



The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAMNATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Omar is spot on, doesn't need Trump clickbait

IN 2023, in its ruling that upheld the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the Supreme Court said, “the Solicitor General of India assured this Court of the Union’s commitment made on the floor of the House that the Statehood of Jammu and Kashmir would be restored in the near future upon elections being held”. The BJP has often touted the drop in the local drivers of insurgency and growth in tourism as evidence of the return of normalcy in “Naya Kashmir”. The high voter turnout in the peaceful 2024 elections to the Union Territory’s Assembly signalled trust in the democratic framework, broke a long political standstill. In this context, J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah’s frustration over the delay in the Centre delivering on its promise of statehood is entirely justified and appropriate.

However, Abdullah, who can be sharp and yet complex, could have framed it better. On Saturday, addressing a gathering of National Conference (NC) workers in Srinagar, he said: “Let BJP tell us whether we have to go to (US President Donald) Trump for statehood... and hold *dharma* outside the White House.” Perhaps, it was a facetious remark, political clickbait. But “internationalisation” (read the US) is among the most knotty threads in the fraught history of Jammu and Kashmir. From the Truman White House pushing the formation of the United Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) in 1948, to US officers assisting armed forces in PoK during the Cold War, to the barely tacit backing of separatism by US State Department officials such as Robin Raphel in the early 1990s, for the better part of a century the US and UK have sought to play a dubious role in the region. Internationalisation of Kashmir has been — and remains — Pakistan’s aim over the years.

Abdullah’s invocation of Trump runs counter to the grain of his tenure as CM so far, which has located Kashmir, with its distinctive history, squarely within the negotiations in a federal polity. While underscoring the curtailed powers of the elected government, he chose not to take a confrontational stance towards the Lieutenant Governor’s office. In the aftermath of the horrific attack in Pahalgam by Pakistan-backed terrorists, he delivered one of the most stirring speeches of his career in the Assembly, framing the Kashmir tragedy as one of the entire country, even as he backed the Union government’s moves, political and diplomatic. Over the last two years, Abdullah has been at the forefront of crafting a new political language in Kashmir. This is his greatest strength as he rightly reiterates the demand for statehood. That’s why there is a need to guard against loose statements that distract attention from it.

On SIR, listen to digital governance pioneer

THE GOVERNMENT and the Election Commission of India (ECI) need to carefully read criticisms of the latest round of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) by one of the country’s digital governance pioneers. In an article in this newspaper, Ram Sewak Sharma — who, as the founder-director of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), played a central role in building the infrastructure that governments now rely on for welfare delivery — amplified concerns voiced since the commencement of the SIR. The ECI has invited criticism for not balancing the legitimate imperative of updating the voter list — removing duplicate or deceased voters while ensuring that newly eligible citizens are enrolled — with the equally compelling obligation to avoid wrongful exclusion. Reports have pointed out that the burden of eligibility lies primarily, and unfairly, on the citizen. People are being asked to furnish proof of birth, residence and citizenship, when, as Sharma points out, the state itself has rarely been diligent enough to keep such records.

In Aadhaar, India has a technologically sophisticated framework for identity verification. However, as Sharma argues, by not regarding the document as credible address proof for the SIR, the state is failing to make meaningful use of a database — which also carries biometric details and proof of age — that it has created. The philosophy behind India’s Digital Public Infrastructure has been to ask less, not more, of citizens. The SIR seems to be moving in the opposite direction — as Sharma writes, by “using a document-heavy method to solve a problem the country has already solved”.

A procedure that carries the possibility of disenfranchisement demands the closest constitutional scrutiny. The government and the ECI, therefore, can ill afford to ignore the words of one who was part of the system not very long ago: “A republic that takes its duties seriously does not make its people prove again and again they belong.” The Supreme Court — which pushed the ECI to be inclusive when the SIR process began but appeared less vigilant when the exercise was held in West Bengal — should urge the poll body to take note of Sharma’s warning: “India has a DPI the world now studies. It would be perverse to declare that none of it can be trusted.”

Nightingale falls silent, her song lives

PLAYBACK SINGERS Janaki, who died on July 11 in Mysuru at 88, was an artist whose career spanned successive generations of composers. As musical preferences and styles evolved and technology underwent revolutions, Janaki, lovingly called the “Nightingale of South India”, remained an enduring presence, singing over 40,000 songs in several languages for six decades. From composers like M S Viswanathan and K V Mahadevan to Ilaiyaraaja, Bappi Lahiri and A R Rahman, Janaki adapted to the changes with ease.

Growing up in Pallapatla village in Andhra Pradesh, Janaki religiously listened to Lata Mangeshkar’s early songs on the family radio and tried to sing like her. With no formal training, she’d belt them out during intervals of plays organised by her uncle, a theatre artist. During one such performance, she caught the attention of filmmaker B R Panthulu and music director T G Lingappa, who, impressed by her bright soprano voice, invited her to Chennai, where she recorded her first song for the Tamil film *Vidhiyin Vilayattu* (1957). Despite being a Telugu speaker, her songs in Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada featured impeccable pronunciation. She’d study how words were spoken in daily life, understand their meaning and rehearse to align the edges.

Janaki won four National Awards among numerous state honours. But she declined the Padma Bhushan, saying the recognition had come too late. The decision drew attention, especially because she demanded a Bharat Ratna, too, overshadowing an otherwise principled stand. For more than six decades, Janaki gave life to the songs she sang, filling many a day and night with their light.

THE WORLD Inequality Report (WIR) 2026 was published in June by the World Inequality Lab, Paris School of Economics. The UN report ‘Counting What Counts’ was released in May. The first focuses on inequality head on. The second does so in part. Both pay some attention to gender inequality. But how? By focusing entirely on women’s unequal position in the labour market. Dare we ask: What about wealth inequality? Neither report mentions women and wealth, although the WIR spends many ungendered chapters on household wealth inequality. So, what are these reports implying? That wealth is only for men while women are merely labour?

The vast body of academic research on women’s economic status over the decades has focussed mainly on one thing: Women’s situation in the labour market. This persistent mismeasurement of women’s economic status by ignoring gender inequality in wealth and assets in numerous papers, reports and policy briefs makes the main source of gendered economic inequality in much of the world invisible and ignored in policy. Work by feminist economists does not entirely escape this bias.

Why is measuring gendered inequality in wealth so important? Not just to correct serious conceptual flaws in measuring gender inequality, but also because wealth/asset ownership (a) affects women’s and children’s well-being in ways that employment alone does not; (b) impacts productivity and economic growth; and (c) is key to most sources of decent work and earnings. Consider each.

First, a vast body of global empirical evi-

dence over three decades (1994-2024), starting from that cited in my 1994 book, *A Field of One’s Own*, till today, shows that in the Global South if the mother owns assets, child survival, health and education outcomes are likely to be significantly better than if only the father owns assets. Gender matters beyond class. Owning immovable assets also hugely reduces women’s risk of domestic violence and of poverty in case of marital breakdown.

Second, several studies, including those collated by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, show that if women have access to a productive asset like farmland and related inputs, it can greatly increase farm productivity and a country’s agricultural growth rates. Third, for vast numbers of women, especially in the Global South, owning productive assets is essential for viable livelihoods since women are employed largely in the informal sector and especially in agriculture.

In India, for instance, in the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-24, two aspects stand out. One, some 86 per cent of all women workers and 91 per cent of rural women workers are informally employed. About 77 per cent of the latter work in agriculture. Two, 73 per cent of rural women workers are “self-employed”, mostly as unpaid workers on family farms or in small business enterprises, including street vending. Hence, barely a quarter of rural women workers (and a third of all women workers) are in wage employment (regular or casual). For the rest, asset ownership is key to viable earnings: For example, land for farming, carts or stalls for street vending, and so on.



BINA AGARWAL

For reducing global wealth inequality, policies to tackle gender wealth inequality are as essential as policies to tackle household wealth inequality

Ramamurti Rajaraman and the journey back home



ASHUTOSH BHARDWAJ



N MANOHARAN



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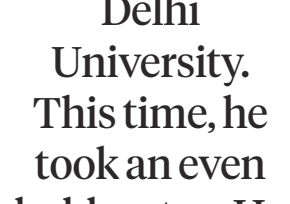
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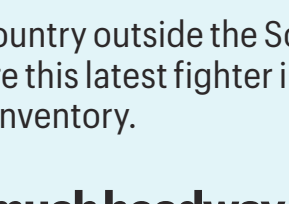
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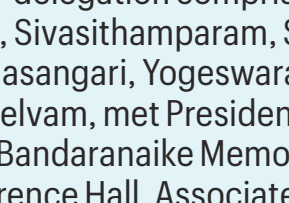
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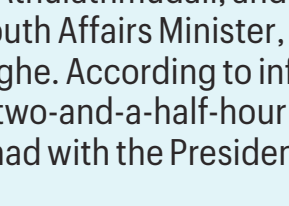
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40 YEARS AGO

July 14, 1986



Fivemore killed in Gujarat

AT LEAST four persons were burnt alive in three separate incidents in Ahmedabad as violence continued unabated on the fifth day. One of the three persons injured in the police firing late on Saturday night in Dhanasutharni-Pole on Relief Road died. One man was fatally stabbed in Baroda, bringing the death toll in the city to three. With this, the total figure of deaths recorded in the state rose to 54.

MiG-29 deal finalised

INDIA HAS finalised a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Soviet Union for the purchase of futuristic MiG-29 fighter aircraft. India will thus become the

first country outside the Soviet Union to acquire this latest fighter in the Soviet air force inventory.

Not much headway in Colombo

A TULF delegation comprising A Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam, Sampanthan, Anandasangari, Yogeswaran and Neelan Tiruchelvam, met President Jayewardene at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. Associated with the President were the National Security Minister, Lalith Athulathmudali, and the Education and Youth Affairs Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe. According to informed sources, in the two-and-a-half-hour meeting the TULF had with the President, they had dis-

cussed the provincial council’s proposals clause by clause.

Police apathetic to massacres

THE WRIT of the government just does not hold good in the so-called Naxalite-infested areas of Jehanabad and its surrounding areas in Gaya district for the simple reason that the police are not free to act as to take the necessary action in a law-and-order crisis. The gory killings in Kansara village of Gaya district and the heinous massacre in Arwal in Nalanda district — the two places are about 20 km apart in different but contiguous districts — is an example of the situation the police find themselves in when the government tries to take sides based on caste.

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Demolition of an institution has begun, due process can wait



DESHKAAL

BY YOGENDRA YADAV

BULLDOZER JUSTICE reaches academia. That could be the headline for an *Indian Express* report last week ("Think tank CSDS likely to face funding cuts from Centre", *IE*, July 10) on the government's move to cut its grant to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), which amounts to 90 per cent of the institution's salary bill. No doubt, this is a demolition exercise.

As in bulldozer justice, the modus operandi involves turning the rule of law upside down. Criminal justice follows a prescribed sequence: An incident leads to evidence, evidence to suspicion, suspicion to trial and the trial leads to indictment and punishment. Here the process begins with public indictment of a culprit identified in advance. Pre-text and paperwork follow to manufacture justification for the punishment pre-decided, if not already delivered. An exemplary punishment that echoes deep and wide.

The CSDS has been to Indian social science what the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) or the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) is to the world of Indian sciences. Founded in 1963 by Rajni Kothari, the faculty roll of CSDS reads like the Who's Who of the first two generations of Indian social scientists, barring economists. Excluding the present faculty, the list includes Ashis Nandy, D L Sheth, Ramashray Roy, Gopal Krishna, Bashiruddin Ahmed, Giri Deshingkar, Sudhir Kakar, Shiv Visvanathan, Harsh Sethi, Suresh Sharma, D R Nagaraj, V B Singh, Rajeev Bhargava, Shail Mayaram, Aditya Nigam and Abhay Dube. Add to this list scholars who have been a part of the extended family of CSDS — Sukhmay Chakravarty, T N Madan, Deepak Nayyar, JPS Ubeeroi, Manoranjan Mohanty, Patricia Ubeeroi and Suhas Palshikar — and you know why CSDS has been at the centre of Indian and global debates on politics, society and cul-



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

ture. A special issue of *Seminar* magazine (November 2012), titled "The CSDS Experience" captures something of the story of this extraordinary institution. (Full disclosure: The present author served on the CSDS faculty for two decades, before leaving it in 2013 and formally resigning in 2016.)

On the face of it, the CSDS is a rather odd target for demolition. During the days of ideological Cold War, the CSDS was known as a non-Marxist, if not anti-Marxist, school of thought. The scholars at the Centre were among the first ones to articulate the agenda for decolonisation of the social sciences. The Centre was also the pioneer in advancing social sciences in Indian languages. A far cry from the deracinated, westernised, leftist intellectuals the present regime loves to hate. Unlike the Emergency, when the CSDS did serve as a node for resistance to the authoritarian regime, the institution has kept a low political profile since 2014. The Lokniti programme, its research initiative that carries out electoral and political surveys, has maintained a scrupulous record of political non-partisanship and has given up election forecasting. On balance, its election surveys over the last decade have overestimated, not underestimated, the BJP's electoral performance.

The reason for choosing CSDS for the present assault is thus hard to fathom. Here is my guess: The three-decade old Lokniti pro-

As in bulldozer justice, the formal justification is an act of post-facto creativity. Once the target, the punishment and the excuse were fixed, the ICSSR appointed a committee to prepare grounds for what had already been decided

gramme is arguably the only trustworthy political barometer in the country that continues to adhere to scientific protocols of survey and transparent reporting, a barometer that cannot be "adjusted" to suit the demands of the rulers. This is one thing authoritarian regimes do not like, especially when they face allegations of electoral malpractices amidst rising public disquiet. Or, maybe, as in the case of Centre for Policy Research (CPR) earlier, the prestige of CSDS makes it the perfect example to send a message to an entire community of academics and intellectuals: Nobody is safe if CPR and CSDS can be targeted.

Once the target was selected, a provocation had to be discovered. The trigger was trivial, bordering on the ridiculous. On August 17, 2025, Professor Sanjay Kumar posted data around an unusual decline and increase in the number of electors in four assembly constituencies in Maharashtra on his personal X account. The calculation was wrong.

Within 48 hours, he deleted the post and apologised for the error. Mind you, the posts were a bland presentation of data with no political interpretation or insinuation. The data did not fit into the Opposition's narrative of "vote chori". This was not institutional reporting of a research project. In any case, this was a trivial error, immediately rectified. The other supposed provocation was also a non-issue. A few days earlier, the CSDS

had published the findings of an opinion poll on the SIR and reported a decline in the level of popular trust in the Election Commission. There was no error nor any element of surprise in this data that was hardly noticed. The BJP's ecosystem smartly conflated the two and pounced upon the CSDS. The troll army was afire, as were the *darbari* channels, demanding exemplary punishment.

Official indictment closely followed the troll army's insinuation. On August 19, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the official body through which grants to all social science institutions like CSDS are funnelled, took to X, saying it was taking "serious cognizance of the data manipulation by CSDS and its attempt to create a narrative with the intention of undermining the sanctity of the Election Commission of India. This is a gross violation of the Grant-in-Aid rules of ICSSR". The verdict had been delivered before the trial began.

Then came the paperwork. As in bulldozer justice, the formal justification is an act of post-facto creativity. Once the target, the punishment and the excuse were fixed, the ICSSR appointed a committee to prepare grounds for what had already been decided and carried out. As reported in *The Indian Express*, the committee has indicted the CSDS for everything other than what the ICSSR had accused it of. Apparently, the proposed punishment is now not for "data manipulation" but for the age-old charges that can be used to implicate anyone in the sarkari system: Fine print of appointment rules, payment or non-payment of allowances to employees, conduct of meetings and recording of minutes, and so on. This is especially odd since all these questions had been raised earlier by the ICSSR and already settled to its own satisfaction.

The committee's report is not yet released. But the ICSSR had stopped the CSDS grant with immediate effect. For the last one year, the institution has been struggling to pay salaries for the entire faculty, most of whom do not work on elections. The worst victims are the non-academic staff, who have nothing to do with all this.

Who cares for collateral damage? Demolition has begun. The trial can wait.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Views are personal

The problem is, the regional party does not hold



VANDITA MISHRA

PRASHANT KISHOR will contest a bypoll in Bihar, in a bid to claim political space, months after his new party failed to wrest a foothold in the assembly election. In West Bengal, following its electoral drubbing, Mamata Banerjee's TMC is coming apart at the seams. In UP, where the countdown has begun for next year's selection, the ruling BJP's internal wrangles make more news than the Samajwadi Party, which remains frozen in public perception since it lost power circa 2017. Chandrababu Naidu's son and working president of TDP, Nara Lokesh, describes "Namo" in Andhra Pradesh as Naidu plus Modi, the once larger-than-state regional player unresistingly subsumed in Modi's cult of personality.

These images are of recent vintage — regional parties/leaders with long careers laid low, even Jan Suraj, the newcomer with a clean slate, countering the same disbelief. They are part of a larger phenomenon of our time. The regional party seems to be crumbling in the face of the BJP's predatory politics, backed by its "one nation" thesis, drive towards uniformity and use of fear and favour to skew the playing field.

But regional parties have also conspired in their own weakening and in a larger undoing of the gains made on federalism for nearly two decades from the mid-1980s. Congress was in decline, even as the 1984 mandate in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination briefly masked it, and the BJP was a long way away from becoming the dominant party. Several regional parties climbed onto the national stage when the Centre was not "strong" through the 1990s. The processes of economic liberalisation were also, arguably, encouraging a decentralisation of the polity.

The ungainly reversal of that process in a diverse polity, which is now framed in the implosion of regional parties, has been long in the making. At one level, it has been made possible by the steady hollowing out of political parties organisationally.

As political scientist KK Kailash has underlined, the "mass party model", which meant the primacy of one face of the party over the other — the "party on the ground" over the "party in public office" — has become outdated. It was a product of its time, when, before Independence and immediately after it, parties were seen as "vehicles of movements attempting to extend the franchise to a broader section of society". Subsequently, the "party in public office" took command, the "party on the ground" became subservient to it.

This has meant "a high degree of centralisation, which revolves around a single leader or a leadership elite; a focus on holding public office and winning elections, where voters matter more than supporters...". It has also meant a growing reliance on government and bureaucracy to push its agenda on one end, and on the other, dependence on professional agencies for designing campaign strategy.

This inattention to organisational strengthening led to the TMC ceding vital decision-making space to IPAC, the political consultancy. It is contributing, in turn, to the stream of TMC cold-timers abandoning the party.

The national parties are also affected by this corrosion. But the inability of the regional parties to withstand it is more vivid. Their platforms were smaller to begin with — even those that have had links to large movements and causes, like the DMK or the RJD. But it is not just impersonal processes, the problem also lies in regional parties' own abdications that have come to haunt them in their confrontation with the BJP.

Travelling through UP recently was to be struck by how much the Akhilesh Yadav-led SP, more than nine years out of power, is still a prisoner of its past image. Akhilesh is still widely seen as the leader circumscribed by family, the SP as the Muslim-Yadav party that, in power, presides over lawlessness. The SP can blame these frozen perceptions on the BJP's propaganda. But it must also ask why its efforts to chip away at that image are dismissed by so many so easily.

These are extraordinary times, when the BJP cramps spaces for opposition politics. But like other regional parties, the SP has not been able to summon, in response, an extraordinary politics. It has fallen short even on a politics that is ordinary. It has not put forth a new political or economic model. On the ground, its proclaimed shift from M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) to PDA (*pichhda*/backward, Dalit/SC, *alpsankhyak*/minority) politics is seen as a variant of an old, exclusionary caste arithmetic. This, against an opponent that outmanoeuvres it by a wider social engineering at one level, and by claiming "*sabka saath*...", on the other. The BJP's social coalition excludes Muslims, but the SP dare not point to that exclusion because of its own timidity — its past record of uneven-handed politics undercuts its credibility.

The inability to fight the BJP on terms not set by the BJP, apart from the incapacity to climb out of the trap of a politics of family, one caste-one community, is common to the regional parties that are seen to be fading or hastening to the side of the BJP.

For now, even as cracks in BJP dominance begin showing, the parties that could have benefited from the opening up of political spaces are unfortunately not up to it.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Series whitewash

TEAM INDIA'S abject refusal to learn from the anatomy of its disaster during its just-concluded T20 encounters against Ireland and England culminated in one of its most humiliating defeats, much to the discomfiture of cricket lovers both home and abroad ("India's one-gear approach behind batting collapses", *IE*, July 13). Perhaps their respective team managements not only observed India's shortcomings keenly but also devised astute game plans to take full advantage of the Indian batters' inability to negotiate short-pitched deliveries, which led to such an outcome.

Kumar Gupta, via email

THE INDIAN men's cricket team's disappointing performances in Ireland and England have again exposed the weaknesses in our overseas cricket ("India's one-gear approach behind batting collapses", *IE*, July 13). It would be unfair to hold the players responsible. The national selectors and the BCCI must share responsibility for this embarrassment. Indian cricketers are groomed on flat, slow pitches and smaller grounds that favour high-scoring batting. Many players develop the habit of clearing the boundary with ease.

Deepanshu Srivastava, Pune

Fragile law and order

THE UNFORTUNATE incident of the mob lynching of an innocent man following a heinous crime against a child reflects the fragile law-and-order situation in the state ("In Bengal, a crime, the mob and state abdication", *IE*, July 11). Those who justify encounters must realise that when a state fails to prevent heinous crimes and provide timely justice, it often attempts to placate public anger and subdue grievances through extrajudicial methods. There is little bravado in this and much inequality, as we see influential TMC leaders finding respite by switching sides, while petty and less influential offenders are subjected to public humiliation.

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata



SHUBHAM KUMAR

EVERY THREE minutes, someone in India dies a preventable death on the road. Two official bodies counted those deaths in 2024 and arrived at three different numbers.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways reported 1.77 lakh deaths. The National Crime Records Bureau's "Accidental Deaths and Suicides" report recorded 1.75 lakh road accident deaths, compiled from police records of accidental deaths through a separate administrative pipeline. The same NCRB's "Crime in India" report, which records deaths due to negligence relating to road accidents, shows that 1.81 lakh people lost their lives in road crashes. Two agencies, three methodologies, nearly 6,000 lives of unexplained variance.

This gap is not a data problem. India records more road deaths than any other country, despite having a far smaller share of global vehicles. In *S. Rajaseekaran v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court recorded the full dimensions of the problem. Four working groups had studied what the Court called the four Es of road safety: Engineering, enforcement, education and emergency care. The findings across all four were alarming. Highway maintenance was receiving only 35 to 40 percent of estimated funding. Salvageable patients were dying because ambulances were inadequate, trauma centres absent, and police stations arguing over jurisdiction

If road accident deaths are preventable, tolerating a governance structure that allows them to continue is a constitutional failure

instead of rushing people to hospitals. Laws on enforcement existed on paper but were rarely applied with consistency.

What gave the Court's intervention its constitutional force was a prior recognition: That road accidents are not random misfortunes. Every crash, traced to its cause, is the product of human failure, and therefore preventable. The resignation to fate, the Court said, has never been the accepted philosophy of human life. It is precisely this understanding that ties road safety to Article 21. If these deaths are preventable, tolerating a governance structure that allows them to continue is a constitutional failure.

Part of why the problem persists is constitutional. Roads, police, public health and vehicle regulation are divided across the Union List, State List and Concurrent List in ways that ensure no single institution owns prevention. A crash on a highway simultaneously touches at least seven constitutional entries, and not one of them assigns clear responsibility for preventing the next crash. National highways belong to the Centre; State roads and police belong to states; motor vehicles sit in the Concurrent List; public health is a state subject. Jurisdictional fragmentation is not incidental to this failure. It is the design. The institutional response to this fragmentation has been a succession of committees, advisories and proposed boards.

The reform path is constitu-

Parliament, not fate, must shape road safety

tional, and it has a precedent.

When tax revenues fragmented across the same three constitutional lists became unworkable, Parliament did not create another advisory committee. It passed the 101st Constitutional Amendment Act and created the GST Council. Road safety authority is fragmented across those same constitutional lists in precisely the same way. A Road Safety Coordination Council built on that model, where Centre and states jointly set standards for road design, vehicle fitness, emergency care and fatality reporting, would give this problem the institutional weight it requires.

Amending the Seventh Schedule to bring roads and traffic more firmly within Parliament's legislative reach would complete that foundation. It would close the constitutional gaps that every advisory body falls through. Below that structural layer, Parliament needs to mandate District Road Safety Committees by statute with defined powers and real consequences for states that ignore them.

Parliament has acted before when a structure failed too many people for too long. Roads have been failing people for longer. Courts have stepped in on road safety repeatedly because executive and legislative institutions have not built durable accountability. That step-in can only go so far.

The writer is a constitutional lawyer and leads policy advocacy at Crashfree India. Views are personal

The burden only Messi can bear

of *Argentina vs Egypt* that Cristian Romero's goal sewed the seeds of my Eureka moment, and Enzo Fernández's stoppage-time goal brought my Archimedean breakthrough. Messi's greatest skill has been to concentrate the pressure and responsibility of performing onto his diminutive shoulders, freeing up space for his teammates to play the game as they'd like. It is his mere presence on the pitch that allows his teammates to play with a freedom from consequence. In the past, no one wanted to be the reason for the greatest player in the world to fail. After Messi's 2008 Olympic gold, the Argentine football team lived through a decade of defeat. Messi himself bore the brunt of constant criticism that he could perform only at club level and that perhaps he wasn't Argentine enough.

Prior to manager Lionel Scaloni's appointment, a stagnation had settled in. The team effectively reduced its purpose to simply getting the ball to Messi. Every pass in the midfield became an act of anxious deterrence, forcing the ball into a suffocating thicket of defenders where Messi was marooned. The 2021 Copa América and 2022 World Cup wins obliterated this trust deficit. Scaloni successfully cocooned Messi in a sys-

By commanding that overwhelming defensive focus, he has vacuumed the structural and emotional stress completely out of the final third

tem where the midfield operated smoothly regardless of his presence. Subsequently, Messi's movements accentuated those of his teammates while allowing them to flourish. The 2022 World Cup win also lifted the weight of legacy from both Messi and the nation's soul. Winning that trophy eradicated the threat of devastating loss. As behavioural psychology tells us, the fear of loss is more powerful than the pleasure of gain.

Snapping back to the present, Messi's performance resembles that of a black hole. Receiving the ball with ease, his runs collapse the spaces between his opposition's lines, drawing defensive structures inwards. By commanding that overwhelming focus, Messi has absorbed the structural and emotional stress completely out of the final third.

He has created a physical and mental sanctuary for his teammates, visible in the precise cross Lautaro Martínez calmly delivered to Enzo Fernández, who surged into the box to score the 3-2 winner.

The dictionaries that so clinically define an "athlete" by physical capability and organised competition will always fail to capture what Messi has become in 2026. He is no longer just a footballing marvel but also a psychological shield. By absorbing the gravity of an entire sport onto his bulletproof legacy, he has granted his teammates the safety to play football as it ought to be played, entirely free from the fear of making mistakes.

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

• DEFENCE

In Mahendragiri, proof of India's growing prowess in shipbuilding

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, July 13

THE INDIAN Navy on Saturday inducted the indigenously built advanced stealth frigate INS Mahendragiri into its Eastern Fleet at a ceremony in Visakhapatnam.

The commissioning marks the induction of the sixth indigenous stealth frigate from the Navy's Project 17A within one-and-a-half years.

What is INS Mahendragiri?

INS Mahendragiri is built with over 75% indigenous content and has a displacement of approximately 6,670 tonnes. It is equipped with the BrahMos supersonic surface-to-surface missiles, a combination of multifunction radar and medium-range surface-to-air missiles that can detect and kill aerial threats at extended ranges. The warship is named after the Mahendragiri mountain range in the Eastern Ghats.

Since January 2025, six of the seven Project 17A frigates have been commissioned. The last of them, INS Vindhyaagiri, is also expected to be commissioned this year. Project 17A frigates are versatile multi-mission platforms that can operate in the deep sea. According to the Navy, the frigates reflect a generational leap in indigenous ship design, stealth, survivability, and combat capability.

What has driven the quick inductions?

From December 2024 to date, the Navy has commissioned 18 warships, showcasing India's growing prowess in indigenous shipbuilding.

By the end of 2026, eight more ships are expected to be commissioned, according to the Navy.

The learnings from constructing the first four P17A ships have enabled compression of the construction timeline. Officials told *The Indian Express* that the progress is due to several factors at both the planning and execution stages. It is understood that the Navy received a considerable number of Acceptances of Necessity (AoNs), or clearances to procure platforms, from the Defence Acquisition Council.

The Navy then commenced design and construction processes on time for several projects, including Project 17A and Project 15 B ships (or Vishakhapatnam-class, the latest class of indigenous guided-missile stealth destroyers).

With multiple AoNs and timely contract signings, construction began as projected, leading to timely delivery and commissioning. Currently, 48 warships are under construction.

Additionally, plans are underway for constructing next-generation destroyers. A dedicated team from the Navy is involved throughout the entire process of constructing the ships. This enhances coordination and engagement between the Navy and the shipyard at all stages, including during the design and integration phases.

Another key factor is the continuous evolution of newer technologies and the modular construction of ships. The use of advanced simulation models during the design process allows for greater accuracy and multiple rounds of refinement. Public-private partnerships for major projects have also helped compress delivery timelines from 90 months to 72 months.



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9 Noida	15 जुलाई दोपहर 3:00 बजे	10 July 6:00 PM
9 Indore	27 जुलाई शाम 5:30 बजे	27 July 8:00 AM
9 Lucknow	20 जुलाई शाम 6:00 बजे	17 July 8:00 AM
9 Prayagraj	30 जुलाई सुबह 8:00 बजे	3 August 5:30 PM
9 Ranchi	14 जुलाई शाम 5:00 बजे	7 July 5:30 PM
9 Patna	16 जुलाई शाम 5:30 बजे	30 July 8:00 AM
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• HISTORY

Satluj row: What legal records reveal about Jaswant Singh Khrala's life & death

Divya Goyal
Ludhiana, July 13

ABOUT A week after *Satluj*, the biopic on Punjab human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khrala, was pulled off the OTT platform ZEE5 in India, it has also been taken down internationally.

Khalra had been documenting disappearances and alleged mass cremations in Punjab during the militancy years. He was killed in 1995. Records of his case in the Central Board of Investigation (CBI) and the Supreme Court reveal the long fight his wife waged to throw light on his life's work and his death.

How Khalra's case reached Supreme Court: Soon after Khalra was picked up from his house in Amritsar on September 6, 1995, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the then president of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and a senior leader of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), sent a telegram to Justice Kuldeep Singh.

The telegram stated that Khrala, who was then the general secretary, Human Rights Wing, of SAD, was "kidnapped by the police." Treating the telegram as a habeas corpus petition, the Supreme Court issued notice to the Punjab home secretary, the director general of police (DGP), and SSP Amritsar.

Meanwhile, Khalra's wife Paramjit Kaur Khrala also filed a habeas corpus plea. According to the petition, Paramjit stated that her husband had been investigating "unclaimed dead bodies" and police excesses, and used to encourage families of victims to file writs in courts. She stated she "strongly believes that her husband was picked up at the instance of Ajit Singh Sandhu", then SSP Tarn Taran, who had "several such allegations pending against him."

The Amritsar Police said "Khalra was neither arrested nor wanted by us in any criminal case." SSP Sandhu claimed in the court on September 23, 1995 that he "never threatened Khrala". The SSP claimed he was on leave from September 5 to 11 for his daughter's wedding in Chandigarh.



