



Unvarnished facts

The full and raw cockpit voice recorder transcript must be released

The pushback by pilot bodies and the agencies that are investigating the Ahmedabad air crash, to the damaging leaks by sections of the media could well turn out to be a tepid attempt to stanch the flow. While these leaks have been dismissed as "selective, unverifiable, irresponsible and baseless reporting" and triggered legal responses, they have, in a way, set a narrative going. There is no fathoming of what more the cockpit voice recorder could contain – especially relating to the troubling possibility of 'human intervention' in the crash of Air India flight AI171 on June 12. In this the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) has to turn the spotlight on itself for its presentation of the key findings in its preliminary report. Its sparse detailing of an unusual "transitioning" of the two separate fuel control switches, from "run to cut-off" and back, a standalone snatch of conversation, reflecting unease and denial, between the crew in the unfolding disaster – that has been left open to endless interpretation – and, finally, a near blanket signing-off of no recommended actions concerning the aircraft type, the engine, and the manufacturers, only point to one direction – of the need for the release of a full and raw cockpit voice recorder transcript.

In a legal analysis, if credible evidence of 'human intervention' does emerge, the investigation could shift, with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Annex 13 inquiry, that is focused on safety, moving alongside a parallel criminal probe under domestic law. It must be noted that in 2015, following the Germanwings flight 9525 accident – a case of definite 'human intervention' – the Government of India was mulling "mid-term" psychometric tests. Then Union Minister of State for Civil Aviation Mahesh Sharma had said that psychometric tests should be carried out on pilots in India from time to time. He added that the Ministry would hold consultations with the regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, to facilitate the preparation of fresh rules keeping in mind the crash of the German plane. A senior counsellor at the Kolkata-based Indian Institute of Psychometry (founded in 1978) had also favoured having a repeat of psychometric tests "if a person, especially a pilot or cabin crew, was undergoing mental stress or had a tragedy on the personal front". On July 17, in a letter of appeal, the AAIB had said that it would publish updates, and as when required, which would have content of technical and public interest. While it is understood that an air accident investigation would be meticulous, at the same time, the hope is that the AAIB clears the fog in the AI171 accident and presents the unvarnished facts – as promised in Parliament on Monday.

Cost of promises

Election-eve welfare measures display a lack of respect for voters

It is raining welfare in Bihar. Nothing surprising: the stakes are high for the ruling National Democratic Alliance in the approaching Assembly elections. According to recent announcements, household consumption of up to 125 units of electricity per month will be free, with effect from August 1 this year. This scheme will cover around 1.67 crore households. Under the Kutir Jyoti Yojana, the government will provide free rooftop solar installations for about 58 lakh Below Poverty Line families. The welfare hamper of the ruling coalition also includes a promise of 35% job reservation in all State government jobs for women, an increase in social security pension from ₹400 to ₹1,100, the creation of a Bihar Youth Commission, and more. A new internship support scheme offers between ₹4,000 and ₹6,000 a month to youth (18 to 28 years) for undertaking internships, and based on their educational qualifications. The plan is to start supporting 5,000 youth in the first year and scaling it up to cover one lakh beneficiaries over the next five years. To promote religious tourism, the State has announced a ₹882.87 crore redevelopment plan for Punaura Dham Janki Mandir, said to be the birthplace of Lord Rama's wife Sita. Migrants from the State who live outside will receive government support to return home during festivals.

All this follows a familiar pattern of governments using welfare as an instrument of election-eve management of popular sentiment. The absence of any serious planning or vision behind such sporadic announcements is evident. They are often in response to the promises of a political rival. In Bihar, the Opposition Rashtriya Janata Dal has said that the Nishankh Kumar government's welfare catalogue is a forced reaction to its promises of similar measures if voted to power. Ahead of the Mahatma Jyoti Yojana elections, the Mahayuti government rolled out a cash transfer scheme for women which helped it win. Later, the new government pruned the list, admitting that there were underserving beneficiaries. Free electricity schemes now exist in several States. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often questioned the rationale of 'freebies', but arbitrary new schemes continue to proliferate. In Bihar, the scramble among parties is also in the context of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's advancing age. His party, the Janata Dal (United), is smaller than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the election could further alter the dynamics of State coalition politics. The control of power had increasingly shifted from Mr. Kumar to the BJP in the last five years and the future of the JD(U) is set to decline. Competitive welfare is at what remains in the toolkits of all parties to woo voters.

Editorial

Ideas on trial, critical thinking in retreat

"Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the supporters of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively the freedom of the one who thinks differently." – Rosa Luxemburg

In an era marked by heightened geopolitical tensions and global scrutiny, nations are compelled to not only safeguard their territorial integrity but also uphold their moral foundations. For countries, characterised by their profound diversity of languages, cultures, and faiths, such moments present an opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to democratic principles and pluralistic values. The projection of national strength tempered by restraint and public reassurances, stands out as indispensable components of this endeavour. However, the alignment of democratic values at home with the image projected abroad is equally crucial, necessitating the nurturing of freedom and open discourse domestically.

An erosion of intellectual freedom

Regrettably, a growing chasm exists between this ideal and the prevailing realities on the ground across the world. The sanctity of intellectual freedom is being steadily eroded across institutions, particularly universities and academic spaces, due to pressures of conformity and control.

The consequences of this trend are far-reaching, with professors facing reprimand or dismissal over minor comments, and students being subjected to punitive action for raising critical questions. This phenomenon constitutes a pressing global concern, albeit one whose repercussions are particularly pronounced in nations that have historically valorised open discourse and intellectual freedom. The United States, during Donald Trump's presidency, exemplifies this trend.

Philosophers such as Hannah Arendt have warned against these dangers of banality in oppressive regimes and the slow numbing of thought, where citizens retreat into private lives and abandon the public realm. Understandably, the assault on freedom is not only about censorship but also about inducing this kind of silence, where fear replaces inquiry, and conformity takes the place of imagination.

In such a climate, society's capacity for critical self-reflection and growth is severely impaired, leading to stagnation and intellectual rigidity. For instance, when curricula are rewritten to reflect ideological imperatives rather than pedagogical or historical rigour, when scholarly work is



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attacked for political reasons, and when free speech on campus is framed as sedition, we are witnessing the slow erosion of academic advancement. We have witnessed this phenomenon on campuses across the U.S., particularly in the context of pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Democratic backsliding is visibly accompanied here by an assault on intellectuals and independent media. In such times, it becomes easy to imagine that freedom of speech is a luxury or a liability, something to be curtailed for the sake of national unity or cultural pride. But, this is a false choice.

An intolerance of voices that question

At the heart of this crisis lies a growing intolerance with voices that challenge prevailing narratives, offer nuanced historical perspective, or simply ask inconvenient questions often painted as suspect. It must be taken for granted that democracy, by definition, demands disagreement and requires the ability to listen to those who think differently, to be challenged, and to evolve. The silencing of scholars, intimidation of writers, and discouragement of free inquiry do not merely target individuals; they diminish the society as a whole.

Noam Chomsky, whose work on propaganda and power remains seminal, noted that the destruction of independent culture is among the gravest abuses of authority. When knowledge itself is politicised, when truth is decided by decree, and when the university becomes a site of ideological performance rather than learning, we find ourselves perilously close to what he called "manufactured consent", or in other words, a democracy in appearance but not in substance.

Historically, universities have served as spaces where civilisational questions are posed, where the past is interrogated, and where future possibilities are imagined. To reduce these institutions to sites of ideological policing is to betray their very essence. The danger today lies not only in the curbing of dissent but also in its systematic delegitimisation. When critical voices are branded as "anti-national", when scholars are seen as threats instead of resources, and when academic inquiry is stifled by fear, society drifts toward intellectual repression. The result is a thinning of public discourse, a narrowing of thought, and a culture of self-censorship.

The geopolitical irony of this situation cannot be overstated. At a time when nations face real external threats, internal cohesion is undeniably vital. However, cohesion cannot be achieved through the suppression of thought. Unity born of fear is not unity; it is coercion. What the world

needs is not only a nation's economic or strategic clout but also its ability to be a vast, diverse, and argumentative civil society. This vitality, rooted in disagreement, debate and intellectual freedom is what defines a truly robust democracy.

The erosion of this vitality has long-term consequences, including the alienation of a generation of students who once believed in the university as a space of exploration and growth, but now the evident discouragement of public intellectuals from speaking their conscience, and the undermining of the moral seriousness with which a nation historically addresses its internal complexities, has set in the steady decline of the very idea of democracy. Moreover, it sends a chilling message that intelligence must be policed, that critical thinking is unwelcome, and that freedom is conditional on obedience.

But there is hope

And yet, there is hope. History reminds us that the tide of suppression, however forceful, is always contested. Whether through protest movements, or the courage of individuals who refuse to be silenced, the spirit of free inquiry has always found ways to endure. Vaclav Havel, writing under the shadow of Soviet repression, reminded us that "living in truth" was itself a political act and a refusal to join in the collective lie.

In societies that valorise critical inquiry and unfettered debate, the capacity to confront and resolve complex challenges is significantly enhanced. A nuanced understanding of patriotism recognises the intrinsic value of constructive critique, acknowledging that loyalty to one's nation or institution is not predicated on unyielding conformity, but rather on a commitment to its betterment. The democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and equality are not merely aspirational, but are instead contingent upon the ability to challenge entrenched injustices and interrogate authority. When societies compromise academic freedom, they not only erode their moral authority, but also impair their capacity for envisioning and implementing transformative change.

Rosa Luxemburg's words serve as a poignant reminder that freedom means little if it is reserved only for the majority or the loyalist. Real freedom, the kind that nurtures innovation, empathy and justice, begins with the courage to listen to those who speak differently. This capacity for receptivity to dissenting voices constitutes a litmus test of democracy's vitality, and its failure to meet this test has far-reaching and deleterious consequences for the polity.

At FTA's heart, the promise of Global Capacity Centres

As the United Kingdom and India move steadily toward signing of their historic Free Trade Agreement (FTA), there is growing recognition of the FTA's potential to redefine bilateral economic engagement. Among the most promising areas of collaboration is the rapidly evolving ecosystem of Global Capacity Centres (GCCs) – a sector where India leads, and the U.K. can be a pivotal partner.

India is already home to more than 1,500 GCCs, employing over 1.9 million people and contributing significantly to the global innovation and digital transformation agendas of multinational corporations. Increasingly, British companies are looking to India not just as a cost-effective back office, but as a strategic partner for research and development, analytics, cybersecurity, and emerging tech solutions.

The FTA could be a catalyst for deeper engagement in this space. By easing regulatory barriers, facilitating smoother movement of professionals, and harmonising digital and data governance standards, the agreement can support the expansion of GCCs that serve U.K.-headquartered businesses – or leverage British expertise to serve global markets from India.

Much potential

The U.K.'s Foreign Secretary David Lammy visited India within weeks of his taking office, demonstrating commitment towards the partnership with the U.K. The Business and Trade Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds' visit ahead of resuming FTA negotiations, following suit. At the UK India Business Council (UKIBC), we think that there is real potential to further increase our trade, investment, and wider partnership. Prime Ministers Keir Starmer and Narendra Modi also had an extremely productive meeting at the G-20 Summit in Brazil, in 2024, agreeing to take the relationship to new heights.

From the U.K.'s perspective, the FTA is a timely opportunity to secure access to one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies, while reinforcing its global services and innovation



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footprint post-Brexit. For India, greater U.K. investment and collaboration in the GCC space aligns perfectly with its digital economy ambitions, skilling objectives, and goal of becoming a global hub for high-value services.

The UKIBC has long championed the idea that the future of trade lies not just in goods but also in the services, skills and technology that power the new global economy. The GCCs stand at the intersection of all three.

The FTA can pave the way for easier cross-border collaboration, robust intellectual property frameworks, and smart mobility solutions that allow talent to move where it is most needed.

A well-crafted agreement can also address the practical challenges businesses face such as double taxation, data localisation mandates and misaligned standards, that often inhibit the scaling of GCCs. Addressing these through the FTA, or individually, will send a strong signal to investors and businesses in both nations.

According to a white paper released by Deloitte India, the country is making strides in the global GCC game, as India-based GCCs have emerged as strategic hubs for multinational companies to manage complex global tax operations, including corporate tax, indirect tax, transfer pricing, and litigation.

India's current policy environment is highly conducive for GCC growth, even without a dedicated national GCC policy at the moment. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has formed an industry-led panel – including the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), Zinnov, KPMG, and Invest India – to design the national GCC framework outlined in Budget 2025. Its goal is to guide States in promoting GCCs, improving talent, infrastructure, innovation, and legal facilitation.

State government policies

Other than central government endeavours, we also see State governments rolling out landmark policies. Uttar Pradesh hosted its first "GCC

Conclave" under Invest UP, bringing together policymakers and industry heavyweights (Microsoft, TCS, HCL, Standard Chartered). The event showcased U.P.'s infrastructure, incentives, and intent to host GCCs beyond National Capital Region cities, in Lucknow, Varanasi, Kanpur and Prayagraj.

In this context, the UKIBC recently held a closed-door consultation to bring together a distinguished group of leaders and experts to explore the expanding role of GCCs in driving innovation and economic growth in India. The group deliberated on a set of recommendations including global best practices from a governance perspective to help India achieve its economic ambitions set for GCCs. It also discussed these: whether there is a need for a dedicated national GCC policy now; whether organic growth from the past is best achieved in the absence of any such policies; or if having multiple State-level policies create unwanted competition instead of overall national progress. The need for honing talent diversity as well as skilling managing the diversity of GCC's themselves, was also underscored.

Some of the legal hurdles and the market outlook was touched upon, with some practical experiences of Indian and U.K. companies being shared. Additionally, the overall impact of India's economic diplomacy efforts through FTAs on the Indian GCC ecosystem was touched on. These included aspects of how the U.K.-India FTA can be leveraged to help Indian GCCs climb up the global value chain, with a focus on talent diversity in terms of professional mobility across the two countries.

A knowledge corridor

As the two governments fine-tune the final provisions, industry leaders must continue to voice the importance of services, digital trade and mobility – the lifelines of modern commerce. GCCs, in particular, stand to gain from – and contribute to – this evolving partnership, shaping a resilient, knowledge-based corridor between the U.K. and India.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Monsoon session

The monsoon session of Parliament shows signs of it being a stormy affair, with the Opposition prepared to raise pressing issues related to national security, electoral transparency and foreign affairs. The list of concerns is long and serious. Matters affecting the dignity of our armed forces, questions of sovereignty, and continuing

instability in border States demand clarity from the highest office. Avoiding direct engagement only fuels speculation and public distrust.

However, responsibility does not rest solely with the ruling party. The Opposition must ensure that discussions remain focused, informed and respectful. National interest must prevail over political

point-scoring. The days ahead will be watched to see whether this session moves forward or sinks into yet another cycle of unproductive confrontation.

Rukma Sharma,
Jalandhar, Punjab

Justice Varma should speak

Right from the time stacks of money were unearthed from the residence of Justice Yashwant Varma,

mystery shrouds the case. The unusual confidence exhibited by Justice Varma, stoutly challenging his indictment and now seeking to quash the impeachment recommendation, has baffled the public. Is there more to it than meets the eye? Was the money kept at the judge's residence for safe keeping? If Justice Varma is innocent, he

should make an indisputable statement about who the real owner is. At stake is the credibility and the sanctity of the judiciary.

Tharicus S. Fernando,
Chennai

V.S. Achuthanandan

V.S. Achuthanandan was a true Marxist ideologue and lived as a proletarian leader till the end. He was one of

the rarest leaders to have struggled for the downtrodden. With his clean image, his political life was written in golden letters. His passing has created a void in the political spectrum of great leaders.

J. Radhakrishna Kurup,
Ettimanoor, Kottayam, Kerala
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

The threat to India's 'great power' status

Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's claims of having vanquished Iran's enrichment programme, the threat of a U.S.-Israel-Iran war remains alive. A combination of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's legal problems, his government's regional agenda, and the neoconservative influence in the U.S. threaten to overwhelm Mr. Trump's instincts towards non-interventionist peace. War would be disastrous for India's economic interests and harm its 'great power' ambitions. If Iran's government is toppled, U.S.-led unipolarity in West Asia would be cemented, precluding the ability of rising powers such as India to grow their strategic footprint. This touches on a fundamental schism between India and the West – Delhi's multipolar world vision. The Trump administration offers an opportunity to address this.

What Iran's defeat could mean A restart of the Israel-Iran war with U.S. involvement poses some risk of regime change or Balkanization in Iran. This would dramatically alter the distribution of power in West Asia. There would remain no nation state that is both not U.S.-aligned and controls all of its territory (Ansar Allah does not control all Yemen). Regardless of how benign U.S. intentions towards India are, this would imperil the trajectory Delhi has been following for the last decade, of strengthening its strategic influence in the region. The negotiating power India held with Israel and Gulf States was underpinned by the fact that Delhi also engaged alternatively aligned states such as Syria and Iran. This has already decreased since President Bashar al-Assad's toppling and would nosedive if Iran's government is ousted.

All of India's West Asia energy imports would have to be sourced from governments dependent on U.S. security guarantees, rather than from the diverse mix Delhi



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draws on now.

All this would harm India's ability to rise as a great power. This is in part because reinforcing the strength of the existing global hegemon, the U.S., means a relative weakening of all rising powers. But it is also due to a fundamental clash in world visions between the American hegemon and rising India.

Before his Moscow visit, India's External Affairs Minister revealed the basis of this clash saying the meeting with Russia would discuss "...the building of a multipolar world order". By definition, this involves the displacement of U.S.-led unipolarity. This means that, on this crucial question, Washington's most important Asian partner shares common cause with China and Russia.

This underlying tension bubbled to the surface recently with Mr. Trump's threat, cheered on by NATO head Mark Rutte, to slap secondary sanctions of 100% on countries purchasing Russian oil, gas, or other strategic goods. Before this, when India commissioned INS Tamal, a warship manufactured by Russia, the U.K. paper, *The Telegraph*, ran the headline 'India is an enemy, not a friend or a neutral'. When it comes to fundamental questions of geopolitics, the corporate media in the West reflects the views of the foreign policy establishment.

A multipolar world order, in which India is one of the poles, constitutes one of the principal pillars of New Delhi's foreign policy. India's main motivation for supporting partnering with the U.S. – balancing against the China threat – does not outweigh the multipolarity goal. This shapes India's interests, not only in relation to Iran and to West Asia, but also the New Cold War more broadly and the hot wars that will in future spring from it. It has been most clear in India's defiance of Western demands regarding isolating Russia.

Going forward, the multipolarity goal will play a

greater role in informing Delhi's policy choices, thus inhibiting actions that reinforce U.S.-led unipolarity. Therefore, even given the existing strategic autonomy preference, it looks increasingly less likely that India will align with the Western bloc. Moreover, Delhi likely perceives its clashing worldview with Washington as amplifying U.S. and Western offensive intentions towards India.

Path to peace

On Iran, India should urge restraint. This can include highlighting that disruption of West Asian oil supplies would weaken India relative to China, which is less dependent on imports – thus harming U.S. interests in Asia. It may also involve *quid pro quo*. As seen in relation to U.S. attempts to isolate Russia over Ukraine, where India sits on any conflict can impact the collective West's interests.

More fundamentally, India should impress on Washington that the U.S. and its allies can best serve their security and economic interests by accepting global multipolarity. When considering the alternatives of kinetic great power war, or (though less likely) Chinese hegemony over Asia and Africa, multipolarity is far from the worst scenario from the West's view.

The present moment offers possibility in this regard. Despite the recent dithering on detente with Russia, Mr. Trump knows he was elected on a compatible foreign policy platform of non-interventionism. Secretary of State Marco Rubio acknowledged early on that the world is moving towards multipolarity. Polls show that Americans, particularly Mr. Trump's base, view the country's vital interests as homeland and near abroad-centred. This translates to tolerance of other powers maintaining hegemony within their own regions.

As the most powerful independent state that the U.S. regards as a partner, Indian suasion would carry weight.

Skeletons in the closet

The hope is that the SIT will find answers to the 'mysterious deaths' in Dharmastala

STATE OF PLAY

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With a former sanitation worker claiming to have buried many bodies in Dharmastala, about 80 kilometres from Mangaluru in coastal Karnataka, discussions on the "mysterious deaths" of people in the temple town have gained traction yet again.

After some dithering, the State government on July 19 set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT), headed by Director General of Police (Internal Security) Pronab Mohanty, to investigate the claims of the sanitation worker.

The complainant claimed to have worked in Dharmastala between 1995 and 2014. He said that during his service period, he buried men and women and also minors who had been raped and murdered. He said that there were "powerful people" behind the crimes who had coerced him to bury the bodies. He claimed that he fled the place along with his family members when a member of his own family was sexually assaulted. The worker said that he had chosen to tell the story now out of sheer remorse. He also asked that more than 100 bodies he buried be exhumed, identified, and given a decent farewell.

Accusing the jurisdictional police of delay in initiating the process of exhuming the bodies, advocates representing the sanitation worker, activists, and public intellectuals, including former Supreme Court Judge V. Gopala Gowda, urged the government to set up the SIT.

There has been chatter about "mysterious deaths" in Dharmastala for more than



five decades. Some even contended that many of the dead were devotees who ended their lives in the hope of "reaching heaven".

Outrage over the deaths grew louder in October 2012 after a second year pre-university student, Soujanya, was abducted, raped, and murdered. The fury transformed into a movement seeking justice for Soujanya. In parallel, temple authorities also held demonstrations to rule out their involvement in Soujanya's murder or in any of the earlier deaths.

Protesters also demanded a separate police station in Dharmastala. Surprisingly, the temple town did not have one despite a substantial population of its own along with a floating crowd of pilgrims.

The State government handed over investigation of the murder to the Criminal Investigation Department and then to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in November 2013, and set up a Dharmastala police station in 2016.

On June 16, 2023, the special CBI court in Bengaluru acquitted Santosh Rao, the lone accused in the Soujanya murder case. Earlier, based on a plea by Soujanya's parents, the court conducted an inquiry into allegations against three persons associated with the temple in the abduction, rape, and murder of Soujanya. It found no substance in the allegations. The CBI court con-

cluded that the preliminary investigation had been shoddy and directed the State Acquisition Committee to initiate action against erring police officers and the official who conducted the post-mortem.

Soujanya's parents and Rao filed separate appeals before the Karnataka High Court seeking *de novo*/reinvestigation of the case. Turning down the plea for reinvestigation, the Division Bench of the Karnataka High Court, on August 30, 2024, said that it was "doubtful that evidence that could not be collected at the golden hour is still available." Also pointing to the bungled initial investigation, the Court directed the State government to expedite the process of taking action against erring officers, and said Rao was at liberty to initiate independent action for compensation.

Soujanya's mother, uncle, and activists continue to demand that the government do all it can to trace the real culprits. They created a WhatsApp group where members have been asked to keep up the demand to trace the real accused in the murder case.

A few days after the sanitation worker registered his complaint in the Dharmastala police station, Sujatha Bhat, a former CBI employee and the mother of Ananya Bhat, a medical student who went missing in 2004 in Dharmastala, approached the police. She sought their help in finding out whether Ananya's body was among those allegedly buried by the sanitation worker. If she finds her daughter's remains, she will finally be able to conduct the last rites, she told Dakshina Kannada Superintendent of Police K. Arun.

All eyes are now on the SIT to provide the answers to the "mysterious deaths" in Dharmastala.

Boys continue to outnumber girls in private schools

In the northern and western States, the share of girls enrolled in any school is lower than India's average of 48.1%

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

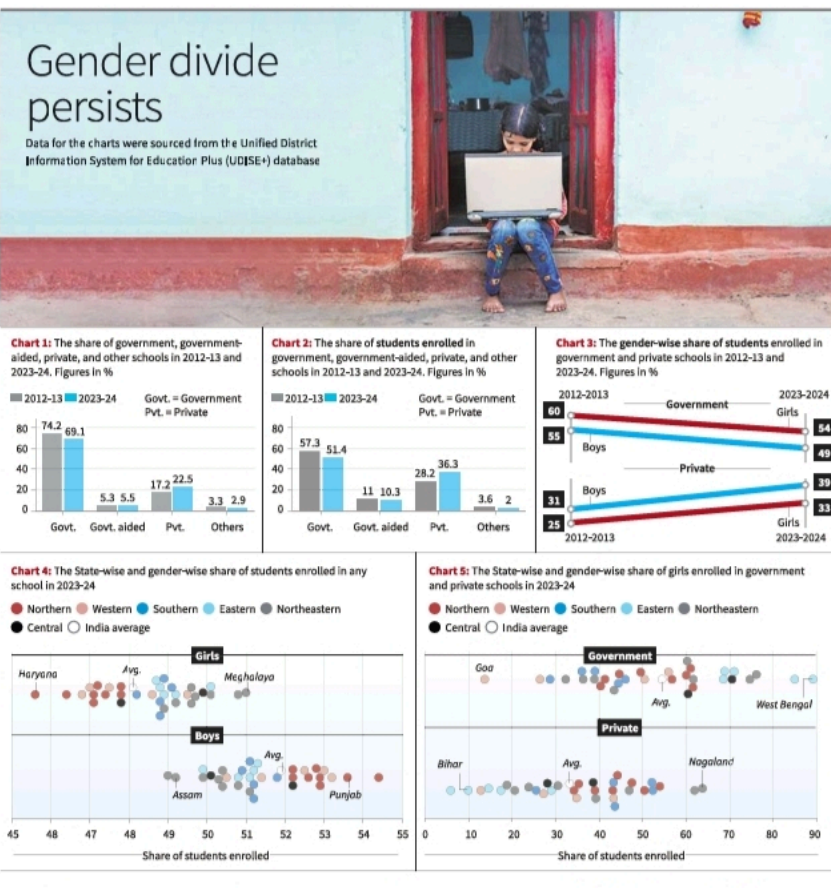
Over the past decade, the share of private schools and the proportion of boys and girls enrolled in them have both increased across India, likely reinforcing each other. However, the share of girls attending private schools remains considerably lower than that of boys. In other words, while parents increasingly prefer private schooling, a considerable share of them still shows a slight preference for enrolling their sons over their daughters. Also, a relatively low number of girls are enrolled compared to boys in schools across northern and western India.

Chart 1 shows the share of government, government-aided, private, and other schools in 2012-13 and 2023-24. The share of government schools has fallen from 74.2% to 69.1%, whereas the share of private schools has increased from 17.2% to 22.5%.

Chart 2 shows the share of students enrolled in government, government-aided, private, and other schools in 2012-13 and 2023-24. The share of children enrolled in government schools has fallen from 57.3% to 51.4%, whereas the share of private schools has increased from 28.2% to 36.3%.

Chart 3 shows the gender-wise share of students enrolled in government and private schools in 2012-13 and 2023-24. For instance, in 2023-24, 54% of girls studied in government schools and 49% of all boys studied in government schools and 39% in private schools.

Chart 4 shows the State-wise and gender-wise share of students enrolled in any school. In the northern and western States, the share of girls enrolled in any school is lower than India's average of 48.1%.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The ~~Hindu~~ Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 22, 1975

Antique dealer held in Bombay for thefts in T Nadu

Bombay, July 21: A notorious idol lifter and a hawker-turned millionaire, Bahadur Singh Teja Singh Lama, who was running two workshops in Bombay for manufacturing fake idols, was arrested by the Bombay Police under COFEPOSA yesterday under orders of the Maharashtra Government.

Bahadur Singh Teja Singh had been earlier ordered by the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Mr. S.C. Kotwal, to be released on a bail of Rs. 5 lakhs in connection with a case involving the theft of several idols from South Indian temples worth Rs. 1.5 crores.

Following this the Additional Commissioner of Police, Mr. R.S. Kulkarni, moved the State Government for his arrest under the Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act (COFEPOSA).

Bahadur Singh was running a modern air conditioned emporium "Kallimpang Art House" in a posh locality in Central Bombay, and two workshops called Handicraft Emporiums ostensibly for selling handicrafts, the Police said.

But actually the workshops were manufacturing replicas of priceless South Indian temple idols which were to be substituted for the original idols with the connivance of temple priests. The original idols were in turn exported at fabulous prices, the police said.

An Inspector and two Sub Inspectors of the Tamil Nadu Police who had come here to take away Bahadur Singh returned to Madras as they had been directed by the Bombay Police to get a Magistrate's order for taking him.

Bahadur Singh has now been lodged in the Nasik Jail.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 22, 1925

British doctors and press articles

According to the London correspondent of "The Statesman" the British Medical Association has decided to lift the ban that has hitherto forbidden doctors to contribute articles to the newspapers under their own names.

