

THE ASIAN AGE

16 JUNE 2025

Israel's attacks on Iran a threat to global peace

It is with reckless abandon that one man who is clinging to the Prime Minister's office by fighting wars has opened a new front in attacking Iran. Benjamin Netanyahu sees this as means to stop what Israel considers its biggest existential threat — a nuclear-armed Iran. The theoretic leaders of Iran may have spoken of nuclear bombs as a way of annihilating the Jewish state, but Iran may be some way from making the bomb and which process the Israelis may have hastened now with their attack.

Any war to stop Iran's nuclear proliferation is an illegal and excessively ambitious attempt to forestall that nation's programme. The Israeli actions also brought about an end to what appeared to be a promising way to resolve the nuclear issue through a US-Iran dialogue. With that avenue closed, Iran needs no guessing that however weak Iran may have seemed in all the time that Israel has attacked it with bombs, missiles and drones, it is still capable of proceeding with its enrichment plans.

The Israeli attack and Iranian counterattack, which led to loss of life in Iran, including that of scientists running the nuclear programme as well as those who died in Israel when some of Iran's missiles got through the air defence shield, represent a dramatic escalation. International attention should focus on who can best stop Netanyahu now and that man is not Donald Trump. The US President, after having appeared to cheer Israel on, still boasts he can bring about a deal with Iran in a day but what he says about his magical capacity feels like so much hot air.

The blame for starting Israel's surprise air strikes of Friday targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure at key facilities in Natanz and Isfahan that shattered the relative peace after Iran's proxy Hezbollah had gone quiet in Lebanon lies squarely with Netanyahu whose party's coalition was set to lose its majority in Parliament. And to keep his government safe he may have had to keep starting wars, this time by dragging Iran into a conflict that could have grave implications for the embattled Middle East region.

The IAEA reporting Iran on not fulfilling conditions to keep its nuclear programme from progressing away from peaceful purposes and into harmful nuclear proliferation may have been the cue on which Israel acted, after keeping the US President in the loop. The gross violation of international laws could not have been starker than in Israeli action, which may have been anticipated for months but which still shocked a world that believes in a rules-based order.

Whatever justification the Israelis may have had in believing in Gaza soon after the October 7, 2023, massacre by Hamas, their subsequent retaliatory actions were seen to be disproportionate with the bombing of the Gaza Strip to smithereens and Asian all its population even as its destruction continues into a third year. There is no justification whatsoever for aiming at Iran's nuclear and oil and gas and energy infra just as political and diplomatic means were being pursued by Trump's United States.

Trump has often banded his first term record of having started no new wars. It would be catastrophic if the US mulls entering directly this Middle East middle created by Hamas, Israel and Iranian proxies like Hezbollah and the Houthis. Even his passive support to Netanyahu is guaranteed to escalate the regional war. Again, who will rein in Netanyahu remains the million-dollar question.

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Sun shines on South Africa

Shosholoz' is a popular song of encouragement in South Africa. It deals with sticking to the task even as the goal seems very far. The national cricket team and their steadfast supporters would have sung that on just on Saturday after overcoming age-old demons that haunted them for so long.

The World Test Championship final win against impregnable Australia at cricket's mecca of Lord's in London was indeed the icing on the cake that must have gone well with the champagne that had been on ice for 27 years in quest for an ICC trophy.

Cases of so near-yet-so-far have been plenty for the Proteas, who have slipped on the final stretch to be tagged "chokers" in the cricket world. Now, it's a full-throated cry of victory. "Whilst we were batting, we could hear the Aussies using that dreaded word, choke," South African captain Temba Bavuma said after the match. The joke was now on the Aussies.

South Africa's victory is a result of crafty calculation, determined performances and favour from up above. Brave Bavuma won the toss, chose to field and dug in deep during the fourth innings chase that can be tricky, as his team hunted down the second highest total in a Test at Lord's.

His fast bowler Kagiso Rabada, coming back from a suspension for using drugs, was on a different high altogether, scalping nine wickets in the game. The bowlers were brilliantly backed up by the slip fielders who snapped up stunners. By contrast, seamed Steve Smith may have let Australia down when he put down Bavuma's catch (and probably the Test match) in the slips.

Then there was Aiden Markram, who got out for a duck in the first innings as his team conceded a bothersome 74-run first-innings lead before picking himself off the floor to score a century in the second essay that put his team on the path to victory.

The Sun smiled on South Africa as well. After 28 wickets fell in the first two overcast days, bright sunshine made batting convenient, which was aptly summed up by Bavuma: "The Sun's been with us."

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KASHMIR LETTERS

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Published and Printed on behalf of the Asian Age, Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Dena Dapal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 011-22121124.

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Sunil Gatade

After Op Sindoor: Will BJP's heady cocktail work this time for Modi?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is at it again. He thinks, breathes, and devours elections. Independent India has never had a leader who was so dedicated to the cause of winning elections — from the panchayat level to Parliament. His detractors see it as an obsession that is not in line with nurturing a healthy democracy.

The criticism apart, it is no accident that the BJP has become the world's largest party, which has attempted to turn the entire Opposition into pygmies. By hook or by crook, the detractors say, alleging that the ruling party was neither playing by the rules nor was there a level playing field.

Now the BJP's campaign over "Operation Sindoor" is a heady mix of Hinduism and staunch nationalism, seeking to drive home the point that only a strong leader like Narendra Modi can provide safety and security in troubled times.

Any action against Pakistan is generally a sure-shot winner for the BJP, which has always thrived on emotional issues. In fact, Mr Modi had even used the slogan of "Mya Musharruf", alluding to the then Pakistani dictator, to win an election hands down in Gujarat well before he shifted to New Delhi.

"Hum pak, humare pakish" — was yet another "taking a bite at the alleged growing family size in the minority community, implying that it had got the majority worried.

The surgical strikes at Balakot following the Pulwama attack in 2019 had paid rich dividends to

Subhani



India, Pakistan no longer hyphenated in world eye



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

On March 2, 2009, I described Pakistan as the Somalia of South Asia after a disastrously attack on Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore. At that point in time an eminent editor with a keen interest in strategic affairs had written an editorial against me in a leading daily newspaper deprecating that equivalence.

I meant and mean no offence to Somalia that is still, a decade and a half later, grappling with its own challenges from the terror outfit, Al-Shabaab. It has to contend with ungoverned spaces where the writ of the government just does not run. This instability has ominous implications for Somalia's neighbours, too.

The larger point, however, is that Pakistan, because of its state sponsorship of terror, has created ungoverned spaces and, therefore, become the epicentre of instability, not only in South Asia but across the world.

This analogy was evidenced by two statements made by two leading US diplomats. Former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, on Dec. 2, 2006, in the wake of the 26-11 Mumbai terror outrage, had famously described Pakistan as an international migraine.

Another former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton had warned Pakistan on Oct. 21, 2011, that it would pay a very heavy price for the state sponsorship of terror. She opined while addressing a press conference in Islamabad that the Pakistani foreign minister in tow, "You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them to bite your neighbours. Eventually those snakes are

going to turn on whoever has them in the backyard." Pakistan's use of terror as an instrument of state policy has devastated its own society.

What is moot is that Pakistan's terrible track record, both as a net exporter of terrorism and as a notorious nuclear proliferator, is so well documented in the esoteric echelons of international high perfidy that it is surprising it still continues to stay the course on its toxic trajectory with out the global opprobrium that should have buried it by now.

It is in this context that it becomes important to contextualise whether India's kinetic actions between May 7 and 10, 2025, and the subsequent diplomatic outreach spearheaded by parliamentary delegations that fanned out across the world were able to reinforce the documented reality of official Pakistan's direct involvement in perpetrating terror into India.

Let us begin by examining the kinetic actions initiated by India between May 7 and 10, 2025. The fact is that these actions were initiated and efficaciously culminated notwithstanding that there was no element of surprise post Pahalgam. It, therefore, goes to the credit of the Indian Armed Forces. For this without the inherent element of surprise always was a bridge too far even in tactical theology, Pakistan was cognisant of the fact that after India had established a new threshold by retaliating conventional warfare, a robust military response would be the order of the day.

Going by reports in the public space it seems that there was no softening of Pakistan's air defence infrastructure as the mandate to the Indian Air Force ostensibly seems to have been to target the infrastructure of terror in Pakistan rather than their military structure.

India effectively has succeeded thanks to aeons of sustained diplomatic effort in sidelining Pakistan's long-standing narrative that unrest in Kashmir is organic rather than externally sponsored

they received in December 1971 at the hands of the Indian armed forces. India's calibrated response to the Pahalgam attack featuring precision strikes across Pakistan stemmed from a broader base of international credibility that India has meticulously cultivating through economic resilience, diplomatic outreach and a firm anti-terrorism narrative now going back many decades.

Unlike in the formative years ago, major global actors do not rush to invoke moral equivalence or pressure both countries equally. The back-channeling this time around was also focused on de-escalation as the outcome of the norm stretching back years now.

Despite four tense days of cross-border hostilities J&K did not re-emerge as a subject of urgent international concern. There was no emergency UN session, no mediation offers from European capitals and no renewed calls for dialogue centred on the so-called "Kashmir question".

This silence is not a diplomatic oversight. It was a direct result of years of consistent Indian policy. New Delhi has persistently argued that J&K is a domestic matter and not an international dispute. That framing, once fully debated, now enjoys quiet acceptance across key global capitals.

Moreover, that Pakistan's use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy has nothing to do with J&K is also now widely understood. India effectively has succeeded thanks to aeons of sustained diplomatic effort in sidelining Pakistan's long-standing narrative that unrest in Kashmir is organic rather than externally sponsored. India's military doctrine of "controlled escalation" or a "war on the rocks" carries intrinsic risks. Repeated military actions, even limited ones, could inadvertently lower the threshold for conflict and bring back the quintessential dilemma — is a conventional response efficacious in proscribing asymmetric warfare?

After 1961, when India liberalised its economy, the politico-economic trajectories of India and Pakistan diverged so dramatically with India progressing rapidly that the narrative of hyphenation peddled by elements sympathetic to Pakistan in the Western establishment sounded fake and hollow.

Anyone who has dealt with the strategic elite of Pakistan knows they can live with India criticising them but can't live with India ignoring them which is also one of the lesser triggers of this state-sponsored terrorism, the principal one being the institutional scar on the collective psyche of the Pakistani military establishment as a consequence of the "whipping

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LETTERS DIFFERENTIAL DAMAGES

All accident victims must be treated with equal dignity and compassion, irrespective of their financial status. All accidents, be it on air, road, or railway tracks, are equally tragic. Akash Patni, 14, was sleeping under a tree in front of his family's tea stall at the time the Air India plane crashed into B.J. Medical College hostel. A burning piece of metal struck him in the head and he was engulfed in flames. His family deserves equal compensation at par with the family members of those who lost their lives due to the plane crash.

Also, why does the government declare only ₹10 lakh for kin of air accident victims when a plane crash victim's family gets ₹25 lakh?

Sujit De Kolkata

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A selfie of the nation

Census 2026-27 will answer questions of caste count
and delimitation in a fraught political moment

SATISH DESHPANDE

TRACKING THE MONSOON

There are signs of its revival. But amid climate and geopolitical shocks, policymakers can't take commodity prices for granted

THE COMING WEEK is crucial for the southwest monsoon, which is showing signs of revival after a premature arrival followed by a prolonged lull. The monsoon set in over Kerala on May 24, eight days before its normal date of June 1, technically marking the start of the four-month season. It advanced over Mumbai on May 26, 16 days ahead of schedule. But it hasn't progressed thereafter, with its northern limit — the imaginary boundary where the rains have reached — stuck since May 29. It has created an unusual situation of May recording not only almost 2.1 times the historical normal rainfall, but also 1.5 degrees Celsius below average maximum temperatures for the month at all-India level. With a relatively cool and wet May not forming the required heat-induced low-pressure areas, which act as a suction mechanism drawing in moisture-laden winds from the Indian Ocean, the monsoon has weakened after the initial burst.

Rainfall this month has so far been 31 per cent below normal, with 30 out of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions registering deficits in excess of 15 per cent. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) sees the monsoon progress and touch Gujarat, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar in the next couple of days. Its forecast of an "above-normal" monsoon is predicated upon there being no El Niño this time and neutral or weak negative Indian Ocean Dipole conditions developing during the season. Both ocean indicators known to influence the monsoon are favourable, just as the southwesterly wind system bringing the rains has been well in place. To what extent the lack of heat lows, due to unseasonal summer showers in May disrupting the normal heating pattern over the Indian landmass, would offset these favourable oceanic and atmospheric wind factors remains to be seen. One only hopes the monsoon revives soon enough for farmers to sow the kharif crops, whose fate depends on the quantum as well as temporal and spatial distribution of rainfall during the season.

On the positive side, annual consumer food price inflation, at below 1 per cent in May, has fallen to a 43-month-low, primarily on the back of a bumper rabi (winter-spring) crop. Government wheat stocks, at 38 million tonnes on June 1, are at a four-year high, and more than four times the necessary levels for rice. The US Department of Agriculture has projected record global grain and oilseed harvests for 2025-26. These should help keep a lid on inflation in the event of the monsoon not quite conforming to the IMD's forecast. The one lesson policymakers may have drawn from climate and geopolitical shocks in recent times is to not take commodity prices for granted. The Narendra Modi government would do well to keep the window wide open for imports.

THERE ARE TWO obvious reasons the recently notified national Census of 2026-27 will be like no other Census in independent India. These have already attracted a lot of attention in the media: The counting of castes beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the new delimitation exercise that will determine the political weight of the states of the Union and the shape of our Parliament. However, the real reason the coming Census will be unique is the particular conjuncture in which the questions raised by caste and delimitation will have to be answered.

Neither delimitation nor the counting of caste is new. Caste had been counted nationally till 1931; even after independence, caste data have been collected for the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes; and more recently, census-like surveys have been conducted in the states of Karnataka, Bihar and Telangana. Delimitation, too, has happened three times before, and the current delimitation formula (for the number of Parliament and Assembly seats) is based on the 1971 Census, while the boundaries of constituencies have been redrawn based on the 2001 Census.

However, the content of delimitation is very different from earlier times. The 84th Amendment of February 2002, enacted under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government, froze states' share of Lok Sabha seats to the allocations based on the 1971 Census "until the relevant figures for the first Census taken after the year 2026 have been published" (the previous reference year had been 2001). Because seat allocation has been proportionate to population (to ensure that each parliamentary representation roughly similar number of electors), this freeze was intended to forestall the apprehensions of the northern states gaining at the expense of the south.

In the mid 2020s, these apprehensions have grown stronger. Population projections suggest that (barring exceptions like Himachal Pradesh) the difference in the populations of northern and southern states will be proportionately more than it was in the 2000s. As widely noted, there is the narrative of the south being "punished" for better performance on population control and larger contri-

butions to national income, and the north being "rewarded" for its backwardness on both counts. Perhaps the all-important factor here is that, electorally, the ruling BJP dominates the north but is almost absent in the south. The unusual delay in conducting the Census and the decision to push it beyond 2026 thus appears to be an unsuitable move to reap electoral advantage from the expected change in seat allocation for the next general election, due in 2029. At the very least, it will provide the ruling regime with a valuable and versatile political bargaining chip.

The circumstances surrounding caste enumeration are also very different today. The last nationwide caste count happened in the 1931 Census amidst protests from nationalist groups who saw this as a coloniser's divisive ploy. In the early 20th century, the Census did in fact help to accelerate the consolidation of caste identities because this was the moment of aggregation — a time when coalitions were being built across clusters of castes. The aggregation phase has continued after independence (despite the absence of caste counts) and reached its peak towards the end of the century, with the Mandal upsurge of the 1990s. Today, caste enumeration promises to play an entirely different role for two reasons.

First and most important, as the first national Census after independence that will count the castes of all Indians, the coming Census will end the statistical anonymity of the so-called "upper" castes who have benefited disproportionately from state-sponsored development. The same castes have gathered even more disproportionate gains from the market-led development of the last two decades. The popular discourse on subjects like reservation has encouraged the illusory belief that visible welfare programmes are the only ways in which the state bestows benefits. As the history of post-liberalisation India shows, the state has been able to shower benefits on the already privileged in countless ways through the market as well.

castes will create the basis for a more complete understanding of the extent to which caste inequalities have been deepened by a supposedly caste-blind state — despite the presence of targeted welfare programmes for "backward" castes.

Second, developments in caste politics over the past three or four decades have taken it out of the aggregation phase into a new phase of disaggregation. By offering data on individual castes within existing official or political caste-clusters and categories, the coming Census will help to highlight internal divisions that will challenge currently dominant political identities, just as the consolidation of similarly situated castes was a necessary phase in history, today the questioning of existing categories and coalitions is the need of the hour. This applies equally to political identities other than those based on caste.

The challenge that irrefutable evidence of inequalities will pose to dominant ideologies of political mobilisation — whether of Hindutva, caste, religion or region — is an open-ended one. It leaves open the possibility that the challenge will be met with genuine attempts to address inequality. It also opens the door for the invention of new identities that bring together hitherto separate groups on the basis of common interests beyond existing labels. Either way, it will force currently dominant political ideologies to provide more substance to the unity they demand in the name of caste, community, or even nation.

There is another feature of the current conjuncture that may prove to be decisive. This is the global tendency of electorally secure authoritarian regimes to produce "alternative facts" in response to inconvenient facts. Taken to its logical end, this tendency ensures that, wherever and whenever possible, inconvenient facts are aborted before they can be born. We can only hope that the census machinery will be spared such excursions.

Because, ultimately, the Census is a selfie of the nation, a self-portrait of the people that can only be painted by their government.

Deshpande is a retired professor based in Bengaluru

A STABILISING FORCE

The India-EU partnership is becoming a central axis in the construction of a multipolar world

THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN India and the European Union (EU) is gaining significance as a stabilising force in the emerging multipolar world. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Brussels this week was part of an effort to consolidate the new possibilities triggered by the growing convergence of interests and changing international circumstances. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Cyprus reinforces the new Indian commitment to Europe. The turbulence of Donald Trump's second presidential term — marked by protectionism and scepticism toward alliances and partnerships — has nudged Delhi and Brussels to hedge against US unpredictability and uphold a rules-based international order. This does not by any means suggest that Delhi and Brussels are going to walk away from Washington. On the contrary, the US remains the most important economic and strategic partner for India and Europe. Both sides will do their best to preserve the essence of that relationship; but they are also naturally looking to deepen other partnerships.

The last year and more has seen greater momentum in bilateral relations. A comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA), targeted for conclusion by the end of 2025, is central to joint efforts to diversify supply chains and promote sustainable growth. After years of stalled talks, Delhi and Brussels are now signalling unprecedented urgency to conclude the trade agreement. Connectivity projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) illustrate the ambition to reshape regional linkages and create new engines of innovation. Cooperation in advanced technologies and the exploration of new possibilities for defence industrial collaboration are also on the top of the current agenda.

There are tricky waters to negotiate. Russia remains a sensitive factor in India-EU relations. While India maintains long-standing defence ties with Moscow and has refrained from criticising Russia's war in Ukraine, Europe is at the receiving end of Russia's ambitions to rearrange the regional order. However, both India and the EU have prioritised pragmatic engagement over ideological arguments. Brussels has avoided putting pressure on India for its Russia policy, instead focusing on trade, technology, and shared concerns about China. Pakistan has inevitably figured in Jaishankar's talks in Brussels, thanks to the post-Pahalgam conflict. While the EU advocates peace and dialogue in South Asia, it also recognises India's right to self-defence and has condemned cross-border terrorism. Neither India nor EU want to let the Pakistan factor derail the new possibilities for building a bilateral strategic partnership. The India-EU partnership is becoming a central axis in the construction of a multipolar world. It is not merely a tactical hedge, but a strategic alignment grounded in shared economic interests, democratic values, and the pursuit of enhanced national security.



OLLY MOHANTA

WITH THE CONCLUSION OF THE UPSC civil service examination prelims, the buzz around reforms has grown louder. Experts and commentators are calling for changes in the syllabus, the pattern, and even the upper age limit — all in the name of efficiency and meritocracy. However, amidst these reformist appeals, one voice remains conspicuously absent: Aspirants from the Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBDs) category.

I write this not as a detached observer, but as someone who has walked — or rather wheeled — through this journey. When I first considered appearing for the exam (before 2015) orthopaedically disabled aspirants like me weren't even allowed scribes. The provision existed for visually impaired candidates, but not for those of us whose locomotor disability made even the act of marking circles on an OMR sheet painfully slow — and sometimes impossible — without assistance. It wasn't just an oversight. It was structural exclusion and ignorance.

Even now, many of us continue to face hurdles that no exam syllabus can prepare us for. The Civil Services Aptitude Test paper, introduced as a qualifying test, for instance, often functions as an unspoken barrier for PwBD candidates. Time-bound reasoning and numerical questions disproportionately impact those who, due to years of inaccessible education or chronic conditions, were never given a fair start. Extra time is a Band-Aid, not a solution, when the foundation itself is fractured.

INFRASTRUCTURE OF DIGNITY

Disability-inclusive reforms must be central to a just, equitable civil service

But the issue goes beyond just question papers. The very act of preparing for the UPSC becomes a daily negotiation with neglect. In my pursuit of higher education for years, I travelled 30-40 km one way to attend classes, only to return home from Metro stations where the elevators were mostly out of order. There were days I reached classes late or skipped them entirely because hopping into an auto or a rickshaw wasn't an option, nor for someone with wheels beneath them and no accessible infrastructure to support them.

Those who advocate for a "younger, sharper" bureaucracy rarely stop to ask: How does one compete on equal terms when disability arrives in your 20s? When your youth — the most defining years of professional life — is spent not chasing internships or placements, but navigating pain, rehabilitation, and invisibility?

I earned a research degree from a premier central government university, but I remain unemployed. Not because I don't want to work, but because age, disability, and lack of formal experience are treated as liabilities. But how do you gain experience if no one hires you to begin with? How is age a stand-alone marker of efficiency?

The private sector doesn't have room for us. And the state public service commissions (PSCs) — ironically — are even more rigid. Many of them refuse to acknowledge the existence of certain disabilities, particularly those who need maximum support. What is left then? For many of us, the UPSC is not a fallback. It is the only ladder that still stands — however frail, however far.

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I earned a research degree from a premier central government university, but I remain unemployed. Not because I don't want to work, but because age, disability, and lack of formal experience are treated as liabilities. But how do you gain experience if no one hires you to begin with? How is age a stand-alone marker of efficiency?

The private sector doesn't have room for us. And the state public service commissions (PSCs) — ironically — are even more rigid. Many of them refuse to acknowledge the existence of certain disabilities, particularly those who need maximum support. What is left then? For many of us, the UPSC is not a

fallback. It is the only ladder that still stands — however frail, however far.

Yet, even this ladder is slippery. Many exam centres lack accessible toilets. And so, many of us avoid drinking water for hours before and during the exam. How does one focus on an exam spread across an entire day when basic human needs are held hostage? Shouldn't these also be taken into account when we talk about reforms?

When we talk of reforms, they must be holistic. They must include those who have historically been left out of the conversation. The agony that disabled aspirants go through — the delays, the logistical nightmares, the financial strain, the social isolation — is not something that can be measured in cut-offs or mark sheets.

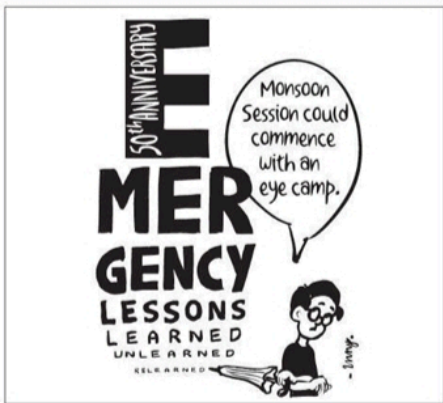
Those who shape policy and regulation — bureaucrats, commissions, experts — are looked up to. That gaze carries weight. It demands responsibility, fairness, and inclusion. Merit, in its truest sense, should never be diluted. But let us also ask: Is the scheme of the exam fair to all? If the system privileges those with stable health, full mobility, financial resources, and accessible transport, what merit are we even measuring?

Disability-inclusive reforms within the UPSC must not be an afterthought. They must be central to any vision of a just, equitable civil service — one where hope is not rationed, and dignity is not reserved for the able-bodied.

The writer is a PwBD UPSC aspirant

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



JUNE 16, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

'QUIT NAGALAND'

THERE IS PANIC in Kohima in the wake of the "Quit Nagaland" notice served by the Nagu Students Federation on Assamese living in the state, following clashes between the police forces of the two states. There were 4,500 Assamese working in the Nagaland government. There are reports of people being asked to produce their inner line permits. The notice comes in the wake of the arrest of five NF of force-bearers who went to the Assam side.

Huwaiza marshlands and were now "six kilometres from the key Baghdad highway". The invaders had seized 100 square km and were now "coming into the area" to purge it of Iraqi resistance. Hundreds of Iraqi soldiers were killed or wounded, and others taken prisoner. The invasion carrying the name of "Jerusalem" was launched in retaliation for Iraqi air force and ground missile attacks on 15 cities that claimed 550 civilian lives.

NO SHIFT IN POLICY

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi had denied that there was any shift in India's economic policy. Answering questions at a meeting with the representatives of the US Chamber of

Commerce, Gandhi said there were some misconceptions about the nature of the Indian economy and socialism. In India, where millions of people were below the subsistence level, "you cannot profess that a capitalist system will solve all problems," he said.

GUERRILLAS KILLED

EIGHTEEN TAMIL GUERRILLAS were killed and about 20 were injured when security forces raided a rebel camp in Sri Lanka's Mannar district. Security officials believe guerrillas from the camp were responsible for last month's massacre of about 150 Sinhalese civilians in and near the Buddhist holy city of Anuradhapura and other attacks.



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Ranmath Goenka

A RED LINE CROSSED IN WEST ASIA, THE WORLD MUST NOT LOOK AWAY

JUNE 13, 2025, may be remembered as the day the world crossed a dangerous threshold. In a sweeping and audacious military operation, Israel launched 'Operation Rising Lion', striking Iranian targets in several provinces, including Tehran and Tabriz. The attacks targeted suspected nuclear facilities, air defences, and the homes of senior commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It's a sudden and dramatic escalation of a long-simmering shadow war, now brought into open confrontation. Iran responded swiftly, firing missiles at Israeli cities. West Asia and the world have awakened to a new and perilous reality.

The global stakes are immense. Oil prices surged, markets tumbled, and geopolitical risk skyrocketed. The fragile world order, already strained by wars in Gaza and Ukraine, Trump's tariffs and economic instability, now faces the threat of a broader regional war with unpredictable consequences.