Jaswant Singh Khrala. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Khalra's press note on mass illegal cremations: Thus, Paramjit Kaur Khrala sought a probe not only into her husband's disappearance, but also placed before the court Khrala's investigation of the alleged fake encounters and illegal cremations by the Punjab Police.

What became the basis for a CBI investigation was a press note issued by Khrala and his associate, Jaspal Singh Dhillon, on January 16, 1995.

Placed before the SC, the press note revealed: "It was learnt that police regularly brings bodies to municipality cremation grounds for cremation, declaring them as unclaimed... The only record available is through firewood receipts which were issued to dispose these bodies."

Landmark SC order: Clubbing Tohra's telegram and Paramjit's petition, the SC Bench of Justice Kuldeep Singh and Justice S Saghir Ahmad, in a landmark order on November 15, 1995, appointed the CBI to investigate both Khrala's disappearance and the alleged extra-judicial killings in Punjab.

Excerpts from the order state: "Court cannot close its eyes to the contents of the press note...even if partially true it would be a gory tale of human rights violations."

CBI files report: On July 22, 1996, the Supreme Court acknowledged the CBI's 74-

page findings, which said that "prima facie, it has been found that a total of 984 bodies were cremated as lavaris by the police in Tarn Taran police district." The CBI said in the court the probe was still ongoing.

'Worst crime against humanity': Meanwhile, the CBI on July 30, 1996, informed the apex court that it had decided to prosecute nine policemen, Ajit Singh Sandhu, SSP Tarn Taran; Ashok Kumar, DSP, Bhikhiwind; Jaspal Singh, DSP, Tarn Taran; Sub-inspector/SHO Satnam Singh (Jhahal police station); S-I Surinderpal Singh (Sirhali police station); SI Jasbir Singh (Manochacha police station); SI Rachpal Singh (Kang PS); ASI Amarjit Singh and head constable Pirthipal Singh for Khrala's abduction.

However, Khrala's whereabouts remained unknown even a year after he was picked up.

In another landmark order on August 7, 1996, the Supreme Court said that Paramjit Kaur Khrala was undergoing the "worst crime against humanity."

"... Kidnapping of a person whose family is totally in dark about his whereabouts — even about the fact where he is dead or alive — is the worst crime against humanity," said the court, while directing the Punjab government to pay interim relief of Rs 10 lakh to the family.

Khalra's murder confirmed only after 3 years: On March 2, 1998, Kuldeep Singh Bachra, then special police officer attached with SHO Satnam Singh, told the CBI that Khrala was "murdered secretly and his body thrown into the canal near Harike (the river Sutlej) at midnight just after Diwali" in 1995. His body was never recovered. Bachra also said Khrala had been tortured in custody.

He also said he could not reveal these details earlier out of fear of then SSP Ajit Singh Sandhu, who allegedly died by suicide during the trial in 1997. Later, the CBI confirmed the date of Khrala's murder as October 27, 1995.

FULL VERSION
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• DEMOGRAPHY

More births, deaths being recorded: Benefits, gaps



EXPERT EXPLAINS
MORADHVAJ DHAKAD

SCIENTIST, MARIE CURIE RESEARCH FELLOW AT MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH, GERMANY

INDIA OFFICIALLY recorded more than 99% of its estimated births and deaths in 2024, according to the latest official data released earlier this month. This marks a significant increase in coverage in around a decade.

Data on births, deaths and stillbirths are recorded under a continuous and compulsory mechanism known as the Civil Registration System (CRS). It serves as a foundational source of India's population data — how many people are being born, how many are dying, where these events are occurring, and so on — for the accurate estimation of mortality, fertility and sex ratio at birth.

India nearing universal registration signals movement towards building a system in which every birth and death can be counted, certified, and ultimately used to inform public policy.

What has the path to universal registration been like?

The CRS has been legally operational since 1970, though the coverage and completeness of reporting were historically poor. The system operates under the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969, which was amended in 2023. Births and deaths are ordinarily required to be reported within 21 days. In hospitals, the medical officer in charge or an authorised official is responsible for reporting such events. For events at home, responsibility generally lies with the head of the household or another prescribed informant.

Until 2000, India registered only 56% of births and 48% of deaths. By 2014, this figure rose to around 86.6% and 72.5%, respectively.

Registration coverage also varied considerably, both by rural-urban location and across states.

The latest CRS report, from the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India under the Home Ministry, shows coverage approaching 100%. In 2024, birth registration reached 99.1% and

• LEVEL OF REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS, 2024

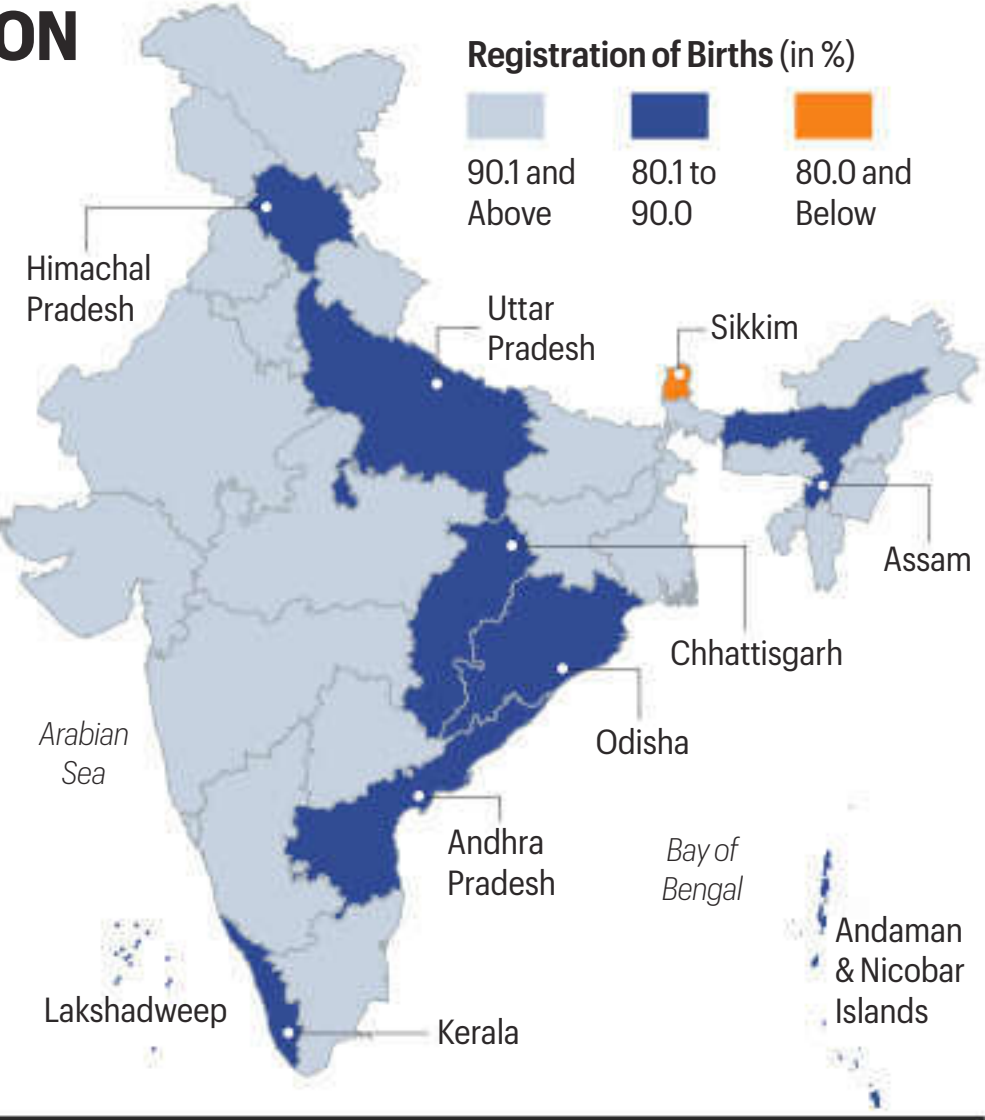
States in grey have at least 90.1% registration of births



STATES SUCH as Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Goa achieved universal birth registration coverage by the early 2000s.

BUT DEATH registration coverage lagged. Only Goa, Mizoram, and Kerala achieved universal coverage by that period.

TODAY, MOST states have very high rates of registration of births.



death registration reached 99.4%. Death registration has historically lagged behind birth registration, but it has since caught up rapidly. This marks a major shift for a country that historically had incomplete civil registration and relied heavily on surveys to estimate fertility and mortality.

The improvement is also visible across states. In 2024, 18 states and Union Territories achieved 100% birth registration, while 21 states and UTs achieved 100% death registration.

Why does the data matter?

A complete CRS is one of the most important sources of vital statistics. It is a crucial input for administrative use, assessing the impact of health and social policies, and understanding trends in fertility, mortality, and population change.

Timely registration of births and deaths can provide real-time information on demographic changes and population health. For example, during a health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, timely reporting of deaths was crucial for identifying high-risk areas and controlling the spread of the disease. CRS is also important for understanding seasonal mortality changes, driven by high temperatures and pollution.

Because of the CRS's historically poor

coverage, India has traditionally depended heavily on the Census, the Sample Registration System (SRS), and household surveys for estimates. But the Census is conducted only once every 10 years, and sample surveys do not provide reliable annual estimates at the district level.

A complete CRS can support local planning under decentralised governance, since district and sub-district level data are far more useful for programme design than national or state-level estimates alone. Registrations also enable individuals to prove their identity from a legal standpoint.

Higher registration

The rapid rise in registration for births and deaths is likely due to a combination of factors.

- Increasing incentives for documentation to avail welfare and other benefits may be among the key drivers.

What explains the shift in data?

The rapid rise in registration is likely due to a combination of factors.

For births, the increase in institutional deliveries in hospitals or health facilities, incentivised by post-delivery benefits, is an important driver — making the event more likely to be reported and registered. Birth certificates are also now necessary for school admission, identity documents, welfare benefits and other official purposes, strongly incentivising registration.

Similarly, death registration may have increased because more people are accessing formal healthcare, including through expanded health insurance and public

health schemes. The expansion of schemes, particularly the PM-JAY, has increased coverage among poorer and vulnerable households. Families also require death certificates for pensions, insurance, inheritance, property transfer, bank accounts and other administrative processes.

Digitisation may have also played a role. The Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023, marked an important step by the Government of India towards making civil registration more complete, timely, and accessible.

By making the birth certificate an essential document for education and enrolment for Aadhaar and voter ID, the amendment gives families a strong incentive to register every birth. However, much will depend on effective implementation, digital access, and consistent monitoring.

The state-level variations can be traced to differences in socioeconomic development, public awareness, institutional delivery, health-system access and administrative capacity. States are responsible for the registration machinery.

What gaps remain?

First, regional disparities remain a major concern.

Second, timely registration is a challenge. Many births and deaths are not registered within the prescribed 21-day period.

The most important gap concerns infant death registration. The report shows that 84.2% of registered infant deaths occurred in urban areas, compared with only 15.8% in rural areas. Since a large share of population still lives in rural areas, where early-age mortality is higher, this pattern may indicate under-registration of infant deaths.

Then there is the quality of information. Registering a death is not the same as recording a medically certified cause of death. Many deaths may still lack reliable medical certification, limiting the usefulness of CRS for disease and mortality analysis.

Finally, the completeness of death registration is itself estimated using SRS figures. However, previous studies have shown that the SRS undercounts both births and deaths, which may lead to an overestimation of CRS coverage.

Building on the progress thus far, the next stage of improvement must focus not only on coverage but also its quality — including timely registration, accurate records, and responsible use of digital data.

India could further consider a system for recording internal migration, which would strengthen administrative planning.

CPI INFLATION AVERAGED 3.9% IN APRIL-JUNE, LOWER THAN THE RBI'S FORECAST OF 4.2%

Fuel, weak rains push inflation in June above 4% after 16 months

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, July 13

PRICES FOR Indian households rose 4.38% in June — the most in one-and-a-half years — on the back of a continued rise in food prices. According to data released Monday by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), food inflation in the country rose to 5.32% last month from 4.78% in May, amid deficient rains. Meanwhile, the impact of the government's fuel price hikes was visible too.

The data for June bore the full brunt of the multiple increases in retail fuel prices announced in May, with personal transport inflation rising to 7.35% in June from 3.06% in May, while that for goods was largely steady — albeit elevated — at 7.7%. In May, it was 7.63%.

Inflation for the 'restaurant and accommodation services' category, which has risen sharply due to more expensive commercial LPG, continued to move north in June. Having stood at 2.9% in March and 5.75% in May, it rose further to 6.9% in June as eateries raised prices. According to Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist at Bank

of Baroda, restaurant inflation is unlikely to decline even when the energy situation normalises.

At 4.38%, the June headline inflation rate, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), is higher than May's 3.93%. Inflation, which is the year-on-year change in prices, has now risen every month in 2026. The last time it was higher was in December 2024, when it stood at 5.22%. However, that figure is as per the old CPI series which had 2012 as the base year.

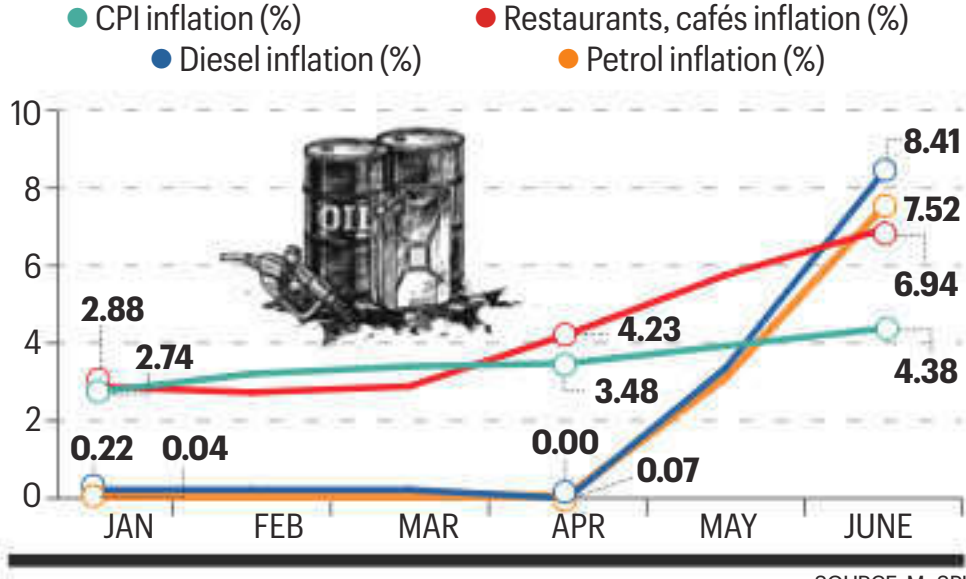
The new series, data for which begins from January this year, has 2024 as the base year for prices and incorporates new methods to calculate certain components of the inflation rate as well as new data sources.

While the old and new data series are not strictly comparable, this is the first time since January 2025 that consumer prices have risen by more than 4%, which is the RBI's medium term target. As per the central bank's legal mandate, it must target a 4% inflation rate in a band of 2-6%. CPI inflation averaged 3.9% in April-June as against the RBI's latest forecast of 4.2%.

Food, fuel prices

The Consumer Food Price

• DINING OUT KEEPS GETTING COSTLIER, FUEL PRICE HIKE HITS INFLATION



Index (CFPI) rose 1.7% last month compared to May as against a 1% month-on-month rise in overall prices. Transport inflation, meanwhile, rose sharply to 4.31% in June from 1.75% in May, with the index for the transport category rising 2.6% month-on-month (m-o-m).

The m-o-m increase in the price indices of any category of goods and services is indicative of the momentum in prices. This is a better indicator of how prices are moving as opposed to the inflation rate, which measures prices compared to last year.

In the wake of a sharp increase in global energy prices and supply disruptions due to the war in West Asia, pump prices of petrol and diesel were increased four times starting mid-May. As such, the June CPI data reflects the full impact of the fuel price hikes on inflation.

“The risk of further fuel-price increases has diminished as oil prices have retreated from their recent highs, although a rapid reversal also looks unlikely given the fragile US-Iran peace process,” Alexandra Hermann Prasad, Lead Economist

at Oxford Economics, said.

On the food front, these items contributed 185 bps to the headline inflation rate of 4.38%, said Dipti Deshpande, Principal Economist at Crisil, as a fading favourable base effect and high temperatures took their toll. As per latest data, the all-India rainfall deficit narrowed to 18% as on July 12 from 43% on June 28.

Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist at ICRA, noted that India usually gets around 32% of its entire season rainfall in July and 29% in August. Additionally, around 55% of the total area sown in the kharif season is typically covered in July. “Consequently, adequate rainfall during July-August remains crucial to support sowing and output and contain inflationary pressures in the ongoing fiscal,” Nayar said.

According to Prasad of Oxford Economics, the June inflation data “reinforces the RBI's intention to remain on hold in August”. Megha Arora, Director at India Ratings & Research, noted that inflation may rise further to 4.9% in July, with geopolitical tensions and El Nino conditions remaining upside risks.

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A HANDFUL OF AI STOCKS DOMINATE TAIEX & KOSPI

How overleveraged retail debt crippled South Korea's markets as AI fears deepen

Akash Mandal

Mumbai, July 13

THE SOUTH Korean market, once the best performer so far this year among equity markets, crashed 9% again on Monday and is down 27% over the past three weeks as panic regarding the AI rally being over-stretched deepens.

The rising debt among retail investors in the country has also amplified this problem at a time when foreign investors are already selling heavily.

However, Taiwan, which is another AI-dominated market, has been much more resilient so far during this meltdown. The country's benchmark TAIEX index is down just around 2.3% in the preceding three weeks.

Both the TAIEX and South Korea's Kospi index are dominated by a handful of AI stocks — Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix make up 54-60% of the Kospi, while TSMC has around 40% weight on the TAIEX. So, why has there been a divergence in the performance of both markets?

Rising debt among retail investors

The South Korean market faces structural issues of its own, with retail investors being sucked out of money due to rising debt to absorb the massive selling by foreign investors since the start of 2026.

US-based leveraged products, which double the gains and losses of retail investors, started gaining popularity in the post-Covid era, which led to billions of dollars of Korean money flying to the US.

To counter this, the South Korean regulators launched domestic single-stock leveraged products late in May. Because the financial regulators

• RETAIL ROUT

While foreign selling has intensified, with FPIs dumping nearly \$13 billion-worth of South Korean equities in June, retail investors have run out of money to absorb the shocks

• ‘Hyper-speculative’ and risky leveraged products are wildly popular among South Korean retail investors while Taiwanese investors have instead preferred passive options such as high-dividend ETFs

allowed companies making up over 10% of the market to be traded using these products to protect investor safety, these products were reduced to only two underlying stocks — SK Hynix and Samsung.

These domestic leveraged products gained popularity instantly, leading to retail investors either borrowing

heavily from brokerages to buy more stocks or overusing specific “ultra-short term” options provided by brokers, which allow investors to buy stocks by

paying only a small portion upfront.

This led to margin debt for retail investors in the country swelling to a record high of \$39 billion in May, according to a report by ValueTheMarkets. Leveraged stock investments by retail investors reached the limits set by local broking firms, said a *Reuters* report from June 10.

“The Kospi is now down 22% from its peak reached on June 19, while the 16 single-stock leveraged ETFs linked to Hynix or Samsung Electronics listed in Korea in late May are down 30% from their peak in asset terms on June 25, as is to a much lesser extent margin debt,” according to a report by

Jefferies from last week.

Thus, while foreign selling has intensified, with FPI dumping nearly \$13 billion-worth of South Korean equities in June as concerns regarding the AI rally deepened, retail investors have run out of money to absorb the shocks.

On Thursday, the market saw over \$100 million of retail stock positions being automatically liquidated by brokers as accounts ran out of cash, according to a report by *Seoul Economic Daily*.

The crisis has seen the Nigerian stock market, up around 68% so far this year in dollar terms, surpass South Korea's 66% gain in dollar terms, according to a *Bloomberg* report from last week.

While the “hyper-speculative” and risky leveraged products are wildly popular among South Korean retail investors, Taiwanese investors have instead preferred passive options such as high-dividend ETFs, which provide monthly or quarterly payouts, making such investors stick to their investments even during temporary crises.

However, many experts remain constructive on AI stocks despite the correction. While AI stocks, especially those in South Korea, have seen “healthy” corrections from peaks, these stocks will remain the go-to option for investors as long as the “AI arms race” continues, the Jefferies report noted.

Christian Mueller-Glissmann, Managing Director for portfolio strategy and asset allocation at Goldman Sachs, said last week that while AI stocks faced a “cyclical” selloff worsened by overleveraged retail positions, the overall AI trend remains structurally intact and is expected to drive equities going ahead.

Aditya Birla Renewables to acquire Shell's Solenergi Power for Rs 17,200 cr

George Mathew
Mumbai, July 13

ADITYA BIRLA Renewables Ltd (ABRen), a subsidiary of Aditya Birla Group-controlled Grasim Industries Ltd, has signed an agreement to acquire 100% of Solenergi Power Pvt Ltd from Shell Overseas Investment B.V., a wholly owned subsidiary of Shell Plc. Solenergi Power owns the Sprng Energy group of companies. The transaction is valued at an enterprise value of Rs 17,200 crore (\$1.8 billion).

The Birla buyout is among the largest acquisitions in the country's renewable energy sector both by value and scale.

“The equity consideration payable to the seller will be determined after adjusting for debt, cash, and other items as specified in the transaction documents,” the Birla group said. The acquisition is proposed to be funded through a mix of debt and equity infusion from Grasim and funds managed by Global Infrastructure Partners — a part of Blackrock.

This transaction adds a contracted portfolio of 5 GWp capacity (3.3 GWp of operational capacity and 1.7 GWp of under construction capacity) along with a strong connectivity and development pipeline, it said.

The Birla buyout is among the largest acquisitions in the country's renewable energy sector both by value and scale

The acquisition significantly accelerates ABRen's renewable energy growth ambitions by combining its strong presence in the Commercial & Industrial (C&I) segment with Sprng Energy's complementary utility-scale platform, the group said.

Solenergi Power is an investment holding company incorporated in Mauritius that serves as a direct shareholder in the Indian renewable energy platform Sprng Energy.

In August 2022, Shell completed the 100% acquisition of Solenergi Power from the British private equity firm Actis. The deal, valued at \$1.55 billion, granted Shell full control of the Sprng Energy group.

“Over a long arc of time, the Aditya Birla Group has built businesses at global scale that have contributed to India's long-term growth, be it in building

materials, metals, financial services, or retail. We view India's energy transition through the same lens. At its core, this is about strengthening our nation's energy future, enhancing industrial competitiveness, and creating the foundations for sustained economic growth,” Kumar Mangalam Birla, Chairman, Aditya Birla Group, said.

“This agreement reflects Shell's continued focus on adjusting the portfolio in our power business,” said Machteld de Haan, President, Downstream, Renewables and Energy Solutions at Shell. “We are high-grading our power portfolio and recycling capital in service of our asset-backed trading strategy outlined in Capital Markets Day 2025. This is another step in building a more focused, competitive and resilient business while improving returns year on year towards 2030.”

“Together, we will have a diversified portfolio and a deep development pipeline that puts us on course to scale to 20 GWp+ in the coming years. More importantly, it positions us to participate meaningfully in one of the largest energy transformations underway anywhere in the world,” Birla said.

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Sitharaman meets PSB chiefs, calls for wider NRI outreach



Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman interacts with Bank MDs, CEOs on FCNR(B), ECB and OFCB swap initiatives in New Delhi. X/@FINMININDIA

Press Trust of India

New Delhi, July 13

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday asked banks to enhance outreach to Non Resident Indians (NRIs) for greater mobilisation of foreign currency deposits.

Chairing a review meeting with CEOs of public sector banks (PSBs) and financial institutions on the Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank), or FCNR(B) deposits, External Commercial Borrowings (ECBs) and Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings (OFCBs) swap initiatives, Sitharaman appreciated the encouraging and enthusiastic initial response.

She called upon banks to further intensify outreach to the NRI diaspora, introduce innovative deposit products and sustain the momentum of mobilisation during the remaining period of the schemes, the finance ministry said in a statement.

During the meeting, CEOs informed that banks are offering attractive returns on FCNR(B) deposits, including on

Bank CEOs to meet RBI Governor today

Mumbai/New Delhi: The heads

of private and public sector banks will meet RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Tuesday to chalk out a roadmap for boosting inflows into the special foreign currency non-resident (FCNR(B)) deposit scheme and address operational hurdles that may be constraining forex mobilisation.

The CEOs of private sector banks will meet the Governor in the morning, followed by chiefs of state-owned banks in the afternoon. Apart from FCNR(B) deposits, the discussions are also expected to cover deposit mobilisation, credit growth and other banking issues. FE

five-year deposits, supported by the suspension of the interest rate ceiling on fresh FCNR(B) deposits under the scheme.

Trade deficit widens to \$30.4 bn in Jun

New Delhi: India's merchandise trade deficit widened to \$30.43 billion in June as exports fell faster than imports, weighed down by shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz linked to the West Asia conflict.

Exporters' bodies have flagged concerns over global demand softness, particularly

from Western markets, as a drag on growth in outbound shipments.

Economists had expected India's trade deficit to widen to \$26.63 billion in June, according to a *Reuters* poll, compared with a deficit of \$28.21 billion in May.

The country's merchandise exports fell to \$40.41 billion in

June from \$45.2 billion in the previous month while imports declined to \$70.84 billion from \$73.41 billion in May, data released on Monday showed.

Aditi Nayar, chief economist at ICRA, said the merchandise trade deficit widened by over 50% from a year earlier as elevated commodity prices pushed up the import bill. REUTERS

US N-fuel firm counters BARC's safety concerns over thorium fuel

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, July 13

CHICAGO-BASED nuclear fuel company Clean Core Thorium Energy (CCTE) has refuted concerns over the use of its advanced nuclear fuel, ANEEL, in existing pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs), claiming that the thorium-based fuel improves key reactor safety characteristics and can be deployed without requiring modifications to reactor designs or control systems.

In a paper published in the journal *Nuclear Engineering and Design*, researchers from Clean Core, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Toronto-based Innovative Nuclear Solutions, and San Diego-

based Structural Integrity Associates challenged the findings of an earlier study by scientists at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). The BARC paper had argued that deploying ANEEL in India's existing PHWR fleet would require reactor redesigns and could increase safety risks under accident conditions.

The paper also claimed the advanced nuclear fuel has the potential to generate around six times more energy than conventional natural uranium fuel.

CCTE, only the second American company to have secured an export license from the US Department of Energy to sell nuclear technology to India in nearly two decades, has developed this patented thorium-

• THORIUM FUEL PUSH

THE BARC paper had argued that deploying ANEEL in India's existing PHWR fleet will require reactor redesigns and could increase safety risks under accident conditions

CCTE HAS developed the patented thorium-based fuel called ANEEL that combines thorium with high-assay low-enriched uranium for use in PHWRs

ANEEL CAN be deployed in India's PHWR fleet, which accounts for the majority of the



country's operational nuclear reactors, as per the company

-based fuel called ANEEL (Advanced Nuclear Energy for Enriched Life) that combines

thorium with high-assay low-enriched uranium (HALEU) for use in PHWRs.

As per the company, ANEEL can be deployed in India's PHWR fleet, which accounts for the majority of the country's operational nuclear reactors.

In December 2024, state-owned NTPC Ltd and CCTE had announced a strategic partnership to explore the development and deployment of ANEEL for existing nuclear stations in India, subject to regulatory clearances. Apart from exploring development and deployment of ANEEL fuel in India, NTPC and CCTE intend to collaborate for exploring the possible indigenisation of its manufacturing with local supply chain development, establishing supply chain for HALEU, and supply of Uranium to India with sovereign guarantee.

In January, a paper published in the journal *Current Science* authored by scientists at the BARC had flagged concerns about using ANEEL fuel in the country's existing PHWRs. It concluded that thorium-HALEU fuel was “far from a drop-in option” and that existing reactors were unsuitable without substantial changes.

The CCTE paper, however, refuted this and described ANEEL as a “plug-and-play” replacement for natural uranium fuel bundles, saying it retains the same external dimensions and geometry as conventional fuel and modifications are limited to internal pin geometry and fuel composition.

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• MARKETS

 Sensex 77,616.40 47.01 0.06%	 NIFTY 24,211.00 4.10 0.02%	 Gold ▼ ₹1,42,188	 US Dollar ▲ ₹95.62
		 Silver ▼ ₹2,18,722	 Oil ▼ \$73.23

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA
GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF JULY 10, 2026



Unsafe practices

Safety protocols should not be given short shrift in tourism and adventure

Survivor accounts of the Vietnam boat tragedy last week point to two clearly identifiable contributors. As the weather turned rough and the speedboat took a sharp turn, it tilted to the left. The passengers – all Indian tourists – sitting on the right fell to the left side. Almost all the passenger weight shifted at once, the boat lost balance and turned turtle. As it capsized, the boat captain and guide escaped through the open front door. Others who found an opening also jumped out. Those who could not leave were trapped inside the capsized boat and took in water. Rescuers pulled them ashore where first aid and resuscitation were attempted before they were moved to hospital. All this took precious time and casualties mounted as a result. Some 15 Indians are reported to have died while 17 survived. Four Vietnamese crew also survived. The Indians on the speedboat at Phú Quốc were among more than 100 employees that a mobile company had taken to Vietnam on a corporate incentive tour.

Industry data indicate that some three crore Indians visit foreign countries every year, with a significant proportion of them coming from non-metro cities. Many of the survivors at Phú Quốc were from such cities. South-East Asia has emerged as the preferred destination, with Thailand and Vietnam joining the traditional attractions of Singapore and Malaysia. Many of these new tourist spots are developing rapidly but, like India, have not fully strengthened safety-of-life practices. For instance, just as in India, pleasure boats operators may carry enough life jackets or distribute them but often do not insist that every passenger wears one. Life jackets keep people afloat with their heads above water if they end up in the sea. In Phú Quốc, passengers were reportedly given life jackets, but it is not yet confirmed whether they were all made to wear them before departure. Another basic safety feature should be ensuring that passengers remain securely strapped to their seats so that they do not shift during rough weather or sharp manoeuvres. Even small shifts in passenger weight can significantly affect the stability of a speedboat. This norm was violated in Phú Quốc. Vietnam in particular has witnessed a surge in tourism, with Indians forming a substantial share of visitors. Speedboat rides between the islets of the Phú Quốc archipelago and the main island are especially popular among Indian tourists. The Vietnamese government has promised to review safety standards on such boats and upgrade them where necessary. But Indians, aided by governments and operators, must strengthen their awareness of safety practices, especially those related to fire and water safety.

True to form

The best teams are in the last four, but FIFA performed poorly

When the 2026 World Cup kicked off on June 11 in Mexico City, the air was filled with cautious optimism. This being the first 48-team World Cup, there were apprehensions that the group stage would be low on quality and feature many one-sided games. But hope stemmed from sport's innate ability to adjust, evolve and thrive in newer settings. After more than a month's action, it can be safely said that the World Cup in North America has been a footballing success. Though semifinalists France, Spain, Argentina and England are all former winners, currently ranked at the top and from the pedigree and established stables, there has been ample space for others to carve their own identities. Cape Verde – a tiny archipelago off Africa's west coast – qualifying for the knock-outs and fighting defending champion Argentina toe-to-toe, spirited performances from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal, Egypt's near-defeat of Argentina in the round of 16, and Norway overcoming five-time titlist Brazil and stretching England for nearly 120 minutes are all vivid examples of the wide geographical spread of sporting excellence. In fact, nine of the 10 African nations in the competition reached the knock-outs, and Asia too would have had more than just Japan and Australia if luck had favoured Iran, which crashed out despite three draws from three matches.