The British press describes this decision as a notable landmark in the progress of doctors, denoting their emancipation from the old-time exclusion and aloofness.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The score of India's first Olympic dressage rider in S-level meet

70 In per cent. Anush Agarwalla, India's first Olympic dressage rider, won his first-ever S-level competition at the Jubiläumsturnier Hofgeismar Open in Germany. S-level dressage involves advanced movements like piaffe, passage, flying changes, and canter pirouettes. **ANI**

Worth of assets attached by ED in Delhi real estate scam

682 In ₹ crore. That's the value of immovable assets attached by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in its probe against Ramprastha Promoters and Developers Pvt Ltd. The ED has arrested Sandeep Yadav and Arvind Walla, director and majority shareholders of the firm. **ANI**

Estimated value of drugs seized in arms, drugs haul in Manipur

76 In ₹ crore. The security forces seized this near the Barak River in Jiribam district, Manipur. The joint operation by Assam Rifles, Manipur Police, and CRPF led to the arrest of one person from Silchar and recovery of 616 soap cases of heroin and 50,000 methamphetamine tablets. **ANI**

Number of drunk driving cases in Delhi from January to July

16,608 The number of drunk driving challans averaged to over 81 per day this year, according to Delhi Traffic Police data. The northern range, including areas like Rohini and Bawana, topped the list with 4,581 cases. **PTI**

Extent of encroached land claimed by the Assam government

10 In lakh acres. According to Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, this land is still encroached by "illegal Bangladeshis and doubtful citizens". Mr. Sarma said that 43,000 acres were cleared in the last four years through eviction drives. **PTI**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is the legal status of right to vote?

What is the difference between a constitutional right and a statutory right? What does Section 62 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 provide? What did Justice Ajay Rastogi state in his partial dissent in the Anoop Baranwal case?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan, R

The story so far:

The Supreme Court is hearing cases filed against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. One of the questions that has arisen during this debate has been the legal status of the 'right to vote'.

What are various rights?

Before understanding the status of 'right to vote' in India, let us briefly understand the different types of rights.

Natural rights are inherent and inalienable rights that are bestowed by nature on individuals. Right to life and liberty are considered to be natural rights. Indian courts may decide that a natural right is embodied in a fundamental right, but they do not directly enforce any natural right. Fundamental rights enumerated and guaranteed in Part III of the Constitution secure equality and liberty which are enshrined in our Preamble. The state is prohibited from making laws that violate these rights. They are directly enforceable in the Supreme Court under Article 32 of the Constitution.

Constitutional rights are contained in the Constitution but outside of Part III. These rights include right to property, free trade, and no taxation without the authority of law. These rights are operationalised through Union and State legislations aligning with the constitutional mandate. They are enforceable in a High Court under Article 226 or as per the legal process in the laws that operationalise them.

Statutory or legal rights are provided and amended by ordinary laws of Parliament or State legislature. Examples include right to work under the MGNREG Act; rights of scheduled tribes under the Forest Rights Act; right to subsidised food grains under the National Food Security



Verifying legality: Booth level officers fill and collect the counting forms from electors in the Patepur block of Vaishali, Bihar on July 10. **ANI**

Act etc. These are enforceable as per the legal process in the laws that provide these rights.

What does the Constitution say about universal adult franchise?

Article 326 of the Constitution grants every citizen the right to vote, without any discrimination. It provides that every citizen, who is not less than 18 years of age on such date as may be fixed by law and is not otherwise disqualified under the Constitution or any law on certain grounds, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter.

The laws enacted by Parliament in this

regard are the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RP Act, 1950) and the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act, 1951). Section 16 of the RP Act, 1950 disqualifies a non-citizen from being enrolled in the electoral roll. Section 19 of the same law requires that the person is not less than 18 years of age on the qualifying date and is 'ordinarily resident' in a constituency.

Section 62 of the RP Act, 1951 provides the right to vote to every person whose name is entered in the electoral roll of a constituency. It further specifies that this right shall not be exercisable by a person who is disqualified under the RP Act, 1950

or is in prison.

What have courts ruled?

The legal status of the right to vote has been a subject matter of debate in various cases in our country. In the *N.P. Ponnuswami* case (1952), a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court held that the right to vote is a statutory right and subject to limitations imposed by it. In the *Jyoti Basu* case (1982), the court reiterated that the right to vote is neither a fundamental right nor a common law right but a simple statutory right. Subsequently in many cases, the same ratio was followed and upheld by the court. In the *PUCJ* case (2003), Justice P.V. Reddy observed that the right to vote, if not a fundamental right, is certainly a 'constitutional right'.

However, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in the *Kuldip Nayar* case (2006), again held that right to vote is only a statutory right.

In the *Raj Bala* case (2015), a division bench of the Supreme Court, based on the ratio in the *PUCJ* case, held that the right to vote is a constitutional right. However, in the *Anoop Baranwal* case (2023), the majority opinion, reiterated the judgment in the *Kuldip Nayar* case, that the right to vote is only a statutory right. Hence, the current legal status of the right to vote is that it is a statutory right.

Justice Ajay Rastogi, in his partial dissent in *Anoop Baranwal*, noted that the right to vote is an expression of the choice of the citizen, which is a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a). Right to vote is intrinsic to free and fair elections that is part of the basic structure of the Constitution. Even if not considered a fundamental right, this right originates from Article 326 of the Constitution and is shaped by statutes made by Parliament. Considering these factors, the Supreme Court may consider elevating the status of right to vote into a constitutional right.

Rangarajan, R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

▼ Natural rights are inherent and inalienable rights that are bestowed by nature on individuals. Right to life and liberty are considered to be natural rights.

▼ Article 326 of the Constitution grants every citizen the right to vote, without any discrimination.

▼ Justice Ajay Rastogi, in his partial dissent in *Anoop Baranwal*, noted that the right to vote is an expression of the choice of the citizen, which is a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a).

What have courts ruled with respect to AI and copyright?

Can AI models be trained on datasets which contain both copyrighted and public domain content?

G.S. Bajpai

The story so far:

Whether the intellectual material produced by various generative AI models infringes copyright laws has been a controversial question posed around the globe. Three recent rulings in the U.S. — *Thomson Reuters* versus *Ross Intelligence* (2025), *Bartz* versus *Anthropic* (2025), and *Kadrey* versus *Meta* (2025) — have brought considerable clarity to the issue. The decisions confirm that transformative training on legitimately acquired texts can qualify for 'fair use', though key limits remain on pirated content and unclear market impacts. However, the issue remains unresolved from a legal perspective.

Do AI models violate copyright law?

Generative AI models can occasionally

produce content that closely resembles or even duplicates specific works from their training datasets, raising concerns about ethics and law. Legal outcomes often depend on whether training AI on original works and its subsequent output undermines the original works' market by replacing them, or whether the AI-generated content adds value and is considered transformative rather than a substitute. The legality of training AI with copyrighted data remains unsettled at the global level. Training generative AI models involves feeding them large datasets, often scraped from the internet, that include both copyrighted and public domain content, which raises legal issues regarding reproduction rights under copyright law. The primary concern is whether copying originals for training constitutes infringement or qualifies as fair use (in the U.S.) or as a text and data mining exception (in the EU and U.K.).

What about databases?

The general principles of liability in

determining the usage of databases and published works in the training of generative AI models are grounded in Intellectual Property (IP) law, contractual obligations, and privacy regulations. Generative AI has many IP uncertainties. There is legal ambiguity in determining whether the training of AI using the IP-protected data, and the generated outputs constitute IP infringements. Some nations provide IP law exceptions, on the basis of it being for fair use, text and data mining, and temporary copying that may apply in cases involving generative AI. However, the absence of global harmonisation and the actual application of generative AI exceptions has not yet been tested, throwing up further legal uncertainty. Additionally, the ownership of IP rights of the output of generative AI is legally uncertain.

Presently, there is no explicit or harmonised global regulation that addresses the intellectual property implications of generative AI. The intellectual property laws of most nations

were developed long before the advent of AI, leading to legal uncertainty over whether IP rights can subsist in AI-generated outputs and, if so, who would own them. This uncertainty is most pronounced in the area of copyright, where authorship traditionally requires human creativity.

What did the U.S. judgments state?

The two landmark U.S. court judgments, one in favour of Anthropic and the other Meta, deduce that the use of copyrighted material for training AI systems could qualify as fair use. However, these rulings do not close the debate regarding the legality of sourcing training data from pirated repositories.

In the *Anthropic* case, Judge William Alsup of the District Court in the Northern District of California ruled that using copyrighted data for training AI software was transformative, comparing the model's training to a writer learning from prior works. However, the judge held that Anthropic must face trial over its use of pirated copies to develop its library of material.

In the *Meta* case, Judge Vance Chhabria of the Northern District of California ruled in Meta's favour, concluding that the plaintiffs had not established that the company's use of their works would result in market dilution by generating AI outputs like the originals. Meta's actions were considered to be covered under the 'fair use' provision. But the judge said that tech companies making money off the AI

boom ought to figure out ways to share the wealth with companies that hold copyrights. In both rulings, the judges adopted a broad view of the concept of 'fair use' when applied to AI training, and provided tech firms with legal protection from copyright liability. But the concerns of unauthorised data harvesting, or of future market damage, have not been dealt with. Courts have signalled that piracy is still a liability and that compensation systems for creators are long overdue.

What are the implications for India?

The *ANI* versus *OpenAI* lawsuit is significant in clarifying how India's existing IPR framework applies to generative AI. Under the Copyright Act, 1957, copyright owners enjoy exclusive economic rights including reproduction, adaptation, and translation, which require permissions for commercial use unless an exception under Section 52 (fair dealing) applies. While some argue that India's IP laws lack provisions specific to AI, the official position holds that the current legal framework is sufficient to address AI-related issues. India, as a member of major international IP treaties, recognises works created by legal persons and provides mechanisms to enforce rights through both civil and criminal remedies, including measures against digital circumvention.

The author is Vice Chancellor, National law University Delhi

BUILDING BLOCKS

The workings behind television screens

Just like the invention of transistors gave rise to the first TV, the discovery of particles with fractional charge may turn contemporary TVs into something we can't even imagine now

Adhip Agarwal

After a few months of a hectic summer, the rains are here. The IIT Kanpur campus is green and nature's colours abound once more. With monsoon, however, comes alive the age-old tradition as well: Sunday evenings of guilt-free laziness, together with the music of the rain's patter, a Bollywood classic on the TV, and some hot, simmering tea. Over the years, the world's technologies have changed shape and form, including the TV. Blinking tubelights have turned to LEDs and televisions have changed from being cubic boxes to flat screens. Why and how did this happen?

It has something to do with physics discoveries behind the scenes.

Electrons to light

When you switch on the TV, you really just switch on the electrical socket where the TV plugs in. We know sockets carry electric currents transported by electrons. But how do these electrons become light?

This isn't unusual if you think about it. We see it all the time in our houses. The protagonist of this puzzle is a class of materials called phosphors. The phosphors (which are different from the element phosphorus) are also called fluorescent compounds because they have something magical about them.

When an electron hits a phosphor, the material throws out light. This has to do with the way electrons are arranged inside these materials. When another electron falls on them, the electrons in the phosphor become excited to higher energies. When they relax back, they throw out some of that energy as light.

Phosphors are thus used to cover the insides of tubelights and fluorescent bulbs. It's the reason we call white bulbs 'CFLs', short for compact fluorescent lamps. Inside the bulb or tubelight, one just needs flying electrons or other charges to hit these materials. If you have ever seen an old broken tubelight, the powder inside the glass tube is nothing but phosphor.

Moving pictures

In a tubelight, since we just need the light, we can uniformly coat all sides with a phosphor and the whole frame will light up when electrons strike it. But to create a picture on a TV screen, we need a few regions to light up and a few regions to remain dark. That way we can see the landscape of lit regions as a single image. We also need the lit regions to be able to change quickly – so quickly that as the pictures change, our brains think it's a moving scene rather than a series of still images.

Enter: a major invention of the early 1900s, the cathode ray tube. A cathode ray tube creates a stream of electrons through the tube flowing towards the screen. Imagine electrons as a flock of birds flying in one direction towards a wall, which in this case is the screen. Now imagine a bird traffic signal manager that can direct birds towards different points on the wall. We similarly need a way to direct electrons to different points on the screen.



GETTY IMAGES

If we know how much to deflect them, and how fast they are moving, we can plan exactly the location on the screen they will strike. And where an electron strikes, the region will light up. Just like the conductor of an orchestra, if our bird traffic manager can direct birds to different locations on the wall, we can continuously change the parts of the screen that will light up, creating a moving picture.

Magnetic fields

Now, even as we have a stream of electrons, how do we deflect them at will? This is done with the help of magnetic fields. Electrons have a charge, and one can move charges using two kinds of forces. Electric fields can make them faster or slower. This is what we see in clocks, wires, and torchlights, where batteries create the fields. A magnetic field, however, can do something more interesting. It doesn't change the speed of charged particles but it can make them move in a circle. It's like when you tie a

ball with a thread; you can pull the ball towards yourself, or you can try to swing the ball around.

This other kind of force is called the Lorentz force – and it is applied by magnetic fields.

We can use magnetic fields to move the electrons to the location we are interested in, and thus we have our traffic police. A bunch of copper wires and coils can be used to create these fields. Such electronic circuits are called analog.

While a lot of physics and engineering goes into creating the perfect images you see on TV, the basic physics is simple. We understand how electrons get directed to different locations on the screen. As they strike various locations, the phosphor lights up. As the TV signal changes the points where the electrons strike, the screen changes continuously, playing for us our favourite Bollywood film.

Boxes to screens to...

With time of course, physicists discovered new concepts and we didn't need all

those coils of wire to move electrons. In 1947, scientists at Bell Labs in the U.S. invented the transistor. This device led to the computer boom and eventually semiconductor electronics.

Here, too, the physics concepts are similar. Instead of phosphor, we have another light-emitting material called gallium-arsenide-phosphide (GaAsP), which throws out light when electrons go into them. And instead of rays of electrons, we can direct electrons more precisely using electronic motherboards like in our laptops. If you're wondering how these newer technologies work, that's a story for another day.

The reason we could make moving pictures was the magnetic field's ability to deflect electrons. Here the electrons were moving in three dimensions, the same number of dimensions we live in. The dimension of space is the number of directions in which we can move. For example, if something can move in all directions – right-left, front-back, top-down, it's said to exist in three dimensions.

A TV of the future may just take advantage of electrons forced to move in two directions: front-back and right-left, like an ant on a table. This happens in some particular materials that physicists can make in the lab.

It turns out there is a big difference in physics between two and three dimensions. In two dimensions, if temperatures are very low, a group of electrons can behave in a funny way. They form what is called a fractional quantum Hall state. Here, effectively new particles emerge that have just one-third of an electron's charge, and they can move only along the edges of the material. Robert Laughlin, Horst Ludwig Störmer, and Daniel Tsui won the physics Nobel Prize in 1998 for discovering such particles.

These kinds of particles are called anyons. They are completely different from the particles we usually encounter in three dimensions, like electrons and photons. Scientists are trying to build a new, powerful kind of quantum computer using anyons as their qubits. These machines could be responsible for bigger technological revolutions in future, and not just TVs.

But for now, we still don't understand all the physics of anyons. The Wolf Prize, one of the most prestigious physics prizes, was given to Jaiendra Jain among others in 2025 for developing the basic understanding of some of this physics. Interestingly, Prof. Jain, who now lives in the U.S., did most of his early studies in India including in Maharaja College in Jaipur and at IIT Kanpur.

If you are inclined to understand some of the physics that goes on here, you'll need to learn quantum mechanics and condensed matter physics. You can consider taking a course in physics here in IIT Kanpur, where some of us teach.

Future TVs

Just like the invention in 1947 of transistors soon gave rise to the first TV, the discovery of particles with fractional charge may turn contemporary TVs into something we can't even imagine now. We never know how discoveries in quantum condensed matter physics today will change the world in the next 30 years.

But just like the warmth of a hot tea on a monsoon evening, the charms of Bollywood classics and basic physics never get old.

The next time you watch an emotional scene unfolding on your TV, don't forget to thank the electrons and the magic materials working away behind the screens.

Adhip Agarwal is an assistant professor of physics at IIT Kanpur.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"I'm sorry I'm late. I missed the bus."

"And I almost walked two miles."
"Almost walked. I see. So, how did you get here then? Did someone give you a ride?"

"I told you that I walked."

"No, you didn't! You told me that you almost walked. Which could mean that you didn't walk at all!"

"What are you talking about?"

"There is a difference between 'I almost walked two miles' and 'I walked almost two miles'."

"There is? I didn't know that."

"When you say, 'I almost walked two miles', you mean before the verb walk. It implies that you did not complete the act of walking. In other words, you didn't walk. Perhaps you wanted to walk, but at the last minute you found someone who could give you a ride."

"I see. What does 'I walked almost two miles' mean?"

"In that sentence the word almost comes before two miles. It tells you the number of miles that you came close to walking."

"I came close to walking! You mean..."
"...What it means is that you didn't actually walk two full miles. You came very close to walking two miles."

"I think I understand, but..."

"...let me give you a couple of more examples. What do you think is the difference between 'Ganesh almost spent five hundred rupees' and 'Ganesh spent almost five hundred rupees'?"

"Well let me see. In the first sentence it tells me how much money Ganesh came close to spending. He might not have spent exactly five hundred, but the amount he spent is very close to five hundred. Is that correct?"

"That's right. He might have spent Rs. 485 or 490. Something very close to 500. But the thing to remember is that in this sentence, Ganesh actually spent some money."

"I think I understand now."

"Good. Tell me, where are you coming from?"

"I had to go to the clinic. As you know my grandmother has the diabetes, so..."

"...You do not use the before diabetes. You say, 'My grandmother has diabetes'."

"You mean diabetes like malaria and cancer doesn't take the before it?"

"Yes, that is right. There are a few more illnesses that are not preceded by the – AIDS, tuberculosis and diarrhoea."

"Diarrhoea! Ha! Ha!"

"By the way, the word diabetes has the stress on the third syllable. The first syllable di is pronounced like the a in China. The e in the third syllable is pronounced like the ee in bee, see, and fee. And the e in the final syllable is pronounced like the i in bit, fit and hit."

"And the s in the final syllable pronounced s or z?"

"It's pronounced s. Diabetes."

"Thanks for letting me know."

Published in The Hindu on April 22, 1997.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

India had hosted an earlier version of the tournament in 2002. Who won the tournament?

QUESTION 2

A game of Chess ends with a result when one player 'checkmates' the other. The word checkmate was derived from the Persian word Shah mat. What does this mean?

QUESTION 3

Who was the first official world champion of the game?

QUESTION 4

What is the name of the rating system that measure a player's progress in the game?

QUESTION 5

How many moves was the longest (known) chess game in history?



Visual questions:

Name the player on the right and the computer he is playing against, which in 1988, became the first machine to beat a grandmaster. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The name of the mission which took man to the moon and codenames for the Command Module and the Lunar Module. **Ans: Apollo XI; the CM was called Columbia, while the LM was named Eagle**

2. The rocket blasted off from this place, and the place on the moon where the lunar module landed. **Ans: Kennedy Space Center in Florida (specifically from launch pad 39A) and Sea of Tranquility (Mare Tranquillitatis)**

3. The first words spoken from the surface of the moon. **Ans: Neil Armstrong said "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed"**

4. Neil Armstrong carried this during the voyage. **Ans: A piece of wood from the Wright Brothers' pioneering aircraft 'Flyer' and a piece of fabric from its wing**

5. The connection between James Lovell, William Anders and Fred Haise. **Ans: They were the backup crew in case Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins were unable to fly**

6. Michael Collins omitted this from the insignia design for the mission. **Ans: Their three names**

7. The trio's version of 'life insurance' for their families in case they did not make it back to Earth. **Ans: Hundreds of autographs, which were to be auctioned off if and when needed by the families**

Visual: Name this. **Ans: 'Armalcolite', a portmanteau word made from Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins**

Early Birds: Nobody got all the correct answers

Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

India is set to host the FIDE World Cup 2025. Here is a quiz on the game of Chess

Word of the day

Surreptitious:

marked by quiet and caution and secrecy; taking pains to avoid being observed; conducted with or marked by hidden aims or methods

Synonyms:

furtive, sneaky, stealthy, clandestine, secret, undercover

Usage:

He took a surreptitious glance at his watch.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/surreptitiouspro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /sʌrɪˈptɪʃəs/

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

A World in Climate Crisis, But Who Cares?

As Texas reels under the deadliest flood in a century, India faces its own climate tragedies with cloudbursts, landslides, and flash floods. These interconnected disasters are not isolated acts of nature, but warning sirens in a rapidly warming world

FIRST Column

Catastrophic flooding in central Texas on July 4 killed 88 people and 41 still remained unaccounted on the fifth day of rescue and relief. It has been the deadliest in hundred years of US history. The flooding began when months' worth of rain fell in a matter of hours, causing Guadalupe river to rise by eight meters in 45 minutes. Back home in India, cloud bursts in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have caused landslides and flooding claiming nearly hundred lives in the last one week alone.



BK SINGH

The flash floods due to incessant rains have also made life difficult in other parts of the country like Northeast, Maharashtra, Odisha too. Three labourers were buried alive under landslide debris, while carrying out mining operations in manganese mine in Baitarani Reserve Forests, in Odisha's Keonjhar district. Why no precautions against flooding and landslides were taken in an operational mine during rainy season? Business as usual is not going to work in the warming world.

As against this, the countries of southern Europe like Spain, Portugal, France etc. are reeling under heat waves with maximum temperature rising above mid-forties, an all time high. Instances of human deaths are also reported from among the vulnerable population, who worked outdoor for municipal cleaning and constructions.

It seems countries have not taken note of such disastrous climatic consequences and continue to expand fossil fuel consumption and favour projects requiring sacrifice of natural tree/forest covers. Forests are the best and cheapest source of absorption of Carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and the only practical way to prevent extreme climate events is to prevent deforestation and go for afforestation.

Let me reiterate a tale from Telangana, where continuous misuse of Forest Rights Act (FRA) has led to large scale deforestation in the state's notified forests.

Forum for Good Governance, Hyderabad, comprising some retired All India Services officers, a High Court judge and a social activist, have expressed concern over approval of claims over lakhs of acres of forest lands in July 2023 under FRA, before November 2023 Assembly polls. In a letter to Secretary Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) three months ago, the Forum has pointed out that the regularisation of 50,000 acres of forest lands by Nizam Government in 1940s and 21 lakhs acres by Andhra Government in 1970s was done in undivided Andhra Pradesh before promulgation of FRA, 2006.

Ahead of 2009 Parliamentary election, state further approved claims over 3.31 lakh acres



forest land and rejected claims over 3.7 lakh acres. The clamour for clearing more forest land continued, as large scale claims were approved by incumbent Governments before every election. After the bifurcation of states in 2014, Forest Minister Telangana in 2018 directed district level forest officers not to evict any encroachment on forest land.

Minister's direction opens floodgate for deforestation on forest land. Within two days, Head of Forest Department (HoD) wrote to state Government asking for the confirmation of the decision; state immediately clarified that there is no such policy decision.

However, in 2023, State's tribal department took up a special drive by deliberately omitting the documentary and scientific evidences (Satellite imagery) listed in FRA Rule 13(1) and relying only on village elder's statement. The action of tribal department in manipulating, form

provided under rule 11(1)(a) has violated Central statute. Despite objections from forest officers several district level committees (DLCs) admitted the claims, but many times there were inter departmental clashes resulting in delay.

Chief Minister on the floor of the Assembly on 12th February 2023, promised the distribution of 11.5 lakh acres' forest land (4 lakh acres for tribal and 7.5 lakh acres for other traditional forest dwellers).

To facilitate the smooth sale by DLCs, Telangana's forest department HoD obtained facsimile signature of district officers and shared with respective DLC for pasting on fabricated opinion of Forest Department on each case of the claim. While HoD in July 2018 referred the Minister's instruction to Government for confirmation, another HoD in February 2023 facilitated the state to approve the ineligible claims. What a contrast? The claim of tribal

totaling 4 lakh acres in the state was approved by July 2023. Thanks to the way shown by HoD. The certificates were distributed by political bosses across the state before the Assembly election.

Though the approval of claims of other traditional forest dwellers over 7.5 lakh acres' forest land has been passed, but the tree growth over these are already cleared and the parcels are brought under plough. The forests have lost carbon sequestration potential.

Story of misuse of FRA is similar in many other states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh etc and the latest state forest report attributed loss of forest cover to FRA among other factors.

However, after 150 forest rights activists have objected to this, MoTA has questioned its sister ministry (MoEF & CC) and asked for the proof of such attribution. The state forest reports are finalised based on the satellite imagery data,

whereas DLCs have been approving claims based on the village elders' oral evidence. It is now MoTA's turn to explain why satellite imagery data, which is more scientific than oral evidence, was overlooked?

Tree felling in Kanha Gachibowli, a 400 acre forested area near Hyderabad Central University was undertaken by Telangana Government in April this year. State intended to divert the area for real estate and was clearing the tree growth at quite a fast pace, to beat university students protest. Finally, Supreme Court had to step in and stop felling.

The Court rejected state's argument that thousands of trees already cut in 100 acres were within exempted category of species under Telangana Water Land and Trees Act, 2002 and did not require any prior permission for cutting. Central Empowered Committee of Supreme Court disputed the claim of the state and said that out of 1500 trees cut in the area, only 1399 trees were of exempted category. Such blatant violation of law of the land is taking place, and HoD is found compromised.

Court further directed that the state should restore the 100 acres' area where tree felling is already done. The direction was to compensate for the damage to environment inflicted by state of Telangana. Compensatory afforestation is in vogue in Forest department's system for a long time and no forest land is diverted for any non-forestry use without identifying the land for growing compensatory afforestation as well as without recovering the cost of growing such plantations.

Court expects the state to plant up 100 acres' area where tree growth is already cleared, with suitable native species. With moderate to scanty rainfall in Hyderabad region, the survival of the seedlings in barren area would be quite challenging, and like any other compensatory plantation, this is also likely to fail, unless special provisions for protection and watering are provided. Supreme Court in TN Godavari case had already directed states and UTs to constitute Expert Committees to identify all wooded areas, which are non-notified forests duly taking into account the dictionary meaning of the word 'forests' and UTs should treat all such areas as forests for the purpose of Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

CEC has also said that Kanha Gachibowli has all characteristics of forests. One of the proposal of state of Telangana is to convert the area into 'Eco-park'. It is human centric development activity and will not render the full potential ecological services it can provide. The entire area should be restored and managed as natural forests, if we are to maximise its carbon sequestration potential.

The writer is Retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force) Karnataka.

Inequalities in India: A Deep Dive into the World Bank's Spring 2025 Report

The World Bank's recently released 'Spring 2025 Poverty and Equity Brief' has sparked a significant debate in India and around the world. The central question that has stirred intellectual, political, and social circles alike is this: Has India really become the fourth most equal country in the world, as the report claims? The assertion is particularly surprising because it stands in contrast to the prevailing narrative that inequality has increased alongside economic growth in recent years. For a long time, experts and researchers have pointed to widening gap between the rich and the poor in India. Several studies and household surveys have revealed that the benefits of economic growth have not been equitably distributed. Income and wealth disparities have persisted, and in many cases, worsened. Critics argue that while a small segment of the population has grown exponentially rich, the majority have either stagnated or seen only marginal improvements in their living standards.



ASHWANI MAHAJAN

So, when the World Bank report presents a picture of declining inequality and improved consumption equity, confusion — and skepticism — are natural responses. Is this merely a statistical mirage, a data manipulation as critics claim, or is there some truth to the assertion that India is on the path to becoming a more equal society?

Understanding the Inequality Metrics: Gini Coefficient and Beyond

To assess inequality, economists often use the "Gini coefficient", which ranges from 0 (complete equality) to 1 (complete inequality). According to data from the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAR), India's income Gini coefficient in 2023 was 0.410, up from 0.371 in 1955, indicating a clear increase in income inequality over the decades.

When we look at wealth distribution, the scenario becomes even starker. In rural India, the wealth Gini coefficient rose from 0.341 in 1955 to 0.403 in 2023. Urban India showed a slight decline from 0.392 to 0.382 in the same period but remained highly unequal.

These figures present a long-term view of growing income and asset inequalities. Yet, paradoxically, consumption-based inequality seems to be narrowing, especially over the last decade.

The Decline in Consumption Inequality

Here lies the heart of the World Bank's claim. The report — like earlier ones from the UNDP — high-

lights that "extreme poverty in India has sharply declined", and "consumption inequality has reduced significantly". As per the report, the Gini Index for consumption (on a scale of 0 to 100) fell from 28.8 in 2011 to 25.5 in 2022. That's a notable improvement in just over a decade.