President Donald Trump's efforts to broker a nuclear deal with Iran are likely dead. His endorsement of the Israeli assault and apocalyptic rhetoric leave little scope for diplomacy. The attack may have unified and hardened Iranian resolve. Europe has called for restraint, but words alone may not be enough to pull the region back from the brink.

For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, this war serves both strategic and political ends. He believes Iran is nearing nuclear capability and seeks to eliminate that threat by brute force. However, there is scant evidence that such actions will bring lasting security. Just as the Gaza campaign failed to destroy Hamas, this attack may only deepen instability. Netanyahu's political survival appears closely tied to military escalation, especially after narrowly escaping a no-confidence vote and mounting global condemnation over Gaza.

India, meanwhile, has vital interests at stake as well. Israel is a key defence and security partner; Iran, a civilisational ally, is crucial for regional security, connectivity, and the strategic Chabahar port. With millions of Indian citizens living in the Gulf, any broader conflict threatens lives, remittances, and national energy interests. India has called for restraint and dialogue, but it must also actively engage with global actors to help defuse tensions. This is a moment of grave international peril. Whether it is allowed to spiral into catastrophe or pulled back from the edge will depend on swift, bold, and coordinated diplomacy—before the fuse burns down.

PROTEAS' STUNNING WIN A FILLIP TO TEST CRICKET

APTAIN Temba Bavuma took a giant leap into cricketing history on Saturday, leading South Africa to victory in the World Test Championship clash against Australia. The team also dismissed the naysayers who questioned their inclusion in the final, as they had not played England or Australia in the current cycle. The win is significant for many reasons. It shatters the narrative that Test cricket is not feasible outside the Big Three—India, Australia, England—and the talk of tiering the longest format so that it remains competitive.

In the recently concluded WTC cycle, India defeated South Africa and England. South Africa beat Australia, Australia won against India, England defeated Pakistan, New Zealand beat India, and the West Indies beat Australia. It means that the standard of the longest form is at its peak, and the International Cricket Council (ICC) should disregard calls for fundamentally altering Test cricket. Sure, it's more profitable for some boards to play the format more often than not, but it doesn't need to be tampered with.

A more pertinent point for South African cricket is that the win represents their long-awaited tryst with destiny. Having come so close to victory on several occasions since their only ICC title in 1998, they have carried the stigma of being bad finishers for too long, and this win buries their ghosts from past horrors. Many Proteas, since their readmission in 1992, have been scarred by their inability to secure closure in the global ICC finals. This victory has the potential to change that narrative. It will also help ease concerns about the state of the five-day game in their country. At the beginning of this WTC cycle, they were forced to send a scratch Test team to New Zealand as they had prioritised their T20 league. That had promoted some alarm within the wider cricketing establishment. While they will be partial to SA20 due to cricket's skewed commerce—the Proteas won't play a home Test until the end of 2026—wins like this compel stakeholders to believe the test format is viable to continue investing in. Their next challenge is an away series in India, and the onus is on them to prove that the win at Lord's was not a one-off but exemplifies their new-found grit.

QUICK TAKE

VIRTUE OF THE VIRTUAL

AST week, 1.3 crore Chinese students took the Gaokao exam, possibly the world's toughest test for university admissions. Students hoping to seek AI assistance got a shock as authorities turned off AI chatbots and tools to prevent 'cheating' and ensure 'fairness'. AI instead monitored unusual student behaviour, including gestures, signs, and whispers. In India, national entrances are largely secure, but the NEET-UG has a chequered history. Cancellations and deferrals due to cheating, paper leaks, or impersonation have plagued the paper-based exam. It's time to standardise the computer-based test format for all entrances and let AI tools plug security breaches, hacking, and cheating, thereby protecting the integrity of the testing process.

HERE are newspaper reports that the Sixteenth Finance Commission (XVI FC) has recently finalised its recommendations and will submit its report on schedule in October 2026. The chairman is quoted saying that no significant increase in devolution to states is contemplated.

The process of appointing a finance commission is not a consultative one. The Prime Minister appoints the members and chairperson. The central finance ministry drafts the terms of reference. This administration has been parochial in its appointments to the commission. The Fifteenth Finance Commission (XV FC) comprised an IMF bureaucrat, an economist-turned-BJP politician and civil servants. There was no representation from the peninsula. The XVI FC follows the same pattern, with just one civil servant from South India, whose career has been spent entirely in New Delhi, serving the central government.

Only the terms of reference (ToR) of the XVI FC seemed to indicate that things would not be business as usual, given the emergent contentious issues. It dispensed with the usual gaggle of meaningless supplementary asks (the XV FC's ToR was particularly egregious on this score, drafted by civil servants with little knowledge of fiscal federalism and endorsed by an inexperienced and clumsy political leadership) and wanted the commission to focus on the core issue of vertical and horizontal devolution.

This unusual brevity and precision on the part of the Government of India recognises a formidable challenge confronting intergovernmental fiscal relations. It is unlikely that the southern states will passively accept the findings of the XVI FC as non-partisan. What this lack of acceptance means in practice is unclear, as the Centre can override any dissent to adopt the commission's recommendations once its report is placed in parliament.

Nevertheless, it is wise not to use parliamentary procedure that works in times of national consensus to ride roughshod when there is serious political dissonance. There have been conclaves of non-NDA southern chief ministers and considerable public debate that has underscored the point that "business as usual" would be unacceptable.

The root of this uneasiness lies in the evolution of a structural break in the country's patterns of economic transformation, which has accelerated significantly over the past 30 years. The relative per capita income of the northern and eastern states has declined, while that of the peninsular states has risen. Human development achievements of the latter have far surpassed those of the rest of India. The peninsula now imports both capital and labour from the rest of India, accounts for most of India's non-commodity exports and is the major destination for foreign investment.

Few countries manage to navigate the asymmetry of a political majority being vastly poorer than an economic minority. Without political settlement, this is an existential threat

ROOTS OF A DEVOLUTION SHOWDOWN

RATHIN ROY

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THE PENINSULA



MANSUR PUGHAR

India now imports both capital and labour from the rest of India, accounts for most of India's non-commodity exports and is the major destination for foreign investment. Other than Delhi, all metropolitan growth has occurred in the peninsula. All sunrise industries—IT, Pharmaceuticals, light engineering, FMCG, and automobiles—are preponderantly located in the peninsula.

However, there is another skew which impacts the balance of political power. Fertility in the peninsula has declined sharply relative to the rest of the country. This means the population share of southern India is now much lower than it was in 1971. In combination, this is a potentially explosive situation. Few countries have managed to navigate this asymmetry of a political majority being vastly poorer than an economic minority. Without convergence or an innovative political settlement, this is an existential threat.

The finance commissions have been the only instrument to mediate this conundrum with an implicit grand bargain. The poorer states have benefited hugely from the transfer of taxable resources from the richer states. This happens because the largest weight in the horizontal devolution formula—which determines how much each state gets from income taxes, import duties and GST—is the inverse of the state's per capita income, which means the poorer a state is, the more resources it gets.

There are many options available to the XVI FC if it has the independence and technical competence to consider them. And I sincerely hope that this is where their focus is, insofar as their abilities allow. However, pusillanimity and business-as-usual thinking, along with throwaway comments to the media (which does not benefit a non-partisan constitutional body), are unhelpful, irresponsible, and damaging at this delicate juncture when intergovernmental fiscal relations are already under strain from larger pressures caused by economic and political divergence.

(Views are personal)
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CONFRONTING LIFE'S FRAGILITY WITH ANCIENT WISDOM

A poignant meme is presently doing the rounds on social media about the uncertainty of life: that you go on a holiday and get massacred, you go on a honeymoon and get murdered, you fly out on a trip abroad, and your plane crashes, you mind your own business in your hotel when the sky literally falls on your head as a doomed plane.

This deeply disturbing pattern prompted me to reexamine the inner history of Hindu thought and its attempts to grasp the riddle of existence—its uncertainties and the frequently brutal outcome.

I found that Hindu thought is actually a practical game plan for life, providing perspective on the chaos I hear it first set in the *Rig Veda*, when the Hindus were still not *nagarik* or settled urban people but wandered the plains with their herds of cattle, frequently clashing over pasture. So severe were these clashes that the encounters of two clans became a euphemism for battle, a *sangram*.

So, you find the Vedas saying a curious thing, "*Ekam sat, viprabhavadavanti*," which I interpret as the practical message, "The facts are the facts, and smart people get it." On the ground, it means, "If everybody has to share the same space, they'll have to work it out."

This is a first in conflict resolution for the project of communal life with maximum damage control. It's a survival directive from the earliest Hindu worldview that internal strife absolutely has to be managed because nobody is going anywhere. Here they are, and here they stay. Hence this official statement: "Live and let live for the greater good."

We hear this point reiterated in many ways in the sixteen principal Upanishads that follow the Vedas. The Upanishads inquire, reflect, debate and theorise about this existential issue. And they continue to expand the concept of *Ekam Sat*.

Sat literally means "What is" or what exists. Its fundamental aspect, they say, is a 'Superself' or 'God', an intangible spirit. Amazingly, it contains every physical form and pervades every physical form. It's an essence so subtle that mere words fail to express it.

However, the Upanishads don't mean to give up without trying, for the concept is too mind-blowing. So, they settle for comparisons that everyone can understand: that the Superself is "*Pushpa madhyavat*"



RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

hagandham, payomadhayeyathaghrta, tilamadhayeyathailam," or "As scent in a flower, as ghee in milk, as oil in a sesame seed." Further, "*Om purnamadahpurnam idam, purnatpurnamudachyate, purnasayapurnamadaya purnamevavashishyate*." It means, "The Superself that contains everything is the whole. Everything that comes from it is a whole in itself, and yet it's a part of the bigger whole."

This is our first theory of a cosmos or universe that includes Earth and everything in it, as well as the galaxy comprising



Hindu thought is a practical game plan for life. It provides tools to understand conflict, mortality, and navigate our constantly changing world

ing the sun, moon, stars, and planets.

So, if it all belongs to the Superself, the *Isha*, what's everybody fighting about? "Don't be greedy," says the opening verse of the *Isha Upanishad*: "*Ishavasyamidamsavamyatkinchajagatyam jagat, natyaktvedanbhunjitha ma gridhah, kas-yavidhanam*," or "Everything moving or unmoving within the universe is controlled and owned by the One. So, we should accept only the stuff we need and not covet anything else, knowing to Whom they belong."

The other aspect of *sat*, they say, is that human beings link the larger world outside and the inner world of thoughts and feelings. What connects human beings

and to the rest of the creation is an inner spark, the "light within the heart".

Having that sorted nicely, with a Superself that encompasses everything and an inner spark connecting us and to the Superself, they want to know more.

Whoosh? We hit the *Bhagavad Gita*. See, the Upanishads are reportage. They tell us that "intuited" or "heard" things and said, "These are the thoughts that came to us and others; and these are the questions asked and the answers that came to us."

However, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, they make the big leap. They want to hear the Superself speak directly to them. It's the philosophical parallel of what happens after the Industrial Revolution, after people are doing making cars, trains and planes, and think, "Right, let's build a spaceship."

And so, they envision a semi-celestial warrior and make him ask on their behalf because nobody will listen otherwise. They set up Arjuna in the middle of two huge armies on the brink of war in the ultimate *sangram*. They make him stick his neck out and say, "*Kathamvidya mahamयोगिन*" (How may I know Thee, Lord?) *Bhagavad Gita* 10:17. You know the live-and-let-live answers to that, especially the bit with cult status, Chapter 16 in the *Bhagavad Gita* about "divine and demonic natures".

But the work never stops because these amazing ideas are not exactly put into practice, and things sink to the bottom of the sea. It takes the Bhakti Movement to haul it up, scrape off the barnacles and reassert the core values of the Upanishads about the Superself and our interconnectivity as human beings. And then we have the colonial age, and paradoxically, it also helps the work because the Upanishads come right back as the Constitution—the modern Upanishad, the old-new life plan.

In sum, given how suddenly we may die, we have no real mental refuge but the kindly arms of Saraswati, the perspective that thought provides on how to live.

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MAIL BAG

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Evocative interview

Ref: 'I can't stop getting a year older', Paramita Ghosh interviews Ruskin Bond (Jun 14). Ruskin Bond's words paint a poignant picture of a life lived in harmony with nature. Him finding solace and inspiration in its rhythms and beauty were deeply moving. His views on success are nuanced and an endearing affection for the comic world was particularly interesting.
Suhrita Basak, e-mail

Crash accountability

Ref: Toll 270, probe panel formed (Jun 15). The aviation minister has offered condolences and ordered inspections, but there has been no acceptance of moral responsibility. Ministers enjoy authority, but avoid accountability. The minister and top officials must step down, not for blame, but as a gesture of responsibility.
T. Kalish Datta, Hyderabad

Bavuma factor

Ref: This time for Africa (Jun 15). As Temba Bavuma holds the championship mace, it depicts a true story of a skipper whose grit, guts and determination led his team to achieve the greatest of ICC crowns.
M Pradyu, Kannur

Private interests

Ref: Smelling cash in the space race (Jun 15). We wish that the commercialisation of space doesn't gradually lead to compromise of safety standards. The dilution of professionalism is a possibility when competing and profit-driven private agencies carry out the missions. Public agencies like ISRO however, demonstrate an immaculate sense of commitment and dedication.
CV Aravind, Chennai

Diplomatic priorities

Ref: World of wars and bonfire of 67 vanities (Jun 15). The 67 meet will be an orchestrated extravaganza. Trump will lead the agenda with his own narratives. No solution to the present geopolitical conflicts is in sight. India should protect its interests through trade deals with the US to boost growth.
Rajarao Kumar, e-mail

Neighbourly concord

Ref: Rajnath Singh to visit China on June 25 (June 14). In today's evolving global landscape, there's no gaining saying the fact that mutual cooperation is pivotal for overall development. Given China's rapid ascent to rival the US as a dominant superpower, there's certainly much for India to gain from its neighbour.
S. Vithalanthan, Madurai

Israel-Iran conflict may not continue for long

The long-standing tensions between Israel and Iran have entered a perilous new phase, marked by direct military engagement and significant strategic consequences. The latest escalation occurred when Israel launched a direct airstrike on Iran's oil and gas infrastructure. On Saturday, an Israeli missile struck Phase 14 of the South Pars gas field—the world's largest—causing a massive fire and forcing Iran to suspend the production of 12 million cubic metres of gas per day. This marked the first known direct Israeli strike on Iran's vital energy sector and signifies a new level of confrontation. The strike, reportedly executed with surgical precision, has dealt a blow to Iran's energy revenues, further pressuring an already

strained economy under years of international sanctions. By targeting South Pars, Israel has moved beyond military installations and proxy militias, striking directly at Iran's economic lifelines. Not incidentally, the conflict has also taken on an ideological and historical dimension. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the trauma of the Holocaust to justify Israel's aggressive posture. In a sombre address to the nation, he declared, "Nearly a century ago, facing the Nazis, a generation of leaders failed to act in time." Drawing parallels with Adolf Hitler's rise and the devastating appeasement that followed, he insisted that Israel would not allow history to repeat itself. "The Jewish people and the Jewish

state have vowed never again," he said. Over the past year, Israel has systematically degraded Iran's military and nuclear capabilities. A series of covert operations and precision strikes have killed several top Iranian commanders and nuclear scientists, many of whom played central roles in Tehran's nuclear programme and strategic planning. These strikes not only weakened Iran's deterrent capabilities but also sent a clear message to both Iran and the international community: Israel is willing to act unilaterally and decisively when it perceives an existential threat. In fact the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas, an Iran proxy, had triggered the ongoing war in the Middle East. Netanyahu has rightly vowed to confront Iran whose

stated goal is annihilation of the Jewish state. The United States, while officially refraining from direct military involvement in the hostilities, has expressed unwavering support for Israel. Washington has reiterated Israel's right to self-defence, and intelligence cooperation between the two allies remains robust. The international fallout from the conflict is already being felt. In India, concerns over regional stability have led to the rerouting of international flights to avoid Iranian and Israeli airspace, resulting in delays and logistical challenges. Financial markets are jittery, with the Bombay Stock Exchange tumbling on Friday amid fears of supply disruptions and broader geopolitical uncertainty. Energy prices have

also surged globally, reflecting the vulnerability of oil and gas infrastructure in the Middle East. Despite the alarming developments, the conflict may not extend for a prolonged period. Israel's objectives are specific and time-bound: to severely degrade Iran's military and nuclear infrastructure and, in the longer term, to encourage or precipitate regime change in Tehran. While the latter is an ambitious goal in the short term, the former is achievable and already in motion. If Israel succeeds in incapacitating Iran's military capabilities—particularly its missile systems, command infrastructure, and nuclear development facilities—it may restore a balance of power in the region. Signs indicate that Israel can succeed.

LETTERS

Religious equality is a must

This is with reference to the article in Mirror (June 15): "Not colonial constitution, but Hindu majority sustains India's secular democracy." Secularism in the Indian Constitution means that the state does not favour any religion and ensures equal respect of all. While the state maintains a distance from religion it can interfere in religious matters based on Constitutional principles to prevent religious domination. Articles 25 to 28 guarantee freedom of religion to all citizens, including the right to profess, practice and propagate their religion. However, many States have passed anti-conversion laws which prohibit minorities from propagating their religion and very often FIRs are booked against them. When 70 per cent of the country's population is Hindus, what necessitated some political leaders to pass such anti-conversion Acts against religious minorities? Not only Hindus, but every citizen irrespective of the individual's religion makes India the secular country that it is.

P Victor Selvaraj, Tirunelveli

NTM and PLI flipping India's technical textiles script

GIRIRAJ SINGH

A few years ago, technical textiles were viewed as a peripheral segment, limited in scope, underinvested and heavily reliant on imports. Today, they stand at the centre of India's industrial transformation. This shift is not incidental.

It is the outcome of deliberate strategy, policy foresight and national commitment, anchored in the larger vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Whether it was scaling up PPE production during the Covid-19 crisis, supporting the armed forces with indigenous protective gear, or supplying critical material inputs for operations like Sinozor, technical textiles have demonstrated their role as enablers of national preparedness and industrial progress.

From niche to strategic: The policy imperative: A pivotal moment came during a review meeting of the National Technical Textiles Mission (NTTM), where I had the opportunity to interact with the then Chairman of ISRO, Dr S Somnath. He underlined the growing need for specialty fibres such as carbon fibre, UHMWPE (Ultra-High Molecular Weight Polyethylene) and nylon 66—materials essential for high-performance aerospace applications.

His message was unequivocal: India must build indigenous capabilities in these domains, not just to reduce dependency, but to unlock the next level of our scientific advancement. That conversation reaffirmed the strategic importance of technical textiles in India's growth narrative, from laboratories to launch pads.

From lab to launch pads and battlegrounds: The defence sector too has begun to feel the strategic value of this transformation.

Take for instance Operation Sinozor, where protective clothing and ballistic gear to camouflage fabrics and chemical-biological protection suits technical textiles played a vital role. As we began investing early in domestic capacity-building, today we are able to support our defence sector not just with manpower, but with material that meets global standards, developed and manufactured on Indian soil.

Understanding technical textiles:

Technical textiles are not about fashion or aesthetics. They are high-performance materials designed to serve a function, often in life-saving or critical infrastructure contexts. These include bullet-resistant jackets, flame-retardant uniforms, surgical gowns, anti-bacterial sheets for farmers, road-reinforcement geo-grids and much more. The sector spans 12 major segments including geotextiles, meditech, protect, agrotech and buldtech. As of 2024, India's technical textiles market was valued at \$26 billion. We are on track to touch \$40-\$45 billion by 2030, growing at an annual rate of 10-12 per cent. Compared to the global average where technical textiles form 27 per cent of total textile output, India stands at 11 per cent. But with the right push, we are narrowing the gap rapidly.

Driving growth: Key government interventions: To unlock this sector's true potential, the Government of India has committed a total outlay of ₹81,200 crore through two key initiatives—the National Technical Textiles Mission (NTTM) and the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme for Textiles.

These programs are not working in silos. Together, they are transforming India into a global hub for technical textiles. Under the NTTM, we are driving focused invest-



With market development as a core pillar, NTTM is expanding both domestic adoption and global reach. The mandatory use of 73 technical textile items across sectors like healthcare, agriculture, infrastructure, and defence has led to their integration into public infrastructure. Over 30 international events, including Bharat Tex 2025, have amplified India's visibility. Meanwhile, overall man-made textile exports rose from \$4.2 billion in 2020-21 to \$5.3 billion in 2024-25, and reduced imports signal growing self-reliance and competitiveness.

ment into research and innovation. Around 168 high-impact projects have been approved with government support of ₹850 crore. Many of these, like the development of fire entry suits and circular weaving technology for geotextiles, have already moved from the lab to the market.

NTTM: Seeding innovation, skilling India

Driven by the vision of Atmanirbhar India, the National Technical Textiles Mission is laying strong foundations for innovation and skill development. While 17 startups have received support under the GREAT (Grant for Research & Entrepreneurship across Aspiring Innovators in Technical Textiles) scheme. Over 2,000 students are pursuing technical textiles courses across 41 top institutes, backed by 16 industry-linked skilling modules that are shaping a future-ready workforce.

Creating demand, driving global presence

With market development as a core pillar, NTTM is expanding both domestic adoption and global reach. The mandatory use of 73 techni-

cal textile items across sectors like healthcare, agriculture, infrastructure, and defence has led to their integration into public infrastructure. Over 30 international events, including Bharat Tex 2025, have amplified India's visibility. Meanwhile, overall man-made textile exports rose from \$4.2 billion in 2020-21 to \$5.3 billion in 2024-25, and reduced imports signal growing self-reliance and competitiveness.

Linking performance to policy: The PLI framework:

In the private sector, performance is rewarded. Those who exceed targets are incentivised to go further and boost the employment landscape of the country. That same principle now informs our industrial policy through the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme. This scheme represents a paradigm shift where incentives are no longer subsidies, but performance-linked rewards. It recognises that for India to compete globally, manufacturing must be treated like a mission, with clear metrics, commercial viability and a growth-oriented mindset. Together, NTTM and PLI

offer a dual engine: while NTTM lays the foundation through research, education and skill development, the PLI Scheme is accelerating growth. Of the 80 companies selected under the scheme, more than half (precisely 56.75 per cent) are working in the technical textiles space. This is a strong indicator of industry confidence. Thanks to this support, we have seen fresh investments of ₹7,343 crore, leading to an impressive turnover of ₹9,648 crore and exports worth ₹858 crore.

To ensure smooth implementation, the Ministry of Textiles has taken proactive steps. We issued HSN codes for technical textiles on three occasions—June 2023, October 2024 and February 2025 and also released detailed FAQs to clarify customs and compliance. An important amendment in February enabled early incentive disbursements totalling ₹854 crore.

Our ambitions extend far beyond domestic boundaries. Through the PLI scheme, India is steadily building capacity in high-value products such as automotive safety equipment, glass fibre and carbon fibre. These advanced materials play a crucial role in defence, aerospace, defence, clean energy and healthcare. By boosting domestic manufacturing in these areas, the scheme is strategically positioning India to compete with leading global textile exporters like China, Vietnam and Bangladesh.

The impact so far:

The impact of our combined initiatives is already visible. India's domestic market for technical textiles is growing at an annual rate of 10 per cent. Exports in the financial year 2024-25 stood at \$2.9 billion. As of March, we have attracted investments worth ₹52.18 crore and generated employment for more than 8,500 people. Technical textiles alone have driven a turnover of ₹3,242 crore, including exports worth ₹217

core. This data is not just about numbers but proof that our strategy is working.

Towards a sustainable and self-reliant future:

Sustainability and circularity are at the core of India's technical textiles strategy. Natural fibres like jute, hemp, ramie, cotton, silk, and even milkweed are being reimaged for high-performance applications benefiting the environment while empowering our farmers and industries. Nature-based solutions (NbS) are emerging as powerful interventions that blend innovation with traditional fibres.

For instance, waste from Kashmiri pashmina is now used in building insulation; cotton and silk are being applied in wound dressings and tissue engineering; and silk is finding use in 3D printing. Jute is enabling biodegradable medical implants, lightweight composites for automobiles, eco-friendly construction materials, and durable furniture.

At the same time, we are prioritising domestic machinery manufacturing, with 25 projects underway to produce goods worth ₹68,000 crore expected to contribute ₹6,700 crore in exports—paving the way for a truly self-reliant and sustainable industrial future. As the Union Minister of Textiles, I take pride in saying that India is not merely participating in the global technical textiles movement—we are positioning ourselves to lead it. With the combined force of NTTM and PLI, we are driving innovation, generating employment, strengthening exports, and building national resilience.

From supporting our defence and agricultural sectors to modernising infrastructure and more, technical textiles are shaping a bold new industrial identity for India. And this is only the beginning.

(The writer is Union Minister of Textiles)

Bike taxis integral to Bengaluru

Bike taxis, the people's preferred mode of transportation, will go off Bengaluru roads, albeit temporarily from June 16. This step is taken in view of the high speed of bike taxis and the penchant to play in wrong directions. Auto drivers and four-wheeler taxis, who have been suffering since the advent of bike taxis, are on protest. In the IT capital of India, bike taxis are the best option to commute. They are financially viable and take less time to reach destinations. Lakhs of people earn their bread and butter by driving bike taxis. Some employees in private organisations are earning some additional income through driving bike taxis in their leisure hours. All eyes will be on the High Court, which will decide the fate of bike taxis in Karnataka on June 24.

Nagendra Kumar Vempalli, Bengaluru

Address poor air quality issues

India is home to some of the most polluted cities on Earth. Gurugram, Delhi and Kanpur have very poor air quality. As a result, people, especially the elderly and children, are falling ill due to air pollution caused by industries, vehicles, constructions, and lack of greenery. Afforestation and tree plantation, water spraying at construction sites and environmentally-friendly vehicles like EVs are needed everywhere. That is when people can breathe a sigh of relief.

Arshad Bastavi, Mumbai

Promote Hyd's eastern and northern parts

It is ironical that while BRS government developed TISS Hyderabad through SEZs prominently called Hitec city where IT and ITES MNCs established offices making it the prime location, the present Congress government focussing on developing the south and south-west parts of Hyderabad, through mega projects like Future city, Pharma city and Aerospace projects. It makes one wonder why the northern and eastern parts of city are being ignored? Why is the city devoid of an inclusive development?

P R Ravinder, New Mirjalgauda, Hyderabad

KLIS: Don't take KCR remarks at face value

Former chief minister K Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR) has previously referred to himself as the architect of the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme (KLIS). But during his recent departure from the PC Ghouse Commission, which is investigating the alleged irregularities in the project execution, he stated that all technical decisions were taken by the engineers and the project had Cabinet approval. Further, he told the Commission that the redesign and re-engineering of the barrages were based on expert reports and technical assessments, not personal directives. He had often described KLIS as a dream project that fulfilled his vision for Telangana's irrigation needs. His latest statements should be verified with the notes written in the files of the project. There is a need to identify the engineers and politicians responsible for the faults and problems in the project.