However, on the administrative front, the tournament has been found wanting. There were problems galore at the beginning, such as forcing Iran to camp in Mexico and travel long hours to Seattle and Los Angeles, and arbitrarily denying visas to officials and fans. But governing body FIFA has not turned over a new leaf. Among the controversies was the way the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was applied in Argentina's narrow 3-2 win over Egypt. The African nation saw a goal overturned for a foul committed in the lead up but did not see the same yardstick applied for one of Argentina's. Another issue that left supporters seething was the intervention of U.S. President Donald Trump in the deferral of forward Polarin Balogun's one-match suspension in time to play Belgium in the round of 16. There is no evidence to prove that Mr. Trump's phone call to FIFA head Gianni Infantino influenced the decision, but in a scenario where the custodian of the game has condoned every wrong from the chief organising country, suspicion is natural. Starting from Tuesday night, Kylian Mbappe's irresistible France, Lamine Yamal's organised Spain, Jude Bellingham's effervescent England and Lionel Messi's evergreen Argentina will be back mesmerising the world. But it will be in football's best interests if its guardians alter their moral compass and march in tow.

Holding the Court accountable amid democratic strain

In late June this year, 23 Opposition parties wrote to the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant raising concerns about the state of the electoral process in India's democracy. The letter reiterated the broad concern that the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is exclusionary, and that the framework is burdensome for ordinary citizens. The Opposition's letter is also a gesture of desperation and disappointment over the Supreme Court of India's refusal to interfere with the massive and continuous disenfranchisement.

The erosion of the right to vote
In *Why India Votes?* (2014), Mukulika Banerjee narrates various encounters with poor ordinary voters. Ms. Banerjee, in the book, referring to Mekhala Krishnamurthy's study, cites an incident: A woman named Rukmini Bai was unable to vote in the elections for lack of proper identification documents. When Rukmini was asked why it was important for her to vote, she said, "My work is to sweep up all the grain that falls from the sacks and the weighing scales on the floor. At the end of the day, I sell what I have collected and I am allowed to keep half the money. That is my income. So you see, I understand the value of each grain of wheat. On the floor they look insignificant, just one isolated grain of wheat, but each grain that is added to the heap determines what I earn. My vote is like those grains of wheat."

For any citizen of a democracy, exercising the right to adult franchise is vital. But for those who have been marginalised from mainstream society, voting becomes a powerful political act. It reaffirms the recognition that they and their votes matter, and that they count as much as those of the privileged. This is why the long queues at polling booths, without class, caste, or income disparities, turns out to be a beautiful image of a functioning democracy.

What the SIR exercise initiated by the Election Commission of India (ECI) has done is to poke at the heart of this electoral enfranchisement. The modalities in which the ECI has invoked this process are also significant. The ECI has been successful in creating an atmosphere of anxiety for citizens, in a matter closely tied to their political identity. The right to vote is a significant facet of political expression envisaged by the Constitution. This right is now, however,



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Lawyer at the Supreme Court of India



Thulasi K. Raj
Lawyer at the Supreme Court of India

The higher judiciary's handling of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls raises questions about judicial scrutiny and India's democratic future

submerged in an entire overarching framework consisting of documentation, inquiry into lineage, appeals and as scholar Rudraksh Lakra calls it – 'digital structural authoritarianism'.

Role of the Court

When the basic structure of a democracy is directly attacked by the executive, the kind of response by the Court – a counter-majoritarian institution – deserves serious study. When a politically aggressive state battles the powerless individual with the entire state machinery at its disposal, one looks at the Court, equipped with the constitutional tools to limit state power.

The Bihar SIR case was adjudicated by the Bench led by the CJI on May 27, 2026. However, this decision came long after the election was over. The Court also has a disappointing history of postponing the final decision in cases after the state action in question has been already operated or implemented.

Therefore, as in the cases challenging demonetisation (2016) and the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, by the time the legality of the SIR was decided, it had become a *fait accompli*. This is the primary failure of the Court – not determining the dispute when time is of the essence.

Second, the way in which the Court oversaw the process was problematic. Unlike the cases where executive action is under judicial scrutiny, in the Bihar SIR, the Court actively involved itself and facilitated the so-called revision that led to deletion of several lakhs of voters. By virtue of several interim orders and a multitude of directions, the Court effectively administered the process. One finds a clear judicial abetment to the electoral process making it a collaborative exercise – quite unprecedented in the country's history. The Court's nature shifted from a forum of judicial review to an administrative body.

Third, the ex-post facto endorsement. In the Bihar SIR case, it was nevertheless crucial how the Court would substantively conceptualise the dispute. This was also determinative for other State elections, particularly in Assam and West Bengal. One could frame the narrative in either of two ways: first, as a technical question concerning the competence and powers of the ECI; and second, as a question of deprivation of rights.

In formulating the questions themselves, the

The right path for India's nuclear power development

International sanctions were imposed on India after its peaceful nuclear test of 1974. The India-United States civil nuclear deal, which was signed in 2008, ended the restrictions on the import of uranium and of nuclear power plants, with some critical exceptions. The free import of natural uranium has enabled India to grow its nuclear programme. Negotiations with major western nuclear power plant suppliers were started but had to be given up as their plants were far too expensive.

Homegrown nuclear advantage
Sanctions forced India to innovate. Every part going into India's nuclear plants was designed, developed, tested, and manufactured in India in patient partnerships between the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and Indian firms. The unit size of India's nuclear power plants went up from 200 MW to 500 MW. Now, 700 MW units have been developed. Four units are under construction and another 10 are being developed. India now makes the cheapest nuclear power plants in the world, costing approximately \$1,700 per Kw. The South Korean plants cost more, around \$2,200 per Kw, the French over \$5,500 per kw, and the U.S. \$15,000 per Kw. Therefore, India has the potential to become a major exporter of nuclear power plants.

With such a clear cost advantage and self-reliance, reports of plans to import nuclear power plants and technology indicate insufficient awareness of India's own capabilities and price competitiveness. The size of India's potential market for nuclear energy is so large that it would be rational for international suppliers to do whatever it takes to get a substantial share of this market. But would that be the optimum choice for India if costs are much higher or if it creates a new stream of technological vulnerability?

At this time, India has further strengthened its



Meera Shankar
Former Indian Ambassador to the United States



Ajay Shankar
Distinguished Fellow, TERI, and former Secretary, Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), Government of India

The country's nuclear future must balance growth with self-reliance and safety

leadership in technology as its 500 MW commercial fast breeder reactor is getting commissioned after overcoming many difficult challenges. Today, India makes Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWR), which use natural uranium as fuel. The Light Water Reactors (LWRs) use enriched uranium as fuel and are based on uranium enrichment technology which is more widely used in the world. India should try and develop its own LWRs, specially as the Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver permanently prohibits the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing technology to India. This should not be beyond India's capabilities, given sufficient resources and a dedicated programme.

Scaling up, staying self-reliant

The government has decided that by 2047, India will develop 100 GW of nuclear power capacity. To achieve this, the sector has been opened up to new entrants from both the public and private sectors through enabling legislation that is well-crafted and investor-friendly. The price of nuclear power in India is now competitive *vis-à-vis* thermal power. The use of the proven, cost-competitive domestic technology by new entrants would be the ideal cost-effective way to scale up. A large programme has scale effects resulting in lower production costs. Further, new entrants could potentially reduce project execution costs and time. Bringing in technology streams and equipment which will give India far more expensive electricity should not merit serious consideration.

To meet the enormous dedicated power demands of artificial intelligence data centres, small modular reactors (SMRs) are being considered as a solution in the West. However, the designs remain under development, with commercial deployment yet to begin. The AEC has offered its technology for 200 MW nuclear

Court leaned towards the former rather than the latter. Barring a singular question on proportionality and legitimacy, all other issues were misidentified. This is why there is no effective deliberation on the legality of the process, particularly with regard to its vagueness and lack of reasoning. The disproportionate administrative demand for (often impossible) paperwork, rigid time limits, and the discriminatory impact on minorities, women, and the migrant population were overlooked. In the adjudicatory exercise, there was no appreciation of the social realities of illiteracy, poverty and lack of institutional access for a substantial number of voters. Ultimately, the Court decided in favour of the ECI on all the issues.

Judicial accountability

Long ago, the liberal thinker Murray Rothbard, relying on the scholar Charles Black, noted that: "the state has largely transformed judicial review itself from a limiting device to yet another instrument for furnishing ideological legitimacy to the government's actions." In his classic work, *The Politics of the Judiciary* (1977), J.A.G. Griffith also exposes the judiciary's natural inclination towards the political branches of the state.

The Indian Supreme Court is one of the most powerful institutions in the world. Many decisions of the Court seemingly involving legal questions are essentially political questions. Therefore, it is necessary for the political Opposition to evaluate and criticise the fundamental aberrations in the judicial realm. This is part and parcel of the function of the Opposition, in today's critical times.

Manufacturing endorsements to support continuing executive excesses is symptomatic of any authoritarian regime. It is important to recognise that India is evolving into a system in which institutions have lost neutrality, as acknowledged by the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, in his speech at the recent INDIA bloc convention.

It is also becoming clearer that any radical change in the polity through the judicial process is unlikely. There is a recent global trend of expanding oppositional politics beyond conventional methods to people's movements. India's democracy must embrace such political praxis.

plants to new entrants. Smaller unit sizes to suit emerging market needs can also be developed domestically in partnership between the AEC and Indian firms. The market for SMRs in India would be a bilateral contractual matter between the generator and buyer. From a regulatory perspective, there would be merit in taking the view that a foreign-designed SMR plant should have operated satisfactorily for a few years before being deployed in India. There would be little justification for an untested SMR being developed elsewhere being first deployed, experimentally, in India.

Ambition needs caution

Given the critical importance of ensuring the safety of nuclear power plants, it would be prudent that new players establish themselves before scaling up. India's record on safety in its nuclear plants has been exemplary till now. This must be preserved going forward. This will be a major challenge amid rapid expansion and the entry of new players, given the prevailing industrial culture in India, where accidents at construction sites and operating industrial plants continue to occur.

A single nuclear mishap could trigger a strong public backlash, similar to the one experienced by the West after Chernobyl (1986), which led to nuclear power development coming to a virtual standstill in many western countries. It would, therefore, be prudent for new entrants to initially develop only a few plants and establish the rigorous internal safety culture required for nuclear facilities, subject to continuous external auditing. Scaling up can thereafter take place gradually, without needlessly risking safety. The goal of achieving 100 GW of capacity by 2047 could be achieved safely while also strengthening self-reliance within India and enabling the country to become a globally competitive player.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Diplomacy over war

The fragility of the U.S.-Iran ceasefire is a dangerous setback that increases the risk of another devastating war in West Asia. Diplomacy must not be abandoned in favour of military confrontation. The United States should recommit to sustained diplomacy, respect international law, and pursue peaceful engagement rather than policies that fuel further escalation.

Jagjit Singh,
Los Altos, California, U.S.

S. Janaki

The passing of legendary playback singer S. Janaki marks the poignant end of a golden era in Indian cinema. Her extraordinary

vocal range and impeccable diction breathed life into thousands of songs across multiple languages. What set her apart was her unparalleled versatility — a rare ability to effortlessly convey the spectrum of human emotion. Whether it was the gentle innocence of a lullaby, the technical brilliance of a complex classical composition, or the depth of a romantic melody, she made every song uniquely her own. Her honey-sweet voice will continue to resonate in the minds of millions.

Namya Jain,
Hyderabad

S. Janaki's contribution to the meteoric rise of music legend Ilaiyaraaja and

several other composers was phenomenal. It is a testament to her extraordinary versatility that she held her own in Tamil cinema, which boasted stalwarts such as P. Susheela, Vani Jairam, and L.R. Eswari, among others.

C.V. Aravind,
Bengaluru

A celestial voice that expressed all kinds of human emotions and the poetic beauty of nature in its perfection has fallen silent. An endearing personality across generations and language regions, S. Janaki will be remembered for her soulful singing and humility.

J. Radhakrishna Kurup,
Ettumanoor, Kottayam, Kerala

The passing of the "Nightingale of South India" is a profound loss to the Indian film industry. Through her soulful romantic melodies and timeless folk songs, she etched her name into the pages of history. Her music captivated millions with its meaningful lyrics, emotional depth, and extraordinary grace. Her songs also served as a bridge that connected families, cultures, and generations. Undoubtedly, the enchanting voice and unforgettable songs of Janaki Amma will continue to resonate in hearts for generations to come, preserving her remarkable legacy forever.

Muhammed Mufthi V.,
Puliyakkode, Malappuram, Kerala

At Wimbledon

Sports lovers across the world will certainly savour and cherish the epic Wimbledon 2026 final between defending champion Jannik Sinner and Alexander Zverev. Evoking nostalgic memories of the classic battles between the all-time greats of yesteryear, the summit clash enthralled and entertained in equal measure. With his awe-inspiring triumph, grit, determination, indomitable will to succeed, and never-say-die attitude, displayed under testing conditions and exemplified by his ability to bounce back after losing the opening set, Sinner has cemented his place as the

new star of the international tennis arena, signalling a generational shift in the sport. The memorable final will also be remembered for the grace and sportsmanship displayed by both players. Their sparkling performances elevated the standards of the game to sublime heights. That said, the legendary Novak Djokovic also deserves special mention for his lion-hearted performances throughout the tournament.

B. Suresh Kumar,
Coimbatore

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

It's time to wean T.N. off populist doles

The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)-led regime in Tamil Nadu, which assumed office on May 10, has, so far, brought out two White Papers - one on public finances and the other on power utilities. While the first talked of “deterioration” of the situation in the last five years (2021-26) - when the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was in power, the second took a longer view of the health of power utilities over the last 25 years. The common thread of the two documents is: the precarious financial condition.

The profligacy of the successive governments has been a key factor that contributed to the very tight fiscal situation in the State. In the name of welfarism, they have been overindulgent in disbursing freebies. Afraid to wound popular political sentiments, the intelligentsia has also kept quiet. But such decisions should have been put to severe critical scrutiny as they reduced the availability of funds for public health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure - all of which come under development expenditure.

One classic example is the cash dole to ration card holders for the Pongal festival. What was started with ₹100 in 2009 rose to ₹2,500 in 2021 and ₹3,000 in 2026, the last two instances of which totalled to ₹12,300 crore. Despite distributing the largesse, the incumbent regimes were voted out in 2021 and 2026. Scrapping the scheme would not have made any difference to those who have been celebrating the festival with usual gaiety.

Unfortunately, the TVK too does not seem to have learnt any lesson from the experiences of its predecessors as its leader C. Joseph Vijay, immediately after being sworn in as Chief Minister, cleared a proposal for providing 100 more units of electricity free to those who consumed up to 500 units bimonthly. This was done as part of his fulfilling an electoral assurance regarding 200 units free every month to “eligible”



T. Ramakrishnan

Vijay and his Cabinet colleagues are in the best position to implement purposeful welfare schemes

domestic consumers. With this, the government added ₹1,730 crore to its tariff subsidy being provided to the State discom. The subsidy in 2025-26, under the DMK regime, was close to ₹17,000 crore. If the present government had, instead, begun cracking down on the parallel system of homeowners collecting from their tenants electricity charges that are far in excess of the official tariff slabs, the lower strata of society, which has been at the receiving end and which was said to have supported Mr. Vijay during the poll, would have got some relief on its power bill. Or, had it restored monthly billing for the domestic category, it would have made around 2.5 crore consumers happy. The government’s payment of tariff subsidy to the discom is in addition to 100% funding of revenue loss and equity share capital contribution. In total, the State provided nearly ₹33,400 crore last year just for maintaining “normalcy” in only one segment of the economy. In 2016-17, this was about ₹10,835 crore.

It is no wonder why the State government’s revenue deficit is always on the rise, especially after 2022-23, when the practice of 100% loss funding came into vogue. Power Minister R. Nirmalkumar, while presenting a few weeks ago the White Paper on the power utilities, stated that there would be no tariff revision this year. Maintaining the status quo appears to be the government’s approach in other revenue-earning areas. Another “welfare scheme” announced by this regime is the provision of one-gram gold ring to babies born in government hospitals. This would cost the exchequer about ₹756 crore annually and this will be implemented from September 15. As of now, the new government has not made any attempt to prune the welfare schemes.

Under such circumstances, it is unfathomable how the new government can continue with “key welfare schemes” of the previous governments as revenue

deficit is estimated to cross the ₹90,000-crore mark in 2026-27. Given the present climate of political instability internationally, Tamil Nadu, whose industrial and services sectors are deeply integrated with the global economy, is likely to experience greater volatility than many other States. After allowing 12% growth in the State’s Own Tax Revenue, the government’s White Paper on public finances has scaled down this year’s total revenue receipts (TRR) by ₹14,000 crore - to around ₹2,15,000 crore. As the committed expenditure - pension, salaries, and interest payments - accounts for around 65% of TRR, this coupled with freebies virtually erodes fiscal space for capital expenditure and investment.

Barring Mr. Vijay, who, at the NITI Aayog meeting three weeks ago, outlined his ambition of turning Tamil Nadu into a \$1.5-trillion economy by 2036, his government and Ministers have not spoken of grand plans for the State. Perhaps, this marks the realisation on the part of the ruling party about the government’s finances. Their enthusiasm in plugging leakages and tackling corruption is understandable, but one has to be realistic in accomplishing tangible results at a short time in a well-entrenched system. So, it is time the TVK regime made it clear to the public that it does not have money to implement universally applicable welfare schemes, old or new. In the process of ensuring targeted delivery of welfare measures, it may earn the wrath of certain sections of society. Still, this should not deter it from cleansing the system. As Mr. Vijay and most of his Cabinet colleagues do not carry any political baggage, they are well-placed to take radical measures to make the government’s finances healthy. Otherwise, the TVK’s promise of transforming Tamil Nadu into a “financially self-sufficient State” will remain just that - a promise.

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A cautious push for industrialisation

As land acquisition in Bengal remains tricky, CM says govt. will buy it for industry

STATE OF PLAY

Shiv Sahay Singh

The BJP government in West Bengal appears to be in a hurry to usher in administrative and legislative overhaul in the State and reverse the policies of the previous Trinamool Congress government.

Even as it has introduced new legislation to make preventive detentions easier, implement Uniform Civil Code, dismantle the statues and signage of the previous regime, and change names of streets, the Suvendu Adhikari government has also accelerated the push to bring industries to the State.

There have been several shifts at the policy level such as reintroduction of an incentive scheme for industry - which was stopped by the previous regime, exemption for investments over ₹100 crore from acquiring a no-objection certificate from local bodies, and re-examination of the West Bengal Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act, which limits private ownership of vacant land in urban agglomerations.

However, the biggest policy announcement for attracting industry was made by the Chief Minister on July 11, when he said that his government would purchase land directly from farmers for setting up industry. “We have accepted the direct land purchase policy of 2013.... With this policy, we are giving land to the BSF, railways and the national highways (authority), and for the new airport... Under the land purchase scheme, we will directly purchase land and hand it over to you,” Mr. Adhikari had said while laying the foundation stone for a manufactur-



ing unit at Dankuni last week.

While the shift in policy indicates that the State government is willing to go the extra mile to attract industries, land acquisition remains a tricky issue. West Bengal is the second most densely populated State in the country with over 1,000 people per square km and the average size of land holding being only 0.77 hectares.

About 20 years ago, the CPI (M)-led Left Front government had returned to power with a huge mandate, winning 235 of the 294 Assembly seats in the State (the BJP won 208 seats in 2026). Led by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, it was in haste to industrialise the State and announced the Tata Motors small car factory at Singur.

However, land acquisition for the project spiralled into a key issue, which consequently ended the 34-year-old Left Front government in the State and catapulted Trinamool chairperson Mamata Banerjee to power in 2011. Mr. Adhikari, who was part of the fight against land acquisition at Nandigram, is aware of the dangers of forcible land acquisition and how it could unite people against the government. “We do not want a repeat Singur and Nandigram anti-land acquisition agitations,” he said, emphasising that he did not want indus-

tries to directly purchase land from farmers.

However, the Chief Minister’s remark has left the industry without a clarity on land acquisition. Business houses say that a clear picture will emerge only when the government comes up with a land acquisition policy in the next few months.

During the 15 years of Trinamool Congress government, prominent industry leaders made proposals worth lakhs of crores at the Biswa Bangla Global Conventions. Often, they repeated the same proposals year after year, while millions of workers from the State moved to the South and the West of the country to work as migrant workers.

The decision of Tata Motors to leave the State at the height of Singur agitation in 2008 is considered a major setback for West Bengal’s dreams of industrial revival after years of militant trade unionism. Over the past two decades, the Left and Trinamool governments tried hard to shrug off the anti-industry image of the State. In those years, West Bengal lost the race of industrialisation to States in the West and the South of the country.

Starting late in the race, Bengal has to tide over several barriers such as land acquisition - on which there is no clarity, ensuring proper law and order that has hit its nadir because of misuse under the Trinamool regime, and improving its infrastructure that appears to be crumbling.

The BJP government’s promise of turning West Bengal into ‘Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal)’ cannot be achieved without ushering in industrialisation, and that is perhaps the biggest challenge before the government.

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Is the undocumented migrant counted?

Evidence using official Census data suggest that there is no surge of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh, at least between 1991 and 2011

DATA POINT

Abhishek Shaw

Can India’s official statistics detect large-scale undocumented migration? Undocumented migrants may evade law, but can they evade the Census? If millions of them are living in India, they must appear somewhere in the country’s official statistics. Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijiju told Parliament that “As per available inputs, there are around 20 million illegal Bangladeshis migrants staying in India”. Then, they must come across enumerators during the Census. What might an undocumented migrant do in such an encounter?

They can respond in three ways: avoid or duck the Census altogether, contributing to coverage error; be counted but report India rather than Bangladesh as the place of birth, creating measurement error; or report the place of birth truthfully.

Each of these choices leaves a different mark in the data, which can be checked. Together, this provides a simple framework for asking whether India’s official data are consistent with the claimed scale of undocumented migration. But a framework based on birthplace has a built-in limit: the Census records where a person was born, not whether they entered legally. The same “born in Bangladesh” category contains citizens, visa-holders, and the undocumented alike, with nothing to tell them apart. What the data can speak to, then, is scale: whether a population of the claimed size exists at all.

Ducking

Ducking is hiding from the enumerator altogether. But hiding is not the only way to duck. A subtler version, for example, is to tell the enumerator “I don’t actually live here; I will be counted at my usual residence elsewhere” and then not to be counted at that other place

either. The outcome is the same, an omission, which is exactly what the Census is built to detect via the Post Enumeration Survey (PES). This has been conducted after every Census to estimate coverage error and reasons for measurement errors.

The 2011 PES finds a net omission of 23 persons per 1,000 nationally, or 2.3%, unchanged from 2001 (up from 1.8% in 1991). The Eastern zone, with States bordering Bangladesh and where “infiltration” claim is concentrated, is best covered (**Table 1**). What can be said confidently is that the population missed by enumeration is small, stable across the decades, and smallest at the border. This leaves little room for the unenumerated population of the scale the political claim requires.

Misreporting

The second option—being enumerated but recording one’s birthplace as India rather than abroad—is the one that costs the least and can be neither verified nor refuted at the point of enumeration. But it has an implication: a person who misreports is still a person the Census has counted. This is what would be termed measurement error. They remain in the total population, in the count by religion, and in the age and sex tables, but the birthplace entry is false.

If, for example, large numbers of undocumented Muslim migrants were doing this, the effect would not be a hidden population but an inflated one—a Muslim population, and with a rate of population growth, larger than natural increase and differential fertility can account for—and concentrated in the border districts. That inflation has been examined in an earlier article in *The India Forum*, which found no such signature. If misreporting were hiding a large migrant inflow, it would surface as border-concentrated Muslim growth beyond what fertility explains. The counts showed growth that is moderate, fertility-consis-

tent, and geographically dispersed instead.

Truthful Responses

The third option is to report their place of birth truthfully with the belief that the Census enumeration is anonymous and does not put them at risk. Migrant stock is a widely used measure to keep track of levels of migration. A person enumerated in India, but born in another country is considered a migrant in this measure.

The composition of the migrant stock in India has seen substantial declines of those born in Bangladesh and Pakistan, with large increases in that of Nepal (**Chart 1**). However, despite decline in overall migrant stock, about half of India’s has consistently been Bangladesh-born persons.

In the last three Censuses, roughly 94% of all India’s Bangladesh-born residents lived in the five border States (West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Mizoram); a share that barely moved even as the national Bangladesh-born population itself fell by nearly one-third from about 4.0 million to 2.7 million.

Table 2 shows data from districts in the Eastern States bordering Bangladesh. Both by share and by absolute numbers across these districts, migrants who are overwhelmingly from Bangladesh are ageing and likely dying out. The younger age-groups show meagre numbers. Much of this population arrived during Partition in 1947 or the Bangladesh War in 1971. That generation is now elderly, and its numbers are falling chiefly because its members are dying.

Thus, the evidence using official data, in all its forms, suggest that there is no surge of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh, at least between 1991 and 2011.

The Census cannot tell us there are no undocumented migrants from Bangladesh. What it does tell, as checked in three different ways above, is that there are not 20 million of them.

Exaggerated claim

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TABLE 1:

This shows the net omission rates in each of the six zones (as defined by Census) in 2011

Zone	Net Omission Rate (%)	Undercount in 2011 (millions)	Percentage of Undercount
Central	4.17	12.78	46.6%
Northern	3.8	6.07	22.1%
Southern	1.5	3.8	13.8%
Eastern	0.84	2.2	8%
Western	1.17	2.02	7.4%
Northeast	1.24	0.57	2.1%
India	2.3	27.67	100%

CHART 1:

This shows the share of people, whose place of birth was not India, counted in the last three Census

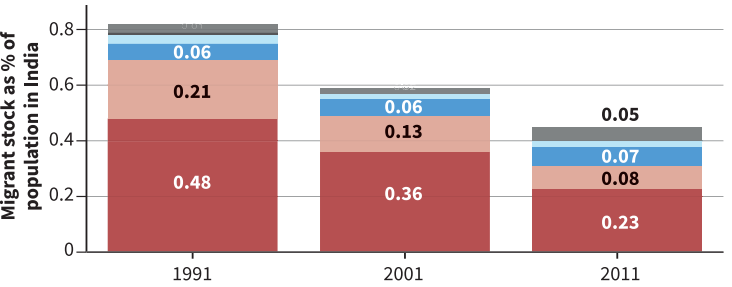


TABLE 2: This shows the number of people in different age groups and their share in total migrant stock in the districts in Eastern States bordering Bangladesh

Age group	2001		2011	
	No of people	% share in total migrant stock	No of people	% share in total migrant stock
0-4 years	2,699	0.2	1,982	0.18
5-9 years	7,348	0.55	3,467	0.31
10-14 years	22,991	1.71	7,030	0.63
15-24 years	72,081	5.35	38,340	3.41
25-34 years	1,42,446	10.58	81,108	7.21
35-59 years	6,48,416	48.14	5,01,655	44.62
60+	4,50,958	33.48	4,90,709	43.65
Total	13,46,939	100	11,24,291	100

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 14, 1976

‘War Room’ for security steps at Montreal

Montreal, July 13: Major incidents are not expected at the Olympic Games. But should they occur, said the man in charge of the most elaborate security arrangement in Canadian history, “the tool is there.”

That tool consists of 16,000 armed security personnel, a force equal in strength to four army brigades. It also includes air, ground and marine forces, detailed planning, the expenditure of millions of dollars and complex James Bond-type scenarios to test the operations.

There is even a ‘war room,’ a sophisticated control centre, provided with instantaneous communications equipment and dozens of closed circuit television cameras sweeping over the Olympic village, the stadia, pools, playing fields that will be used by some 12,000 athletes from 120 nations, beginning on Sunday. The operation is presided over by Mr. Guy Toupin, the chief of the Canadian security forces.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 14, 1926

The plight of returned immigrants

Calcutta, July 13: Mr. M. S. A. Waiz, Secretary of the Imperial Indian Citizenship Association, Bombay, is in Calcutta for a few days making investigation into the condition of returned Indian immigrants from the Colonies such as Fiji, Surinam and British Guiana. He said: “There are about 2,000 returned immigrants scattered all over Calcutta. Most of them are colonial-born and have come out to visit the motherland. Nothing will induce them to leave Calcutta, for one thing they have had a bitter experience of being ostracised by their own people and secondly, they hope that, one day, the Government of India will send them out and, if they are not in Calcutta, they will be left behind. they are living a very precarious life. If the Government of India, for some reason, are unable to help those unfortunate people, the different colonial Governments should be approached for securing free passages, for there they are all British subjects and their rights must be protected by the Government of the colony in which they were born and have spent the major portion of their lives.”

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Average crude oil production in Nigeria last month

1.56 million barrels per day. Nigeria's crude production reached a 74-month high last month, authorities said over the weekend, hitting an average of 1.56 million barrels per day. Africa's largest oil producer has increased production in recent years in part by cracking down on theft while also hiring former militants who sabotaged pipelines to act as security. AFP

Aid pledged by the EU to help Moldova's air defence system

120 in € million. "The Council adopted an assistance measure worth €120 million under the European Peace Facility in support of Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova to enhance the country's air defence capabilities," said a statement from the Council of the EU. Moldova's relations with Russia have been soured by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. REUTERS

Decline in India's soybean meal exports in June 2026

69 in per cent. India's soybean meal exports fell nearly 69 per cent to 30,000 tonnes in June amid high prices and weak demand in major importing markets, the Indore-based Soybean Processors Association of India (SOPA) said on Monday. According to data made available by SOPA, 97,000 tonnes of soybean meal was exported in June 2025. PTI

Arrests ordered by Turkey ahead of coup anniversary

1,000 A decade after Turkey's failed 2016 coup, prosecutors ordered the arrest of nearly 1,000 suspects linked to an organisation that Ankara holds responsible, the Justice Minister said on Monday. On July 15, 2016 a rogue military faction made a short-lived bid to overthrow the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. AFP

Rate of increase in India's exports in June 2026

15.5 in per cent. India's exports rose 15.5 per cent year-on-year to USD 40.41 billion in June, while the trade deficit widened to a five-month high of USD 30.43 billion due to a surge in imports, driven mainly by higher crude oil prices. Crude oil imports jumped 40 per cent to USD 19.32 billion during the month. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Can biogas aid India's energy security?

India, which imports nearly 85% of its crude oil needs, remains vulnerable to global energy shocks. Over the years, it has pushed several initiatives to promote compressed biogas. Despite these efforts, progress has been limited; government support and incentives could provide a boost to the sector

EXPLAINER

V. Nivedita

Tensions in West Asia continue to keep global energy markets on edge. India imports nearly 85% of its crude oil needs, much of it from West Asia, and supplies faced disruptions due to the Israel-U.S.-Iran war. While the government has diversified its crude oil suppliers, around 90% of India's LPG imports still transit through the Strait of Hormuz, making any instability in the region a potential risk to India's energy security.