The World Bank also highlighted a dramatic reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty. Using the international threshold of \$1.90 per day (adjusted for purchasing power parity), only 5.3 per cent of Indians were living in extreme poverty in 2022-23 — down from a staggering 27.1 per cent in 2011-12. If one applies the older benchmark of \$2.15/day, the figure drops to just 2.3 per cent. Clearly, these numbers indicate a transformative shift in living standards and access to basic goods and services for millions of Indians. Despite these encouraging signs, critics remain unconvinced. Their arguments against the World Bank report are rooted in methodology, definitions, and data interpretation.

They argue that the report is based on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), which does not capture "income and wealth inequalities". Consumption data, they argue, is not a reliable indicator of inequality because wealthy individuals tend to "understate consumption" and save a larger proportion of their income. As a result, consumption-based Gini coefficients typically "underestimate inequality".

Second, critics claim that the "survey methodology is flawed", particularly in capturing data from the top 5 per cent of income earners.

These individuals often "under-report their expenditures", leading to skewed results that suggest a lower level of inequality than actually exists.

Third, they highlight the "incompatibility between the 2011-12 and 2022-23 surveys", due to changes in methodology, sampling, and questionnaire design.

This makes a direct comparison — and the World Bank's conclusions — less reliable. Fourth, it is noted that only about 49 per cent of the national consumption was captured by the survey. The rest — largely comprising the consumption of the wealthiest — remains under-represented, further weakening the validity of conclusions drawn about overall inequality.

Has Inequality Really Reduced?

Despite these concerns, the reduction in poverty and improved consumption standards cannot be dismissed. Multiple global institutions, from the UNDP to the World Bank, acknowledge these changes.

This progress has much to do with a series of welfare-driven and industry-focused policies implemented in India over the past decade.

For instance, the construction of over "3 crore houses in rural areas" and "1 crore in urban India", the near-universal provision of "electricity, piped water, clean cooking fuel, and access to "free pri-

mary and secondary healthcare" under schemes like "Aayushman Bharat", have all contributed to improving the lives of the poor.

What distinguishes the recent approach from older welfare models is the "efficiency of implementation". Previously, much of the budgeted assistance failed to reach the intended beneficiaries due to leakages and corruption. However, the introduction of "56 crore Jan Dhan bank accounts", "Aadhaar-based identification" and "Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)" has significantly minimised leakage, making Government aid more effective.

These structural reforms have led to a "visible improvement in the consumption capacity" of the lower-income population, which, in turn, is reflected in the Gini consumption index.

The Road Ahead: Reducing Inequality Beyond Consumption

While the narrowing of consumption inequality is a notable achievement, "it should not be seen as the final goal". The reliance on "Government support and subsidies" raises sustainability concerns. Welfare schemes can create a buffer but cannot "eliminate the root causes" of poverty or inequality. To reduce "income and wealth inequality" in the long term, India must move towards "empowerment and capacity building". This includes:

- Expanding access to quality education
- Vocational training and skill development
- Support for micro-enterprises and entrepreneurship

Decentralised development to uplift rural economies: By focusing on these areas, India can ensure that individuals are not merely consumers of Government assistance but "contributors to and beneficiaries of economic growth".

Conclusion

The debate over whether India has become more equal reflects deeper questions about how we measure inequality and what indicators we prioritise. While the World Bank's report does suggest genuine improvements, especially in terms of "consumption-based equity" and "poverty reduction", it does not invalidate concerns about rising "income and wealth concentration".

It is possible that "both perspectives hold truth" — that "poverty and consumption inequality have reduced", while "income and wealth inequality remain high".

The challenge now is to sustain the gains made through welfare-driven support and transition towards a model of "empowerment, productivity, and equitable opportunity". Only then can India truly achieve the vision of an inclusive and equal society — not just in consumption, but in every dimension of economic life.

(The writer is National Co-convenor of Swadeshi Jagran Manch)

When Guru Dutt met Dev Anand

In the golden era of Hindi cinema, 1950 stands out as a unique phase. It was a phase of distinctive styles, themes, innovation, and storytelling. The era saw a unique *jugalbandi* between two distinctive personalities, both legends and creators of meaningful content, deep thought, and insight. In the century birth year of the master Guru Dutt, it would not be out of place to correlate his genius relationship with Dev Anand, which gave Hindi cinema a new wave and phase of cinematic excellence, expression, and portrayal. Much has been documented and written about Guru Dutt's work since the centenary celebrations began on 9th July. It would be a befitting tribute to dive deep into the two distinctive styles of creators that redefined the art of filmmaking on the silver screen. The serious, emotive and focused style of Guru Dutt and the charming, energetic and flamboyance of Dev Sahab blended well with each other. Despite the different approaches, it was the convergence of themes, styles, ideas, narrative and vision of cinema that made Guru Dutt and Dev Anand complement each other through the lens of entertainment, innovation and emotional movies. Melancholy was the mantra of Guru Dutt — underlying the theme of his movies, amplified through characters, the search for perfection, complex cinematic situations, and soul-searching visions. Dev Anand, on the contrary, displayed a unique infectious energy, which ran through his roles, personality, and treatment of subjects. His style of storytelling was quiet, aspirational, youthful, and optimistic. In the movies that both legends collaborated, we get an insight of the artistic depth of their personalities and their cinematic vision that appealed to audiences. Their vision was strongly ingrained in a deep-rooted friendship. There are very telling anecdotes which marked the beginning of an unforgettable association. This was further cemented by a promise made to each other of complementing their strengths at an appropriate juncture. Their unwritten promise acted as a catalyst, leading Hindi cinema to embrace the most memorable films. *Baazi* was the first collaborative venture between the two legends in 1951, produced under the Navketan banner. Dev Anand's character in the film had many contrasts and personality traits. Each of them were perfectly visualised and framed by Guru Dutt's creative thinking and well-crafted visuals. The dialogues, storyboard and portrayal of principal characters reflected the mastery of Guru Dutt's wisdom and Dev Anand's spontaneity and youthfulness. A perfect blend of creativity, moods, elegance scripted through tight direction and subtle narration. The beauty of Dev Anand and Guru Dutt's relationship was the mutual influence that the two legends had on each other despite contrasting styles. Guru Dutt and Dev Anand's second venture was *Jaal* in 1952. The movie created a new wave of storytelling as it gave a new aesthetic ecosystem to



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

the treatment and character of the film. While the movie was based on the complex interface and relationships, the visualisation was quite focused, leaving audiences to enjoy a full-biting story. The movie reflected the complexity of life involving deceit, falsehood, and dark undertones. CID as a movie truly challenged conventional storytelling. It gave a new architecture and design to creative collaboration.

As a movie, CID created a new form of cinema that embraced romance, youth-

ful idealism, vibrant creativity, melodious music interspersed with moods, emotions and deep meaning lyrics. For both the legends, the projection of emotion and mood through songs created an unprecedented buzz of excitement, involvement of characters and catchy and celebratory moments. Songs for Guru Dutt portrayed pain, emotion and gave audiences a critique of life. The tone remained melancholic. For Dev Anand, songs were the preface to an enjoyable moment, sequence or segment of the movie. Songs for both were ingrained in the cinematic landscape and narrative. Though context remained different, Guru Dutt's lyrics were tied to introspection and emotional language. Dev Anand looked at songs in a celebratory mood or charm that gave hope. Yet both produced memorable songs with unique composition and moods. 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Editor's TAKE

The Transformational Journey of the Northeast

With Modi's Act East Policy and infrastructure push, the region is carving out a new identity

Ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, he has been keen to bring the Northeast to the national forefront and his focus has had a positive impact on the region's development and progress. For decades, India's Northeastern region remained one of the most overlooked and underdeveloped parts of the country. Despite its rich cultural diversity, strategic location and natural resources, the "Seven Sisters" (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) plus Sikkim often struggled with poor connectivity, insurgency and economic stagnation. However, in recent years, the region has witnessed a visible transformation. Prime Minister Modi, during several visits and speeches, has consistently asserted that the Northeast is no longer "remote" but "mainstream." Recently, speaking about the Northeast at the Rising Northeast Investors Summit, he said that there was a time when the Northeast was merely called a frontier region. Today, it is emerging as the "Front-Runner of Growth." And rightly so, as the Northeast is fast changing and becoming mainstream.

Under the Modi Government, there has been a major push to enhance physical connectivity in the Northeast. Projects like the 'Bogbeel Bridge' in Assam, improved national highways and the UDAN scheme for regional air connectivity have significantly reduced travel time and opened up the region for trade and tourism. Railways have reached areas like Manipur and Mizoram for the first time and plans are underway to further integrate the region into the national railway network. Security has been a longstanding concern in the Northeast. However, the Modi Government has brought to bring several insurgent groups to the negotiating table. Ceasefire agreements and peace accords — such as the Bodo Accord in Assam — have built an environment of trust, though a lot needs to be done in Manipur, where the law and order situation remains a serious cause of concern, and a lasting solution to the ethnic strife needs to be found on a priority basis. Rebranding the earlier "Look East Policy," Modi's 'Act East Policy' emphasises the strategic importance of the Northeast as India's gateway to Southeast Asia.

With cross-border projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the region is being positioned as a vital link for trade and diplomacy, boosting its economic potential. The Digital India and Jan Dhan Yojana initiatives have improved access to banking and Government services. Prime Minister Modi has frequently celebrated the Northeast's unique culture on national platforms, fostering a sense of belonging among its people.

Events such as the North East Festival and promotion of the region's cuisine, crafts and traditional knowledge systems have helped bridge the cultural divide between the Northeast and the rest of India. Tourism has been identified as a major economic driver. With improved connectivity and Government support, the region is now attracting domestic and international tourists.

Despite these gains, challenges such as ethnic tensions, limited industrial development and ecological concerns persist. But the overall trajectory is undeniably positive. The rise of the Northeastern states is one of the most notable success stories in recent times.

The Dalai Lama Dashes China's Succession Bid

The Tibetan spiritual leader delivered a clear rebuke to Beijing on his 90th birthday. The bold assertion has rattled Chinese authorities, who would find it difficult to have their own Dalai Lama as the spiritual head of Tibet

China's long-held hope that it would choose the next Dalai Lama and thus strengthen its stranglehold over Tibet — has been dashed after the Buddhist spiritual leader's announcement that it will be the Gaden Phodrang Trust, comprising his inner circle of monks, which will have the sole authority to recognise his future reincarnation.

Significantly, in clear messaging to China on his 90th birthday, the 14th Dalai Lama also said that "no one else has any such authority to interfere in this matter." This has predictably left China, which describes its annexation of Tibet in 1951 as "peaceful liberation," bristling with anger. It has thrown a spanner in the works of the Chinese regime's well-laid-out plans to appoint a person of its choosing as the next Dalai Lama. Even if two Dalai Lamas are now appointed — one chosen by Beijing and the other by the Gaden Phodrang Trust — the former is unlikely to enjoy much credibility or stature among Tibetans or even the world at large.

More broadly, China perceives this announcement as one that questions its sovereignty over Tibet, well over seven decades after it usurped the region. It is extremely sensitive about this issue amid well-founded criticism for its attempts to erase the socio-cultural and religious identity of the Tibetan people. It stands accused of 'Sinicisation' of the region while curbing — quite aggressively — the freedom of Tibetans in its effort to assimilate the region with mainland China.

China also no longer uses the name Tibet officially, with the region now called Xizang (Chinese name for Tibet). It found its way into the 19th White Paper released by China on Tibet in 2023, but a mere name change, while not according to the demand for autonomy by its people, will not facilitate assimilation. The current Dalai Lama has become the lodestar for Tibetans worldwide in their resistance to China's oppressive policies in their homeland — something that has become a bitter pill for Beijing to swallow. Beijing promptly launched a broadside against the Dalai Lama, following his announcement about a successor, once again dubbing the much-revered Tibetan spiritual leader, who has lived in exile in India since 1959,



as a "separatist." A fulminating Chinese ambassador in New Delhi, Xu Feihong, tweeted: "The reincarnation of Dalai Lamas neither began from him nor will end due to him. He has no authority to decide whether the reincarnation system shall continue or be abolished."

The post reflected China's frustration and anger at the Dalai Lama's announcement, which will also take away the legitimacy of any successor appointed by Beijing. In the event that there are two Dalai Lamas, New Delhi should formally recognise the one chosen by the Gaden Phodrang Trust, instead of trying to play a neutral role as is being suggested by some. It is about time India used the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile on its soil to its strategic advantage, shedding its inhibitions about not rubbing China the wrong way. While India recognises the Tibet Autonomous Region as an inalienable part of China, it needs to throw its weight behind the next Dalai Lama chosen by the Trust, given that Beijing has shown little concern for New Delhi's own strategic interests. India did not by sending some ministers to participate in the birthday celebrations of the 14th Dalai Lama in McLeodganj, Dharamshala, on July 6. Among them were Ministers Affairs Minister Kiran Rijji, who belongs to Arunachal Pradesh, as well

THE CURRENT DALAI LAMA HAS BECOME THE LODESTAR FOR TIBETANS WORLDWIDE IN THEIR RESISTANCE TO CHINA'S OPPRESSIVE POLICIES IN THEIR HOMELAND — SOMETHING THAT HAS BECOME A BITTER PILL FOR BEIJING TO SWALLOW

as the state's Chief Minister, Pema Khandu. China claims the Indian, Northeastern state as "South Tibet" or "Zangnan." Prime Minister Narendra Modi too sent birthday greetings to the spiritual leader, all of which raised Beijing's hackles.

China has not only been making deep inroads into India's neighbourhood, but also been seeking to grab large parts of what India claims as its own territory through its salami-slicing tactics — the attempt to do so in eastern Ladakh is the latest such instance. Though there has been disengagement from immediate face-off sites between the Indian and Chinese

armies in eastern Ladakh, Beijing has as yet shown no inclination for the larger process of de-escalation and de-induction of troops amassed along the entire 3,488-km-long Line of Actual Control. China's deep military collusion with Pakistan also poses a major threat to India's security.

The latest such instance was the active assistance China provided to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor. Apart from extensively using Chinese military hardware and software, Islamabad also got live satellite feeds from Beijing on Indian military deployments during the May 7-10, cross-border hostilities. China, of course, also readily comes to Pakistan's defence on the cross-border terrorism it actively aids and abets against India. At the recent SCO meet in China, Islamabad found backing from Beijing in omitting the mention of the Pahalgarh terror massacre in the joint statement, which was eventually not adopted due to New Delhi's strong objections.

Time and again, China has shown itself to be an untrustworthy — even perfidious — neighbour. There is little reason, therefore, for India to be mindful of Chinese sensitivities on the Dalai Lama issue any more. Rather, its own strategic interests need to be paramount.

(The writer is a senior journalist who writes on strategic affairs)

PICTALK



A giant biodegradable land art painting titled Vers l'horizon by French-Swiss artist Saype adorns the ridges of Grand Chamossaire above Villars, Switzerland. PTI

A mind's compass and a heart's rudder

SECOND Opinion

In an era where machines can solve equations in a blink and algorithms predict our desires before we voice them, the worth of human judgment teeters on the edge. As technology evolves and our choices grow ever more complex, we are compelled not only to examine what we think, but also how and why we think. And within this introspective exercise emerges a vital question: Does critical thinking include ethical thinking, or does ethical thinking require critical thinking? At first glance, the two seem similar — both pillars of intellectual maturity and clarity. But look closer, and their differences become apparent.

One is grounded in logic, evidence, and structured analysis; the other is informed by principles of fairness, empathy, and moral integrity. Much like a ship and its rudder, they are most powerful together. A vessel may sail swiftly, but without direction, it risks wreckage. Critical thinking is the foundation of intelligent analysis. It helps us evaluate facts, spot fallacies, question assumptions, and arrive at rational conclusions. It is the skill of navigating a foggy world where misinformation can spread faster than truth. But critical thinking is not, in itself, moral. It is a tool — capable of constructing life-saving innovations or manipulating populations with equal efficiency. Like a scalpel, it can heal or harm depending on the intent behind it. That is where ethical



SAKSHI SETHI

thinking becomes indispensable. If critical thinking teaches us how to think, ethical thinking teaches us why. It draws from empathy, justice, and concern for the greater good — not from sentimentality, but from deliberate moral reasoning.

Ethics challenges us to look beyond legality into legitimacy, beyond rules into responsibilities. Yet, without critical rigour, ethical thinking becomes shallow. Good intentions can still result in bad outcomes if not examined thoroughly. As the adage reminds us, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Take the example of

Edward Snowden. He shed light on government surveillance, but his actions also raised questions of loyalty, transparency, law, and consequence. His was a decision where ethical conviction rested on the shoulders of critical reflection.

On a more everyday scale, imagine a teacher confronting a student caught cheating. A purely rule-based response might dictate punishment. But ethical thinking urges a deeper look — what led the student to cheat? Was it fear, pressure, or lack of support? This is not about excusing wrongs; it is about understanding causes, applying discernment, and seeking just resolutions. Conversely, critical thinking without ethical grounding can turn dangerous. A company might conduct stellar market analysis to maximise profit while

underpaying its workers and harming the environment. The strategy might be efficient, but it lacks soul. Logic, devoid of values, becomes amoral. As Einstein once said, "Not everything that counts can be counted." Indeed, ethical thinking demands the same faculties as critical thinking — analysis, evaluation, perspective — but it also requires a moral compass.

It is not about blindly following rules; it is about wrestling with what is right, even when it is not easy. It is about reconciling legality with justice, efficiency with empathy, self-interest with collective good. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare this need for moral reasoning coupled with critical clarity. Governments were forced to make agonising decisions — how to distribute limited resources, when to impose or lift lockdowns. These were not just policy choices, but ethical dilemmas requiring careful, compassionate reasoning.

Ultimately, to separate critical and ethical thinking is a false dichotomy. They are not rivals, but partners. Critical thinking may give us the skeleton; ethical thinking breathes life into it. A clear mind is valuable, but a mind that also feels and reasons with integrity is transformative.

So yes, ethical thinking does require critical thinking, as fire needs oxygen. But the reverse is not always true. We must teach not just how to think, but how to think rightly. For in a world brimming with bright minds, what we truly need are wise hearts.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist)

Letters to the Editor

WHEN THE GUNS FALL SILENT, SO DOES ACCOUNTABILITY

We are quick to chastise every armed intervention with hyped publicity in its wake. Then comes the routine confrontation in Parliament with an Opposition that merely wishes to be heard, not listened to. All this only ends in unproductive silence — till the next instance.

The 2016 surgical strikes or the Balakot air strike were celebrated for their audacity, but there were no post-facto institutional reviews, audits, or cross-party briefings.

Sindoor seems fashioned likewise, but the quotes from the Oval Office are getting unsettling. The Kargil Review Committee was a rare exception — though its findings remain unknown.

In the US, conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan have triggered public hearings, congressional oversight, and intervention. The UK undertook a full-scale inquiry into the Iraq war that brought out intelligence failures and leadership lapses. Institutional

oversight and systemic declassification for public accountability create space for reform.

By contrast, at home, we tilt too heavily towards executive secrecy and, in some concession, to selective disclosure. The need is for a dedicated Parliamentary Oversight Committee on Defence and Intelligence, a declassification policy, and a commitment to table white papers soon.

Silence after war or major conflict may serve political optics, but transparent post-conflict discourse builds trust and strengthens democratic mores. Mature democracies grow stronger when they reflect — not just when they retaliate. A culture of silence after conflict weakens institutional integrity. Real strength lies in transparency, not theatrics.

R NARAYANAN | NAVI MUMBAI

Please send your letter to theletters@pioneer@gmail.com. In not more than 400 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Forgotten promise of justice

The acquittal of all 12 individuals in the 2006 Mumbai train blast case by the Bombay HC is a stark reminder of the deep flaws within our criminal justice system. After spending over a decade behind bars — some under death sentences — these men have finally been declared innocent. But what does one say to someone who has lost 17 years of their life to a failed investigation and a trial built on weak, inconclusive evidence?

The High Court's observation that there was no credible evidence, and that suspicion alone cannot convict, is a damning indictment of our investigating agencies and prosecution. The role of the Anti-Terrorism Squad, which arrested these men and built the case against them, must now come under urgent scrutiny. If these individuals were innocent, the real perpetrators of one of India's deadliest terror attacks remain unidentified and free. Innocent lives were caged, families were shattered, and public trust in our legal institutions weakened.

The victims of the blasts have received neither closure nor truth. We must now demand accountability — not just for the wrongful confinement of these men, but also for the collective failure of our legal machinery. Justice is not served by imprisoning the innocent while the guilty roam free. A democracy must uphold justice with rigour, fairness, and — most importantly — in time.

VISHAL MAYUR | KARNATAKA

Caught between war and humanity

Since the time humans began using their intellectual abilities to bring about the Agricultural Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Technological Revolution — ushering in new social systems — there has also been a gradual erosion of human values. Today, in the age of Artificial Intelligence, we talk about integrating emotions, feelings, and sensitivities into robots and machines. Ironically, these very emotions are vanishing rapidly from within us. Not a single year has passed since the beginning of the 21st century without some war or conflict erupting in some corner of the world.

On one hand, humanity has been scaling the peaks of progress, acquiring ever-advanced technological capabilities. On the other hand, emotions like empathy, love, warmth, and compassion towards fellow human beings are fading at a rapid pace. The great irony is that we are now trying to rediscover that warmth and emotional connection in robots and machines. Today, we are using robots and drones in warfare to eliminate enemies. Perhaps, as mentioned at the end of the Indian epic Mahabharata, Yudhishtira rightly states: "O noble ones, peace can never come from war. War is never the ultimate solution under any circumstance." And yet, today — despite calling ourselves an advanced species — we continue to look for final solutions in war itself.

JITHESH MOHI | GUJARAT

Topsy-Turvy way of Trump

The Trump administration imposed new restrictions on flights from Mexico and threatened to end a longstanding partnership between Delta Air Lines and Aeromexico in response to limits the Mexican Government placed on passenger and cargo flights into Mexico City several years ago.

The move violated a trade agreement between the two countries and gave domestic airlines an unfair advantage. Mexico is the top foreign destination for Americans, with more than 40 million passengers flying there last year. Let these actions serve as a warning to any country that thinks it can take advantage of the US, its carriers, and its market. "America First" means fighting for the fundamental principle of fairness.

All Mexican passenger, cargo, and charter airlines will now be required to submit their schedules to the Transportation Department and seek Government approval of their flights until Duffy is satisfied with the way Mexico is treating US airlines. Trump is trying hard to destabilise the trusted system of transactions and trade relationships with a whimsical approach that is driving away even neighbouring countries. Trump's unilateralism undermines long-standing partnerships and disrupts regional cooperation.

JAYANTHI S MANIAM | MUMBAI

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, TUESDAY, JULY 22, 2025

THE IDEAS PAGE

The game is on

Designation of The Resistance Front as a terrorist group is welcome, but also a reminder: We must assert our narrative, unfiltered by Western media, unpressured by superpower coercion



MANOJ K CHANNAN

ASIM MUNIR'S VISIT to Washington reaffirmed Pakistan's alignment with US strategic interests. Publicly endorsed by CENTCOM chief General Michael E Kurilla as a "phenomenal partner", Pakistan continues to position itself as a counterterrorism ally, despite its longstanding use of militant groups as foreign policy tools. These developments underscore the transactional nature of the US-Pakistan relationship, where tactical alignment often overshadows long-term strategic divergence.

For India, this highlights the need for vigilance and independence in dealing with regional security issues, particularly as Washington continues to balance its ties with both Islamabad and New Delhi. India's approach must be practical, based on realism, and free from the historical baggage that hinders progress.

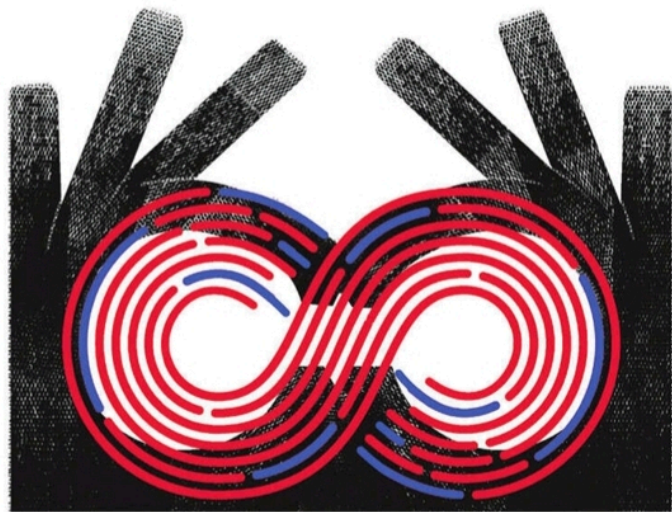
The recent designation of The Resistance Front (TRF), a rebranded offshoot of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), as a global terrorist organisation by the US represents more than just a counterterrorism action. It sends a strategic message that connects with broader regional dynamics and internal shifts within Pakistan. The US has long utilised terror designations, military aid, and economic pressure as tools of influence. The timing of the TRF's listing — during backchannel meetings, changing alliances, and defence cooperation talks — should not be seen as coincidental.

Pakistan, under the informal control of the powerful military establishment led by Munir, remains a central player in this situation. Reports that Munir may be preparing for a transition from military to civilian leadership — possibly as the country's next president — add a new layer of complexity. The Pakistan Army has always played a dual role, exerting de facto political power while maintaining the appearance of democratic governance. If Munir does become president, it would formalise what has long been an open secret: Pakistan is a state run by its generals, not its elected officials.

Munir's current influence, untempered by public accountability, distorts Pakistan's already fragile democratic structure. His management of both foreign and domestic policy has led to a loss of strategic autonomy and military strategy. Recent high-level meetings involving Munir and the chief of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), coinciding with TRF's terror designation, raise questions about the legitimacy and goals of these interactions.

The backdrop to these engagements is likely Pakistan's urgent military needs. India's military strikes during Operation Sindoor caused significant damage to key Pakistani airbases at Nur Khan and Sargodha, amongst others, requiring repairs and replacements. The PAF is reportedly seeking spare parts for its F-16 fleet — a need that cannot be met without US cooperation. It appears that the Pakistani government is quietly collaborating with Washington to secure this support without resorting to IMF or World Bank funds, thereby avoiding scrutiny of military spending amid economic instability.

This implicit understanding between the US and Pakistan reflects an evolving relationship. Washington no longer views Islamabad



C.R. Sasikumar

solely through the lens of the Afghan conflict but instead as a flexible partner, willing to meet demands in exchange for support. The days of aid in exchange for loyalty are gone — now, cooperation is transactional, and Pakistan's leadership appears more than eager to cooperate.

For India, this situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The shifting alignment of US interests — sometimes favouring Pakistan, at other times leaning toward India — requires a clear and focused response. American support for Indian security remains strong, but it is not without conditions. Washington will prioritise its national interests above all, even if that means playing both sides in South Asia.

Whether it's counterterrorism cooperation, arms sales, or trade negotiations, New Delhi must assert its independence with Washington. American tariffs and weapons deals serve as tools of influence, often used to sway policy decisions or gain concessions. India's autonomy is crucial in these interactions, and it must remain focused on its national interests and avoid being manipulated into a state of dependency.

Meanwhile, new alignments are starting to form. Russia and China are showing renewed interest in strengthening the Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping. Although this trilateral framework lacks the strength of NATO or the Quad, it serves as an essential counterbalance to Western influence. India should explore this space, not out of unquestioning loyalty, but to prevent undue pressure from any single power bloc.

The re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, three decades after being ousted, and the US's ongoing operational presence in the region (including leasing airbases and printing Afghan currency) indicate a long-term American interest in Central and South Asia. These actions are not driven by altruism — they are part of a calculated strategy to maintain influence in one of the world's most volatile regions.

India must recognise that it is being

watched, evaluated, and targeted by global powers who see it as both a partner and a pawn. In this environment, the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gain renewed relevance. Not the NAM of the Cold War era, but a reimagined model — one that is pragmatic, flexible, and focused on issue-based cooperation rather than ideological loyalty.

To navigate this complexity, India must also look inward. There is an urgent need to engage its neighbours, not as subordinates, but as equal stakeholders.

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To navigate this complexity, India must also look inward. There is an urgent need to engage its neighbours, not as subordinates, but as equal stakeholders.

This means reevaluating relationships with nations such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and even Pakistan. It involves restarting stalled dialogues, not to compromise sovereignty or national security, but to build a regional consensus that benefits India. Assertiveness must be balanced with diplomacy, and power must be tempered by responsibility.

India's path forward should be neither isolationist nor interventionist — it should be independent. We must assert our narrative, unfiltered by Western media, unpressured by superpower coercion, and unfazed by regional provocations. The TRF listing, the whispers of a presidential coup in Pakistan, and the transactional nature of US foreign policy are all reminders that the game is on. We must shed the weight of the past. We cannot undo Partition. We cannot undo wars. But we can choose how we move forward. Let history be a lesson, not a leash. Let us walk forward — eyes open, feet grounded, and purpose clear.