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ECI's ineffectiveness: The watchdog on a leash

VARAN JIWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

In a June 7 article Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi made a serious allegation of 'industrial-scale rigging' in the 2024 Maharashtra Assembly elections. His claims were strongly rebutted by the Election Commission of India (ECI), which dismissed them as 'completely absurd' and aimed at defaming the Commission.

In retaliation, Rahul Gandhi strongly objected to this rebuttal that came in the form of an unsigned note, raising questions about the transparency and accountability of the institution.

Meanwhile, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh cautioned ECI to be 'independent and transparent' and avoid speaking through BJP president JP Nadda. The ECI has long been regarded as one of India's most respected constitutional bodies entrusted

with the vital task of ensuring conduct of free and fair elections to Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and State Legislative Councils, besides elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President.

The CEC was a one-man institution from March 21, 1950 to September 30, 1993. On October 1, 1993, it became a three-member body. Registration procedures also have restrictions on the party names. Categorizing parties either when they register or later, such as national and regional is also in vogue.

The registration process is governed by ECI, which begins with submission of an application on the party letterhead, enclosing required fee remittance details, bye-laws including formal constitution with a provision regarding periodical organisational elections at different levels with a mention of term of office, declaration of office bearers, minimum number of members, and affidavits



committing to secularism and democracy. But this drama is more a procedural one, than substantive.

In effect, ECI itself remarkably limited its own powers giving an impression that they are largely procedural, but not punitive. This contradiction, apparently strong in electoral conduct, weak in party ethics, has created a wide chasm between legal norms and ground realities.

The reason is simple: The ethical part in some form or the other to be followed by parties is conspicuously absent, and over a time ECI conducting elections and political parties' changing

interpretation on ECI role has become a subject of unequivocal controversy, and ambiguous rebuts by ECI. Furthermore, ECI rarely dares to touch any political party on issues of dishonest promises and observations, except sticking to the rule book regarding the model code, expenses, affidavits, offensive or hate speeches that too during the election process.

Despite this inefficiency of ECI, in the vast and often turbulent arena of political parties, there have been shining examples of best practices that elevated democratic values, practices that signalled evol-

ing norms, and individuals who led parties not just to electoral success but to moral and institutional maturity. These instances provide blueprints for what political leadership can and should be. It is beyond doubt that, in the often-unpredictable theatre of Indian democracy, political parties serve as principal vehicles of public representation, policy formulation, and power negotiation.

ECI in January 2017 published a book, 'Unfolding Indian Elections: Journey of the living democracy' that documented interesting facts on Indian elections. Post-Independence and with Universal Adult Suffrage, first general elections were held for Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies simultaneously during 1951-52. Every citizen above 21 years (18, since 2014 elections) of age was eligible to vote. The enormous task to enrol every adult citizen was fairly a grand success.

Spending money or buying votes in the first general

elections, the whole process of which took place from September 10, 1951 to June 4, 1952, was an anaesthesia. The global community witnessed these elections with great interest. It took notice of subsequent elections with journalists, politicians and observers from numerous countries descending upon India to see its novel experiment of adult suffrage.

The first ECI Sukumar Sen oversaw the elections. Indefatigable for application on voter's fingers was developed by Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. Metal and wooden boxes were used to receive ballots. Each candidate was assigned one box then. Strangely some voters regarded ballot boxes as objects of worship and dropped flowers, and some dropped papers writing something.

From Sukumar to present CEO Gyaneshwar, it has been a long and successful journey. Let us hope that the ECI will use its established powers.

Fast probe required

Crash investigation should be quick and credible

The tragic crash of Air India Flight 171 shortly after it took off from Ahmedabad has brought attention back to the airline, the regulators, and the broader state of civil aviation in India. Very little is known for certain about what caused the aircraft's failure to achieve the required thrust and the eventual crash into a medical hostel 2 km from the runway. It would be wise to wait for the crash-investigation report rather than indulging in speculation. It is also important that this investigation be transparently conducted by the relevant authorities and its report released in a timely fashion. The nodal agency for this investigation will be the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB), which is a branch of the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation. India set up a separate investigation agency in 2012; the only major investigation it has conducted so far is the probe of Air India Express Flight 1344's crash while landing at Kozhikode Airport in 2020. Most investigations worldwide are carried out with the assistance of global experts, often including assistance from the country where the flight was heading. In this case, given the plane was due to land at Gatwick Airport in London, and that more than 50 of those on board were British citizens, the AAIB's counterpart in the United Kingdom has already deployed four people to assist. Boeing, the manufacturer of the aircraft in question, has also sent personnel.

The very fact that this is only the second large-scale crash that requires investigation by the AAIB is a testimony to how much safer flying has become in India, even as the aviation market in the country has consistently been the fastest-growing in the world. The 1970s and 1980s saw a spate of crashes and other incidents, including terrorist attacks on Indian aviation. But the 21st century has seen, simultaneously, a proliferation of private airlines, vast growth in passenger numbers, and a sharp reduction in the number of high-profile incidents and fatalities. The good reputation of Indian aviation has been hard-earned, and will be maintained only if the investigation into this crash is swift and credible, and that any recommendations to the airlines and authorities are accepted and speedily implemented.

It should be noted that Air India itself, while troubled on several dimensions, has not had a major fatality due to a crash (as distinct from terrorist attack) since a Boeing 707 crash-landed in Mumbai in 1982. This record compares favourably with many of its global rivals. But its low-cost subsidiary, Air India Express, has done considerably worse. Meanwhile, in 30 years of private civil aviation in India, the major private-sector airlines have never suffered a major crash. Questions can and will be asked about whether in the internal restructuring of Air India's operations since privatisation, safety has been retained as the top priority. These questions will hopefully be answered by the investigation, and so it is in the airline's interests to cooperate fully. After some incidents in other countries — such as EgyptAir Flight 804 in 2016 — investigations suffered delays, disputes, and restrictions that have been political in nature. India cannot afford such problems with this probe. The government has set the ambitious target of doubling domestic traffic by 2030, alongside 50 more airports. For these ambitions to be achieved, safety procedures must be paramount, and be seen to be paramount. The AAIB's work will, therefore, be carefully scrutinised, and it must produce a comprehensive and accurate report as quickly as possible.

War clouds over West Asia

The risks of economic fallout are high

Israel's attack on Iran signals an ominous widening of the war in West Asia, threatening a global economy that is struggling to come to terms with the havoc of American President Donald Trump's tariff wars. The barrage of air strikes that the two nations have exchanged so far has heightened the chances of an escalation into a proxy war between Israel, supported by the United States (US), and Iran-sponsored groupings in the region, the Houthis and the Hamas, with the potential of disrupting critical trade routes and air space on both sides of the Arabian Peninsula. East of Saudi Arabia, Iran's position at the northern end of the Strait of Hormuz could become a potential choke point for Tehran choose to block the waterway in retaliation for sustained Israeli attacks, given that Oman and the United Arab Emirates at the southern end are allies of the US with military bases and listening posts. The Strait of Hormuz accounts for the transport of almost a quarter of global oil supplies and a significant portion of the world's liquefied natural gas. On the western end, Iran's clients, the Houthis of Yemen, could intensify their attacks on international shipping via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. This area accounts for about 15 per cent of global maritime trade and is crucial for links between Asia and Europe. Added to this are rising prices of crude oil and gas. Prices of crude oil jumped 7 per cent and gas 5 per cent after hostilities broke out. The consequences of the 1991 Gulf War remain a cautionary tale in this respect.

The fact that Israel initiated these hostilities while US-Iran nuclear talks were on has raised suspicions that the attacks were coordinated to put pressure on Tehran over its uranium-enrichment programme. Tel Aviv deployed as an alibi the fears that Iran has the capability to produce multiple nuclear weapons within a year, whereas Iran insists its enrichment programme is for peaceful purposes. But given that Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons — which it denies — heightens the possibility of an arms race in a confrontation fraught with extreme peril. Since Israel has inflicted real harm on Iran — killing several generals and nuclear scientists and damaging its nuclear facilities — neither leadership can afford to back down. For Iran's Shia Islamic regime, war with Israel imparts legitimacy to its increasingly unpopular authoritarian rule. Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu rightly fears losing power if he ends hostilities on both fronts and calls elections. Meanwhile, even as Israel seeks to annihilate Gaza, it is by no means certain that its destruction of the top echelons of Iranian cleric Hamas has decimated this grouping. The security risks for Israel remain as potent as ever.

Given the studied indifference of the Western powers to Israel's systematic destruction of the Palestinians in Gaza, the strong statement by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), comprising nine Eurasian member-states condemning Israel's attacks on Iran on June 13, is a salutary, if symbolic, message. Since India has relations with both combatants and its economy stands to lose more than any other SCO member from this conflict, it has chosen to carve out an independent position calling for dialogue and diplomacy. As with its stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflict, this can be seen as an unexceptionable position in line with its perceived national interests.



IBC in stress

Its survival depends on the judiciary and executive staying committed to its core principles

The Indian Parliament in 2016 enacted the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) to address the country's persistent challenges of financial stress and managing bad debts, with the overarching objective of driving economic growth. In its initial years, the IBC benefited from rare institutional alignment. The legislature amended the code six times in the first five years to address implementation challenges and respond to the evolving economic environment. With alacrity, the executive issued the rules and regulations, established the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) and National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), accredited insolvency professionals, and built the supporting ecosystem. The judiciary reinforced the code's commercial and time-bound character through purposive and pragmatic interpretations.

This concerted effort, reinforced by stakeholder support, initially yielded remarkable outcomes. Faster resolutions, behavioural shifts among debtors, and improved credit discipline. India's global ranking for resolving insolvency improved from 136th to 52nd in the first three years of the IBC's implementation. However, this momentum appears to have waned. While shortcomings are visible across the insolvency ecosystem, this piece focuses on two sources of growing concern: The judiciary and the executive, whose recent actions seem to undermine the IBC's core objective of insolvency resolution. Recent rulings of the Supreme Court have somewhat modified the foundational premise of the code, diluting the legislative vision and mandate. A recent unsettling instance is the verdict in the *Bhushan Steel and Power Ltd.*, where the court set aside a resolution plan implemented years ago. The inordinate delay adds to the disquiet: It took five years to decide a matter under a law that explicitly mandates time-bound resolution. This judgment signals that any commercial transaction, no matter how long it has been implemented or how many layers of state

approval it has received, can be unravelled years later.

There was a jolt from the *Rainbow Papers Ltd.* case, where the Supreme Court accorded the government a first charge over the assets of a company. This was despite the IBC's long title explicitly providing "alteration in the order of priority of payment of Government dues", and the priority rule placing government dues below unsecured debts. Unsurprisingly, a Coordinate Bench in the *Pachmalchand* observed that this statutory priority rule "was either not brought to the notice of the court in *Rainbow* or was misread altogether", acknowledging the legislative intent to subordinate government dues to claims of creditors.

The legislature decided to use default as the trigger for initiating proceedings to ease the burden on the NCLT and enable the swift admission of cases. The notes on clauses appended to the Bill reinforced this rationale, emphasising quick admission as essential to achieving faster and better outcomes. However, in *Vidarbha Industries Power Ltd.*, the court departed from this intent by requiring the NCLT to assess the company's viability and overall financial health, a task it is neither mandated nor equipped to perform. It further held that the NCLT may "keep the admission of the application of the Financial Creditor in abeyance, unless there is good reason not to do so".

Now the executive. Timeliness is what makes the IBC valuable. A stressed company must be admitted to the process swiftly before it turns unviable. A resolution plan must be approved and implemented expeditiously before it runs out of money. Resources locked in unviable companies must be released quickly before the value dissipates. Likewise, the value lost through avoidance transactions must be clawed back promptly before recovery becomes impractical.

Unfortunately, the NCLT often takes years to admit applications, approve resolution plans, or rule on avoidance matters. Meanwhile, resolution appli-



M S SAHOO & ASHISH MAKHIA

Rate cuts can't shift growth gear

On June 6, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) surprised the markets — it sliced the repo rate by 50 basis points (bps) to 5.5 per cent and cut the cash reserve ratio (CRR) by 100 bps, phased over four 25-bp tranches from September to November. The move, expected to inject ₹2.5 trillion (\$30 billion) into the system, briefly lifted spirits. The Nifty index climbed 1 per cent that day, with a modest gain the day after.

However, by the end of the week, the index had slumped below its pre-cut level. The rate cut is a sideshow. With the RBI shifting its stance to "neutral" or "accommodative" there will be no "easing cycle". A mere 100-bp cut will do little to spur demand. The RBI's expected growth in gross domestic product (GDP) is projected to be the same 6.3 per cent as last year, and consumer price inflation slightly lower. This means overall growth expectations are modest. The reason: The four main economic drivers of the economy are stuck in low gear.

Consider consumption first. Private final consumption expenditure (PFCE), which makes up nearly 60 per cent of India's GDP, fell from a growth rate of 6.8 per cent in the pre-Covid years to 4.1 per cent in 2019-20 (FY20). After a brief post-pandemic recovery, it fell again: To 5.6 per cent in FY24, according to the RBI, and an even weaker 4.4 per cent, according to the National Statistical Office. The consumption rebound was short-lived because it was led by debt and higher welfare spending by the government. After all, average income growth in most sectors (engineering, financial services, retail, information technology, logistics and consumer goods) was outpaced by inflation. But debt-funded consumption has its limits. Since mid-2023, growth in personal loans has fallen off the cliff — from 22 per cent then or 10 per cent or so now — reducing consumption.

The second element in GDP growth is net exports (exports minus imports). Indian exports are a disaster. Large headline stories, like growing cell phone exports, mask a poor overall performance in merchandise exports, which fell 12.8 per cent in FY24 and are expected to grow by only 2 per cent in FY25. Year after year, India's net exports are negative. It has no control over imports — fossil fuel and gold imports are inelastic — and benefits only when the prices of these commodities are down. It cannot boost exports either, because enormous costs of doing business sap the productivity and competitiveness of Indian exporters. India's services exports and enormous remittances partly reduce the impact of poor net exports.

The third driver of growth is private capital expenditure (capex). There is a lot of bullish anecdotal evidence about shiny new factories coming up, but the most comprehensive and authentic set of data is not so rosy. According to the Forward-Looking Survey of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, actual intended private-sector capex will fall from ₹6.56 trillion in FY24 to ₹4.9 trillion in FY26, a fall of 25 per cent. This survey was confined to large enterprises, and the mood is worse among small and medium ones. The reason for sluggish spending is sluggish demand — this can be traced back to the state, which comes in the way of creating a thriving, competitive, and innovative business climate.

This leads us to the fourth engine of growth: Government capex, probably the most important one in the current climate. India is continuing with the old "dominant state" model, extorting a lot of money from businesses and citizens even in a period of stagnant growth. Notice that the growth of manufacturing and exports is miserably low, and even large com-

panies are struggling to increase their revenues beyond single digits. But the government's take from goods and services tax (GST) between FY20 and FY25 expanded by an astonishing annual rate of 19.46 per cent. In FY23 and FY24, capitalising on GST collections and adding massive borrowings to its pot, the government massively increased spending. The Union Budget of FY25 announced a huge capital outlay of ₹10 trillion, which was increased to ₹11 trillion in FY25, to be spent on railways, roads, urban transport, waterworks, energy transformation, and defence production. This boosted growth for two years. However, despite large allocations, actual government capex was surprisingly sluggish in FY25. There was no growth that year, while revenue expenditure went up, leading to a 2.2 per cent revenue deficit. In a society where the rule of law is weak, corruption is rampant, and red tape is entrenched, the limitations of government capex as a driver of growth are obvious. Also, if tax-and-spend was expected to trickle down, it has failed: India's rural wages and job growth are stagnant, and this has wrecked consumption growth.

Clearly, it is not for the RBI and its monetary policy committee (MPC) to fix any of these deep structural issues and magically create growth. If any evidence is needed that the current economic strategy is not working, payroll growth is a definitive one. According to the government data, net payroll addition under the Employee Provident Fund was -5.1 per cent in FY24 and -1.3 per cent in FY25. The Naukri Jobsseeker Index of white collar jobs has flattened since FY23. Risk job creation reflects how ineffective the headline 7 per cent GDP growth really is; it also hobbles consumption, the economy's lifeblood. There is no escape for policymakers to face facts: What we have is a structural, not cyclical, issue.

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The world of DIY submarine builders



PETER SAGAL

Matthew Gavin Frank begins *Submersed*, his book about the amateur submersible community, with a confession: "For as long as I can remember, I've been afraid of the ocean."

The fear of drowning may be one of those inherited atavistic survival instincts — all other primates sink like stones. Perhaps that's why the world's attention was seized by the disappearance of the private submersible *Titan* while it was touring the wreck of the *Titanic* in June 2023. We imagined the

final moments of the five passengers, shuddered and tried to think about something else.

Frank, an accomplished author of narrative nonfiction, uses his terror as inspiration for this exploration of personal submersibles — or "p-subs" — and the eccentricities that make, descend and sometimes die in them. The result, though, is not the tale of how he triumphed over his nightmare, although he does eventually submerge in one of these tiny homemade metal air bubbles. Nor is it solely a portrait of the mostly self-taught engineers who spend their days in garages or backyards welding steel and fiddling with control panels.

It is in large part the story, told in excruciating detail, of one particular death on a submarine: The 2017 murder of the Swedish journalist Kim Wall by the Danish amateur submariner Peter Madsen.

Madsen was a world-famous private sub-builder, sometimes compared to Elon Musk, whose mini-sub *Nautilus* was a legend before it became a crime scene. In his preface, Frank asks: Could there be a link between the kind of obsessive drive and egotism necessary to devote one's life to building a submarine by hand and the dark compulsion to take a stranger's life?

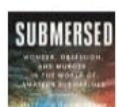
There are hints along these lines: Almost all the amateur submariners are men, most have trouble forging lasting connections, and there is a dark strain of bigotry and hatred among some of them; admiration for Nazi efficiency seems uncomfortably common.

(Madsen, as Frank documents, has his own history of sexual paraphilia and a kind of brazen self-regard that could have easily masked psychopathy.)

The two strands — a survey of a community of quirky obsessives and a true-crime horror story — don't quite mesh.

Frank's painstaking research (he likens it to a kind of OCD) yields evocative mini-portraits, whatever his subject. It is not enough for him to know that a person walked somewhere on a particular night years ago; he has to know everything that person experienced — the signage, the lights, the band that was playing the music coming from a bar on the corner. This can become almost self-parody: Kim Wall's last wave to her boyfriend, before she turned and walked to her death on the submarine, is followed by two solid pages of exegesis of the gesture, including on the biomechanics of a human hand, the significance of hand-waving in Greek myth and the wave's meaning in different cultures.

But almost all such quibbles can be forgiven because of, well, the sheer depth of Frank's skill. We can smell the



SUBMERSED Wonder, Obsession, and Murder in the World of Amateur Submariners by Matthew Gavin Frank Published by Pantheon 309 pages \$28

The one real misstep comes toward the end, as the diligent author, who seems to have spoken to everyone involved in Wall's murder but the con-

damp wood and tequila in the Alaskan cabin where one Nazi-obsessed submariner builds his vessels, and we instantly admire the endlessly energetic Shmuel Stoppitzky, "one of the few 'non-dudes' in the p-sub community," as she lays out her pie-in-the-water plans to build, and then inhabit, a human-friendly underwater habitat.

Frank is right: It does make a difference to the reader to be able to picture Kim Wall's last moments with loved ones. His book is a success if only for its ability to conjure so vividly Wall's character and the tragedy of her death by someone who did not know her at all.

The one real misstep comes toward the end, as the diligent author, who seems to have spoken to everyone involved in Wall's murder but the con-

victed killer himself, drives to a Danish prison for that climactic interview. Again, we are given a description of the place in minute detail — Frank tells us he's researched every aspect of the prison interior, leading to a detailed imagined encounter with Madsen as lucid as the nightmares of drowning that open the book. But then, standing in the parking lot, Frank aborts the mission. He never speaks to the central subject of his book.

Frank's starting thesis — that there must be something connecting the urge to risk one's own life by building submarines and the urge to take another — remains not only unproven, but frustratingly unprovable.

We are left only with the terror he invokes and never quite conquers, and the strange kind of reckless bravery required to risk everything by building your own submarine, or walking aboard somebody else's.

The reviewer is the host of NPR's *Walt Whitman ... Don't Tell Me!* @2025 The New York Times News Service

THE IDEAS PAGE

An alternative nationalism

For centuries, Indian society has been characterised by an unselfconscious pluralism of religions and cultures. Gandhi's innovations in thinking of governance in highly decentralised terms built on that



AKEEL BILGRAMI

YOGENDRA YADAV ("The nationalism we forgot", *IE*, May 27) stresses a familiar distinction between two nationalisms, one that emerged in the crucible of the Indian freedom struggle and another that he repeatedly calls "European nationalism", specifically citing only Germany (presumably of the 1930s and '40s). He invokes a vivid label — "belonging without othering" — to characterise the distinction. The nationalism pursued in the freedom struggle exemplified this label. The nationalism in Europe precisely did not, neither does the nationalism in currency in India today.

Much of the essay elaborates how this current form of nationalism in India has resulted in undermining the rights of citizens to speak critically of the government. Being a nationalism defined by hostility towards the other — both outside our borders as well as inside — it extends this hostility to its internal critics as well, viewing all criticism as treasonously aligning itself with the outsider. By contrast, a nationalism that refuses "othering" in its understanding of belonging views its internal critics as enriching the plurality that such a refusal permits (in contrast to the "uniformity" demanded by the very act of "othering"). This latter pluralist nationalism was the worthy legacy of the freedom movement and Yadav concludes his essay by laying the fault for the rise of the offending nationalism in India today at the doorstep of that he thinks of as a secularised, internationalist, modernist ethos that was cultivated in post-Independence India, which eschewed all nationalism, thereby creating a "nationalism" vacuum that is now filled by the Hinduva conception of the nation. It would seem, then, that for Yadav, the betrayal of the legacy of the freedom movement began with the secularised modernity adopted after Independence and that betrayal gave rise to its opposite, the religious majoritarian Hinduva nationalism of our present time.

Suhās Palshikar ("Who stole my nationalism?", *IE*, May 31) is right to accept the distinction between these two nationalisms and sensible too in expressing some scepticism about Yadav's diagnosis of its fault line. He builds more squarely responsible the contemporary perpetrators of Hinduva, but citizens by tracing their nationalism to elements within the national movement more than a century earlier.

I'd like to briefly give the related genealogies of these two nationalisms because that will bring out why it is not enough to see the "nation" as their main topic. The topic is equally — and comparably — the "state".

Sometimes in the mid-17th century in Europe, as a result of the rise of modern science, traditional justification of state power, as residing in the divine right of the monarch who personified the state, had lost its appeal. So, a new justification was sought, no longer in theology but in political psychology. At the same time, two developments occurred that shaped this revised justification. Since the Westphalian peace, a new entity had emerged (the nation), and power, whose loca-



CR Sasikumar

tions had hitherto been relatively scattered, became increasingly centralised. In the centuries that followed, these twin developments conjoined and culminated in the fusion of the nation and the state, a fusion expressed by a hyphen: The nation-state. So, the political psychology that provided the new justification of state power took the form of generating a feeling for what was named by the left-hand side of the hyphenated conjunction (nation) — and because it was fused with what was named by the right-hand side of the hyphen — that feeling would legitimise the state. Much later this came to be called "nationalism". And the question was: How was this feeling to be generated?

Everywhere in Europe it was generated by a standard ploy: Find an external enemy within the nation (the Jews, the Irish, the Protestants in Catholic countries...), despise it and subjugate it, and declare the nation to be "ours", not "theirs". When numerical and statistical methods came to be applied to the study of society, notions of majority and minority emerged and the ploy came to be called "majoritarianism" — and since these categories were often defined by religion, it was, in those cases, called "religious majoritarianism".

It is worth remarking that in tandem with this genealogy in Europe of one of these nationalisms is the genealogy of the doctrine of secularism. Nation-building exercises on the basis of such religious majoritarianism inevitably led to religious minoritarian backlash, and it was the civil strife created by this that gave rise to the doctrine of secularism, which blamed the influence of religion on the polity for such strife, and sought to repair the damage by articulating an outlook in which all religion (whether of the majority or the minorities) was ushered out from having any direct influence in the polity and the institutions of state.

I mention this point about secularism because the genealogy of the other nationalism can be presented by explaining why Gandhi showed no interest in secularist doctrine. His argument was quite straightforward. The doctrine is there to prevent a certain damage created by European nationalism and since that damage had not occurred in India, it would be slavish mimicry to adopt it. Indian society has, for centuries, been characterised

There were indeed antecedents to contemporary Indian nationalism in Mahasabite (and Savarkarite) ideas of an earlier time, but to call them the roots of the present would require tracing an organic causal path that connects the two. No one has done that. The roots of contemporary Hinduva nationalism lie no further back than a few decades, starting with the respectability that the Hindu right gained in opposing the Emergency (which the centre-left abjectly failed to do), and also in the ferociously concerted and highly effective effort that it then made to combat the effects of Mandal in exposing how divided Hinduism was by caste.

by an unselfconscious pluralism of religions and cultures living side-by-side and so Indian nationalism will re-play this pluralism in inclusive mass mobilisations against imperialism — and both he and Nehru conspicuously sought to do so, especially with Muslims, both in the Khilafat period and later with the Muslim Mass Contact campaign. Secularism is only relevant when this unselfconscious pluralism has been undermined and replaced by the civil strife that warranted it in Europe. Moreover, since the strife came via a nationalism that was at the heart of a legitimisation of a certain form of centralised state power, that very idea of a state should be shunned in India — Gandhi's innovations in thinking of governance in highly decentralised terms were as much part of his alternative nationalism as his pluralism that Yadav asks us to cherish. It was those ideas of governance more than the pluralism that were dismissively repudiated by his own party in the years immediately after independence.

A word, in conclusion, about Palshikar's tracing of Hinduva nationalism to much earlier elements in Indian nationalism. We need in these matters a distinction between the notion of "roots" and "antecedents". There were indeed antecedents to contemporary Indian nationalism in Mahasabite (and Savarkarite) ideas of an earlier time, but to call them the roots of the present would require tracing an organic causal path that connects the two. No one has done that. The roots of contemporary Hinduva nationalism lie no further back than a few decades, starting with the respectability that the Hindu right gained in opposing the Emergency (which the centre-left abjectly failed to do), and also in the ferociously concerted and highly effective effort that it then made to combat the effects of Mandal in exposing how divided Hinduism was by caste.

