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Inside Notre-Dame

Why rebuilding the famous Gothic cathedral in France will be a big challenge

STANLY JOHNY & G. ANANTHAKRISHNAN

The story so far: A fire that broke out in Paris's Notre-Dame cathedral on April 15, last Monday, caused enormous damage to the over eight-centuries-old church, which is known for its religious and historical significance as well as architectural beauty. The fire – the cause is still unknown – raged through the cathedral's lattice of huge wooden beams (known as “the forest”) and roof and brought down its famous spire. The French government has vowed to rebuild the cathedral, with pledges of support pouring in from around the world.

What is its historical significance?

It took 182 years to complete the construction of the Notre-Dame de Paris. According to the official cathedral history, Paris Bishop Maurice de Sully started the construction of the cathedral dedicated to the Virgin Mary in 1163. The church had been a centre of attraction for pilgrims for centuries as it had priceless artefacts in its possession such as the Holy Crown of Thorns, believed to have been worn by Jesus before the crucifixion, a piece of the “True Cross” upon which he was said to be crucified, and a nail from the crucifixion. It's believed that King Louis IX of France, who was later venerated as a saint, brought the Crown of Thorns and the fragment of the cross from the Latin Empire of Constantinople to Paris in the 13th century.

Notre-Dame, which housed several statues of kings, had attracted the anger of protesters during the French Revolution in 1789. They ransacked the cathedral, destroyed the royal statues and brought down the original spire. When Catholicism was banned in France

Large-scale spending to restore the cathedral could cause social tensions in the time of an economic slowdown

crumbling cathedral remained a venue for imperial events for years. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, the 1831 classic by Victor Hugo, in which the protagonist – the one-eyed and deaf Quasimodo – is the bell-ringer of Notre-Dame, rekindled the interest of Paris's elite in the dying Gothic building. In 1844, King Louis Philippe ordered its renovation. Architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and his team started the ambitious project and in 20 years, he restored it, with a new spire. The church Viollet-le-Duc rebuilt would survive till this month's inferno.

What makes its architecture special?

Two distinct features of Notre-Dame are its flying buttresses and gargoyles. The flying buttresses are arching supporting structures providing stability to a roof or vault of the main hall, and they connect with a vertical support outside. This Gothic design feature allowed for the creation of familiar high ceilings in churches of that era, and has endured in several churches worldwide. A second intriguing feature is its gargoyles. One of the more iconic ones immortalised in numerous pictures and films came to be called le Stryge, or the vampire, sitting with its hands on the chin, tongue protruding, staring down at the city. He does not, however, serve the classic gargoyle function of a drain pipe for rainwater that is usually found in cathedrals. Viollet-le-Duc used the expression of “chimeres” or “chimeras” for the many frozen stone monsters. In some of his writings, he felt that the intense fascination with the past, surrounding structures such as Notre-Dame, reflected the despair with the present. A restored Notre-Dame with its strange creatures led to the creation of a balustrade. Historian Michael Camille says many visitors frequented it, one of the more famous being Sigmund Freud, in the late 19th century.

What is in store?

French officials have said that while the blaze has destroyed the cathedral's roof and spire, its structure remains sound “with some vulnerabilities”. Most of the relics, including the Crown of Thorns, were rescued from the blaze. The cathedral's famed rose windows appear to be safe and its 8,000-pipe Great Organ, with some pipes dating to before the 1730s, is intact. French President Emmanuel Macron has said that the cathedral will be rebuilt in five years, and at least \$1 billion have been pledged for its restoration from around the world within days of the tragedy. But repairing the over 850-year-old structure is a long road ahead. The original roof and the beams were wooden and rebuilding them exactly as they were before the fire needs hundreds of trees, which itself is a challenge. The restoration cost is yet to be decided as the extent of the damage is still being assessed. France might get donations for the restoration, but large-scale spending on the cathedral could also cause social tensions, especially at a time when the economy is going through a tough phase and the country is grappling with large-scale protests.