The writer is a lieutenant colonel (retired), former Armoured Corps officer and defence analyst

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The truth revealed by the Epstein scandal — that ordinary Americans are deeply angry at the unfairness and abuses created by elites — is worth heeding."

— THE GUARDIAN

Political questions, textbook answers

NCERT history books and their revisions frame a challenge: To reckon with violence in medieval ages, nudge people to see it in context



KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

REVISION OF SOCIAL science textbooks, especially history readers, has become par for the course. Most times, this exercise is not guided by the scholarly imperative to mirror developments in knowledge. Instead, it seems to be the ideological hallmarks of those in power. Textbooks have long borne this burden. However, there's a difference in today's restructuring of reading material compared to schoolbook rewriting exercises of the past.

In the last five years, parts of history textbooks have been either excised or modified, and the changes have been ascribed to a variety of factors — from rationalising content to reducing the burden on students. These exercises claim to be motivated by a desire to ensure student "well-being", but carry imprints of the ruling regime's anxiety to flatten social complexities.

Introduced last week, the latest changes, dotted with references to the "brutality" of medieval Muslim kings, carry a disclaimer, "Notes on Some Darker Periods of History". It says: "No one should be held responsible today for events of the past. The emphasis is on an honest approach to history and a vision of a better future." Historians have rightly underlined that the account is not as "honest" as it claims. The selective references to the destruction of places of worship by Muslim kings have not gone unnoticed. Scholars have rightly pointed out that such violence was not uncommon across a variety of regimes in ancient and medieval times.

These are significant interventions. Yet, there is a broader challenge for historians: To underline the fundamental differences between the social and moral universe of pre-modern and modern India. Muslim kings and sultans were not accountable for their actions, statecraft had very different objectives and wars were often critical to empire-building. All this is historical common sense. However, it's yet to become general common sense. Narratives of the pre-modern era continue to be framed around heroes and villains.

The search for a proto-nationalist Ashoka, Alauddin Khilji or Tipu Sultan — depending on ideological inclination — and describing a Mahmud of Ghazni or Alauddin Khilji or Aurangzeb as evil might seem somewhat different endeavours. But both obscure an understanding of epochs, much removed in time — Mahmud of Ghazni lived in the 10th-11th centuries, the Khaljis in the 13th and 14th centuries, and the last great Mughal ruled from 1658 to 1707. That the latest revisions in textbooks bracket a more than 500-year period under the shibboleth of "Dark Age" shows that even a section of historians, affiliated to the ruling regime, carry such blinkered views.

The challenge, in large measure, has to do with a historiographical deficit, plaguing which remains a work in progress. Indian historians have produced groundbreaking studies on the extractive nature of medieval kingdoms, the ebbs and flows of commerce, the caste system and the rise

of kingdoms far away from sultanates in Delhi. Yet, an understanding of violence in pre-modern times is a relatively recent historiographical pursuit. Charges of destruction of places of worship continue to be countered by narratives that stress the political impulses behind such violence — as opposed to religious motives. The standard response is also that instances of destruction of places of worship by sultans and badshahs were far fewer compared to the grants they gave to temples and monasteries. A historian should, of course, be judged by her fealty to facts. Viewed from that perspective, there is nothing wrong with how most professional historians have responded to allegations of "brutality" levied on Islamic kings.

However, today the challenge in classrooms — and beyond — is not just to provide a point-to-point counter. The internet, political propaganda, social media, films and TV make lives information-heavy. WhatsApp chats have precipitated the collapse of some of the traditional filters on information.

How can narratives that place violence in medieval times in their historical context help? Why do people need to understand the complexities of times when rulers would demolish temples and give grants to many others? What purpose would it serve to depict Mughal and several other rulers as complex personalities who had the blood of their kin on their hands and yet presided over great cultural refinement? Why tell the stories of Shivaji's successors who struck terror in the hearts of British rulers? Shivaji's role in resisting the British without deploying the violence his forces meted out to some communities? Studies placing personalities in their times — and dissemination of such scholarship outside academia — are, of course, needed for purely educational purposes. But in a time when most vigorous when it not only celebrates the resilience of societies but also tries to understand fault lines. The search for syncretism in medieval times was driven by a young nation's desire to place a salve on the wounds of Partition as well as to challenge the narrative of a Hindu India that Indian history, before the arrival of the British, was nothing but an account of communal feuding. Histories of pre-modern violence, not prejudiced by colonial blinkers and innocent of sectarian agendas, have been few, and they have not gone beyond academia.

But why do the students' "well-being" by introducing such complexities in textbooks? The latest changes have been introduced in Class VIII textbooks — a time when youngsters step into their teens. They are introduced to complicated concepts in mathematics and science — cell division, the importance of rigor in research materials. The task is to perhaps the only text of history that a large majority of people, who do not engage with the discipline for professional purposes, will encounter in their lives, while they would be inundated with myriad accounts of the past. Critics of the revisions are, therefore, right in underlining the importance of rigor in research materials. The task is also to find ways to communicate the complexity that informs their scholarship outside select circles — a difficult yet necessary imperative for the historian, inside and outside academia.

kaushik.dasgupta@expressindia.com



DINSHAW PARDIWALA

AS SOMEONE WHO has spent decades in the field of sports medicine, closely observing the physical and psychological toll elite sport takes on athletes, I am both encouraged and excited by the emphasis placed on sports science and technology in the upcoming National Sports Policy 2025. This is not just a policy — it's a paradigm shift.

For the first time in our nation's sporting journey, we are embedding science, technology, and evidence-based medicine at the heart of athlete development. From injury prevention and biomechanics to mental conditioning and recovery, the policy evolutions a system where performance is supported, not just expected.

India has made great strides in global sports. But to compete consistently at the highest level, performance needs to be sustained by systems that are smart, adaptable, and medically sound. The National Sports Policy 2025 acknowledges this and integrates sports science, sports medicine, and cutting-edge technology as foundational pillars for the next decade of Indian sports.

It gives me immense satisfaction as a medical practitioner to note that the new

How to create champions

National Sports Policy 2025 will empower athletes through science, innovation

policy focuses on: Injury surveillance, prevention, and early intervention, which remain essential for athlete longevity; biomechanics and performance analytics to refine training and technique; nutrition and recovery science — areas where marginal gains often make the difference between podium finishes and missed opportunities; and mental health and cognitive conditioning, which, in today's high-pressure environment, are non-negotiable.

The policy outlines that facilities for sports science and sports medicine will be established and upgraded at major training centres across the country. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) has already begun enhancing sports science facilities and installing world-class recovery equipment at its regional centres and National Centres of Excellence, in partnership with the National Centre for Sports Science & Research.

The SAI's ongoing efforts in Bengaluru, where our Olympic medal prospects under the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) train, has got one of the best sports science facilities in the entire country. Another Return to Sports division was recently es-

tablished at the Indira Gandhi Stadium in New Delhi. These are multi-disciplinary hubs where coaches, physiotherapists, psychologists, orthopaedic surgeons and data scientists work together to support athletes.

In a significant step, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports had constituted a 10-member medical panel in association with the Indian Olympic Association last year, including myself, to be stationed in Paris during the Olympic Games. For the first time, India had a dedicated medical team on ground to manage injuries, monitor recovery, and make real-time decisions for our athletes' health and safety.

The policy also rightly champions technology as a tool for governance and performance monitoring. Platforms will be upgraded and restructured to improve the transparency and efficiency of various schemes. From AI-driven performance analysis to real-time dashboards, monitoring training loads and recovery metrics, technology will be harnessed not just to track, but to intervene early, predict outcomes, and course-correct when necessary. What excites me even more is that we

are not stopping at application — we are fostering sports innovation by leveraging technology for data-driven monitoring and implementation of sports programmes. With the proposed sports innovation task force and research grants, educational and research institutions will be encouraged to explore interdisciplinary solutions, creating a pipeline of ideas, tools, and technologies that are India-specific.

In a nutshell, the National Sports Policy 2025 is not just forward-thinking — it is vital. By embedding sports science and technology into the fabric of our sporting ecosystem, we are moving toward certainty — from passion alone to passion empowered by precision.

As someone who has treated hundreds of India's top athletes, I know that talent and training are never enough. Support, science, and systems are what create champions. With this policy, we are finally building those systems.

The writer is a sports orthopaedic surgeon. He was head of a medical panel constituted by the sports ministry to support Indian athletes at the Paris 2024 Olympics

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DRIVE TO EXCLUDE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A prism of exclusion' (IE, July 21). The eviction drives in Assam raise grave concerns about due process and inclusive governance. While the government claims to be inclusive, the real concerns are valid concerns, targeting predominantly Bengali-origin Muslims with the rhetoric of "land jihad" and "demographic invasion" set dangerous precedent. With 19.6 lakh residents still needing to prove their citizenship, governance must not turn into citizenship erasure. Administrative action must be humane, equitable, and just — not exclusionary.

Nilesh Dubey, Ahmedabad

ADMIT THE EVIDENCE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Not so private' (IE, July 21). The Supreme Court correctly ruled that spousal communications are privileged. Protecting the admissibility of secret disclosures by a spouse is also important to preserve the sanctity of the marital relationship. Section 122 of the Evidence Act preserves marital intimacy and privacy in marital spouses. The exclusion of digital evidence in the age of technology would defeat the act's purpose.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

ISRAEL'S BRUTALITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Orwell in Gaza' (IE, July 21). While the debasement of language is rightly exposed, the world must confront the deeper horror: War crimes under the guise of "security". Israel's alleged use of white phosphorus in densely populated areas, banned under international law, is deplorable. There are also allegations of contaminated aid routes, forced displacement masked as "voluntary migration", and strikes on hospitals. These acts are violations of the Geneva Conventions. Doubletalk should not distract us from what may amount to ethnic cleansing.

Zainab Ishaq, Patna

LOSING OUR YOUTH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'UPSC's helping hand' (IE, July 19). The initiative by the UPSC to support candidates who couldn't get a posting is a welcome step. Even then, however, most candidates will not be able to get a satisfying job without policy changes. We are in the age of digital employment. The hysteria around UPSC should be toned down. Otherwise, we will lose our youth to decades of unemployment.

Arsi Siddiqua, via email

Syria's continuing turmoil: al-Sharaa, Druze & Israel

Jihadist-turned-President Ahmed al-Sharaa wants to unify Syria after its 14-year civil war. But domestic and external pressures pose a significant challenge



BASIR ALI ABBAS

OVER THE past week, clashes between Druze and Sunni Bedouin militias in southern Syria's Sweida Governorate have left more than a 1,000 people dead. They have also triggered a UN intervention, in favour of the minority Druze, including an airstrike on Syria's Ministry of Defense in Damascus on Wednesday.

These developments underlie the complexity of the challenge facing Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa: as he tries to pick the pieces of a bloody 14-year-long civil war, fissures within the Syrian body politic and external geopolitical pressures have put him in a very difficult situation.

Disturful minorities

In his six months as President, Sharaa has

publicly presented a singular focus: the integration of Syria's various ethnic/sectarian factions under the new Syrian flag. This is crucial for Syria's reconstruction and economic revival. But Sharaa's personal history — he was formerly an al-Qaeda leader and a designated US terrorist, and has been implicated in violence against Syrian minorities during the civil war — and inability/reluctance to prevent sectarian violence has complicated this effort.

Thus far, he has faced scrutiny on three fronts: the Alawites, the Kurds, and the Druze.

ALAWITES: Residing primarily along Syria's Mediterranean coast, Alawites are the country's largest ethnic minority who served as the former President Bashar al-Assad's principal support base. Alawite areas have been a staging ground for last-ditch armed efforts by pro-Assad militias.

Clashes with Syrian security forces in March led to the death of more than 1,500, mostly Alawite civilians and unarmed fighters. While Sharaa has promised an investigation, he has also repeatedly blamed the supporters of the former regime for the violence, and called them to disarm and surrender.

KURDS: Like their counterparts in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, Syrian Kurds fiercely guard

their distinct ethnic identity. An (uncomfortable) *modus vivendi* with the Assad regime in 2012 gave them a semi-autonomous civil administration (Rojava) with an armed wing (Syrian Democratic Forces; SDF) in oil-rich northeastern Syria.

Sharaa has sought to bring the region under Damascus' direct control and maintained that the SDF needs to fully integrate itself with the Syrian Army. This led to daily clashes between the SDF and armed forces allied with Damascus till March, when the Kurds largely agreed to Sharaa's demands in exchange for specific protections.

But the failure of Syria's interim constitution to specifically guarantee Kurdish rights has been viewed as a betrayal. The Kurds demand a longer timeline to implement the March agreement as well as American and French oversight.

Israel, Syria & the Druze

Around 500,000 Druze live in Syria, mostly in the Sweida Governorate. This historically persecuted ethnic-religious minority has rejected the interim constitution, which would see the disarmament of all Druze militias and the imposition of Damascus' rule on the semi-

autonomous Sweida Governorate.

But unlike the Alawites and the Kurds, Israel's interest in "protecting" the Druze represents a fundamentally different challenge to Damascus. Israel is the home of some 150,000 Druze: there is a vocal, highly integrated Druze community in the Jewish country which has, in recent months, constantly pushed for Israeli intervention against Sharaa's "imposition".

Israel itself sees the Druze as additional cover for its ongoing territorial expansion in southern Syria. Between December and July, Israel has repeatedly struck Syria in order to destroy its conventional military capabilities and expand its occupation of the Golan Heights. This, Israel says, is to ensure that hostile forces cannot use the region as a springboard for attacks on the country.

The recent clashes between Druze and Bedouin militias, the latter of whom Israel claims is backed by Damascus and Sharaa, only gave the Jewish nation further justification to intensify its attacks until a US-brokered ceasefire on July 19.

Despite Israeli aggression, Sharaa has refrained from taking an overtly antagonistic position vis-à-vis his southern neighbour. In fact, Sharaa in May confirmed that Syria had been

indirectly negotiating with Israel "to pressure them to stop interfering in Syrian affairs."

Sharaa's reconciliatory tone has as much to do with his country's incapability to take on the Middle East's predominant military power, as it has to do with his domestic priorities. That said, Israel itself has repeatedly undercut Sharaa's position.

In February, when Sharaa was convening the much-anticipated National Dialogue Conference with various tribal, ethnic and sectarian stakeholders, Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel "will not allow... the new Syrian Army to enter the area south of Damascus", promising "indefinite" Israeli presence in the demilitarised buffer zone — a direct challenge to Syria's sovereignty. The very same month, Netanyahu asserted that Israel will "not tolerate any threat to the Druze community in southern Syria".

What this means

Syria's Arab neighbours and Turkey have supported Sharaa's attempts at rebuilding Syria. Gulf states like the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia's \$15.5 billion debt to the World Bank, successfully convinced the Trump administration to lift American sanctions on Syria, and have com-

mitted vast sums of money for Syria's reconstruction.

This is fuelled both by their common interests in preventing an Iranian resurgence in the region — another factor that has driven Sharaa to negotiate with Israel — and a hope for a more stable neighbourhood.

Israel's independent interests in Syria, however, hinder this regional effort and create what scholars call a "broken windows" effect: instability and violence in one part of Syria risks further instability elsewhere.

Broadly, strong ethnic and sectarian tensions continue to tug at Syria's peripheries while its political core in Damascus struggles with enforcing national unity. In the south specifically, Israel's military actions have supplemented Sharaa's pre-existing challenges.

For the time being, it remains in Sharaa's continued interest to seek peace with Tel Aviv, leveraging Arab and Turkish support. However, the more pressure Israel exerts externally, the more Sharaa's position is weakened internally, spelling more instability for Syria, and the whole region.

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

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

MORE TROOPS & AIR POWER: WHY RUSSIA IS GAINING GROUND IN UKRAINE

RUSSIA'S SUMMER offensive in Ukraine is gaining ground as its forces attack on multiple fronts.

In June, the country's numerical advantages in troops and air power proved its biggest monthly gains in territory since the beginning of the year.

The ground war

Over the past two months, Russian units have been able to step up their attacks on multiple fronts, from Ukraine's Sump region in the north to the steps of Zaporizhzhia in the south.

Russia now controls more than two-thirds of Ukraine's Donetsk region — the main theater of the ground war. Russian forces have carved out a 10-mile-deep pocket around the Ukrainian troops defending the crucial city of Kostiantynivka.

Russia has also entered the Dnipropetrovsk region of eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian soldiers say the Russian army uses two main tactics to advance on the battlefield: pinning down Ukrainian troops with drones, shells, and glide bombs before attacking enemy lines with relentless squad assaults.

Ukraine responds by sending experienced, drone-equipped units to help plug the gaps.

But Russia's relentless attacks are placing a strain on Ukraine's defenses. According to Deep State, a Ukrainian group that maps the conflict using drone footage and its links with the Ukrainian military, Russia gained more than 214 square miles of Ukrainian territory in June, up from 173 square miles in May.

The air war

Russia has been increasing the toll it in-



Russia has advanced around Kostiantynivka and Sump. The NYT

flits on the Ukrainian population at large by punning the country with mass-produced exploding drones. Over the past weeks, Russia has been setting records on the number of drones it sends into Ukraine. This month, Russia launched 728 exploding drones and decoys. As Russia builds up its drone-making infrastructure, military analysts expect Moscow to routinely launch more than 1,000 drones per volley by autumn.

The Russian bargains also include cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. Ukraine has a variety of air-defense systems but the ballistic missiles can be shot down by only one air-defense system in Ukraine's arsenal: American Patriot missiles.

On July 13, US President Donald Trump said he would send these missiles to Ukraine to help the country defend itself.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

JAY MAZOOMDAAR NEW DELHI, JULY 21

DEEPAK MAHAWAR was a popular snake rescuer from Madhya Pradesh's Guna district who on July 14 was seen riding a bike with a cobra slung around his neck. Although his video went viral on the Internet, the 42-year-old was bitten by the venomous snake. He died that night.

Mahawar's is not an isolated case. Nobody is keeping a count, and only a fraction of stunts gone wrong make it to the media. But with daring acts of irresponsible snake handling in the garb of "snake rescue" becoming a social media rage over the last decade, hundreds of "rescuers" have suffered bites, many fatally.

On July 6, *Sarp mitra* J P Yadav died of a cobra bite during a rescue attempt in Bihar's Vaishali. In May, another cobra rescue went wrong in Bihar when 'snake man' Jai Kumar Sahni died in Samastipur.

In March, Santosh Kumar met the same fate in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, close to where another snake rescuer, K Murali, was fatally bitten by a Russell's viper last August. In 2023, Karnataka's 'snake' Nareish was carrying in his scooter's trunk a rescued cobra that killed him.

In this long list of casualties, one of the most telling is the death of 'snake expert' Manish Vaishnav in Rajasthan's Pali in 2021. The 19-year-old died en route to a Jaipur hospital hours after being bitten by a cobra while addressing "fans" on Facebook Live.

Shortcut to fame, riches

The irrational loathing for snakes — ophidiophobia — common among the masses is matched only by their reverence for snake rescuers (read handlers).

"I am a botanist by training and have worked on tigers for over two decades. But people are most impressed when I turn up for an occasional snake rescue," said Dharmendra Khandal who runs Tiger Watch, a non-profit in Ranthambore.

Unsurprisingly, "snake stunts" provide a path to instant visibility on social media, enabling influencers to rack up follower counts and as a result, enjoy big payouts.

The biggest such snake influencer in

EXPLAINED WILDLIFE

Why so many 'snake rescuers' in India get bitten on the job

DEEPAK MAHAWAR
Death: July 14, 2025
Cause: Bitten by a cobra which was slung around his neck.

'SARP MITRA' J YADAV
Death: July 6, 2025
Cause: Cobra bite during a rescue attempt in Bihar's Vaishali.

'SNAKE' NAREISH
Death: 2023
Cause: Rescued cobra in his scooter's trunk bites and kills him.

'SNAKE EXPERT' MANISH VAISHNAV
Death: 2021
Cause: Bitten by a cobra while addressing "fans" on Facebook Live.

India, Murliwale Hausla from Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, has a whopping 16 million subscribers on YouTube and 3.6 million followers on Instagram. The mid-range of the spectrum spans from Chhattisgarh's Kamal Choudhary (12 lakh YouTube subscribers) to Karnataka's Snake Hariha (2 lakh YouTube subscribers). Then there are many aspirants vying for the 1-lakh mark.

Jose Louies, chief executive of non-profit Wildlife Trust of India, is censorious of snake rescuers who go to great lengths for financial gains.

"They tease snakes for viewership, even snake rescues. One video, for example, shows cobras (predator) and rat snakes (prey) together in a well. Shifting wild animals like that amounts to hunting under the Wildlife Act," he told The Indian Express.

Free for all industry

Few states have specific regulations for snake rescue, that is, relocating a snake from a place where it poses a risk to people. Fewer are in a position to enforce those rules since forest officers often rely on volunteers to answer frequent rescue calls.

"There are just too many cases to attend to, particularly during the rainy season. Given

our staff strength and the shortage of trained hands, we are forced to rely on private rescuers, knowing very well how some of them would milk those situations," said a senior forest official in Madhya Pradesh.

In 2018, Maharashtra issued a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for snake rescues, mandating training and documentation. Kerala made certification mandatory for snake rescuers in 2020, followed by Gujarat in 2021, Karnataka in 2022, and Odisha in 2023.

So far, however, only Kerala with its technology-enabled, real-time response system — the SARPA App — has succeeded in keeping a tab on certified rescuers and blacklisting some of the unethical ones. Elsewhere, these rules have made little impact on the ground where self-styled "rescuers" keep playing with fire.

A high risk job

Even while playing by the book, snake rescue is a high risk job.

Of the four most venomous snakes of India, collectively referred to as the Big Four and responsible for a majority of snakebite deaths in the country, the krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*) is probably the easiest to handle. Known for its deadly neurotoxins, it can spring the occasional surprise but is usually

docile, particularly in the daytime. The cobra (*Naja naja*) tends to follow the rescuer's movement, giving a fair indication of where it is headed. Not aggressive unless hassled, the roaring snake is capable of striking from a considerable distance. It usually contracts its hood — a visual cue — before lunging to strike.

Vipers, on the other hand, are often aggressive without much provocation; there is no telling how they might behave. Lightning fast, the saw-scaled viper (*Echis carinatus*) is under 3 feet, and has a way of warning an adversary by rubbing parts of its body together, creating a "sawing" sound.

The muscular Russell's viper (*Daboia russelii*) can grow to double the length of the saw-scaled viper, and poses the biggest challenge for rescuers. It resembles a mighty helix poised to explode, and can reach up to 1.5 metres in a flash.

Doing it right

A simple snake hook and a pipe-necked sack are the best tools for rescuing a snake. These enable rescuers to lead the creature to a burrow-like opening, relying on its natural tendency to enter a dark space. Ideally, rescuers should not need to touch the animal at any stage. Teasing, displays and stunts with snakes are punishable under the Wildlife Act.

While the availability of anti-venoms have improved, many rescuers bitten by snakes die during treatment. "Typically, a snake is agitated during a rescue and likely to deliver a higher quantity of venom if it gets an opportunity to bite," Louies said.

Vivek Sharma, a Jabalpur-based herpetologist, underlined the human cost of recklessness. "Most of these rescuers are under 40, with limited education, and from a modest background. Many of them are the sole earners in the family, some have young kids. They fail to appreciate the risk they take," he said.

Given that it is impractical to police thousands of snake rescuers in the field, Khandal has a radical solution. "A stiff penalty for filming and posting rescue videos will disincentivise the stuntmen and leave only the serious rescuers to do the job. This is a vital service in a country where 40-50,000 people die of snakebite every year."

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Paris Fashion Week 2025: Why do runways show 'unwearable' clothes?

SHAARVI MAGAZINE NEW DELHI, JULY 21

THE MOST exclusive segment of the Paris Fashion Week, the Haute Couture Week, was held from July 7 to July 10. The event signifies the highest level of fashion that is both exclusive and legally safeguarded, featuring clothing that showcases a designer's creative abilities and the brand's craftsmanship.

Major design houses, including Rahul Mishra, Chanel, Dior, Schiaparelli, Giorgio Armani Privé, and Maison Margiela, presented their latest collections under the watchful eye of the organiser, Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode.

While celebrated for craftsmanship and conceptual vision, the collections lead many to wonder: what is the functional purpose of these seemingly unwearable garments?

What is haute couture?

Haute couture means 'high sewing' or

'high dressmaking' in French. Often used for clothing primarily produced in Paris, haute couture includes clothes made manually with great attention to detail, high-quality and expensive fabric, and generally custom-designed for the wearer.

The official haute couture certification is given by the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, and to be eligible, fashion houses must have a workshop in Paris, employ at least 20 staffers full-time, and present "a collection of at least 25 original designs twice a year (January & July) at the Paris Couture Week", according to the official website.

The terms is also used for custom-fitted clothing in other fashion capitals like Milan, New York, and London.

The French term for ready-to-wear fashion is prêt-à-porter, which is also sold as haute couture houses.

The haute couture shown at fashion shows is rarely sold and usually designed to boost the brand's image. Decreasing revenues have led some couture houses to drop their less

profitable couture lines and concentrate solely on prêt-à-porter, resulting in their removal from the haute couture classification.

What is trickle-down effect in fashion?

The perceived disconnect between runway and retail can be explained through sociological and economic theories of the fashion industry. The "trickle-down" theory, articulated by sociologist Georg Simmel, suggests that fashion is a tool for social stratification. Elite groups adopt unique, often costly styles to signify their status. When these styles are imitated by "lower" social strata, the elite move on to new, exclusive looks, creating a continuous cycle. Haute couture runways are the starting point for these defining styles.

This desire to display status through consumption is termed "conspicuous consumption", coined by economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in 1899. Veblen argued that the wealthy engage in lavish, non-essential spending (on goods like extravagant fashion) primarily to signal their wealth and social standing, not for the util-



A model at Paris Fashion Week. Reuters

ity of the goods themselves.

Fashion shows, especially haute couture, epitomise conspicuous consumption. They

showcase garments that are often restrictive or fragile, making them impractical for daily life but perfect for signalling wealth and exclusivity. The high cost of materials and labour makes these pieces quintessential Veblen goods. Their primary purpose is to assert the designer's creative authority, build prestige, and set trends that will later be simplified for mass consumption.

Is there more to fashion than prestige and wearability?

Beyond status signalling, haute couture shows serve a fundamental purpose: they are exhibitions of art. Fashion designers, particularly those working in haute couture, are artists whose medium is fabric, structure, and the human form.

These creations explore conceptual ideas, push technical boundaries of construction and materials, tell stories, and reflect cultural moments in ways that ready-to-wear often cannot. The focus is on pure, unadorned creative expression, innovation, and craftsmanship akin to a painter's most experimental work or a sculptor's largest installation.

When asked about haute couture, fashion designer Akshar Bhan said, "You may not understand a painting by Picasso if you have not read about it. I feel the same about couture. When you wear a couture dress and walk on the ramp, it is to showcase a designer's ideas and creativity."

The "art" displayed on the haute couture runway, however, doesn't stay confined to the gallery. It initiates the trickle-down effect in tangible ways. The radical colour palettes, novel fabric treatments, innovative silhouettes, distinctive prints, or even specific embellishment techniques debuted in couture gradually move down.

Muskaan Kanodia, a merchandiser at COVU, said, "Before social media, fashion shows were exclusive and only attended by buyers, fashion houses, and retailers... Now, everyone can watch runway shows on live streams, and haute couture focuses a lot on the brand's visibility and reach. Every brand has its very own 'design language'. For example, Dior has a very subtle design language, as opposed to designers like Rahul Mishra, Tanu Tahiliani or Iris van Herpen."

[OUR TAKE]

Awaiting closure after 20 years

Acquittals in the 2006 Mumbai blasts leave a lot for Mumbai police to answer

The 2006 blasts in Mumbai are among the worst acts of terrorism in the country's history. On July 11 that year, high-intensity explosive devices ripped through first-class compartments of seven suburban trains on the city's busy Western line in the span of five minutes, leaving 187 dead and 820 injured. In 2015, a trial court convicted 12 persons for the terror strike and sentenced five of them to death. On Monday, the Mumbai High Court overturned the convictions and set all 12 convicts free. The order has raised several questions.

We do not know who carried out this gruesome attack, clearly meant to cause maximum deaths and mayhem, considering the targets and the timing of the terrorist strike. Two years later, a 10-member Lashkar-e-Taiba squad from Pakistan attacked the city and killed 166 people. Could this incident have been prevented if the law enforcers had caught the real perpetrators of the train blasts? Were the planners of the Mumbai 26/11 emboldened by the success of the 2006 killings? There is much for the law enforcement agencies to answer. And on the other side are the victims and their families — who have discovered, after 20 years, that they still do not have closure.