Over the years, India has pushed several initiatives to promote alternate fuels like compressed biogas to reduce dependence on imported fuel, tackle agricultural waste and support rural incomes. But despite ambitious targets and policy support, progress has remained limited.

The search for an alternative fuel

Biogas is a mixture of methane, CO2 and small quantities of other gases produced by anaerobic digestion of organic matter. It can be processed and compressed to get Compressed Biogas (CBG). It is chemically identical to CNG; renewable, carbon-neutral and can be produced from waste. It can be used directly to produce electricity, heating or as an energy source for cooking.

India has also been trying to blend biogas into its gas supply for at least a decade. The push gathered pace in 2018, when the Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT) initiative was launched with a target of establishing 5,000 plants by 2023. Only 132 are completed as of June 3, 2026.

The Centre launched the GOBARdhan (Galvanising Organic Bio-Agro Resources Dhan) scheme to increase CBG production. Under this 'waste to wealth' programme, the government offered grants of up to ₹50 lakh per district for



A biogas plant at the Waste-to-Energy unit in Koramangala in Bengaluru. J. ALLEN EGENUSE

community biogas plants. ₹564 crore was earmarked for the purchase of biomass collection machinery, while ₹994 crore was allocated to build pipelines connecting biogas plants directly to the gas grid.

However, progress on the ground has remained limited. The lack of infrastructure, poor private investment, difficulties in accessing formal credit and high upfront cost of technologies have stalled progress. Financial support from the government can make biogas projects economically viable. Other incentives, like accelerated depreciation and tax holidays, would also help attract private players.

Impact on cultivation patterns

The development of biogas has been uneven across the world, with Europe, China and the United States accounting for 90% of global production.

Germany is one of the largest producers in Europe, along with France, Denmark and the U.K. The fillip for the sector came in 2000, when Germany introduced the Renewable Energy Sources Act to incentivise production.

Over the years, it introduced schemes to guarantee income to producers, gave bonuses to help operators increase their income and encouraged small-scale biogas plants. However, the country's push for biogas triggered a "corn mania", with maize cultivation rising sharply because it was highly profitable for farmers. Maize slowly started to replace other food crops. Over a decade later, the government was forced to step in and control this by introducing a cap on the use of maize in biogas plants.

This danger hits close to home. The Economic Survey 2026 noted that maize cultivation in India has increased sharply, potentially affecting crop diversity and food security. It noted that while the national maize yield increased from approximately 2.56 tonnes per hectare in FY16 to roughly 3.78 tonnes per hectare by FY25, the yields for soybeans, sunflower, rapeseed, peanuts and millets, among other crops, have either stagnated or declined.

While this trend could be attributed to technological advancements, ethanol pricing can be an important factor.

The government fixes administered

per-litre ethanol prices based on the feedstock used. The price for maize-based ethanol is higher, while the price for rice-based ethanol is lower. The price for molasses-based ethanol is fixed between the two. Between FY22 and FY25, the administered price of maize-based ethanol grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.7%, making maize more lucrative for farmers.

While maize's area under cultivation and production jumped between FY22 and FY25, pulses output declined, while oilseeds and other cereals registered only modest growth.

India imports large quantities of pulses and edible oils to meet demand. Yet, instead of focusing on increasing production, the government's policy might inadvertently disincentivise farmers from cultivating them. Over time, this could increase India's dependence on imports and expose domestic food prices to greater volatility during supply shocks.

Denmark, which is targeting to use only biomethane in its gas system by 2030, offers a solution. The government discouraged the use of crops as feedstock, and the primary source is livestock manure and agricultural waste.

Government's action plan

In 2023, the National Biofuels Coordination Committee approved a mandatory blending obligation. Gas distributors have been mandated to blend CBG into their supply from FY26. It would start at 1% and rise to 5% by FY29. In her Budget speech in February 2024, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the phased blending of CBG in CNG for transport and Piped Natural Gas for domestic purposes "will be mandated."

To meet these targets, the government is ramping up the establishment of plants.

The question is whether the government can replicate India's ethanol blending programme with CBG. In 2014, just 1.5% of petrol was blended with ethanol. By December 2025, it had hit 20%, five years ahead of the original 2030 target.

THE GIST

▼
Biogas is a mixture of methane, CO2 and small quantities of other gases produced by anaerobic digestion of organic matter. It can be processed and compressed to get Compressed Biogas (CBG)

▼
In 2023, the National Biofuels Coordination Committee approved a mandatory blending obligation. Gas distributors have been mandated to blend CBG into their supply from FY26. It would start at 1% and rise to 5% by FY29.

What is the India-Australia uranium supplies agreement?

What do the administrative arrangements mean for India's nuclear energy sector?

Kallol Bhattacharjee

The story so far:

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Australia last week, India and Australia "finalised the administrative arrangements" required to enable export of uranium from Australia to India. These exports will be "exclusively for peaceful purposes and under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) watch" under the Australia-India Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, 2015.

What does the latest development mean?

The finalisation of the "administrative arrangements" means that private Australian mining entities involved in uranium extraction will be able to conclude commercial contracts with Indian private sector companies and joint ventures. The participation of private

Indian entities in uranium exports from Australia adds a new chapter to India's energy journey, which was recently boosted by the SHANTI Act passed in December 2025, opening the nuclear sector to private players.

The timing of the announcement is significant, as it has come at a time when India's energy sector is under severe stress due to the U.S.-Israel attack on Iran. India is being forced to diversify and explore options to cope with short-term requirements by buying hydrocarbons from Russia, the United States, and Venezuela, while also planning for the future. The arrangements with Australia for uranium export are expected to help India meet its energy requirements in the future.

Why is this significant?

Australia holds more than a quarter of the global uranium reserves and has traditionally maintained a strict policy

regarding the supply or export of uranium to non-NPT member countries. According to the World Nuclear Association the countries that have received Australia's uranium include the United States, Japan, South Korea, France, Sweden, Belgium, Finland, the United Kingdom, and Germany. India is among the non-signatories, which are countries that chose not to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Australia has been exporting uranium to countries with which it has "bilateral safeguards agreements", as it maintains that support for nuclear non-proliferation is among its "paramount" considerations. The "administrative arrangements" can be interpreted as further firming up of "bilateral safeguards" that were part of the Australia-India Nuclear Cooperation Agreement 2015.

India has an unblemished nuclear supply chain record and an ambitious nuclear energy programme. Though it is

not a signatory to the NPT, it signed a safeguards agreement with the IAEA in 2008 after India and the U.S. signed the nuclear deal, which was presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush. Subsequently, the 48-member Nuclear Suppliers Group made a major move by exempting India from the list of countries with which they are prohibited from engaging in nuclear-energy-related business, thereby opening the gates for nuclear-energy-related supplies to India. This exemption has been the basis of several civil nuclear agreements that India has signed with partner countries.

What negotiations made this arrangement possible in 2026?

While Canberra and New Delhi have finalised the "administrative arrangements" now, negotiations between the two sides have been ongoing for nearly two decades. On November 12, 2009, during Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's visit to India, the two issues were addressed."

A joint statement issued during this visit said, "Mr. Rudd noted India's plans to meet its future energy requirements by exploring and developing all sources of energy, including nuclear, renewable and non-conventional resources. Both sides recognised the benefits of enhancing bilateral commercial exchanges of renewable and non-renewable energy

resources. The two Prime Ministers also agreed that energy security concerns are best met by reconciling the long-term interests of both energy-producing and energy-consuming countries through a truly open and competitive energy market. Both sides also expressed their willingness to join efforts which promote a cooperative response to any global energy crisis." The same joint statement also mentioned mutual commitment to oppose nuclear weapons. These negotiations led to the Australia-India Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 2014 and came into force in 2015.

According to World Nuclear Association, the "administrative arrangement" between India and Australia was 'finalised and became operational' after the signing of the Australia-India Nuclear Cooperation Agreement of 2015 and at least 300 tonnes of uranium were exported to India since 2018.

But it is understood, that uranium export was part of a 'test drive' as there were lingering concerns about Indian entities receiving Australian uranium. The latest announcement on the "administrative arrangements" and the emphasis on "exclusively peaceful purposes and under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards" indicates that the 'test run' has paved the way for bigger commercial deliveries.

ABSTRACT



The historical movement of people can leave traces in both genetic and linguistic patterns but the two do not always travel together. GETTY IMAGES

How genetic history reveals why some languages are so unique

A new study measured how different neighbouring languages were from one another. The authors say that linguistic hotspots may offer glimpses into how human languages became more varied before large migrations and population movements reshaped much of the world

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

Anna Graff, et al., “An inverse correlation between structural linguistic and human genetic diversity”, PNAS, May 2026

Hindi and Tamil differ in far more than just vocabulary. Languages differ in how they are organised, and these differences are not spread evenly around the world. In some regions, neighbouring languages like Basque and Spanish differ dramatically from one another. In others, they share many of the same features, like Tamil and Kannada.

A new study by researchers from Europe and Japan has found human history itself gives shape to the pattern. After analysing thousands of languages alongside genetic data from populations around the world, the researchers found that places that were relatively isolated for a long time tended to harbour more linguistic features. On the other hand, regions shaped by migration and sustained contact contained languages that were more alike.

“I was struck by the clarity of the signal,” Anna Graff, lead author of the study and a biological anthropologist at the University of Zurich, said. “In studies of human history and diversity, such clear global patterns are often difficult to find.”

A feature checklist

Crucially, the researchers did not count the number of languages in a region. Instead, they measured how different neighbouring languages were from one another. Some languages placed verbs near the beginning of a sentence while others placed them at the end. Some distinguished between a hand and a finger with separate words while others used the same term for both.

A region where languages had more such differences was considered more

linguistically diverse than one where languages shared many of the same traits – even if both regions had the same number of languages.

To investigate, the researchers assembled one of the largest datasets of its kind, combining information from more than 4,200 languages with genetic data from over 5,700 individuals representing 650 populations around the world. Then they divided the world into hundreds of roughly 500-km-wide hexagonal cells and calculated two measures for each: diversity of linguistic features found among languages spoken there and the genetic diversity of the local populations.

Thus they found that regions whose populations had been relatively isolated over long periods tended to have more diverse linguistic features.

The effect was modest. Imagine describing each language using a checklist of 333 characteristics. The difference associated with isolation was roughly equivalent to making about 11 items on the checklist vary substantially across the languages spoken in a region.

Yet the pattern proved remarkably persistent, appearing again and again, across statistical tests.

‘Accumulation zones’

The researchers also tested if the pattern could be explained by other obvious factors. Languages spoken close together often influence one another while related languages can resemble one another because they inherited features from a common ancestor. Yet neither explanation fully accounted for the trend.

At first glance, the findings also seem counterintuitive. One might expect places with a long history of migration and population mixing to have more language patterns. But Dr. Graff and her colleagues argued that contact often has the opposite effect. As people move, trade, and

interact, languages can borrow words, sounds, and grammatical features from one another, gradually becoming more alike.

Isolation allows languages to evolve independently, increasing the chances that they will grow more different over time.

They described these differences by classifying a place as a “spread zone” and or an “accumulation zone”. Spread zones are repeatedly reshaped by large population movements associated with the spread of farming, state expansion, empire-building, and, more recently, colonialism.

New Guinea, home to more than 800 languages, is a good example of an accumulation zone. The island’s languages are remarkably varied in their linguistic features. According to the authors, its long history of relative isolation allowed these differences to accumulate rather than become smoothed out by repeated migration and contact.

Linguistic fossils

The significance of such regions goes beyond explaining present-day diversity. The authors argued that linguistic hotspots may offer rare glimpses of how human languages became more varied before large migrations and population movements reshaped much of the world.

In that sense, places such as New Guinea may preserve traces of a linguistic world that existed before waves of expansion and migration reduced diversity across regions. That is, having been less affected by forces that make languages more alike, they may preserve ways of organising language that have disappeared elsewhere.

That makes the loss of small languages especially consequential. Languages spoken by small and relatively isolated communities are “important windows

into the diversity and breadth of linguistic structures we humans are able to learn, transmit and process,” Dr. Graff said. “At the very least, documenting them is essential if we want to preserve a record of the full range of linguistic variation.”

Signatures on languages

“Patterns in genetic diversity certainly do capture history very well at both broad and fine scales,” Iain Mathieson, professor of genetics at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, said. “Very naturally, one would expect those patterns also to correlate with features of linguistic and cultural diversity at least on average, and this interesting study shows exactly that,” the professor said.

The findings do not imply, however, that genes determine language. The historical movement of people can leave traces in both genetic and linguistic patterns but the two do not always travel together.

The study’s central argument also resonates with observations from the field. Patience Epps, professor of linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin who studies indigenous languages of Amazonia, said the findings align with observations from her own field.

In the Upper Rio Negro region, where Dr. Epps conducts fieldwork, communities often intermarry and maintain extensive contact across language groups. She noted that Amazonia still lacks the detailed genetic datasets required for a systematic test of the study’s conclusions.

The authors also argued that such local processes, repeated across centuries and larger regions, can leave broader signatures on patterns of language diversity around the world. (Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi.)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression “at the drop of a hat”? (D. Gundu Rao, Bangalore)

When you say that you are willing to do something at the drop of a hat, it means that given the opportunity, you are willing to do it immediately. It is not necessary for anyone to urge you to do it. The task is something that you want to do and you needn’t be told twice to do it. Here are a few examples.

Kamath was willing to help me with my homework at the drop of a hat.

I would go to Arunachal Pradesh at the drop of a hat.

According to some scholars, this idiom originated in the U.S. During the days of the wild wild west, boxing contests were very popular – I guess this explains why Las Vegas hosts many of the bouts even today. During the early days however, bells were not used to inform the fighters when to begin their bout. Instead a hat or a cap was used. The referee, or the man who was getting the show on the road, raised his hat high and then he dropped it. The dropping of the hat signalled to the boxers that they could get on with the fight. And the boxers went about their business immediately; they didn’t wait for a second invitation. The same signalling system was used in horse racing as well. As soon as the man at the starting gate lowered his hat or dropped it, the jockeys immediately spurred their horses on.

Is it OK to say “Have you married your daughter?” (K. R. Manohara, Chitradurga)

Grammatically there is nothing wrong with the sentence; but no one actually goes about marrying his own daughter. If the meaning that you wish to convey is “Have you got your daughter married?” then the question you should ask is “Have you married off your daughter?” The expression you are looking for is “married off”. When you marry off your son or daughter, you find a suitable partner for him/her. Here are a few examples.

Radha’s parents married her off to a rich old man.

The greedy parents wanted to marry him off to a princess.

What is the difference between “egoist” and “egotist”? (K. Narayan, Madurai)

The words “egotist” and “egoist” are often used interchangeably, but there is a subtle difference in meaning between the two. An “egotist” is an “I” specialist; he keeps talking about himself all the time. He makes sure that the conversation revolves around him. We have another name for such a person; we usually call him a “bore”. An “egoist” is interested in promoting his cause as well, but unlike the “egotist”, he may not talk about himself all the time. He is much more cunning; he may get what he wants through devious means. He is not a boaster like the “egotist”; in fact, he may deliberately avoid boasting if he thinks that it will jeopardise his advancement. An egoist is very selfish; he treats self-interest as the foundation of morality. An egotist, though boastful, need not be selfish. Here are a few examples.

The egotist decided to become a politician.

There was a heated argument when Sandeep accused his wife of being an egoist.

Published in The Hindu on April 3, 2001

Word of the day

Beleaguer:

annoy persistently

Synonyms: badger, pester

Usage: The political party was beleaguered by internal divisions and electoral setbacks.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/beleaguer

International Phonetic Alphabet: /biˈliː.ɡə/

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

On the death anniversary of Rachel Carson, here’s a quiz on the pioneering marine biologist and writer whose work helped shape the modern environmental movement

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1

Before becoming a full-time writer, Carson worked for which U.S. government agency?

QUESTION 2

Which insecticide became the principal symbol of the environmental concerns raised in Carson’s 1962 Silent Spring?

QUESTION 3

Carson warned that pesticide concentrations increase at successive trophic levels. What ecological process describes this phenomenon?

QUESTION 4

Carson’s first book, published in 1941, focused on the sea. What was its title?

QUESTION 5

Complete this famous Rachel Carson quotation: “In nature nothing exists ____.”



Visual question: Identify this bridge spanning the Allegheny River in Downtown Pittsburgh. JET LOWE/ HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY (HABS)

Questions and answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:

1. Of the 13 Indians inducted into the Hall of Fame, only one has not led the country. **Ans: Neetu David**
2. As per the ICC website, apart from Kapil Dev, the only other ‘all-rounder’ inductee to have led his country to limited-overs World Cup glory. **Ans: Imran Khan**
3. The third inductee along with Anjum and Sourav this year. **Ans: Kevin Pietersen**
4. The Sri Lankan legends Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara were both inducted in this year. **Ans: 2021**

5. Name the only Indian inductee not to have played One Day Internationals. **Ans: Vinoo Mankad**
6. In 1999, Anil Kumble emulated a 2009 Hall of Famer in achieving a rare Test feat. Name him and the feat. **Ans: Jim Laker. Taking all 10 wickets in an innings**
7. Name the Pakistani cricketer who was honoured posthumously in 2022. **Ans: Abdul Qadir**
Visual: The only woman wicketkeeper to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. **Ans: England’s Sarah Taylor**
Early birds: Prem Nath Tiwari | K.N. Viswanathan | Suchit Narottam | Tito Shiladitya | Prem Raj P.



OUR VIEW



Has El Niño spared the monsoon? Not exactly

Rainfall coverage is still of enormous importance to Indian well-being. While initial fears of an El Niño dry-up this year might have begun to evaporate, it's too early to relax our guard

Nearly six weeks after the South-west monsoon that accounts for about 75% of India's total rainfall arrived in Kerala, it is time to take stock of this age-old determinant of economic outcomes, especially in the country's rural hinterland. The sectoral composition of India's economy has transformed over the years, with agriculture now making up only about 18% of gross value added, but this reduction in share has not been matched by a corresponding decline in the numbers who depend on farming. As estimated, the farm sector supports almost 43% of India's workforce today. No wonder the annual monsoon's progress holds us in thrall year after year.

The good news is that our worst fears about 2026 being an El Niño year—when a pronounced tilt in warm equatorial waters from the Pacific Ocean's western side to its eastern tends to give India a harsh summer and weak monsoon—have not been realized. Some of the initial deficit in rainfall has been made up over the past week or so. The bad news is that although rains have now covered the entire country, its progress has been far from uniform. According to the India Meteorological Department, rainfall is likely to be 'subdued' over large parts of the landmass over the next six-seven days. Region-wise, east and north-east India are the worst off, recording a deficit of 37% due to weak rains in Bihar, Jharkhand and five states of the Northeast. Also, total precipitation is not all that counts. The spatial and temporal spread of rainfall is highly relevant to agriculture. And here, the harsh reality is that only about half our arable land is irrigated, leaving vast tracts reliant on seasonal rains.

Worse, irrigation facilities are largely concentrated in the relatively rich north-western part of India and some coastal states, which means poorer states suffer more from scanty rains. The impact of this year's erratic rainfall, critical for the *kharif* season crop, is already visible in sowing data. The latest update, dated 6 July, shows that sowing is 21% lower than last year, with the shortfall higher in the case of pulses and oilseeds, both of which already stand out for high import dependency. Cereal supplies are less of a problem. As reported, stocks of wheat and rice in the central pool are nearly four times the prescribed buffer norm. This offers a cushion against any scarcity-led price pressures. But as Indian diets move away from an overdose of cereals towards more pulses and other protein-rich foods, a poor domestic harvest of pulses may have a disproportionate effect on people's cost of living. Add to that a revival of uncertainty over oil supplies via the Strait of Hormuz, and general price volatility is hard to escape. Retail inflation was almost 4.4% last month, with food inflation not just higher, but looking up.

In such a scenario, the government bears the onus to relieve a potential rise in distress. Employment can make a difference. The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin, which promises rural jobs, went into effect on 1 July. But several fiscally stretched state governments are reportedly reluctant to let it soak up funds, since the scheme is not fully funded by the Centre and they can suspend it during harvest season. This tangle may need to be resolved swiftly. At midway point, the monsoon hasn't suffered much of an El Niño dry-out, but it's too early to relax our guard.

THEIR VIEW

Cement: a high-emission sector that'll test India's carbon resolve

The industry has the technical know-how but needs a market that will reward decarbonization



SOUMYA SARKAR

is an independent expert based in New Delhi, Kolkata and Odisha. Twitter: @scurve Instagram: @soumya.scurve.

India cannot build a \$10 trillion economy without cement. It also cannot meet its climate ambitions if cement remains as carbon-intensive as it is today. That is the paradox at the heart of India's infrastructure story.

Demand will only grow as the country urbanizes. India's cement production could rise from about 391 million tonnes in 2023 to around 660 million tonnes by 2030, according to Niti Aayog. Even if emissions per tonne continue to fall, total emissions are likely to rise because India will simply be making much more of the stuff.

The debate is often framed as a search for breakthrough technologies. But India already knows how to make cleaner cement. The challenge is to create a market that rewards it. The industry often deserves more credit than it receives. Over the past two decades, Indian producers have become among the world's most efficient. They have lowered energy consumption, expanded renewable electricity, installed waste heat recovery systems and increased the production of blended cements, according to a report by the Global Cement and Concrete Association.

But efficiency improvements are reaching their limits. Unlike many industries, cement's biggest problem is chemistry rather than fuel. More than half of its emissions come from making

clinker, the binding ingredient in cement. Heating limestone releases carbon dioxide as part of a chemical reaction. Even replacing coal energy with renewable electricity cannot eliminate these process emissions. That is why cement remains one of the world's hardest industries to decarbonize.

The next phase requires changing the material itself. One of India's most promising innovations is limestone calcined clay cement (LC3), developed through a collaboration involving IIT Delhi, IIT Madras and École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. By replacing a significant share of clinker with calcined clay and limestone, LC3 can substantially reduce emissions while relying on raw materials that are widely available in India. It is one of the few low-carbon cement technologies with real potential for large-scale deployment in developing economies.

India's leading cement companies have already begun positioning themselves for that future. UltraTech has expanded blended cements, renewable energy and waste heat recovery while investing in new low-carbon technologies. Dalmia Bharat has pursued lower-clinker products, greater use of alternative fuels and research on carbon capture as part of its climate strategy. Shree Cement has focused on improving energy efficiency and increasing renewables across its operations. Such investments reveal not only that the industry is preparing for a lower-carbon future, but also that it moves fastest when cleaner production improves competitiveness or lowers operating costs.

The more difficult technologies tell a different story. Carbon capture would likely be needed to contain emissions released during clinker production, but it remains expensive and commercially uncertain. India lacks the transport networks, storage infrastructure and financial incentives needed to deploy it at scale. Without these, expecting businesses to make huge investments may be unrealistic. Also, much of India's

progress in reducing clinker has depended on fly ash from coal-fired power plants and slag from steel plants. As both sectors gradually decarbonize, these industrial by-products may grow less abundant. The materials helping cement become cleaner today may not be available in the quantities needed tomorrow. That makes alternatives such as LC3 even more important.

The industry's future therefore depends on economic incentives. Today's market still rewards the lowest upfront price rather than the lowest carbon footprint. Government agencies, among the country's largest buyers of cement, rarely show a meaningful preference for lower-carbon products when awarding contracts for highways, railways, ports or public buildings. Typical investors mostly focus on capacity expansion, margins and market share, even as climate risks become financial risks. India's evolving Carbon Credit Trading Scheme is an important step, but carbon markets alone are unlikely to reshape investment decisions without complementary procurement standards, product specifications and clearer price signals.

This is ultimately a story about demand sluggishness rather than technological failure. India has much of the knowledge needed to make cement significantly cleaner. What it lacks is a system that consistently rewards companies for using that knowledge. Public procurement could create demand. Financial institutions could recognize transition leaders. Regulators could encourage lower embodied carbon in construction. Together, these measures would do more to accelerate cleaner cement than waiting for the next technological breakthrough.

India's infrastructure will define its economy for generations to come. The country has the technology to decarbonize it by using cleaner cement. Now, the country must create a market where producing it becomes a smart business decision.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

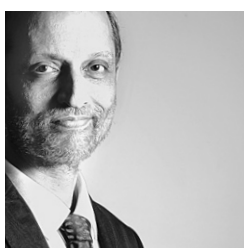
Debt is like any other trap, easy enough to get into, but hard enough to get out of.

JOSH BILLINGS

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

Why unease lurks under placid sovereign bond yields

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

Last month, the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) *Financial Stability Report* arrived amid a turbulent macroeconomic environment. Oil prices had spiked due to West Asia tensions, the rupee had slipped amid foreign fund withdrawals and RBI's own inflation forecast had been revised upward. By the textbook, the central bank should have raised interest rates. Instead, its Monetary Policy Committee held the repo rate steady at 5.25% for the second-straight review, and India's long bond yields have stayed remarkably placid through it all.

Part of the explanation is deliberate engineering. RBI has opened a swap window for foreign currency non-resident bank deposits and eased the rate ceiling on these, hoping to attract \$50 billion or more of non-resident dollars in a few months. This is similar to RBI's 2013 rescue that followed the taper tantrum. Bonds are also getting more dollar inflows. This is because the government has scrapped withholding and capital-gains taxes for foreign holders of government

securities. Indian bonds might now make it to Bloomberg's flagship Global Aggregate Index in addition to the two other emerging-market indices they are already part of. Thus, India is hoping for a durable overseas source of bond demand that will help keep domestic yields low. It is like importing calm from abroad while inflation pressure builds at home. Sustaining this calm has its own costs since absorbing a dollar surge requires RBI to drain the very liquidity created by such inflows.

But today's global rates are not benign, unlike in 2013. The Bank of Japan has pushed rates to their highest since 1995, closing off much of the cheap-yen carry trade that once pushed capital into markets like India's. US 10-year yields are holding stubbornly above 4.4%, keeping the India-US rate differential unusually narrow by historical standards. This combination of an unusually hawkish Japan and a high-yield America might have squeezed emerging-market bonds very hard. That it hasn't happened to India yet is a policy achievement, engineered rather than accidental.

But a bond market that has been kept calm through clever liability management masks a growing unease in domestic credit demand. The latest *Financial Stability*

Report tells a less comfortable story about households—whose borrowing has been redrawing India's financial risk map.

Household debt has risen to 45.5% of GDP and is dominated by fast-growing non-housing retail loans. Credit cards, personal loans and gold loans now make up 58.4% of all household borrowing, a share that has been rising every quarter. Nearly half of all household debt is now taken for pure consumption, not for building a home or business. The report's own survey of major banks found that loan originations and, tellingly, loan defaults are concentrated among households earning below ₹10 lakh a year, which is precisely the segment with the least room to absorb a shock. The fastest-growing are gold loans, up 42% annually since 2024, driven mostly by existing borrowers pledging jewellery at higher prices to roll over old debt. Families are monetizing their last financial cushion to stay current on earlier borrowing. That is not resilience. It is a coping mechanism

wearing the appearance of credit growth. And what if the value of gold, the pledged collateral, falls sharply?

The savings side of the ledger is just as troubling. Net household financial savings, which touched 11% of GDP in 2020-21, had collapsed to around 5% by 2022-23, and have recovered only partially since. This has implications well beyond household balance sheets. It is these savings that have traditionally financed the government's borrowing and companies' credit needs. With that pool shrinking just as the fiscal deficit is expected to widen this year, the arithmetic gets harder for everyone competing for the same rupee of savings.

There is thus an uncomfortable asymmetry. Interest rates have stayed low and government bond yields are calm, but households—the segment least equipped to handle debt—have taken on record leverage even as their savings buffer diminishes. The biggest beneficiary of this low-rate regime is not the stressed house-

hold. It is the biggest borrower in the room, the government, both at the Centre and in states, whose appetite for debt shows no sign of slowing. Cheap money has financed public deficits comfortably, while addressing private distress. Signs of rising defaults in the small-loans segment aren't surprising.

For households to deleverage themselves in any meaningful way, real wages and employment need to grow faster than they have. Neither prospect looks assured right now, even as asset and income inequality continues to widen. Ironically, inequality helps sustain lower rates because higher incomes of the rich cause excess supply of savings, which are piled up as financial assets while the middle and lower rungs continue to borrow just enough to keep pace with the cost of living. Sovereign yields, meanwhile, stay calm despite a spike in inflation risk.

Public policy cannot outsource this problem to monetary policy alone. It needs a sharper macroprudential eye on unsecured and gold-backed lending, a fiscal glide path that doesn't keep drawing from the same shrinking pool of household savings. And above all, it needs a genuine push for real wage growth and job creation, without which no extent of low interest rates will aid the solvency of Indian households.



GUEST VIEW

It is time to address the missing layer in India's export strategy

Small Indian businesses must develop export competitiveness internally. The government can only act as an enabler at best



AMITABH KANT & PRATEEK GOYAL

are, respectively, chairperson, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise (FCFE), and director, enterprise growth lab, FCFE.

Over the last decade, India has signed nine trade agreements, including with large markets such as the UK, Australia and the EU. Indian firms will now have market access to much of the developed world. However, only competitive businesses can convert this opportunity into exports, jobs and livelihoods. Indian enterprises need to be digitally enabled, harness artificial intelligence (AI), understand global demand, meet global standards and deliver on quality, cost and timeliness to capture global value chains (GVCs).

India's export debate is usually conducted at the macro level: exchange rates, logistics, credit, power, land, labour and trade agreements. These matter. Without them, firms cannot compete. The signing of new trade pacts presents an opportunity for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to integrate more deeply into global markets.

However, market access is not the same as entry. Exports happen at the enterprise level. For small firms, the binding constraint is often not just production capacity, but the ability to understand demand, appear credible to global buyers and transact seamlessly across borders. A firm must find a buyer, signal trust, meet standards, price its offerings correctly, deliver reliably and generate repeat demand. This is the missing layer in India's export strategy. If India wants MSMEs to become global sellers, export competitiveness must be built within the firm, not just around it.

Competitive advantage is increasingly determined by digitization. Worldwide, the number of digital buyers reached 2.7 billion in 2024 and are expected to continue growing. In a similar vein, a recent Icrier report finds that digitally integrated companies are now essential for outperforming the market. Non-integrated firms struggle to understand consumer behaviour and trends; 95% of survey participants achieved higher profit margins and sales growth by integrating e-commerce into their businesses. The report highlights that post-integration, 90% of enterprises have adopted innovative practices, 62% have invested in employee upskilling and 50% have invested in R&D. For Indian MSMEs to become global sellers, they must craft demand-driven, digitally enabled export strategies. This underscores the importance of digital transformation (Dx) strategies.

What should a Dx strategy for a small firm entail? Most enterprises do not need the full stack, but rather a path to digital maturity. Digital readiness is a journey that doesn't start with AI, but with an online presence, followed by digital payments and bookings, customer relationship management, data-driven marketing, AI-enabled forecasting, and then strategic pricing and personalization. In global commerce, trust is infrastructure. A



buyer must still be able to assess quality, reliability and compliance before placing an order. To signal trust, verified reviews, transparent pricing, reliable delivery timelines, certifications, product traceability, professional catalogues and responsive communication are key. MSMEs should develop innovative frameworks, including leveraging the creator economy to expand reach and earn trust.

AI adoption can help smaller enterprises make better decisions with limited managerial bandwidth. Demand forecasting, multilingual customer support, inventory planning, catalogue automation, dynamic pricing, fraud detection and well-targeted marketing are just some potential areas.