Finding an external enemy (the Muslim) within the nation that all Hindus must oppose was that unifying move. No doubt there were antecedents to such attitudes during the freedom struggle but they were marginalised by the dominance of Gandhi and Nehru and though this certainly left unresolved questions, these do not amount to the roots of current Hinduva nationalism.

The writer is Sidney Morgenbesser professor of Philosophy, Columbia University

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"(Trump) said [he] was not concerned about a regional war breaking out due to Israel's strikes. Few will feel so sanguine. The current incoherence and incomprehensibility of US foreign policy fuels instability and risks drawing adversaries towards fateful miscalculations." — THE GUARDIAN

After Op Sindoor, a collective duty

Its success sets the tone for a shift towards technological self-reliance and state-led innovation



SHAMIKA RAVI

OPERATION SINDOOR, WHICH struck at the heart of the enemy's terror camp, infrastructure and psyche, was a remarkable military success. India's response to the cowardly terrorist attack in Pahalgam was decisive and swift. It reflected India's resolve and growing ability to exploit modern, indigenous technology. Operation Sindoor marked a turning point in India's policy on terror — an act of terror is an act of war.

Providing safety and security is the paramount responsibility of the state. If acts of terror threaten the survival and unity of the state by causing social and communal disharmony, then it reserves the right to strike its enemy with all its might, which is what India did and is duty bound to do so in the future. Operation Sindoor was also a major political success. The all-party delegation from different political, social and communal backgrounds showcased India's unique unity in diversity, and on questions of security and sovereignty, showed that we are Indians first.

I wish to focus on the economic implications of Operation Sindoor. First and foremost, there is no substitute for modern technology. However, modernisation and technological innovation should not be limited to the armed forces alone, but should be pervasive across all sectors of the economy. Standard economic theory highlights that sustained long-term economic growth and development require technological innovation which enhances the productivity of the workforce. In the new global order, technology transfer across the world will become increasingly challenging, therefore leaving us with no choice but to be self-reliant. Developing indigenous technology and laying the foundation for an innovative society, however, requires a change in mindset that the government and society should be willing to embrace and perhaps celebrate, rather than avoiding failures and setbacks.

Research has shown that while we cannot plan to pick technologies that will succeed, the government and society can plan strategically to create conditions where trial and error become a mantra for innovation. This requires a strategic and complementary partnership between the government, academic institutions and the private sector. The common purpose should be to create conditions where trial and error is encouraged and celebrated. Second, "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States". This statement from the Constitution is a reminder that when we embrace the Prime Minister's vision for Viksit Bharat in 2047, the states and the Union Territories have an equal responsibility to fulfil this national vision. Modernisation and development are no longer a matter of choice but an imperative

to preserve the security and sovereignty of Bharat. Given the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the states and Union Territories, different states and UTs are at varying stages of economic development. An important implication of this is that each state should have a blueprint for economic development tailored to its comparative advantage in terms of resources and human capital. Therefore, it is futile to talk about growth and development models at the all-India level.

On the contrary, we should have a distinct growth model for each state. For example, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu could have an economic growth model driven by manufacturing and industry, while Kerala's growth model could be services-based. The northern states, on the other hand, could be driven by innovation in agriculture and the agro-processing sector. The northeastern states, with its rich flora and fauna, could become a hub for tourism. Modernisation and technological innovation must become a state policy. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, state chief ministers (particularly from Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh) demonstrated that with smart policies and determined effort, it is possible to transform the lives of ordinary people through innovation and modernisation.

Third, we must recognise the role of the private sector. Economic policy has so far primarily prioritised or protected either size or sector. We must now find economic policy to promote and encourage modernisation and innovation. It is essential to remind ourselves that it is practically impossible to cherry-pick winners. Therefore, the role of economic policy should be to create conditions and institutions where, through trial and error, people and ideas that are most suited to the task are selected through a "spontaneous order".

Over the last decade, Bharat has made tremendous progress by lifting more than 250 million people out of extreme poverty. It has successfully reformed and modernised its public infrastructure, the banking sector, the taxation regime, and digital public infrastructure, which delivers government welfare schemes at an unprecedented scale to more than a billion people. It has demonstrated that even during the most challenging of political times, it has the resolve and resilience to move forward. While democratic institutions are backsliding in the Western world, India remains committed to upholding democratic principles, ensuring last-mile development and delivery, regardless of gender, caste, or religion. This is not a slogan but a lived reality for the billions of people whose lives have been transformed.

As we march forward, there will be a few elements for whom the rise of Bharat will not be palatable. Some powers would do anything to disrupt the progress and cause social and communal disharmony. The primary safeguard against such nefarious designs would be to modernise and innovate continuously, which should become the national duty of the Centre, the states/UTs, and the private sector.

The writer is member, EAC to PM



SUJAN CHINNOY

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI's visit this week to Cyprus and Croatia, members of the External Affairs Minister's Jaishankar's visit to France, EU and Belgium last week and to the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany earlier in May. Bilateral relations are rapidly evolving, anchored in the India-EU strategic partnership.

In February, during the visit of Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, and the EU College of Commissioners to India, the two sides had welcomed growing defence cooperation, including joint exercises and collaboration between the Indian Navy and EU maritime security entities. The two sides had also committed to exploring a security and defence partnership. In this context, one must closely examine the opportunities for deepening the partnership provided by the Joint White Paper (JWP) on European Defence — Readiness 2030, issued by the European Commission in March.

The new policy approach outlined by the WP has undoubtedly been occasioned by the protracted war in Ukraine and recent stresses in the transatlantic partnership with the US. The main thrust of the WP is to support member states in achieving full defence readiness by 2030. The target is to mobilise additional defence expenditure of up to 15 per cent of the GDP. Based on projections of gradual progression, defence investment could reach at least €800 billion over the next four years. The scope of the WP points to opportuni-

The rearming of Europe

India must tap opportunities for exports and joint research

ties for Indian defence industries to acquire or establish start-ups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Europe.

Both Europe and India have recently been tested for their defence preparedness. In the short term, the emphasis in Europe is on replenishing stocks of ammunition, weapons, and military equipment. This may provide an opening for India to export ammunition to Europe. The Indian defence sector has received a boost in the aftermath of military tensions with China and, more recently, with Pakistan. India's defence exports have surged to a record high of approximately Rs 23,622 crore (US\$2.76 billion) in the financial year 2024-25. A foundation has been laid for a higher quantum of exports in the future.

In the wake of the high-level visits this year, India should endeavour to explore sales of the Advanced Towed Artillery Guns (ATAGs), the Pinaka Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher, air defence missiles, and radars that meet NATO standards. The focus in the WP on critical and foundational technologies — such as artificial intelligence, quantum, biotechnologies, and hypersonic technologies — and their classification as dual-use with both economic and military implications offers India a chance to collaborate with EU member states.

The strong undercurrent of commitment in the WP to enhancing India's defence and security capacities is noteworthy. The new policy is oriented towards sharing the EU's military mobility corridors, space assets, and serv-

ices with Ukraine. The key, therefore, lies in Indian companies being part of the landscape in the EU, and perhaps in Ukraine as well, at an early stage in the process of internal integration and harmonisation of the regulatory framework. India should explore opportunities for acquisitions and joint research in defence technologies. As such, the EU has welcomed India's interest in joining projects under its Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and in engaging in negotiations for a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA).

India should closely study the evolving EU model of defence preparedness and adopt best practices to refine its own roadmap toward *amrinbhartha* in aerial mobility — particularly the development of domestic civil transport aircraft manufacturing and maintenance, repair, and overhaul hubs. The EU's defence omnibus package offers India a chance to collaborate with the EU on cross-certification of defence products and mutual recognition of certification, creating the basis for a future market for India's military and dual-use products.

The changes in the EU may also provide job opportunities for Indian skilled professionals to work in the defence industrial complex across the EU. It is vital for India to engage each of the EU members on migration and mobility issues in the context of the ongoing FTA negotiations. The EU's harmonisation of rules and procedures for defence procurement could lead to some changes in export regulations. Major

European producers of defence equipment could find their capacities committed to national needs or to the ReArm Europe Plan. India would have to examine the impact, if any, on its supply chains originating in Europe.

India could explore the possibility of joining the EU Defence Innovation Scheme (EUDIS), drawing from its experience in initiatives such as the INDUS-X with the US — though this may require some special arrangements, since entities participating in EUDIS projects are generally required to be located in the EU or Norway with local legal identity and control. Further, with the emphasis on infrastructure in the WP, Indian engineering, procurement, and construction companies should explore the potential for securing contracts for the expansion of EU multimodal corridors, including ports and terminals.

The emergence of the EU defence union will mark a scaling up of all existing European defence and security structures. The rapid rearmament of Europe is seen as a bulwark against Russia, reasserting Europe's strategic autonomy in securing itself as well as Ukraine, and strengthening the EU's defence contributions to the still vital transatlantic partnership. As an aspiring global power and strategically autonomous pole, India should invest strongly in the partnership with the EU.

The writer is the director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A MAJOR SETBACK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'After the crash' (*IE*, June 14). The Air India plane crash has come as a shock to the nation. It also marks a significant setback for the civil aviation sector. Ironically, it was only two months ago that the state-of-the-art digital flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder laboratory were inaugurated at the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AARB). The facility, described by the central government as a "significant stride towards enhancing aviation safety", is aimed at improving the mechanism to identify the causes of accidents. Now, the onus for holding culprits to account will be on the AARB.

Kholan Das, Kolkata

RECKLESS & ILLEGAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Step back from brink' (*IE*, June 14). Israel's strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities are illegal, reckless and dangerous. If there was any possibility of resolving the nuclear issue through dialogue, Israel has killed it. Iran's possible military or proxy-based response may destabilise not just Israel but also the Gulf states. This tit-for-tat brinkmanship undermines ongoing diplomatic efforts. Moreover, it raises the spectre of a nuclear arms race in the region. The international community must act swiftly to de-escalate tensions and revive meaningful dialogue before the situation spirals beyond control.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'After the crash' (*IE*, June 14). The Ahmedabad air crash exposes the safety standards of Indian airlines. A high-level inquiry must be conducted to probe the reasons behind the crash and suggest recommendations to prevent another incident. No compensation can bring back the lives lost. Justice will be delivered to them only when those responsible for the mishap are brought to book. While the Director General of Civil Aviation is empowered to impose fines on airlines, the regulatory body must be assisted with more powers so that it ceases to be a toothless tiger. It must also be probed whether the DGCA officials did what they are supposed to do.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Step back from brink' (*IE*, June 14). The recent strikes by Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities, amid ongoing diplomatic efforts between Washington and Tehran, mark a dangerous escalation that threatens to destabilise West Asia. Such unilateral aggression when negotiations were underway is not illegal under international law and undermines trust in diplomacy. Israel's attack has provoked predictable retaliation from Iran. Israel's post-October 7 behavior has been marked by unchecked militarism. The world cannot afford to remain silent. It is imperative that the international community, including India, mounts a coordinated effort to halt this escalation.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

A-I plane crash: how DNA analysis is used to identify victims

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, JUNE 15

AFTER LAST week's Air India Boeing 787 Dreamliner crash in Ahmedabad, authorities are using DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) analysis to identify the remains of those killed. DNA samples from victims' family members have been collected, and some of the deceased have already been identified.

With the exception of identical twins, every person has a unique DNA that is present in nearly every cell of their body. DNA analysis is the gold standard for identifying human remains, especially after mass fatality events in which bodies might not be easy to identify.

But how does this work? How are DNA samples collected from human remains? How do scientists analyse these samples?

Collecting, storing samples

As soon as an individual dies, their DNA begins to degrade. Over time, this degradation can make it difficult, even impossible, for the DNA to be analysed.

■ DNA survives much better in cold and dry conditions than when it is hot and humid. This is why samples have to be collected as soon as possible, and once collected, stored in as cool and dry an environment as possible. They should ideally be frozen at minus 20 degrees Celsius, or, in the case of soft tissues (skin, muscles, etc.), they may be stored in 95% ethanol.

■ DNA from soft tissues degrades much faster than that from hard tissues (bones and teeth). This is because cells in hard tissues are largely protected from the effects of putrefaction and decomposition. This is why forensic investigators usually collect DNA from hard tissue.

After a plane crash, the collection of tissue samples from the wreckage usually takes a couple of weeks. But this depends on the magnitude of the tragedy — after the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, it took authorities 10 months to collect the samples of the nearly 3,000 victims.

To identify who the collected DNA belongs to, reference samples are collected from biological relatives. Parents and children of the victim are ideal candidates for providing these samples, given that they share 50% of each other's DNA.

Methods of analysis

After samples are collected, the next step is to extract DNA from them. Subsequently, depending on the quality of the collected DNA, scientists can choose between a number of different methods of analysis.

Short tandem repeat (STR) analysis: The method evaluates short tandem repeats, which are essentially short repeating sequences of DNA. STRs are used for DNA identification as they widely vary between individuals.

"After analysing 15 or more of these hyper-variable regions of DNA... the resulting profile can be used to ascertain family relationships with a high degree of confidence," according to a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Note that STRs are typically found on nuclear DNA, which is located within the nucleus of a cell. Therefore, to carry out STR analysis, it is essential that the nuclear DNA extracted from the sample is not degraded.

Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis:

This method is used when nuclear DNA is degraded or unavailable. Mitochondrial DNA is found within the cell's energy-producing organelles known as mitochondria. As mtDNA is present in multiple copies within the cell, it is easier to recover from human remains that are not well preserved.

This is used for identification because mtDNA is passed down by the mother, unchanged, to all her children. This means that samples from a person's remains can be matched with samples from their mother, maternal grandmother, sibling, maternal aunts or uncles, and distant relatives as long as they belong to the maternal line of inheritance.

Y chromosome analysis: Humans have two types of sex chromosomes, X and Y: biological males typically have one X and one Y chromosome, and biological females typically have two X chromosomes.

In this method, a panel of STR on Y chromosomes, passed on from father to son, is examined to match the remains of the victim with their male relatives. "This can be useful when close relatives are not available for comparison: any member of the paternal line, including brothers, paternal uncles, and paternal male cousins, may be used for matching," the ICRC report said.

Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) analysis: The method is typically used when the DNA to be analysed is highly degraded. SNP is a variation in the DNA sequence where a single base — A, C, G, or T — at a specific location differs among people. Given that SNPs are unique to each person, they can be used for identification purposes with the help of reference samples taken from, let's say, the victim's personal belongings such as a toothbrush and hairbrush.

However, this method is not the most effective.

EXPLAINED AGRICULTURE

WHY PUNJAB IS STRUGGLING TO DIVERSIFY FROM PADDY FARMING



Workers transplant paddy in a village near Patiala on Saturday. *Harmeet Sodhi*

ANJU AGNIHOTRI CHABA
JALANDHAR, JUNE 15

DESPITE PUNJAB government's efforts to diversify the state's crop mix, the state is once again staring at a near-record area under paddy cultivation.

Last year, Punjab saw an all-time high of 32.44 lakh hectares under paddy. Current trends suggest the acreage this year will remain in the same ballpark.

Context

Roughly 35-36 lakh hectares are under cultivation in Punjab during the kharif season (June to October). Last year, this figure was 35.2 lakh hectares.

The main crops during the kharif season are paddy (basmati and non-basmati), cotton, maize, certain pulses (like mung, urad and arhar), oilseeds (like groundnut and sesame), and sugarcane (cane is cultivated all year round).

But paddy accounts for a vast majority of the kharif acreage — more than 92% last year. All other crops are deemed "alternatives" to paddy.

The problem is that growing the same crop year after year on the same land increases vulnerability to pest and disease attacks. Paddy cultivation specifically depletes soil nutrients, which increases dependence on chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Also, paddy guzzles water. Punjab's groundwater table has been declining by 0.5 meters per annum on an average, largely courtesy paddy.

Attempts at diversification

Punjab, through various schemes and policies, has long tried to address the paddy monoculture problem. The state has launched a pilot project to divert 12,000 hectares from paddy to maize, and increase area under cotton cultivation by 15%.

But even if these plans succeed, non-paddy kharif crops would only have an acreage of around 3.16 lakh hectares, and paddy approximately 32.04 lakh hectares.

That would mean about 91% of the kharif cropped area would still be under paddy, close to last year's all-time high.

In fact, if the cropped area during the season goes beyond last year's 35.20 lakh hectares — as it has done several times in the past — then the area under paddy could actually increase in absolute terms.

Previous attempts at diversification have also not yielded expected results.

Notably, the state in 2009 enacted the Punjab Preservation of Subsoil Water Act, which barred nursery-sowing and transplanting of paddy before May 15 and June 15, respectively. That ended up pushing the cropping cycle back, shortening the window between the kharif harvest and the sowing of wheat (the predominant winter crop), forcing farmers to burn paddy stubble to clear fields and adding to air pollution across the region.

Why paddy remains king

There are several reasons why Punjab cannot look past paddy.

■ First, plans such as the one to divert 12,000 hectares to maize simply are not ambitious enough to make any real difference, even if they succeed.

■ Second, guaranteed procurement at Minimum Support Price (MSP) makes paddy more attractive than alternatives like maize or pulses, which enjoy much weaker market support.

■ Third, the current situation is the product of decades of flawed policy-making from the government. It has provided freebies like eight hours of free electricity that farmers use to run irrigation pumps, and subsidies on fertilisers. These policy positions are fundamentally aligned towards the cultivation of paddy.

War in Middle East: what next

Israel has the capabilities to keep up its strikes on Iran, but its maximalist goals might still be out of reach. For Tehran, the choices are stark, but Netanyahu's actions seem to be pushing Iran's neighbours closer to it

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

AS OF JUNE 15, Israel and Iran have exchanged four waves of strikes. Among a number of targets hit by either side, Israel's assassination of key Iranian generals on June 13 remains the most prominent outcome thus far.

Also, Israel targeted the Iranian Supreme Leader's office by assassinating Ali Shamkhani, political adviser to Ali Khamenei and key overseer of the US-Iran nuclear talks. Israel is expected to continue its escalation, as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Sunday afternoon issued warnings in Persian to Iranian civilians to leave military weapons production facilities.



An oil storage on fire as it is hit by Israeli airstrikes in Tehran, on Sunday. *The NYT*

effectively hit sites such as Fordow, its focus on Iranian personnel and conventional assets reveal that it is prepared for a slow-burn war with Iran.

Israel's actions seem to be based on two assumptions — that all Iranian retaliation can be successfully absorbed, and that with each hit, Iran becomes weaker.

What does this mean for Iran?

Tactically and objectively, Israel's assessment of Iran's weaknesses has been vindicated insofar as the security of key Iranian personnel is concerned. However, notwithstanding Iran's broader conventional inferiority to Israel, Tehran has shown an ability to reciprocate Israeli attacks at a smaller scale.

For instance, after Israel's attack on Iran's Asaluyeh refinery and South Pars gas fields, Iran successfully targeted the Bazan oil refinery (Israel's largest) in Haifa — crucial to the IDF's fuel needs.

Iran moved to the negotiating table with the US under moderate President Masoud Pezeshkian to give its economy relief from crippling sanctions, something that headline leaders only acquiesced to. Now, the nature and scale of the Israeli attack would allow the conservative leaders, who dominate the Iranian Parliament, to create fresh pressures on any reformist action. Also, the attack coming in the midst of US-Iran negotiations will reinforce a core constituency that views the US as a duplicitous negotiator.

Calls for regime change in Iran by Israeli and American leaders deepens the mistrust that has grown since the CIA's removal of

Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. It will also be a mistake to assume that Iranian hardliners have lost influence over the nuclear deal. Key hardline leaders like Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (Speaker of the Iranian Parliament) remain influential in matters of national security.

Washington's openness to continuing negotiations is immaterial to Iran, which also remains in favour of resuming talks, but only after Israel halts its attacks. For Iran, Israel's assassination of a senior leader involved with the negotiations — Ali Shamkhani — further betrays Israel's intentions to sabotage the talks, and not merely act as Washington's force multiplier.

What are Iran's choices?

International reactions to Israel's aggression have varied. European and American reactions have focused on the dangers of Iran's nuclear programme, while not acknowledging Israel's provocations.

On the other hand, regional reactions from the Gulf have shown an evolution. Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours have shifted from forming an integral part of Israel's air defence net against Iranian missiles to condemning Israeli aggression and demanding respect for Iranian sovereignty. In fact, arch-regional rival Riyadh has expressed "strong condemnation" of Israeli action, which it views as an aggression against a "brotherly Islamic Republic".

However, Israel's attack has pushed Iran towards an impasse. On one hand, it increases Iran's need to resuscitate its pursuit

of a nuclear weapon — renewed learning from contemporary conflicts is that the absence of a nuclear deterrent invites military adventurism from adversaries.

On the other hand, Iran's lack of sufficient modern arms, Israel's degradation of its existing capabilities, its increasing leadership losses (both at home and in the Axis of Resistance), and the worsening of its economic health force a pragmatic approach.

Even if Iran is capable of nuclear breakout, it would be difficult to achieve amid the evidently high level of intelligence penetration in the country.

Significantly, Iran has still not targeted US diplomatic and military infrastructure, directly or through its proxies. The most prominent among these continue their pre-June *modus vivendi* — the Houthis maintain their ceasefire with the United States (while continuing attacks on Israel); Hezbollah adheres to its ceasefire, and the Hashd in Iraq refrains from substantially attacking the Green Zone in Baghdad, where US diplomats and officials are concentrated. While this could change in the future, Iran has also likely engaged regional interlocutors to press for an end to the war.

Israel has the capacity to continue strikes on Iran for as long as it deems necessary. However, its maximalist objectives cannot be met without a full-scale war involving the United States, which would be in stark contrast to Trump's stated objectives and reinforce his failure to strike a peace deal both in Europe and the Middle East.

For Iran, absorbing a large blow in the dam is better than a complete breach. Tehran can also look to counter Israel's objectives by continuing its engagement with the US for a nuclear deal and making voluntary concessions, instead of those forced on it militarily.

Given that Israel's *casus belli* is unclear and that its objectives remain maximal, it is difficult to ascertain Tel Aviv's future course of action, making Iran's consequent choices similarly unpredictable.

However, amidst these choices, what is highly unlikely is Iran's forced closure of the Strait of Hormuz (33 km wide at its narrowest point). While Iran has the capacity to enforce a very limited blockade (as has threatened in 2011, 2012, and 2018), disrupting the 20 million barrels-per-day flow through the Strait will rupture Tehran's partnerships, end its rapprochement with Arab states, and draw in the US military. The US is likeliest to act militarily when protecting shipping and oil supply, as it did during the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, and in the Red Sea more recently, after the Houthi-led disruption of shipping in the region.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi

Centre's rationale behind MGNREGS spending cap, the concerns with it



LAAVANYA TAMANG & PURBAYAN CHAKRABORTY

THE FINANCE Ministry has capped spending under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at 60% of its annual allocation for the first half of Financial Year 2025-26.

There was no such spending limit so far. This is because MGNREGS, which provides up to 100 days of employment as a right to any rural household, is a demand-driven scheme.

Civil society groups and MGNREGS worker unions have raised concerns about the move. Here's why.

Finance Ministry's rationale

MGNREGS has long been plagued with financial troubles, which are perhaps what the Finance Ministry hopes to address by implementing the spending limit.

Data from the Ministry of Rural Development show that over the last few years, more than 70% of the budget is frequently exhausted by September, and while supplementary allocations are often made in December, these run out by January.

This leaves significant pending dues by the end of the financial year (FY) — over the last five FYs, pending dues have ranged between Rs 15,000 crore to Rs 25,000 crore. On average, 20% of the subsequent FY's budget is spent in clearing these.

By implementing an expenditure cap, the Finance Ministry is likely ensuring an adequate budget for the latter half of the FY, so that no supplementary allocation will have to be made.

The MGNREGS budget for FY 26 stands at Rs 86,000 crore. Just clearing existing

dues will exhaust roughly half of the budget.

Issue of fluctuating demand

By design, MGNREGS acts as a buffer for rural citizens, especially during times of lean harvests, freak weather events, and rural distress.

Work demand under the scheme fluctuates throughout the year.

It is highest between April and June, and picks up again after the kharif sowing season in September. But weather abnormalities such as delayed rain can lead to high MGNREGS work demand even in July or August.

In 2023, for instance, low rainfall led to 20% higher work demand than usual in July and August, with Karnataka in particular spending more than 70% of the annual MGNREGS budget within six months due to extreme drought conditions.

The expenditure cap does not take into account these contingencies.

Question of legality

There is a legal issue too. Social security and welfare in India are implemented either via schemes designed and executed by the government of the day (for instance, PM Kisan Samman Nidhi or the LPG scheme), or through schemes based on specific legislation that establish certain programmes as statutory rights, like MGNREGS (based on MGNREG Act, 2005) or the Public Distribution System (based on National Food Security Act, 2013).

The former can, and often are, altered, discontinued, or repackaged when a new government comes to power. For the latter, while the government does have the power to determine the modalities of implementing legislation, this power is conferred by the legislature and is limited in its scope.

The MGNREG Act recognises employment as a statutory right. The Act signified a critical shift from this being a negative right under Article 21 of the Constitution (which

mandated that the state must not interfere with your livelihood unreasonably), to a positive statutory obligation on the government to provide employment on demand.

The spending cap ordered by the Finance Ministry makes it virtually impossible to realise an entitlement guaranteed under the Act once the ceiling is reached.

Constitutional courts have held that financial inability cannot be a reason to disregard statutory or constitutional duties, including in *Swaraj Abhiyan v Union of India* (2016), *Municipal Council, Ratlam v Shri Vardhichand* (1980), and *Pashchim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity v State of W.B.* (1996).

Lack of clarity

There is currently no clarity on what will happen once the ceiling is reached. States could be forced to deny employment even when there is demand, or workers may have to work without timely payment.

In both scenarios, statutory rights of the workers may be violated — the right to re-

ceive employment within 15 days of raising the demand, as provided under section 3 of the MGNREGA, and the right to receive wages within 15 days of closure of work, as mandated under para 29 of schedule II of Act.

To be sure, wage delays have been rampant in the scheme for years, and unemployment allowances and compensation for delayed payments have gone unpaid or been poorly calculated (as the Supreme Court has observed).

However, the Finance Ministry's decision could potentially undermine the letter and spirit of the Act in an attempt to address the financial problems in MGNREGS.

Laavanya Tamang is Senior Researcher with the Foundation for Responsive Governance, and affiliated with the NREGA Sangharsh Morcha.