The order is scathing of the Mumbai police's anti-terror squad (ATS) that investigated the crime. The two-judge bench of the high court that heard the case has exposed the police probe as criminally shoddy. The conclusion of the probe rested on confessions extracted through torture, the judges found. The court has described the police's refusal to share call detail records with the accused and, later, their destruction, as suppression of material evidence. It has also said the other material that the ATS produced as evidence, books and air tickets among them, is insufficient to corroborate the claims that the men in custody were members of proscribed outfits and received training in Pakistan. The miscarriage of justice is not just for the blast victims and their families, but also the 12 men, all Muslims, who were arrested, tortured in custody, convicted, and imprisoned for nearly 20 years; five persons, now declared innocent, have been on death row for 10 years now. The compromised investigation shows Mumbai police, and by extension, law enforcement in India, in a poor light; the moral burden on the Indian State is heavier than ever.

Sure, the country has moved ahead since, and after the 26/11 attacks, created the National Investigation Agency to investigate and combat offences related to terrorism and other threats to the security, sovereignty, and integrity of the country. Perhaps, NIA needs to reinvestigate the incident, find where the ATS probe slipped, try to identify the guilty and fix responsibility, even at this late stage.

Pilgrims are not exempt from the law of the land

The *kanwar yatra* has, over the past few years, morphed from a stringent test of devotion to a free pass for all sorts of hooliganism, vandalism and cacophonous disruption of traffic. The *yatra* that passes through the national capital region (NCR) is supposed to be undertaken by the faithful on foot, demanding rigour and a high level of spiritual awareness, fitness and endurance, but it now features large contingents of two-wheelers and trucks loaded with boomboxes, blasting music (not necessarily of a pious nature), and blocking traffic on already choked roads. Then, the *kanwar* mayhem is not just about inconvenience to urban commuters. It has become one of rowdy conduct in the name of faith. Those urging the *kanwar* processions to maintain order and cooperate with the authorities are often met with intimidation. This aggression has seeped into almost all aspects of *kanwar* conduct — CCTV footage from Mirzapur railway station showed a group of *kanwar* beating up a paramilitary personnel in uniform. The noise pollution from boomboxes is in blatant violation of the decibel limits set by the authorities. The lights and loud music that characterise these processions now, provoked a female elephant and her calf on the Doiwala-Dehradun highway that runs along the Rajaji National Park to attack vehicles.

It is time the administration got tough on enforcement of the rules set for *kanwar* processions. Instead of calling criticism of unruly *kanwar* as an attack on faith and talking of penalising such criticism, authorities must be brave and enforce the rules, encouraging (and forcing) *kanwar* to undertake their *yatra* in an orderly, non-disruptive manner.

Old shackles still bind the new Indian woman

The Radhika Yadav murder epitomises the contradictions of the present moment, where young women's desire to write their own futures, away from the shackles of family and community, poses a threat to patriarchy

A father killing a daughter might appear shocking to some urban denizens of Delhi and the rest of the civilised world. Not to me, though. It is as routine as the everyday violence that girls and women in India face as in many other countries across the world. Indeed, there is no country that is free of gender violence.

India has just about begun to turn its back on a scourge that has haunted its girls for the past several decades — the sex selective abortion of female fetuses, a virulent form of son preference. Many thought this method of daughter killing was an improvement over female infanticide since it arguably absolved one of the guilt stemming from wilfully ending the life of a newborn child. Assisted by state-of-the-art diagnostic technologies, the patriarchal desire for sons resulted in India losing millions of girls. Their aborted birth inflicted involuntary bachelorhood on thousands of men in the northern and western regions of the country. And in a perverse logic, peo-

ple ended up sympathising with these "hapless" men, who were seen as unfairly deprived of wives, their own culture and community. Such men were "forced" to bring poor women as wives from far-off states such as Assam and West Bengal, suffer the trauma of social shame and, even worse, accept so-called tainted lineages — a concern that made the Haryana *khatras* finally come around to the view that killing one's own daughters wasn't perhaps such a good idea. Protecting the caste order of caste, community, and kinship pride was the rationale, not that girls inherently deserve to live and thrive.

Fathers in the patriarchal (and other) regions of the country have routinely killed daughters; the decade of the 2000s witnessed many so-called honour killings, hate crimes where girls who married outside caste or religion or entered traditionally proscribed marriages were brutally murdered. Such killings met with community and societal approval — after all, hadn't the righteous parent avenged the slight to his "honour", personal family and community honour? The murderers were valorised by the community, their actions commended for their bravery and courage and for having upheld the moral order under threat from wayward girls.

Did Radhika Yadav's father kill her to avenge his honour? In Haryana, such a murder would be considered routine since the state has been at the epicentre of both female foeticide and marriage-related honour killings. But

there is a new twist in the tale here, it seems. The murder took place in upscale Gurugram, where the rural and the urban leak into each other and which embodies, as Dipankar Gupta would say, "a mistaken modernity". The Yadavs' ancestral village is enclaved within villas and high-rises, with a resident proudly declaring, "We are modern now" and "women work today," leading one to believe that perhaps the family had embraced a patina of urban values, shedding its rural baggage. When it comes to daughters, however, the rural-urban, educated-undecad divides often collapse, and it is the community consensus — which in this case is clearly supportive of the father — that comes to the fore.

To the police, the father, Deepak, cited the frequent taunts from relatives and neighbours about "living off his daughter's income" as causing him great distress and as the primary reason for killing his daughter. It is also reported that Radhika's family "was not facing financial difficulties," and, therefore, she "did not need to work," so why did she have to put her father, who had supported and helped build her tennis career, through this shame and psychological distress? Was it that she was a stubborn girl who refused to acquiesce to his demands to give up her coaching activities after her tennis career was cut short by an injury? Was it because she dared to be disobedient, challenging his authority, control, and power over the family? Were there other points of discord, other intangibles, lurking beneath the



Ravinder Kaur



By wishing to forge her own life, Radhika was challenging the expectations from the social construct of a good daughter of an honourable father.

surface in the veiled spaces of family life that might still emerge? The silence of the mother, who accompanied the daughter on her rent-making outings, speaks to other gendered fault lines in the family.

It seems that Radhika, making breakfast in the family kitchen, was hardly expecting to be shot in the back by her own father. Can a premeditated murder have been wholly unexpected? Or perhaps just its timing was? Or the certainty that her father would not resort to a final solution to their acrimony? Perhaps she had a premonition of it when she expressed to her friend that she would like to get away from her home, even if only temporarily. While the precise psycho-social intricacies of what led to the killing may remain shrouded in mystery, we can only underline the larger societal shifts that help us understand this particular case of filicide.

Radhika, by all accounts, was a successful tennis player and her father had, according to neighbours who testified, worked hard to build her career. Just as many fathers today are nurturing their daughters in sports and other fields, providing role models to other families and girls. Radhika was certainly one of those new Indian women — independent, aspirational, desirous of mundane things such as a career, economic independence, and a life of

her own choosing. By wishing to forge her own life, and not one dictated by patriarchal power and authority, Radhika was challenging the expectations that go along with the social construct of a good daughter of an honourable father. The expectations of good daughterhood far outweigh those of good sonhood in patriarchal societies. While both are subjected to familial and societal expectations, sons' flaws and transgressions are overlooked or concealed, while daughters must pay for theirs.

Radhika's murder epitomises the contradictions of the present moment, where young women's desire to write their own futures, away from the shackles of family and community, poses a threat to patriarchy — the rule of the father. The new reality is of women who, with their capability and competence, take risks every day — whether in Iran, China, India, or even in the West — to take their place in a world that can no longer oppress them as easily as before. The death throes of a patriarchy, where society and its powerful henchmen, from politicians to policemen, are ranged against women, promise to be long and bloody.

Ravinder Kaur is professor emerita (sociology), IIT Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

Questions that arise in the wake of AAIB report

A theatre of the absurd has followed the release — in the early hours of July 12 — of preliminary findings of the Air Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) in the Air India crash last month.

The AAIB preliminary report clearly indicated that the crash was caused by dual engine failure triggered by a loss of fuel supply soon after take-off. What it left unanswered is what led to the fuel cut-off.

Two possible theories emerged as the report was dissected. One group's view was that some equipment failed to cut the fuel off while the other favoured the view that the cut-off was triggered by deliberate manual action since the switches can't move through inadvertent human action.

A few, selective leaks to the international media helped the "crash as a result of a deliberate action by the captain" view gain traction. A tsunami of explanations by the group pushing this view has swept YouTube, WhatsApp, social media platforms and all corners of the internet. Reportage by many international publications and platforms has propped up this narrative, seeking to convince the public that this is the only possible explanation, notwithstanding the absence of adequate evidence to draw such a conclusion with certainty. This theory has effectively ruled out any kind of equipment failure.

The commonality among those in this cohort is the ability to hold attention based on sharp articulation, albeit with spurious data and evidence. Speculations flew ad nauseum to cement the belief — with a tone of desperation creeping in — that no explanation barring deliberate pilot action was possible. Surprisingly, a former Indian captain went on record to say that he was absolutely certain that this was a case of pilot suicide.

Not everyone agrees with this narrative, and this has led to the formation of a new, equally aggressive group defending the pilot. This primarily comprises Indian commanders, crew, pilot associations, and aviation industry professionals — many of whom are willing to bet their careers that this was not

pilot suicide, but was some kind of equipment failure (due to a design fault, a design or software-led malfunction, poor maintenance leading to malfunction or electrical failure). This group has also argued that sabotage leading to the twin-engine failure couldn't be ruled out, pointing to the government forming a high-level committee under the home secretary right after the crash as evidence. They also questioned why airlines such as Emirates and Singapore Airlines are conducting checks on the switches when there is no apparent need as per the AAIB. Voluble aggression has crept into such defence. A few Boeing commanders in India also claim to have lost confidence in the aircraft they have believed in and piloted for decades.

Amid all this, officials of AAIB and all government officials who can be held accountable, Air India and Tata management, Boeing and GE company representatives, have all stayed quiet (except for a brief comment by the US National Transportation Safety Board chief that reports blaming the pilot are premature). Bloomberg recently reported, "The AAIB didn't immediately respond to requests for comment sent out on normal business hours. The US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which is assisting on the investigation, referred questions to the Indian authorities. Boeing also referred questions to the AAIB."

To this last group, some questions need to be posed — after all, 260 lives have been lost. Here are some fundamental, non-technical questions that the public and families of victims may be interested in and deserve answers to.

Was the report release timed to suit corporate in the US (since past midnight is not the ideal time for Indian media), home to Boeing and GE Aerospace? Why not hold a press briefing to clarify matters and answer questions for enhanced transparency? Why was such a loosely worded report that fosters speculation and creates more doubt in everyone's minds released? Are we not entitled to know exactly who all were involved in the investigation, with a detailed annexure on their credentials and why they have been selected for this job? Why is the report unsigned? Why aren't there a few B787 captains or some experienced Boeing commanders in the investigating team? And, if there are, why are their names not known to the public? Why not release the Cockpit Voice Recorder transcript and the Flight Data Recorder data? If the data is controlled by privacy laws, the breach and the leaks to the press should be investigated by the AAIB since it is the custodian of the data.

Air India CEO Campbell Wilson has reportedly told employees in a memo that the report identified no cause and didn't make any recommendations. The question that arises then is: What purpose has it served exactly, and for whom?

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[JAGDEEP DHANKHAR] VICE PRESIDENT

A thriving democracy cannot sustain constant acrimony. Political tension must be reduced, as confrontation is not the essence of politics.

At the start of the monsoon session of Parliament

HT

India must build on the US action against TRF

Countering terrorism in 2025 is anchored in geopolitics, which offers both opportunities and challenges. The recent decision by the US State Department to place the Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in its list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) is an observable moment in the New Delhi-Washington trajectory.

TRF had claimed responsibility for the horrific Pahalgam terror attack in which 26 people were killed. India responded with Operation Sindoor, a military operation targeting terror camps and infrastructure deep inside Pakistani territory, leading to the most significant conflict since the 1999 Kargil war. Since then, US President Donald Trump has claimed that he mediated a ceasefire between the two countries. India has steadfastly maintained it agreed to a thaw only after Islamabad reached out.

TRF is the latest manifestation of Pakistan's long quest to promote cross-border terrorism as state policy. For a long time, it has been LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which have been at the forefront of these efforts. TRF was formed at the end of 2019, mostly as a reaction to India's decision to abrogate Article 370 that gave Kashmir a special status. Another similar entity, the People's Army (PA), also reared its head in the Kashmir Valley around the same time. Unlike LeT and JeM, making them more ideologically attached to the idea of non-Islamic and patriotic resistance than a theology-centric one.

Their design priorities laid along with religion. The two groups want to position themselves domestically to rally potential young recruits against the government's policies, prioritising development of a localised ecosystem rather than the cross-border ones promoted over the decades. In 2021, after the Taliban retook Kabul, TRF released propaganda videos and photographs showing their training camps and western-made weapons such as M4 and M16 rifles. Former chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), General Musharraf, had labelled TRF as the "Terror Revival Front".

The US designation, despite its potential limited real-world impact, is a setback for Pakistan. The visit to Washington by the country's all-powerful army chief General Asim Munir was instrumental to India's push to isolate and corner Rawalpindi on the international stage. Trump seemingly had other plans as he continued to

stake claim of bringing a ceasefire between the two nuclear powers. This would have no doubt raised the temperature in New Delhi. However, challenging Trump directly on this issue would have been self-defeating. Slowly gnawing into his inner circle to make sure the correct people hear of and act on India's concerns regarding TRF, PAFT, and others may, in fact, have worked efficiently.

Countering terrorism remains a core security deliverable for the US, but the post 9/11 architecture of dealing with the issue as a premier global crisis has changed. This must be factored into India's approach moving forward. Over the past five years, compromise and political brinkmanship have been prioritised over trying to militarily defeat terror organisations. The US cut a deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021. In Syria, former al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Al-Sharraf of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) took power in Damascus after the fall of Bashar Al-Assad. This too, was accepted, if not directly prompted, by western powers. Mediation and politicking are the new game.

One way to highlight TRF as a core concern in the US could have been to showcase its design being like that of Hamas, a group that today truly captures the imagination of American political structures these days. While TRF and Hamas, in structure, practice, and construct, are distinctly different, the former, since its attack against Israel in October 2023 and the ensuing Israeli war in Gaza, has enjoyed a narrative top-spin, where it has been rebranded as a "resistance" in many chants of public opinion.

Pakistan's visceral reaction against TRF terror listing is a rare victory for India considering it has historically had a lonely journey to market Pakistan's promotion of its terror agendas. For India and the US, this listing could also be part of a larger development of bilateral ties under the Trump administration, which in nature is transactional and built around short-term gains. As both States are in the final stages of a much-anticipated trade deal, the TRF listing could well be part of a quid pro quo, where Trump may offer some leverage on the trade and tariffs front in exchange for a core security deliverable. In this fractured world of countering terror, it is now up to India to carry the momentum from Washington to other multilateral and bilateral platforms.

Kabir Taneja is deputy director and fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal.

Opinion

We have seen in so many matters that ED (Enforcement Directorate) even after the well-reasoned order by the HC (high court) is filing appeals after appeals, only for the sake of filing

One Nation, One Market?

e-NAM has taken off but inter-state and inter-mandi trade is limited

TRADE VOLUMES HAVE no doubt picked up on the electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) since it was launched in April 2016 to catalyse the digital transformation of mandi or market-place operations for the sale of agricultural commodities. The aim was to create a transparent online competitive bidding system to enable farmers to secure remunerative prices for their produce. While the market access of farmers has improved, e-NAM's stated objective of a unified national market for agricultural produce—facilitated by inter-state and inter-mandi trade to enable efficient price discovery—is still a work in progress. Inter-state trade in agricultural produce kicked off six years ago with the first transaction in tomatoes between a trader in Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and a farmer in Haldwani in Uttarakhand. But since then, it has not really taken off. Last fiscal, inter-state trade on e-NAM declined on year by 50% to ₹21 crore. In the first quarter of this fiscal, it plummeted on year by 62% to ₹2.92 crore. This amounts to 0.01% of the overall turnover on e-NAM. The volumes of inter-mandi trade, too, are negligible.

Nevertheless, e-NAM that is largely driven by sales within the wholesale markets of states has made progress and covers a growing number of commodities like apples, saffron, ragi (finger millets), jeera (cumin seeds), chana (gram), soya bean, copra, and silk cocoons. The e-NAM platform currently allows online trading in 231 agricultural, horticultural, and other commodities notified by the various state governments. Private entities providing services such as transportation, assaying, weather forecasting, and fintech are also being integrated into the platform to enable more farmers to sell their produce to buyers of their choice. At present, 1,522 mandis in 27 states and Union Territories are integrated with e-NAM. Around 17.9 million farmers, 4,518 farmer producer organisations, 0.27 million traders, 0.12 million commission agents, and other stakeholders are registered with e-NAM. The platform thus has reached critical mass to improve farmer incomes. Overall turnover on the digital platform hit ₹80,262 crore last fiscal and is up by 4.2% on year to ₹19,784 crore in the first quarter of this fiscal.

The question naturally is, what is constraining progress towards one nation, one market to fulfill the real promise of e-NAM? Obviously, the various states must relax norms including allowing traders from outside to buy and sell commodities. Union minister of agriculture and farmers' welfare Shriyav Chouhan responded to a question in Parliament in February saying that agricultural marketing is a state subject that is regulated by the agricultural produce market committee (APMC). For online inter-state trade, enabling provisions to recognise the trading licences of other states is required. A few states like Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and those in the northeastern region have such provisions. The APMC Acts of Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh do not prohibit the inter-state trade. Other states do not have such enabling provisions. Logistics also remains a major hurdle for inter-state and inter-mandi trade. In this regard, the government has decided to upgrade the e-NAM platform to facilitate the onboarding of logistic service providers to ensure faster agri-trade across state borders. To improve e-NAM, a national integrated dispute resolution mechanism also needs to be evolved to tackle cases where the quality of goods delivered varies from what is shown and bid for on the platform.

Is Wall Street still too bearish on tariff impact?

"LIBERATION DAY" FEELS like a long time ago. Since President Donald Trump shocked markets with sky-high new tariff rates and a hasty U-turn, the S&P 500 index has rebounded to all-time highs, and there's a pervasive sentiment that Wall Street is recklessly ignoring economic risks that haven't really gone away. Earnings season may, however, provide further fuel for the rally.

Earnings estimates for the more trade-sensitive companies still haven't rebounded from the very serious hit they took after April 2. Maybe (just maybe) we'll start to see that happen as companies announce their quarterly results. Though tariffs are no joke for profit margins, many large companies are finding ways to mitigate the impact, and there's no clear sign that the levies will precipitate the downturn many feared.

Consider consumer discretionary stocks. Excluding special cases Amazon.com and Tesla, sell-side analysts are projecting a 6.2% contraction in S&P 500 discretionary earnings this calendar year. The outlook following after Liberation Day and has remained gloomy. The speed and scope of the downward earnings revisions for the sector since early April were the worst in 20 years outside of 2020 (the start of the Covid-19 pandemic) and 2008 (the onset of the financial crisis).

We can observe a similar collapse of earnings expectations across the entire S&P 500 five-carve out the so-called Magnificent 7 group of mega-capitalisation growth stocks. Analysts now project modest declines this year for consumer staples, and the rebound in industrial earnings is expected to be weaker than what was estimated early in 2025. Among the non-Mag 7 cohort, it's noteworthy that analysts soured not only on profit margins but also on revenues. The latter has room to recover even amid enduring tariffs, as long as we assume that the US economy will skirt a downturn.

If analysts are so down on so many stocks, how has the index performed as well as it has? Basically, it's the same old story of Magnificent 7 exceptionalism, with a special emphasis on a few standouts among them. America's superstar mega-cap stocks are putting the market on their shoulders, driven by extraordinary underlying growth and optimism about artificial intelligence.

The trade war briefly hit earnings expectations for tech titans of Nvidia and Amazon, but they swiftly bounced back. More than just a retailer, Amazon has a massive cloud business that's relatively trade-proof, and Nvidia has benefitted from positive revisions in policy since the trade war first broke loose.

Microsoft, Meta Platforms, and Alphabet never lost their mojo in the eyes of analysts, a reflection of business models that weren't highly exposed to the changes that Trump introduced. Of the entire group, only Apple and Tesla have seen an enduring drop in earnings expectations after early April.

Investors are also learning that some of these stocks qualify for special treatment from the Trump administration. This week, the government reversed course on restricting shipments of key AI processors to China, unlocking billions in potential revenue for Nvidia and rival Advanced Micro Devices.

Whether this Magnificent 7 leadership is a blessing or a hazard is still mostly in the eye of the beholder. Certainly, the lofty expectations implicit in these companies' valuations come with risks of their own, but they're generally separate from the question of whether markets are appropriately pricing tariff policy.

Moreover, equity investors have other developments to cheer. The Republican tax and spending package, known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, enshrines tax benefits on domestic and international income that Morgan Stanley said could benefit companies across a range of industries, including tech and communication services.

On the trade front, Bloomberg reported that President Trump had softened his tone with China to set the table for a summit with counterpart Xi Jinping.

Could the tariff story take another turn for the worse? Absolutely. Yet unlike small businesses, large-cap stocks have extraordinary negotiating power with their suppliers, and the dispersive forecasts in key sectors suggest that there could, optimistically speaking, be room for analysts to start revising earnings higher rather than lower this earnings season. If that happens, we may see some modest upside in the US market.

● DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND STATES NEED TO FINE-TUNE EDUCATION SYSTEMS BUT IT'S PRIVATE ENTERPRISE THAT HAS TO HIRE & TRAIN LABOUR

A template for skilling

ONE OF THE anomalies in our system is that there is talk of demographic dividend where there is a large young population. At the same time there is a constant lament that we do not have adequate trained youth who can be hired for various jobs. This is a serious issue of demand and supply, which on deeper thought leads to the question of skilling the population. So, while we have a large number of youth with varying levels of education, the skill gap is still quite high. That there is scope to improve on this metric is a no-brainer. There should be a medium-term strategy to bring about an alignment. There is some urgency given that the large-scale spread of use of technology and artificial intelligence can exacerbate the problem. Post-Covid, there has been a tendency among companies to gravitate more toward using technology that is displacing labour.

First, there is a need for students in schools to be exposed to different crafts such as rudimentary carpentry, plumbing, electrical jobs, etc. These are skills which would be required all through one's life. While presently the majority do hire such workers for their jobs, having the knowledge helps in times of emergency. At the school level, the mind is also alert and receptive to acquiring skills. This is evidently the case with sports and should be extended to other skills too. Ideally, this should be a part of the curriculum for all schools. This can be kept mandatory for two years in the 9th and 10th classes.

There can be a buy-in with the boards to set aside some marks for completing such courses. Several school boards also include foreign languages as part of the grading process. This can be included in a similar manner. In fact, schools have classes for art, craft, and physical training that can be extended to these skills too. Children from the lower income groups would be going to state-assisted schools—also called municipal schools—which should be covered in more comprehensive manner. At a practical level, it may make sense for state boards to include these options in the curriculum and then expand to all-India boards depending on the outcomes.

Second, we need to have specific courses which look at honing these skills. Just like there are streams like arts, science, medicine, engineering, and information technology, there could be ones looking at practical skills that make students fit for joining industries such as construction, automobiles, or textiles that suffer from a skill shortage. By making it a formal course with a degree instead of a certification from vocational training institutes, an element of seriousness is introduced. In fact, there can be aptitude tests to guide students on what courses suit them best. The qualifying marks in school, which is normally fixed for professional courses, can be fixed at a lower level to draw students who are not good at academics. Also those who are unable to pass the school-level board exams can be



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nudged to these courses that are oriented more towards actual use of skills rather than textbook learning. Third, the employment-linked scheme of the government introduced last year was largely successful. The concept of having internships with companies is a novel way to get the youth have access to on-the-job training. Some public infrastructure spaces can be the perfect ground for grooming such students. There is a lot of investment in railways, ports, airports, among others. These organisations can accept students who have finished basic courses in schools and colleges and need to be provided jobs on real projects.

Here, the government can get youths to register with their qualifications in a database that can then be evaluated periodically and candidates short-listed for internship programmes. The companies which require such labour and are willing to train them in the requisite skills can also be enrolled. In this manner, demand and supply for such skills can be matched. The government can offer incentives in the form of a tax break or allow the cost to be reckoned under corporate social responsibility. A similar modality has been implemented

The on-the-job training via internships should focus more on manufacturing rather than services as this is where there is more value to be added

in the internship scheme announced last year by the government; it can be modified for this purpose. The problem is acute today given that employment generation has been a challenge. Spaces like logistics, retail, and construction have generated a good number. While some jobs like delivery do not require specific skill sets, they may not be sustainable for individuals in the medium term as one cannot build a career in the same. As more unemployed individuals join this workforce, the earnings tend to get depressed. Construction too has challenges where developers are not able to get skilled persons like carpenters, electricians, etc. The major headcount is in menial jobs, which again do not help one move up the income chain. Hence a relook at our education system is necessary where a separate opportunity can be created for those who aren't good in academics. In this manner the skill requirements in industries such as construction, auto repairs, sewing, handicrafts, etc. can be filled by creating a formal workforce with these qualifications. The on-the-job training via internships should focus more on manufacturing rather than services as this is where there is more value to be added. Besides, when we are talking about India becoming a part of global supply chains in manufacturing, having a skilled manpower is an imperative. It must also be noted that the government is only an enabler and has taken the first few steps. The states need to join in focusing on fine-tuning the education systems, but at the end of the day it is private enterprise which needs to hire and train labour. This can be a template that can be pursued for the next five years or so until 2030.

Views are personal

Embed innovation in industrial policy



ADITYA SINHA
The writer is a public policy professional

IN 1957, THE Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik catalysed a significant strategic response from the US. Within months, NASA was established, federal science funding doubled, and educational curricula saw an overhaul. Ironically, in 2025, the US is witnessing a contraction in federal R&D outlays, citing fiscal prudence and administrative efficiency. This reversal in the global innovation epicentre presents a rare opportunity for emerging economies like India. As Joseph Schumpeter observed, innovation flourishes in moments of disruption. India must recognise this juncture not merely as a chance to catch up but as an inflection point to lead, provided it can embed innovation at the heart of its industrial policy.

India has taken commendable initial steps. The establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, proposed ₹1-lakh crore Research and Innovation Fund, and recent department of expenditure circulars easing global procurement of scientific equipment collectively reflect a nascent commitment to reposition India as an innovation-driven economy. These reforms, while necessary, are insufficient. India's private sector investment in R&D remains stagnant at under 0.3% of GDP, and overall gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) has hovered around 0.64% over a decade. Structural inertia, fiscal fragmentation, and institutional silos continue to dilute the potential of these interventions. The real question, thus, is not if India is doing enough to support innovation, but whether innovation is structurally integrated into its industrial development strategy.

To make this pivot, it is imperative to make a case for a state-led innovation policy. Neoclassical economics traditionally

relegates innovation to the periphery, treating it as an exogenous variable. In contrast, Paul Romer's endogenous growth theory posits that long-run growth is fundamentally driven by knowledge production and technological change, both of which exhibit increasing returns and spillovers. These properties create classical market failures; as knowledge, once produced, is non-rivalrous and partially non-excludable, this leads to systematic underinvestment by private actors. Moreover, the returns to innovation are highly uncertain and often non-linear, making them ill-suited to traditional cost-benefit logic underpinning private capital allocation.

It is here that industrial policy must evolve from its legacy perception of being protectionist to a dynamic tool for capability discovery and technological deepening. India's recent (unintended) industrial policy evolution, from regulatory liberalisation and foreign direct investment attraction under Make in India to targeted schemes such as production-linked incentive and the Semiconductor Mission, marks progress. Yet, these schemes often emphasise production volume over innovation intensity. They incentivise manufacturing scale without sufficiently integrating design, research, and tech co-development.

As Mariana Mazzucato argues, innovation policy must not simply de-risk private investment but shape markets around public purpose. In the Indian context, this means aligning industrial policy with national missions in sectors that inherently require public R&D leadership.

India risks remaining a consumer of technology rather than a becoming a creator unless it embeds capability-building into every layer of industrial policy

From a systems perspective, India must address structural failures in the innovation ecosystem. This includes not only market failures but network fragmentation (coordination among actors), institutional (weak absorptive capacity in industry), and directional failures (lack of coherent policy signals on long-term priorities). One way to address them is by embedding adaptive governance structures rooted in the framework of 'embedded autonomy' as conceptualised by Peter Evans and expanded by Dani Rodrik and Charles Sabel. This framework articulates the need for states to simultaneously possess autonomy (insulation from narrow interest capture) and embeddedness (deep institutional linkages with firms, researchers, and intermediaries).