Tourism shows how a Dx strategy could work in services. According to a Google-Kantar report, YouTube has emerged as the top source of travel inspiration. With most travel-related bookings now made online, key drivers of digital enablement are a faster, more transparent and more reliable reservation experience. Again, this makes digital readiness the first step for enterprises. Tourism businesses can leverage India's growing creator economy to influence globetrotters. For instance, 'Thailand's Co-Creator' programme leverages celebrities, creators and influencers to produce content that promotes the country for leisure travel. With single campaigns expected to reach 100 million-plus impressions worldwide, the outreach is massive. Strong affiliate programmes can help enterprises look at creators as performance-based business partners.

Dx for MSMEs requires an enabling environment. The government's role should be threefold.

First, sector-specific digital readiness pathways must be designed for MSMEs. The definition of being digitally ready can vary across sectors. The MSME ministry can work with industry associations and private enterprises to define sector-spe-

cific Dx strategy frameworks. These could define stages of digital readiness for MSMEs that can be certified through stage-wise implementation. A promising step is an initiative by Confederation of Indian Industry and Niti Aayog called Dx Edge (Digital Excellence for Growth and Enterprise). These efforts could help translate digital readiness from a broad aspiration into a sequenced set of implementation journeys.

Second, reduce the cost of digital adoption through shared tools as well as solutions enabled by digital public infrastructure (DPI) and AI diffusion. DPI-enabled digital credit holds potential. The diffusion of AI solutions for MSMEs can be enabled through a DPI-for-AI approach.

Third, close gaps in demand information by making global buyer data, certification requirements, price benchmarks and market intelligence affordable for small firms. India's MSMEs must craft their export strategies with the buyer in mind. Alignment with market demand, however, is held back by patchy information available to small exporters. Sector-specific data on prices, quality standards, certifications, delivery timelines and documentation needs will help craft successful strategies. While this data exists, single-user access licences are often prohibitively expensive for small firms. The ministries of MSMEs and commerce and industry could procure such licences and make them available to MSMEs at a nominal cost.

The Indian MSME's big challenge is to compete more effectively. To succeed with exports, it must understand global demand, meet standards, use digital tools and consistently deliver on cost, quality and timelines. The government's role is to reduce friction and create the right policies and infrastructure. But becoming competitive is the firm's responsibility.

These are the authors' personal views.

MINT CURATOR

South Africa's anti-immigrant protests raise many questions

The rise of xenophobia is a danger all of Africa needs to examine



JUSTICE MALALA

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African leaders should not tolerate anti-democratic actors among them. AFP

As betrayals go, South Africa turning its back on its continent is particularly brutal. Between 1960 and 1994, when South Africa's liberation movements were banned and leaders like Nelson Mandela were imprisoned by its apartheid government, African countries established camps and schools for the diaspora and gave money and military aid to the resistance.

Yet, last week, a months-long violent campaign of anti-African immigrant protests in the country by the newly minted organization March and March culminated in attacks on homes and property and the shutdown of major cities. Although these rallies did not descend into wholesale violence, shameful scenes of South Africans attacking alleged illegal foreigners and citizens they misidentified as immigrants were beamed across the globe. Organizers have vowed to protest every Thursday until local elections scheduled for 4 November.

These attacks are reprehensible, hateful, xenophobic, largely misinformed and have damaged South Africa's reputation. The anti-migrant campaign imperils major investments on the African continent as pressure mounts from key destinations such as Nigeria for boycotts and diplomatic sanctions to be imposed.

That said, tough questions need to be asked of Africa's leaders about why millions of their citizens gamble with death to reach Europe or to wade through the crocodile-infested Limpopo River to escape Zimbabwe and reach South Africa. For too long, pointing out the faults of fellow Africans was seen as playing into the West's post-colonial playbook. Those arguments are no longer sustainable as Africans themselves are asking these questions.

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa said in an address to his nation that solving migration pressures requires "peace where there is conflict, economic growth where there is stagnation and opportunity where there is poverty." Rwanda's foreign minister Olivier Nduhungirehe said on a visit to South Africa in mid-June that any discussion on migration should focus on root causes and that poverty, conflict and limited opportunities in countries of origin must be addressed, rather than shifting the blame to destination states such as South Africa.

In plain language, Africans are fleeing undemocratic and kleptocratic leaders to find succour in places where they feel they can live freely and prosper.

Take mineral-rich Zimbabwe, the home nation of by far the vast majority of illegal immigrants in South Africa. Its former

President Robert Mugabe was ousted from office after 37 years; his successor since 2017, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has just changed the constitution to extend his power beyond 2030. Instead of condemning him, Ramaphosa rewarded him with a high-profile visit two months ago. The millions of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa were not mentioned. So even as South Africa drives out unregistered Zimbabweans—60,000 were deported just last week—many more will continue to come because their home country is politically and economically intolerable.

In Uganda, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the army chief and son of President Yoweri Museveni (41 years in office), has just shut down the country's main independent media group's television station and newspaper. Two weeks ago, Kainerugaba kidnapped an opposition leader and posted pictures on X of the man begging for mercy while being tortured.

It will not get better anytime soon unless something changes. According to US non-profit Freedom House, nine countries have slid into dictatorship from democracy in Africa since 2019. Many of these are blessed with abundant mineral wealth—but only politically connected elites benefit.

It is convenient for the privileged to blame colonialism for Africa's migration crisis. There is some truth to that, of course; but look at South Africa's western neighbour, Botswana. It experienced 30 years of annual economic expansion surpassing 7% due to the astute management of its diamond wealth and its fidelity to democratic leadership. Botswana's people do not flee; leadership matters.

What is to be done? Ironically, African leaders have shown the way. Through the Lome Agreements of 2000, African Union (AU) leaders agreed to hold each other accountable and even boot out anti-democratic actors and kleptocrats among them. Major state wars in Africa declined to just four in 2010 from 12 in 2000. African leaders have now thrown their admirable handiwork aside. The AU has reverted to the bad ways of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, which was notorious for tolerating dictators. If a few good leaders can rejuvenate the AU and reinforce the spine of the Lome agreement, then there is hope.

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MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Does America face a middle-age crisis—or existential?

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



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America is 250 years old this year. It is tricky to establish a 'nation-state' equivalent of human years, but if I were to hazard a guess, then it would be about one nation-state year for every seven to ten human years. Broadly similar to the dog-human ageing relationship. Of course, dogs age unevenly with respect to humans, reaching a 'human age' of 24 in their first two years and then slowing down over the next decade plus. By this yardstick, the US today is middle-aged at most. There is no science behind this nation-state equivalence, only the backing of recorded history: great civilizations of the past often lasted a thousand years, a little more than 10 human lifespans by the aforesaid reckoner.

The Egyptian civilization was among the longest lasting; it endured from about 3000 BCE till its Roman annexation at the turn of the first millennium. Rome itself was strong for about 500 years and its empire lasted nearly a thousand more until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE. The Ottomans who

conquered what's now Istanbul prevailed for about half a millennium. The Han dynasty in China held sway for nearly 400 years and the British Empire for about 350 years.

So, is America on its last legs, or is it going through a middle-age crisis, or simply a reset for a long innings ahead? Like with the canine epigenetic clock, we must be careful in our analysis: this need not be a phase in which it ticks faster, as national ageing has no biological inevitability, nor would it be merely such a clock at work.

Before we evaluate America's future, it is instructive to consider how the country got here. Alexis de Tocqueville, French philosopher and an early visitor to the US, made some incisive observations in this 1835 book, *Democracy in America*. He praised the US for its township self-government (a laboratory for democracy), its spirit of volunteerism, its free press as a check on power, and for its freedom of association as a counterweight to majority tyranny. He was most impressed by its practical, restless energy and work ethic, as also its cultural mores.

If Tocqueville had revisited America 150 years later in 1990, he might have observed an 'association' legacy that included the great American corporation, the successful civil rights movement of the 1960s against major-

ity tyranny and a strange "equality of conditions" brought about by a mass consumer culture. To this, I would add two things: first, that America in its period of ascendancy established a 'high trust' society as described by Francis Fukuyama in his book *Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*; and second,

that its ability to attract the best to its universities and its pathway for that talent to develop new technology and products for the world sustained its success. Van-nevar Bush, in his 1945 policy recommendation to then president Harry S. Truman titled *Science: The Endless Frontier*, advocated federal investment in scientific research as the fund from which practical applications of knowledge must be drawn. That led directly

to the creation of the National Science Foundation in 1950. This established the bedrock upon which is built a pillar of America's greatness: university research plus capitalist commercialization powered by imported talent. This force was so powerful that as America sought to gain efficiencies through a massive

wave of globalization, it left some of its communities behind even as the world benefited. Its high-trust society was fractured in this process as described in Dan Rodger's book, *The Age of Fracture*. A backlash in the context of low trust brought about its current political movement against globalization and towards

putting up physical walls and technology barricades. If Tocqueville were to assess America today, it is unlikely that he would pick up any strong signal on 'free association.' As measured by interpersonal trust or trust in government, Fukuyama's 'high trust' society no longer holds, as most recent surveys indicate. America's incumbent president, Donald Trump, has been taking a chainsaw to research funding and has created fear even among legal migrants and students at its top universities.

The only US pillar left standing is its commercial pillar, which in several cutting-edge fields like artificial intelligence (AI), chip design and quantum computing appears to be as robust as ever.

On the evidence of just these indicators, the country's future looks cloudy.

The living history of a people who form a nation, though, is subjective. To comprehend and evaluate whether they can regain their vitality, one must draw from periods of difficulty. So far, the US has shown remarkable resilience and bounced back from each. This is evident in periods such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, oil shock of the 70s, global financial crisis of 2008 and the more recent covid pandemic.

Historically, America's greatest strength has been its ability to adapt and re-invent itself in the face of crisis. The country still possesses reservoirs of political talent and well-built institutions and mechanisms of democracy, apart from the personality traits required for a resurgence. In my view, US declinists are calling a fall prematurely. It does have deep challenges to overcome, such as societal polarization, an affordability crisis, lack of housing and healthcare for all, and excessive debt. Yet, American resilience should be able to combat them and emerge victorious.

P.S: "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults," said Alexis de Tocqueville.

India's GCC advantage

They are an important element of the ongoing services exports boom

THE SILVER LINING in India's trade performance is services exports that expanded year-on-year (y-o-y) by 6.2% to \$103.4 billion in the April-June quarter of FY27. Services exports are expected to further grow y-o-y by 11.6% to \$470 billion during FY27 as a whole to help meet the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's overall exports target of \$1 trillion. Services exports are a key driver of growth and an important constituent of India's external accounts. Their share in the nation's gross domestic product rose to 10.7% in FY26 from 9.7% in FY23-FY25 and 7.4% in the pre-pandemic period, FY16-FY20. Due to rising surpluses in services trade, India's deficit in goods and services transactions is much smaller than it otherwise would have been. This makes for a lower and more manageable imbalance in the current account.

While this is the good news, the ground for concern is the heightened policy uncertainty and growing competition in global services markets. Last fiscal, the growth in India's services exports moderated to 8.7% from a rapid clip of 14% in FY23-FY25 and 7.6% in the pre-pandemic period. Notwithstanding this moderation, the Economic Survey 2025-26 argues that the underlying momentum has been maintained as the current pace of expansion remains above pre-pandemic levels. This momentum reflects the fact that India is increasingly becoming a knowledge-based economy as software services have consistently comprised half of its services exports. A gradual increase in the share of business services — which include research and development (R&D), professional, and management consultancy — has been observed. They accounted for 29.4% of services exports in FY26, up from 19% in FY14.

These positive shifts in services exports reflect the growing number of global capability centres (GCCs), which are a successful part of India's growth story. GCCs are facilities set up by global giants to house critical functions such as R&D, information technology (IT), information technology-enabled services (ITeS), and business process management in locations away from their headquarters to support their operations. With 2,100 centres located here employing 2.3 million professionals, India accounts for half of GCCs worldwide outside of their home country. This factor is an important element of the boom in India's services exports. GCC exports — or more generally, exports of multinational corporations providing IT, ITeS, and engineering R&D services from India — are pegged at \$164 billion in FY26, according to consultancy firm Wismatic. These numbers must be seen against India's services exports of \$421 billion in FY26.

Sustaining the momentum in services exports must be an overriding policy priority. In an adverse global environment, this depends on further diversification within services and moving up the value chain. The policy environment must facilitate more GCCs coming to India as they provide opportunities for diversifying beyond the traditional software exports to finance and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI). Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has indicated that this was a vast untapped opportunity as two-thirds of the Fortune Global 2000 companies are yet to establish their presence in the country. GCCs must be encouraged to look beyond Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune to smaller towns, cities, and other states. Around 10 states have either announced or are developing dedicated GCC policies. Despite these positives, Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran warned against complacency as India's current advantage could erode as competing countries replicate its GCC model.

Why the birthrate panic has a blind spot

THE RESILIENCE OF the global economy in coming decades will hinge on geopolitics, the evolution of supply chains, technology — and demographics. Contrary to some troubling depictions, the slide in birthrates doesn't mean permanently lower growth. Nor does it have to lead to an inexorable erosion in standards of living or the end of innovation. Some high-profile academics are offering a refreshingly upbeat perspective. Fertility rates are coming down dramatically in many countries. The retreat is particularly notable in Asia, where the most dynamic economies have tried — and mostly failed — to encourage larger families. They have rolled out an array of incentives designed to make parenting more attractive and to ease the burdens that new arrivals place on household budgets. None has made significant headway. Cultural barriers play a role: Women need to be assured that they can reap the financial rewards from having a career — and raising children — and that men will back them.

But panic is counterproductive. A welcome corrective to gloomy narratives comes from a quartet of academics, including Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and David Autor, renowned for his work a decade ago that chronicled the hollowing out of US industrial regions after imports from China surged. Far from being harbinger of economic collapse, their paper found output per employee increased between 1970 and 2020. "Our findings challenge the prevailing pessimism: lower birth rates, and the ageing and shrinking populations they have produced, have raised rather than lowered GDP per worker during these decades." Thinning ranks of workers may be an ingredient in the success. Under their model, scarcity spurs the quick adoption of labour-saving technology that can lead to gains in GDP per employee and even overall GDP. Across countries, a one-percentage point drop in birth rates is linked with an increase of around 27% in worker output. Investment in technology is key. That's positive for export powerhouses like South Korea, whose fertility rate is among the lowest in the world. Labour-saving technologies will comprise a more important share of overseas shipments.

For much of the post-World War II era, headcount management was considered a key plank of development for newly independent nations. Reversing it is far more difficult. Singapore isn't giving up, but Prime Minister Lawrence Wong added some valuable perspective last month. "We should have some humility," he said. "It's happening everywhere in the world. No one has the answers for now." Incentives have a role, but the objective should be a better life for the families that do exist. To say the paper disputes the dominant negative narrative on demographic change is an understatement. The authors are careful not to extrapolate too far into the future and acknowledge that the pace of demographic change is likely to accelerate and pose fresh challenges.

But it's nice to hear an alternative analysis to the pessimism that greets each new step of fertility or fresh milestones on the way as societies are becoming super-aged. It's understandable that policymakers look at the numbers and see school closures, strains on healthcare and pension systems. They also worry about how a shrinking pool of working age people will pay enough tax to support generous fiscal settings. These concerns aren't without merit: China's pension system is underfunded; the US Social Security trust fund will cease paying full benefits by late 2032 lest Congress finds a way to fix it. Emerging markets like Thailand have gotten old before becoming rich. So much of the discussion has a wistfulness about it. If only we could return fertility to the level of replacement, generally held as 2.1 children per woman. But that ship has sailed. Sure, the right combination of state programmes and subtle shifts in attitude can lift the rate off the floor. Ultimately, policymakers will need to fall back on solutions that were always there: Immigration and automation. The former can be a heavy lift politically. The latter is consistent with the current boom in AI.

Technology doesn't have to be just a substitute for labour shortages or receding populations. It can enhance the productivity of those alive today and the smaller families that follow them. It may even spur innovation. Global headcount won't start going — gently — into reverse for at least another half century. The latest research suggests at least some of the anxiety is premature. That's progress.

● COMPLEMENTARY CODES

DEBATE OVER IBC & SMC INSTEAD EXPOSES A GAP OF RESOLUTION FRAMEWORK FOR FINANCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

Fears of overlap misplaced

**MS SAHOO
SUMIT AGRAWAL**

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creditors under the IBC.

The SMC's emphasis on settlement finality and collateral protection therefore does not undermine insolvency law; it largely operates in respect of assets and obligations that insolvency law itself treats differently. Viewed through this lens, the two Codes are better understood as complementary rather than competing regimes. The real challenge lies elsewhere: how should a CC or CM be resolved if it fails?

The SMC clearly contemplates such failures. Its provisions address the consequences of insolvency, liquidation, and resolution proceedings. They protect settlement finality, netting arrangements, and collateral enforcement even after insolvency proceedings commence. Yet the SMC does not itself provide a resolution framework for CCs and CMs. Nor does the ordinary framework of the IBC.

FSPs are generally excluded from the IBC's scope. Parliament recognised, however, that some categories of FSPs may require the IBC's procedural architecture with modifications suited to their specialised functions. Section 227 of the IBC, therefore, empowers the central government, in consultation with the relevant regulator, to apply the insolvency framework to specified categories of FSPs with appropriate modifications.

Read together, the SMC and Section 227 demonstrate that a workable resolution framework can be constructed. The IBC supplies the procedural machinery, while the SMC identifies the modifica-

tions required to preserve settlement finality, close-out netting, collateral protection, and the continuity of critical market functions. This, however, is an interim solution at best. The policy question is whether India should continue to rely on the modified framework under Section 227 or establish a dedicated resolution regime for financial institutions.

CCs and CMs are unlike ordinary commercial enterprises. They handle client assets, intermediate transactions among market participants, and perform functions that are essential to the stability of financial markets. Their failure can have consequences that extend far beyond their shareholders and creditors. In many respects, they resemble banks, payment systems, and other systemically important financial institutions more than manufacturing companies or trading firms.

This points to a broader policy question. Not all FSPs are alike. Some hold substantial customer assets, perform critical infrastructure functions, or pose systemic risks. Others operate in a manner that is economically similar to ordinary commercial enterprises. Treating all FSPs identically may, therefore, be neither necessary nor desirable. India should adopt a differentiated resolution architecture.

Systemically important institutions should ideally be resolved under a financial resolution framework designed specifically for financial-sector failures. At the other end of the spectrum are FSPs whose

The SMC should neither be viewed as an alternative insolvency regime nor as a challenge to the IBC

Algorithms, ailments, and the human touch



**S RAMADORAI
ARVIND SINGH**

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While AI holds potential to curb delays, support clinicians, and bring expert knowhow, the human element becomes even more critical in healthcare

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is being rapidly adopted across healthcare. Diagnostic tools, predictive systems, and large language models are influencing everything from medical imaging to patient support. With this progress, however, a narrative has emerged that suggests AI may eventually replace the doctor.

In an earlier article (bit.ly/3Twb7g1), we explored why this is not possible. Developments since then have only strengthened the case. AI will undoubtedly become an important and powerful part of medicine. But healing, in its truest sense, cannot be reduced to an algorithm.

A recent editorial in *Nature Medicine* made an important point that deserves wider attention. It stated that claims about medical AI must be supported by proper evidence. The stronger the claim, the stronger must be the evidence required. In the current excitement around AI, it is a principle that is increasingly forgotten.

Today, many AI systems perform impressively in controlled environments and retrospective studies. They may identify patterns faster than humans, analyse vast quantities of data, and assist in diagnosis with remarkable accuracy. The real question is whether AI can meaningfully improve patient care in the real world.

Hospitals are complex environments, patients are not data sets, and medical solutions are rarely straightforward. Every illness exists within the context of a human life that includes personal medical history, anxieties, uncertainties, financial

constraints, family situations, and emotional burdens. A system may achieve high technical accuracy and still fail to improve patient care — here, real-world impact evidence matters.

Medicine has always demanded caution before adopting new interventions. Drugs, devices, and therapies undergo rigorous scrutiny because human lives are involved. AI too must be held to similar standards. We cannot let our enthusiasm override the need for the evidence of AI's impact.

Recent events have bolstered the need for greater caution. In an experiment conducted by researchers at the University of Gothenburg, a completely fictitious medical condition called "Bixonimania" was deliberately created and described in fraudulent research papers. Despite obvious warning signs, several leading AI systems treated the condition as real and it even found its way into peer-reviewed medical literature before being retracted. The lesson is that AI-generated recommendations must always be validated through evidence, clinical judgement, and human oversight.

Recognising these limitations should not, however, diminish the enormous potential of AI. In countries like India, where access to healthcare remains uneven and specialists are often scarce, AI can become a major force for good. It can reduce delays,

support clinicians, and bring expert knowledge to underserved populations. The future of healthcare, in our view, lies in combining the strengths of technology with the irreplaceable strengths of human beings. We cite two examples that illustrate how.

The first is a service called "A Second Opinion", created by CMC Vellore graduates KV Krishnan, a cardiac surgeon, and Lalitha Krishnan, a neonatologist. They recognised a growing and familiar problem — the confusion arising from multiple medical opinions and the anxiety that accompanies serious illness. They created a platform that connects patients to highly respected specialists who provide second opinions and advice. Patients can upload their reports, consult specialists online, and receive detailed guidance. AI may make such systems more efficient, but what truly reassures patients is knowing that an experienced doctor has listened to and explained their condition. These are the kinds of human and technology integration that will expand the reach of compassionate care.

The second example comes from the field of mental health care support for university students. Ramji Venkatachari and Sharad Singh, both US-based engineers, started an initiative (www.dhruvitrust.org) to support students dealing with stress

and emotional challenges. It provides continuous, personalised support addressing specific needs. While AI tools may detect patterns of distress earlier than traditional methods, true emotional healing requires human presence, trust, understanding, and encouragement. The initiative attempts to address this gap.

These examples remind us that healthcare is fundamentally a relationship of trust. Every time a doctor interacts with a patient, something more than clinical analysis takes place. With knowledge and training, there is empathy, judgement, reassurance, and compassion. Often, it is these qualities that give patients the strength to face uncertainty.

A parent waiting outside an intensive care unit is not searching only for statistical probabilities. A cancer patient does not remember merely the prescription. A person battling depression does not heal because an algorithm generates a response. What people remember is kindness, dignity, and the feeling that someone truly cared. This is why we believe "the final mile" of healthcare delivery must remain human.

As AI becomes more integrated into healthcare, the human element will become even more important. In a world of automated recommendations, doctors will continue to guide patients with judgement, ethics, and compassion. The future lies in AI helping doctors become better healers, because healthcare is ultimately a moral and human enterprise.

Diplomacy, restraint, and adherence to international law are the only sustainable means of resolving such disputes. The world cannot afford another prolonged conflict in a region that is so vital to international trade and energy. Peaceful negotiations, not military might, must prevail in the interest of global stability and shared prosperity.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Economy

TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2026

IN THE NEWS

RULES FOR TARIFF CUTS UNDER OMAN FTA NOTIFIED

INDIA ON MONDAY notified procedures for quota-based tariff concessions on items like dates, marble, copper, aluminium and some petrochemicals under a free trade agreement with Oman, which came into effect on June 1 this year.

TEXTILE EVENT BHARAT TEX 2026 OPENS TODAY

OVER 120 COUNTRIES will take part in India's largest global textile event, Bharat Tex 2026, being held in New Delhi from July 14-17. Over 1,600 exhibitors will showcase India's complete textile value chain, including fibre, yarn, fabric, apparel and home textiles.

NCLAT upholds Simbhaoli Sugars' insolvency

The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) on Monday upheld insolvency proceedings initiated against Simbhaoli Sugar while dismissing appeals by the company's suspended director and a group of sugarcane farmers.

Rice diversion in MP ethanol case at 242.50 quintal: FCI

THE FOOD CORPORATION of India on Monday clarified that it is investigating the alleged diversion of only 242.50 quintal of rice — supplied for ethanol production in Madhya Pradesh in 2024-25 — and not the quantities reported.

—FE BUREAU & AGENCIES

Edelweiss arm wins 2 highway stretches

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, July 13

EPIC CONCESSIONS 2, a portfolio company of EAAA Alternatives, has signed a concession agreement with the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) to acquire two toll roads in Tamil Nadu for an upfront payment of ₹2,259 crore.

The two highway stretches in Tamil Nadu on National Highways 38 and 83 were awarded under the NHAI Toll, Operate, Transfer (TOT) programme. In lieu of upfront payment, Epic Concession will collect tolls on these stretches for 20 years.

It will be the first highway monetisation of this financial year by the NHAI. The stretches are the Trichy-Thanjavur section and the Madurai-Tuticorin section, with a total length of 184.5 km.

These stretches are part of the ToT Bundle 19, which was first bid out in June 2024 and saw many extensions of the last date of submitting bids. Apart from Epic, there were three other bidders for the assets.

"The addition of these roads will expand our portfolio to 26 roads across 17 states, further strengthening our presence across geographies," Sreekumar Chatra, managing director — infrastructure funds, EAAA Alternatives, said in a statement.

Other ToT bundles for which the bids are currently open are Bundles 20, 21 and 22. According to budget estimates, the monetisation target for this financial year has been set at ₹30,000 crore.

To get to this target, the

'PARTIES WILL FIND WAYS TO AVOID MORE TARIFFS'

Trade deal with US ready, to be signed at right time: Official

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, July 13

INDIA'S TRADE FRAMEWORK deal with the United States is ready and will be signed at the right time, a senior official said Monday. Both sides would find innovative ways to ensure that no new tariffs are announced under any other mechanism, the official said.

The comments come as the US finalises the additional tariffs based on the probe into forced labour inputs in exported products under Section 301 of the Trade Act.

New Delhi has picked holes in the US probe in this regard. The US is also conducting Section 301 probe into policies of its other trade partners that enable excess capacities and undermine American business. These investigations are running parallel to trade negotiations the US is having with different countries.

"Trade deals are about comparative advantages and that is an integral part of the deal that we are finalising. Whenever you do a trade deal, it should not happen that new tariffs come in," the official said, adding that he sees no challenge around the agreement.

To finalise the deal based on the Joint Statement of February, discussions are being held at the highest levels. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer visited India from June 22-24 to further the talks on the agreement.

The discussions aimed on pathways to conclude an interim agreement as an important milestone toward a comprehensive Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). They also focused on the core elements of BTA like enhanced market access, digital trade, supply chain resilience, reduction of non-tariff barriers, and expanded coopera-

ON TRACK

■ US has finalised additional tariffs on Indian exports under Section 301 of the Trade Act

■ These investigations are running parallel to trade negotiations between the countries

■ US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer visited India from June 22-24 to further the talks on the agreement



■ The forced labour report of the USTR under Section 301 has recommended

12.5% additional duties on India



Once the draft report comes, it will take 4 to 6 months minimum or maybe more, to complete the final outcome of that, the commerce secretary said

tion in strategic sectors.

"Both sides (during Greer's visit) reaffirmed their commitment to an agreement that is balanced, commercially meaningful, and delivers tangible benefits for businesses, farmers, workers, and consumers in both countries. Our teams remain fully engaged in achieving this objective," Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said in a social media post.

"We don't see any dissension, we don't see any challenge around it (the trade deal).

"We feel we are on a very positive deal, the trade has been going well. India has also been increasing its imports, including energy imports from the US, and that is also a positive thing," Commerce Secretary Rakesh Agrawal said.

The forced labour report of the USTR under Section 301 has recommended 12.5% additional duties on India and the consultation process is on in the US on the final outcome. The Section 301 report on excess capacities is still awaited.

"So we understand that once the draft report comes, it will take 4 to 6 months minimum or maybe more, to complete the final outcome of that. So these investigations are going on," Agrawal said. "I think the trade deal, whenever we sign it, all aspects of the trade relation will get addressed," he added.

New index to measure services output debuts today

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, July 13

THE MINISTRY OF Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) will release on Tuesday a new index to measure the change in output of the services sector, which makes up for nearly half of India's GDP and generates substantial employment.

The Index of Services Production (ISP) will be released on a trial basis, providing data on the growth in output of the 19 sub-sectors of the services economy. The new index will have 2024-25 as the base year and will be released with a lag of 60 days from the end of the reference month.

The index is aimed at

ON TRIAL BASIS

■ The Index of Services Production will be released on a trial basis with 2024-25 as its base year

■ It will be released with a lag of 60 days from the end of reference month

■ GST data will be used to compile 15 of the 19 sub-sectors of the ISP



Information and computer related services will have the largest weight in the trial ISP at 21.91%

addressing the need for a high-frequency indicator to measure the performance of the formal services sector. But the compilation of the index will not be easy.

Services are largely intangible and output cannot be measured through physical quanti-

ties, as is the case with industrial activity. This makes compilation of ISP much more complex than compilation of the Index of Industrial Production.

"How do you define a product, that is the big challenge in services," said Pronab Sen, for-

mer chief statistician of India. "Previously, too, there were attempts at ISP but they were dropped. Measuring production in services is very tricky."

The government had formed a Technical Advisory Committee on Indices of Ser-

Hormuz squeeze likely to add \$2-3/bbl to India's crude cost

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 13

RISING TANKER FREIGHT, war-risk insurance premiums and spot fuel purchases are emerging as the first cost pressure points for India as vessel movement through the Strait of Hormuz turns defensive amid renewed West Asia tensions.

Tanker spot freight rates can jump 50-80% within weeks due to vessel shortages, while war-risk insurance premiums can rise 200-300%, adding \$200,000-500,000 per VLCC voyage, said Manas Majumdar, leader — oil & gas, fuels & resources, PwC India.

These maritime costs could add \$2-3 per barrel to India's landed crude cost, translating into a ₹2-3 per litre retail impact if oil marketing company margins are maintained, he said. Costlier spot LNG could also



■ Tanker spot freight rates for the region can jump 50-80% within weeks

■ War-risk insurance premiums can rise 200-300%, adding \$200,000-500,000 per VLCC voyage

raise domestic urea costs, increasing the fertiliser subsidy burden by around ₹10,000 crore every month that higher prices persist.

Indian refiners are also buying LPG and liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the spot market amid concerns of further esca-

lation and uncertainty over Strait operations, said people aware of the development. Spot LPG prices are currently as high as \$600 per tonne. India is procuring more LPG from the US, while spot LNG is being sourced from the US, Angola and Algeria. Crude oil procurement

arrangements remain unchanged from the position before the Iran-US MoU on June 17. Queries sent to HPCL, IOCL and BPCL remained unanswered till press time.

The cost pressure comes as confirmed crossings through the Strait of Hormuz fell around 52% week-on-week over July 10-12, according to Marine-Traffic data. Total crossings declined from 30 on July 8 to 22 on July 9, 19 on July 10, 24 on July 11 and 14 on July 12.

Traffic has also shifted towards defensive routing. Use of Iranian and dark routes increased, while activity on the IMO and Omani corridors fell to minimal levels. No new IMO-confirmed physical attacks have been reported since June 27, but renewed US-Iran tensions and recent IRGC warnings continue to weigh on shipping confidence.



Kharif sowing still lags 16% on year

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, July 13

DUE TO SURPLUS monsoon rainfall this month, the sowing of key kharif crops — rice, pulses, oilseeds and cotton — has been delayed, with overall sown area at 53.12 million hectare (Mha), a 16% year-on-year decline, the agriculture ministry said on Monday.

Total sowing till July 10, according to the ministry, was 48% of the normal area of 110 mha. By the same time a year ago, more than 57% of the normal area was sown due to average monsoon rainfall. A week ago, lag in kharif crops sowing was 21% on year.