Purbayan Chakraborty is a Kolkata-based lawyer and works closely with the Pashchim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity. All data accessed from MJS on June 12

EXPLAINED POLICY

IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM



SRINATH RAGHAVAN
HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR

WHY SRINATH RAGHAVAN

Historian and scholar Srinath Raghavan analyses Indira Gandhi's political career and the momentous changes that India experienced under her leadership in his new book *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India*. It is an authoritative take on the Emergency years between 1975 and 1977 and draws on new material to shed light on her politics, government and even her adversaries and critics. Raghavan is professor of history at Ashoka University

ON LEADER OVER PARTY

MRS GANDHI HAD AN ABILITY TO MAKE CHARISMATIC, CAESARIST APPEALS DIRECTLY TO THE ELECTORATE. SO THE FUNCTION AND ROLE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM ITSELF UNDERWENT A VERY SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN HER TIME

I wanted to situate her long stints in power and out of power from 1966 until her assassination. And the idea of doing that was to get away from the Emergency itself, which tends to be the focal point of discussions. Important things happened both before and after the Emergency, which I think left a longer imprint. When we say that Indira Gandhi did something, we tend to think of it as something done intentionally. As a historian, I think it's also useful to remember the consequences of what her actions were rather than simply the intentions behind them. It's important to understand what she accomplished. Three things have cast a long shadow on politics, democracy and our political economy. First, we went from a period of more or less one-party dominant rule under the Congress to one where the Congress became a dominant player, but in a much more competitive environment. The competitiveness of Indian democracy that we see from the fourth general elections — 1967 onwards — is a very important feature. That very competitiveness led to a disregard of rules, norms and procedures, which are as important as elections in structuring democracy. The Emergency is the most extreme and shocking example of that kind of disregard for the rules of electoral democracy. The second aspect is strengthening of the executive vis-à-vis the legislature and the judiciary. The Janata government did attempt to undo some of it but still the overall institutional balance of power remains tilted towards the executive. This is true even of coalition governments. Mrs Gandhi had an ability to make charismatic, Caesarist appeals directly to the electorate. So the function and role of the party system itself underwent a very significant change in her time. The party was no longer the instrument which aggregated people's preferences and revealed them during the elections. Rather, it supported the political appeal of the leader. A similar model of leadership, where the charisma of an older patriarch follows on to the next generation, is seen not only in national politics but also state politics. The third impact was on political economy. There was a somewhat unwilling and unwitting move towards liberalisation of the economy, which actually started from about 1975, even before the Emergency. That process was important because it put India on this long road towards liberalisation. Though I wouldn't give much credit to her on that. She left her own impression on the welfare economy instead. We saw targeted schemes aimed at particular groups because they came under certain thresholds. The poverty line, for instance, became the longest and the most important imprint. And it continues.

Manoj CG: Do you think her decision to choose Sanjay Gandhi first, and the Congress party's decision to bring in Rajiv Gandhi after her killing, laid the template of dynastic politics in India?

The Congress party that elected Indira Gandhi as prime minister in 1966 was a very different kind of an entity from what it became during her time. She, of course, broke that party quite consciously in 1969. But what she found much more difficult through the 1970s was the ability to reorganise the party in ways that could actually strengthen its machinery. So the move towards relying on her son, first, the younger one, Sanjay Gandhi and subsequently Rajiv Gandhi, comes out as a result of her inability really to institutionalise the party.

Manoj CG: Do you think the Congress needs to break from Mrs Gandhi's legacy going forward?

There is very little that we see by way of an alternative leadership. And even if we do, like Sharad Pawar or Manmohan Singh, they walk out. No ambitious politician has a significant pathway to the party's top leadership, given the kind of a family holding structure that this party has come to acquire. It started under Mrs Gandhi and has now just gone on for so long that it is very difficult, even for her successors, to come up with an alternative. That will require a break with this model, which, I think, is both cognitively and practically quite difficult for most people in this party to conceive of and execute.

What should be the legacy of Indira Gandhi that the Congress party should carry? What was both a source of her strength and weaknesses was a very bold and tenacious leader. Splitting the Congress party, a party of the nationalist movement, in 1969 was a dramatic move. She did it again post-Emergency though the party was already truncated at that time. But during the 1971 Bangladesh war, she was initially hesitant, tentative, she assessed. But when she felt the time was ripe for a decisive move, she was willing to make it and even break taboos. For instance, the peace and friendship treaty with the then Soviet Union in August 1971 was a decisive move towards non-alignment, a key aspect of the party's foreign policy orientation. If the Congress party

'Institutional rules of the game were considerably weakened even before the Emergency'

Historian Srinath Raghavan on the build-up to the Emergency, its transformative impact on Indian polity and the lessons that we should learn. The session was moderated by Chief of Political Bureau Manoj CG

Manoj CG: Was the Emergency a natural culmination of her authoritarian streak?

We tend to focus on why Indira Gandhi did the Emergency. But an equally important question is, how was it possible for an Emergency to be declared? After all, you have a political system. It has all kinds of checks and balances supposedly. There are various insti-

tutions in place; there are various political forces at hand. Despite all of this, how was it possible for an authoritarian rule to be imposed?

The parliamentary party has always a certain kind of a check on the executive. But Mrs Gandhi, by her willingness to break the party and then subsequently those spectacular electoral victories that she won, practically became the entire party. It was beholden to her rather than to any way being controlled by it. The second thing was the strengthening

of the executive vis-à-vis Parliament and then the judiciary. The supersession of judges in 1973 was a very important moment. So the institutional balance of power was already se-

creted to the executive by June 12, 1975. After the Allahabad High Court ruling of June 12, 1975, (which found Mrs Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractices and barred her from holding elected office for six years) Jayaprakash Narayan demanded that the Prime Minister should step down in response to a popular demand, even though the Supreme Court said that she had a conditional stay, that she could stay in power. Indira

Gandhi paid them in the same coin. By that time, all the institutional rules of the game were considerably weakened. Without that, it is actually difficult to imagine how the Emergency could have been imposed.

Vikas Pathak: Did Indira Gandhi bring in a new normal where the leader was seen as strong enough to deliver what institutions, which are a maze of procedures, could not? Has that stuck to Indian democracy?

That's a very accurate assessment. Soon after the imposition of the Emergency, she announced a 20-point programme for various kinds of economic development and social policies. While some things done during the Emergency, for instance, have not been

attempted subsequently, the underlying template that you need a strong leader to deliver specific things for specific segments of Indian society remains.

Vikas Pathak: Why did she decide to revoke the Emergency?

From June 1976 onwards, various assessments were being prepared for the Prime Minister on the progress of the Emergency. Initially, there was a sense that the government was decisive about moving against labour unions. There was a move towards redistribution of land for Dalits and other groups. When she realised the diminishing returns of continuing with this regime, the unfavourable aspects of population control policies and sterilisation, and that it would be better to move towards elections, she withdrew. To Indira Gandhi, the Emergency was only an interlude.

Ritika Chopra: What convinced you that the Emergency story was worth retelling? What archival discoveries surprised you?

The reason I wanted to write this book was because of the new archival material that I came across while researching for another book on the creation of Bangladesh. I came across private papers of Mrs Gandhi's principal secretary PN Haksar and other people close to her. The Janata Party's own papers,

which are available in Teen Murti, allowed me to look at her from her opponents' lens. So I wanted to situate her within the broader historical context of her times and how those contexts were changing quite dramatically. The period between the late 60s and the mid-80s was a period of turbulence across the world. If you look at the 1970s, democratic governments everywhere were on the rope. India is only an extreme example of what happened. Part of the reason for that was the global economic and energy crisis of that period. So I wanted this broad picture within which to situate her actions.

Harish Damodaran: What was the difference between Indira Gandhi of the 60s (rupee devaluation), the 70s (bank nationalisation and welfare schemes) and the 80s (when she secured a \$5.8 billion IMF loan despite US opposition)?

The rupee devaluation attracted strong political opposition, including from her own party. Bank nationalisation is perhaps the single most important economic decision taken in independent India. One of the things we

could be pretty sure that people would immediately go to the courts and would have at least a stay on some of what the government was trying to do. But the coercive drive was possible precisely because of the broader framework of authoritarianism within which the Emergency was happening. So I think that the coercive aspects of the sterilisation drive are only one dimension of the broader authoritarian turn that Indian politics had taken during this particular period.

ON CONGRESS

IF THE CONGRESS PARTY COULD RECOVER A FRACTION OF HER CHUTZPAH AND THE KIND OF WILLINGNESS TO GAMBLE AND TRY NEW THINGS THAT SHE DEMONSTRATED, PERHAPS IT WOULD HAVE BEEN STRONGER

Aakash Joshi: Did Mrs Gandhi's leadership destroy the Congress' institutional mechanism and internal democracy? Much of the illiberal tendencies in subsequent governments, be it on federalism, preventive detention or role of governors, are traced back to Mrs Gandhi. What's your assessment?

Where Indira Gandhi failed entirely was that having broken the party, she could never find other means of reconstituting it. She tried various things. The Youth Congress was from time to time trumped up as this great solution to the problem of institutionalisation. Again, to give credit to the Youth Congress and even perhaps to Sanjay Gandhi, they did bring in a new set of leaders. Nevertheless, there was not an answer for having new institutional structures. I do not believe the Congress of the old variant could have continued on course either. Something would have changed irrespective of whether she came on or somebody else did.

Also illiberal tendencies did not begin with Mrs Gandhi. Preventive detention has been a feature of statute books for pretty much the time that the Indian Constitution has existed. The Constitution itself actually provides for preventive detention, funny enough, in those parts which talk about fundamental rights. But what changed under her was the kind of preventive detention laws that she brought about, like the Internal Security Act of 1975. The Janata government repealed the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) but brought in a new preventive detention law.

Similarly with the governors, I think no other Prime Minister or no government has used Article 356 (which mandates President's Rule) as much as Indira Gandhi did. That led to, especially in her final term, the whole Centre versus State kind of dynamic. Yes, she aggravated and accentuated many of the worst features of our legal political system but everything cannot be assumed to have originated from her.

Rinku Ghosh: The Emergency has set a template that non-Congress parties now use to justify their actions in a tussle of whataboutery. What does this portend for future governments?

What kind of lessons should we learn from this particular episode in our history? I say this fully conscious of the fact that history itself does not offer any lessons. It's only historians like me who tell what the lessons of history are, which is why we constantly disagree with each other.

Rather we must ask, what was it that enabled the Emergency to happen? And when we ask ourselves that question, we understand that there is a much more collective responsibility that the entire Indian political elite of the time had for this disastrous turn that Indian politics took in 1975. Because without that kind of collective abdication of the rules of the game, in some ways, you would not have had a system which collapsed this way. If we believe that the rules of the game are of no consequence, then we are setting ourselves up for graver and more serious disasters.

Deeptham Tiwary: What actually hit Mrs Gandhi's popularity really badly, making her lose from her pocketborough in the elections that followed the Emergency, was forced sterilisation. Do you think the move that allowed the government to actually enter people's homes was a body blow?

I don't think so. If you had a normal situation where fundamental rights were enforceable by courts, you could be pretty sure that people would immediately go to the courts and would have at least a stay on some of what the government was trying to do. But the coercive drive was possible precisely because of the broader framework of authoritarianism within which the Emergency was happening. So I think that the coercive aspects of the sterilisation drive are only one dimension of the broader authoritarian turn that Indian politics had taken during this particular period.

Illustration: Sangeetha Day

ANDHRA PRADESH



Tragic climax: A view of Srinivasa Mahal, an old theatre in Vijayawada that was shut down owing to losses. G.N. RAO

Silent fall of single-screen theatres in Andhra

As technology barrels on, iconic single screens across Andhra Pradesh struggle to stay afloat, bleeding money amid dwindling revenue. **Nellore Sravani** explains the fall of this once-prosperous business and the contentious profit-sharing model between exhibitors and distributors in the Telugu film industry

The narrow lane outside Navarang Theatre in Vijayawada's Governorpet was once abuzz with taxis and auto-rickshaws that brought an excited audience. On billboards, large posters caught the movie cast in the thick of action and drama, and in the air, hung faint snippets of dialogues and music waiting out from the hall.

Opened in 1964, Navarang Theatre was a cultural landmark, where rickshaw pullers and taxi drivers took pride in watching Hindi and English movies alongside the city's elite. Blockbusters ran for months, with word of mouth doing its magic. Today, however, silence has shrouded the theatre, its empty seats and faded walls a stark contrast to the housefuls in its heyday.

Navarang Theatre is one of the last few independently run single screens in Andhra Pradesh. Most of its contemporaries, including the State's first theatre Maruthi Talkies, Vijaya Talkies, Sri Durga Mahal, Mohan Das, all in Vijayawada, have shuttered, while many others have either leased out their theatres or rented them out as real estate properties.

The decline began decades ago, when television became commonplace in households. Then came the internet revolution, the smartphone penetration and, finally, the proliferation of OTTs. These, along with an "unreasonable" revenue-sharing model between distributors and exhibitors, seem to have finally broken the back of this once-prosperous industry.

Rolling with the punches

For Navarang Theatre proprietor R.V. Bhupal Prasad, its "passion" that keeps him in the business. His family used to own 13 theatres, including Saraswati Talkies, Saraswati Picture Palace, Leela Mahal and Navarang, across the State. Leela Mahal, which opened in Vijayawada in 1944, was the first theatre in the Andhra region of the Madras Presidency to screen English and Hindi movies.

Today, he agonises over which movie to screen. "It is exhausting; we don't know which movie will strike a chord with the audience. Sometimes, even a big-starrer tanks at the box office, and sometimes, a small movie makes waves," he says.

In a 2021 research paper titled *Amplification as Pandemic Effect: Single*



Earlier, a producer would inform the distributor about a new movie. A distributor would look at the casting, content and production cost and then invest in the movie to buy the rights. There used to be one distributor for an entire region.

GRANDHI VISWANATH
Film exhibitor

Screens in the Telugu Country, authors S.V. Srinivas, a professor of literature and media studies at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, and Raghav Nanduri say that around 90% of single-screen theatre owners in Andhra Pradesh have leased out their theatres.

Dwindling business is one reason. "These days, pirated copies reach one's smartphone even before the film's release. Why would anyone want to incur losses? So, they lease the theatre out to those who have the wherewithal to run it. That guarantees a stable income. These days, running a supermarket makes more sense," says a veteran exhibitor, who sought anonymity. Across A.P. and Telangana, over 600 independently run single screens are haemorrhaging money.

Srinivas, one of the authors of the research paper, says that leasing has helped single screens survive. "Under the lease system, where most lessees are bigshots in the industry, many single screens were renovated and received a multiplex feel. Moreover, re-releases, too, have become the lifeline for many theatres." However, some in the business feel that small producers find it difficult to get their films released in theatres run by these bigwigs.

On expenses, the veteran exhibitor explains that around ₹20,000 a day is needed to run a single screen in a city such as Hyderabad or Visakhapatnam. In smaller cities, it could be around ₹15,000. The power bill comes around ₹2.5 lakh a month and staff salary around ₹1.5 lakh. "If we get ₹4 lakh a month, we can break even, but we rarely get it."

While Kamal Haasan's 2022 movie *Vikram* fetched him ₹7 lakh in the first week, the same

actor's recent movie *Thug Life* barely scrapped together ₹7,000, opening to a 6% occupancy rate in his theatre. "I incurred a loss of ₹3 lakh over the past four months," he adds.

Revenue sharing model

While decreasing footfalls, piracy and OTT platforms are problems faced by multiplexes, too, their situation is slightly better, say some single-screen owners. And it is here, in the difference, that the chief concern of exhibitors comes to the fore: the revenue-sharing model.

To understand the revenue-sharing model between the exhibitors and distributors, it is important to know how the system of buying-distributing-selling of a film works.

"The concept of exhibitor-distributor existed since the first movie," says Grandhi Viswanath, who has nine single-screen theatres across the State. His grandfather, G.K. Mangaraju, became the first distributor and exhibitor in the State in 1927, when silent movies gave way to talkies. His distribution office, Poorna Pictures, is the first distribution company in the State.

"Earlier, it was a healthy system. A producer would inform the distributor about a new movie. A distributor would look at the casting, content and production cost and then invest in the movie to buy the rights. There used to be one distributor for an entire region for that particular film. The distributor would have links with a few theatre exhibitors, to whom the

print of a film would be handed over. The ticket revenue was shared on a percentage basis between a distributor and an exhibitor," he explains.

Because only one or two theatres screened a film, it would have a good run. The A. Nageswara Rao-starrer *Devadasu* ran for 140 days in Vijayawada's Maruthi Theatre, the State's first theatre opened in 1921.

Now, however, old established distribution companies have been replaced by 'buyers'. Mr. Srinivas and Nanduri, in their research paper, say: "These buyers could be anyone with the capital to bid for distribution rights. Typically, buyers would bid competitively, and speculatively, for rights in a single-distribution territory, resulting in substantial gains for producers of big-budget star vehicles." According to some film exhibitors, the entry of these buyers heralded the downfall of their industry. Mohan (name changed), an exhibitor, says there is a distributor for every district now, and that person ensures that the film is released on all the screens across that district. "These days every new movie is screened simultaneously on all the screens. When the audience is spread among so many theatres, the chances of a theatre seeing a houseful dwindle; the audience thins out on the second day itself," he adds.

Moreover, these days, the new-age distributors help producers finance big-budgeted films. The distributors collect half the amount the producer requested from theatre owners. If the film fares well, the producers give back the advance amount to distributors, who, in turn, give it back to exhibitors. If the movie is a flop, then exhibitors do not get their money immediately, according to some exhibitors. This has resulted in exhibitors' money getting blocked for a long time. Depending on the locality and the film's potential, the advance may range anywhere from ₹5 lakh to ₹40 lakh, they claim.

This, in addition to the current revenue-sharing model, has crippled single-screen theatres in the State. "The distributors decide on the revenue sharing unilaterally. In the first week of the theatrical release of a movie, the distributors either give us a rent or a percentage system, whichever gives them more profit. If the movie is a hit, the distributors give us a rent. If it's a flop, they offer a percentage," alleges Mohan.

The way forward

In May, film exhibitors in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana announced that they were not in a position to continue to screen movies. Mohan says that one of their chief demands is that the ticketed revenue be shared on a percentage basis, like how it is in multiplexes and other States. "The percentage model can solve some of our problems," he feels.

According to the research paper, single-screen theatres continue to be important for box office collections and contribute up to 60% of ticketed revenue. Despite this stature, no new single-screen theatre has come up in the two Telugu States over the past decade, says the veteran exhibitor. Mr. Grandhi Viswanath feels that along with the overhaul in the revenue sharing system, the government should allow flexible admission rates (ticket prices) as well. Currently, ticket prices in the State are fixed in accordance to the Government Order (G.O. Ms.No.13) issued on March 7, 2022. In this order, the government had fixed rates for different types of theatres in municipalities and corporations.

"The exhibitors should be given the discretion to decide on the admission rate (ticket price) of a movie, depending on its potential. This will help get more patronage for smaller movies," he says.

Echoing this, Chandrasekhar (name changed), another exhibitor, points out that the exorbitant production costs of a film lead to higher ticket prices. Once a moviegoer spends ₹250 a ticket for a big-budget movie, they may not see another film in a theatre for, say, a month. "Smaller movies, released after the big-budget movies, often get killed thus. The theatres, too, hence do not see much footfall," he says, adding that the government should also ensure that a movie is released on the OTT platform eight weeks after the theatrical release.

Chandrasekhar says that theatre owners like him never called for a *bandh*. "It is unfortunate that we were misinterpreted; we only want to request the government to consider our demands for a percentage system, which will allow us some breathing space. After all, our goals are the same, to bring back audience to the theatres."

What distributors say

A distributor in Visakhapatnam, who sought anonymity, says it's the distributor who stands to lose more than an exhibitor when a movie flops. "The success rate these days is 6%. We invest in a movie and we lose when it flops. The exhibitors do not have anything to lose. They can at least benefit from parking charges. The advance amounts that they have to part with are immediately returned." To the exhibitors' demand for implementation of a percentage system (for all the weeks), he says this would be disadvantageous for distributors.

Responding to the exhibitors' concerns, Telugu Film Chambers of Commerce president Bha-rath Bhushan says that distributors, too, are facing problems and that the whole issue stems from a dearth of hits in the industry. "A flop movie is a problem for everyone" The Telugu Film Chambers of Commerce has formed a committee of 30 members, comprising distributors, exhibitors and producers, to work out a solution amenable for all. The report is expected soon. Bharath Bhushan says a decision regarding the demands would be taken after a meeting with the stakeholders on June 23 and 24.



Sallaja Theatre in Vijayawada was renovated to offer more amenities to the audience and compete with the multiplexes. G.N. RAO



Fire on waters

India's maritime firefighting capabilities are standing up to the test

The Indian coast needs to be protected against three types of major peacetime maritime accidents involving merchant ships: sinking of merchant ships, causing the loss of cargo, disruption of maritime traffic, and environmental damage; fire onboard merchant vessels that can seriously threaten not just the environment but also life and property on the coast; and oil spills. The recent fire onboard *MV Wan Hai 503*, that started with explosions when the ship was some 44 nautical miles off the Azhikal coast in Kannur, Kerala, on June 9, has been successfully controlled now. Photographs of the ship showed a cocktail of smoke of brown, white, grey and black colours billowing out, indicating that many substances were burning. The cargo manifest showed that more than 140 of the 1,754 containers had various types of hazardous cargo. Coast Guard officials report that the raging *Wan Hai* had started drifting dangerously towards the coast even as firefighting was on and the sea remained rough under monsoon conditions. A tow rope was passed onto the ship but it snapped. An Indian Navy helicopter flew in to airdrop a salvage team and pass a wire rope that was made of steel, which was then used to tow the ship 45 nautical miles away from the coast where the depth is nearly one kilometre. The owner of the vessel pelted in by commandeering tugs through their agents. *Wan Hai* does not pose an immediate danger to the Indian coast now. Smoke is still seen from the ship and there are hot spots, but it is now up to the ship owner to salvage the vessel after completely putting out the fire.

Most of the patrol vessels, the workhorse of the Coast Guard, are now fitted with firefighting equipment since firefighting is a key mandate of the agency. While hazardous cargo on containers are indeed a major fire hazard, a more severe fire hazard is oil. Gas-carrying merchant ships are perhaps the greatest fire and explosion hazards. Nightmare scenarios that can bring the world to its knees involve gas carrier accidents at choke points such as the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca off Singapore. In 2020, the Indian Coast Guard and Navy successfully put out a massive fire that broke out off Colombo on the Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC), *Very Diamond*, chartered by the Indian Oil Corporation. The VLCC was carrying 2,70,000 tonnes of crude oil and bound for Paradip in Odisha. That these ships were structurally intact despite week-long infernos is a testament as much to the maritime firefighting capabilities of India as the advanced design, materials and construction of the ships. Quick salvage of sunk ships and fighting oil spills, which require quick, extensive and close multi-agency coordination, are the other areas where India needs to build and demonstrate more expertise.

Mind the gap

India needs to ensure women's participation in policymaking

India has dropped two points from its position last year in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index report, holding at 131 out of 148 countries. The parity score is just 64.1%, making it among one of the lowest-ranked countries in South Asia, according to the report released last week. The Index measures gender parity in a country across four aspects — economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. While the performance of India in three of the four dimensions is either stable or has marginally improved, the significant lack of achievement in the fourth weighs down the overall result. The report says, in the economic participation and opportunity category, India has improved by +0.9 percentage points. The parity in estimated earned income rises from 28.6% to 29.9%, positively impacting the subindex score, the report said. Scores in labour force participation rate remained the same (45.9%) as last year — India's highest achieved to date. In the educational attainment and health and survival categories, the scores have been driven up by positive shifts. It is in the political empowerment category that India records a drop in parity, since the last evaluation. Female representation in Parliament fell from 14.7% to 13.8% in 2025, lowering the indicator score for the second year in a row below 2023 levels. Also evaluated was the share of women in ministerial roles, which fell from 6.5% to 5.6%, continuing the sinking trend since 2023.

The path ahead is obvious — consolidate and improve on the gains and make efforts to set right the lacunae with policies and political will. India has had a long, shameful tussle on this issue as it toyed with the idea of increasing representation for women in polity. The controversial Women's Reservation Bill was passed in 2023, 27 years after it was first introduced in 1996. The Bill has been visited upon by many charades, was blocked at every turn, and the path to actualisation of the goal was lined with monumental impediments. The present Act reserves one third of the seats for women in Parliament and the State legislatures, but will only be implemented from 2029, after the completion of the Census, and the delimitation exercise. But India climbing up the ranks of a global index should be only secondary to achieving a rounded, applause-worthy, gender parity structure within the country. There is, also, nothing keeping political parties from increasing women's participation in the electoral process, even before the law necessitates it.

More 'mind space' for India in America's imagination

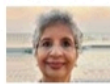
Why is there no 'Schwarzman Scholars' programme for India? Why does a country of 1.4 billion people — an ancient civilisation, a dynamic economy, a nuclear power, and a key player in the Indo-Pacific — still appear marginal in the priorities of elite American institutions? The answer lies not merely in policy lag but in perception, psychology, and deeply embedded narratives that continue to shape the West's engagement with Asia.

The Schwarzman Scholars programme
The 'Schwarzman Scholars' programme, launched in 2016 and based at Beijing's Tsinghua University, was explicitly modelled after the Rhodes Scholarship (founded in 1902). Its mission is ambitious: to cultivate a future generation of global leaders, deeply familiar with China's systems, strategic worldview, and societal aspirations. That no such equivalent programme exists for India is not an accident. It is the culmination of decades of lopsided intellectual investment — one that privileges China as essential, and views India, at best, as peripheral.

This imbalance was presciently explored by Harold R. Isaacs in his seminal work, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (1958). Isaacs uncovered the psychological residue — "scratches", as he termed them — left on American consciousness by media, education, missionary evangelism, and diplomatic narratives. China loomed large in this imagination: revolutionary, mystical, dangerous, promising. India, by contrast, was filtered through colonial British lenses: remote, spiritual, chaotic, and, ultimately, less urgent.

Even today, those scratches endure. India is often misunderstood, misrepresented, or, more often, simply missing in the frameworks that shape western elite understanding. The Cold War's bipolar logic left India unmoored in American strategic thinking. China was a site of ideological competition, and later, a partner in global capitalism. India, non-aligned and self-reliant, never fit the template. Its democracy attracted rhetorical admiration, but its strategic ambivalence dampened deeper interest.

This selective seduction continued into the 21st century. China masterfully framed its rise as an opportunity — and the West was psychologically prepared to believe it. Scholars such as Australian sinologist Stephen Fitzgerald described in the 1980s how the West "wanted China to succeed" — economically, politically, even ideologically. China offered a compelling, seductive narrative of transformation: poverty to prosperity, isolation to



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India needs to ensure that it captures intellectual space in the American imagination, and is understood on its own terms

globalisation, authoritarian control with capitalist efficiency. Western business leaders, academics and policymakers were drawn in. Programmes such as Schwarzman were not just reflections of China's pull — they were symptoms of the West's emotional and intellectual readiness to be seduced.