Such arrangements create collaborative discovery processes, where state capacity is not merely about issuing incentives but about iterative co-creation of industrial trajectories. Through learning-by-monitoring, feedback loops, and real-time policy calibration, the embedded autonomy framework enables governments to respond dynamically to technological uncertainty. For example, Taiwan's Industrial Technology Research Institute and Germany's Fraunhofer Institutes function not as static research centres but as living intermediaries, translating public R&D into industrial applications through close engagement with small and medium enterprises and global supply chains. In India, creating such translational institutions across regional clusters could help bridge the chasm between lab and line.

Structural inertia, fiscal fragmentation, and institutional silos continue to dilute the potential of interventions

employment opportunities for its youth at any cost. —Bal Govind, Noida

Reserve AI use

Apropos of "Tech made life easier, but focus harder" (FE, July 21), a 2023 study by Malik et al. revealed that 75% showed reduced critical thinking and 73% exhibited excessive technology dependency, signalling a decline in decision-making skills among Gen Z

Ernest Liu demonstrates that in economies with complex production networks, targeting innovation support to sectors with high distortion centrality, upstream inputs that affect multiple downstream industries can generate large economy-wide productivity gains. For India, sectors like electronics hardware, precision engineering, and green chemistry offer such leverage points. Moreover, in the context of mission-oriented innovation policy, long-term public investment in foundational technologies must be backed by predictable, rule-based procurement commitments that can crowd in private R&D and manufacturing investments.

Capability development must also be seen not just in terms of capital stock but institutional and organisational learning, as articulated in the work of Sabel and Sanjaya Lal. Building industrial capabilities is not a one-time investment but a cumulative, path-dependent process. Consistent upward revision of R&D goals and capability thresholds underpinned China's journey from low-end manufacturing to leadership in AI and quantum technologies. Between 2000 and 2023, China raised its GERD from 0.9% to 2.64% of GDP. In contrast, Israel's 5.6% R&D to GDP ratio reflects a dense web of university-industry linkages, military R&D, and start-up ecosystems. India risks remaining a consumer of technology rather than becoming a creator unless it embeds capability-building into every layer of industrial policy.

We must remember that innovation is not a by-product of industrial growth, it is its precondition. As India seeks to leapfrog development stages, it must remember that one cannot buy its way into the future. One has to invent it. And invention, unlike capital, cannot be imported.

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



JONATHAN LEVIN
Bloomberg

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Andhra's aerospace bet

Apropos of "Karnataka vs Andhra" (FE, July 21), Karnataka has had an aerospace policy since the 90s and would have been the first choice of investment. But after Karnataka dropped its plan to build an aerospace park near Bengaluru airport, Andhra Pradesh is going all out to woo foreign direct investment in aerospace. Karnataka's farmer's

gain is a loss to the state government. The biggest factor which can tilt the scales in favour of Andhra is having a plethora of land and a pro-industry and investment CM at the helm, and it is governed by a partner of the National Democratic Alliance which rules at the Centre. Andhra's Space Policy 4.0 will provide incentives to big firms as well as micro, small, and medium enterprises. Andhra is keen to bring economic development and

employment opportunities for its youth at any cost. —Bal Govind, Noida

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and young workers. Tools meant to enhance intelligence are fostering dependency, with artificial intelligence (AI) often performing tasks autonomously. We must prioritise human potential, while asking ourselves 'what's the maximum capability can utilise as a human?' and reserve AI for mundane tasks. —Murali Verma, Jabalpur

Markets Powering Big Corp Engines

Banks must focus on unlocking subsidiary value

Top-tier companies are borrowing more from capital markets, adding to disintermediation of banks that are facing a diversion of household savings away from deposits into equities and debt. There are cyclical and structural factors at play here. Companies have deleveraged heavily and are finding adequate interest from investors for their equity and debt issues. The demand for corporate credit has also slowed on account of a delayed revival in private investment. Capacity addition by industry remains tepid despite GoI's rapid infra build-up. On their part, banks, too, are tapping the markets on the strength of their balance sheets. Yet, deposit growth trails lending to households as fiscal and monetary policy adjusts to prop up consumption. This is restricting banks' access to cheap money that would make their corporate lending competitive.

A deepening corporate debt market is a healthy development. It frees up bank credit for small enterprises that would otherwise have been subsidising their big rivals. The strong interest in IPOs of small companies suggests an eventual growth in bank lending to this segment. The harmonisation of the regulatory structure for banks and shadow lenders should push credit demand in the direction of the former. The process aids in strengthening bank lending by reducing concentrated exposure to big borrowers. It also imposes competitive intensity into a system that had worked itself into a bad loan crisis a decade ago.

Banks are now doing business differently through improved risk management that will keep them in the reckoning. Banks have entered other areas of finance such as insurance and MFs and are yet to unlock value in their subsidiaries. Companies grow relatively slowly in India, limiting their ability to raise cheaper debt from the capital market. The funnel of small enterprises is widening as larger sections of the economy formalise. Rising incomes will keep credit demand strong from households. Indian banking is in a sweet spot; it must keep adapting to the evolving economic landscape.

It is Not the Age of Genocide, and Yet...

That apathy and inaction can make for deadly weapons is horribly evident by the free pass Israel has received from the international community. India included, to continue with their genocidal land-clearing mission in Gaza. While administrations argue over what constitutes 'genocide' and the extent to which 'antisemitism' can be extended to cover any critique of the Israeli state, famine conditions in Gaza have deepened, with at least 18 people dying of hunger over the weekend. Israeli military operations, which have killed at least 115 Palestinians, and wounded more than 200 people as children are dying of state-imposed starvation, has reached Biblical proportions.

The failure of geopolitics to intervene and make the Benjamin Netanyahu regime cease its mission of Lebensraum is proof of the triumph of realpolitik over basic human empathy. Netanyahu's mission to oust Palestinians from Gaza is a Herodian massacre of the innocents, where starving people by cutting off aid, including baby food, is part of 'strong state' tactics of 'burning down the forest to flush out bandits'. The strategy to make for 'living space' is strikingly familiar. Descendants of European Jews are now perpetrating it on Israel's Palestinians, making it a psychopathological act by which victims have given themselves a licence to become perpetrators of the same crimes committed on them.

Agencies like UN seem defunct, while powers like the US and China are keener to leverage a tragedy than to end it. India, if it wants to stand up and be counted for the right thing, must intervene — pick up the phone and speak to 'Friendly' Tel Aviv; if need be. It is not the age of war, yet wars are happening. It is certainly not the age of genocide and holocaust, and yet...

THINK ABOUT IT

Primitive societies still measure political power in mob numbers

Martyrs at the Altar Of 80s-Style Rally

Somewhere in a forgotten corner of modernity thrives an ancient political ritual: the political rally. The primal display of power through marching mobs, rivers of stalled traffic, and vanloads of people moving to one destination is still a thing in primitive locations like Kolkata. Mamata Banerjee's annual 'martyrs' day' rally yesterday, for instance, really refers to citizens being martyred at the altar of ease of 21st-century living. Such societies still believe that power is measured in sq ft blockage. But can you really blame Didi for picking up and walking in droves with this communist ritual? There clearly are enough people who'll follow the piper in these medieval non-Germanic Hamelins for a free day trip to the City of Play and, for some, per diem and box lunch en famille.

Citizens who, in any other corner of the world, would have demanded they be allowed to go about their daily business, are happy to take such mob showboating as just another normal activity. Daily business being an oxymoronic concept in these places, a staycation on a weekday (for those who can afford to stay home and take a day off) becomes quite another rallying point. One almost admires the commitment to archaic spectacle — until your metro route is hijacked by a banner-waving throng shouting about something that similar mannequins would have shouted in the 1980s.

CHAPATI India must enhance its potential as trade and tech partner, and look beyond US

Vishwa Guru, or Also-Ran?



Ashok Malik

What is the nature of India's current foreign policy problem, or at least predicament? Do not! Trump's episodic statements and social media posts are attention-grabbing. His inner circle's pay-as-you-go diplomacy is alarming. The endless, but unavoidable, wait for tranche 1A of the bilateral trade deal is exasperating. Yet, tactical responses (or non-responses) to any or all of these should not detain us from a strategic re-appraisal.

The US retrenchment from global commitments is creating gaps in three areas — the world's trade and economic system, security framework, and provision of international public goods. There is far from a total withdrawal, but the 800-pound gorilla is slumping down to a 700-pound gorilla. What's more, the fall is not being induced evenly across sectors, regions and geographies. As such, there is the 'known unknown' of the quantum of decline — the notional 100 pounds — but also an 'unknown unknown' of the consistency of American retrenchment: the where, when and how long.

No one nation, partnership or coalition can fill the gap America leaves. This is as true for consumer demand as it is for security architecture. To be sure, different groupings can address some of the gaps in different regions and domains. Read along with great, but still inexorable, US-China digital power competition. This is leading to two parallel processes of hedging for countries such as India:

● **Tech & security** There's a straightforward hedging between the US and China in the digital and strategic technology spheres, as well as security and security-adjacent domains. Here, the space for hedging is contracting. India, like many others, is making its choices. These choices are systemic choices. They have greater resilience and buy-in in US government agencies, and tech and business



Aap up and away, kya?

constituencies. They will advance with or without the White House's outright support. Sometimes they could even do so in spite of it. Of course, pace and visibility will be muted.

● **US plus one** Then, a second process involves hedging between the US and like-minded, non-China partners. Here, the space for hedging is actually expanding. Actors such as India seek, if not alternatives, then at least complements and supplements to their export and trade, supply chains, defence and security, and tech relationships with the US. Skewed dependencies are sought to be mitigated to the degree possible. There are attempts to diversify.

India and Europe looking to do more together in trade, defence supply chains and innovation is one example. India-Australia cooperation in rare earths is another. Increasing partnerships involving non-US Quad countries, as well as non-Quad countries, in the Indo-Pacific is a third.

Having said that, in some domains, even a partial withdrawal of the US footprint is so substantial that no new arrangement can entirely fill it. Nevertheless, it is what it is. Volatility and unpredictability are now a way of life.

attributes the headline of its external strategy. It is not enough to conclude free trade agreements — more accurately, feasible trade agreements — with, depending on who in the government is describing it, 'complementary economies', 'partners to our West' or 'rich countries'. The game is much more gritty granular and painstaking.

India offering a meaningful trade relationship, an economic stake or a supply chain must have to as many countries as possible is the hard, slow and relentless mechanism to building foreign policy leverage. In such a reckoning, they are simply no non-partners — no countries one can afford to ignore. There will be limitations to what India can do with China and Pakistan, but aside from that, India will need to strive to make itself indispensable to some economic imperative or the other with about every country.

This will include individual Asian countries, neighbouring countries — in some of which reckless application of India's quality control orders (QCOs) has caused legitimate push-back — as well as problem countries such as Turkey. In the end, that unique economic stake and proposition India offers another nation is the best metric of its foreign policy influence. An aggregation of such stakes and propositions will make for composite national relevance in a smash-and-grab world order.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two visits this week — to the UK to conclude a trade deal that, among other things, could give Scotch a market advantage over bourbon, and to the Maldives, where bloody-minded economic engagement has outlasted political acerbity — offer a glimpse of what could be. There'll still be about 200 countries to go.

India's systemic choices have greater resilience and buy-in in US govt agencies, and tech and business constituencies, and will advance with or without White House support



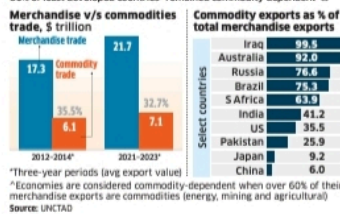
The writer is partner, The Asia Group, and chair of its India practice

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

On Day one, the Parliament met,
With hopes, not a single regret —
But shouting began,
They stuck to no plan,
Four adjournments? Now, that's a racket!

Commodity Exports

Commodities exports comprise about a third of international trade, but their share has decreased slightly in the past decade. During 2012-2014 and 2021-2023, the value of global merchandise trade expanded substantially by 25.6%, while commodity exports grew relatively slowly at 15.5%. As many as 95 of 143 developing economies—including more than 80% of least developed countries—remained commodity dependent.



Bell Curves



I'm receiving their signals. Let's not respond until they learn to speak our language!

A Materialistic Policy



Dhairaj Nayyar

MP Materials is not an American company that many would have heard of. It is the only integrated rare earth producer in the US, covering the entire value chain from mining to processing and magnet production. Last week, the US invested \$400 mn in it, an attempt to use industrial policy to counter China's might in rare earths. Economics 101 frowns on the use of industrial policy — that is, government 'picking winners'. But it can work if used judiciously. India can learn, particularly from the US experience.

In the current mood of de-globalisation and associated economic nationalism, industrial policy has become a global buzzword. But there is a great danger in applying it indiscriminately, particularly in a country like India, which has a long history of largely unsuccessful industrial policy. The fact is that India still does not have a global champion.

The key to success lies in three principles: use only for select sectors, from the private sector, and ensure that the supported firms are competing globally. India has often flouted all three. In the most strategic sectors, it is usually the public sector that gets preference. India's industrial policy is oriented towards protection, creating firms or industries that serve the domestic market but are not competitive globally.

In the US context, Trump's tariff bluster and blitzkrieg are not industrial policy. They represent a mercantilist strategy to reduce America's trade

deficit. They are a political strategy to address key political constituencies. But it's not industrial policy. What the US is doing with MP Materials is. The US government has, for long, supported sectors that are hi-tech or inputs to hi-tech (critical minerals and rare earths in today's world).

America's defence manufacturing industry (all of it privately owned) is what it is because of state procurement, an underrated instrument of industrial policy. The rise of SpaceX also owes a great deal to procurement by NASA. The development of the internet also happened courtesy of R&D spending committed by the US. In India, this is another aspect of industrial policy that is under-recognised and under-funded. Direct state investment in firms is another method.

In MP Materials, the US government is now the largest shareholder with a 15% stake, but it allows the company to remain in private hands and function independently. And, in most cases, the goal is to create best-in-the-world companies/industries that can domi-



Make the world our oyster

nate all markets, not just the US. India has a legacy of central planning, like China. While much has changed post-1991, the legacy of central planning lives on — most tellingly via 250 plus PSUs. These are usually given preferences, particularly in strategic sectors. GoI has not moved ahead with privatisation, but at least in defence, there is now a deliberate, welcome attempt to encourage private sector participation. But a challenge remains.

As long as PSUs exist, GoI will always have to give them business, even when the 'competing' private sector companies are more efficient. In natural resources, GoI gives preference to PSUs (they don't always have to compete in auctions, for example). Even in the race to acquire overseas mineral assets, GoI prefers PSUs. In this un-level playing field, PSUs don't have an incentive to be efficient, while the 'competing' private sector bears the cost. GoI also spends resources propping up PSUs with little future, like BSNL, instead of supporting productive firms and R&D.

GoI also overextends itself. PLI, for example, is a good scheme. It trusts the private sector and has worked well in electronics. But there is less evidence of it working in other sectors. It's better to focus on one or two sectors than spread it thin.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for India is to change the mindset from creating firms that produce for India to firms that sell to the world. For this, reliance on protectionist measures like trade barriers must go. GoI should insist that it will only support firms that will be global winners.

The writer is chief economist, Vedants

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

Paraphrasing from Partridge

Mosquito
Premendra Mitra
The story's so tied up with Ghana's name — most tellingly via 250 plus PSUs. These are usually given preferences, particularly in strategic sectors. GoI has not moved ahead with privatisation, but at least in defence, there is now a deliberate, welcome attempt to encourage private sector participation. But a challenge remains.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Nourishing The Soul

SANT RAJINDER SINGH

As modern life constantly progresses and new innovations continue to improve the quality of life, we are placing greater emphasis on living longer, healthier lives. This growing awareness drives us to eat nutritious foods, get quality sleep and exercise regularly. While all these help us achieve ideal physical and mental health, is that all we need to lead an optimal life?

It is important to understand that spiritual health depends on the health of the body and the mind. The most crucial aspect of well-being is spiritual health. True wellness lies in leading a life where the Divine and the material are in harmony. How can we replenish and restore the well-being of our soul? What does our soul need?

Just as we nourish our mind and body with the sustenance of good diet, sleep and exercise, we must nourish the soul with the sustenance of God's name. Our soul is a part of the Divine and gains strength as it experiences closeness to the Almighty. Through meditation, we can experience the love and Light of God within. As the soul reconnects with the Divine in meditation, we attain true wellness. To embark on this divine journey, we must imbibe teachings of great saints. An ardent soul is healed, our physical and mental health also improves. For this to happen, we must help daily and diligently, meditating on the Divine. This journey of bliss, ultimately attaining optimal wellness.

Chat Room

A Better Mousetrap?

Apropos 'Don't Make UP a Tax Trap' by Ateesh Tankha (Jul 21), the apprehension about tax implications of UPI transactions on small and medium entrepreneurs is indisputable. However, there is no data suggesting that business of small and medium offline merchants has shrunk. On the contrary, they use multiple QR codes for UPI payments in the names of family members, employee, etc, to split sales and reduce tax incidence. The small and medium merchant works on credit and low capital, which makes her financially stressed. It's better to let GST department proceed on the presumptive tax schemes without a mandate for regular account books, which is advantageous for both entrepreneurs and revenue departments.

Vinod Jhri
Delhi

Fossils Fuel Our Health Damage

This refers to the Edit, Air Pollution Norms Went Up in Smoke' (Jul 21). The coal lobby seems to have prevailed over any environmental concerns. This move may provide short-term relief to coal-dependent industries, but can seriously damage the environment for decades. SO₂ is a major contributor to respiratory illnesses, and India is one of its largest emitters. People in the north, especially NCR, should brace for worse pollution levels. It is mind-boggling that rather than discuss and ponder over the de-sulphurisation bill, go took the easy route and put the health of millions at serious risk.

Raj Coohnd
Noida

Just Call Our Bunkerbusters

Apropos 'US Declares Lashkar From the Back Group After Pahalgam Attack' by Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury (Jul 19), we have nothing to be gleeful about since this is a covert terror tactic rather than help us in any way. Instead, we should deploy paramilitary and military forces on the ground and launch a special operation to catch his agents. We've accepted that there's no place in the world that he hasn't been in the last two hundred years and no event that he hasn't had something to do with. I don't exactly know why he decided to come live in our country, even if it is to dwell in this obscure lane. That he condescends to grace our holiday *adidas* with his presence must also be attributed to his infinite kindness.

Translated from Bengali by Anjan Das Gupta
Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com

GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Women's participation in India's labour force must not languish

The economy may stay in a low equilibrium if we do not act to resolve well identified restraints on women taking up jobs



KRITIKA SONI & JAYANTA TALUKDER are, respectively, research associate and associate fellow, National Council of Applied Economic Research.

As India inches closer to the \$5 trillion economy mark with human capital playing a key role, a critical disconnect emerges in this growth story: the disparate contribution of women to the labour force and the economic loss therein. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24, the literacy rate for urban women stood at 84.9%, yet their labour force participation rate (FLFPR) was only 28%. In contrast, the gap between literacy and work participation for rural women is smaller at 22 percentage points (see data graph). While this imbalance is universal, even among developed economies like the US, Japan, Germany and Australia where female literacy rates are nearly 100%, there is an almost 40 percentage point gap between literacy and FLFPR (World Bank 2024). However, developing nations like Vietnam and Bangladesh show a smaller gap of 25 points. India lies in between, with a gap of nearly 33 points (rural-urban combined) but with a lower female literacy rate (74.6% according to PLFS 2023-24). This reveals a deeper structural and social disconnect that continues to limit women's economic engagement. Without addressing this gap, our growth milestones risk becoming superficial targets.

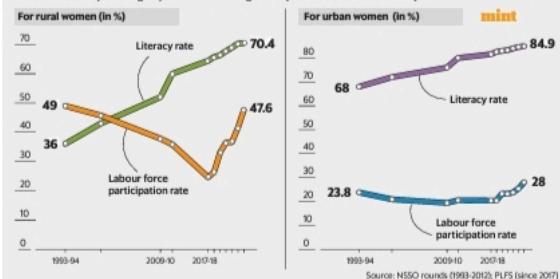
This leads us to a deeper question: Are rural women conditioned to seek rural employment over urban or is urban planning failing women? The differing socio-economic and infrastructural contexts of rural and urban India, perceived as two distinct worlds, shape female labour force outcomes in contrasting ways. According to PLFS 2023-24, over 92% rural women workers were either self-employed (73.5%) or casual labourers (18.7%), predominantly engaged in agriculture. In contrast, only 42.3% urban women were self-employed, seeking jobs in the services sector, a domain that—as the World Bank notes—offers women limited returns due to persistent barriers such as restricted mobility, informal work arrangements, concerns around workplace safety and prevailing social norms (South Asia Development Update, 2024). These structural challenges contribute to what McKinsey described in 2018 as a “leaky pipeline,” where women enter the workforce but steadily drop out before reaching mid- and senior-level roles.

Further compounding this challenge is the role of caregiving, with national data showing women with young children were significantly less likely to be employed (Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman, 2018; India Human Development Survey). This effects an often irreversible FLFPR loss, evident among women with school-going children. One pertinent factor driving this trend is the lack of accessible and affordable childcare infrastructure in urban India. Urban settings—where, according



India needs a larger share of women at work

Women in villages and cities face different obstacles but the proportion who are in the labour force—or actively seeking to join it—tracks rising literacy levels across the country



to the National Family Health Survey-5, 61.3% urban households are nuclear—often leave women without the familial support needed to balance caregiving and employment. In contrast, rural India offers stronger community and family networks that help shoulder childcare responsibilities (Bhindi & Jangra, 2025). Additionally, flexible work options such as self-employment and agricultural labour are more readily available in rural areas, enabling women to balance paid work and childcare through what Gautham (2022) terms the “it takes a village” effect, unlike the rigid and demanding structure of the urban services sector, which offers fewer adaptable opportunities for working mothers.

There was a notable decline in labour force participation among rural women between 2005 and 2019. This trend is particularly surprising when viewed against the backdrop of falling fertility rates, increasing consumption, rising household incomes and ongoing urbanization, as these are factors that should in theory support greater female participation. So why have we seen the opposite?

As household incomes rise, deep-rooted cultural norms can take precedence, reinforcing traditional ideas that cast men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. If the financial need for a woman's income diminishes, her economic participation can reduce further. India's rural FLFPR is persistently higher than its urban FLFPR, despite the latter's education and infrastructural back-up. Instead, what seems to grow with urbanization is invisible labour. According to the Time Use Survey

2024, Indian women spend an average of 289 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, compared to 88 minutes for men. Urban women, in particular, are burdened with the challenge of juggling professional and domestic responsibilities, often without structural support. This invisible weight leads to time-bound underemployment, where women may want to work but are unable to find opportunities that align with their caregiving obligations. These unobserved nuances continue to hold back industrious female employment, both in rural and urban landscapes. Further, the post-covid rise in our rural FLFPR can be partially attributed to crisis-driven fallback strategies, uncharacteristic of persistent long-term solutions.

The World Bank estimates that closing the gender gap in employment could boost global GDP by more than 20% (Women, Business and the Law, 2024). But this is as much about equity as it is about lost opportunity. Increasing the FLFPR can make gender progress a key factor in economic output, address issues that women and children face, and enhance social development overall. This requires redesigning our labour market with investments in public childcare infrastructure, promoting flexible work models and challenging the notion of caregiving as a woman's exclusive burden as a few of the necessary steps. A comparison of rural and urban data shows that neither setting is working for women, even if the reasons for this differ. We need to address our low women's labour force participation to avert a growth story that may remain stuck in a low equilibrium.

These are authors' personal views.

Robotaxi battle royale: Uber's new deal ought to worry Tesla

Tesla may get left in the dust by rivals if it doesn't show results soon



LIAM DENNING is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering energy.

Conventional wisdom has it that the rise of robotaxis is bad for Uber and oh-so-good for Tesla. But conventional wisdom is the antithesis of disruption. Along comes a deal to hammer home the point: Uber's autonomous vehicle partnership with Lucid and Nuro. Tesla should watch out.

The three companies are teaming up to build a fleet of at least 20,000 robotaxis, using Lucid's Gravity electric SUV fitted with Nuro's autonomous vehicle (AV) system, and owned and operated by Uber or third-party partners. They plan to deploy the first ones next year in an unnamed major US city. As part of the deal, Uber will invest in both companies. For Lucid, the funding is to refit its assembly line to incorporate Nuro's technology. But along with the sales pipeline, it has already refit Lucid's distressed stock. Having fallen by nearly 90% over the past three years, it jumped by more than a third on the news as an army of short bets got squeezed.

In theory, robotaxis are bad for Uber's ridesharing business, letting the likes of Waymo, Alphabet's AV unit, Tesla, and a few others eat into its business. In December, Uber's stock suffered its single biggest one-day drop in more than two years on news of Waymo's expansion to Miami.

The reality, however, is that AVs, currently less than 1% of the rideshare market, aren't suddenly going to displace human drivers. Rather, we'll likely see a hybrid model develop. Like airlines, making AVs profitable relies largely on higher utilization. More butts in seats goes places. But we humans travel erratically, so building enough robotaxis to meet peak demand would inevitably mean a lot of empty ones for long stretches of the day, a downside known as “deadheading.”

In addition, AVs as struggle with some of the most profitable but complex routes such as picking up and dropping off at the automotive mecca known as the airport line. A better model, at least for the foreseeable future, would involve a base of AVs covering a steady diet of rides supplemented by human drivers serving the more lucrative demand surges as well as routes that befuddle robots.

This takes us to a wider point raised by Uber's deal: No one yet knows what success in the autonomy market will look like. In this case, Uber is capitalizing on its own success—free cash flow doubled last year to \$6.9 billion—and the struggles of Lucid to secure a pipeline of high-end electric robotaxis. But that is just one of several bets it is making. In April, it announced an agree-



Tesla's leadership of the US driverless taxi market is far from assured.

ment with Volkswagen to deploy the latter's Buzz electric vans for autonomous rides in Los Angeles, targeting commercial operation in 2026. And rather than outright competitors, Uber and Waymo are more like frenemies, with the latter's robotaxis operating exclusively through Uber's app in Atlanta and Austin.

The robotaxi business is ripe for such cross-cutting competition and collaboration. Besides the hardware and software mix in the vehicles themselves, there is a surrounding ecosystem—cleaning and maintenance, charging, network management and, often overlooked, remote customer service and tele-operations for when robotaxis or passengers require assistance. Beyond this, there is an opportunity for AV developers to license their technology to legacy firms like Detroit's automakers, which have struggled with in-house efforts at self-driving cars.

One company that stands apart from all this is Tesla. Mostly vertical integration served the company well in disrupting the auto market with desirable EVs. The benefits in AVs are, thus far, less clear. Last month's launch of Tesla's long-delayed robotaxi service in a patch of Austin has been disappointing, relative at least to the stratospheric expectations set over the years by CEO Elon Musk and which underpin Tesla's triple-digit earnings multiple.

One of this new market's central debates is whether Tesla's cheaper camera-based general autonomy model can beat the more expensive, gradualist approach using multiple sensors such as Lidar that characterizes Waymo's rollout. Tesla's limited Austin rollout undercuts its high-buzz narrative, but its resilient stock speaks to the strength of belief in Musk's ability to not merely take the lead, but outright crush the competition.

Yet, in launching its service, Tesla has started the clock on having to demonstrate real progress. In some ways, the dream of a robotaxi was more valuable to the company than actual deployment.

Meanwhile, competitors are placing multiple bets in multiple markets, knowing that some may pay off while others become footnotes. It will be years before we can judge the success of Uber's latest move. For Tesla's stock, priced for dominance, it's a problem already.

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MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

Don't be naive: Agentic AI won't eliminate agency costs

SIDDHARTH PAI



is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

In 1976, economists Michael Jensen and William Meckling—later my professors—introduced a theory that would fundamentally reshape corporate governance. Their insight was elegant and unsettling: whenever a “principal” hires an “agent” to act on its behalf, the agent's behaviour may diverge from the principal's interests. This misalignment, whether stemming from perverse incentives, bad information or mere opportunism, gives rise to “agency costs.” These costs extend beyond direct losses, encompassing expenditures on supervision, control and contract design—all intended to narrow the behavioural gap.

In a corporate setting, for example, shareholders (or principals) entrust executives (agents) to steward their capital. Yet, these executives might chase vanity acquisitions, entrench themselves in power or inflate their compensation, rather than maximize shareholder value. Corporate board oversight and elaborate incentive schemes have evolved to mitigate such tendencies.

But what if the agent is no longer human? Increasingly, tasks once executed by human agents are being delegated to artificial ones—systems powered by advanced machine learning, capable not merely of following commands, but of evaluating inputs and initiating actions autonomously. This phenomenon has acquired a name, Agentic AI, and few have embraced it as ardently as Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, who envisions a world in which digital agents are not assistants but quasi-employees: systems that manage customer interactions, initiate procurement processes, adjust workflows and operate enterprise software.