Rice, the major kharif crop, has been sown across 11.46 Mha, a 8.6% decline, indicating deficient rainfall in the eastern parts of India, especially in Bihar and Jharkhand. Average area for paddy sowing is 41.2 Mha. A week ago, rice acreage was 13% below 2025 level.

Similarly, area under pulses acreage stands at 5.66 Mha, a sharp 23% year-on-year fall, mostly attributed to the scanty rainfall received till end of June in central India. Tur (pigeon pea), a key kharif pulse, has been sown across 1.95 Mha so far, more than 30% less than year ago period, because of delay in monsoon arrivals in Maharashtra and Karnataka in this monsoon season.

Due to the 'active' monsoon from July 1 - 10 over the rain-fed core zone of central India, the deficit in the region has been reduced to 8% on Monday from over 50% reported till end of June. This is expected to boost pulses and oilseeds sowing in coming weeks.

Subsidy support masks discom stress; reforms key: S&P

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 13

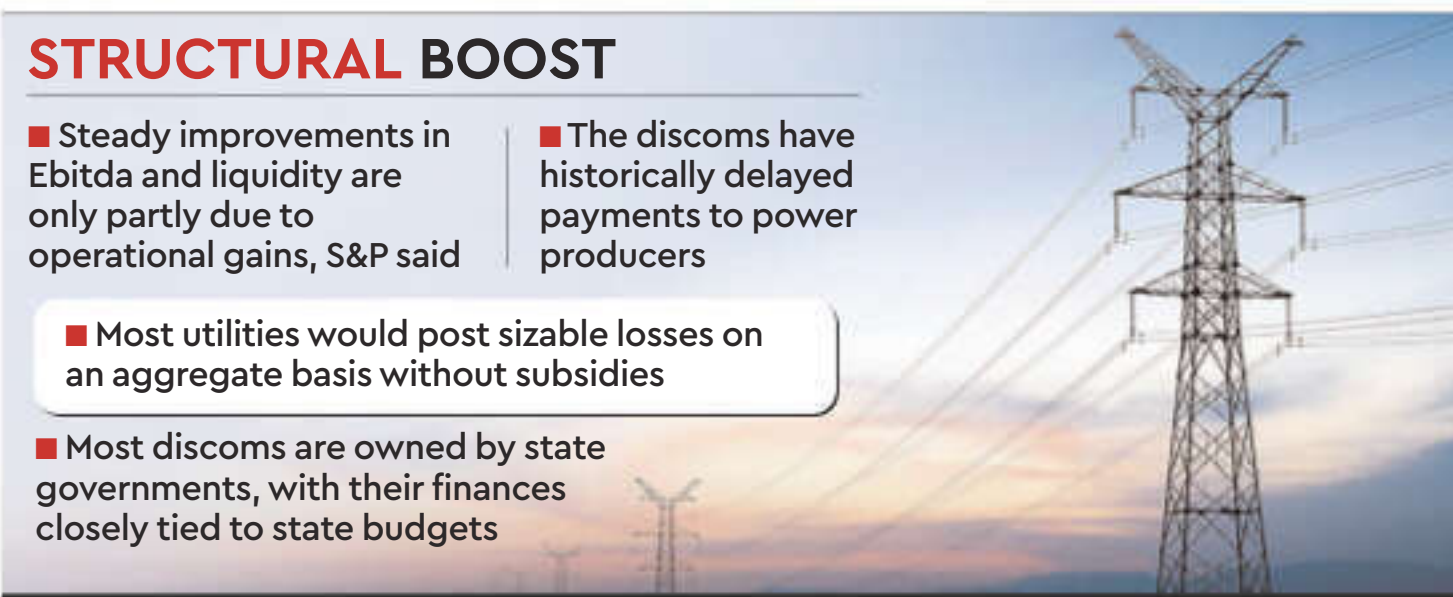
INDIA'S POWER DISTRIBUTION companies are showing stronger earnings and liquidity, but the improvement is being driven largely by rising government subsidies, grants and ad hoc cash injections rather than deep structural reforms, S&P Global Ratings has warned.

The assessment raises a fresh red flag for India's power sector, where discoms sit at the centre of the electricity payment chain. The utilities buy power from generators and supply it to consumers, but have historically delayed payments to power producers. Any renewed stress at the discom level can quickly spill over to generation companies and other utilities.

S&P said discoms look stronger on the surface, but most would post sizable losses on an aggregate basis without subsidies. The key exceptions are discoms in Gujarat and the privatisation success stories of Odisha and Delhi.

"Power sector transfers are an increasing proportion of Indian state government spend, putting sustainability of transfers to discoms at risk," said Neel Gopalakrishnan, credit analyst, S&P Global Ratings. "Structural reforms will be needed to put discoms on a sustainably improving trend, including spending for much needed modernisation."

The rating agency said steady improvements in Ebitda and liquidity are only partly due to operational gains such as



STRUCTURAL BOOST

■ Steady improvements in Ebitda and liquidity are only partly due to operational gains, S&P said

■ The discoms have historically delayed payments to power producers

■ Most utilities would post sizable losses on an aggregate basis without subsidies

■ Most discoms are owned by state governments, with their finances closely tied to state budgets

lower electricity theft or network improvement. Instead, stronger financials have largely come from higher subsidies, larger grants and one-time cash support from governments.

The warning is significant because most discoms are

owned by state governments, making their finances closely tied to state budgets. Rising subsidies have helped discoms and other utilities by improving cash flows, but S&P said the model may become harder to sustain as transfers keep rising

in relation to state revenues.

"If subsidies were sustainable, the Indian state discoms could maintain a stable credit profile," said Vernice Tan, credit analyst, S&P Global Ratings. "However, herein lies the big risk. Given subsidies are increas-

ing steadily in relation to state government revenues, maintaining such high levels of transfers to state discoms may not be sustainable over the long run."

S&P said the path to durable improvement requires a stronger regulatory framework, tariffs that reflect actual costs and lower dependence on state subsidies. While political compulsions may make it difficult to eliminate subsidies, making the system more efficient and predictable could improve investability.

The agency said privatisation can transform discoms, as Odisha and Delhi have shown, but it is not the only route. Gujarat has demonstrated that state-run discoms can perform well when fundamentals are sound.

Retail rulebook

India needs a clear policy framework

The All India Consumer Products Distribution Federation recently raised questions on the legality of operating models being used by foreign-owned ecommerce firms, asking the government to step in and correct the anomalies. While there may be merit in the organisation’s claim that foreign firms have violated the policy on foreign direct investment (FDI), it’s time to review the broader issue of complex rules plaguing the retail sector — both offline and online. As advancements in technology outpace regulatory debates, there is a need to bring clarity, transparency and agility to the rulebook, which should be made easy to follow for any retail business. Simpler rules should result in higher compliance on the part of the industry, while helping to draw investors.

For specifically ecommerce, expected to grow from \$90 billion-100 billion now to around \$250 billion by 2030, a comprehensive and lucid policy should serve as a single reference point, so that the stakeholders don’t have to rush from one government department to another for clarifications and permissions of various kinds. Typically, an ecommerce company, especially if foreign-owned, needs to engage with eight to nine ministries or departments for different requirements. An ecommerce policy, which has been in the making for years, should be able to improve the ease of doing business. Policies for the retail sector, calculated at over \$1 trillion as of last year and estimated to cross \$2 trillion by 2030, have been politically sensitive for several decades, cutting across party lines. This has, in turn, led to layering the sector into multiple nomenclatures and guidelines — a model not seen in most other countries.

FDI in multibrand retail has been in abeyance even after a policy was notified in 2012, permitting up to 51 per cent foreign investment. Protecting mom-and-pop stores or *kiranas*, a significant political constituency, has been the central reason to resist foreign multibrand players such as Walmart. Unlike multibrand retail, FDI in single-brand retail has worked, and in this up to 100 per cent foreign investment is allowed. Major international brands such as Apple, Ikea and H&M have entered India through the 100 per cent FDI route, though after years of negotiations. The franchisee route is another format for foreign brands, again with different sets of rules. Some of the brick-and-mortar international brands such as Walmart and Carrefour experimented with the cash-and-carry format for business-to-business transactions after their multibrand ambitions failed to materialise in India.

With ecommerce emerging as the biggest disruptor, international marquee brands entered this space and, more recently, the quick-commerce segment. Walmart (as the majority stakeholder in Flipkart) and Amazon are both upping their investment in ecommerce and quick commerce. Quite like the brick-and-mortar retail rules, the guidelines for ecommerce vary, depending on the format a company follows. So, there’s a medley of online formats with a range of FDI rules — inventory-led, marketplace, food manufactured in India, and international food brands. A separate category could come up for exports too. The recent complaint by the traders’ body arises from the differentiation between inventory-led and marketplace formats. While foreign-owned ecommerce and quick-commerce firms can’t own the inventories, they can help in setting up the warehouse infrastructure, according to FDI rules on ecommerce. Such differentiation comes in the way of not just attracting investors but it may also be seen as going against the notion of a level playing field on any international platform.

Off-field divide

European football teams are racially diverse but Europe isn’t

Anyone following European football since the mid-nineties would not have failed to notice the growing racial diversity of the teams. Footballers from Africa, the West Indies, West Asia and even Southeast Asia increasingly play stellar roles in key European leagues. Driven by hyper-competition and big money, European clubs cast their net wide — and without discrimination — for the best available talent to win money-spinning silverware each season. Inevitably, the racial diversity of club football has had its impact on the composition of European squads appearing for the Fifa World Cup. Much was made of the dominant African origins of France’s 1998 World Cup winning squad — a point its Algerian-origin superstar Zinedine Zidane underlined in the afterglow of victory. This was true of France’s 2018 victory too; over 80 per cent of the current squad that will play Spain in the semifinal tomorrow are of African origin. France’s star striker Kylian Mbappe, of Algerian-Cameroonian origin, will be pitted against two Spanish stars, 19-year-old Lamine Yamal, whose parents come from Moroccan and Equatorial Guinea, and Nico Williams, of Ghanaian origin.

Initially, the African/non-white dominance in European clubs reflected the colonial heritage of these countries — with Nigerians and Jamaicans in England; Ivoirians, Algerians and Moroccans in France; Cameroonians and Ghanians in Germany; Angolans in Portugal, and so on. Later, this pattern changed, as strategically relaxed citizenship rules in the European Union enabled foreign players to gravitate towards the country that maximised their earning power. France’s Michael Olise, for instance, is of Nigerian and Algerian origin. He grew up in England and played for clubs in the English Premier League before opting for France. Jude Bellingham, the feted striker for England, is of Irish and Jamaican descent. Most of these players are first-generation citizens having been born in their country of adoption after their parents settled there, often as political or economic refugees.

This warm, fuzzy notion of racial integration on the football pitch that the media celebrates is not reflected in the real world in Europe, however. White Europeans may be happy to watch foreign players from the distance of a football stadium win sporting laurels for their nations but are unlikely to welcome them elsewhere. In social, political or corporate institutions, African-origin citizens are conspicuous in their scarcity. Few can claim not to have been racially abused. Nowhere is this more evident than in France, where people of African descent account for 10 per cent of the population but less than 1 per cent of leadership in the top 50 French companies and about 2 per cent of lawmakers in the National Assembly. It is telling that the bulk of France’s African-origin footballers grew up in the *banlieues*, low-cost suburban housing projects. This is also true of Germany and Italy, where immigrants exist on the squalid margins of urban life. Only England remains an exception where racial integration is evident across the political and social spectrum, although Brexit was partly a product of growing anti-immigration sentiment. The racial composition of European football teams stands in stark contrast to the rise of rightwing nationalism across Europe, which has put anti-immigration front and centre of political platforms — from France’s Rassemblement National to the Alternative For Germany and Brothers of Italy, among others. This is the reality fans must remember when they watch Mbappe or Yamal strut their stuff on the pitch tomorrow.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Can India innovate?

The country’s innovation problem begins with its largest companies

The narrative around India is quite gloomy at the moment. One of the biggest pushbacks is that India is losing the artificial intelligence (AI) race. Any business model that depends on selling billable hours of skilled employees is bound to be disrupted, so goes the bear thesis. There is also a strong perception that India is not good at innovation. We are lagging in most of the new industrial sectors, be it electric vehicles and battery storage, biologics, humanoids or renewables. We spend only 0.65 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on research & development (R&D), substantially below the norm of 2.5-3 per cent in most other large economies.

Is this perception of India being unable to handle cutting-edge technology and innovate accurate?

One can point to some successes. The ability to indigenously build a ballistic nuclear-powered submarine is an astonishing accomplishment; only four other countries possess this capability. Our space and missile programmes are truly world class. The Agni VI is a truly intercontinental ballistic missile, and we have built credibility in space launch capability and planetary missions. The fast breeder reactor programme is unique, as is the digital public infrastructure used by millions of Indians.

These are just four examples of true innovation and the ability to handle very complex technologies. What is common to them all is the involvement of government, both as the primary source of funding and in setting out the vision. All took decades to fructify and were national priorities. While the government is far from perfect, it does have a track record of being able to deliver in critical areas of national security where no foreign technology is easily available.

So maybe India’s innovation problem is more a private-sector issue? This is already evident, as, in India, of the money spent on R&D, more than 60 per cent is government-funded, unlike other countries

where the private sector is dominant.

If we look at the private sector, one gets a sense that there is enough innovation activity among smaller companies and startups. Talking to venture capitalists, one gets the impression that multiple deep-tech funds are being launched and that there is heavy investment in the areas of space tech, defence, electrification, and additive manufacturing. There is risk capital available from both the government and investors. There are sufficient successful startup role models in India. Our best talent is moving into startups, as we have seen successful monetisation.

Even smaller listed companies exhibit ambition and a willingness to take risks. The entrepreneurs here are willing to invest in capex and pursue new growth vectors, often involving interesting niche technologies and markets.

The real problem seems to be the large Indian companies. Here, innovation seems to be abysmal. I cannot think of much in terms of cutting-edge research or technology. The only exception is pharmaceuticals, where certain companies have shown the ability and the desire to undertake real innovation.

Why do larger Indian companies lag in innovation? Being highly profitable and focused on return on capital, one view is that they are too focused on short-term financial metrics. Senior leadership at these large companies may feel that R&D expenditure in the short term will hurt margins and the stock price.

This is a mistaken interpretation in my view. Properly explained and segregated, the Indian markets today are mature enough to back certain companies and promoters investing in R&D. The market will assign higher multiples to these companies as the period of competitive advantage extends through R&D. This multiple expansion will more than compensate for lower short-term earnings.

The lack of innovation may also be based on the



AKASH PRAKASH



MACRO PULSE
RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

Making India attractive to foreign capital

Last month, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced a series of measures to support the rupee by encouraging foreign borrowing. So far, they seem to have worked. The rupee has stabilised. But the important question now is whether this stability will last.

The answer depends on whether the problem is temporary or permanent. If it is temporary, the RBI’s strategy makes sense. Borrowing can bridge the gap in dollar supply until conditions improve. But if the problem is permanent, borrowing only postpones the adjustment. Eventually, the same problem will return and the country will have to deal with it from a weaker position, since it will have accumulated debts in the meantime.

So, is the problem temporary? Only partly. The war in West Asia has pushed up oil prices, increasing India’s import bill and putting pressure on the balance of payments. But this factor is only a small part of the problem. Even if the tensions continue for a few more months and oil prices rise back towards \$100 a barrel, India’s current account deficit should remain within its traditional “safe limit” of 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

The bigger problem lies in the capital account. For much of the period since the 1991 reforms, India attracted substantial foreign capital. During the investment boom of the mid-2000s, inflows were more than sufficient to finance the current account deficit (CAD) and still allowed the RBI to accumulate foreign exchange reserves. That is why a CAD of around 2 per cent of GDP came to be seen as safe. Over the last couple of years, however, capital inflows have weakened steadily and, at current levels, they are no longer sufficient to finance even a modest CAD.

There is another reason why foreign capital

matters. The government’s goal of making India a “Viksit Bharat” by 2047 will require the economy to grow at around 8 per cent a year, in real terms, for the next two decades. Achieving that will require much higher investment. Domestic savings alone are unlikely to be enough. Foreign capital will, therefore, have to fill part of the gap.

Consider the incremental capital output ratio (ICOR). It measures how many rupees of investment are needed to generate one additional rupee of GDP.

India’s ICOR has historically ranged between 4.5 and 5. At that rate, sustaining a real GDP growth rate of 8 per cent requires investment of 36-40 per cent of GDP every year.

Today, India’s gross savings and investment are both around 30 per cent of GDP. Raising investment to the level needed for sustained high growth would, therefore, require an additional 6-10 per cent of GDP every year. At today’s GDP of around \$4 trillion, even the lower end of that range amounts to roughly \$240 billion a year in investment. Unless domestic savings increase substantially,

India will need foreign capital to bridge this gap.

The obvious question, then, is how India can attract more foreign capital. The RBI’s June 5 package, especially the elimination of capital gains tax on foreign investors’ bond purchases, is a step in the right direction. But much more needs to be done. For example, nothing has been announced so far to encourage foreign direct investment (FDI). This matters because FDI is not only more stable than portfolio investment, but also brings technology and access to global production networks that India needs to build a competitive manufacturing sector.

To encourage FDI inflows, three policy actions are

perceived lack of competition. The largest Indian companies are getting more and more entrenched. They have pristine balance sheets and market share dominance. The Herfindahl-Hirschman index is rising across sectors. Given the difficulties in scaling a new business in India, the incumbents don’t see the need to innovate to stay ahead of the competition.

The largest companies and groups are also busy investing in nation building. They have multiple areas in which they can invest large sums. They see no need to spend money on cutting-edge technology when they can invest billions into basic infrastructure at good returns.

Many of the largest groups have moved from founder mode into manager mode, wherein professional executives now run the business, or the next generation of the family is more interested in family office constructs. Founder mode, wherein the founder/family is fully in charge, should normally lead to greater risk appetite. There are many risks that only the founder will have the confidence to take. Their time frame will normally be much longer than professional management. R&D fits this profile. We may need to see greater equity incentives for the management team to act more like founders.

We also have no real role models to emulate. There has been no breakout success of a company using innovation to gain global share in any industry. The obvious potential was in the IT services space, where the global delivery model at scale was a genuine business innovation. These companies became global champions using the new business model. They had the size and resources to make a genuine attempt at innovation. However, instead of using their profits to invest further into technology, they chose to return over ₹6 trillion back to their shareholders over the last decade.

Returning the majority of your profits to shareholders instead of investing is the sign of a maturing industry and today these stocks trade at sub-market multiples due to a challenged growth outlook. These companies had exceptional track records and management teams; investors would not have penalised them for a step-up in R&D.

While resources are an obvious challenge when trying to do R&D and competing with the best, the fact remains that the best R&D is done by small teams with capital constraints. Corporate India does have the scale to compete in certain research disciplines. We as a country definitely have the human talent.

India’s innovation problem is largely a private-sector large business problem. The only way to kickstart this is to enhance competitive intensity across sectors. New players have to enter, whether they be startups or foreign players. Ease of business reforms remains critical to achieve this. Only when their profits and growth are threatened will our largest companies react.

Alternatively, we need to see a big research success, something that can deliver billions of dollars in cash flow. This will be a wake-up call for corporate India and undoubtedly cause heartburn and force comparisons. The asymmetry of returns will be visible. We need more innovation in India, and it is not the fault of the government or markets; large Indian companies have to look inwards. We investors have to disproportionately reward R&D, then our companies will listen.

In today’s world, anyone not innovating will ultimately fade away.

The writer is with Amansa Capital

What public finance documents don’t tell you



A K BHATTACHARYA

The story of India’s public finances is mostly discussed and debated in short bursts. The need for fiscal consolidation or fiscal policy reforms assumes urgency in the national media and among experts mostly around the time the Union government presents its annual financial statement, or the Budget. Once the Budget exercise is over, the debate over fiscal issues also fades out.

Every year, about 30 governments in the states and Union Territories also produce their budgets, but they too provoke little discussion before or after their presentation. Even the national media gives short shrift to the importance of

states pursuing a path of fiscal prudence — so much so that rarely do the fiscal deficit numbers provided in state finance ministers’ Budget speeches attract any attention in the news coverage. Instead, the state finance ministers’ focus on big projects and welfare schemes hogs the limelight.

Anoop Singh, a member of the 15th Finance Commission and an economist who spent many years in the Reserve Bank of India and the International Monetary Fund, has made a signal contribution in trying to change this pattern of public discourse. His book, *Managing Public Finances in a New Global Era*, scrutinises public finances in India, an exercise that is bound to ignite a much-needed debate over how the Union and state governments frame their annual budgets. Hopefully, this laudable initiative will result in greater awareness about what constitutes a healthy public financial management in the country.

The book is neatly divided into two sections. The first section examines

India’s fiscal architecture and the second focuses on the prevailing climate change governance structure, emphasising that it must be rooted in robust public financial management systems. Unsurprisingly, the second section, apart from providing a brief overview of India’s climate change commitments, lists a few basic steps to integrate green public financial management practices into government processes.

But the more striking revelations are in the first section of the book. As the author rightly notes, the first section is the core of the volume as it analyses data gaps, off-budget practices and institutional weaknesses that adversely impact fiscal transparency. This section provides important insights into subsidy reporting, misclassification of capital expenditure, and how states target fiscal prudence. There are also important recommendations for reforming India’s public financial management system to improve fiscal governance, reporting integrity and government accountability.

All these suggestions should ideally be taken up seriously not only by the finance ministries at the Union and state governments, but also by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, which would do well to incorporate some of the yardsticks Dr Singh has recommended for inclusion in its auditing and assessment exercise. However, the book stands out in highlighting startling gaps in how governments measure and present their subsidies and capital expenditure to legislative bodies.

Dr Singh points out that there is no standard, universally accepted definition of subsidy at either the Union or the state level. “Freebies, tax rebates, cash transfers and implicit subsidies are often selectively omitted or included, making comparisons difficult,” Dr Singh notes, underlining the need for a uniform framework. Other instruments used to bypass scrutiny and conceal financial liabilities while allocating resources for subsidies include off-budget financing, extra-budgetary resources, and deferred

payments. These practices result in risks to financial credibility and debt sustainability. Consequently, over the last many years, the actual subsidy as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) has been higher than the subsidy reported in Budget documents.

Equally disturbing is the author’s assessment that the actual capital expenditure by the Union and state governments is misleading.

For the states, Dr Singh argues that over 40 per cent of their capital expenditure is for debt repayment, not tangible asset creation. Similarly, the Union government’s actual capital spending on creating non-financial assets is lower than its budgetary gross estimates. This assessment is based on the principles laid down in the International Monetary Fund’s Government Finance Statistics Manual.

On off-budget borrowings, the author notes that some progress has been achieved at the Centre, but more needs to



Managing Public Finances in a New Global Era: India's Experiences and Challenges by Anoop Singh Published by Academic Foundation 336+XXXII pages ₹1,795

be done for the states. Dr Singh’s central argument is that India’s public finance management systems at the Union and state levels lag international best practices, although several committees, including the finance commissions, have recommended reforms. An interesting suggestion the author makes is that states should present their annual budgets before the end of February, just as the Union government now presents its budget on February 1 to facilitate passage before the financial year starts.

Rich in public finance data from the last couple of decades, the book makes a compelling argument that Union and state governments must reform their budgetary practices without delay. In other words, the Union and state governments must reform their budgetary practices to make India’s public financial management system comprehensive, integrated, and consistent with international best practices.



OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

At last, old cases see new benches

The lower judiciary needs to follow the example set by the apex court and set up dedicated channels to deal with pendencies

A special roster unveiled by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant, under which four dedicated benches will exclusively hear the Supreme Court’s oldest civil and criminal cases, is a welcome move. It needs to be complemented by similar moves in high courts and district judiciary, and wider structural reforms that put an end to protracted litigation that not only hurt the criminal justice system but also tilt the scales of justice against the marginalised. This newspaper reported on Monday that the apex court identified around 800 long-pending matters for expedited disposal in the court’s first structured docket-management exercise in recent years. From July 13, two division benches headed by justices PK Mishra and SVN Bhatti will exclusively hear the oldest civil matters on non-miscellaneous days — Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Two other division benches headed by justices Manoj Misra and Ujjal Bhuyan will similarly hear the oldest criminal cases on those days. This is a significant beginning to lower the load of pending cases and shows that the top court has made this a priority. According to the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG), the Supreme Court currently has 96,045 pending cases. Of these, 37,883 cases, around 39.4%, are less than one year old, indicating that a large chunk of the docket comprises older cases awaiting adjudication.

But this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Of the 54 million cases pending before the Indian judiciary at the end of 2025, around 48 million were in front of the district and subordinate courts. Not only do such cases affect the common person the most — after all, the district judiciary is the first port of justice for ordinary people — but also hold important ramifications for personal and civil liberties. Hence, the lower judiciary needs to follow the example set by the apex court and set up dedicated channels to deal with the issue of pendency.

Ultimately, the problem of pendency — which is growing year-on-year, underlining that the scale of the problem is only growing — requires concerted efforts by all stakeholders. This not only includes the judiciary but also the government, which is the largest litigator in the courts and can instruct its departments to weigh decisions before automatically filing appeals in every case. Structural reform — which prioritises personal liberty, bail before jail, and fulfilling judicial vacancies in an apolitical manner — is the only way to ensure that the promise of speedy justice is kept alive.

The myth of the big happy Indian family

The jury is still out on whether Indians are indeed the most family-oriented people in the world. Intergenerational families that travel together, carrying their own food and dancing their dances, would make everyone think so. There is also the great Indian wedding where relatives, thrice removed, behave as integral body parts. The Indian family system still works within Asia’s largely collectivistic culture. Which is why the growing number of elderly abuse cases should raise eyebrows for it ruptures the foundational principle of family: burden-sharing.

The Bombay High Court recently established that parents, irrespective of their financial status, can reverse a gift deed made to their children should they feel a breach of the underlying familial contract. The court ruled in favour of parents who had transferred property on the understanding that their son would care for them. They later alleged that the arrangement had broken down, forcing them to leave their home. They moved the tribunal, invoking the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, which cancelled the gift deed. The court rejected the son’s petition to overturn the tribunal’s decision.

Indian society’s realities are far removed from perception. If perceptions of the big fat Indian family were correct, a country, where a majority follows a belief system where parental authority is almost divine, wouldn’t need constitutional protections for the elderly. Experts say only one in 24 cases of elder abuse is formally reported, making the problem more common than it appears. The court’s intervention has thus addressed a largely invisible domestic issue and sought to protect the interests and dignity of the elderly parents.

Become creators, not just consumers of tech

Every major breakthrough in the next generation of AI will emerge from deep understanding of current foundation models

India stands at an inflection point in Artificial Intelligence (AI). The debate is often framed as a binary choice: Should India invest in building its own large language models (LLMs), or should it simply build AI applications on top of models developed elsewhere? This is the wrong question. The right strategy is not “build versus use.” It is “build enough to remain technologically sovereign while winning commercially at the platform and application layers.”

There is little doubt that the greatest commercial opportunity over the next five years lies above the foundation model layer. Intelligent model routing, enterprise AI infrastructure, trusted data platforms, multimodal AI, edge deployment, and domain-specific systems for health care, agriculture, education, manufacturing, finance, etc, will create enormous value. These are areas where India enjoys significant structural advantages: world-class engineering talent, Digital Public Infrastructure, cost-efficient innovation, and access to large, real-world datasets.

However, it would be a profound strategic mistake to conclude that India can dominate these higher layers without investing seriously in foundational AI research. Every major breakthrough in the next generation of AI — reasoning models, autonomous agents, neuro-symbolic systems, and architectures that may eventually succeed today’s transformers — will emerge from deep

understanding of current foundation models. No nation can leapfrog technologies it has never mastered. The organisations that define tomorrow’s AI will be those that understand today’s AI. I know this from 50 years of my own experience in semiconductor technologies: Today’s semiconductor miracles could not exist without 50 years of foundational learning. Every innovation at the frontier of semiconductors today is not a departure from the past — it is the past, compressed, recombined, and pushed to its physical limits.

China’s DeepSeek offers an important lesson. Its success came after it mastered large-scale model training, distributed computing, optimisation, reinforcement learning, and model distillation. The breakthroughs that attracted global attention were possible only because the underlying scientific and engineering capabilities had already been built. The lesson is clear: Innovation follows mastery — not avoidance. India, therefore, does not need to outspend the US or China in a race to build the world’s largest frontier model. But it can’t afford to abandon foundation model development altogether. The objective should instead be to build strategic capability.

India should establish one flagship national frontier-model initiative, supported by a small number of complementary research centres at leading institutions such as IISc, the IITs, and a capable private-sector partner. Rather than dispersing scarce talent and compute across multiple disconnected efforts, the country should concentrate its resources on building one world-class programme, with affiliated centres contributing specialised research

in multilingual AI, Indic language tokenisation, evaluation frameworks, reinforcement learning, safety, and domain adaptation. Such a programme is not about surpassing the latest models from the AI leaders. It is about ensuring that India possesses the talent, engineering expertise, and institutional knowledge required to understand, audit, improve, and independently operate advanced AI systems.

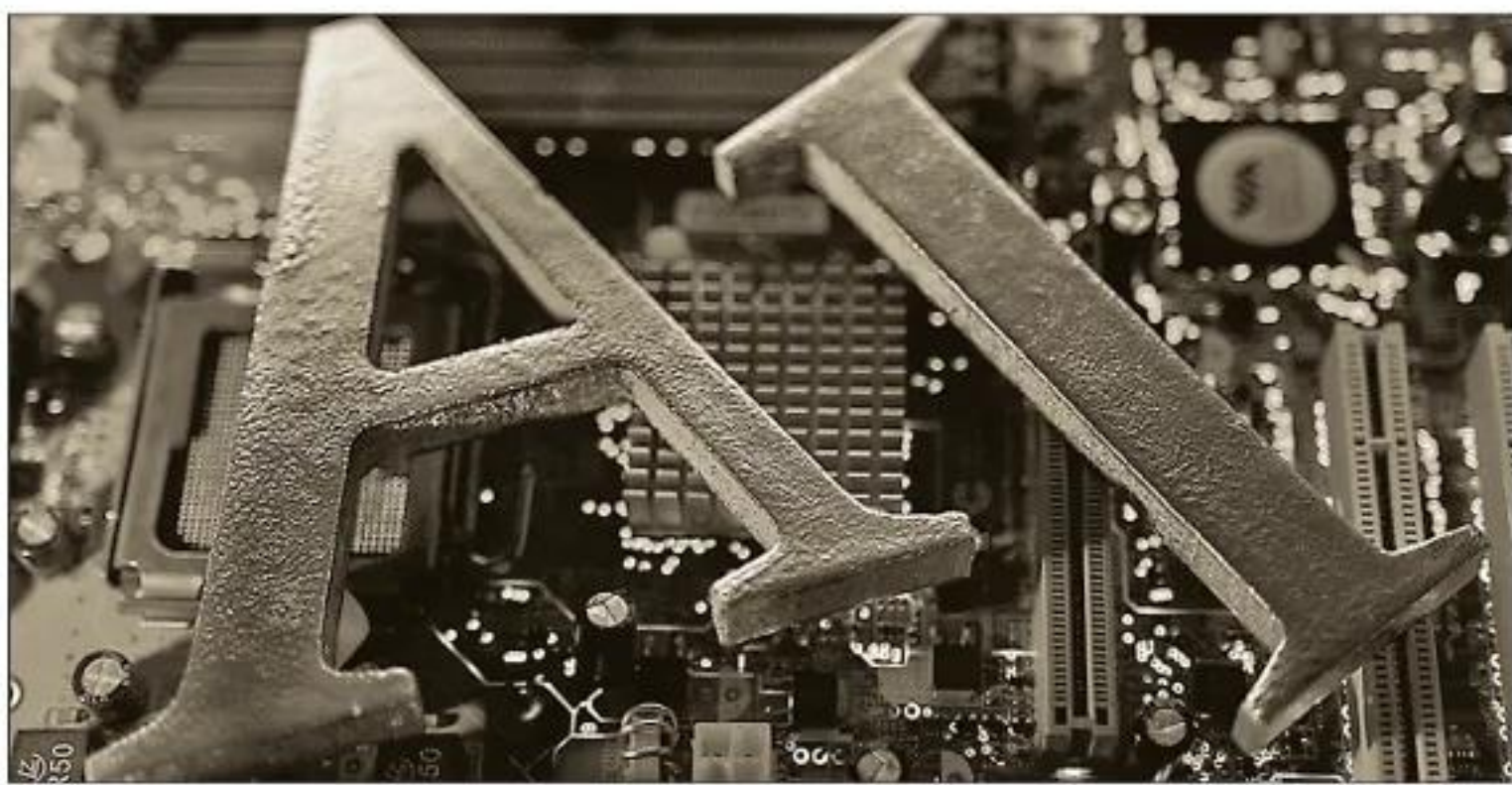
France’s experience with Mistral AI is instructive. Mistral was never intended to replace OpenAI globally. Its value lies in giving Europe strategic autonomy — the ability to inspect, customise, and deploy frontier-class AI without depending entirely on foreign providers. That carries long-term strategic value. India should pursue a similar objective.