India never orchestrated such seduction. It emerged from colonialism with a focus on sovereignty and self-reliance. It rebuffed bloc politics, avoided entanglements, and developed slowly and unevenly. Its strengths — pluralistic democracy, entrepreneurial diaspora, and cultural richness — did not easily translate into strategic urgency or narrative coherence for the West. While the Chinese state invested heavily in soft power — through Confucius Institutes, think tanks, cultural exchanges, and university partnerships — India's outreach was modest, sporadic, and often bureaucratically constrained.

The problem with India-focused research
Even within American academia, the difference is stark. China Studies enjoys robust institutional support across top universities. With a few exceptions, India-focused research, by contrast, is fragmented, often subsumed under South Asian or Postcolonial Studies, with an emphasis on religion, anthropology, or classical language. These are critical fields, but do not capture the lure of a civilisational state and a modern India that is shaping global technology, space innovation, climate policy, and strategic affairs. India appears in headlines, but rarely in syllabi.

The consequences are serious. Future American leaders, whether in diplomacy, business, or policy, are not being trained to understand India in its full complexity. The persistence of reductive frameworks, such as the old hyphenation of "India-Pakistan", continues to distort strategic thinking. U.S. President Donald Trump's repetitive remarks about mediating between India and Pakistan are not just personal gaffes. They reflect institutional inertia, a failure to update mental maps to match geopolitical reality.

And here lies a paradox: just as India's importance is rising, its visibility in American intellectual and philanthropic circuits remains limited. The absence of a flagship fellowship akin to Schwarzman is both a symptom and a cause of this gap. Such a programme would not just serve India's interests; it would meet a growing demand among global youth for deeper engagement with the world's largest democracy — its challenges, innovations, contradictions, and aspirations.

But for such a fellowship to succeed, India

must first invest in the institutional foundation. Tsinghua University, where Schwarzman is housed, is not just a campus. It is a brand, a node of state-backed ambition with global recognition. India has institutions of excellence — the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and emerging liberal arts universities such as Ashoka and Krea — but none as yet combine academic prestige, international pull, policy connectivity, and philanthropic momentum at the scale required. This must change. India needs a globally oriented, strategically empowered academic platform that can host and nurture the next generation of world leaders — Indian and foreign — who understand India not just as a subject of study but as a site of leadership. Creating such an institution will require government will, private capital, academic autonomy, and long-term vision.

Narrative matters

India also needs to project its narrative with much more feeling and conviction. The Chinese have always felt they are a 'chosen' people. The world, from Napoleon, has felt the same. India is the Cinderella in this story. Strategic restraint and ambiguity has served Indian diplomacy in many arenas, but silence can be mistaken for absence and risk-aversion for reticence and a lack of confidence. Narrative matters. Global leadership today is as much about shaping perceptions as it is about GDP or military muscle. That means calling out outdated framing, investing in storytelling, and claiming intellectual space with confidence. The refrain of a rising GDP lifting all boats, of International Yoga Days, will not just do. Every few blocks in an American city you will find a yoga studio and an Indian restaurant. But does that change the power scene in India?

Ultimately, the battle for influence is not only fought in the corridors of power or in street corners, but is also shaped in classrooms, fellowships, research centres, and campus conversations. If India wants to be understood on its own terms, and not just as a counterweight to China or a bystander in someone else's story, it must be present in the places where ideas are formed and futures imagined.

The scratches on our minds can be healed, but not with silence. They require vision, voice, and a story compelling enough to inspire the next generation of global leaders. A Schwarzman-style fellowship in India would not just be a corrective. It would be a declaration that India is no longer content to be studied at a distance. It wants to be known, on its own terms.

India needs a sincere aircraft accident investigation

In a country where every life lost in an aircraft accident should result in justice, transparency, and reform, we find ourselves, instead, battling a system that is seemingly designed to obscure the truth.

On paper, India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AIB) is a statutory and autonomous investigative body. In reality, it is anything but independent. It functions as an office of the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), the very same authority that oversees airlines, regulates aviation through the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), and, crucially, appoints the leadership of the AIB and the DGCA. This structure presents an apparent conflict of interest. In railway accidents, investigations are typically carried out by the Commissioner of Railway Safety or, occasionally, a judicial authority, and not by the Ministry of Railways. Although, technically, under the MoCA, the Commissioner is functionally independent of railway operators, this ensures that those running trains are not the ones investigating the derailments. But in aviation, the MoCA controls airline operations and accident investigations.

Stop the firefighting

The accident on June 12, 2025, at Ahmedabad was not just an operational occurrence. It was a full-fledged aircraft accident that should serve as a wake-up call. Is India's aviation safety framework keeping pace with its exponential growth? There have been a number of helicopter crashes, accidents involving flying schools, there was a weather-related incident in May 2025 that affected a Delhi-Srinagar IndiGo flight, and, in addition, troubling ground handling lapses, that include the cancellation of ground handler (Celbi Aviation's) permit over security concerns. These are not isolated incidents but point to something more profound. Are we identifying and fixing risks before they become headlines? Or are we merely reacting? We cannot keep firefighting. We need a system that prevents failures, and not just manages the damage.

The high-level committee appointed to investigate the Air India AIT7 crash must go beyond reviewing a single event. It must recognise that India's aviation ecosystem has outgrown the current National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP). In a complete revamp of the NCAP, 'safety' should be deeply woven into every regulation, operation and decision. That is how



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India does not lack the talent or the tools to investigate air accidents; what it lacks is institutional courage to tell the truth

we prepare for the responsibilities that come with being one of the largest aviation markets in the world.

A report that told inconvenient truths

The Air Marshal J.K. Seth Committee Report in 1997 was India's most honest and far-reaching review of aviation safety. But it was quietly buried because it told the truth. It highlighted key systemic flaws: fragmented oversight; lack of independence; inadequate training and resources; and regulatory capture. These issues remain largely unresolved. Any new committee must reckon with these truths and not repeat the pattern of superficial reviews and buried reports.

Too many accident reports have internal contradictions. In an accident in 2001, that claimed the life of a former Union Minister, 'entry into the cloud' was cited as the cause, while the meteorology section confirmed that there were no clouds around. Was it a mistake or does it point to something else? Overloading was evident in the Indian Airlines crash (IC491) in Aurangabad in 1993. Yet, the final report did not spell it out so clearly. This writer has pursued data for years in another case of suspected overloading on an Air India Express flight (IXG1), in October 2018, from Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu to Dubai, only to be denied access. What is being protected?

The Aircraft (Investigation of Accidents and Incidents) Rules, 2017 make one point clear — that the purpose of an investigation is to prevent future accidents, and not to assign blame. Yet, law enforcement and courts routinely misuse the AIB's findings. The police, lacking the expertise and jurisdiction in aviation matters, rely almost entirely on the AIB's reports, treating them as conclusive. The AIB's findings are meant for safety learning, and not legal prosecution. When these reports are interpreted outside their technical scope, truth becomes a casualty.

Investigating officers unfamiliar with aviation treat the AIB's "probable cause" as a legal verdict. The judiciary focuses on what is immediately visible, while the AIB is meant to dig deeper. But both often end up blaming the pilot, the case is closed and the truth is left behind.

Why is pilot error so often the conclusion? Because it is convenient. Legally, it simplifies matters. From an insurance standpoint, a conclusion of pilot error helps expedite payouts. It closes the loop quickly, shielding other

accountable entities — airlines, maintenance providers, and air traffic control, from scrutiny. The pilot becomes the system's scapegoat, even in death.

A front to protect people

Too often, accident investigations in India are reshaped to protect institutions, and not the people they serve. The MoCA holds all the levers, policy, regulation, appointments and investigations. With that much control, real accountability becomes a myth. Each time a family receives a hollow, contradictory report instead of honest answers, the system not only fails but also breaks faith. At times, the structure is so well-insulated from responsibility that it has perfected the art of getting away with murder — through delay, dilution and the quiet deletion of truth.

The International Civil Aviation Organization's State Safety Briefing (2022) says that India has had zero fatal accidents recently. But 21 lives were lost in the Kozhikode air crash in August 2020. The recommendations in the investigation and those of the committee to review the accident have not been implemented duly. There is no accountability. No systemic change. Just silence. India cannot claim global leadership in aviation while hiding behind data. Absolute safety comes from integrity.

These are the steps needed. First, move the AIB and DGCA to an independent statutory body that reports to Parliament. Second, stop having parallel committees that bypass or undermine established investigative bodies. Third, take legal steps to prevent the AIB's findings from being used in criminal trials unless independently validated. Fourth, amend Rule 19(3) of the Aircraft Rules, 1937, which holds the powers to penalise a pilot for any mistake. There is a need to protect a pilot with a genuine no-blame culture, unless gross negligence is proven. Fifth, appoint an independent ombudsman to review how accident reports have been handled and mishandled.

It is not that India lacks the talent or the tools to investigate accidents. What it lacks is the institutional courage to tell the truth. Therefore, this writer's plea. Have an honest, sincere aircraft accident investigation; one that shows that India values truth and precious lives over image. Let that be India's legacy for those lives lost, not only in the skies but also in the silence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A troubling trend
I write this letter as the Additional Private Secretary to the Governor of Kerala. The controversy over the image of Bharat Mata at the World Environment Day function held at Raj Bhavan

reflects a troubling trend — the politicisation of cultural and national symbols. What should have been a dignified state event turned into a needless flashpoint when the Agriculture Department objected to the

inclusion of a traditional lamp and an image of Bharat Mata. Although the objection to the lamp was withdrawn, the image of Bharat Mata was rejected on the grounds that it was allegedly associated with a

certain political organisation. Raj Bhavan even suggested an alternative image — Bharat Mata holding the national flag. Participation in the floral tribute programme was made voluntary. Yet,

citing vague "protocols", the government called it off altogether. Governor Arlekar's response was measured: for him, Bharat Mata is above all politics. That this image is now being rejected not out of

reason, but political insecurity, signals a drift from our civilisational roots. **P. Sreekumar**
Thiruvananthapuram
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.



India has long been the world's go-to supplier for generic drugs, but as AI sweeps through the global life sciences industry, there's a sense something much bigger is in the works. REUTERS

AI and biomanufacturing: can the policies match our ambitions?

When an AI model is used to control a bioreactor, how do we know that it's reliable? Who checks that the data it was trained on is representative of India's diverse conditions, or that it won't make a catastrophic error if something unexpected happens? These are matters of public trust and safety

Deepakshi Kasat

India stands at a pivotal juncture in its quest to harness artificial intelligence (AI) for biotechnology innovation. On one hand, initiatives like the BioE3 Policy and the IndiaAI Mission reflect a bold vision to position the country as a global leader in AI-driven biomanufacturing and ethical AI development. On the other, fragmented regulations and lagging safeguards threaten to undermine this progress. As India races to capitalise on AI's transformative potential, a critical question emerges: can it balance ambition with accountability?

India's biomanufacturing sector is abuzz with possibilities. For decades, the country has been the world's go-to supplier for generic medicines and vaccines, a reputation it has built on scale, cost, and reliability. But now, as AI sweeps through the global life sciences industry, there's a sense that something much bigger is in the works. Many modern biomanufacturing facilities already have robots running precision tasks, biosensors streaming real-time data, and AI models quietly optimising everything from fermentation to packaging.

DNA of biomanufacturing
Biocon, one of India's largest biotechnology firms, is integrating AI to improve drug screening and its biologics manufacturing processes. By leveraging AI-based predictive analytics, Biocon will enhance the efficiency of fermentation and quality control, reducing production costs while maintaining global standards. Similarly, Bengaluru-based Strand Life Sciences uses AI in genomics and personalised medicine, helping accelerate drug discovery and clinical diagnostics. Their platforms use machine learning to analyse complex biological data, making it easier to identify drug targets and predict treatment responses. These efforts illustrate how AI is already reshaping biomanufacturing and healthcare delivery in India.

It's not just about swapping out people for machines. AI is transforming the very DNA of biomanufacturing. Imagine a production line where sensors feed thousands of data points every second into an AI system that can spot the faintest hint of trouble, like a temperature drift, a pH blip or a subtle change in cell growth. Before a human operator even notices, the AI predicts a deviation, tweaks the process, and keeps the batch on track. Digital twins, which are virtual replicas of entire manufacturing plants allow engineers to run simulations, test changes, and foresee problems without ever touching a real fermenter.

The result? Fewer failed batches, less waste, and products that consistently meet the gold standard for quality. For a

country like India, where every rupee and every dose counts, these gains can be transformative.

Interesting and complicated
The Government of India has clearly recognised this potential. The BioE3 Policy, rolled out in 2024, is a playbook for the future. The policy lays out plans for state-of-the-art biomanufacturing hubs, biofoundries, and "Bio-AI Hubs" that will bring together the best minds in science, engineering, and data. There's real money on the table too, with funding and grants designed to help startups and established players alike leap from the lab bench to the market shelf.

Equally important is the IndiaAI Mission, which is working alongside BioE3 to ensure India's AI revolution is both innovative and ethical. The Mission is as much about building technical capacity as about building trust. By supporting projects that focus on explainable and responsible AI – such as efforts to reduce algorithmic bias or frameworks for "machine unlearning" – the Mission is helping set the standards for how AI should be developed and deployed in sensitive sectors like health and biotechnology.

But here's where things get interesting and complicated. While India's ambitions are sky-high, its regulatory framework is still catching its breath. The rules that govern how new drugs, biologics, and manufacturing processes come to market were written for a different era. Today's AI-driven systems don't always fit neatly into those boxes. For example, when an AI model is used to control a bioreactor or predict the yield of a vaccine batch, how do we know it's reliable? Who checks that the data it was trained on is representative of India's diverse conditions, or that it won't make a catastrophic error if something unexpected happens? These aren't just technical questions. They are matters of public trust and safety.

Risk-based, context-aware
Globally, the rules are changing. The European Union's AI Act, effective since August 2024, classifies AI tools into four risk tiers. High-risk applications like genetic editing face strict audits while the U.S. FDA's 2025 guidance mandates a seven-step framework for AI credibility. These models emphasise two things India lacks: context-specific risk evaluation and adaptive regulation. For instance, the FDA's 'Predetermined Change Control Plans' allow iterative AI updates that are critical for evolving cancer therapies without compromising safety. India needs this kind of risk-based, context-aware oversight as it moves from pilot projects to full-scale, AI-powered manufacturing. Picture an Indian biotech startup that develops an AI platform to optimise enzyme production for the specialty

chemicals industry. This sector is already worth \$32 billion (₹2.74 lakh crore) and growing fast. If this AI is trained only on data from large, urban manufacturing sites, it might fail to account for the quirks of smaller plants in semi-urban or rural areas, like differences in water quality, ambient temperature or even local power fluctuations.

Without clear standards for dataset diversity and model validation, the tool could recommend process tweaks that work beautifully in Bengaluru but flop in Baddi. The result: lost revenue, wasted resources, and a blow to India's reputation for quality. This is why the context of use and credibility assessment that are core pillars in the FDA's approach are so important. We need to be clear exactly what question the AI is answering, how it's being used, and how strict our oversight should be, depending on the risks involved.

Of course, biomanufacturing is only one piece of the puzzle. Imagine a future where India not only supplies 60% of the world's vaccines but also designs them using algorithms that predict viral mutations. A future where farmers in Bihar receive AI-generated advisories to combat pest outbreaks and patients in rural Tamil Nadu are diagnosed by tools trained on India's genetic diversity. This isn't science fiction – it's the promise of AI-driven biomanufacturing, a field where India is making bold strides. Yet beneath this optimism lies a critical question: can our policies keep up with science?

With great power comes...
The intersections are multiplying. In drug discovery, AI platforms can screen millions of compounds *in silico*, slashing the time and cost needed to find new treatments. Molecular design tools are helping researchers fine-tune drug candidates for maximum efficacy and minimal side effects. Clinical trials that were once notorious for delays and inefficiencies are being streamlined by AI systems that optimise patient recruitment and trial design, making studies faster and more representative. Even the supply chain is getting an upgrade: AI-powered predictive maintenance keeps manufacturing lines humming, while demand forecasting ensures that medicines reach the right place at the right time, reducing shortages and waste.

Another unique application of AI is Wipro's work in developing AI-powered solutions for pharmaceutical companies to streamline drug discovery. By combining machine learning algorithms with computational biology, Wipro has helped reduce the time required to identify viable drug candidates. Similarly, Tata Consultancy Services is leveraging AI in its 'Advanced Drug Development' platform, which uses machine learning to fine-tune clinical trials and predict treatment outcomes. These applications

As AI begins to play a bigger role in inventing new molecules and processes, questions about inventorship, data ownership, and licensing are becoming more urgent. Without clear, harmonised policies, the risk of stifling innovation or ending up in costly legal battles persists

demonstrate how AI is not just confined to manufacturing but is transforming the entire healthcare value chain, from research to patient care. These innovations also indicate India's potential to lead the way in AI-powered healthcare solutions.

But with great power comes great responsibility and a host of new challenges. Data governance is a big one. AI models are only as good as the data they're trained on, and in a country as diverse as India, that's no small feat. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 is a start, but it doesn't address the specific needs of AI in biomanufacturing, like ensuring that datasets are clean, diverse, and free from hidden biases. Intellectual property is another thorny issue. As AI begins to play a bigger role in inventing new molecules and processes, questions about inventorship, data ownership, and licensing are becoming more urgent. Without clear, harmonised policies, the risk of stifling innovation or ending up in costly legal battles persists.

Create, not just copy
So, what's the way forward? First, India needs to move quickly towards a risk-based, adaptive regulatory framework. This means defining the context of use for every AI tool, setting clear standards for data quality and model validation, and ensuring ongoing oversight as systems evolve.

Second, India needs to invest in infrastructure and talent – and not just in the metropolitan cities but across the country.

Third, it needs to foster a culture of collaboration, bringing together regulators, industry, academia, and international partners to share best practices and solve problems together. If the country gets this right, the rewards are enormous. India's legacy in generic drug manufacturing is secure but the future belongs to those who can harness the power of AI to create, not just copy. With the right policies, the right people, and the right priorities, there's no reason why the next great leap in biomanufacturing shouldn't come from India. The world is watching and the time to act is now.

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Sarcopenia contributes to frailty, slow recovery, and hospital readmissions in older adults. ALAN CALVERT/UNSPASH

Common molecule offers clue to making old muscles young again

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

As we age, it gets harder to recover from a fall, injury or even a tough workout because the body's muscle-repair system starts to falter. Muscle stem cells (MuSCs), the in-house repair crew, stop dividing and rebuilding tissue, losing their ability to respond to damage.

A study in *Cell Stem Cell* on June 12 suggested this decline may be reversible. The key isn't some futuristic therapy but a molecule already used in hospitals today.

Researchers found that five daily injections of prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), a compound involved in inflammation and used clinically to induce labour, restored muscle stem cell function in aged mice. After treatment, older mice regained the ability to regenerate damaged muscle: their muscle fibres grew larger, muscle mass increased, and strength improved by about 20% compared to their untreated peers.

The findings are important because PGE2 is naturally produced in the body, particularly after injury. It signals MuSCs to start repairs in young muscle, but in older tissue this signal fades, leaving stem cells inactive even when needed. After PGE2 treatment, aged stem cells "woke up," resumed dividing, participated in tissue repair, and helped restore the animals' muscle strength. Remarkably, these effects lasted at least two weeks beyond the treatment window, suggesting more than just a temporary boost.

Even more strikingly, the outcome held

Five daily injections of prostaglandin E2, a compound involved in inflammation and used clinically to induce labour, restored muscle stem cell function in aged mice

true outside the body. When aged stem cells were treated with PGE2 for just 48 hours in the lab and transplanted into injured muscle, they formed new tissue at levels comparable to young stem cells. Imaging showed that these treated cells engrafted robustly, persisted for weeks, and even expanded in response to subsequent injury – evidence that PGE2 acted directly on the cells themselves, not just their environment.

To understand how, the team examined molecular changes inside the cells. PGE2 reopened regions of the genome that had become inaccessible with age. It also dialled down a stress-related pathway called AP-1, which becomes overactive in aging MuSCs. The molecule reset the cells' internal programmes, allowing them to act more like their younger selves.

The study adds to an ongoing shift in how scientists think about ageing. For years, researchers believed age-related decline in muscle repair was driven mainly by the environment around stem cells, such as inflammation or scar tissue. But this work adds to evidence that stem cells themselves carry reversible, internal changes, opening the door to therapies that rejuvenate cells directly.

The relevance goes far beyond the lab. Sarcopenia affects millions and contributes to frailty, slow recovery, and hospital readmissions in older adults. There are no approved therapies that restore MuSC function. The new study suggests a brief intervention could one day support healing in such situations. By showing that stem cell ageing isn't irreversible, this study also opens a new frontier.

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For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

Blocked channels

Rate cuts done, monetary transmission must improve

The fall in India's consumer price inflation print to 2.82 per cent in May appears to vindicate the Monetary Policy Committee's (MPC's) latest stimulative, growth-plus policy. But Governor Sanjay Malhotra also indicated that after these front-loaded cuts (in repo rate and cash reserve ratio), monetary policy would have little room to undertake further easing — unless the incoming data change.

Even so, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) can ensure that monetary easing aids the economy, by focusing on policy rate transmission. Studies show that monetary policy actions in India take two to three quarters to impact output, with a partial pass-through of rate cuts. Economists recognise three main channels through which monetary transmission works. The first is the interest rate and credit channel, where cheaper cost of funds and more liquidity impels lenders to step up credit and lower lending rates, stoking consumption. Transmission through this channel works best when bank balance sheets are in good shape — as they are now. The second channel is through asset prices, where lower interest rates spur households to invest in homes and companies to buy fixed assets. Three, lower rates trigger currency depreciation, making imports cheaper and exports more competitive, aiding GDP growth. In India, of these three channels, two are unlikely to be effective in the near term. With households hamstrung by slow income growth and companies by low demand visibility, lower interest rates alone are unlikely to spur investments. A depreciating rupee may not stimulate exports, amid tariff threats and geopolitical uncertainty.

The best bet for quick monetary transmission at this juncture is the interest rate channel to boost consumption. RBI data on lending and deposit rates of banks until end-May suggests that the transmission of rate cuts by banks in this easing cycle has been no better than in previous cycles. Between February 1 and May 31, 2025, as the MPC cut rates by 50 basis points and RBI opened the taps of liquidity, banks' weighted average lending rate on new loans fell by just six basis points and legacy loans by 17 basis points. Weighted average interest rates on new deposits fell by 26 basis points, but legacy deposits saw almost no change in their costs. It remains to be seen if graded CRR cuts kicking in from September manage to accelerate deposit rate cuts, which hold the key to lending rates. On the lending side, the advent of External Benchmark-based Lending Rate (EBLR) loans which use the repo rate as their peg have speeded up the pace of transmission in some pockets of the credit market.

Here, private sector banks have widely adopted EBLR loans, with 86 per cent of their loan book now repo-linked, but public sector banks still have over half of their loan books pegged to the MCLR (Marginal Cost of Funds-based Lending Rate). This results in tardy transmission. EBLR is also used mainly in home loans. Nudging banks and NBFCs to adopt EBLR lending may improve monetary transmission.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

Overboard on social media

Sindhu Hariharan

Social media is a funny world that lets you be who you want to be depending on the news cycle of the day. One day people are national security experts, it's time to wear geopolitical specialists hat another day, and these days, everyone is an aviation enthusiast. There is something more than just grief when it comes to an airline mishap. It unites people to come up with varied likely theories and put them out there in a bid to provide answers before the experts do. We saw it happen in the case of Malaysia Airlines MH370, whose disappearance almost 11 years ago remains one of the world's greatest aviation mysteries and has inspired documentaries.

As we all wait for experts to decipher the Black Box of Air India flight AI 171, there is no dearth of experts today leveraging social media platforms to list out the

various likely causes of the horrific crash. The engagement-linked payout models of social media platforms also give them an additional push to make their content sensational.

Given that an overload of content is what drives media business models today, the experts are also finding a larger platform to inflate their self-importance. Even as this content is feeding the hunger of conspiracy theorists, it is also impacting those who are grappling with the tragedy.

Do these theories help the families mourning their loved ones? Will these help them as they navigate their own baggage of questions and confusions? Are these theories going to play any role to make the investigation any easier?

Yes, freedom of speech is important but it will be great if self-professed experts understand that with freedom also comes responsibility.

Dealing with China's coercion

GEAR UP. China's economic coercion is a 'critical' tool blending trade, technology, and geopolitics to pressure India



RAM SINGH

In April 2025, China's decision to impose export controls on rare earth elements and other critical minerals sent shockwaves across global industries, particularly in high-tech and green sectors. The move, couched in national security and environmental rhetoric, highlights Beijing's leverage in geo-economic statecraft.

India's \$240 billion automotive sector, heavily dependent on Chinese-origin rare earths and materials, is experiencing immediate disruptions, delays in EV component shipments, stalled customs clearances, and warnings from auto-manufacturers about production halts. These reaffirm China's strategic use of economic coercion to shape global supply-chains and geopolitical behaviour.

Given this context, it is important to comprehend India's supply-chain vulnerabilities across the sectors having adverse economic impact. Correspondingly, the article decodes it using Kraljic Matrix, identifying imported products under four different categories and classifying them based on supply risk and economic impact.

CHINA'S COERCIVE TACTICS
China's economic coercion is a strategic tool blending trade, technology, and geopolitics to pressure India. It exploits dependencies through supply disruptions (example, APIs, critical minerals), informal sanctions (seaford bans post-border clashes), and selective investments that avoid strategic sectors. Tactics include customs delays on electronics and auto components, dual-use infrastructure via BRI and "String of Pearls," and financial exits from firms like Paytm and Zomato. It also arms India's adversaries and engages in cyber intrusions (example, RedEcho's 2020 blackout in Mumbai). Recent export controls on neodymium, dysprosium, gallium and germanium, citing vague "national security" concerns, are part of this playbook, using formal policies with informal opacity to create plausible deniability while exerting coercive pressure outside WTO constraints. Selective customs delays, even after the

Kraljic Matrix

Vulnerability in items with over 50% China imports

Economic Impact	Supply risks	
	LEVERAGE (Low supply risk, high economic impact)	STRATEGIC (High supply risk, high economic impact)
	Textiles, footwear, musical instruments, where India has or can build strong manufacturing capacities.	Pharma, electrical, electronics and industrial machinery; should formalise agreements with resource-rich countries
	NON-CRITICAL (Low supply risk, low economic impact)	BOTTLENECK (High supply risk, low economic impact)
	Umbrellas, toys, furniture; can be sourced flexibly or domestically produced.	Ceramics, base metals, glassware, iron and steel; used in smaller volumes; critical for manufacturing, defence. India should fast-track pacts

DGFT issued end-user certificates to 17 Indian auto-component manufacturers, are aimed at manipulating prices through state-owned firms, thereby destabilising supply-chains without breaching formal rules and enabling coercion with strategic ambiguity.