Is the EC free enough to play fair?

The Model Code of Conduct has been violated by several candidates during campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections. Does the Election Commission of India have the power to act?

K. VENKATARAMANAN

The story so far: The run-up to the 2019 general election has seen several violations of the Model Code of Conduct. The Election Commission of India (EC) admitted to the Supreme Court that it was “toothless”, and did not have enough powers to deal with inflammatory or divisive speeches in the election campaign. On April 16, it imposed campaign bans, ranging from two to three days, on some political leaders, including Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. On Friday, April 19, the EC put a 48-hour ban on Himachal Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party president Satpal Singh Satti for his derogatory remarks against Congress president Rahul Gandhi. What exactly are the EC's powers to ensure a free and fair election?

From where does the EC derive its powers and what is its extent?

The Election Commission of India is a creation of the Constitution. Article 324 says the superintendence, direction and control of all elections to Parliament, the State legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President shall be vested in the EC. The Article has been interpreted by courts and by orders of the EC from time to time to mean that the power vested in it is plenary in nature. It is seen as unlimited and unconditional in the matter of holding elections. In other words, the EC can take any action it deems fit to ensure that elections and the election process are free and fair.

The independence of the EC is preserved by clauses in the Constitution that say the Chief Election Commissioner cannot be removed from office except in the manner provided for the removal of a Supreme Court judge and that the conditions of his service cannot be varied to the incumbent's disadvantage after appointment.

Has the EC always been a multi-member body?

No, the Election Commission was helmed by a single Chief Election Commissioner for decades since the body was set up in 1950 based on the provisions of the Constitution. It was on October 16, 1989, that two more Election Commissioners were appointed to expand the panel's composition. Their tenure ended in 1990. Thereafter, two Election Commissioners were appointed in 1993. Since then, the EC has been a three-member panel, with a Chief Election Commissioner and two Election Commissioners. Decision-making within the panel is by majority. While the CEC can only be removed in the manner set out for a Supreme Court judge, the other two Commissioners may be removed on the recommendation of the CEC. In 1995, the Supreme Court held that the Election Commissioners are on a par with the CEC and the latter is not superior in standing with the



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For some violations, the Election Commission has the power to advise or censure candidates in addition to directing registration of cases

other Commissioners. The EC has been demanding that the protection and safeguards given to the CEC under the Constitution should also be extended to the other Election Commissioners.

under election law and the criminal law of the land, the EC has the power to recommend registration of cases against the offenders.

However, for some violations – such as canvassing for votes during a period when electioneering is barred, making official announcements while the MCC is in force, and making appeal to voters on sectarian grounds – the EC has the power to advise or censure candidates, in addition to directing registration of cases. In some cases, as recent incidents would show, the EC may bar candidates or leaders from campaigning for specified periods. Asking individuals to leave a constituency or barring entry into certain areas are other powers that the EC may exercise. These powers are not necessarily traceable to any provision in law, but are generally considered inherent because of the sweeping and plenary nature of the EC's responsibility under the Constitution to ensure free and fair elections.

Its powers extend to postponing elections to any constituency, cancelling an election already notified, and even to abrogate or annul an election already held. While postponement on the grounds of rampant bribery of voters has been done on a few occasions, the resort to the grave action of rescinding the notification for a Lok Sabha constituency happened in Vellore in the current general election. Earlier, by-elections had been called off on similar grounds. In March 2012, the Election Commission cancelled a Rajya Sabha election in Jharkhand after polling was completed, following the emergence of evidence that candidates were bribing voters.

What are the limitations of the EC's powers?

The EC does not have the power to disqualify candidates who commit electoral malpractices. At best, it may direct the registration of a case. The EC also does not have the power to deregister any political party. However, the Constitution empowers the EC to decide whether a candidate has incurred disqualification by holding an office of profit under the appropriate government, or has been declared an insolvent, or acquired the citizenship of a foreign state. When a question arises whether a candidate has incurred any of these disqualifications, the President of India or Governor has to refer it to the EC. The poll panel's decision on this is binding.