In the near term, however, the country’s most realistic and commercially valuable goal is developing world-class expertise in adapting and extending leading open-weight models such as Llama, Mistral, and DeepSeek. Sovereign capability in post-training, reinforcement learning, safety, evaluation, domain adaptation, and multilingual fine-tuning is likely to generate far greater practical value over the next three to five years than attempting to compete head-on in trillion-dollar pretraining races.

This approach still requires deep research capabilities. Fine-tuning frontier models for India’s languages, health care, agriculture, legal frameworks, education, and governance demands sophisticated AI research and advanced engineering talent. The skills developed through this work will ultimately position India to undertake increasingly



Vinod Dham



India does not need to outspend the US or China to build the world’s largest frontier model. The objective should be to build strategic capability. REUTERS

ambitious foundation-model efforts in the future. None of this, however, is possible without sovereign AI infrastructure. High-performance GPU clusters are strategic infrastructure on par with power grids and telecommunications networks. Without domestic compute, India cannot securely train, fine-tune, or deploy AI systems using sensitive national datasets spanning health care, agriculture, financial services, legal records, scientific research, and government applications.

Over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to work closely on developing sovereign GPU technology for India as a founding advisor to the emerging startup, Agrani. This experience has reinforced my conviction that indigenous compute capability is a strategic necessity. AI sovereignty begins with compute sovereignty.

Equally important is India’s ability to run and customise leading open-weight models on infrastructure located within its own borders. The GPU capacity now being created through the India Semiconductor Mission and related national initiatives is, therefore, far more than an infrastructure project. It is the foundation upon which India’s long-term AI independence will rest.

Yet compute alone will not be sufficient. India’s greatest challenge may well be talent. Many of the world’s leading AI researchers of Indian origin currently work at the world’s premier AI laboratories. Building a sovereign AI capability requires attracting at least

some of this extraordinary talent back into the national ecosystem through globally competitive research environments, ambitious missions, entrepreneurial opportunities, and meaningful long-term support.

India has repeatedly demonstrated in the past that it can create globally competitive technology ecosystems when policy, talent, and entrepreneurship align. AI presents the next great opportunity.

India should not attempt to win the global AI race by building the biggest language model. Nor should it resign itself to becoming merely an application developer dependent on technologies built elsewhere. Instead, India should invest enough in frontier AI research to preserve technological sovereignty, build world-class expertise in open-model adaptation and post-training, develop sovereign compute infrastructure, attract exceptional research talent, and focus commercial energy where India has the greatest comparative advantage — the platform and application layers that will define AI’s real-world impact. The choice before India is whether to remain a creator of the technologies that will shape the future — or become permanently dependent on those created by others.

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Businesses must put their load on electric trucks

Between 2020 and 2025, electric buses went from minority traffic to a familiar sight on Indian roads, priced nearly 30% below diesel and backed by public procurement in most states. India went from about 500 electric buses in 2020 to over 63,000 buses contracted in 2026, with 16,000+ on the road — valued at \$8 billion. The government was firmly at the wheel of this transformation, and it delivered.

Contrast that with freight. Despite years of pilots, subsidies, and industry pledges, fewer than 1,000 electric heavy-duty trucks operate on Indian roads, out of a fleet of nearly four million. The global discourse on commercial vehicle electrification rests on a single proposition: As battery prices fall and electricity stays cheaper than diesel, market forces will drive the switch. This is only partly true. Cost competitiveness is a powerful tailwind, but it is also fragile, reversible, and unevenly motivating across the supply chain. The single most consequential lever available to accelerate freight electrification is a fleet electrification mandate, which compels India’s largest industrial shippers to convert diesel trucks to electric on a defined timeline.

But cost savings alone won’t do it. Indian trucks consume roughly ₹6 lakh crore of diesel every year. At today’s grid tariff of about ₹8/unit, full electrification could cut this to ₹2.1 lakh crore, a 65% saving. At renewable tariffs of ₹4/unit, savings climb to nearly ₹4.8 lakh crore, or 80%.

These same economics underpinned India’s electric bus transition, where high upfront capital costs were amortised over long-term service contracts, resulting in the 30% savings. But economics alone didn’t drive that shift, active orchestration by the public sector did: the PMO, multiple ministries, state governments, and public transport agencies together created demand, de-risked procurement, and proved e-buses could scale. Freight, however, sits overwhelmingly in private hands, and cost reduction alone cannot sustain adoption at scale. Three structural gaps explain why and point to what must be done.

First, the accountability gap. Ask a large cement or steel company about its emissions and you’ll get a polished report covering Scopes 1 and 2, meaning emissions from its own operations and purchased power. Ask about freight, which falls under Scope 3, and the answer, sometimes confidently is: It’s neither within their control nor their ownership. Yet cement alone moves over roughly 50,000 trucks a day, and logistics can account for 15-17% of a cement company’s costs. Disowning this on the grounds of “not my emissions” has gone unchallenged for too long — especially now that electric freight, under the right commercial model, can cost less than diesel, removing any excuse that reporting it is commercially burdensome.

Scopes 1 and 2 disclosures are mandatory under SEBI’s Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) Core framework for India’s top 1,000 listed companies. Boards review them, investors question them, and rating agencies score them against these. Even if not always taken as seriously as other compliances, this loop works because it isn’t optional. Without similar regulatory teeth, freight (Scope 3 emission) stays someone else’s problem.

The second, and much more serious issue, is the reversibility problem. Diesel prices swing, and every swing changes the electrification math. A shipper who switched because electric freight was 20% cheaper will keep benchmarking against diesel, expecting the same discount indefinitely, regardless of what it costs the operator to deliver it. But the risk sits asymmetrically: Savings accrue to the shipper, while operators carry the capital risk of trucks, batteries, and charging infrastructure, with revenue exposed to diesel prices and annual rate renegotiation. Without long-term contracts locking in volume and revenue, the business case stays fragile no matter how good the underlying economics look. Electricity tariffs aren’t guaranteed to hold either. As rooftop solar schemes succeed, discoms increasingly worry about losing their best-paying customers. Today’s subsidised EV tariffs may not last, and not every state offers the time-of-day structures that match commercial charging patterns.

Eliminating this requires mandating the transition on the shipper side. Only then does procurement move past annual diesel-price comparisons, unreasonable price expectations, and start rewarding long-term efficiency and diesel reduction.

The third is that shippers hold the demand. Large industrial shippers set the rates, corridors, volumes, and contract durations. Directing even a share of that demand toward electric fleets will drive the transition at scale and fast. Leave it voluntary, and it doesn’t. Trucks follow contracts, not the other way round. A phased mandate requiring large shippers above a defined emissions or production threshold to convert a specified share of contracted freight to electric on a fixed schedule creates demand that cannot be ignored. It forces capital planning, pushes the greening conversation into heads of commercial functions, and gives OEMs, financiers, and charging-infrastructure operators the order visibility they need to invest at scale. These targets will also sharpen the government’s own infrastructure planning. Sector-specific mandates will define a limited set of high-priority freight corridors, and those become the corridors where charging stations, grid capacity, and parking infrastructure should be built into national highway expansion plans first.

The mechanism need not be built from scratch. Scope 3 freight disclosure could be phased into the BRSR Core framework over the next two reporting cycles — first requiring disclosure, then mandating reductions. But, an even simpler method would be for shippers of a defined turnover or fleet-size threshold to be mandated to electrify, on a sector-by-sector approach, starting with cement, steel, mining and chemicals. The ministry of road transport and highways and the ministry of heavy industries could jointly anchor implementation, by focusing attention on the most-used electrifying highways. If the goal is rapid, at-scale freight electrification, the clearest path is to give large freight users electrification targets, phased through a mechanism the government already knows how to run and contracts that investors are already familiar with.



Mahua Acharya

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{ URSULA VON DER LEYEN } PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

This is not about whether children can access social media. It is about whether and when social media can access our children

On the need for age-appropriate restrictions on social media

Amarnath Yatra embodies India’s civilisational legacy

A spiritual journey is the only real miracle there is. Every year, as lakhs of devotees begin the arduous climb to the holy cave of Baba Barfani, the nation witnesses a tradition that has continued unbroken for centuries. Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra is one of the country’s most celebrated pilgrimages and enduring civilisational traditions. Its significance extends well beyond the destination because the journey itself is a search for purpose that transforms hardship into prayer and perseverance into worship. A great alchemy is born, and each and every moment turns divine. This is precisely why the yatra has retained its relevance and reverence across generations.

It offers a rare lesson in patience, devotion, reflection, endurance, and inner strength. It is a journey of togetherness, where pilgrims freely share their possessions, wisdom, prayers, love, and joy with one another.

For centuries, the pilgrimage has been supported by the common man of Jammu and Kashmir. Local residents, many belonging to different faiths, have traditionally welcomed pilgrims, offered assistance, and contributed to the smooth conduct of the pilgrimage. Their participation reflects a long-standing culture of coexistence. Volunteers, civil society organisations, local communities, and government agencies work together to ensure that every devotee completes the journey safely and with dignity. These moments reaffirm the eternal truth that India’s greatest strength is its power to bring people together, transcending differences.

The pilgrimage also sends a message that darshan at holy cave is not only about individual salvation but it is equally about collective responsibility and shared humanity. The yatra also breathes new life into the local economy.

Another defining feature is its extraordinary diversity. Pilgrims arrive from every corner of the country. Along the challenging mountain trek, differences dissolve into a shared identity shaped by devotion and common purpose.

In recent years, the scale and management of the yatra have undergone a transformation. Under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, sustained investments in infrastructure have significantly improved the pilgrimage experience. Better roads, expanded accommodation, enhanced health care facilities, improved telecommunications, reliable electricity, and strengthened logistical support have made the journey safer and more accessible, even in one of India’s most

challenging terrains.

The growing numbers of devotees also reflect this progress. Over the past three years, the pilgrimage has recorded an average annual participation of approximately 4.57 lakh pilgrims, one-fourth higher than its long-term average.

A significant administrative achievement underpins these numbers: RFID-based tracking systems now help ensure pilgrim safety. Grid electricity has reached stretches of the Baltal route up to the holy cave and onward to Panchatarni, improving visibility and security. Advanced surveillance systems have modernised pilgrimage management. Equally important has been the expansion of facilities at transit camps in Chanderkot, Baltal, Pantha Chowk, Srinagar, and Nunwan. The establishment of an integrated command and control centre (ICCC) and improved disaster preparedness mechanisms shows technology and efficient governance can complement religious tourism while ensuring public safety.

Considerable effort has also been made to preserve the sanctity of the holy shrine, protect the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, and maintain the cultural identity of the pilgrimage. In his message to this year’s pilgrims, PM Modi urged devotees to embrace five key pledges, including responsible waste management and biodiversity conservation. The Prithvi Sukta in the Atharva Veda comprises a hymn of 63 verses devoted to the Earth. It conveys eco-friendly wisdom, offering insights into the treasures of our planet and guiding their use and management in a sustainable way. The yatra imparts the wisdom of the Sukta.

However, the success of these initiative rests on collective effort. The administration, the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, the Army, Jammu Kashmir Police, security forces, health care workers, volunteers, civil society organisations, other departments and local communities have demonstrated that cooperation remains our most valuable resource during the yatra. The yatra ultimately teaches perseverance in the face of adversity, respect amid diversity, service before self, and responsibility towards nature. It reminds us that our civilisational strength has always rested on its ability to combine spirituality with social harmony, tradition with progress, and faith with compassion. Preserving these values is our collective responsibility.



Manoj Kumar Sinha

Manoj Kumar Sinha is the lieutenant-governor of Jammu and Kashmir. The views expressed are personal



A thought for today
The power of fortune is confessed only by the miserable, for the happy impute all their success to prudence or merit
JONATHAN SWIFT

Science Of Winning

Congrats to Physics Olympiad winners. Would've been great if non-coaching class kids could make the cut too

Amid all the news and noise, did you notice that India just finished as joint winner of the 56th International Physics Olympiad in Colombia? All five boys who represented the country are coming home with a gold each. Last year, it was three golds and two silvers, and overall, in the past 30 years, India's won around 60 golds and 55 silvers. This is India's second all-gold performance after 2018. Given how important physics is this century – just look at the valuations of Nvidia, SpaceX and other chips and AI firms – we should all be very proud of this moment.

But as a nation, we also need to pause and reflect on the way we nurture bright minds, encourage them, and then polish them into winners. All five Indian winners this year represent top coaching institutes, not regular schools, whether private or run by govt. It would appear that India's school pipeline, by itself, isn't up to equipping the brightest students for tough international competitions. Just as it's proven inadequate for our JEEs and NEETs. Is that the case elsewhere too? A quick check of last year's gold-medalists shows Allen Li from US studied at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino. It's a public school, funded by govt. So is Henry M Gunn High School in Palo Alto, where another gold-medalist, Agastya Goel, studied.

If ends justify means, this conversation is pointless, but if means matter, we should ask why aren't India's schools capable of producing such winners on their own. If a small country like Cuba – under US embargo since 1962 – can win occasional medals at the Olympiad, and Iran has won over 100 silvers and golds since 1990, it should be clear that winners can be made without private coaching centres. What's needed is depth within the school system. But in India, the school base itself is shrinking. Recent reports show over 90,000 govt schools have been shut down over the past 10 years. So, govt's task is cut out: upgrade course material, teaching and school infra rapidly. Simultaneously, aim for an all-gold team made up of govt school students within the next 10 years.

Sir, What Was That?

Voters are still stumped by EC's rules, and are still struggling to be included

One might have expected, after the tortuous labyrinthine process in 10 states/UTs, and massive exclusions, that at least the voter enrolment form would no longer trigger anxiety. That enrolment would have been standardised in the 19 remaining states and UTs, where EC's special intensive revision (SIR) is under way. Alas, confusion reigns, because the process is inconsistent. If in Bihar, EC had said a pre-filled enumeration will be made available to electors, which will have to be simply 're-submitted', a year on, in SIR's third avatar, BLOs in Delhi, for one, are asking existing long-term voters to fill up Form 6, that enrolls new voters, and in the 'house-to-house' – that really means a crazy scrum at

RWA offices – all queries will be fixed. Everyone's a new voter. While in earlier avatars, reportedly, only those who were never enrolled as voters would need to provide parents' documents, in recent rounds, you need to provide parents' details, or previous EPIC numbers, regardless.

Imagine what this means for an orphan, a 75-year-old, or an 18-yr-old whose parents have never wanted to be on the voter roll. It is harrowing. From where does an orphan produce parental records? What will EC do with details of an 80-year-old's parents, born pre-Partition? Who is to assure the 18-year-old migrant that she will not be viewed with suspicion, simply because her parents were never on the voter rolls? Is she an alien? Being on the electoral roll is not mandatory.

Making it an exclusionary process – and placing the onus of proving eligibility on the individual – and making SIR documentation a nightmare, is increasing citizens' pain. Down the rabbit hole of documentation – one where GOI claims that passport is a mere travel document, ration cards are off-limits, Aadhaar is iffy, birth certificates a recent phenom, one where the bewildered elector holds out their trove of documents, only to be stumped by a query on the provenance of documents. Can't say? "Off with his name", is what's happening in very many cases. It's a peculiar, and unfortunate, situation where universal adult franchise is getting marked by EC's stamp of exclusion.

Purple Drain

Monsoon never changed. Bengaluru did

Chethan.Kumar@timesofindia.com

There was a time when rain and I understood each other, and Bengaluru quietly approved of the arrangement. Growing up in this city, rain was never an inconvenience. It was part of the rhythm of life. Pre-summer showers would drift in quietly, cooling the city without bringing it to a halt. Monsoon brought heavier downpours, but even those seemed to possess a sense of timing and restraint. Rain interrupted little. Instead, it invited participation. You could even enjoy it.

As children, we rushed outdoors at the first sign of darkening skies. The narrow gutters outside our homes became miniature rivers into which we stepped without hesitation, never pausing to worry about bacterial counts. Rain was not a public health advisory. By college, I was something of an unofficial weatherman, who could look at a perfectly sunny Bengaluru afternoon and predict rain before the post-lunch lecture ended. I could smell the petrichor even before the first drop hit Earth's floor.

Even after work consumed schedules and spontaneity, my relationship with rain remained intact. A shower was an invitation to slow down. I would stand by windows watching the city blur behind silver streaks, take the longer route home simply because it felt right, and occasionally surrender to getting drenched for no reason other than the joy of it. Rain was not merely weather. It altered the mood.

But somewhere along the way, Bengaluru changed the terms of my relationship with rain. A downpour that once inspired poetry now triggers traffic updates. Roads disappear beneath water with astonishing efficiency. Potholes become tests of faith and vehicle suspension. The Earthiness, once the city's signature perfume, now competes with sewage rising through overwhelmed drains. Those little streams outside our homes have either disappeared or mutated into channels for things no child should be encouraged to paddle through.

Colleagues know me as the person who plans around rain. Not because I dislike getting wet. But because this means something different today. Perhaps that is what I miss most. Not merely the rain of my childhood, but the version of Bengaluru that treated it as a companion rather than a crisis. This season, as clouds of drought loom large, both Bengaluru and I are missing rain. Maybe rain and I still understand each other but are trying to find our way back through the city that grew up around us.

‘We Didn’t Even Spare Ram’

We’ve found the story of corruption at the Ayodhya temple entirely plausible. That’s really our collective shame. That dishonesty and prayers coexist in places of worship, seems routine to most of us

Chetan Bhagat

Are Indians naturally corrupt? We didn't even spare Ram. For decades, people fought over his temple in Ayodhya. It shaped politics, divided communities, consumed national attention, and became one of the most emotionally charged issues in modern India. Millions celebrated when the Ram Janmabhoomi temple finally became a reality. And now we are confronted with allegations that the very people entrusted with serving this institution, may have stolen from it.

Not from a govt department. Not from a contractor. Not from some faceless corporation. We stole from Ram.

This isn't a routine Indian scam – like people stealing from a flyover construction project, or a govt official taking bribes to get a job done. On the Indian morality scale, those scams are routine. Stealing from the Ram temple is a new low, even for us.

The easiest thing to do now is what we always do. Find a few villains, express outrage, send some people to jail, and move on. A few bad apples. A few greedy individuals. Nothing to see here. But that explanation is too convenient. Because the uncomfortable truth is that corruption in India has never been the project of a few bad people. It survives because millions of otherwise decent people have learned to live with it, excuse it, admire it, benefit from it, or participate in it when the opportunity arises.

We like to imagine corruption as something done by others. Politicians. Bureaucrats. Contractors. Really? Who are these people? Did they arrive from another planet? No. They came from the same homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities as the rest of us.

Somewhere along the way, we stopped treating corruption as a moral failure and started treating it as a life skill. A businessman who hides income is 'smart'. A govt official who makes extra money is 'well-settled'. A person who finds a way around the rules is 'resourceful'. We complain about corruption in public and admire its rewards in private.

How many times have we heard parents evaluating a prospective groom with a govt job ask about his 'extra income'? Or seen people boast about cash transactions, tax avoidance, finding shortcuts?

Many of us have also convinced ourselves that religiosity and morality are the same thing. They are not. A person can perform elaborate rituals, donate generously to temples, attend every festival, and still behave dishonestly in everyday life.

In fact, one of the strangest features of modern Indian society is our tendency to use religion as a substitute for ethics. Cheat in business. Evade taxes. Underpay workers. Exploit people who have less power than you. Then donate some money to a temple and feel spiritually balanced. As if God is running an adjustment-entry service. As if a donation can compensate for a lack of integrity.

The Ayodhya theft story exposes the weakness of that thinking. Because if a place associated with Ram –



Image by A from a photograph

revered as the embodiment of dharm – cannot prevent people from succumbing to greed, then perhaps the problem was never a lack of religion. Perhaps the problem is a lack of character. And perhaps that is a much harder problem to solve.

Some people will respond by saying corruption exists everywhere. Of course it does. Some will point to scandals involving other religions, other institutions, other countries. Fine. But what exactly does that prove? The existence of corruption elsewhere does not make corruption here any less shameful. Nor should this become a debate about Hindus vs non-Hindus. Those accused in this case were not outsiders attacking a temple. They were insiders entrusted with serving it.

The larger lesson is that no institution should rely

Not The Next Messi, The First Yamal

From an immigrant neighbourhood outside Barcelona to the billboards of Atlanta, the 18-year-old's rise has been breathtaking. He's also landed as one of the most marketable athletes on the planet

Luis Buxeres



Spanish journalist covering World Cup

Mid-June already feels like a long while ago. That's when Spain's World Cup began, in Atlanta. Hours before that kickoff against Cape Verde, the streets around Mercedes-Benz Stadium had turned into a sea of red. Yes, La Roja supporters had arrived early to savour its debut. But as they streamed towards the stadium, one detail became impossible to ignore. That the vast majority of those red shirts, old and new, with different designs, carried the same number and the same name. 19. Lamine Yamal.

Born in Rocafronda, a North African immigrant enclave north of Barcelona, Yamal is only 18, and already the face of Spanish football. Cameras follow him. Fans gravitate towards him. Every conversation, somehow, finds its way back to how well he dances with the ball.

He is both the undisputed leader of the Barça side, and the creative fulcrum of Luis de la Fuente's Spain. His dazzling play at the last Euros, at just age 16, was crucial to La Roja winning the championship. His semifinal strike against France, in particular, became a defining image of Spain's march to that title. In the two years since then, his ascent as one of the best footballers in the world has been relentless, even if he's yet to leap to the highest station. At his age, there is little point in burdening him with expectations either. They will arrive soon enough.

Of course, every exceptional young

player who emerges from Barcelona eventually meets the same question: Is he the next Messi? But Lamine Yamal does not need to become another Messi to become one of football's defining players. He only needs to continue becoming himself.

Yamal didn't arrive at the World Cup in his best shape. An injury towards the end of the club season even put his presence here in doubt. But he approached rehabilitation with a discipline that belied his years, following every medical instruction, meeting every recovery target and made his World Cup debut – a dream realised – with a brief appearance against Cape Verde. Since that now-distant scoreless draw, his momentum has only gathered pace.

He scored his first World Cup goal against Saudi Arabia, after breaking into the starting lineup, and he has not surrendered his place since. In fact, against Belgium he played the full 90 minutes and got to enjoy from close quarters Mikel Merino's dramatic winner – another unforgettable chapter in Spain's remarkable campaign.

What has unfolded off the field has been almost as remarkable. His appeal to younger audiences, effortless

authenticity and remarkable composure have made him a marketer's dream, making him one of the most sought-after faces among the world's biggest brands. This was all too obvious at that Atlanta debut. Towering over the hotel beside Mercedes-Benz Stadium was a giant image of Yamal, promoting an energy drink owned by Coca-Cola, whose global headquarters are based in the city.

No other player at this World Cup received that treatment. Not Messi. Not Mbappé. Not Haaland. None of the tournament's established superstars dominated the city's skyline the way Spain's teenage sensation did. On the pitch, he may still be chasing their achievements. Off it, he already belongs in the same commercial league.

His rise as a global brand has accelerated throughout the tournament. American television has been saturated with commercials featuring him, and these aren't just any brands. He's fronting the likes of McDonald's and Visa – companies whose logos are recognised in virtually every corner of the world. This football star's relaxed personality, infectious confidence and seemingly effortless ability to handle

immense pressure have made him a magnet for advertisers.

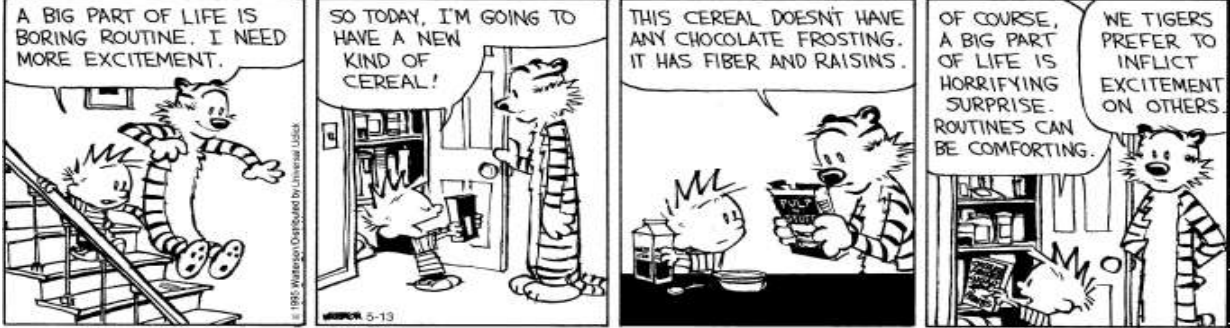
When Messi was 18, YouTube was still in its infancy and Instagram did not exist. His legend spread through newspaper reports, TV highlights and word of mouth. Yamal belongs to a different age. Every dribble becomes a viral clip within minutes. Every celebration is a meme. Every appearance generates millions of impressions before the final whistle. Talent still matters, but the machinery of fame now works at a speed Messi never experienced in his youth.

But even as his global fame multiplies, Yamal often celebrates goals by making the numbers 304 with his fingers – a tribute to the last three digits of Rocafronda's postal code (08304). It's an unusual gesture in modern football, where stars often distance themselves from their roots. Yamal has made his neighbourhood part of his identity.

The Lamine Yamal phenomenon feels almost unstoppable. It grows with every performance, every headline and every campaign. What began as the story of a gifted teenager from an immigrant Catalan neighbourhood has become something much larger – a sporting, cultural and commercial force gathering momentum at extraordinary speed. The snowball is already enormous. And it's getting bigger with every passing day, with all eyes now on what Yamal delivers at the semifinal against France.

The writer is La Vanguardia's correspondent for the Spanish national team

Calvin & Hobbes



Hasmukh Adhia

The universe is a complex creation, marked by perfection. The laws of universe are perfect in every respect. The sun is never late in rising, Earth rotates exactly the way it should, and ecological cycle brings seasons in time. It never happens that when you sow wheat grains, rice plants sprout. Each small seed is endowed by nature with the capacity to blossom into a huge tree. Can there be such an intelligent creation without any creator behind it? We may call it God or by any other name. But He exists. That is why all sects have a notion of one God, worshipped as the creator by different names.

Well, even if one believes that God doesn't exist and that the universe was created by chance, there are several

benefits to believing in God. They are not available to those who don't believe in God. The concept of God is that of a protector. If i believe that God always protects me in all situations, it gives to me relief. Devotees always feel that 'my God is always there to protect me, and He will never let me down.' This emotional connection with God is a great psychotherapy. Some studies say that those who believe in God have a better quality of life and live longer.

Fear of God dominates some people's understanding. 'What if God is unhappy with me?' God is not a judgmental authority who decides on reward or retribution. Results are based on the fruits of past karm.

The infinite scientific knowledge

that pervades this universe is an autopilot system in which definite, predictable results are obtained for every action. The karm-karmfal equation is part of this autopilot mechanism. Understanding this mechanism immediately liberates us and makes us secure. We have the freedom to choose: if we make the right choices in life, we are more likely to be happier. Making the right choice is dharm. God doesn't arbitrarily decide *sukh*, *dukkh* of every being.

One may have a question. If the results of our actions are determined by our karm, what role does God play, and how can prayer to God come to our rescue in times of difficulty? A simple answer is that the Divine can forgive one's sins and

Sacredspace



The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Why Should We Not Believe In God?



THE SPEAKING TREE

Feel That Fatigue In Binge-Watching?

New struggles of streaming platforms

Viewers are reportedly switching off sequels to Netflix’s popular series, pointing to struggles that video streaming platforms are having in creating engaging content. It takes a while to make a series, which encourages binge-watching. But the delay causes audience loss. Netflix is reworking its strategy to scatter its winners across quarters. Yet, subscriber growth is tepid. Its troubles are symptomatic of the streaming video industry, which is trying to get its business model right. OTT apps built their impressive subscriber base on people switching from expensive cable TV, but now have to deal with rising fees and user fatigue.

Big-budget original content and overzealous bidding for live sports are squeezing margins. Platforms have multiplied, and subscribers now pay quite a bit to Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+ and Max for shows they seek. Viewers are snacking on shows, cancelling subscriptions immediately afterwards. Ad-supported tiers, smaller libraries of titles and screen restrictions are contributing to audience discomfort. All this plays out on a TV screen that works alongside a smartphone or a laptop as a second screen. Viewer attention wanders during commercial breaks and slow scenes. Streaming video platforms are yet to figure out a way to match engagement levels of social media.

Audience behaviour has changed substantially in favour of short-form, user-generated content on Instagram and, outside India, TikTok. Netflix and its rivals are now having to pit their premium curated libraries against community-driven entertainment. Technology favours algorithmic feeds that push a continuous stream of content to users on social media over catalogues of video streamers. The two platforms are feeding off each other, with social media providing OTT players with discoverability while streaming giants fund original programming from digital creators. There is room for much greater convergence as viewer attention flits between screens. The market for premium programming will grow with improved engagement.

India’s H-1B Edge Needs Compliance

The Trump regime’s focus on suspected fraud in the non-immigrant visa programme for highly skilled, specialised workers and the employment- and skills-based Green Card programme is unsurprising. The programme has been politically polarising since its inception in 1952 (H-1) and its revamp in 1991 (H-1B). JD Vance’s refrain, ‘US jobs for Americans, not foreign fraudsters’, captures the renewed emphasis. Lack of success in Iran — as well as Ukraine — economic costs of the wars, approaching November midterm elections, and the scramble to burnish credentials for Trump’s endorsement and the Republican presidential nomination have all pushed this long-standing flashpoint back to the forefront. Creation of the Task Force to Eliminate Fraud in March, led by Vance, has further sharpened that focus.