China's motives span several fronts: retaliating against political stances (example, over Taiwan or the South China Sea), deterring supply-chain diversification, and asserting dominance in future-facing technologies like electric vehicles, solar energy, and semiconductors. By mandating exhaustive disclosures on end uses, quantities, and product outputs, Beijing seeks to define new norms of industrial governance with the "Middle Kingdom" as the fulcrum of its geopolitical statecraft. Within this schema, economic coercion emerges not merely as a tool of influence, but as an instrument of techno-industrial ascendancy. To mitigate vulnerabilities and build long-term resilience, India must shift from reactive crisis responses to a strategic procurement approach. The Kraljic Matrix, which classifies imports along the axes of supply risk and economic impact (see figure), offers a structured tool to prioritise policy actions, guide investment, and focus

India should liberalise norms under the Mines and Minerals Act, and encourage MSMEs to plug into low-risk supply chains.

diplomacy. It considers items having more than 50 per cent share of China as a supply source.

Strategic imports include products such as pharmaceutical ingredients, electrical, electronics and industrial machinery (HSN:29.83,84.85). These are essential to India's energy transition, industrial modernisation, and technological sovereignty. To secure their supply, India should formalise long-term offtake agreements with resource-rich countries like Australia, the DRC, and Argentina. Public sector undertakings should lead investments in overseas assets. Simultaneously, domestic capacities for refining, magnet production, and battery-grade material processing should be scaled-up under the oversight of a proposed National Critical Minerals Mission.

Bottleneck items such as ceramic products, base metals and cermet, glassware, and articles of iron and steel (HSN:69.81, 70.73), though used in smaller volumes, are critical for manufacturing and defence supply chains. India should fast-track bilateral cooperation with countries like Japan, the EU, and the US to ensure stable access. At the same time, promoting e-waste recycling and investing in R&D on photonics and compound semiconductors can reduce external dependence.

Leverage items include textile products, footwear and musical instruments (HSN:54.58, 60, 64, 92), where India has or can build strong manufacturing capacities. These offer room to negotiate favourable import

terms with other countries while expanding domestic production. Rationalising duties, streamlining GST, and supporting downstream manufacturing such as EV wiring and motor parts can boost competitiveness.

Non-critical importable items like umbrellas, sports toys, clocks and furniture (HSN:66, 95, 91, 94) can be sourced flexibly or domestically produced. India should liberalise mining and licensing norms under the Mines and Minerals Act, and encourage MSMEs to plug into low-risk supply chains, reducing import dependence and generating local jobs. By aligning trade, industrial, and foreign policy through a Kraljic-informed matrix, India can address such economic coercion in future and transform dependencies into strategic capabilities.

WAY FORWARD

India's experience with China's mineral coercion underscores the urgent need for a proactive, sovereign strategy that elevates mineral security to the level of food and energy security. A cohesive National Strategy for Mineral Security, anchored by the ₹16,300 crore Critical Mineral Mission, should integrate exploration, R&D, strategic offtake contracts, and recycling. Institutional reforms should be complemented by a robust diplomatic posture, leveraging platforms like the MSP, Quad, and IPEF, to forge resilient supply networks, as seen in India's MoU with the US for gallium and germanium.

Domestically, India should go beyond extraction to build end-to-end value chains, especially in refining lithium, cobalt, and rare earths. Industrial examples such as the Vizag magnet plant serve as scalable models. Private sector risk can be lowered through transparent auctions, AI-driven geological surveys, and innovative financing. Lastly, embedding circular economy principles via PLI incentives for recycling and urban mining is equally critical.

India must take up this issue at all geopolitical forums (BRICS, SCO, G-20) soliciting supply-chains free from economic coercion. India should also invest in materials science to develop substitutes for rare earths, and create a Strategic Minerals Reserve, overseen by an empowered inter-ministerial body. Chinese coercion can be converted into a strategic advantage.

The writer is Professor/Head, IIT New Delhi. Views are personal

Customer service in banks: Mind the behaviour gap

Focus on 'customer protection' and grievance redressal should not override the role of customer interaction and experience

S Adikesavan

Recently, M Nagaraju, Secretary, Department of Financial Services (DFS), made surprise visits to a few bank branches in Delhi — posing as a regular customer. In one case, he waited an hour just to speak with the branch manager, who remained engaged on a call. Similar experiences were reported in other branches he went. Media coverage highlighted his concern over "behavioural" issues and the lack of "courteous" interaction with customers. The Secretary urged banks to improve their customer service standards, especially in how they engage with people. To seasoned observers, this is not surprising. While many bank branches do offer efficient service, bankers know that customer service needs substantial improvement across their network. And the issue is ownership-neutral — creamy layer banking is out of the purview here.

Banks need to realise that the focus on customer protection and grievance redressal should not override the importance of "customer interaction and experience". Even regulatory committees tasked with studying customer service have often used terms like "customer service" and "customer protection" interchangeably, missing the nuance. What truly matters is how customers are treated at the counter, via email, or over the phone — before

complaints even arise.

Therefore, the DFS Secretary's emphasis on behavioural issues is important from a sectoral perspective. If customers feel respected and welcomed, much of the dissatisfaction can be prevented. Admittedly the entire gamut of "customer service" is broader and needs a separate analysis.

Courteous interactions, timely email responses, acknowledgement of issues, and a sense of attentiveness are the first steps in shaping customer perception. The question here is how can the system make staff warm, responsive, and customer-friendly across all touchpoints?

AREAS NEEDING ATTENTION

To improve customer experience at touch points, banks must address several issues. Here are a few areas needing attention:

Low customer-facing staff ratio: Only about 60 per cent of staff in banks are in customer-facing roles as per certain studies, compared to 80 per cent internationally. Redeployment from administrative offices to customer-facing desks could help correct this imbalance and improve service.

Redefine the role of service managers: Designate operations/service managers or deputy branch heads in branches as "Customer Service Managers" with clear responsibility and primacy of their KPIs tied to customer satisfaction — while remaining under



CUSTOMERS. Must be treated better

the BM's authority for unified command. Single officer branches may need additional support, through own/outourced human resources.

Weakened institutional oversight: The reported dissolution of the Banking Codes and Standards Board of India in the recent past needs rethinking. In its absence, there must be alternative oversight mechanisms to monitor and enforce service standards.

Revising terminology in grievance systems: Terms like "Ombudsman" are not intuitive for most customers and may even be intimidating. Simpler, more relatable language — like "Customer Complaints Authority" — would be more effective in communicating purpose and intent.

Customer Service Index: As suggested by the Kanungo committee, RBI could build and publish a "Customer Service Index" to benchmark banks on behavioural and service quality metrics.

This will drive competition and accountability.

Privacy in "customer service" in evaluating branch heads: Branch managers juggle up to 40-80 tasks, often prioritising "campaigns", in-house meetings and compliance over customer service. "Customer experience" must be a "weighty" performance indicator (KPI) in their evaluations.

Use of AI in service monitoring: AI tools can be developed to flag dissatisfaction based on keywords in customer emails or even detect body language through CCTV footage. Automated escalation of issues on this basis can speed up resolutions.

Leadership outreach to remote branches: Senior executives may frequently visit rural and semi-urban branches to assess service standards first-hand. These areas often lack awareness of grievance mechanisms and are under-represented in oversight.

Zero tolerance for misconduct: Staff indifference or rudeness to customers should not be tolerated. While the focus should be on retraining and improvement, serious lapses must have consequences that set a precedent.

Improving customer service in banks is not just about speeding up transactions or resolving complaints faster — it's about changing the mindset on how customers are treated at every level.

The reviewer is a commentator on banking and finance

● BELOW THE LINE



No quick-fixes

Encouraged by the conclusion of India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, India had expressed hopes in May of arriving at a quick early harvest trade package with the EU, possibly by July. But getting the bloc, comprising 27

member-countries, to agree within two months on a free trade package, albeit limited in scope, turned out to be tall order. During Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal's recent visit across European countries, it became clear that an early deal was not in the horizon anymore. External Affairs Minister's Jaishankar recently said that wrapping up an India-EU comprehensive trade deal by the year-end seemed feasible. But the question now is whether it would indeed be possible to get all 27 countries plus India on the same page on diverse issues — market access for industrial and farm goods,

quality restrictions, intellectual property, government procurement, carbon taxes and other non-tariff barriers — in another six months' time. The fact that FTA talks between the two were actually initiated almost two decades back demonstrates how complicated things could get. With US President Donald Trump's erratic tariff policies giving enough reasons to many of US's trade partners to expand and consolidate ties with other countries, the miracle may just happen.

Talking stock

The fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh has

affected Indian businessmen in several ways. A livestock start-up founder recently narrated an unfortunate development. A Bangladeshi buyer was interested in getting the start-up's unit launched in his country, and was willing to fund it. However, this was before the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government. Once the government changed, everything got stuck. The buyer is unable to do much because of the antagonistic stance of his country under Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus.

Relief for gig workers

As the Chennai Corporation opened an exclusive lounge for gig workers in Anna Nagar last week, the city won a

lot of praise for being the first in the country to do it. As reporters went on location to gauge what delivery partners had to say, many of them were all praise for the pod, which helps them access facilities such as air-conditioning, seating, drinking water, mobile phone charging and wash room. However, gig workers suggest an electric vehicle (EV) charging point, too, to ensure that more of them make the change to electric two-wheelers. Others said that while a worthy step, this step should be actually taken up by the new-age commerce companies who are making huge revenues out of the gig economy. **Our Bureau**

An FIR and an angry High Court

On May 14, the Madhya Pradesh High Court directed the State Police to register a First Information Report (FIR) against Cabinet Minister Vijay Shah for making allegedly inflammatory remarks against Indian Army officer, Colonel Sofiya Qureshi. Agast at the Minister's remarks, the Court directed the police to register an FIR against him for offences under Sections 152, 196(b) and 197(c) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which are related to acts endangering national unity and promoting enmity between groups.

Though a criminal case was registered against Mr. Shah on the same date at Raikunda village under the Mampur police station limits in Indore (Rural) district, the Court questioned the manner in which the FIR was written. It said that the FIR was "deficient in material particulars of the actions which constitute each of the specific offences" and could be "quashed on a later date". The Court, therefore, not only directed the police to consider the entire order of May 14 to be read as part of the FIR for all processes, but also decided to monitor the probe so that the police act fairly in accordance with the law without being influenced by any extraneous pressures.

Essential ingredients

While the law relating to the quashing of an FIR is well settled, so is the law relating to the registration of a cognisable offence. Section 170(1) of the BNS states that "every information relating to the commission of a cognisable offence", if given orally, will be written, and if communicated electronically, will be taken on record by the officer in charge of a police station. So, information pertaining to commission of a cognisable offence must be written in the FIR. It is common for the police to reproduce the main complaint in the FIR if the complaint is given in writing. Even in a case where



R.K. Vij
Former IPS officer

preliminary enquiry is conducted into a complaint which does not contain elements of a cognisable offence, the original complaint is reproduced in the FIR along with result of the enquiry. Therefore, though such an FIR may run into pages, the essential elements of an offence are not missed out.

It is also prudent to write elements of the cognisable offence in the FIR, which form the basis for application of various sections of the law, because this gives the accused an opportunity to seek bail and apply for other protections under the law.

There are many instances where the FIR has been found wanting in the ingredients of a cognisable offence and as a result, relief was provided by the constitutional courts. In *Vinod Dua v. Union of India* (2021), the Supreme Court, exercising its powers under Article 32 of the Constitution, quashed the FIR holding that "all the offences set out in the FIR are not made out". In *Arbab Goswami v. the State of Maharashtra* (2020), it granted bail to the appellant on the premise that "a prima facie evaluation of the FIR does not establish the ingredients of the offence of abetment of suicide".

Quashing of an FIR

The law relating to the quashing of an FIR is well settled. It is intrinsically entwined with the law relating to the writing of an FIR. High Courts can exercise their inherent powers under Section 528 of the BNS to quash an FIR, to prevent abuse of the process of any Court, or otherwise to secure the ends of justice. However, such powers are to be exercised sparingly and with caution.

The Supreme Court, in *State of Haryana v. Bhajan Lal* (1992), laid down certain guidelines on the circumstances where a High Court can exercise its inherent powers. The first two guidelines under which an FIR can be quashed are relevant to this case. The first guideline says the inherent powers to quash an FIR can be exercised

"where the allegations made in the FIR or the complaint, even if they are taken at face value and accepted in their entirety, do not prima facie constitute any offence or make out a case against the accused". As per the second guideline, an FIR can be quashed "where the allegations in the FIR and other material, if any, accompanying the FIR do not disclose a cognisable offence, justifying an investigation by police officers under Section 156(1) of the Code except under an order of a Magistrate within the purview of Section 155(2) of the Code." The Code refers to the erstwhile Criminal Procedure Code, and Section 155 pertains to a non-cognisable offence. Other situations include the allegations made in the FIR along with the evidence collected not disclosing the cognisable offence, the FIR disclosing only a non-cognisable offence, the allegations being absurd and inherently improbable, the offences with express legal bar given in the Code or the Act concerned, and criminal cases manifested with mala fide intentions.

In the case under consideration by the M.P. High Court, while referring to the links of the video of the Minister's speech, the FIR states that the "full order dated 14.05.2025 is enclosed". Thus, if the FIR is challenged for want of sufficient material disclosing commission of a cognisable offence, the enclosed order of the Court cannot be lost sight of. As per the settled law, the FIR can be quashed only if the Court finds the material deficit after considering the FIR and the enclosed material (the court order in this case) in its entirety.

Though it would have been prudent for the police to include relevant parts of the alleged speech which constitute offences mentioned in the FIR, the FIR if read in entirety, is not deficient in the required material. Therefore, the High Court's harsh comments against the police seem unwarranted and premature.

A renewed OBC outreach in U.P.

All the political parties are focused on wooing the numerically largest segment

STATE OF PLAY

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In Uttar Pradesh, political parties are focused on mobilising the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which are estimated to comprise more than 40% of the State's population and consist of about 48 caste segments. This move comes against the backdrop of the Centre's announcement that caste enumeration will be part of the Census in 2027.

On June 14, the Congress began a month-long outreach campaign called Bhagidari Nyay Sammelan, with the aim of reaching out to the OBCs. The party has started holding conferences across the State to raise awareness about the declining employment opportunities for OBCs. It is also organising village-level 'champl' campaigns to sensitise people on the importance of a caste census and an economic survey. It plans to hold district-level marches on the need to increase the reservation cap beyond 50%. Congress leaders have said that they will raise caste-centric issues of various OBC segments, such as the Kurmis, Noniyas, Binds, Mauryas, Kushwahs, Rajbharas, Pals, Nishads, Nais, Mallahs, and Prajapatis. The party is confident of its OBC-centric approach in U.P. since Rahul Gandhi's recurrent pitch for a caste census during the party's campaign to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was moderately successful.

Similarly, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has started organising OBC cadre camps in various Assembly constituencies across the State in a bid to attract the OBCs, especially groups that are extremely

backward and which used to vote for the party along with Dalits in the 1990s and 2000s. The party is keen to remind OBC voters about the welfare measures launched for the segment by previous BSP governments under Mayawati. The reports of these cadre camps will be analysed at the party's State headquarters.

The focus on OBCs by the BSP, considered to be a Dalit-centric party, is evident from the party's choices for leadership: State president Vishwanath Pal, for instance, belongs to the Gadariya (OBC) community. In 1995 and 1997, Bhagwat Pal and Dayaram Pal, two OBC leaders, were at the helm of the party in the State and played a significant role in helping the BSP make inroads within OBC groups and dent the Mandal formula of the Samajwadi Party (SP).

The BSP today is a shell of its past. The party won just one seat in the 2022 Assembly polls and secured a vote share of just 12.8%. Given its downfall, it is keen to occupy the Opposition space through its OBC outreach and prevent the SP from making the State a bi-political battlefield.

The main rivals on the U.P. political chessboard — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the SP — are also making attempts to garner the support of these social segments. SP president Akhilesh Yadav recently held meetings in Lucknow with social and polit-

ical organisations of the Noniya and Rajbhar OBC groups. He promised them a slew of progressive measures if elected to power in the 2027 Assembly polls. Mr. Yadav also promised to build a statue of Maharaja Suheldev, considered an icon by the Rajbhar community, along the Gomti river in Lucknow. The SP has constantly emphasised that it is the party's PDA (Pichhda, Dalits and Alpaankhyak — meaning, backward castes, Dalits, and minority communities, respectively) plank and demand for a caste census that has pushed the BJP government to include caste enumeration in the 2027 Census.

The BJP, which has been saying that its decision to include caste enumeration at the national level shows the party's push for social justice and upliftment of the OBCs, has been giving a lion's share of its organisational posts to OBC leaders. In its district president list, announced recently, the BJP had 25 OBC presidents. Of them, five are Kurmis, two are Lodhs, two are Mauryas, and one each is from the Yadav, Kushwah, Rajbhar, Pal, Saini, Kashyap and Vaishya communities. The Kurmis are numerically significant among the OBCs; they constitute roughly 4% of the State's population.

Last week, former minister and a prominent OBC face, Swami Prasad Maurya, launched a political front called Lok Morcha. This comprises small parties, led mostly by OBC leaders. The parties have coined the slogan, 'Jiski jiti sankha bhari, uski utni hissedari' (representation according to population), which is an old cry of OBC-centred parties. Evidently, no party is leaving any stone unturned to woo the OBCs.

New Tatkal rules aimed at curbing bots and bulk bookings

As 60% of Tatkal tickets are bought in the first 10 minutes of the booking window, the new system aims to give genuine users a fighting chance

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The recent changes to the Tatkal ticket booking system are significant and necessary. Under the new rules, OTP authentication using Aadhaar will be mandatory for all Tatkal bookings made online. Agents will be prevented from booking Tatkal tickets during the first 30 minutes of the booking window. In addition, OTP authentication will be sent to the mobile number of the user while Tatkal tickets are being booked by agents or at counters.

Aadhaar-based OTP authentication could create further delays and uncertainty. However, the intent appears to be a course correction: to plug systemic loopholes exploited by bots and unauthorised agents, and to restore fairness in last-minute ticket booking.

The latest move must be viewed in the context of the rapid growth of online train ticketing. When the service was introduced in 2002-03, about 2 lakh tickets were booked online. In 2023-24, the number soared to 45.3 crore, accounting for nearly 83% of all tickets booked on the Indian Railways website (Chart 1). The share of tickets booked through mobile devices has also sharply increased — from just 1% of online bookings in 2014-15 to over 50% by 2023-24.

While online booking has helped reduce the long queues at reservation counters and requires nothing more than a mobile phone and Internet connection, it has also become a double-edged sword, especially in the context of Tatkal tickets. An internal analysis by the Indian Railways revealed that in the first five minutes of the Tatkal window, up to 50% of login attempts on the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) website were made by bots. These bots can autofill details, bypass captchas, and secure tickets within seconds, even as ge-

nuine users struggle to manually enter their information. An analysis by the Indian Railways shows just how competitive Tatkal bookings have become, too. For the AC class, around 5% of the available Tatkal tickets are booked in the first minute, 21% in the second, and another 36% over the next eight minutes. This means 62% of all AC Tatkal tickets are booked within the first 10 minutes of the booking window (Chart 2A). For non-AC classes, the rush is even sharper — nearly 66.5% of Tatkal tickets are booked within the first 10 minutes (Chart 2B).

In FY25, the Indian Railways detected an average of 83 lakh logins every day — a sizable share of them during Tatkal booking hours — by both individuals and bots. For instance, on March 21 and 22 last year, 1.85 lakh and 2.23 lakh tickets, respectively, were booked during the Tatkal windows of 10 a.m.-11 a.m. and 11 a.m.-noon — the highest single-day Tatkal bookings recorded that year. The scale of the challenge is staggering and the latest rules are aimed at least taking bots and bulk bookings out of the equation, giving individual users a fighting chance.

The Railways have already been taking steps to keep bots and unauthorised agents at bay. Between 2019 and 2022, over 17,000 fraudulent agents were arrested for illegally procuring tickets and selling them at a premium, with the highest number of arrests reported from the Western Railways (Chart 3). In addition, the Railways have identified over 140 software tools that have been used to game the system. They have also deactivated more than 2.5 crore suspected user IDs linked to suspicious booking activity.

Tatkal is an important source of revenue for the Railways, with over 5% of the total revenue garnered from three sources — Flexi fare, Tatkal, and Premium Tatkal. Chart 4 shows the amount earned by the Railways through these sources in ₹ crore.

Bots vs humans: Tatkal ticket race

The data for the charts were sourced from the Press Information Bureau, the IRCTC website, IRCTC's annual reports and the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha's Questions and Answers



Chart 1: Number of tickets booked online in crores (right axis) and the share of online tickets out of all tickets booked (left axis)

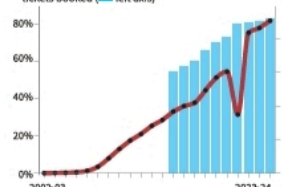


Chart 2A: The share (%) of available AC Tatkal tickets booked across time periods

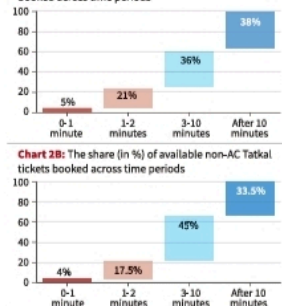


Chart 2B: The share (%) of available non-AC Tatkal tickets booked across time periods

Chart 3: The Railway zone-wise split of the 17,000 fraudulent agents arrested between 2019 and 2022

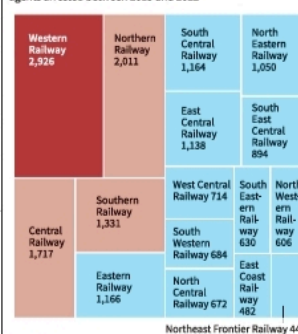


Chart 4: The amount earned by the Railways through these sources in ₹ crore each year



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 16, 1975

Israeli troops kill Arab guerillas

Tel Aviv, June 15: A four-man Arab guerilla death squad from Lebanon attacked the frontier settlement of Kfar Yuval to day, seizing a house and holding people hostage inside, before Israeli troops killed them in a hail of gunfire, military sources said.

Two members of the family were killed and six others, including a seven-month-old baby, were wounded, an Army spokesman said.

The guerillas who attacked the co-operative settlement less than a mile south of the hilly frontier were killed by the storming troops, about 24 hours after they attacked.

The Arab marauders shot their way into the settlement at dawn, held an Israeli family at gunpoint and demanded that Israel release the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Jerusalem and other Arab prisoners.

The Syrian-born Archbishop, Monsignor Hilarion Capucci, was jailed for 12 years in December for smuggling arms to terrorists inside Israel.

Troops then surrounded the village and stormed the house.

Formations of Israeli warplanes bombed a village and plantations in the Arkoub area of south Lebanon to-day, a Lebanese Defence Ministry spokesman said.

Arkoub is often referred to as Fatahland, home of the Palestine guerilla group.

The Israeli air strike came less than one hour after the report of the guerilla raid into the Israeli village.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 16, 1925

The Everest expedition

London, June 14: In an address at the Royal Geographical Society, Lord Ronaldsday referring to the Everest expedition, paid a very high tribute to the leadership of Bruce and Norton and also to the brilliance of the latter's despatches. He reiterated that the Everest climbers were not prepared to admit their defeat.

He said the prospect of putting the matter to the final test depended on the willingness of the Tibetan Government to permit another expedition rather than on the readiness and ability of the Committee to organise and despatch it.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of children out-of-school across the globe

272 million. The global out-of-school population is now estimated to be 272 million, over 1 million more than the last estimate, according to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Team (GEM). The report also noted the impact of conflicts on out-of-school populations.

Number of dead bodies received by Ukraine from Russia

1,200 Ukraine on Sunday said it had received another transfer of 1,200 bodies from Russia as part of an exchange agreement struck in Istanbul earlier this month. "In total, 4,812 bodies have been returned this week," Ukraine's Defence Minister said.

Amount approved for Keshkal bypass road in Chhattisgarh

307 ₹ crore. The Union government has approved a four-lane bypass road to be built at the cost of ₹307.96 crore in Keshkal of Chhattisgarh's Kondagon district to strengthen road connectivity, a State government official said on Sunday.

Number of citizens from Nepal in Israel and Iran

5,512 Nepal's Foreign Ministry said there are 5,500 Nepalese nationals in Israel and 12 in Iran, and all of them are safe. Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba instructed Nepal's envoys in Tel Aviv and Doha to keep in high priority the security of the nation's citizens.

Number of complaints resolved by SEBI via SCORES portal in May

4,493 The SEBI Complaint Redressal System (SCORES) is a platform which facilitates investors in lodging and tracking complaints against listed companies and registered intermediaries.

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What are flue gas desulphurisation units?

What are the different types of FGD systems commonly used in coal-fired thermal power plants? Why are emissions of sulphur dioxide a threat to the planet? Why is the government advocating for a rollback of FGDs in coal-fired power plants? What are the alternatives?

EXPLAINER

Pravali Prakash

The story so far:

On June 4, *The Hindu* reported that a committee of experts, chaired by Principal Scientific Advisor (PSA) Ajay Sood, has recommended that India do away with a decade-long policy of mandating Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) units in all coal-fired thermal power plants (TPPs).

What is a FGD unit?

Flue gas is emitted as a byproduct of combustion of fossil fuels. It mainly contains pollutants such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, etc. FGD units specifically target the SO₂ emissions in flue gas. SO₂ is an acidic gas, and is usually treated with a basic compound in the FGD unit to neutralise the pollutant. There are three common types of FGD systems around the world — dry sorbent injection, wet limestone treatment, and using sea water to remove SO₂. The dry sorbent injection method involves adding a powdered sorbent like limestone to the flue gas, where it reacts with SO₂. The resultant compound can be removed by using an electrostatic precipitator, or a fabric filter. The wet limestone treatment method also uses limestone to remove SO₂, but instead of using it in a powdered form, it uses a limestone slurry. Passing SO₂ through this slurry results in the formation of gypsum, which is a stable compound and has wide applications in industries like construction. This is the commonly used technology, and has very high efficiency.

Sea water treatment is used in plants located near coastal areas. Sea water first absorbs SO₂ from flue gas, and then the water is treated to make it suitable to be discharged back into the sea.

Why are SO₂ emissions bad?