These agents are programmable, tireless and crucially far less costly than salaried workers. If Jensen and Meckling were concerned with agents acting out of their own self-interest, what happens when the agent lacks interests altogether? Algorithms do not scheme or self-promote. They do not negotiate bonuses or conceal incompetence. Surely, this should obviate agency costs.

Yet, substituting organic with synthetic agency doesn't dissolve the problem—it only reconstitutes it. While human agents may act in bad faith, artificial agents are susceptible to malfunction, misjudgement and malevolent interference.

In 2023, an airline's AI-driven pricing engine misread demand signals and began offering long-haul business class seats at economy prices. Thousands of customers seized the opportunity before the system was corrected, costing the airline millions. In finance, trading bots have misfired spectacularly, executing vast loss-generating trades in minutes, sometimes triggered by spurious data or misinterpreted sentiment scraped off public forums like Reddit.

The problem is not intention, but opacity. With human agents, principals have recourse to discourse, judgement and punishment. With AI agents, especially those operating on the basis of opaque neural networks, the rationale behind a decision is often untraceable even to the engineers who built the model (the “black box” problem). Yet, market appetite for Agentic AI remains unabated because the financial calculus is compelling. Humans demand salaries, benefits, ergonomic chairs and holidays.

They introduce unpredictability via fatigue, emotion or bias. AI agents are low-maintenance, infinitely scalable and ostensibly rational. They can ingest terabytes of data, execute decisions in microseconds and do so without ever filing a leave request.

They also promise something seductive: uniformity. Human discretion is noisy. One service representative might waive a fee out of sympathy; another might escalate the matter. AI, by contrast, is consistent, provided its internal logic holds. It offers the kind of docile fidelity to policy that Jensen and Meckling would have deemed utopian.

But AI agents don't understand context—they parse inputs, optimize against objectives and act on learnt correlations. If those inputs are flawed, the goals poorly specified or its correlations spurious, it could be calamitous. Worse, since these systems learn from data rather than being explicitly programmed, their internal reasoning can be both technically correct and operationally catastrophic.

Machines can act with rigorous logic and still violate common sense. Their inability to recognize the limits of their own scope poses an under-theorized form of agency risk.

Security compounds the hazard. A human agent, even if compromised, can only inflict damage locally. An AI agent, if hacked, can propagate harmful decisions across an enterprise in a flash. It might reorder inventories, unlock restricted files, manipulate pricing models or approve fraudulent transactions. By investing authority in AI firms may unwittingly be upping systemic risk.

Jensen and Meckling taught us that agency entails a cost. The essence of the principal-agent problem is not merely bad behaviour but structural misalignment—an inevitable by-product of delegation. Agentic AI reveals that alignment, even when theoretically perfect, does not eliminate the burden. It shifts the problem from motive to mechanism, self-interest to system design and watchfulness to interpretability. The notion that Agentic AI will vanquish agency costs is naive. Agency has not been abolished. It has mutated. It now resides in lines of code, probabilistic models and behaviours no one fully understands. In delegating judgment to algorithms, we are not escaping but deepening the agency dilemma.

Adopters of AI agents should be wary of risky ways in which such bots could veer off their objectives



OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Crypto regulation can't be left for another day

We urgently need to set up a sound regulatory framework for digital assets. Sebi, RBI and the government must come together to fill the vacuum and protect investors before it's too late

India topped global crypto adoption for the second year in 2024, according to Chainalysis, a US-based blockchain analysis firm, with 119 million investors, nearly one-fifth of all crypto holders worldwide. The US ranked second with 53 million investors, followed by Indonesia with 39. Telling as these estimates are, the ranks could soon change. Last Friday, US President Donald Trump signed into law the Genius Act to create a regulatory regime for stablecoins. American investors, unlike their Indian counterparts, will now have the comfort of a regulatory framework. America's new law requires stablecoins—or crypto tokens whose value is pegged to a regular currency—to be backed by liquid assets such as US dollars and short-term Treasury bills. This enhances their credibility. Issuers must also disclose the composition of their reserves every month. Consequently, digital assets could become a routine way to make payments and transfer money. Stablecoins, mostly designed to maintain a 1:1 dollar peg, are already in heavy use. Under the new law, the market could grow to \$2 trillion by 2028, as Standard Chartered Bank estimated. For comparison, the market for gold is projected to grow to just \$458 billion by 2032, according to Fortune Business Insights.

India, alas, is yet to regulate cryptocurrencies. Even as India's wealthy and not-so-wealthy seem drawn almost irresistibly to crypto assets, despite the risks, we remain in a regulatory vacuum. The government has been quick to tax crypto gains, but has not been remotely as agile in clearing the fog on digital assets or laying down rules. As former finance secretary S.C. Garg argued in a *Mint* op-ed, India's approach to crypto assets has been piecemeal, passive and systemically unsustainable. A long-awaited

discussion paper on the subject is yet to be released. Meanwhile, investors in these digital assets appear to be swelling steadily. According to reports, retail investors dominate crypto exchanges in India, making up 90-95% of users, though they account for only 30-50% of trading volumes, while high net-worth individuals and institutions are fewer in number (4-10%) but drive 50-70% of turnover with larger trades and their frequent use of derivatives. India's regulatory vacuum has seen several crypto exchanges rush in to meet demand, but the safety of these platforms is a wild guess. Take cyberattacks. Just last week, CoinDCX suffered a cyber heist of \$44 million, with this money reportedly stolen by hackers from an internal account. Though the exchange said all investments are safe, the incident highlights the need to make this market both safer and more transparent. Last year, WazirX had lost \$234 million to theft.

These are not small amounts and it is too late for a crypto ban. At least stablecoins need legal recognition (and rules). Sure, it could be argued that UPI already eases payments and that the central bank's e-rupee can serve the smart-money functions of crypto. But investors have voted with their wallets for private tokens. In this scenario, we need action of the kind taken by our regulator of capital markets, Sebi, to make the market for equity derivatives safer for investors. Sebi must now join hands with the government and central bank to fill the crypto vacuum before retail investors burn their fingers. Garg has proposed mandatory licensing, transparency, insistence on Indian jurisdiction and the functions of exchanges, brokers, aggregators, custodians and other entities kept apart as the four cornerstones of a crypto regulatory framework. That would be a good start.

Ratings: What works for bonds can aid investors elsewhere too

Retail investors should thank Sebi for its proposal to extend this idea to a diverse range of sectors



MADAN SABNAVIS
is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun'

Credit rating agencies (CRAs) in India are allowed to rate only debt instruments that are (or could be) offered to the public. This implies that all public issues must be rated. However, private placements also get rated as they could be offered in the market at some point. In fact, issuers of such private placements get ratings from three or four CRAs, as investors often insist on them. Hence, there is a lot of value that is brought to the table. The Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) draft paper that explores the widening of such ratings to companies or instruments that come under different financial regulators is noteworthy. As a number of financial products are reaching the retail level, it is a timely discussion. A wider range would help investors in general make better-informed decisions. Sebi has already noted that these new ratings would be ring-fenced from the rating business through separate outfits to minimize conflicts of interest.

In the past, CRAs have graded non-debt instruments too. They have graded initial public offerings (IPOs) of equity and also real estate. However, these services did not quite catch on. One lesson learnt was that unless such a grading was mandatory, entities were unlikely to opt for one. For IPOs, it began as a useful tool to denote how true the company was to what it stated in its issue

prospectus. It was not to be an indicator of how well that stock would later do. However, the concept got undermined as critics attempted to link the stock's post-listing market performance with its grading. So such gradings were left to the choice of stock issuers, which gave up on the idea.

Real estate grading was also not very successful, with mostly lesser-known builders opting for an evaluation. Bigger developers had their brand names to see them through, while others faced the risk of a low grading that could work against them. Without regulatory compulsion, real estate companies preferred not to get graded.

Now that ratings or gradings seem likely to be extended to other regulatory domains, services such as insurance and pension would qualify for such evaluations. There are a plethora of schemes offered by insurers to cover life and other general risks. Their finer points, however, often go into the fine print, which customers are rarely aware of. As insurance agents tend to push products that suit their own interests, customers often end up making inferior decisions. Having a grading for each product will ensure that the customer can evaluate the options available on that basis. The grading could cover aspects such as the policy's promised benefits, the insurer's financial strength, record of service to claims, turnaround times and so on.

These are key inputs for the customer. A similar rationale holds for pension funds, which showcase past returns with the caveat that these are not indicative of the future. A grading of such schemes can be especially useful for investors. In fact, even mutual funds, under the domain of Sebi, should have their schemes graded in a manner that offers investors a clear picture based on metrics other than returns.

There are several similar-focused schemes run by asset management companies that need to be evaluated independently. Presently, independent agencies do give star ratings that are

based not on performance but how portfolios are handled by investment managers. This idea should also be explored for the purpose of ratings.

Note that the Reserve Bank of India mandates banks to use only ratings issued by an external credit rating agency for determining risk weights while calculating the capital that must be maintained by banks to cover the risks of their asset portfolios. Therefore, it can be argued that ratings are in a way already being prescribed by financial regulators other than Sebi.

Much effort by regulators in all fields has gone into improving India's level of financial literacy and nudging people to try different products. This is welcome, as it helps investors plan their finances better. But in the absence of knowledge, people often take investment decisions based on influencer tips, which can result in sub-optimal outcomes. Having ratings for a wide range of financial products, therefore, will be of help.

That said, there are steps that need to be taken to make this initiative successful. First, the idea needs the buy-in of the relevant sector's regulator. *Prima facie*, there cannot be any objection as anything that benefits the customer should be welcomed. Second, gradings must be made mandatory. If not, players may not go for such a rating or grading as these could work out unfavourably for them. Third, the rating or grading methodology needs to be formulated in discussion with all market participants and the field's regulator, so that it has wide acceptability. As this exercise would be novel, consultation with insurers and pension funds would be required. Fourth, a major campaign must be launched to spread awareness of these ratings, so that the public is nudged to take them into consideration as envisaged.

This idea of extending ratings to financial products beyond debt is a chance to strengthen public confidence and should be taken up by all regulators. These are the author's personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

If you don't take good care of your credit, then your credit won't take good care of you.

TYLER GREGORY

THEIR VIEW

Banks mustn't let Risk Appetite Statements gather dust

DEEP MUKHERJEE



is a quantitative risk management professional and a visiting faculty member of IIM Calcutta

The term 'risk appetite' (RA) gained currency after the 2008-09 financial crisis that began in the US. In 2013, the European Banking Authority (EBA) and Financial Stability Board (FSB) were the earliest regulators to include RA in formal regulatory asks. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its 2014 Master Circular on Basel III Capital Regulations articulated the need for banks to document their RAs clearly. Bank boards and their managements are expected to set risk limits and lay down the types of risk exposure they plan to take in pursuit of profits. This is to be formally documented as a Risk Appetite Statement (RAS) and monitored for any breach. It calls for an upfront resolve that the bank will not take certain types of risk and keep those taken within the ambit of its stated risk appetite. Since some forms of lending are highly profitable in times of an economic boom but can erode more capital than the profits made if and when the cycle turns, an RAS encourages thinking beyond the short-term. The act of stating what level of risk the

bank's board acknowledges as being borne by the business heightens the awareness of risks and ensures capital planning to cover them. To achieve their objectives, RAS limits and thresholds must be unambiguous, granular and quantitatively robust. However, that is often not the case.

RAS as a neglected risk management tool: The actionability of a risk appetite statement has remained an issue. Globally and in India, only a few exemplar banks have well-designed, strategically relevant and definitive statements. In such cases, the RAS drives the strategic planning exercise. Further, enterprise-level thresholds cascade to the business-unit level, translating into growth projections, capital requirements and risk guard-rails for each unit. In contrast, at banks where the RAS serves only as a regulatory tick box, the strategy planning exercise rarely refers to the statement and business-unit level planning and risk-taking are not aligned with enterprise-level risk limits. At times, business unit heads are not even aware of how the enterprise-wide risk appetite applies to their operations. This leaves the board with limited control over the risks the bank actually ends up taking.

Banks need impactful risk appetite statements. Let's focus on three aspects.

Explicit quantitative thresholds: Let's take the capital adequacy ratio (CAR), a common metric of a capital cushion to absorb losses. RA thresholds are often set on these. Say, the regulatory minimum CAR is 12% of risk-weighted assets. A bank cannot have a below-threshold that will cause its CAR to fall below 12% in an adverse situation of loans going bad. If a hypothetical Bank XYZ's CAR is 18%, to set a CAR threshold, it may take the average of the two (i.e. 15%) or review its historical CAR level and limit it to the average of that. Or it could take a number between its historically low CAR and its average. While this sounds comforting, such approaches lack economic rigour and risk relevance.

Typically, for a healthy bank, the minimum capital to be held as directed by CAR regulation should be higher than its economic capital (EC), or the amount of equity required by the bank to cover a loss of 1-in-1000 odds, stylized as a 'once-in-1,000-years loss'. Likewise, a bank could take multicycle loss data to—adjusting

for the fat-tail nature of credit losses—estimate the size of a 1-in-3 odds loss. If such an event reduces the capital cushion by a sum that hits the bank's CAR by one percentage point, then an RA limit set at 13% implies a 1-in-3 chance of dropping below the 12% regulatory minimum. Such a choice suggests a very high risk appetite.

Banks must state their risk appetites on the basis of metrics that turn these statements into steering wheels What would a conservative bank with a lower risk appetite do? If a 1-in-20 shock (much less likely to happen) is estimated to hit the CAR by 4 percentage points, it could set an RAS threshold of 16%. Either way, for the RAS to work meaningfully, the bank must make an explicit choice.

Risk-adjusted performance measures: The Risk Appetite Statements of banks often have return-on-asset (RoA) and return-on-equity (RoE) thresholds. But this does not allow the estimation of capital consumption at the business-unit level. For this to be done, banks must calculate return-on-economic-capital (RoEC). This would help in measuring the economic value added at

the business-unit level and thus help both in improving capital allocation and ensuring that the RAS cascades through the bank.

Stress testing: Bottom-up portfolio-wise stress tests should be carried out to estimate the sensitivity of the bank's losses to relevant macroeconomic and geopolitical factors. This is critical to simulate and assess how a portfolio growth strategy will impact losses during a downturn. While banks perform stress tests to meet regulatory requirements, there is scant evidence that this exercise has been integrated with their RAS and strategic planning processes. Most banks perform 'static' stress tests, with their capital sufficiency tested under the assumption of, say, an X% surge in bank-wide losses.

Banks must shift from treating the RAS as a tick-box routine to using it as a steering wheel for their strategy in the context of risk control. Without a functional RAS, a bank's board cannot properly supervise the risks being taken by business units in their rush to meet short-term targets. When stakeholders are hit by earnings shocks or adverse disclosures, bank boards are often just as surprised as shareholders and the regulator. A well-designed Risk Appetite Statement could tackle this problem and result in markedly safer banking.

Fixing GST

India needs a simple and stable tax structure

The goods and services tax (GST) system is set for an overhaul in the coming weeks. It has been reported that Union Home Minister Amit Shah would initiate discussions with different stakeholders to resolve pending issues. If true, this reflects the political urgency to improve the GST system through a consensus between the central government and states. Another news report last week showed that the Prime Minister's Office had given in-principle approval to the restructuring of the framework. The Union government's intention to adjust the GST system to improve its workings should be welcomed. It, however, must be noted that while GST has enabled the creation of one national market as intended, it has underperformed in terms of revenue collection, which has particularly affected the Union government's finances. Unlike states, the Union did not have the cushion of compensation for a revenue shortfall in the initial years.

As discussions move forward, the GST Council has to focus on at least three areas. First comes slab and rate rationalisation. It is now well acknowledged that one of the reasons for the underperformance of the GST system is the complexity of its rate structure and multiple slabs. Ideally, economists argue, the system should have a single rate. However, India decided to make it progressive. Even while striving to achieve this objective, the number of slabs can be reduced. In this regard, it has been reported that the 12 per cent slab will be done away with, and the items taxed at this rate will be shifted to the 5 and 18 per cent slabs. This could complicate the system. A better way will be to merge the 12 and 18 per cent slabs at an appropriate rate. The objective of rationalisation should be to simplify the rate structure without losing revenue. Premature rate reductions in the initial years affected revenue collection. Gross GST collection, including the cess, in 2023-24, for example, was about 6.7 per cent of gross domestic product, as against 6.3 per cent collected from taxes subsumed in GST in 2016-17. Net collection excluding the cess was much lower in 2023-24.

The second aspect that the GST Council has to address is the compensation cess. Under normal circumstances, the collection of compensation cess should have ceased after the completion of five years of GST. However, it was extended until March 2026 to repay the debt incurred for compensating states due to the shortfall in compensation-cess collection during the pandemic. Estimates suggested that the repayment would be over by December or January. If relevant provisions are not changed, cess collection will have to be stopped after the repayment is completed. Some stakeholders have suggested that the cess be subsumed in the GST rate.

In this regard, it must be remembered that the initial objective was to impose the cess for a limited period of five years to serve a limited objective. It was extended in exceptional circumstances. Further, contrary to the objective of simplifying the GST structure, subsuming the cess in GST rates could end up increasing the number of slabs and complicating the tax system further. So, it's important that all such issues are taken care of in time. Different groups of ministers have worked on both rates and cess issues. Third, the GST Council should also address the compliance issues, which are raised from time to time by businesses. One of the reasons for GST's underperformance is said to be compliance complications. The GST Council would be well advised to address all outstanding issues in one go to simplify the structure and improve revenue collection. India needs a stable and simple GST.

Targeted intervention

Focusing on low-productivity districts will boost growth

The Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PM-DDKY), recently approved by the Union Cabinet, marks a shift in India's agricultural policy — from blanket subsidies to targeted, district-level intervention. By focusing on at least one district per state with low productivity, low cropping intensity, and low credit disbursement, this scheme aims to target areas that have been left behind. It places strong emphasis on enhancing agricultural productivity through crop diversification, sustainable practices, improved post-harvest infrastructure and irrigation facilities, and better financial access. Backed by performance-based monitoring through 17 indicators, the scheme signals a clear intent for systemic reform.

Historically, India has experimented successfully with similar models. The Intensive Agriculture District Programme (IADP), launched in 1960, and later expanded as the Intensive Agriculture Area Programme (IAAP), brought subject-matter experts together at district level to direct coordinated intervention. It was within this very framework that high-yielding wheat varieties were introduced in 1966, paving the way for the Green Revolution. This demonstrates that district-led, integrated planning is not new but remains a proven template worth revisiting.

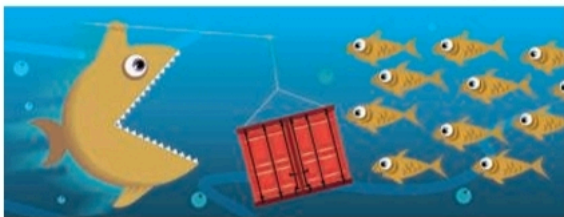
However, identifying the 100 "Dhan-Dhaanya" districts and designing 17 performance indicators are only the starting point. Given India's agro-climatic and socioeconomic diversity, success will depend on decentralised problem-solving and participatory governance. The formation of the "District Dhan Dhaanya Samiti" is a welcome move in this direction. It must ensure the inclusion of diverse local actors, such as panchayats, farmer-producer organisations (FPOs), women's self-help groups (SHGs), agri-entrepreneurs, cooperatives, private players, and, above all, farmers, because their participation is indispensable for identifying ground-level bottlenecks, prioritising needs, and ensuring accountability. That said, the scheme's design brings its own risks. It relies on the convergence of 36 existing schemes across 11 departments, an effort that, while conceptually sound, is in danger of getting mired in bureaucratic complexity. Additionally, the monthly tracking of 17 indicators across 100 districts, though data-driven in spirit, could become an administrative burden. Over-monitoring may shift focus towards box-ticking rather than tangible outcomes.

Besides, another vital dimension is the integration of climate resilience and natural-resource management into district-level planning. Many of the identified districts may overlap with regions vulnerable to erratic rainfall, soil degradation, and groundwater stress. A 2019 NITI Aayog report suggested a water-focused approach in framing state-level agricultural policies and incentives. The PM-DDKY must therefore embed climate-smart agriculture, such as drought-resistant crop varieties, precision irrigation, and agroforestry, within district plans. Strengthening local weather forecasting and promoting decentralised water budgeting can help futureproof these districts. Without climate adaptation as a core metric, short-term productivity gains may falter in the face of long-term environmental distress. To mitigate these risks, capacity-building must be prioritised. Targeting low-productivity districts will not only boost economic activity in some of the backward areas, but will help push overall growth.

World needs willing allies

We need countries to cooperate to counter the adverse impact of current US government actions

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Eighty years ago, an international organisation, the United Nations, was set up and its agreed charter defined the legality of relations between States and established diplomatic practices that favoured restraint and mutual respect. This global standard of behaviour by countries was also reflected in the charters of several other international institutions. To a certain extent, this held true even during the first four and a half decades of its existence that were dominated by tension between the United States and the USSR. Over the past three decades, polycentrism has emerged with substantial rise in the global impact of China, particularly in trade. The incidence of interstate wars has also declined to some extent.

In recent years, this world of balanced relations between nations and restraint in official wars has been diluted — and lately, even disappeared. Substantial interstate war has surfaced in the Russia-Ukraine war, in the genocidal war waged by Israel in Gaza, and the attacks on Iran. Another older example is the attack on Iraq in 2003, led by the US, and supported by the United Kingdom, Australia and Poland, which, unlike the 1991 attack, was not authorised by the UN. Of course, over the past decades, war without UN authorisation have taken place and justified on the grounds of self-defence, which is permissible under the UN Convention.

A major area of success that was important for speeding up development in the post-World War II era was the trade agreement among nations. This global agreement on trade is being vigorously demolished by the US under Donald Trump. But what is worse is the departure from restraint and respect for national independence, which is so evident in Mr Trump's statements about America's capacity to kill the head of State in Iran, and his aggressive remarks to the head of State in Brazil about their treatment of the former Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro. In fact, Mr Trump seems quite keen on making hostile comments about other heads of State.

These departures from established rules are being

largely ignored by most states in their response to Mr Trump's actions. Many are even tolerating the gross breaches of diplomatic courtesy that have become commonplace, particularly in Mr Trump's statements. If a tough neighbour abuses you with demands and you respond to the demands while tolerating the abuse, your behaviour amounts, in effect, to complicity. That is precisely what we are doing in coping with Mr Trump's aggression.

What can be done to counter a strong and aggressive country that, in effect, bullies other countries individually? Consider the example of a bully in a school. In my school, there was one who, during the break, would stand in a spot and summon any lone student walking past to give him a couple of whacks on the head. But if a group of connected students walked past together, the bully did not dare to summon even one of them. In the same way, what we need today are groups of states that can act collectively to counter or neutralise adverse US actions.

At the inter-country relationship level, we cannot count on actions sanctioned by the UN or other international organisations like the World Trade Organization or the International Monetary Fund. The answer lies in what are labelled as "Coalitions of the Willing". These are initiatives of a group of countries that support an international initiative that does not get formal UN support, generally because of the opposition of one or more powerful countries.

There are two specific examples from the '90s — the treaty banning anti-personnel landmines and the agreement to set up the International Criminal Court. These coalitions were promoted by Canada and Italy, respectively, and included other countries that agreed with the aim, leading to outcomes that had a significant positive impact on global cooperation. However, India was not part of these coalitions. A similar move that did not get or require formal UN agreement was the 2000 Jubilee Debt Initiative on debt forgiveness, launched by an NGO and pushed by the UK. Inciden-

tally, there is now a new 2025 Jubilee Debt Initiative. An effective Coalition of the Willing that can make a significant difference in international politics or the global economy cannot be formed on a general-purpose basis to counter the aggressive bullying by the US. It is unlikely to come up as a response to trade policy disruptions, and certainly, quite impossible for some such coalition to reduce the risks of war. It must be focussed on more specific cooperative actions to respond to some recent adverse switches in US policy.

My first suggestion relates to two agricultural research institutions which have had a positive global impact and are now being denied substantial funds they received from the US. One is the Mexico-based International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre, and the other is the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute. The removal of US financial support is a major problem and could endanger the quality of their very useful global impact. They have been a major source of support for agriculture in India and many other countries. A Coalition of the Willing to counter the adverse decision of the US could be set up by India and other beneficiary countries, which could take on the responsibility of compensating for the loss of funding from the US — a loss that may not be offset by other major donors who are also reducing their aid provisions.

The second, perhaps more difficult, suggestion is action by a coalition of countries to compensate for the recent backtracking by the US on its carbon reduction promises. The US under President Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement, and his "big, beautiful budget" has reversed actions undertaken by the previous administration to promote carbon emission reduction. This will reduce the emission cuts promised by the US for 2030 from 40 per cent to just 3 per cent, resulting in an increase of about 4 billion tonnes of CO₂ in 2030 relative to what was promised.

Formal action on correcting this at the international level is not possible. Hence, some major countries committed to action on climate change can form a Coalition of the Willing that takes on some commitment to compensate for the US' planned failure to deliver what it had promised for 2030. Covering the full gap of 2 billion tonnes of CO₂ will not be affordable, but even partial compensation by a group of countries would keep alive the idea of inter-country cooperation for global ends. India has the capacity to raise its goal of carbon reduction by 2030 and can join other countries that also have such potential in a Coalition for Global Cooperation on Climate Change Risks.

The emergence of a few Coalitions of the Willing to pursue some of the agreed global ends will be a partial answer that keeps alive the prospects envisaged 80 years ago. It cannot eliminate the bullying power of a powerful State, but it can dilute the impact of some of its anti-global acts. Hopefully, it may also influence public opinion in the US on how its federal government should behave.

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NITIN DESAI

Realism on rare earths

Rare earths have made headlines ever since China effectively wielded its rare earth exports (particularly permanent magnets made with rare earths) as a weapon in its trade war with the United States. China produces about 70 per cent of the global supply of rare earths and almost 90 per cent of rare earth magnets, and its dominance in this sector will not dissipate anytime soon. Restrictions on rare earth metals and magnet exports have hit our automobile industry, particularly electric vehicles (EVs), hard. They are also used in medical devices, smartphones, wind turbines, semiconductors, missiles and aircraft. We should, therefore, be prepared for more disruptions. If the six-month truce between China and the US is not extended.

India now plans to incentivise large-scale magnet production and is hunting for rare earth suppliers worldwide. Resources in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asian countries have been identified. However, from locating geological reserves to mining, processing, and producing metals, the process is so complex that merely identifying geological resources is geopolitically insignificant.

China's dominant position in rare earths production has been decades in the making, based on an industrial strategy, technological research & development, as well as unlocking its geological resources. In the late 1980s, Chinese planners identified strategic materials as a key element in plans for China's modernisation. Deng Xiaoping is credited with having said as early as 1992, "The Middle East has oil, China has rare earths". Oxford Energy Studies, in an October 2023 paper on how China achieved its dominance of global markets (China's Rare Earth Dominance and Policy Responses), identified the major factors: Early moves into the industry, state investment along the supply chain, export controls, low labour costs, and decades of low environmental standards. In the

1990s, China declared rare earths "protected and strategic minerals". Export quotas were introduced, and the export of rare earth concentrates was banned.

China's policy shifts reflected its success in developing a complete supply chain — from mining and crushing thousands of tonnes of rock, to beneficiation and processing of oxides through chemical cracking, and solvent extraction for separation of individual rare earth elements. Some 80 per cent of the mine-to-metal cost lay in energy inputs, labour, and chemical reagents, where China's capacities — and low environmental costs — gave it a cost advantage. Thereafter, China adapted technology developed in the US and Japan for permanent magnets, and built industries on a world-beating scale. By the early 2000s, China became the world's largest exporter of rare earths and rare earth products, at costs low enough to make other countries curtail production, or close down and source their requirements from Chinese companies.

China also acquired raw material resources abroad. In neighbouring Myanmar it traded directly with the insurgent Kachin Independence Army to import materials containing scarce heavy rare earths like terbium and dysprosium, which are vital for defence applications like missiles and smart weapons.

China demonstrated, as early as 2010, that it could use rare earths as a trade weapon when it cut off Japan from rare earth exports for some months over a maritime dispute. Reduction of export quotas (particularly for heavy rare earths) in the same year also adversely affected other industrial trade partners. Japan, the European Union and the US then responded with strategies to diversify supply sources, but these have had limited impact, except for moderation in Japan's dependence on China. Japan invested in Australian mines and a processing facility in Malaysia.



RANJAN MATHAI

Approaches to India faltered on the rock of our regulatory obstacles.)

The Mineral Security Partnership (MSP) was set up in June 2024 by a developed countries to bolster critical mineral supply chains independent of China. India joined the group a year later. The MSP does not have its own funding but encourages private capital and state-backed funds to invest in critical mineral projects, including rare earths among its priorities. China took note of the MSP as a Western tool for "all-out competition", but remained sanguine that its dominance in rare earths would be unaffected, as it had advantages in equipment for upstream mining, midstream smelting, and downstream electrolysis technology.

A decade of experience suggests that the Chinese confidence was not entirely misplaced. It retains dominance in world markets, because progressing from mine to magnet is a technologically complex and, at present, highly polluting path. China's advantages in the economics of extraction, processing and separation enable its companies to manipulate prices to curb competitors. It keeps tight controls over technological know-how, and is even restricting foreign travel of experts. And it "manages" the environmental costs that delay approvals of projects elsewhere. In the US, the Pentagon has now taken control of a rare earth producer to hasten domestic magnet production. India has long been a net exporter of rare earths — mostly light rare earths — from monazite and beach sands. Yet despite hosting the world's third-largest known reserves, India's production is less than 2 per cent of China's output. Policy and regulatory obstacles block the exploration and development of further resources. Public hostility towards mining and processing has also not helped. Until there is a change in industry practices, and government and civil society recognise the criticality of mining, critical minerals will remain a critical challenge for India.

The author is a former foreign secretary

Unhealthy truths about J&J



PROSENJIT DATTA

sales in 2010. A revolutionary hip implant, DePuy had introduced and aggressively marketed had become a roaring success and DePuy was the jewel in J&J's crown. The success story would start unravelling soon, though.

Kaunain Sheriff, national health editor at *The Indian Express*, tracks the story of this unravelling — and more importantly about how the global giant kept selling the defective hip implants in India long after it had realised the implants were causing major problems in other markets around the world. And the book also examines how it fought to ensure that it had to give the least amount of compensation to Indian patients, compared to those in other countries. In the process, Mr Sheriff examines not only the behaviour of J&J (or DePuy) senior management but also the problems in India's healthcare system, and why the Indian medi-

cal regulatory framework requires a major overhaul to ensure that Indian patients are treated by multinational giants in the same way as patients in developed countries.

Mr Sheriff is an adept storyteller. The book moves from case studies to the global background and marketplace, and then back to India. It examines in detail the launch of a product with much promise by DePuy to restore its number one position in the hip replacement market from the market leader, the aggression of its marketing staff and the *dramatis personae* — from the leader of hip replacements in the UK to the Indian patients to a honest Indian bureaucrat who played a crucial role in putting evidence together that DePuy was selling a product that was creating major problems for patients.

Most importantly, Mr Sheriff also looks at the problem of implants and

other devices that are often cleared for patients by regulators in Western countries on the basis of a certain amount of data presented to them — and marketed aggressively by the company. The book is not only for serious problems with the product becoming clear much later after thousands of patients have already started using them. Mr Sheriff also shines the spotlight on regulators who have been too lenient with the patient's best interests in mind but are sometimes swayed by their close association with the company selling the flawed products.

While this book is about DePuy's then



The Johnson & Johnson Files: The Hidden Secrets of a Global Giant by Kaunain Sheriff M. Published by Juggernaut 379 pages ₹599

who are affected by a faulty product and whose lives will never be the same, it is an unequal battle given their limited resources. More importantly, the compensation they win — if they win — is often far less than what they should ideally get.

Mr Sheriff's book is a fast read, though it is occasionally repetitive. The book switches from the big global picture to the lives of patients who were unlucky to have been recommended (and agreed to) a defective product. Their stories are heart-breaking. And they are not just Indian citizens — one example is a woman who flew from the US to India because of the lower costs here and the country's growing reputation as a medical tourism destination. She had done her research, and nothing she found at the time indicated that J&J's product

could be the culprit. However, she began suffering from pain shortly after the surgery and grew progressively worse during her flight back home.

But there are also a few heroes. From a distinguished orthopaedic consultant called Anand Nargol to K. K. Madan Zagade, an IAS officer whose diligent investigation helped build the Indian case. Dr Nargol, who can trace part of his ancestry to India, was aggressively wooed by DePuy to try out its devices — and also one of the first to realise it was creating problems for his patients. Mr Madan Zagade, whose work ensured the recall of the device, Mr Zagade, an honest bureaucrat, would put together key evidence of the problems before he was transferred. The book is a good but also scary read about the world's deep-pocketed healthcare multinationals and the broken regulatory system, especially in India.

The reviewer is former editor of *Business Today* and *Businessworld*, and founder of *Prosalic View*, an editorial consultancy

Sin taxes and GST

Tobacco, harmful foods can be taxed more

Pritam Datta

In India, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for 63-67 per cent of all deaths. Four major NCDs—cardiovascular diseases, cancers, respiratory conditions, and diabetes—cause nearly 80 per cent of premature NCD deaths. Rising consumption of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs), Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs), alcohol, and tobacco—alongside inactivity, obesity, poor diets, and pollution—are key drivers of India's NCD surge. Strong fiscal and policy measures to curb these products are crucial to reversing this trend.

The WHO has long advocated higher taxes on tobacco and now recommends similar measures for alcohol and sugary drinks, with potential taxes on UPFs under review.

The Finance Minister has hinted at GST rate rationalisation and slab restructuring—offering a timely opportunity to align taxes on tobacco, SSBs, and UPFs with WHO guidelines.

While tobacco has long been taxed to reduce consumption, SSBs and UPFs remain under-taxed. SSBs are taxed at 28 per cent but lack a dedicated health cess, and UPFs are often taxed at lower rates.

Alcohol taxation varies widely by State, leading to price disparities, with some States like Gujarat, Bihar, and Nagaland enforcing full bans. There remains considerable scope to increase tobacco taxes, close loopholes, and expand the tax base. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive health tax framework for tobacco, SSBs, and UPFs.

The 139th report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health highlighted that tobacco products in India remain among the cheapest globally. Despite being taxed under the highest GST slab, their growing affordability poses a challenge for policymakers and economists. India's current tax share on tobacco is well below the WHO-recommended minimum of 75 per cent—around 58 per cent for cigarettes and just 22 per cent for bidis—revealing a significant gap in effective tobacco taxation.

A key issue in the post-GST regime is the stagnation of tobacco tax rates, which have not kept pace with rising incomes and inflation, leading to increased affordability of tobacco products over time. GST rates can't be



HEALTH HAZARD. Taxing times

revised annually due to structural constraints and the need for consensus in the GST Council, making changes slow and politically sensitive.

Tobacco products also attract two key non-GST levies: Central Excise Duty (CED) and National Calamity Contingent Duty (NCCD). Though CED was initially subsumed under GST, it was reintroduced in Budget 2019-20 to restore fiscal control. NCCD, introduced in 2001 for disaster relief, remains in place.

The GST Council is currently awaiting final reports from two key Groups of Ministers (GoMs): one on GST rate rationalisation and addressing inverted duty structures—and another tasked with recommending a post-2026 cess framework as the current Compensation Cess arrangement nears its end.

GST COUNCIL MEET
The 56th GST Council meeting is expected to consider a 40 per cent GST slab on sin goods. However, raising the rate from 28 per cent to 40 per cent alone may not suffice, especially with the Compensation Cess ending in 2026.

A comprehensive approach is needed—revising Central Excise Duty (CED) and National Calamity Contingent Duty (NCCD), and introducing a dedicated Health Tax on harmful products like SSB, UPFs and tobacco.

To sustain the impact of sin taxes, the Council may create a standalone, adjustable GST slab for these sin products, making them less affordable over time. An additional Health Tax, alongside CED and NCCD, can increase the overall tax burden within the GST framework, generate fiscal space, and fund public health initiatives like anti-tobacco efforts, awareness campaigns, and detox programmes—turning harmful revenue into healing.

The writer is Fellow, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP), New Delhi

The illusion of fiscal discipline

Capital flows depend on economic and geopolitical power, placing middle, low income countries at a huge disadvantage

MACROSCAN.



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

The control of fiscal deficits—primarily by restraining or reducing government expenditure—has been an article of faith for economic policy makers for several decades now. The Washington Consensus that made this one of the central tenets of macroeconomic policy may now be much more discredited within policy circles in rich countries, but the worldview it is alive and well, indeed still actively promoted, among governments across middle and low income countries.

There are good reasons for this: middle and low income countries are much more in thrall to international finance, which they are repeatedly told will punish them for any transgressions that cause fiscal deficits to rise. In economies that are integrated into global capital markets (now most countries in the world), the fear of capital flight causes governments across the lower-income world to behave in the opposite way from what sound Keynesian macroeconomics would suggest. They behave procyclically: cutting spending or trying to minimise expenditure increases during economic downturns, thereby adding to economic pain and delaying economic recovery.

The IMF constantly adds to this, telling all the countries who request them for assistance that they must bring down their public debt to GDP levels (usually through expenditure cuts or regressive taxation and increased user charges on public services). The IMF does this for all countries that are recipients of any funding, even when the problem is not domestic debt but debt denominated in foreign exchange, which the concerned countries have a shortage of.

How justified is this position? One way to assess this is to examine the actual public debt to GDP levels of countries at different levels of per capita income. The IMF database fortunately provides us with this information, some of which is indicated in the figures below. Figure 1 shows the level of gross public debt to GDP, while Figure 2 describes the net ratios (government financial liabilities minus assets) to GDP. The most striking feature that emerges is that the government debt-to-GDP ratios are significantly higher for the high income countries, and have also grown more rapidly over the period since 2008.

Two periods in particular show significant hikes in the ratio for the rich countries: the period after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (essentially 2009-12) which was associated with expanded public spending along with massive monetary easing, and the period of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-21). It is noteworthy that gross government debt-to-GDP levels never reduced very much after these episodes, but remained at the higher levels. The average ratio went from 78 per cent in 2008 to a peak of 122 per cent in 2021, and is projected to be 110 per cent in 2025. By contrast, middle income countries showed much lower levels of gross government debt to GDP in 2008, at 34 per cent less than half of those of the rich countries, and increased only to 75 per cent in 2025. For low income countries, the ratio was even smaller, at only 27 per cent in 2008. It did increase to 50 per cent in 2020, and is projected to be 52 per cent in the current year—but these are really

Middle, low-income countries debt-GDP ratios were at 34 per cent and 27 per cent in 2008 and rose to 75 and 50 per cent respectively in 2025

very respectable ratios compared to the averages of high income countries.

If net debt is measured, as in Figure 2, which takes into account the government's financial liabilities net of its financial assets, the disparities reduce somewhat but the picture remains broadly similar. High income countries continue to have significantly higher ratios—more than double those of middle income countries throughout the period until 2020, and only slightly less difference thereafter. The only notable difference that looking at net debt makes is that lower income countries have a higher ratio than middle income countries in recent years, because their liabilities have increased faster than assets, for obvious reasons.

These patterns appear surprising, but they reflect fiscal behaviour that has also generally been more "prudent" in middle and low income countries than in rich countries. This is evident from Figures 3 and 4. Overall fiscal balances have generally been showing greater deficits for both high and middle income countries than for low income countries.

Indeed, since a significant part of public spending in middle and low income countries is towards debt servicing, the divergences are even greater for primary deficits, as shown in Figure 4.

Clearly, high income countries have been willing and able to splurge much more in periods of economic stress, to allow for countercyclical public spending that would counteract the adverse effects of economic shocks, downturns and slumps.

LOWER GOVT DEBT
By contrast, low income countries have clearly striven to contain their primary deficits as much as possible regardless of the economic conditions—and notwithstanding their obvious need for much greater spending given the greater poverty of their people and their more urgent social and developmental goals. This pattern is reinforced in Figure 5, which describes government spending as share of GDP. Governments in high income countries very evidently spend more in response to shocks like financial crises and the Covid-19 pandemic. Middle income countries do so to a lesser extent, and low income countries barely adjust to these shocks at all in terms of total spending.

KEY QUESTIONS

There are some obvious questions arising from this. Why are the countries experiencing debt crises more concentrated in low and middle income countries if they are "better behaved" in fiscal terms? Why do global financial markets punish them so much more, such that spreads on their sovereign bonds rise so dramatically in some periods?

For example, in 2023 the median of sovereign bond spreads rose to around 1400 basis points for "high debtors" (all of which are really low debtors compared to the average of rich countries) and (IMF Fiscal Monitor 2025, Figure 1.12, page 10). Even the "low debtor" countries faced spread of nearly 500 basis points in 2020, through no fault of their own.

The answer lies in the reality that the IMF obviously recognises but refuses to state clearly: that of currency hierarchies that affect investor perception, and therefore bond market behaviour, which makes middle and low income countries the victims of volatile capital flows quite independent of their own fiscal prudence.

This reflects economic and geopolitical power, not the adoption of "correct" macroeconomic policies. Participation in global capital markets on such unequal terms is clearly problematic—and the sooner that low and middle income countries realise and act on this, the better they will enable their own progress.

CHART 1

Debt profile

Gross debt position (% of GDP)

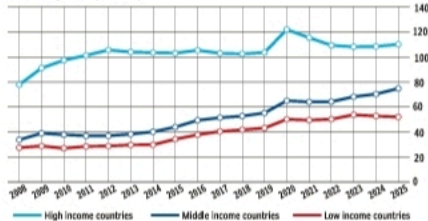


CHART 2

Rising trend

Net debt (% of GDP)

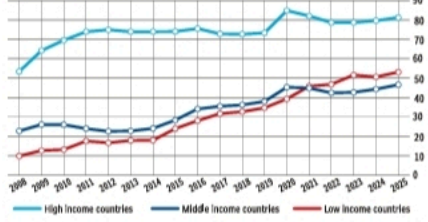


CHART 3

Fiscal path

Overall fiscal balance (% of GDP)

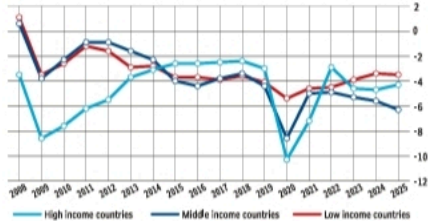


CHART 4

Deficit profile

Primary fiscal balance (% of GDP)

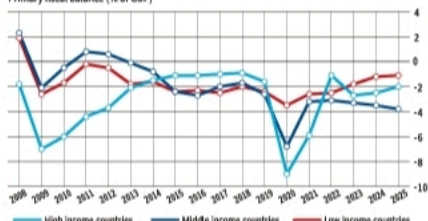


CHART 5

Spending pattern

Government expenditure (% of GDP)



thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 22, 2005

China revalues yuan; ties it to euro basket

China ended its decades-old peg to the dollar, and let the yuan fluctuate to a basket of currencies, responding to criticism from the US and Europe that their currency was undervalued. The new Yuan rate revalues the currency by 2.1 per cent to 8.11 per cent per US dollar immediately, the People's Bank of China said on its Web site.

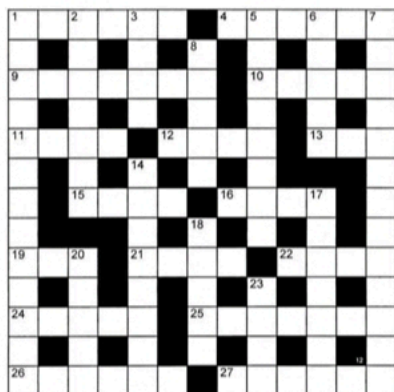
Many risks in Indo-Iran gas pipeline project, says PM

Observing that the proposed multi-billion dollar Indo-Iran gas pipeline via Pakistan is fraught with risks, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, has said he did not know if any international consortium of bankers would underwrite the project. "Only preliminary discussions have taken place (on the pipeline)," he told The Washington Post on Wednesday when asked about the discussions on building a gas pipeline with Iran.

Aiyar, Chidambaram discuss composition of oil firm boards

The Petroleum Minister, Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar, today met the Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, to discuss the board composition of oil companies, particularly ONGC. The two also discussed the role of the Finance Ministry nominee on the ONGC board.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2744



EASY

ACROSS

1. Ridiculous (6)
4. Support given to someone (4,2)
9. Conversing (7)
10. Sea map (5)
11. Precipitation (4)
12. Ward off; self-support (4)
13. Parts for making up (3)
15. Part of foot (4)
16. Make small cuts (4)
19. Begin to form (fruit) (3)
21. Evils, misfortunes (4)
22. For nothing (4)
24. Cross (5)
25. Gold in the mass (7)
26. Deny, nullify (6)
27. Church attendant (6)

DOWN

1. To a certain extent, in a way (5,1,7)
2. Preoccupied with own affairs (7)
3. Transport method (4)
5. Mishap (8)
6. Dexterity, adroitness (5)
7. Breakfast (Fr) (5,8)
8. Be in harmony with (5)
14. Dregs (8)
17. Coming away from (7)
18. Model world (5)
20. Sound of plucked string (5)
23. Impish enjoyment (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Very silly of bard maybe to take us back in (6)
4. Support for the PU (4,2)
9. In conversation, link may be made with tag (7)
10. The main sort of map (5)
11. Sound rule to come down from the clouds (4)
12. Make shift for oneself loudly and finish it (4)
13. An outfit for Christopher shortly will appear (3)
14. A cad is the last thing one will find in the boot (4)
16. For a tailor it's a certainty (4)
19. Get solid arrangement for the hair (3)
21. Misfortunes of the Linnaean Society began with the Italian (4)
22. Professional charge is about right if it's gratis (4)
24. Cross that is put around a deserter (5)
25. Precious metal in the mass found as Taurus takes one (7)
26. Imply non-existence of age ten can turn to (6)
27. Pew-opener at the side of the road on the right (6)

DOWN

1. Somehow or other it is following a mode (5,1,7)
2. Flesh is thus concerned only with number one (7)
3. There's a bird making part of the fence (4)
5. It wasn't meant to happen, but I'd got in a circumflex (8)
6. Trick of doing a petty contrivance (5)
7. Breakfast diet Peter and June set out (5,8)
8. Say one will rage about the environment initially (5)
14. The deposit of ten cents is to be sent round (8)
17. Leaving each other a line on the scalp (7)
18. The world of the Theatre (5)
20. Nasal tone produced by insect getting up round window-top (5)
23. Part song, all mirth and gaiety (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2743

ACROSS 1. Pastimes 7. Bread 8. Noodles 9. Unusual 10. Heal 12. Deduced 14. Toyshop 17. Apse 18. Fireman 21. Departs 22. Elard 23. Startled
DOWN 1. Poncho 2. Stowaway 3. Its 4. Enured 5. Beau 6. Addled 7. Blunder 11. Exhumed 13. Corporal 14. Toffee 15. Pundit 16. Teased 19. Reap 20. Spar

Water, energy demand spotlights risk of human-induced quakes

Mining, extracting groundwater, impounding water behind a dam, injecting fluids into the ground, and engineering coastal structures have been shown to induce seismic activity. This is because loading and unloading the crust in a repeated manner can cause strain to accumulate underground

Nivedita S.

Earthquakes are usually natural – but not always. Sometimes some natural factors can combine with human activities to lead to earthquakes as well. Quakes induced by human activities are called human-induced earthquakes. According to one estimate researchers discussed in *Seismological Research Letters* in 2017, more than 700 human-induced earthquakes have been recorded around the world in the last 150 years, and they are becoming more common.

Human activities like mining, extracting groundwater, impounding water behind a dam, injecting fluids into the ground, constructing tall buildings, and engineering coastal structures, among others, have been shown to induce seismic activity. This is because, according to experts, loading and unloading the crust in a repeated manner can cause strain to accumulate between tectonic plates, which would in turn modulate seismic activity.

In India, seismologists have also been studying how the amount of water above and below the ground can affect the geological processes.

A 2021 study in *Scientific Reports* noted that shallow earthquakes recorded in the National Capital Region could be linked to excessive groundwater extraction in the region for farming and human consumption.

"It was seen that between 2003 and 2012, when the water table had depleted significantly, there was an increase in seismic activity. The seismic activity reduced after 2014 when the water table stabilised," Bhaskar Kundu, associate professor at NIT Rourkela and one of the authors of the study, told *The Hindu*.

Managing extraction

When groundwater is pumped out, the mass of water maintaining the pressure under the earth is removed, creating jolts on the surface.

"The situation is not of major concern because these earthquakes in the Delhi-NCR region are usually minor, with the maximum going up to 4.5 magnitude," C.P. Rajendran, geoscientist and author of *The Rumbling Earth: The Story of Indian Earthquakes*, said. "It can go up to 5.5, which for a densely populated city like Delhi could have risks."

This is because Delhi lies on several faultlines and is in the Zone 4 seismic risk category, meaning it's a quake-prone region.

The risk for earthquakes induced by groundwater extraction is spread across the Gangetic plains, where the water table has been dropping in leaps, Dr. Rajendran said. This is mostly because crops sown in the region still need large quantities of water and very little of that thirst is quenched by rainfall.

He added that there is a need to manage the rate of groundwater extraction and its recharge in a scientific manner and while considering the rate of seismic activity in the region.

In the past, human-induced earthquakes have devastated lives and property, caused foremost by large dams that change the water load on the surface. On December 11, 1967, for example, an earthquake of 6.3 magnitude wrought



An earthquake of 6.3 magnitude wrought significant damage in Koynanagar in Maharashtra in 1967. Several studies that followed blamed the disaster on water overloading in the Koyna hydroelectric dam nearby. VARSHA DESHPANDE (CC BY-SA)

significant damage in Koynanagar, a village in Maharashtra. More than 180 people were killed and thousands of houses were destroyed. Several studies that followed blamed the disaster on water overloading in the Koyna hydroelectric dam nearby.

Similarly, research has recorded an increase in seismic activity around the Mullaperiyar dam in Idukki, Kerala, which like Delhi also lies in an earthquake-prone zone.

Energy and quakes

"The U.S., which has recorded reservoir-induced earthquakes, has implemented regulations on how quickly a dam should be filled and emptied. Such regulations should also be enforced in India to prevent earthquakes," Vineet K. Gahalaut, Chief Scientist at the National Geophysical Research Institute, told *The Hindu*.

He also said seismic activities in a region should be properly evaluated before a dam is built there.

"Huge dams in seismically active areas like the Himalayas are not recommended because the water load and percolation could change the local stress regime," Dr. Rajendran said.

India's growing energy demand also increases the risk of this type of disaster.

"The methods used to extract energy to meet our needs have significant risks on our earth, be it oil or hydropower," Dr. Gahalaut said.

Fracking – where liquids are injected into the ground to push rocks apart and allow extraction of oil and natural gas – has also been shown to induce



The U.S. has implemented regulations on how quickly a dam should be filled and emptied. Such regulations should also be enforced in India

VINEET K. GAHALAUT,
Chief Scientist at the National Geophysical Research Institute

earthquakes, Dr. Gahalaut added. India currently has 56 tracking sites across six States. In Palghar district in Maharashtra, which has been experiencing a sequence of quakes since 2018, experts have said plate deformation is occurring in an isolated manner. Initial findings by seismologists indicated that the cause could be fluid migration due to rainfall.

"Strong seismic networks using instruments need to be established across India in regions like these, which are experiencing isolated plate deformation, to monitor and track seismic activity more accurately," Dr. Kundu said.

Impact of climate change

Scientists have said that climate change can indirectly affect the occurrence of earthquakes and render them more frequent over time. The melting of glaciers due to global warming has been found to trigger earthquakes around Antarctica and Greenland. Changes in rainfall patterns due to climate change have also been known to modulate the water loading process on the surface.

For example, sudden heavy rainfall

could alter the stress accumulated between tectonic plates and induce seismic activity.

The area around the Sahyadri range of the Western Ghats has been recording tremors due to heavy rainfall for this reason.

"The height of the mountains should have been reduced considering the rate of rainfall. However, the mountains have maintained their height due to seismic activity," Dr. Gahalaut said.

Changing rainfall patterns can also change the soil chemistry. Dr. Rajendran said, affecting cropping patterns and compelling farmers to turn to groundwater for irrigation, which can also induce seismic activity.

Similarly, longer droughts can also reactivate seismic faults. Such a drought-induced earthquake was recorded in California in 2014.

"The risk of earthquakes is not present at all locations where there is groundwater depletion or huge dams. They have only been recorded in areas that are present on faultlines or are facing plate deformation processes," according to Dr. Kundu.

At present, the rate at which strain has been accumulating along plates and the fraction of this stress that is due to human activities is not possible to ascertain, he added. Experts have thus warned against concluding that such activities are solely to blame for tremors or earthquakes. Research thus far has only shown that these activities could postpone or accelerate tectonic processes causing these movements.

(nivedita.s@thehindu.co.in)



A Greenpeace activist in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin, July 7, 2025. AFP

New deep sea mining rules lack consensus despite pressure from the U.S.

Agence France Presse

After two weeks of negotiations, the International Seabed Authority (ISA) is still far from finalising rules for the extraction of coveted metals on the high seas despite heightened pressure triggered by US efforts to fast-track the controversial practice.

Following a meeting in March and the current session in Jamaica, the 36 members of the ISA's executive council completed on July 17 a line-by-line reading of the proposed "mining code" and its 107 regulations for exploitation of the ocean floor in international waters.

The minerals and metals in question, such as cobalt, nickel, and manganese, are used for electric vehicles and other emerging technologies.

But after more than a decade of talks, crucial sections of the proposed rules, including mechanisms for protecting the marine environment, are far from winning consensus.

"The exploitation activities cannot begin as long as we do not have a solid, equitable framework," Chilean representative Salvador Vega Telias, whose country is one of 37 asking for a moratorium on deep sea mining, told the plenary session.

President Trump ordered his administration to fast-track granting of permits for mining in domestic and international waters, citing an obscure 1980 U.S. law and sidestepping the ISA

He also said mining could not begin until experts could pinpoint "all the scientific knowledge that we need to have to identify the potential impacts and effects on the marine environment."

The ISA session, which will continue this week with the assembly of all 169 member states, comes as U.S. President Donald Trump threw a monkey wrench into the process in April.

Trump instructed his administration to fast-track the granting of permits for deep sea mining in domestic and international waters, citing an obscure 1980 US law and sidestepping the process undertaken by the ISA.

The United States is not party to the independent ISA or to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, under which the ISA was established in 1994.

Canada's The Metals Company (TMC) quickly jumped at the opportunity, lodging a first request for a high seas mining license, a short-circuiting of the ISA process that was slammed by non-governmental organisations and some member states.

Those parties appear to want to send a message to TMC on Friday, the last day of the council's session.

A draft text still under discussion calls on the ISA's legal and technical commission to investigate "possible issues of non-compliance of contractors that may arise out of the facilitation of or the participation in actions intended to appropriate resources... contrary to the multilateral legal framework."

The draft calls on the commission to report any instances of non-compliance or potential violations of the Law of the Sea and "recommends, where appropriate, measures to be taken by the Council."

The talks in Kingston have been tense at times, with several delegations miffed about the rules put in place by the council president, including convening some negotiations behind closed doors.

"What the council is discussing currently is the common heritage of humankind," Emma Watson of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an alliance of NGOs, said, criticising what she called a "big shift" in procedure.

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

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Animals with misleading names

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

Contrary to the two descriptors in its name, the _____ is true to neither. Instead, these mammals glide between trees and are more closely related to primates than to lemurs. They are also known as coobegs. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 2

The X Y is neither from X nor is related to Y. Instead, these South American rodents are called so because they were probably shipped from the West African coast, and can live in small quarters spending most of their waking hours eating. Name X Y.

QUESTION 3

"Tasmanian tiger" and "Tasmanian wolf" were common names for the _____, which of course was neither tiger nor wolf but a marsupial. The last individual of this species died in 1936 in Tasmania. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 4

_____ is a common name for *Phrynosoma* lizards because of their small horns and their round bodies, blunt snouts, and move slowly. In fact *Phrynosoma* itself refers to their common name. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 5

The P Q is also known as the sea cookie — and both names and others allude to the shape of this sea urchin's skeletons once they wash

ashore. In some American folktales, the P Q were thought to be coins lost by mermaids. Name P Q.

Answers to July 15 quiz:

- Property that causes crystals to split light into two beams – Ans: **Birefringence**
- Conductor of 1801 experiment that revealed wave nature of light – Ans: **Thomas Young**
- Distortion whereby colours are focused at different points – Ans: **Chromatic aberration**
- Process that splits light inside a triangular prism – Ans: **Dispersion**
- Light property that allows fibre optical cables to work – Ans: **Total internal reflection**

Visual: Donna Strickland

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Chithira T.D. | James Stanly J. | Joe V.R.



Visual: This is the earth's largest living species of fish. It's unrelated to the first half of its name and, unlike the reputation of the second half, poses no threat to humans. Name it. ABE RHAO LAK (CC BY-SA)

Please send in your answers to science@thehindu.co.in