What went wrong with debt MFs?

Why did fixed maturity plans of some funds fail to fully mature? What are the risks involved?

SURESH SESHADRI

The story so far: Earlier this month, Kotak Mutual Fund informed investors in its Fixed Maturity Plans (FMPs) that it would not be able to fully redeem investments made in two series of the FMPs. Separately, HDFC Mutual Fund also announced the extension of one of its FMP schemes, which was due for maturity on April 15, by 380 days.

What are FMPs?

Debt mutual funds, unlike equity MFs, invest in debt securities issued by companies (both publicly listed and privately held) and governments. FMPs, in turn, are a class of debt funds that are close-ended: one can only invest in them at the time of a new fund offer and they come with a specified maturity date, much like a fixed deposit (FD). However, in contrast to deposits, FMPs don't offer a guaranteed return but only pitch an indicative yield that the investor then takes a bet on. What the investor forgoes in terms of liquidity compared with an FD, she hopes to make good via the marginally higher returns that the fund's investments in higher-yield debt instruments such as commercial paper, corporate bonds and non-convertible debentures (NCDs) could potentially earn it. Additionally, investments in FMPs are more tax-efficient, since there are indexation benefits linked to capital gains, as opposed to tax on interest income in the case of an FD. FMPs, however, like other debt funds come with their own set of risks: the most significant ones are interest rate risk and credit risk.

How did Kotak's and HDFC's FMPs end up stuck?

Both the mutual funds' investment managers had invested (as part of their portfolios) in debt securities issued by some of the Subhash Chandra-promoted Essel Group's listed and unlisted companies.

Specifically, Kotak had invested in debentures of Konti Infrapower & Multiventures Private Limited, a Mumbai-based provider of accounting and consulting services, and Edison's Utility Works Private Limited, also based in Mumbai and reportedly operating in the construction industry. These debentures, which carried a coupon interest rate of 11.1%, were rated A+(SO) – putting them in the middle of the scale for investment grade ratings and indicating that the issuer had stable financial backing. The debt had also been secured by a pledge of Zee Entertainment Enterprise Limited's shares.

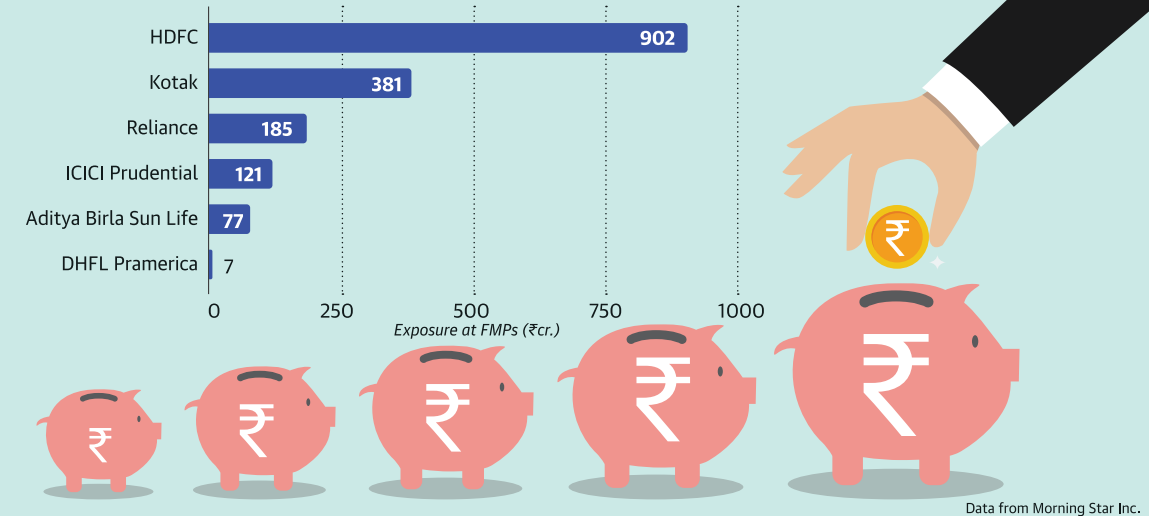
While the exact purposes for which the borrowed funds were utilised is not known, Mr. Chandra's group firms did make some investments in infrastructure projects and also sought to acquire Videcon's D2h business. “In retrospect, disastrous investment decisions,” was how investment advisory services provider Morningstar Inc. described the group's investments, in an April 12 note on their website.

In November 2018, the Essel Group announced that the promoter group planned to sell up to 50% of its stake in Zee Entertainment. This announcement, coupled with market speculation about financing difficulties at the group, prompted some lenders to start looking for ways to minimise their losses in the eventuality of a ‘credit event’ such as the announcement of a default on

Close-ended

Kotak Mutual Fund informed investors in its Fixed Maturity Plans (FMPs) that it would not be able to fully redeem investments made in two series of the FMPs due to their exposure to the Essel group

As of December 2018, the overall mutual fund exposure to the Essel group was ₹8,000 crore, of which, ₹1,670 crore (about 21%) was held in close-ended funds like FMPs



repayment of the borrowings.

On January 25, some lenders sold about ₹200 crore worth of Zee Entertainment shares, resulting in a sharp fall in the stock's price from its previous close of ₹434 on the BSE, to ₹319 per share.

At this point, the remaining lenders including Kotak MF and HDFC MF opted to not convert the notional loss on their holdings into a real one and instead reached a standstill agreement with the Essel Group.

As per the agreement, the creditors agreed to give Mr. Chandra and the Essel Group time up to September 30, 2019, to conclude the strategic stake sale in Zee Entertainment and use the proceeds to repay the borrowings with interest.

Which are the funds affected by Essel woes?

The cumulative amount at stake for FMPs is estimated to be more than ₹1,400 crore with over 40 schemes maturing later this year. More importantly, about 14 schemes, with an exposure of almost ₹475 crore, were set to mature this month.

In the case of Kotak, besides the FMP Series 127 and 183, which matured on April 8 and April 10, respectively, and whose investors did not receive full redemption proceeds on account of the funds' exposure to the Essel group firms, four other FMPs viz. Series 187, 189, 193 and 194 as well as the Kotak Credit Risk Fund have exposure

FMPs like other debt funds come with their own set of risks: the most significant ones are interest rate risk and credit risk

to the Essel group firms.

According to Morningstar Inc.'s analysis of FMP fund portfolio statements as of December 2018, the cumulative exposure of close-ended funds like FMPs to the Essel group's debt was pegged at ₹1,670 crore (see graphic).

What else is at stake for MF investors?

Kotak's note to investors from earlier this month is revealing. Besides the Essel group exposure, the fund house has acknowledged that four of the FMPs viz. Series 183, 192, 193 and 194 had also invested, in May 2016, in NCDs issued by the IL&FS Transportation Networks Limited, a unit of the financially distressed IL&FS.

Kotak said it had made a 100% provision by February 12, 2019, for this investment as the recovery would now depend on a resolution plan agreed to by a new board at the beleaguered parent and the National Company Law Tribunal.

Also, the troubles at both the Essel group and IL&FS point to the woeful inadequacy of credit ratings as a means to assess the most crucial element for fixed income investing: credit risk.

A look at Kotak's own breakdown of the overall portfolio holdings of Assets Under Management (AUM) for its debt schemes reveals that only about 46% of the overall funds are parked either in sovereign (almost 13%) or AAA-rated (22.9%) securities.

The rest of the AUM are spread across fixed income securities rated below AAA, while still invested in investment grade assets.

The industry's mandatory disclaimer: “Mutual fund investments are subject to market risk”, couldn't be more germane than in this case.

The art of coping with summers

When the heat is on, some have their own mechanisms to deal with the discomfort

YAMUNA MATHESWARAN

Ah, summer. How I just loathe you.

I grew up in Chennai, a city that has a year-round summer – the heat a sort of clingy companion you cannot evade. We dealt with it using artificial, environmentally unfriendly methods to ease our discomfort, shuffling from one air-conditioned environment to the next in air-conditioned cars.

A decade later, I found myself living and studying in Germany. But, alas, my hope of gaining respite from the heat for a good part of the year was not realised. The last few winters were barely cold, let alone freezing, but the summers were relatively brutal for the region. The Germans reacted in the same way when the sun came out – they stepped outside clad in minimal clothing to soak it all in, even frolicking as they developed the perfect tan.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH RAVIKUMAR

Meanwhile, I remained indoors until 5 p.m., when I could be certain the worst of the heat was over and it was safe to venture out.

I'm very sensitive to heat, more so than the average person. It's an actual condition and not mere dramatics on my part, as I often tell my

dismissive friends. On the warmer days in Germany, I carried sets of handkerchiefs (which I'd brought in bundles from Chennai) with me to soak up the sweat while I saw other people sauntering about, dry as a bone.

But despite all my be-moaning, I'm aware that as

far as real-life problems go, this is a relatively trivial one. Over the years I've devised ingenious coping mechanisms to make summer just a little easier to handle. For one, my productivity seems to be directly proportional to rising temperatures as I spend 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in-

doors, writing or painting. And that still leaves enough time to spend the milder evenings taking a stroll or catching up with friends and not feeling like a recluse. I also do indoor activities during the afternoons – hitting the museums, the cinemas, even sweating it out at the gym

(now, that kind of perspiration I don't mind).

But always the hardest part is grappling with the dreaded FOMO (or Fear of Missing Out) that inevitably strikes. Convincing yourself that you're having a good time indoors while the entire world seems to be living it up without you, can feel like a useless endeavour sometimes. I picture endless summer clichés – piña colodas, inflatable pools, shirtless lifeguards running in slow motion – until I remind myself that all I'm really missing out on is feeling like a polar bear trapped in a sauna. Besides, I live in Delhi now and the likelihood of those things happening is close to zero.

As always in life, there are some things you can control and others you've got to roll with. And so, in the hottest months, I put away my favourite trench coat wistfully.

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The Uncertainty Principle at work

Science and life's realities today

PANSHUL MISHRA

In Quantum Mechanics, the uncertainty principle developed by W. Heisenberg states that it is impossible to specify precisely and simultaneously the values of both members of particular pairs of physical variables that describe the behaviour of an atomic system, the variables happen to be position and momentum. It implies that in atomic domain, one cannot predict the future of the particles, while in the classical world, by applying the Newton's law one can anticipate the probable future of an object.

Well, it may sound a bit puerile that despite belonging to the science community I am trying to establish an impalpable association between the atomic world and the classical world, where the same laws don't hold water. Classical mechanics is the branch of physics that satisfies our common sense, while Quantum Mechanics deals with the obscurity observed at the atomic level, challenging the comprehension level of the human mind.

I see a typical Indian graduate confined in the same circumstances as an elementary particle. The future of an Indian graduate seems to be completely unpredictable, uncertain and gloomy. A person grows and develops throughout his formative years, enjoys college days and finally becomes a graduate. After graduation, an endless list of hopes, desires and aspirations lies before him. Graduates confront a moral burden, sometimes even an unnecessary *schadenfreude*, from society. Some look forward to cracking examinations such as those of the Union Public Service Commission and the Short Service Commission, some opt for further studies and a few even end up taking a PhD degree. This is a spontaneous cycle, where nobody seems to be breaking the rules. But in the end, the overarching thing that outstrips the inevitability of everything is a job that can sustain you and your family.

I often wonder about my childhood, when I was promised the moon by an astrologer who predicted my probable future. As I have grown up now and completed my graduation, a desperate need for a job has started tormenting me. My education is associated with

the doctrines developed by Newton, Einstein, Schrodinger, Maxwell and many other intellectuals who transformed the world beyond recognition. I studied science, but see no reason to continue with the stream, and I too run for a job.

Shambolic

The impregnable desire of a graduate to achieve something in his life is thwarted by the feckless policies of the government. The schemes and announcements designed by the government are often highlighted with proper rhetorical ingredients and skillfully glorified by the leaders. With the shambolic implementation, government policies, with a goal to empower and equip people with skills and transform them into an epitaph of dexterity, seem to be a tremendous fiasco. Some schemes like Startup India, which were aimed at promoting and incentivising the innovative calibre of youth failed devastatingly. The repercussions of the deceitful promises could create a Stygian world for the downcast aspirant, where there would be no shred of sanguinity.

I was in Class 12 in 2014, when the Modi wave was gyrating across the nation. Its amplitude was boasting the exponential increment in the dividends that it could bring. Whenever I heard of Mr. Modi, he was broadcast as an epitome of a utopian world. The manifesto proposed by the BJP in 2014 was considered a doctrine of development.

It is 2019 now, and the promises have started to evaporate and the condensate has taken a new shape. I anticipate an apocalypse. The 21st century is endowed with insurmountable technologies, with artificial intelligence and biotechnology leading the herd. With AI dominating the macrocosm of technology, the probability of getting a job for humans would decline exponentially. The inefficacies of the government coupled with the impeccable capabilities of technology make the equations unbalanced.

The graduate, like the electrons, revolve around the nucleus with uncertain predictability, languishing in the same manner. Whatever happens, he would remain a nebbish.

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A golfer's sorry tale

T.P. KANNAN

It has been four months, or is it five, since I played a round of golf. First it was a frozen shoulder. After it was 'defrosted', pain in the neck which I could not even mention to anyone for fear that it would give them a chance to come out with black humour. Then the rains. It wasn't much this year but it did rain on the days I wanted to play. Clearly, the gods aren't kind to me. The hot season has followed.

Come 2 p.m., the hands would start shaking. Like those of an alcoholic at dusk. The palms would clutch each other in a light grip (not too light, not too tight, my coach had told me) and the arms would swing backward and forward hitting an imaginary golf ball. The ball would soar high in slow motion and land on the green with a thud that could be heard at the tee box and stay there, not moving an inch. "Good shot," my caddy.

Must remember to pay him twenty rupees extra. The sound of the hard ball falling into the tin cup and whirling inside before settling down was music to ears. "Birdie".

Midsummer now. I am sure to have many more such midsummer night's dreams. But real golf... when?

"Don't whine! Go do it! Nobody is stopping you!" I heard someone yell. I will.

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Lies versus the truth, the choice is ours

Admitting and learning from mistakes should be the right way to go, and Indians need to learn that

FELIX BAST

A few months ago, I visited a museum of history in Berlin called the Topography of Terror. The exhibits in this indoors-and-outdoors museum portray heinous crimes committed by the Nazis. Here, the thought that came to me was of tolerance and conflicts of interest. Topography of Terror is funded and managed by the German government – proof that Germans are fine with self-reflection and criticism.

In many leading democracies, such introspection and criticism are tolerated. Consider the recent Boeing 737 MAX aircraft crashes. It was the U.S. media – including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* – that were in the forefront of debates on certain technical flaws in the software used in the aircraft that could have led to the accidents. An article in *The New York Times* (March 23, 2019) even said it was Boeing's relentless competition with its European rival Airbus for orders from America's own airlines that led to security lapses. American airlines were considering placing orders for hundreds of jet aircraft with Boeing's European rival Airbus, which forced Boeing into a frenzied rush, and in record time it developed and deployed the 737 MAX 8, even overlooking certain key safety features. Americans, like Germans, aren't afraid

of such self-criticism.

Can I even imagine a museum in Delhi portraying some of the mistakes Indians have committed, in line with Topography of Terror? A museum on sati, the caste system, honour killings, mob lynching and so on? Tolerance for criticism and dissent vary substantially across time and space. Our own level of tolerance, while far below that of the majority of developed countries, is still higher than that of many West Asian countries, China, and so on.

A few decades ago, our own tolerance level was arguably higher than it is today. Consider, for example, how Jawaharlal Nehru reacted to certain political caricatures criticising him, done by cartoonist R.K. Laxman. One morning, Laxman was surprised to receive a call from Nehru. The Prime Minister told him he had so enjoyed his cartoon that morning, and asked if he may have a signed copy of it.

Tolerance for criticism, introspection, learning from mistakes and feedback loops are indeed hallmarks of Baconian logic and scientific methodology. If we don't criticise other people's mistakes and our own past acts, and, more important, learn from the mistakes, how can we progress? If Germans and Americans can criticise their own past actions and make remarkable progress in terms of education, health and standard of living, why can't we do it



too? Let's accept that we have made mistakes in the past (and make them in the present time, too), in order to move forward by learning from the mistakes, to march towards a better India.

The other viewpoint

Conversely, in Germany I also met a youngster who, instead of acknowledging the mistakes of his country, swore by his opinion that the Holocaust never happened, and that the whole story was only propaganda created by Jews and a leftist lobby. "Have you been to Topography of Terror?" I asked. According to him, everything in that museum comprised doctored, fabricated lies. Hitler and the Nazis were good people. Later I found there are hundreds of people like him, those who subscribe to the theory of Holocaust denial, consi-

dering it to be in the nature of a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories are everywhere. Perhaps the best-known among them is the moon-landing hoax, which pronounces that the Americans never landed on the moon; all six moon landings were staged, manufactured lies by NASA's Apollo programme. Other examples include flat earth (thousands of people still swear by the theory (the earth is flat, not round!)) and intelligent design (god created the world in a period of a week some thousands of years ago). There are dozens of conspiracy theories in India, including the glorification of our past, and giving credit to the vedas for the discovery of aircraft, plastic surgery, the Internet...

When even some established historians and academics swear by such con-

spiracy theories, and when such theories are fed in as facts into mainstream scholarly literature and textbooks, the situation becomes more serious – an unethical practice called historical revisionism.

The fight between history based on evidence and historical revisionism is analogous to that between science and pseudoscience – the ignorance that wears the white-lab coat of an experimental scientist and masquerades in public as ambassadors of real science while evading Popper's falsifiability and appealing to the public through emotion and anecdotes rather than evidence-based and reproducible claims. Of course, we have countless "scientists" who consult horoscopes and astrologers for the arranged marriage of their children, and consult homeopaths. One example of historical revisionism is the controversial revision of textbooks that occur in India from time to time.

All of it boils down to Yin and Yang – the carnal struggle between two extremes; one that is retrogressive, stubborn, not open to criticism and is not evidence-based (historical revisionism and pseudoscience), and the other that is progressive, flexible, open to criticism and evidence-based (scholarly history and science). Lies vs. Truth. The ultimate choice is ours.

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Why April is indeed the cruellest of months

The summer and its heat can extract the price on the road – and how!

SUMIT PAUL

"April is the cruellest month because many a man falls prey to women's blistering blandishments in this month," wrote T.S. Eliot. A new study in the United Kingdom has found that men are more likely than women to crash their cars in summer – because they're too busy looking at girls in skimpy outfits. As many as 29% of male drivers admitted in a survey they could not keep their eyes on the road in hot weather when they spotted women in revealing summer clothes.

High temperatures also got the blame for increased levels of road rage. One in five male motorists (21%) confessed to being more prone to aggressive driving during the hot months. And 25% of male drivers have had at least one summertime crash or near-miss in the last five years, compared with just 17% for women, a survey of 1,300 motorists found.

"Research shows men are

far more easily distracted behind the wheel than women," the *Daily Express* quoted Donna Dawson, a behavioral psychologist, as saying. "Distractions such as billboards or an attractive woman walking down the street can quickly take their attention away from driving. Testosterone plays a part as it makes men more prone to aggression, especially when frustrated by a confined space such as a car – and men are quicker than women to expose such irritability in hot weather," she said.

Jacky Brown of Sheilas' Wheels, a car insurance brand based in the U.K. that caters to women, said: "In the age of air-conditioning, you might expect all drivers to be equally chilled out in summer, but men are significantly more likely than women to claim." Indeed, all men, of any age and stature, are genetically programmed to ogle at women. Whether walking, cycling, peddling, driving or having a leisurely stroll in a park, the very sight



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH RAVIKUMAR

of an attractive woman will distract men of all hues.

Researchers have found that even male babies as young as six months feel joyous to see a beautiful model's face on television. They also show reluctance to leave the warmth of a beautiful woman's affectionate embrace and have been found to be extra happy after receiving a kiss from a miss! Then they don't cry the whole day and bother their mothers! Hollywood heart-throb of yore, Clarke Gable, would often say he must have winked at the beautiful nurse when he was born.

So every man grows up

with an inherent sense of admiration for a beautiful female face, religiously believing in the dictum, "never lose an opportunity to see anything that is beautiful, for beauty's god's handwriting". There are connoisseurs who will look at a beautiful woman on the billboard with so much passion, attention and intention that they might have a satori in an moment.

The unconventional painter Salvador Dali would often say beauty-gazing is an enlightening experience. "It takes the gazer to heaven," he would say. It will be debatable where the gazer will finally go, but driving with a

roving eye can surely take the admirer to meet his Maker in heaven. Whether it's the scorching heat of India or the bone-piercing cold of the Arctic region, man will look at a woman with great expectations. And will never get tired of his hobby-horse. Women warm the cockles of a man's heart, however dry and monotonous he may be.

Some years ago, a Canadian doctor concluded after 20 years of research that men suffer much more than women in terms of pain in the neck. And the reason he stated was that man's head keeps turning as he finds that every second woman is a veritable head-turner. Going by this finding, whenever I see a man having some problem in his neck, I'm invariably reminded of that doctor's finding. And when I myself suffered from smarting pain in the neck, I realised that of late my head had begun to turn too much on the road.

Prudential and Metropolitan, two insurance companies from the U.K. and the U.S. respectively, requested the civic authorities not to erect billboards showing beautiful women. The very

sight distracted male drivers and caused accidents that resulted in successful insurance claims by the policyholders. On Oxford Street in London, where the department store Selfridges is situated, billboards showing scantily-clad models is a strict no-no. An inviting face oozing from a hoarding often causes traffic jams as a host of male drivers brake their vehicles to have a glimpse of the sorcerer.

William Faulkner wrote, "Man becomes reckless and cares not for his life when there's a beautiful woman around." Many traffic accidents can be explained by the novelist's incisive observation. After all, didn't an Urdu poet say, *Kisi ko muskura ke khoobsoorat maat na dena / Qasam hai zindagi ki, zindagi ko kaun poochhega* (Don't look at a man smilingly and bestow death upon him / When death will be so desirable, who'll care for life?).

Remember the New York City Police's advice to drivers and riders: "Beware of head-turners, they may cause head-on collisions."

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A.J. RAJENDRAN

Shopping in this age

Who needs to buy dresses? All you may need is a trial room selfie for Facebook
NAVNEET KAUR

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