SO₂ is one of the major greenhouse gases



Costly cleanup: Smoke comes out from the Tuticorin Thermal Power station in Thoothukudi. FILE PHOTO

that cause global warming, and can cause respiratory problems in humans. Sulphur dioxide can also lead to the formation of other oxides of sulphur in the atmosphere, which can in turn react with other compounds to form particulate matter. "It has been established in several modelling studies that 15% of India's ambient PM_{2.5} is attributable to coal. A significant share of this (80%) is in turn attributable to secondary particulate matter formed from the SO₂ that is released when coal is burned. FGDs are absolutely necessary to mitigate this route to PM_{2.5} formation," Karthik Ganesan, Fellow and Director - Strategic Partnerships, Council on Energy, Environment and Water told *The Hindu*.

What's status of FGD units in India?

In 2015, the Union Environment Ministry issued a policy that mandated all 537 coal-fired TPPs in India to install FGD units to reduce SO₂ emissions. The first

deadline for this was 2018, but merely a handful of the plants met the deadline. As of April 2025, compliance had been pushed to 2027, 2028, and 2029, respectively, depending on the category of the thermal power plant. It takes around two years to install an FGD unit.

According to a government press release dated August 1, 2024, FGD units have been installed in only 39 out of 537 coal-fired TPPs in India. On December 30, 2024, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued a notification, pushing back the deadline for complying with SO₂ emission norms by three years without specifying any reasons. In April 2025, a study commissioned by the PSA's office concluded that the Environment Ministry should roll back its 2015 policy mandating all of India's TPPs to install FGD units.

Why are FGD units contentious?

Installing FGD units is a costly affair.

According to the Central Electricity Authority, FGD costs approximately ₹1.2 crore per MW to install. As of April 2025, India's installed coal capacity stood at 219,338 MW, which is more than 46% of the country's total electricity installed capacity. This is expected to rise in the coming years. In his statement at a June 10 press conference, Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar said, "About 97,000 MW of power will be added, and implementing FGD means an additional expense of ₹97,000 crore. We have to consider this carefully. Neither should health be harmed, nor people face increased tariffs, nor warming increase."

However, some researchers like Shruti Sharma, Lead, Affordable Energy, at the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Bengaluru, believe that even though "skipping FGD units may appear to offer short-term savings, it risks undermining India's clean air targets and public health commitments". "FGDs can add up to ₹0.72 per kWh to electricity tariffs — a cost that reflects the price of cleaner air. Importantly, over 80% of this increase in tariffs is due to the FGD technology's fixed costs, and variable cost increase is in all cases less than ₹0.1 per kWh. This limits the risk of volatile or unexpected costs and makes it easier for utilities and regulators to plan and manage the impact," she said. It's also tricky to gauge how FGDs make an impact on air quality, since it depends on the proximity of towns to power plants. "The contribution to PM_{2.5} in Delhi, for example, is not that significant from coal-based power plants but given the levels that Delhi experiences, many sources have to be addressed, and stationary sources are easier to target," Dr. Ganesan said.

Is there an alternative to FGD?

According to experts, no. "There is no alternative to FGDs itself to remove SO₂ that is released from the burning of coal...There is an urgent need to get these [TPPs] compliant without delaying any further," Dr. Ganesan said.

THE GIST

Flue gas is emitted as a byproduct of combustion of fossil fuels. It mainly contains pollutants such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, etc.

SO₂ is one of the major greenhouse gases that cause global warming, and can cause respiratory problems in humans.

Installing FGD units is a costly affair. According to the Central Electricity Authority, FGD costs approximately ₹1.2 crore per MW to install.

Why have special economic zones rules been relaxed?

Have these relaxed rules encouraged investment in the domestic manufacture of semiconductors? How important are semiconductors to the digital ecosystem?

T.C.A Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

The Government of India has been taking various steps to boost the production of semiconductors and electronics in India, in a bid to reduce our dependence on imports. Some previous measures include the Semicon India programme launched in 2022 with an outlay of ₹76,000 crore. Now, the government has gone a step further and has relaxed key rules related to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to further encourage the domestic manufacture of semiconductors and electronics.

Why are semiconductors important?

Semiconductors lie at the heart of an increasingly electronic society, with AI and machine learning only the latest in a long trend of increased digitisation and

automation. Semiconductors are the tiny chips processing vast amounts of information that make all of these processes possible, in one's phone, computer, tablet, smart TV, smart speaker, car, and every other electronic gadget. According to the Semiconductor Industry Association, China accounted for about 35% of all semiconductors manufactured in the world in 2021. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the world, including India, realised that the concentration of supply chains in one country posed huge risks for any country dependent on those supplies. Therefore, they started trying to boost the domestic manufacture of such key components.

What are the latest steps by the Indian government?

On June 9, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced that it had notified several modifications to the Special

Economic Zones (SEZ) Rules, 2006, a week earlier, to enhance the domestic manufacture of semiconductors.

One of these tweaks was to Rule 5, which dealt with the size of the SEZ. Earlier, an SEZ set up exclusively for the manufacture of semiconductors or electronic components needed a minimum contiguous land area of 50 hectares. This has now been significantly reduced to 10 hectares. This reduced size will allow companies to make smaller investments but still avail of SEZ benefits such as tax exemptions, duty-free imports, and infrastructure support.

Another amendment to Rule 7 of the SEZ Rules now allows the Board of Approval for SEZs to relax the condition that had required SEZ land to be "encumbrance-free". Land is deemed to be encumbrance-free if it does not have any legal claims, liens, or charges against it, and when clear title of ownership and

transfer can be established. With India's complicated and often-archaic land record mechanisms, and lengthy legal processes, such a requirement would have stymied a lot of SEZs. Relaxing this rule will allow SEZs to come up faster.

A third amendment was to Rule 18, allowing SEZ units in semiconductor and electronics component manufacturing to supply domestically, after paying the applicable duties. Conventionally, SEZs are exclusively export-oriented. Allowing domestic sales not only shields the SEZs from the ongoing global trade uncertainty, but also ensures a steady supply to the domestic market itself.

What has been the impact?

Given the changes are so recent, one can't immediately establish long-term impacts. However, following the tweaks, two new SEZs have already been approved with a total investment of ₹13,100 crore. Micron Semiconductor Technology India will establish an SEZ facility in Sanand, Gujarat for the manufacture of semiconductors with an estimated investment of ₹13,000 crore, while Hubballi Durable Goods Cluster, a part of the Aegus Group, will establish an SEZ facility for the manufacture of electronic components in Dharwad, Karnataka, at a cost of ₹100 crore. Micron's plant is to be 37.64 hectares in area and the Aegus plant is expected to be 11.55 hectares.

THE GIST

Semiconductors lie at the heart of an increasingly electronic society, with AI and machine learning only the latest in a long trend of increased digitisation and mechanisation.

On June 9, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced that it had notified several modifications to the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Rules, 2006.

Following the tweaks, two new SEZs have already been approved with a total investment of ₹13,100 crore.

PULSE-CHECK



Prevailing symptoms: Medical officials set up beds for COVID-19 patients at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, in New Delhi, on June 5. PH

How a lung gene is linked to post-COVID symptoms as per genetics study

Long COVID, or technically post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection, refers to symptoms that continue for weeks or months after the initial illness clears. A new study has tried to find out why some people develop long COVID while others recover quickly

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

More than four years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the disease remains a global health concern – not because of new surges but because of what persists. Long COVID, or technically post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC), refers to symptoms that continue for weeks or months after the initial illness clears. These include fatigue, breathing problems, and cognitive issues. The World Health Organization defines long COVID as symptoms that begin within three months of infection and last at least two months without another explanation.

Why some people develop long COVID while others recover quickly remains unclear. A recent genome-wide association study published in *Nature Genetics* analysed genetic data from six major global ancestries to investigate whether inherited differences play a role.

A diverse study

The study, conducted under the COVID-19 Host Genetics Initiative at the Germans Trias i Pujol research institute in Spain, used a Genome-Wide Association Study (GWAS) to identify genetic risk factors for long COVID. GWAS scans the genome for small 'spelling mistakes' – also known as single-nucleotide polymorphisms – in the DNA sequence that appear more often in people with a condition than in those without. This method has helped uncover links to many complex and chronic disorders.

The analysis used data from 33 groups across 19 countries, making it one of the largest efforts to date in this area. The researchers first analysed data from 6,450 long COVID cases and over one million population controls. In this discovery phase, they identified a genetic signal near the *FOX P4* gene. This signal was then tested in a separate replication cohort of more than 9,500 cases and nearly 8,00,000 controls, and the association was confirmed.

The researchers applied two definitions of long COVID: a strict one requiring test-confirmed infection and

ongoing symptoms, and a broader one that included self-reported or clinical diagnoses. Controls were also defined strictly (infected but recovered) or broadly (general population without long COVID). This helped the team test whether its results held up across different clinical definitions.

Gene linked to long COVID risk

The analysis found a strong association between long COVID and a region on chromosome 6, near the *FOX P4* gene. A specific variant in the region, called rs9367106, increased the risk of developing long COVID. People with the 'C' version of this variant were about 63% more likely to have long COVID symptoms than those without it.

Notably, *FOX P4* increased long COVID risk even in people who weren't hospitalised, suggesting its effect is not tied solely to the severity of the initial infection. The variant's frequency also varied across populations. It appeared in about 1.6% of non-Finnish Europeans but up to 36% of East Asians. Because it was more common in some groups, its effects were easier to detect, even in smaller samples.

This highlights why genetic studies that include diverse populations are more reliable and globally relevant.

From lungs to immunity

To understand the connection between *FOX P4* and long COVID, the researchers examined how active this gene was in different tissues and cell types and how its activity related to the condition.

The authors noted that the variant lies in a stretch of DNA that is especially 'active' in lung tissue, suggesting it may affect how lungs function. Using GTEx, a large gene activity database, they found that a nearby variant (rs1266042), often inherited with rs9367106, was linked to higher levels of *FOX P4* expression in the lung. This made it more likely that the gene influences how the lungs respond to infection and injury.

Going further, the researchers checked which lung cells produced *FOX P4* most strongly. They found high activity in type 2 alveolar cells, key players in keeping air

sacs open, clearing fluids, and repairing tissue damage. These cells also help coordinate the immune response to respiratory viruses like SARS-CoV-2. The same genetic region has also been associated with lung cancer in earlier research, suggesting that *FOX P4* may influence multiple lung-related conditions via shared biological pathways.

To test whether *FOX P4* activity – and not just the genetic variant – might be linked to long COVID, researchers analysed blood samples from people who had recovered from the initial phase of infection. They found that individuals with moderately higher levels of *FOX P4* had more than twice the odds of developing long COVID. This association persisted even outside the acute illness phase, suggesting a longer-term role for the gene.

Finally, a technique called co-localisation analysis showed a 9% probability that the same genetic signal affects both *FOX P4* activity and long COVID risk, reinforcing the gene's biological importance.

India's genomic gaps

The study has important implications for India, given its large population, genetic diversity, and significant COVID-19 burden. Multiple waves of infection and unequal access to care mean many Indians may continue to face lasting symptoms, often undiagnosed or untreated due to limited awareness and clinical follow-up.

Indian studies suggest a wide range in long COVID prevalence: from 45% to nearly 80% depending on design, follow-up, and illness severity. One multicentre study across Hyderabad, Vellore, Mumbai, and Thiruvalla found that 16.5% of hospitalised patients self-reported symptoms like fatigue and breathlessness even a year after discharge.

Although the GWAS included participants from six ancestry groups, the authors said most datasets were of European origin. South Asian representation was limited or unclear. This is a broader issue across GWAS in general, many of which have focused on

European populations. Thus, it remains uncertain how frequently the *FOX P4* variant occurs in the Indian population or whether its effects are similar in local contexts, particularly given region-specific factors such as air pollution, metabolic risk, and healthcare variability.

India's growing genomic infrastructure is beginning to close foundational data gaps. The GenomeIndia Project has released genomic data on 10,000 individuals from diverse Indian populations. While the project is not focused on disease mapping, it provides a foundational catalogue of genetic variation across populations. This reference can support future studies, such as an India-specific GWAS on long COVID, thus building confidence in translating findings into clinical or diagnostic settings in local contexts.

Some limitations

This large-scale international study identifies *FOX P4* as a genetic factor linked to long COVID, offering a new clue as to why some individuals experience prolonged symptoms after a SARS-CoV-2 infection.

However, the authors also note several limitations.

Most data were collected before widespread vaccination and the emergence of newer variants like Omicron, making it unclear if the findings apply to all populations today. They also caution that evolving definitions of long COVID may have led to misclassification in some cohorts.

Additionally, the overall genetic contribution to long COVID appears modest, suggesting that other factors, including immunity and pre-existing conditions, also play key roles.

As India continues to address the long-term effects of the pandemic, studies like this highlight the importance of including diverse populations in genetic research.

Such efforts can improve public health responses and help tailor care to those living with long COVID.

Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from Delhi.



A black box. GETTY IMAGES

EXPLAINER

How do black boxes work?

PH

The story so far:

As thousands of commercial flights take to the skies daily, sturdy boxes painted in bright orange are tucked away in aircraft fuselage. These boxes, better known as black boxes, record data during flights without interruption and hold crucial information in case of plane crashes.

What are black boxes?

Unlike its name, black boxes are painted bright orange to ensure high visibility. In modern aircraft, black boxes comprise of both a Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) and a Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR). In some aircraft, these two recorders are integrated. In April, the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) set up a flight recorders laboratory at its premises in New Delhi for carrying out more effective probes into accidents. Under the Civil Aviation Ministry, the AAIB carries out detailed investigations into accidents and also suggests measures to improve safety. The crash of Air India's Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner plane from Ahmedabad to London soon after take-off is being probed by the AAIB.

DFDRs are coated with bright orange colour, treated with reflex material for high visibility and securely connected with automatically activated signalisation for localisation underwater, according to the agency. The development of flight data recorders evolved over a period of time. It started with the use of metal foils for recording data, and later, were replaced with magnetic tapes. At present, solid-state chips are used in flight data recorders.

What is history of flight recorders?

1950: The first generation of Flight Data Recorders (FDRs) emerged with metal foil as the recording medium.

1953: General Mills sold the first FDR to Lockheed Aircraft Company, enclosed in a yellow-painted spherical shell.

1954: Australia's David Ronald de Mey Warren invented the world's first FDR while probing an air crash. In 1953, Mr. Warren, a jet fuel expert, was working as part of a special team analysing mysterious mid-air explosions experienced by the world's first commercial jet aircraft, the de Havilland Comet. Subsequently, he invented the FDR so that the recordings would be helpful in the analysis of aircraft accidents.

1960: FDRs and CVRs are made mandatory for aircraft.

1965: FDRs were required to be painted bright orange or yellow to locate them easily at crash sites.

1990s: Solid-state memory devices replaced magnetic tapes in FDRs. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization, audio recordings from cockpit voice recorders supplement flight data by providing details on flight crew responses. The recordings also aid in assessments of how radio communications or other outside distractions may have been a factor in an accident. This data has assisted understanding of how aircraft perform, both before and during an accident, and have provided useful information for airline flight data analysis programmes.

THE DAILY QUIZ

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Apart from the book being set on June 16, how is the date important in Joyce's life?

QUESTION 2

Made of 18 episodes, the book is divided into three parts. If Part II is *Odyssey*, what are Part I and III?

QUESTION 3

What was the working title of *Ulysses*? The book originally began as a novel focused on which character already created by Joyce?

QUESTION 4

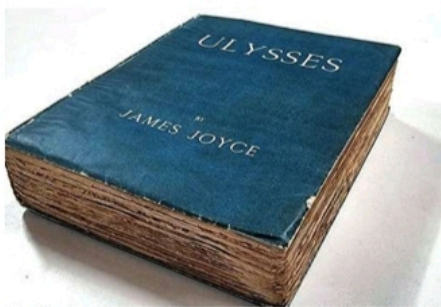
Name episode 15 which Joyce scholars say is roughly the length of the first eight episodes of the novel combined.

QUESTION 5

What does Bloom eat for breakfast that has become very famous now?

QUESTION 6

Serving as a motif, which song features in both Bloom's and Molly's memories?



Visual question:

This is a first edition of the book. Which Paris-based publisher printed the book because it was banned in the U.K. and the U.S.?

Questions and Answers to the June 13 edition of the daily quiz:

1. Yeats was from this country. **Ans: Ireland**

2. The year in which Yeats received the Nobel Prize in Literature. **Ans: 1923**

3. This poet described Yeats as one of the "great artificers of God who uttered great truths to a little clan". **Ans: William Blake**

4. The influence of this writer is evident in Yeats' works. **Ans: Oscar Wilde**

5. Yeats expressed his admiration for this Italian politician. **Ans: Mussolini**

Visual: Identify this American poet. **Ans: Ezra Pound**

Early Birds: Tom Alan Faith | K.N. Viswanathan | Piyali Tuli | Rajib Ganguly | Dashleen Kaur

Word of the day

Puerile:

of or characteristic of a child; displaying or suggesting a lack of maturity

Synonyms: adolescent, juvenile

Usage: I do not like his puerile jokes.

Pronunciation: newsth.liv/puerilegro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/pjuː.əl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

DELHI

A leap of faith

A fire engulfed an apartment in one of Dwarka's apartment blocks last week, forcing three members of a family, including two children, to jump off the ninth floor to save themselves. Tragically, they died. The incident has brought to light how fire emergency measures are flouted by residential high-rise buildings, leaving people vulnerable, finds **Samridhi Tewari**

In June 10, Wazir Singh, 40, was asleep inside a duplex apartment on the ninth floor of Shabad Apartments, Dwarka, a predominantly residential area in south-west Delhi. Singh was visiting his cousin Yash Yadav, 35, and the extended family had got together for a big puja.

At 9.40 a.m., Singh woke up to thick smoke entering his room. Singh woke up to thick smoke entering his room. Struggling to breathe, he called out to his sister-in-law, Mamta, Yash's wife, and they managed to make a quick run down the stairs. There were 10 others in the house.

At the bottom of the stairs, they saw three bodies, surrounded by neighbours. Yash; his daughter, Ashima, 10; and his nephew, Shivam, 12, lay in a pool of blood. The neighbours said they had jumped from the balcony of the apartment Singh had fled from. Singh froze, unable to process what had happened. A couple of minutes later, he jumped in to give CPR. By the time they reached hospital, the children were declared dead on arrival. Yash died a few hours later.

Outside the gates of the society, eight fire engines lined up. They were unable to enter because the society's name board blocked the entryway. A couple of smaller vehicles fitted with firefighting equipment finally did manage to get into the housing society to put out the fire, so it did not spread and was localised to the ninth and tenth floors of the apartment.

Soon, videos of the trio jumping from the balcony to save themselves surfaced online, sparking discussions over fire safety.

Hours after the tragedy, Singh, in an ash-covered grey shirt, sweating heavily, as he says, "I was sleeping, and when I woke up, people were screaming. All I could see was smoke. I ran out and rescued myself and a family member. When I reached the ground floor, I saw Yash's head was severely injured," he recalls. His family members stand behind him in support as he takes difficult questions from the media.

A first information report has been registered at the Dwarka North police station for death by negligence and a negligent act related to fire, with the police waiting for reports from the fire and forensics department to understand whose negligence resulted in the tragic incident.

The fire inside a planned locality — Dwarka Sub-City is spread across 56.48 sq. km and 29 sectors, and began to be developed in 2000 — with broad roads, open spaces, and relatively clean surroundings, has brought to light many buildings' lack of compliance, poor monitoring by government agencies, and a slow emergency response.

In 2023-24, the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) got 31,575 calls regarding fires. They recorded 1,303 deaths and 3,232 injuries from these incidents. In 2009-10, they got 21,344 calls and 423 deaths were recorded. A senior official



We needed a 6-foot space to move our vehicle, and since the society had their board fixed onto the gate, our trucks with the hydraulic platform, used for high-rise buildings, couldn't enter
SANDEEP DUGGAL
Divisional officer, fire department

from the fire department explains that they receive the highest number of calls in summer (between April and June) due to high temperatures from the weather and the heat emitted from air conditioning units.

Initial investigations by the fire department and the police reveal that the fire likely started from a lit *diya* placed inside a home temple on the ninth floor. The flames rapidly spread due to highly flammable PVC panelling inside the flat.

The blame game

Singh says there was no fire alarm; nor were the extinguishers working. The fire department confirms that the cylinders were empty. They also say that the last time Shabad Apartments got a fire department clearance was in 2016.

As per the Delhi Fire Safety Act, 2007, and the Delhi Fire Services Rules, 2010, no objection certificates (NOCs) need to be renewed every five years. Clearance is given based on access to the building, number and type of exits, fire extinguishers, hose reels, automatic fire detection and alarm systems among other factors.

The family also alleges a delay in fire service response. They say it took the fire department 30-40 minutes to arrive despite making multiple phone calls, some of which went unanswered. The fire department says the call was registered at 10.01 a.m. and help arrived at 10.10 a.m.

The divisional officer at the fire department, Sandeep Duggal, who was at the spot, explains, "In intense situations like these, panic-stricken people make many calls, and there are at least 15 phone lines." "We needed a 6-foot space to move our vehicle, and since the society had their board fixed onto the gate, our trucks with the hydraulic platform used for high-rise buildings couldn't enter," he adds. He says that people jump in panic but should wait for rescue workers instead, adding, "Using ropes and ladders could get the victims to the floors either above or below the flat."

A day after the fire, people, either walking or on two-wheelers, are making videos of the blackened structure. The air still smells of smoke, but life goes on as usual in the apartment block. Residents of the society say they pay a monthly maintenance fee of ₹3,600, which includes security, among other expenditure.

Shabad Co-Op Society's secretary, Mukesh Kumar Sharma, says all the fire safety equipment were present. "We'll look into the allegations made and do an assessment. We had equipment recommended by the fire norms. The issue we're facing is that our committee's tenure is over, and once we have re-election in September, we can make working decisions," he says over the phone, claiming he is away from Delhi. He refuses to share details of the existing fire equipment in the society or address the issue of the lapsed clearance certificate from the fire department.

The fire department says of the 600 apartment buildings in Delhi, only 100 have NOCs, while 72 have been rejected.

A similar death

This isn't the first such incident with a delayed emergency response.



The charred remains of the apartment in Shabad Housing Society in Dwarka where a fire broke out and claimed the lives of three persons; Meera (centre), the sister of Yash Yadav, one of those who died in the fire. P11

Fifteen months ago, a similar fire engulfed a flat nearly 4 km away in Dwarka's Sector 10. Jasuri Devi, 83, and her granddaughter, Pooja Pant, 30, jumped from their fourth floor apartment in Pacific Society after a fire broke out due to a gas leak. As they jumped, the people from the society held bedsheets, blankets, and mattresses below, so their fall would be cushioned. Only Pant survived.

The fire department's response was allegedly delayed because of traffic since school buses lined the road, leaving no space for the fire engine to navigate. The fire department flagged that fire systems weren't functional in the society and that the NOC had not been renewed by the residents' welfare association (RWA).

Now, the external textured walls that had once turned pitch black, have been painted peach and the internal walls are whiter than the others. A set of clothes hangs out to dry.

The RWA president of the 25-year-old Pacific Society, which has around 75 houses, Ram Nivas Yadav, says, they realised after the incident that the fire system needed an upgrade. "We acknowledged our responsibility and took the fire department on board to revamp our security measures. Our hydraulic system needed to change, and we ensured a system check was done from time to time," Ram Nivas explains.

As per DFS's suggestions to him, regular locks were safer than electronic locks that can get jammed. They also said bigger balconies provided better safety in case fire broke out. The RWA is yet to procure basic equipment like ropes and ladders. "We're functioning as a society. It's expensive for people, so we have a lot of convincing to do. You cannot only blame RWAs because the decision is taken as a collective," he adds.

When Pacific Society applied for NOC renewal, at least eight objections were flagged by DFS, which are being looked into.

A home of their own

Many families of the regular-salaried-income strata of society live in Dwarka. They bought apartments under the Cooperative Group Housing Society (CGHS), a membership-based legal entity that procures land from the Delhi Development Authority, which works under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Once known as Pappan Kalan, then considered a bit of a backwater, about 25 km far from the heart of the national capital, Dwarka has seen property prices surge 40% over the past decade. The Indira Gandhi International Airport is only 10 km away, and Gurugram, the National Capital Region's corporate hub, 19 km away.

Prominent colleges like Netaji Subhas University of Technology and National Law University Delhi, also found acres of land, which led to a transformation in the area, and an influx of students. The India International Convention and Expo Centre or Yashobhoomi, which led to increasing property prices around the Urban Ex-

tension Road-II, goes through Dwarka and also connects three national highways.

The concrete high-rise apartment buildings look similar — grey, peach, blue. But what they lack in imagination they make up for in practicality: Dwarka is dotted with green parks, and each block has its own set of amenities — a vegetable vendor, a milk booth, and a convenience store.

Yash was from Etah in Uttar Pradesh. He came to Delhi 10 years ago to start a flex board company. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the business struggled. Later, he began to get interior design contracts and managed to save up to ₹3.5 crore to purchase a property in Shabad Apartments. Many share a similar story of buying a home in Dwarka. All his life, Balwan Singh Duhani, 60, who hails from Rohtak, has been able to travel to different parts of the country thanks to his job in the aviation industry. When in 2000 he decided to buy a house, Dwarka was an upcoming project which was being discussed in his circles. Duhani managed to save up ₹10 lakh for a 3-bedroom-hall-kitchen (BHK) plot inside the Home Ministry employees' society.

He remembers driving down Dwarka's roads back then. "It wasn't so green. It was a barren patch of land on Delhi's outskirts that nobody visited. We were sceptical but there were many CGHS projects mushrooming, so we gave it a shot," Duhani says. The civil agencies began to lay parks out. The first sectors to begin occupancy were Sectors 6 and 10, he says.

It was only when Delhi metro began its operations in 2005 that "the game changed," he adds. The metro connects Dwarka to U.P.'s Noida and Ghaziabad. "Now, people from Dwarka were connected to the rest of Delhi. Access to education, coaching, hospitals, all improved," says Balwan, now an RWA president. Now, apartment prices in Dwarka cost ₹3.5 lakh, at par with localities like Vasant Kunj on the edge of south Delhi.

Living with worry

Around 4 km away, in Dwarka's Sector 18B, Anupama Yadav, 33, has been residing with her family in Samridhi Apartments for 10 years. Anupama, a resident on the fifth floor, is worried about similar fire incidents.

"Despite the incident, there has been no word from our RWA on checking fire safety equipment. We've never had a fire safety drill, and people here don't even know how to use an extinguisher," she explains. She pays ₹1,000 for monthly maintenance. She feels apartment complexes in Noida and Gurugram are stricter about fire systems being in place.

Some societies have started checking their fire safety systems. Some RWAs say implementing safety systems is difficult when residents don't pay their monthly maintenance fees. RWAs claim they have sent out messages to neighbours asking them to be careful with electrical devices and to make sure fire alarms and hoses work.

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The apartment block where the fire broke out. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP