverty and the determination to ensure the right of their people to self-determination, free of foreign and odious interferences, were common goals of both countries.

Before leaving Venezuela, the two leaders issued a joint communique announcing the plan to open a resident mission in Caracas to facilitate Indo-Venezuelan commercial exchanges. It said that the two countries recognised the need and potential for cooperation in the commercial, cultural, technological, and scientific fields. It also referred to the polarisation of wealth and economic power in developed countries on the one hand and the stagnation and slow progress in the developing world, and said that determined efforts were required to rectify the present patterns of international commerce.

## Upon Indira's return to India

Soon after her return to India, Gandhi spoke about her travels in the Lok Sabha. “It was a moving experience to discover that India is held in such high esteem and indeed affection,” she said, as quoted by a 1968 Times of India report. “Everywhere there is deep interest in our present endeavours and understanding of our efforts to promote international peace and cooperation,” she added.

Speaking about the significance of establishing ties with the South American countries, Gandhi pointed out: “It is to our advantage and in our national interest to forge the closest relations with the largest number of proud and resurgent nations of South America and the Caribbean. We hope that with the follow-up action which we have in mind, our objective of developing a close and fruitful relationship with them will be realised.”

Over the decades, however, the ties between India and Venezuela, rooted in anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, have been largely forgotten. Yet traces linger in unobtrusive corners of the country—such as a primary school in a village in West Bengal or a street in New Delhi’s diplomatic enclaves that bears the name of Simon Bolivar.





# The viral memeification of Maduro's arrest

– *Sonal Gupta*

The script writes itself. It reads like dystopian fiction. A mercurial leader of a country captures a strongman autocrat of another country. The latter is charged with narco-terrorism and awaits a trial. In the backdrop, there is an oil industry that needs “fixing”, decidedly so by American hands.

Amid all this geopolitical theatre, one detail hijacks the spotlight. A photo shared by United States President Donald Trump announcing Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's capture goes viral for a completely different reason: his Nike Tech sweatshirt, the unofficial uniform of gym bros and fitness influencers.

We were barely three days into the New Year, and we already had a “not on my bingo card” moment. The implications of Maduro’s arrest for the rules-based international order and territorial integrity were much debated among experts, in the media, and on online forums. Meanwhile, a parallel discourse dissected Maduro’s outfit, supposedly the grey Nike Tech Fleece jacket and joggers.



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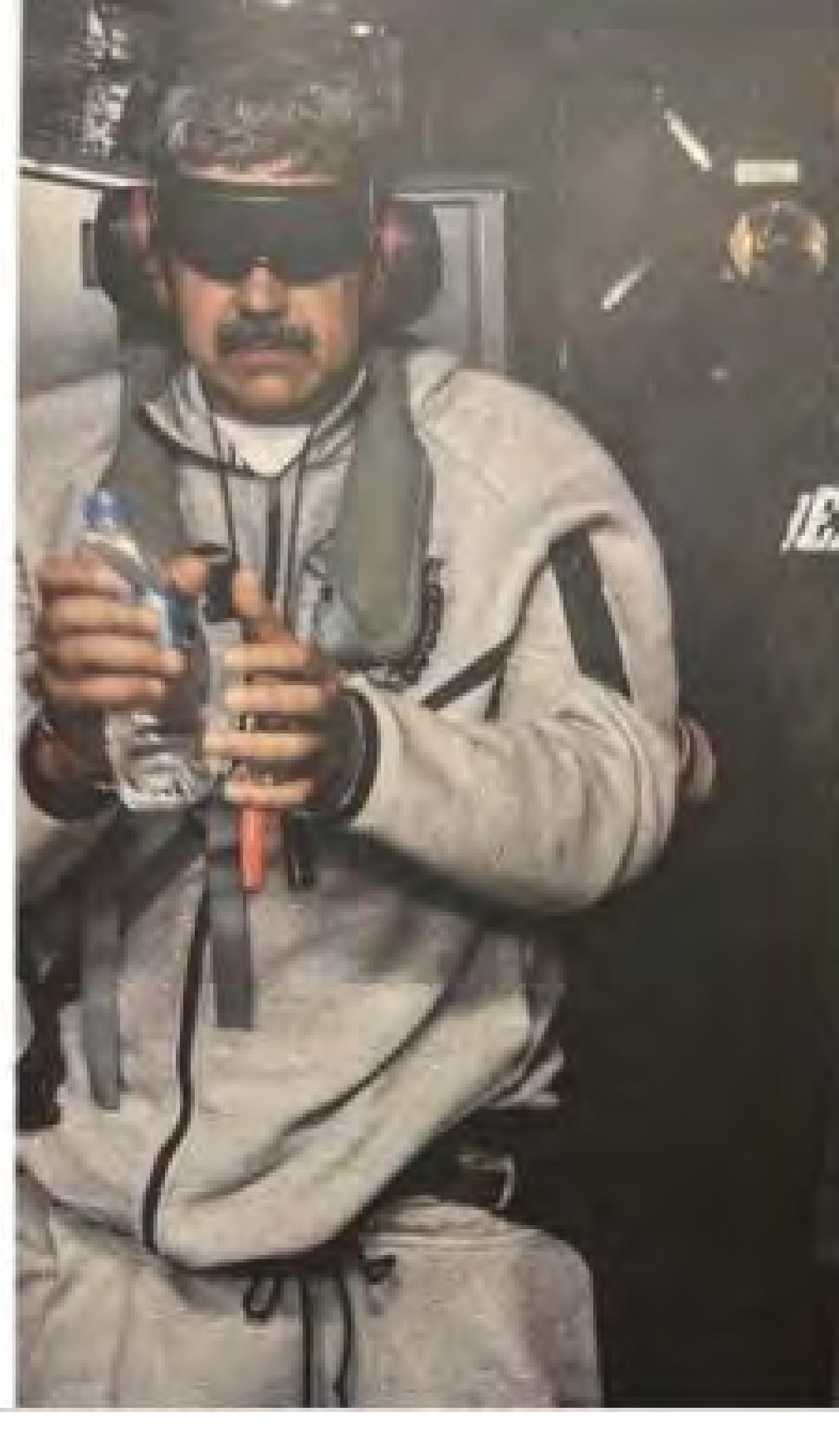
Nicolas Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima.



**Donald J. Trump**  

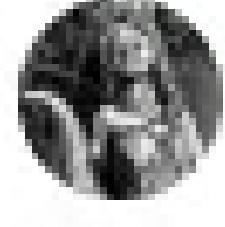
@realDonaldTrump

Nicolas Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima.



The moment was iconic, to say the least, capturing the imagination of millions of internet users. As

is now customary with breaking news, memes raced across social media far faster than the facts ever could.



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Who's next?



Soon enough, AI-generated, altered images of Maduro flooded the internet. One showed him

smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk, dressed in his Nike Tech sweatsuit, the giant headphones, and the eyecover, much like the original photo.

Memes had captions like, “steal his look” or “just coup it”, a nod to Nike’s slogan “just do it”. Another showed Trump shopping for the same fit. Then there was a video of Maduro dancing in a prison cell.

Funnily enough, Nike Tech was already a subject of memes in the US and UK, with young men debating whether the quarter-zip style sweatshirt was better than the sportswear brand’s sweatsuits. In *The Guardian*, freelance writer Xaymaca Awoyungbo wrote that the quarter-zip movement was a way to attach more “professionalism,” and liken oneself to “white, middle-class finance bros – or Rishi Sunak”. Whereas, the Nike Tech sweatshirt was considered more “hoodlum”, associated with “black, working-class men living in cities”, and represented “criminality”.

## Linking sweatsuits with criminals

Pop culture has reinforced the association of sweatsuits with criminals time and again, whether it’s Tony Soprano, a mob boss in the HBO crime drama *The Sopranos*, or Henry Hill’s famous Adidas tracksuit from Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*.

The trend came full circle and turned into an instant meme when Maduro, widely considered somewhat of a “mob boss” himself, was seen donning a sweatshirt.

But there’s more to the sweatshirt memes than just hilarity and absurdity. It signals a digital space where serious news is met with trivialising reactions. A few months ago, when burglars broke into the iconic Louvre Museum in Paris, the internet reacted with apathy. The crime quickly became a comedic pastime. Users posted videos bejewelled from head to toe, claiming to have robbed the museum. In fact, the criminals’ all-black outfits were once again a topic of discussion, as many turned them into their Halloween costumes.

Earlier, when Luigi Mangione was arrested for allegedly assassinating the United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, much of the internet was obsessed with his chiselled jawline and manicured eyebrows. His courtroom outfits were discussed on Instagram reels and Reddit threads. Even today, comments on updates related to his case have users jokingly giving alibis for Mangione, claiming, “he was with me” at the time of the incident.

## Finding humour within news

We saw a similar wave of memes during the recent

India–Pakistan tensions, with jokes ranging from water scarcity in Pakistan after New Delhi suspended the Indus Waters Treaty to quips about navigating government-mandated mock drills.

Experts suggest that memes help people cope with stressful situations like geopolitical crises, wars, or inflation through humour. Human beings find connection when they create, like, or proliferate memes, building a community through shared context. Humour makes news palatable.

Yet the transformation of significant real-world developments into throwaway memes points to something more troubling. When empathy and compassion give way to ridicule and performative irony, we risk breaking down the social order. Online, almost anything can be excused under the safety net of “dark humour”. Many often fall back to the familiar argument, “it’s not that deep.”

But perhaps that is precisely what demands deeper introspection. What moments are grave enough to warrant our full attention? And in a fugue-like state of endless doomsscrolling, what can still break through the noise?

In the era of rage-baiting and engagement farming, memeification goes beyond just a coping

strategy. It becomes a means to hijack attention and distract from the crux of the matter. The effect is more pronounced when the administration itself busies itself in “content creation”.



Department of State

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President Trump is a man of action.

If you don't know, now you know.



Trump has repeatedly shared AI slop, reimagining conflict-torn Gaza as the “Riviera of the Middle East” or of him in a plane dumping faeces on the protests against him. Shortly after the Maduro capture, the official handle of the White House shared an image of Trump with the words “FAFO”

(an acronym for the phrase “f\*\*\* around and find out”) shortly after Maduro was captured.

The Department of State said, “Don’t play games with President Trump,” supposedly as a warning to other nations.

When leaders govern through memes and audiences consume crises as entertainment, we risk something more fundamental than just being uninformed. We risk becoming unable to distinguish between spectacle and substance, between performance and policy.

There are already indications of what could come next. The White House is reportedly deliberating acquiring Greenland, but the news was suspiciously foreshadowed by Katie Miller, wife of Trump aide Stephen Miller, who shared an image of Greenland’s map draped in US flag colours, captioned “Soon”.

Denmark issued a strong rebuke, but was Miller joking or issuing a threat? In our meme-saturated landscape, the answer hardly matters. The confusion is the point.





# The Sonipat lawyer couple turning India's darkest legal files into justice

– *Vineet Upadhyay*

At 4 am, while the rest of Sonipat sleeps, Yogita Kaushik Dahiya is already mentally rehearsing a cross-examination. In the quiet of their shared study, she and her husband, Vineet Dahiya, prepare for a battle most find unthinkable. The lawyer couple shares a rare professional bond: both are Additional Public Prosecutors at Delhi's Rohini Courts, and together, have secured over 150 convictions — a staggering 85 per cent of which fall under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

From their modest breakfast of *poha* (beaten

rice) to the high-stakes drama of fast-track courtrooms, their lives are a masterclass in discipline and empathy. They deal in the “rawest forms of human cruelty”, turning chronicles of broken childhoods into airtight legal victories.

For Yogita and Vineet, justice isn’t just a profession; it’s a shared burden and a symbiotic mission. Whether they are navigating hostile witnesses or resisting the pressures of “threats and bribes,” their resolve remains unshaken.

“This is when I gather myself. You cannot enter these cases unprepared, not just legally, but mentally,” 40-year-old Yogita says.

Nearly two hours later, her husband Vineet, 41, rises and slips seamlessly into the rhythm of the morning. Breakfast is modest and unchanging, *poha* or *daliya* (porridge), tea poured without ceremony. By 7.30 am, the couple is seated side by side at a shared study table, files arranged with quiet precision.

Sitting in their cosy office space of about 100 square feet, adorned with soft lighting arrangements with bookshelves full of law books, spiritual reads and the case files, becomes a focal point of what will transpire in a day when they appear before their respective courts.

A wooden desk complemented by an ergonomic

chair, one for the desk and two comfort chairs for the guests have been witness to countless case files, discussions, mourning, as well as celebrations depending on the outcome of the case.



*Lawyer couple Yogita and Vineet share the same study to prepare for the day's cases.*

The paperwork is heavy in every sense. Depositions, medico-legal reports, charge sheets annotated in the margins. Almost all of it relates to cases under the POCSO Act, rape, aggravated sexual assault, molestation, and sometimes murder. These are not just legal briefs but chronicles of both broken childhoods and adolescence.

“It is duty,” Yogita declares, without drama or self-congratulation. A prosecutor since 2014, she speaks with the clarity of someone who has long accepted the weight of her role.

“We owe it to the victims and survivors. Our responsibility is to ensure the law reaches its

logical conclusion,” she insists.

Vineet, a prosecutor since 2011 and the quieter of the two, agrees.

“By the time we step into court, the case is already alive in our minds. Once we’ve gone through the documents, examined the sequence of events, and anticipated the defence, the picture is clear. From there, it’s about perseverance, about staying the course before the court,” he says.

## How the journey began

Vineet, son of a retired government servant and a homemaker mother, hails from Nahri village of Sonipat and completed his legal studies in 2007.

Younger among two brothers and always aspiring to join the judiciary, he prepared for the state judicial services exam for the next three years till 2010.

He started working as an assistant public prosecutor in Tis Hazari in 2011 after his selection through the Union Public Service Commission.

Recalling a memorable case he got in 2012, he details the allegations- a sub-inspector who was promoted shot a businessman, was caught and subsequently convicted. This one, he says, was

one of his first cases through which he got a lot of recognition.

“It was one of the finest cases in my life when I had seen real appreciation for me and feelings of justice being served in the eyes of the son of the deceased. That moment had made me feel that I am in the best job where I can help people a lot,” he says.

Incidentally, both of their parents wanted them to take up a teaching job. With a willingness to walk a different path, however, they chose to take up the mantle of assisting the law to take its course in a just manner.

The couple met in 2012 and became friends. “I think it was love at first sight, but we realised it later,” Yogita quips.

Born and brought up in Sultanpur Majra of Delhi, she was a bright kid in school. Her transporter father and homemaker mother ensured the best for all their children, a son (who died in 2024 at the age of 32) and two daughters, she says.

She recalls how personal and professional roadblocks made it difficult for them to convince the families.

“Belonging to different caste groups, initially our families were against the union. It took a lot

of effort and convincing, coupled with working towards advancing our careers. Finally, in 2017, we got married with our families' agreement," she chuckles.

The couple decided not to move to Delhi but to commute from their native village in Sonipat.

"We have been with our parents for our whole lives and didn't want to move away from them. It has never been difficult to travel to Delhi for work," says Vineet.

About the new home they moved into in 2025, he reveals how it was all planned. Talking about her transition from the hustle and bustle of the national capital to a quiet, serene rural matrimonial home, beaming with a smile, Yogita said there was no problem in settling in Haryana.

"By God's grace, since 2017 until today, everything is going well. My parents-in-law are exceptions. They always stand for us and are ready to make our lives easy," she says.

Revealing that she grew up in a joint family and knows how important family is, she hints at how marital relations should be dealt with.

She believes that a marriage does not happen in isolation, and the whole family is involved. While working in 'mahila courts' (court for cases

related to women) and being part of the joint family, she understood the intricacies of relations turned sour.

“Further, at the start of a marriage, every couple desires privacy, so the family must ensure it,” she says.

Vineet says they both never wanted to move away from their roots. “We feel blessed that we have circumstances favouring us. We decided to move into the new home, but at the same time, we have not abandoned our native village. Yogita feels happier than I and close to nature there,” he says.

Yogita, who finished her law course in 2009 from Sonipat after she graduated from Delhi University in political science, tried hard to make it to the judicial services.

“I qualified for prelims once,” she says.

Her journey in the courtroom was marked by her debut as a defence lawyer. A son of a construction worker accused of an attempt to murder, the case came to her through a relative who requested legal help as the accused was from an underprivileged background and couldn’t afford a private counsel of his own.

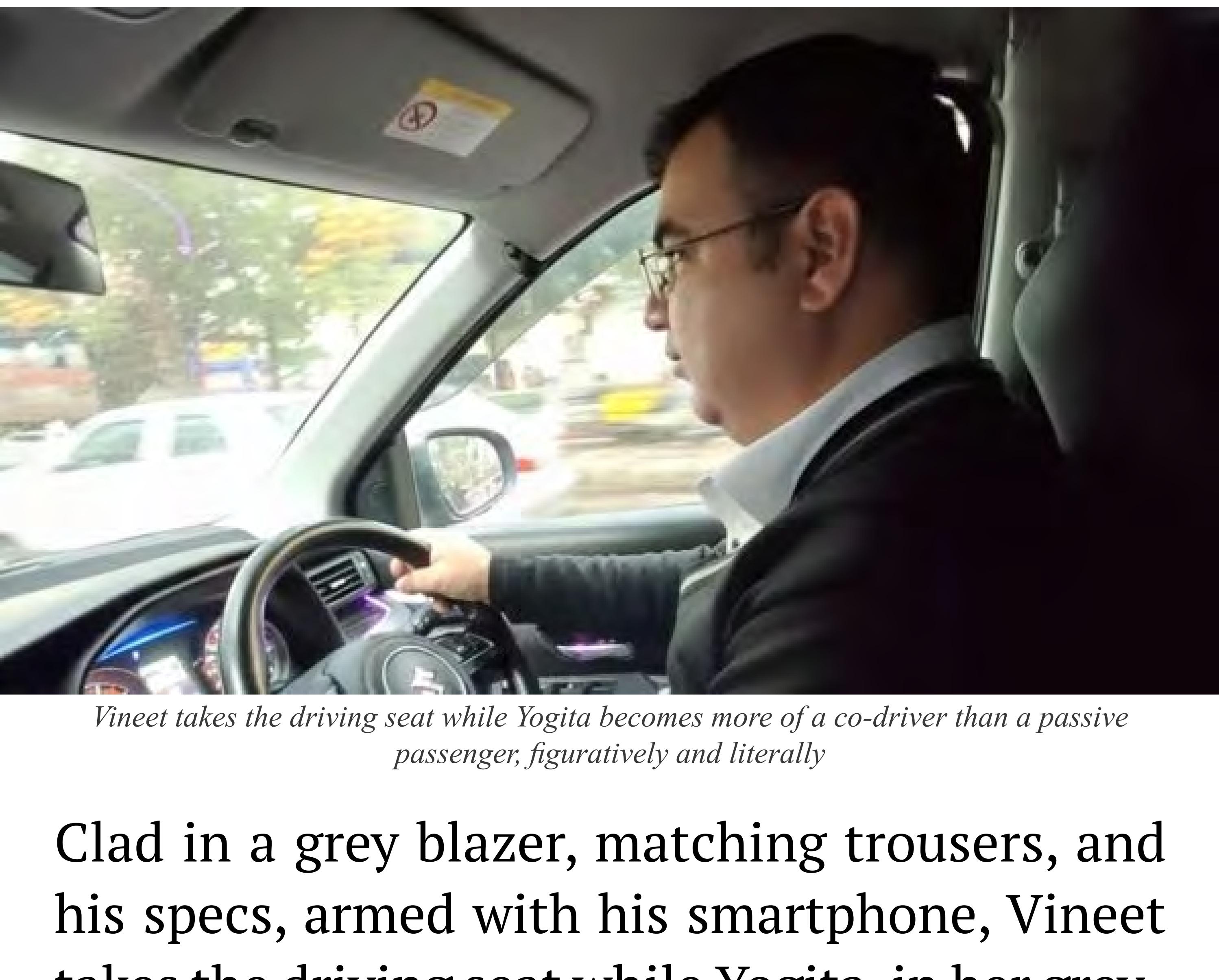
“I represented him for a while, but then reality

dawned. I was also broke, no income, my father's business was not doing well, and I had to scour a lot for cases. It is not easy to sustain when you are new and have no experience," says Yogita.

Later in 2011, she joined a law firm, and since 2014, after clearing the UPSC exams for prosecutors, a topper in that batch, she has never looked back.

"All my friends used to talk and plan about going to Oxford, Cambridge, but I never aspired to leave the country. It's a dream come true to be able to give back to society through our daily work," she says.

## The road to court



*Vineet takes the driving seat while Yogita becomes more of a co-driver than a passive passenger, figuratively and literally*

Clad in a grey blazer, matching trousers, and his specs, armed with his smartphone, Vineet takes the driving seat while Yogita, in her grey-black printed salwar suit, becomes more of a

co-driver than a passive passenger, figuratively and literally.

Earlier this year, the couple moved into what they call their “dream home” in Sonipat, close to their native village. Delhi, they say, never felt essential. Each morning, they leave around 8:20 am, reaching Rohini Courts in roughly 45 to 50 minutes.

“That’s not much in Delhi-NCR,” Vineet remarks with a faint smile, revealing the disciplinarian beneath his calm exterior.

As their car traverses through National Highway-1, evergreen Kishore Kumar takes over the mood with his ‘*assman ke niche hum aaj apne piche pyar ka jahan basa ke chale*’ inside the vehicle, and both of them stop talking to immerse in the timeless melody.

As the song stops, a case discussion comes up between the couple for the rest of the way to work.

By 9:15 am, both are in their offices on the first floor of the lawyers’ chambers building. Greetings with colleagues are brief, almost ritualistic. Soon, they are back inside their files, mentally rehearsing arguments, anticipating questions from the bench, revisiting evidence they know by heart.

On a cold December morning, Vineet heads into a fast-track court to examine a witness in a rape case, the first of several matters listed that day. Minutes after he enters, the court staff informs him that four women who had alleged rape have turned hostile.

For a moment, disappointment flickers across his face. It quickly gives way to concern. “Where are they from? Were they threatened?” he asks, requesting to speak to them. One of the women explains that she could not testify because her child was unwell.

There is no time to linger. Vineet moves briskly to another courtroom, where he opposes a bail plea filed by a rape accused. The judge accepts his submissions and denies bail. It is a small order on paper, but one that carries enormous significance for the survivor.

By 1:30pm, Vineet steps out for lunch, tired, but still alert. In prosecution, the day is never truly over until the court rises.

Both meet in Vineet’s office for lunch. Discussions related to the hearings of both their cases take over for a brief moment, only to be taken over by the upcoming one in the second half of the day.

Post-lunch at around 2:25 pm, Yogita is ready

for her court to make submissions in a sexual assault case.

The moment she walks in and reaches her seat, the court staff briefs her and hands over the additional documents. She dives and takes short notes while the judge hears another case.

As her turn comes up, she opposes the arguments of the defence lawyer who asserts it was a consensual relationship. After over 45 minutes of arguments, the court set the next date.

## Lunchroom philosophy

Lunch is shared in Yogita's office, and the conversation drifts beyond files and court schedules. Yogita believes crime does not begin with action but with thought.



*“Prosecutors rarely get their due. We are often seen as villains, especially in popular culture. We are not as glamorous as defence lawyers, but without us, the system collapses,” says Vineet.*

“Crime is collective in origin,” she says.

“It grows out of socio-economic conditions — poverty, broken families, addiction, inequality. But punishment is individualistic. If we truly want to reduce crime, especially against women and children, we must address the root causes,” she further adds.

Her words are shaped by personal loss. Yogita still grieves her brother, who died as a teenager after slipping into drug abuse. “The same parents raised all three of us without discrimination. I still wonder how he got trapped,” she says softly.

Vineet agrees that while laws like POCSO are powerful deterrents, patterns recur with disturbing regularity, perpetrators known to the child, fractured family environments, lack of education, poverty, and substance abuse.

“We feel the most helpless when family members are accused. These crimes permanently scar children. They rupture families and communities. The damage is irreversible, and it often breeds more crime,” he adds.

The couple is quick to credit judges who go the extra mile to deliver justice.

Vineet recalls a rape case involving a minor where the judge ordered DNA sampling of ten relatives and family members. “That was a judge going beyond the ordinary, but strictly within

the law. It showed how the system can work when everyone is committed,” he says.

Asked about the challenges prosecutors face, Vineet speaks candidly. “Prosecutors rarely get their due. We are often seen as villains, especially in popular culture. We are not as glamorous as defence lawyers, but without us, the system collapses,” says an ardent believer in the Constitution of India.

## A shared life, a shared burden

For Yogita and Vineet, both first-generation lawyers, the line between personal and professional life barely exists. Their partnership, they say, is symbiotic.

“Vineet is calm, composed, and handles pressure far better than I,” Yogita says, recalling how their friendship began in late 2012. “I have relied on him from the very beginning,” she adds.

Recalling their evening tea conversations, when they discuss ongoing cases with near-ritualistic resolve. “Isko toh nahi jaane denge (we won’t let this one walk free),” they vow whenever they come across a case that shakes their soul.

Years in prosecution have not dulled their emotional investment. “We try to stay detached yet passionate,” Yogita admits.

“But sometimes the mind and soul are affected. We get angry. Then we console each other, promising ourselves we’ll get a conviction. And when it happens, we celebrate those wins together,” she says.

By early afternoon, Yogita heads to court for her own submissions. Free by 3:45 pm, she returns to her office determined to clear her desk, studying files, dictating drafts, and guiding her staff.

A follower of Swami Vivekananda’s Vedanta philosophy, Yogita believes punishment must coexist with reformation. She recalls a troubling case where a 15-year-old girl accused her father of rape, only for it to later emerge that the allegation was false, driven by marital discord.

“These are deeply social problems and just legal solutions alone are not enough. They must operate at both individual and societal levels,” she believes.

## Integrity under pressure

Vineet speaks openly about the pressures prosecutors face.

“There are offers, sometimes bordering on threats,” he says.

“In my early years, I didn’t always understand what was happening. Now, if someone approaches me

saying ‘baat karni hai,’ I refuse outright. Usually, it’s about money. I don’t entertain it,” he says.

He once appeared for a state judicial services mains examination before choosing prosecution instead, a choice he says he has never regretted.

## **Yogita’s personal demons**

In 2009, Yogita, then a graduate in political science and law, could not afford Rs 27,000 for judicial services coaching. Financial constraints forced her to abandon the plan. She began practising law instead and quickly realised how difficult survival was for a young lawyer.



*For Yogita and Vineet, the line between personal and professional life barely exists.*

With help from her maternal uncle, she joined a law firm and made her first appearance in the Delhi High Court in 2011, without a gown. Justice Gita Mittal noticed and asked her why. Yogita replied simply that she had never needed one.

Soon after, she was appointed a local commissioner in the same case. Asked to collect a cheque of Rs 6,500, she instead received Rs 65,000. “I earned barely Rs 7,000 a month then. I was on cloud nine,” she recalls.

She paid for coaching, supported her family, and took on a wide range of work, bail matters, marriages under the Special Marriage Act, and divorce cases.

Her turning point came in 2014 when she cleared the preliminary examination for public prosecutor recruitment conducted by the UPSC. The mains exam had just been removed. After a long interview, heavy on legal reasoning and ethical dilemmas, she was selected.

“I cried uncontrollably,” she says. Vineet took her out for pani puri, her favourite, to celebrate.

Relatives who once questioned her decision to pursue law instead of teaching now congratulate her.

## **Homeward, and forward again**

The journey back home begins around 5:30 pm, often punctuated by quick stops for groceries, essentials, or medical consultations. This evening, they stopped at a well-known local pastry shop.

“Don’t miss this one,” Vineet insisted.

“This is our time away from work and home. We cherish these few minutes,” he said.

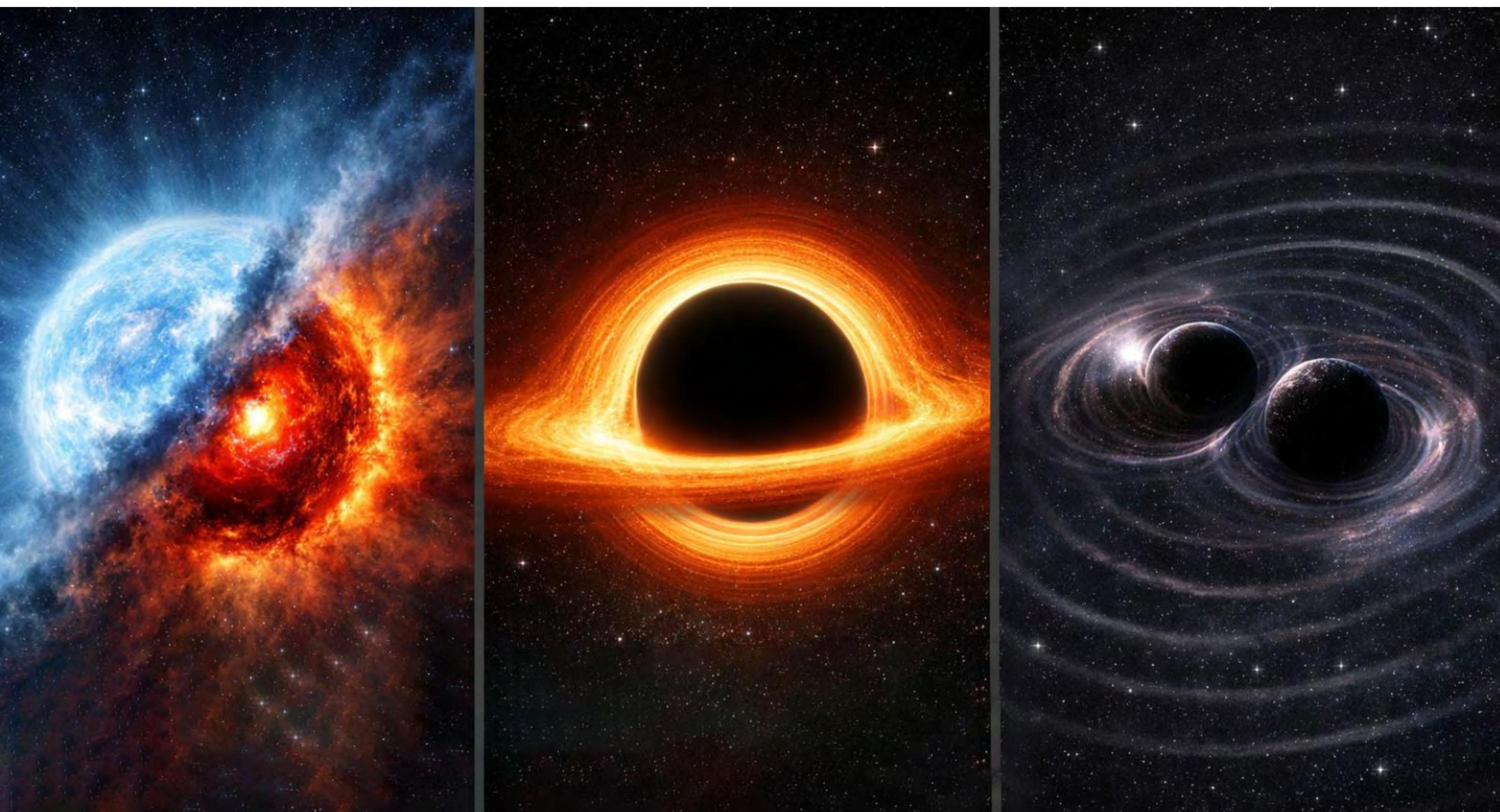
Reaching home at around 6:15-6:30 pm, the couple meets and greets the family members awaiting their arrival in their aesthetically decorated 20 x 20 living room with a teal-coloured sofa set and a matching carpet, which gave vibes of the Victorian era with soft lights.

What follows includes evening teas, family conversation, case discussion and almost every other thing under the sun. The room of their new home has become a fertile ground for their manifestations, turning into a reality on personal as well as personal front.

Evening tea follows around 7-7:30 pm, conversations drifting from a new film release to developments in the legal landscape of another country. Family time comes next, dinner around 9 pm, and quiet preparation for the next day.

As the house settles and files are finally closed, the couple prepares to begin again before dawn, two lives bound by law, discipline, and a shared, almost spiritual belief that justice, pursued honestly and relentlessly, can still make a difference.





# The many lives of **black holes**

– *Shravan Hanasoge*

A black hole is not a hole in space, nor a cosmic vacuum cleaner. It is a region where gravity becomes so intense that escape is impossible, even for light. This happens when a large amount of mass is compressed into a remarkably small space. The boundary marking the point of no return is known as the event horizon. Cross it, and all paths lead only inward.

From a distance, black holes behave like any other object of the same mass. Up close, they reveal how extreme gravity can bend space and time themselves.

## **Stellar-mass black holes: When stars collapse**

Most black holes we know form when massive

stars reach the end of their lives. Stars shine because nuclear reactions in their cores release energy that pushes outward, balancing gravity's inward pull. When the fuel runs out, that balance fails.

For very massive stars, the core collapses under its own weight. Often, this collapse triggers a spectacular explosion, a supernova, while the core shrinks into a black hole just a few tens of

kilometres across, yet heavier than the Sun.

But recent discoveries have shown that not all dying stars go out with a bang.

Astronomers have now observed “vanishing stars”, massive stars that simply fade from view without a bright explosion. In these cases, the star appears to collapse directly into a black hole, swallowing itself so completely that little light escapes. These failed supernovae confirm a long-standing prediction: some stars die quietly, forming black holes almost invisibly. It is gravity acting without drama – and without mercy.

## **Supermassive black holes: Monsters at galactic hearts**

At the centres of galaxies reside black holes of a very different scale. Supermassive black holes, millions or billions of times heavier than the Sun, anchor galaxies including our own Milky Way. We know they exist because we can watch

stars orbiting something invisible at enormous speeds.

In 2019, astronomers offered the world its first direct glimpse. Using a global network of radio telescopes known as the Event Horizon Telescope, scientists released an image of a glowing ring surrounding darkness – the shadow of a black hole in the galaxy M87. It was not a photograph in the ordinary sense, but it confirmed decades of theory: black holes are real, and we can see their gravitational imprint.

Intermediate-mass and primordial black holes  
Between stellar and supermassive black holes lies a long-missing category: intermediate-mass black holes. Only recently have gravitational-wave observatories detected signals suggesting their existence, likely formed through repeated mergers in dense star clusters.

Even more speculative are primordial black holes, which may have formed in the universe's earliest moments, long before stars existed. These hypothetical objects are being investigated as possible contributors to dark matter, though evidence remains elusive.

## Listening to black holes collide

Black holes announce themselves not only through light, but through motion. In 2015, scientists detected ripples in spacetime –

gravitational waves – produced by two black holes spiralling together over a billion light-years away. When converted into sound, the signal produced a brief chirp, the echo of an ancient collision.

It was a milestone that opened an entirely new way of studying the universe, allowing astronomers to hear cosmic events that light alone cannot reveal.

## Are black holes dangerous?

Despite their fearsome reputation, black holes pose no everyday threat. A black hole with the mass of the Sun would not consume Earth unless it replaced the Sun itself. Gravity obeys the same rules – only under extreme compression does it become extraordinary.

## Why black holes matter

Black holes shape galaxies, regulate star formation, and provide the most stringent tests of our theories of gravity. They are where physics is stretched to its limits, where space and time behave in unfamiliar ways.

As Stephen Hawking once observed, black holes force us to confront “the deepest questions about space, time, and reality itself.”

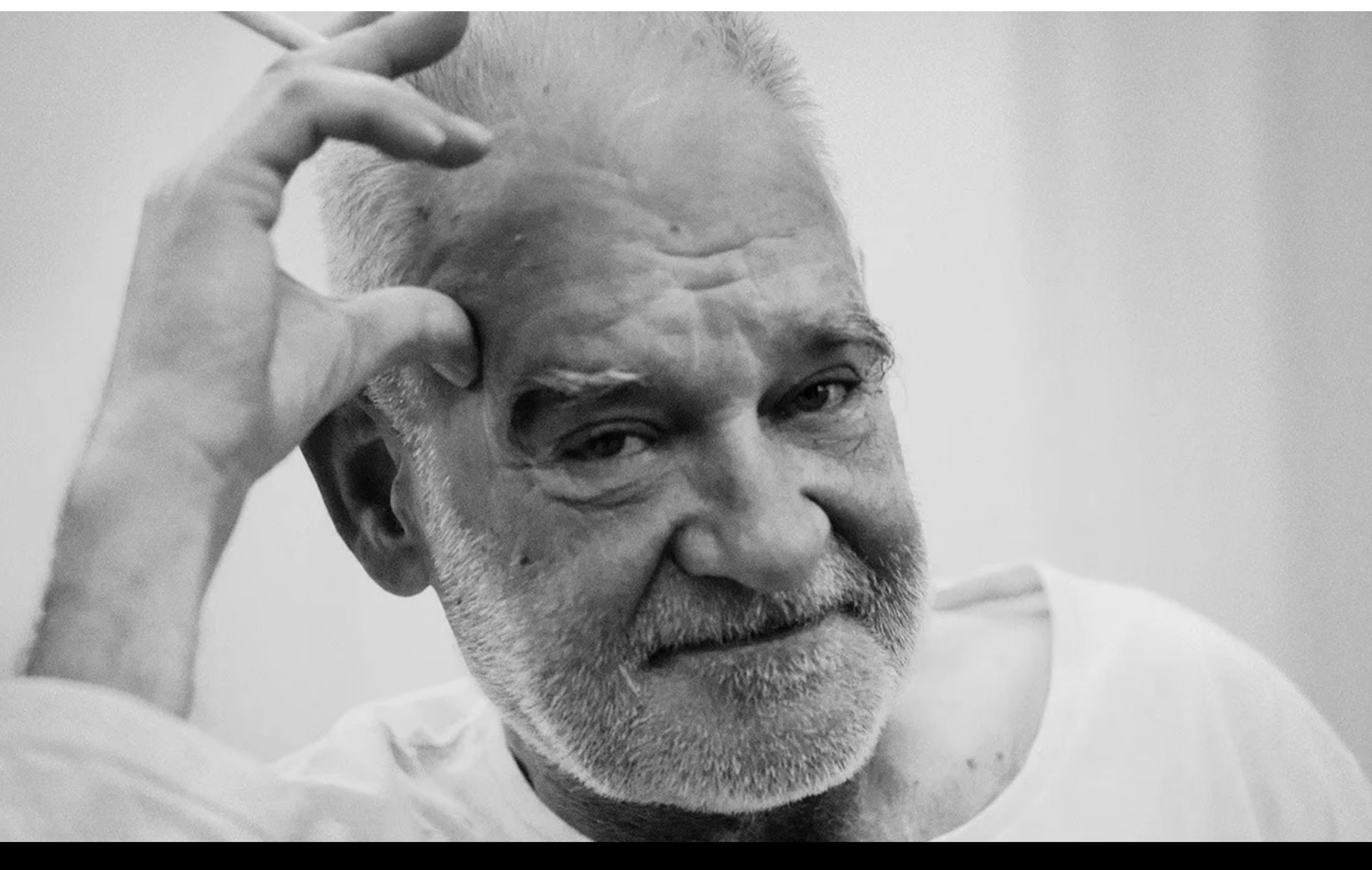
It was Indian physicist Subrahmanyan

Chandrasekhar, who, on a ship journey to England at the age of 19 in 1930, worked out the mathematics of what happens when a star collapses under its own gravity. From his lonely calculations at sea to disappearing stars collapsing in silence, black holes have evolved from abstract mathematics into central characters in our cosmic story. They remind us that the universe is not only vast and beautiful, but also capable of extremes far beyond everyday experience.

And sometimes, the most dramatic events happen not with a flash — but by quietly vanishing from sight.

*Shravan Hanasoge is an astrophysicist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.*





## The faithful infidelity of **Bela Tarr**

– *Aishwarya Khosla*

Hungarian filmmaker Bela Tarr, renowned for his slow-paced movies with striking black-and-white visuals, such as *Satantango* and *Werckmeister Harmonies*, has passed away. Those of us who dwell in the world of letters, Tarr's legacy is a lifelong, radical experiment in the very possibility of adaptation, one that should thrill and unnerve every screenwriter, filmmaker and editor who has ever considered the journey from page to screen.

His monumental works, especially the seven-hour *Satantango*, were baptised in the pages of László Krasznahorkai's novels. The conventional wisdom of adaptation is a pact of translation, which involves capturing the plot, honouring

the characters, and preserving the spirit. Krasznahorkai himself, a writer of labyrinthine sentences and profound philosophical despair, scoffed at this notion.

“A book by me does not need an adaptation,” he told an interviewer. Yet, in Tarr, he found a coconspirator. Their collaboration, spanning six films, rejected the literalism that often guts great literature on screen. Instead, as Krasznahorkai described it, their method was to spend “day and night” drawing out “the philosophical background of our question.” Rather than transcribe chapters, they distilled essences.

## How to film a sentence

This is where Tarr’s work becomes essential reading for the literary mind. He understood that Krasznahorkai’s power, that “mesmerising blend of prophecy and foreboding” built through relentless, lapping prose, was not in its actionable plot, but in its ontology of despair. A traditional adaptation of *Satantango* or *The Melancholy of Resistance* would be futile. How do you film a sentence that spirals for a page? Tarr’s answer was to create its cinematic equivalent: the unbroken ten-minute take. Where Krasznahorkai uses language to immerse, overwhelm, and trap the reader in a state of being, Tarr used time, sound, and the human face.

Consider the process. Tarr would famously place his actors in a meticulously constructed, rain-lashed reality and then give them minimal direction. He called a shot a “question,” and the actor’s authentic presence within it, the “answer.” This is the direct inverse of filming rehearsed dialogue from a script. He was using the novel’s philosophical scaffold to create a new, visceral experience of the same existential themes. For *Werckmeister Harmonies*, Tarr took Krasznahorkai’s allegorical critique of Hungarian history and infused it with the “visceral and affective impact only film can provide,” advancing the novel’s own project of traumatic “mourning work.”

For editors, this is a liberating manifesto. Tarr and Krasznahorkai demonstrate that the highest form of respect for a literary work is not slavish devotion, but creative audacity. It is a partnership where the writer serves as the deep philosophical core, and the filmmaker becomes the sensory engineer. The goal is to correspond and create a separate artistic object that resonates at the same fundamental frequency. Tarr’s entire career was, as he said, “the same movie... about human dignity.” Krasznahorkai’s novels provided the libretto for that lifelong opera.

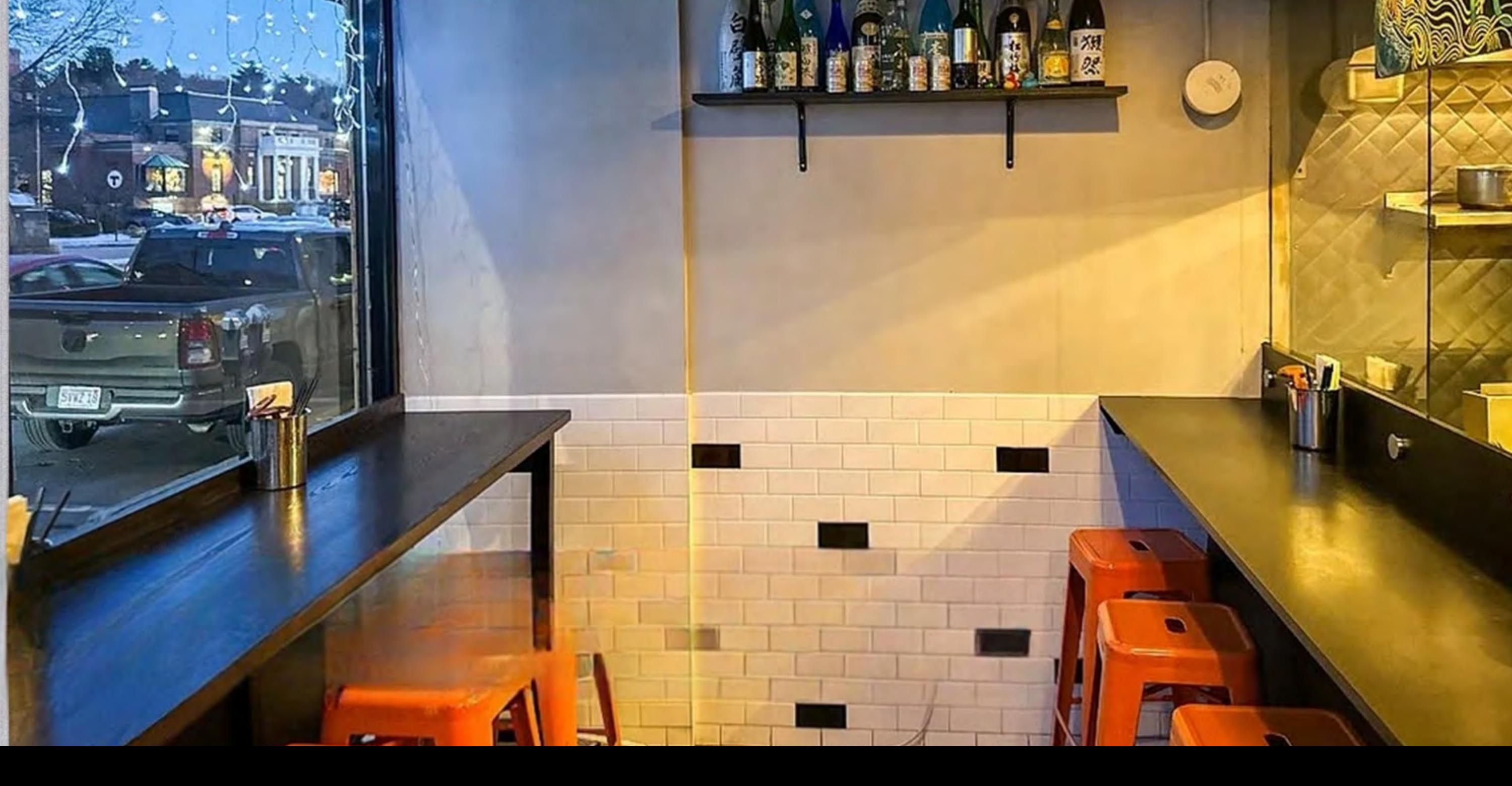
## Dare to deviate

In an age where the adaptation pipeline often

feels transactional, designed to flatten complex works into digestible content, Tarr's model is a beacon. It argues for partnerships built on deep artistic kinship ensuring that the best adaptations are not summaries, and carry on the conversation of the book in a new language.

Béla Tarr is gone. But the challenge he issued from the director's chair remains for every screenwriter, editor, and filmmaker: Dare to be unfaithful to the text in order to be profoundly faithful to its soul. The most enduring adaptations are not copies. They are, as Tarr and Krasznahorkai proved, collaborations in the art of human truth-telling, wherever the camera—or the sentence—may dare to linger.





# Decoding Gen Z's obsession with micro-dining shacks

– *Ishika Roy*

A viral dosa joint in Mumbai is always teeming with customers. Long queues outside the establishment, filled with young people, make you stop and wonder what exactly is so special about the place. I clicked on their hashtag on social media and was bombarded with 30-second reels of creators tearing into fresh, off-the-skillet crispy dosas, slathered in dollops of white butter sliding off the surface, or dipping podi-smeared idlis into flavourful chutneys before popping them into their mouths.

Less than a minute in, I have already wishlisted the place and furiously texted friends in the group chat to clear their weekend. A visit to the

dosa joint's Delhi branch is a must, even if it means standing in an hour-long queue under the winter sun.

Hole-in-the-wall coffee shops serving artisanal coffee, tiny shacks specialising in authentic ramen, gluten-free bakes, and gelato establishments with limited seating have taken over our social media feeds. Gen Z is getting on month-long waitlists and lining up outside micro restaurants to get that perfect money shot of a signature dish, come rain or shine. These places barely invest in seating arrangements, letting only a few guests into their sacred space.

Is it just a fun ploy to save on infrastructure costs or to drive hype on social media?

## Decoding the appeal

Shakti Banerjee, senior vice president and head of qualitative research at Hansa Research, says that the success of this trend hinges upon the fact that Gen Z does not chase hype. This generation is busy curating a food culture they can identify with – filled with food they can experience, that delivers meaning to food and doesn't just serve meals, Banerjee says.

During an extensive qualitative research conducted by her firm, Banerjee asked Gen Z what draws them to such tiny establishments. The answers were surprising. Some said, "If

there's a line, I feel like it's already been approved by people, vis-à-vis when it's too easy to get a table, it feels less exciting," while a few others claimed that large restaurants and chains feel generic. They lack the specialised attention, service and care that smaller establishments offer their customers.

"In a smaller outlet, you remember the person cooking your food; he comes and asks you whether you liked the food or not," Banerjee recalled a young interviewee's words.

Don't our roadside thelas do the same? Isn't that why we keep going back to them?

## **A cross-section of taste and intentionality**

Yash Bhatia says micro-dining works because it brings people closer to the space, the food and the intent behind it. When a restaurant is small, every decision matters more and that level of intentionality is something this generation instinctively responds to, he said.

Choosing a small-format model was a conscious decision for Bhatia, founder of Mai Mai, Indiranagar, Bangalore.

"We wanted to build a space where quality, control and consistency came before volume. A smaller format forces clarity in the menu, the

kitchen flow and the overall experience. It keeps founders and chefs close to the product, and that closeness shows up in how food is cooked, plated and served,” he told [indianexpress.com](http://indianexpress.com).

For Gen Z, the appeal has shifted away from expansive spaces and surface-level drama. They are drawn to feeling, intimacy and meaning. Bhatia’s Mai Mai taps into this exact shift in generational dining behaviour that values honesty and connection. Gen Z prefers spaces that feel personal and lived-in rather than overwhelming or performative.

“Transparency matters to them. They want to see how food is made, understand the thinking behind it and feel part of the rhythm of the room. Even imperfections, when handled openly and sincerely, build trust rather than distance,” he said, adding that an open kitchen, a slower pace and deliberate service all contribute to that sense of belonging.

Nakazawa Kyouhei, project manager at Kuuraku India Pvt Ltd, says that dining options are abundant nowadays and believes that both restaurant categories and the taste of the food itself have become commoditised.

“As it has become difficult to differentiate restaurants based on taste alone, Gen Z places importance on the experiential value that goes beyond simply eating a meal,” he opined, giving

examples of experiences related to the stories behind the food, such as the origins of ingredients, the cultural background of the dishes, and the chef's intentions.



*Micro-dining works because it brings people closer to the space, the food and the intent behind it. (Source: Instagram/@whatshotbangalore)*

Experiences related to the atmosphere, the type of service, and how the food is presented and enjoyed also play a role.

“Micro dining offers intimate, high-density experiences for a small number of guests, and the trend highlights places where both restaurants and customers can more easily express and embody their own preferences and originality, something that larger, conventional restaurants cannot provide. I believe this is exactly what attracts Gen Z,” said Kyouhei.

Sidhant Kalra, director of Khan Chacha, agreed with Kyouhei, sharing the restaurant side of the trend’s widespread popularity on social media. According to him, micro-dining works for many new-age brands because it taps into a shift toward curated, intentional dining.

“It helps restaurants stand for something specific, resulting in tighter menus, stronger identities, and more consistent execution,” he said.

## Is micro dining sustainable?

However, Kalra emphasised that longevity is the real test. “Once the buzz fades, only strong food and memorable experiences keep people coming back.”

For Gen Z, Instagram and FOMO (fear of missing out) may drive the first visit, but their behaviour is now more nuanced. Kalra highlighted that Gen Z is shifting its focus from material purchases to experiences, seeking exclusivity and curated moments rather than mass offerings.

“They disengage quickly if quality falls short, so long-term relevance depends on authenticity, consistency, and a genuine connection with the diner,” he said.

While some restaurants can sustain themselves solely through social media, this is limited to situations where the location, target audience, and originality are clearly defined, added Kyouhei.

Yash emphasised that while social media can spark discovery, it does not sustain loyalty. Gen Z is sharp, intelligent and quick to see through hype. Repeat visits are built on trust, consistency, and genuine experiences.

Micro-dining allows restaurants to stay focused on craft and emotional resonance rather than scale, creating spaces people want to return to.

“Ultimately, when everything from service to ambience is intentional and human-centric, the experience stays with guests long after they leave, and that is what brings them back,” he concluded.

With Gen Z redefining celebrations and luxury to value experiences, intimacy and exclusivity, micro restaurants that check all the boxes have a long future ahead.



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