Announcement of investigations should prompt Indian firms to review their HR and compliance systems. Indians account for nearly 75% of all H-1B visas issued. So, any allegations will have a disproportionate impact on them. Companies with US operations must ensure that their practices are foolproof. While businesses are on the front line, cross-border mobility of skilled professionals is a vital socioeconomic element of India’s engagement with the US. GoI should consider establishing an oversight mechanism — like the one it has for Gulf-bound workforce recruiters — to ensure that companies sponsoring non-immigrant US work visas adhere to the rules.

Assessments and studies of skilled worker demand project substantial growth through 2033. If India wants to continue to dominate this flow, it must demonstrate compliance. That will not drown out the political rhetoric. But it will keep Indian companies and workers on the right side of the law.



THINK ABOUT IT

Repurposing Orwell’s dystopian warning as a great management tool

Let’s Memory-Hole Our Way to Success

Baday bhai George Orwell coined ‘memory holes’ in his 1949 novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which the totalitarian party maintains pneumatic chutes leading to incinerators that destroy any historical evidence or past statements that contradict current state propaganda. But on any organisational level, one can jolly well master the art of ‘memory-holing’ to erase inconvenient truths. For, selective amnesia can be such a fine lubricant of progress. Yesterday’s failed product launch? Vanished from the press release archive. Today’s ‘new vision’ is unencumbered by ghosts of past blunders. Investors, mercifully, prefer not to dwell on history when the next quarterly promise beckons. A bad quarter is quietly buried, replaced by positive projections. Memory-holing isn’t deception so much as success based on ‘recen-tability’ — people relying on the most recent information, not on earlier ones, no matter how cogent.

It also works on the personal level. Marriages survive because grievances are edited out of the domestic record. Orwell may have intended memory-holing as a warning. But 1984 + 42 yrs later, it’s the go-to tool of resilience. Erase enough to move forward, but not so much that reality itself dissolves. The memory hole is less a dystopian furnace than a pragmatic shredder. One that keeps the machinery that keeps us running, run smoothly.

STATE OF PLAY India needs to act quickly on some geopolitical tailwinds coming its way

Make Hay While Sun Shines



Pranab Dhal Samanta

India seems to be catching some favourable geopolitical winds that it must cash in on at the soonest. The trigger? Shock waves from the first Chinese submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test in the South Pacific last week, winds of change within the Five Eyes (FVEY) — the intelligence-sharing alliance comprising the US, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — and a deeply divided Gulf looking for non-Iran, non-Saudi, non-Türkiye security and economic arrangements.

On July 6, China’s 7,500 km JL-3 nuclear-capable SLBM took a path that flew across Pacific Islands and the Philippines to land in an ocean space within the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) as defined by the 1986 Treaty of Rarotonga. This pact has all five declared nuclear weapons powers, including China, as signatories to a commitment to Australia, New Zealand and 12 Pacific Island countries that they will not test or deploy nuclear weapons in this zone.

China has argued that the missile was not nuclear-tipped and, thus, didn’t violate the treaty. But as both Australia and New Zealand conveyed to Indian authorities during Narendra Modi’s visit last week, to them, the test was an assault on the spirit, principles and purpose of the treaty. On top of that, China had given only 60-90 mins’ notice to Japan, Australia, New Zealand and other countries in the region.

It prepared for two plausible routes — one over Japan, the other across the South China Sea. This kind of muscle flexing is usually associated with the US in the Pacific.



Have the upper hand

With the Trump regime still reticent on China, Australia has moved on its own and signed a defence alliance with Fiji on the principle that an attack on one, will be an attack on the other. The word out is that New Zealand, the first OECD country to sign an FTA with China in 2008, is now seriously considering joining the alliance following the SLBM test.

The shift is not going to be easy. While Australia and New Zealand are economically very dependent on China, Pacific Islands like Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Fiji — over whose territories the missile flew — don’t even have standing armies. They have paramilitary forces dependent on Chinese police aid.

This China threat, coupled with Washington’s reluctance to act, was reason enough for Canberra and Wellington to shift gears with New Delhi. In fact, the first alarm rang with China’s 2024 ICBM test. Now, it’s the SLBM, raising strong sus-

China’s SLBM test, coupled with the US’ reluctance to act, was reason enough for Australia and New Zealand to shift gears with India

picions that an air-to-land ballistic missile test could be next in line.

As for India, it was also around 2023-24 that the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office (Asno) shifted its stance, and indicated willingness to find a way forward on technical issues blocking a uranium supply agree-

ment. Both governments had agreed to this in principle. But Asno’s insistence on a separate bilateral arrangement ‘flagging’ Australian uranium through its entire usage cycle posed a technical problem.

India said it gives a Material Balance Report (MBR) to IAEA for civilian reactors based on the principle of ‘fungibility’, where uranium can be interchanged with that obtained from other sources, but is fully accounted for as per IAEA requirements. Having resisted the Indian line for nearly a decade, Asno finally agreed to the fungibility principle, with an assurance that a copy of the IAEA MBR would be shared. This resulted in this strategic deal during Modi’s visit.

Away from this theatre, India has witnessed a significant shift by Canada. The Mark Carney government is undoing the damage Justin Trudeau, and his pro-Khalistan politics,

did to the relationship. But, more importantly, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police made it clear that it had, so far, found no evidence in its investigations of Indian government involvement in the Hardeep Singh Nijjar killing, pinning it now on organised criminal gangs in Indian prisons.

This distinction has found resonance in the US as well, indicating that a nuanced shift from charging the Indian state with extraterritorial killing was now underway. This is a big shift within FVEY, which had a few years back sought to build these cases as leverage against India.

From a diplomatic standpoint, this eases the path for realigning India’s North American strategic agenda to its original course. This will also rub off positively on India’s efforts at developing the US and Canada as alternate energy sources following the West Asia conflict, besides structuring favourable trade deals.

Similarly, in West Asia, where S Jaishankar conducted a trip at the same time the PM was in the Indo-Pacific, India stood by smaller Gulf countries like the UAE,

Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait as they faced attacks from Iran. While India has opportunities of oil trade with Iran if sanctions are removed, the security and economic agenda is much broader with these Gulf nations looking to chart a course of their own, much like the South Pacific countries.

Now that India has set its eyes on entering UNSC again in 2028-29, this period could well be the crest India was looking to ride after having battled the uncertainties of Chinese aggression, Covid, the Ukraine war, Trump shock and, now, West Asia conflict.

What holds the key for India, though, is not sailing with favourable winds, but to motor these winds to achieve speed and pace in a time that will still be dominated by instability, insecurity and unpredictability.

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Life, as Tennis

ANDRE AGASSI

It’s no accident, I think, that tennis uses the language of life. Advantage, service, fault, break, love, the basic elements of tennis are those of everyday existence, because every match is a life in miniature. Even the structure of tennis, the way the pieces fit inside one another like Russian nesting dolls, mimics the structure of our days. Points become games become sets become tournaments, and it’s all so tightly connected that any point can become the turning point. It reminds me of the way seconds become minutes become hours, and any hour can be our finest. Or darkest. It’s our choice. But if tennis is life, then what follows tennis must be the unknowable void. The thought makes me cold...

...Tennis is the sport in which you talk to yourself. No athletes talk to themselves like tennis players. Pitchers, golfers, goalkeepers, they mutter to themselves, of course, but tennis players talk to themselves — and answer. In the heat of a match, tennis players look like lunatics in a public square, ranting and swearing and conducting Lincoln-Douglas debates with their alter egos. Why? Because tennis is so damned lonely... People sometimes mention the track-and-field runner as a comparably lonely figure, but I have to laugh. At least the runner can feel and smell his opponents. They’re inches away. In tennis, you’re on an island.

Excerpted from ‘Open: An Autobiography’



The Nights are Quiet in Tehran

Shida Bazayr

King of kings they called him, and they said, We rejoice in him, we rejoice in his wife and her beauty; they said, We love this country, and then we said, We love this country. We had to rejoice in his newborn son, for longer than we never would a birth in our own family, his newborn son, in the far-off Palace of Flowers. Our parents had been told that the oil, the Americans, the English, were part and parcel of the same thing, with the Shah, against us. Our parents stopped working, took to the streets, and then went home again; they were afraid of the secret service and

they said nothing more, said nothing against the Shah ever again. Sent us to school and said, We love this country; now you love its schools. His haughty gaze above the teacher’s desk. We learnt what we had to learn, got older, and decided that whatever was written in our schoolbooks, we wanted the opposite. We read Long live the Shah and thought, Death to the Shah... The Shah has gone because he was sick, and the statues have fallen because the people didn’t believe in them.

Translated from German by Ruth Martin

Chat Room

Go Forth and Prosper – @All

‘India’s Prosperity Problem’ by Rathin Roy (Jul 13) offers a compelling argument that economic growth alone does not guarantee prosperity. One completely agrees with the emphasis on inclusive growth. However, the central challenge remains India’s deep income inequality and the unequal distribution of income and opportunity. While public transfers and subsidies provide an important safety net, they cannot by themselves address structural inequities. Prosperity cannot be sustained when a large share of economic gains accrue to a small segment of society while incomes for many remain stagnant. Lasting progress requires quality employment, rising wages and wider access to economic opportunity. Until inequality is addressed meaningfully, the country’s growth story will remain impressive in aggregate but incomplete in its impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. Gaurav Modak Mumbai

Get the Vibes to Guard-Rail AI



Sharda Tikoo

At the crux of vibe coding — an intent-driven software development approach where you use natural language to describe what you want, and an AI handles the generation, testing and updating of the code — lies speed. Describe it, build it, ship it. The tech industry has embraced it with open arms. Developers are writing entire applications with a few lines of instruction. Non-coders are spinning up functional tools without understanding a line of syntax. Founders are compressing months of product development into days. The barrier to building software has never been lower. This is transformative.

But every revolution carries a shadow. Vibe coding is outpacing frameworks designed to keep it safe. This risk is quietly building across organisations and accumulating in gaps between speed and scrutiny. Traditional software development was methodical by design. Code was written, reviewed, challenged and tested before it reached end users. Every

stage was a deliberate checkpoint to ensure it was built responsibly.

Vibe coding compresses — and, in many cases, eliminates — that deliberation. When a team’s primary benchmark becomes functionality, hard questions around security crop up. Does it run and behave as expected? Can it ship, with structural integrity taking the backseat? The result is not failure of intent but of process. Guard rails haven’t been removed. They’ve just not kept pace with the speed at which code is now being produced.

What makes AI-generated code consequential is how much it brings along silently. A prompt for something as routine as a login feature, or data processing module, can result in code that carries third-party dependencies the team never consciously selected, default configurations suited for a test environment but dangerously permissive in production, and logic built for ideal user behaviour that falls apart when users behave otherwise.

No single element appears alarming in isolation. Each decision looks reasonable under pressure. This is precisely how security debt accumulates — through a series of small, well-intentioned choices made in the interest of speed. By the time the problem surfaces, it’s always more costly to fix than it would have been to prevent.



We’ll have to run more tests

Among the least-discussed consequences of AI-generated development is what it does to ownership. When a developer writes every line of code, accountability is traceable. When that code is generated by AI, reviewed briefly and deployed at pace, responsibility recedes and diffuses. The individual who submitted the prompt, the team lead who it signed off, the automated system that produced the output — none of them fully owns what was built. Organisations that can’t answer who’s responsible for what they have shipped will always struggle to respond decisively when coding goes wrong.

Vibe coding does not dismantle the existing security frameworks. It overwhelms them. Review processes, approval workflows and security checks were designed for a specific volume of output at a specific pace. AI has changed all the variables significantly. The infrastructure governing software quality was never built to evaluate

what AI can now generate, and the gap between production speed and review capacity continues to widen. Slowing the adoption of AI-assisted development is neither practical nor strategic. Efficiency gains are real, as is competitive pressure to move quickly. Resistance is not the response. Adaptation is. Issues need to be caught early.

An alert raised *after* deployment is far less valuable than a signal surfaced during development. Guard rails must be automatic. Security cannot depend on every developer remembering every rule while prompting at speed. This is where platforms, not point tools, become important. When code security is integrated into the same place teams already manage risk and tied directly into CI/CD (continuous integration/continuous deployment) workflows, it becomes part of how software is built.

Critically, controls put in place must fit naturally into existing workflows. Security that creates friction gets bypassed. But the one that fits the flow gets adopted. The risk was never AI writing code. It’s organisations deploying code that no one had the opportunity or the framework to secure properly. To win in this era is to build fast and fortify your fences at the same pace.

The writer is country manager, India and SAARC, TrendAI

Big Ideas Boom in Small Towns



S P Chun

In West Bengal, Anupriya Nayak and her friends, all in secondary school, started a pilot project on menstrual health. Three years later, Nayak’s venture, Menstrumate, developed affordable sanitary pads from sugarcane waste and has scaled operations across 10 states and more than 6 countries.

The startup is developing a smart diagnostic pad to enable early detection of sexually transmitted infections (STI), hormonal disorders, such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and cancers through menstrual blood analysis.

Nayak’s story is not an exception. Across India, young innovators are drawing inspiration from challenges they face and transforming them into scalable solutions. For example, Shambhavi Sinha, Arpit Kumar and Abhijeet Kumar, three students from Patna, worked together to solve the problem of arsenic contamination in groundwater. Today, the team operates a water tech startup Navmarg, which focuses on turning

molecular science into deployable infrastructure.

These examples reveal a truth. Proximity to a problem produces a deeper understanding of how solutions need to work seamlessly in real life. For decades, India lived with the assumption that cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Gurugram would remain the only magnets for startup talent, investors and ideas. That assumption is now being challenged.

This shift is reflected in the broader ecosystem. India’s startup ecosystem has expanded from about 300 Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)-recognised entities in 2016 to over 2 lakh by December 2025, making it the world’s third-largest startup ecosystem.

Nearly half of all DPIIT-recognised startups now come from tier-2 and -3 cities across over 670 districts, a remarkable shift from a decade ago when the country’s innovation economy was overwhelmingly concentrated in a handful of metros. Behind these numbers lies a larger story.

For years, talent was distributed across India but access was limited. Mentorship, incubation, institutional validation and industry exposure were limited to a handful of urban centres. What is changing now is not distribution of talent but of opportunity.

Spread of affordable smartphones, digital payments, online learning platforms and high-speed internet has dramatically reduced the disadvantages once associated with smaller towns. Young innovators today can access mentors, investors, technical resources and global markets without relocating to Bengaluru or Gurugram.

The country’s innovation infrastructure has expanded dramatically. Today, India has 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL), engaging more than 11 mn students — and a growing network of incubation centres that are exposing school students, not just university graduates, to innovation at an early age. What is interesting is not just the

quality of ideas that is emerging but their diversity. These are deeply local in origin, yet widely relevant in application. Tata Social Enterprise Challenge, for instance, has attracted ideas spanning rural livelihoods, tribal entrepreneurship and climate resilience in its latest edition. Similarly, Microsoft’s Imagine Cup has seen 5 semi-finalists from India emerge from cities such as Durgapur in West Bengal and Mathura in UP.

Countries that lead in innovation over the coming decades will not simply be the ones that produce the most technology, but the ones that are able to coax ideas from the widest possible talent base. If India gets this equation right, Viksit Bharat 2047 will not be built by a handful of metropolitan clusters. It will be powered by young innovators emerging from thousands of classrooms, workshops and colleges spread across the country.

India’s next innovation race will not be won by producing more engineers alone, but by ensuring that a student in Patna has the same access to mentorship, capital and opportunity as the one in Bengaluru. Geography may have defined India’s first startup wave. It does not have to define the next one.

The writer is corporate VP, Samsung Southwest Asia

Catch a spark

Editor's

TAKE

India finally arrives in the South Pacific

Prime Minister Modi's visit to New Zealand — the first by an Indian Prime Minister in four decades — resets bilateral ties after years of neglect

When Narendra Modi closed the final leg of a nine-day arc that began in Jakarta, in New Zealand, he did so by closing a much longer gap. No Indian Prime Minister had set foot in New Zealand in forty years; only Indira Gandhi in 1968 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1986 had come before him.

That the visit lasted barely a day, bookended by talks with Christopher Luxon and an address to the diaspora at Auckland's Spark Arena, only underlined how overdue it was.

The three-nation itinerary was not incidental. Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand together mark the arc of India's "Act East" outreach into the Indo-Pacific, a region where Delhi has spent a decade playing catch-up to China's economic and naval footprint. In Jakarta, Modi discussed heritage conservation at Prambanan; in Australia, the two countries struck a uranium export deal, feeding India's push towards 100 gigawatts of nuclear capacity by 2047.

New Zealand was the finale, smaller in scale but symbolically significant as the relationship's most underdeveloped corner. The challenges are real and long-standing. Trade talks, first launched in 2010, collapsed in 2015 over India's reluctance to open its dairy sector, to protect its millions of small farmers.

Even the Free Trade Agreement signed this April, ahead of Modi's visit, reflects that caution: bulk infant formula and select re-exports get duty-free access, but butter and cheese—the products New Zealand's dairy industry actually wants to sell—stay largely outside the deal, prompting open disappointment from its dairy lobby.

Separately, the presence of pro-Khalistan groups in New Zealand—including a 2024 referendum push by Sikhs for Justice that drew a formal protest from Delhi—remains a running irritant, echoing the friction that has strained India's ties with Canada. Against these frictions sit sturdier binding factors: a 200,000-strong Indian diaspora, growing convergence on Indo-Pacific maritime security, and a shared wariness of an assertive China across the Pacific. These pulled the two governments towards each other despite the trade impasse, and this visit turned that convergence into tangible outcomes. Modi and Luxon elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership and signed eighteen outcomes, including ten formal agreements: a four-year roadmap for cooperation, a reciprocal logistics support pact between the two navies, a maritime cooperation framework, and a pledge to jointly tackle transnational crime, from drug trafficking to cyber-enabled fraud.

They also set an aspirational target of doubling two-way trade to NZ\$7 billion by 2030. The real test now is follow-through. The FTA still needs ratification and entry into force, and its dairy carve-outs will keep testing New Zealand's patience unless Delhi shows more flexibility over time. And the defence commitments—naval exercises and cyber cooperation—need budgets and calendars behind them, not just communiqués.



BHOPINDER SINGH

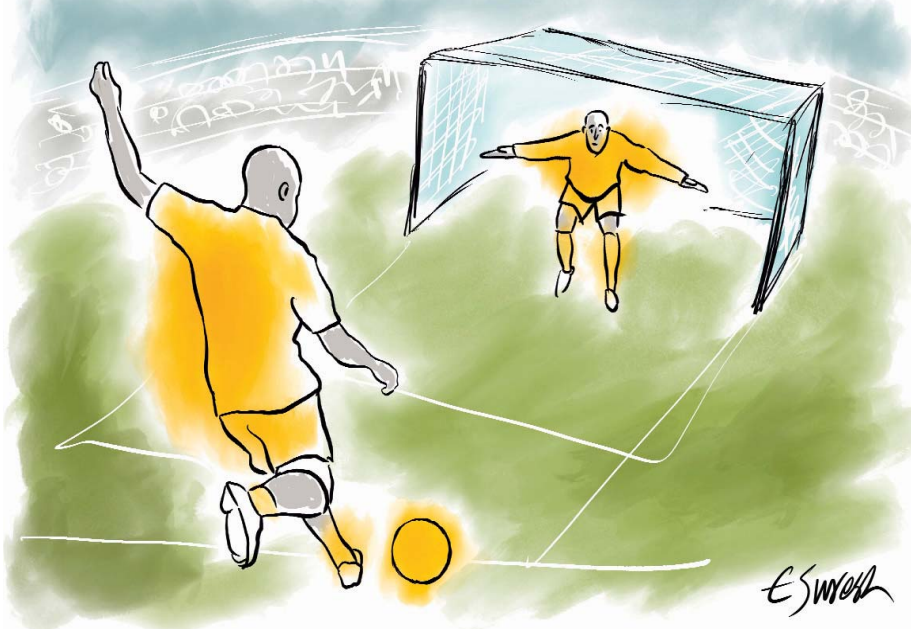
People of Moroccan origin constitute one of the largest immigrant-origin communities in the Netherlands, numbering approximately 450,000. For decades, the Moroccan-Dutch community has been at the centre of debates surrounding integration, identity and social cohesion. Issues such as religious extremism, youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, socio-economic segregation, and concerns about crime among a small minority of young men have received significant media and political attention.

Certain high-profile incidents intensified these debates. The 2004 assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent with Islamist extremist motivations, and the exposure of the Hofstad Network (2002-2005), a jihadist group whose members were involved in extremist activities, became defining moments in Dutch discussions about radicalisation and integration. Although these cases involved a very small number of individuals, they contributed to public anxiety and provided political ammunition for right-wing movements, particularly the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, which has repeatedly argued that the Netherlands faces what it describes as a "Moroccan problem".

One of the most contentious issues arising from these debates has been dual nationality. Dutch law permits dual citizenship in certain circumstances, but nationalist politicians in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe have questioned whether it can create competing loyalties. Their argument is rooted in the belief that citizenship should represent an exclusive commitment to one nation and that full integration requires a primary and unambiguous national identity.

From this perspective, dual nationality may create situations in which individuals face conflicting obligations if the interests of their two countries diverge. Critics argue that, while dual nationals may legally pledge allegiance to the Netherlands, their emotional or cultural attachment may remain divided. They contend that a cohesive nation requires a shared civic identity and that multiple national affiliations may weaken that sense of belonging.

This debate resurfaced during the FIFA World Cup when Morocco defeated the Netherlands in a tense knockout match



THE QUESTION OF DUAL NATIONALITY REFLECTS A BROADER EUROPEAN DEBATE ABOUT BELONGING IN AN ERA OF MIGRATION AND GLOBALISATION

The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry, and a military veteran

decided by a penalty shoot-out. The Moroccan national team, known as the Atlas Lions, has historically included many players from the global Moroccan diaspora. Meanwhile, the Dutch national team has long reflected the multicultural character of Dutch society, with legendary players of immigrant heritage such as Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard, Clarence Seedorf and Patrick Kluivert.

The match highlighted a new dimension of the identity debate. Several members of Morocco's squad were born or raised in the Netherlands, including Noussair Mazraoui and Sofyan Amrabat, while others developed their careers within Dutch football structures. These players had eligibility options but ultimately chose to represent Morocco, the country associated with their family heritage.

There were undoubtedly sporting considerations involved. Morocco had established itself as a highly competitive international team, reaching the latter stages of major tournaments. A player's decision is influenced by many factors, including football opportunities, personal relationships, coaching environments and family connections.

Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of these choices was difficult to ignore. Ismael Saibari, closely associated with Dutch football through PSV Eindhoven, chose Morocco despite eligibility ties to Spain and Belgium. Explaining his decision, he said:

"Playing for Morocco was a choice from the heart." Similarly, Noussair Mazraoui explained that although he had discussions with Dutch coach Ronald Koeman, he had

already decided: "When I spoke with Ronald Koeman, I already had the feeling that I would choose only Morocco and nothing else."

For supporters of a more nationalist view of citizenship, such statements reinforce concerns about divided loyalties. Politicians such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France argue that citizenship should involve a clear and primary allegiance to the nation-state. From this perspective, citizens born or raised in a country choosing to represent another nation because of their ancestral identity raises questions about national belonging.

Supporters of this view contend that a nation functions best when citizens share a strong civic identity. They argue that immigration and naturalisation policies should encourage newcomers and their descendants to develop a deep identification with their adopted country. However, critics argue that sporting representation should not be treated as a direct measure of civic loyalty. They point out that many people maintain multiple identities and that a connection to ancestral heritage does not necessarily diminish commitment to the country where someone lives, works and contributes to society.

The debate became more visible after Morocco's victory, when celebrations took place in several Dutch cities with large Moroccan-origin populations. Many were peaceful expressions of pride, though incidents of disorder and clashes with the police led to criticism and renewed discussion about integration and social cohesion.

Ultimately, the question of dual nationality reflects a broader European debate about belonging in an era of migration and globalisation. The challenge is finding a balance: allowing individuals to maintain their cultural heritage while ensuring a strong shared commitment to the civic values and institutions of the country they call home.

The responsibility rests on both sides. Host societies must create genuine opportunities for inclusion, while immigrant communities and their descendants must engage with and invest in the national identity of the societies in which they live. The future of multicultural democracies may depend on whether multiple identities can coexist alongside a common sense of citizenship.

PIC TALK



An artisan gives the final touches to an idol of Lord Jagannath ahead of the Rath Yatra festival in Nadia, West Bengal.

PHOTO: PTI

The infrastructure we cannot afford to ignore



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

Whenever a new highway, bridge or airport is inaugurated, it becomes a visible symbol of India's progress. Such projects inspire confidence because they represent ambition translated into reality. Yet, there is another kind of infrastructure that rarely attracts headlines, despite determining whether these physical assets ultimately succeed. It cannot be seen, photographed or inaugurated. It is the invisible infrastructure of trust, accountability and institutional integrity.

Every nation invests in roads, railways and power networks because they create economic opportunities and improve quality of life. India has made remarkable strides in this regard over the past decade. However, physical infrastructure alone cannot transform a country into a developed nation. The institutions that maintain these assets,

enforce standards and inspire public confidence are equally important. Without them, even the finest engineering achievements eventually lose their value.

Consider any public service. A modern hospital cannot deliver better outcomes if patients distrust its doctors or administration. Likewise, digital platforms remain underutilised if citizens fear data breaches, and universities cannot strengthen the economy if employers lose confidence in their graduates. Infrastructure functions best when people trust the systems behind it. India has already witnessed the power of invisible infrastructure. The success of Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface and DigiLocker depended not only on technology but also on citizens believing these platforms would make life simpler, safer and more reliable. Trust transformed innovation into mass adoption. The same principle extends to economic growth. Investors seek stable regulatory environments where contracts are honoured and policies remain predictable. Entrepreneurs take calculated risks when institutions uphold fairness. Citizens are more willing to pay taxes when they believe public resources are utilised responsibly. Even disaster management becomes more effective when communities trust official warnings and cooperate with the authorities. In each case, confidence acts as a multiplier that enhances the benefits of every physical investment. As a civil engineer, I have learned that no structure remains durable without a robust maintenance ecosystem. Designing a bridge is only the beginning. Its longevity depends upon quality inspections, transparent

procurement, timely repairs and professional accountability. These invisible processes rarely receive public attention, yet they determine whether infrastructure remains safe and functional for generations. The same principle applies to nation-building itself.

India's aspiration to become a developed country by 2047 therefore demands a broader understanding of infrastructure. Alongside highways, ports and industrial corridors, equal emphasis must be placed on judicial efficiency, ethical governance, administrative competence, quality education and professional standards. These investments may not produce dramatic photographs, but they generate something even more valuable: lasting public confidence.

Invisible infrastructure is not created by governments alone. Every honest public servant, responsible business leader, dedicated teacher and conscientious citizen contributes to an environment where trust flourishes. Development is sustained when institutions and individuals reinforce one another through integrity and accountability. Concrete may connect cities, but trust connects people. India's future will not be defined only by the kilometres of roads it builds or the skylines it transforms. It will ultimately be measured by the strength of the institutions that stand behind those achievements. That invisible infrastructure will decide whether our development remains impressive on paper or truly endures across generations.

The writer, a civil engineer, is a consultant at Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE



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INDIA'S RISING STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN A VOLATILE WORLD

Appropos the front-page report, "JPC endorses One Nation, One Election" (12 July), the proposal deserves serious consideration as a major electoral reform. If implemented, holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies could significantly reduce the enormous expenditure incurred on frequent polls. Estimates suggest that savings to the national exchequer could be substantial, allowing greater public resources to be directed towards development and welfare.

The reform could also benefit political parties, which currently spend considerable time and resources preparing for successive elections across different states. A common electoral cycle may encourage parties to focus on long-term governance, present more meaningful vision documents and forge stronger alliances where

necessary. Smaller parties, too, would have the opportunity to contest elections more strategically instead of engaging in continuous campaign mode.

Frequent elections keep governments in campaign mode, slowing policy decisions and governance at both the Centre and in the states. Simultaneous elections could enhance political stability, improve governance and create a more favourable environment for economic growth and investment.

While constitutional, logistical and federal concerns must be addressed through consensus, the proposal has significant potential. If Parliament enacts the necessary legislation, *One Nation, One Election* could become a major step towards more efficient governance and a stronger democracy.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Sleep is the foundation of good health

Refer 'The Healing Power of Sleep' by Rajyogi Brahma Kumar Nikunj Ji. The article rightly reminds readers that sleep is not wasted time but the body's most vital period of restoration and healing. Modern medical research increasingly confirms what ancient wisdom has long recognised — that quality sleep is indispensable for physical, mental and emotional well-being. The outdated belief that "sleep is for the weak" deserves to be discarded. Longevity expert Bryan Johnson aptly describes sleep as a superpower because no supplement, energy drink or productivity hack can compensate for chronic sleep deprivation. Sleep is second only to oxygen in sustaining human life. During sleep, the brain consolidates memories, strengthens learning, regulates emotions, repairs tissues, balances hormones, boosts immunity and removes harmful metabolic waste. People who consistently enjoy adequate sleep are more productive, make better decisions and are less vulnerable to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and dementia.

Educational institutions must also rethink practices that glorify sleeplessness. Daytime submission deadlines would serve academic objectives without compromising health. Sleep is not a luxury but the very foundation of lifelong health, happiness and productivity.

HARSH PAWARIA | ROHTAK

Strengthening public trust in the police

The controversy surrounding *Satluji*, the recently banned film inspired by the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khaira, has generated widespread debate across Punjab. Despite the restrictions, many people have reportedly viewed the film through digital platforms. While some believe it highlights the alleged excesses committed by the Punjab Police during the militancy years, others argue that it pays inadequate attention to the horrific violence perpetrated by terrorists, resulting in a one-sided portrayal of a deeply painful period in the state's history. Sensitive subjects involving terrorism, human rights and law enforcement deserve balanced treatment, as selective narratives can reopen old wounds and influence public perceptions.

If the authorities found the film objectionable, such concerns should ideally have been addressed during the certification process rather than after its completion and release. The Punjab Police can strengthen public confidence by promoting transparent, accountable and humane policing, expanding community engagement and demonstrating unwavering respect for human rights. A professional police force that enjoys the trust of the people remains the strongest guarantee of peace, justice and lasting social harmony.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A voice that will echo forever

The demise of S Janaki Amma at the age of 88 marks the end of one of the most glorious chapters in Indian film music. For more than six decades, her extraordinary voice became the emotional heartbeat of millions, captivating listeners across generations with its remarkable range, versatility and expressive depth.

Whether rendering intricate classical compositions such as Singara Velane Deva, lively folk songs, playful comic numbers or even singing convincingly in a child's voice, she displayed a rare mastery that few singers have ever matched.

Her greatness lay not only in her vocal brilliance but also in her ability to transcend linguistic boundaries. Singing flawlessly in 18 languages, she became a beloved cultural icon across South India and beyond.

By declining the Padma Bhushan, believing the honour had come too late, she made a principled statement without diminishing her immense stature. She required no official recognition; the enduring love of her countless admirers had already crowned her. Though her voice has fallen silent, her immortal songs will continue to inspire generations.

S PADMANABHAN | KOCHI

Five water stories from Dhanbad that can shape Jharkhand’s water future

As climate change makes rainfall more erratic and water increasingly uncertain, Jharkhand’s next generation of water governance must move beyond delivering water schemes to securing water systems



EKLAVYA PRASAD

Dhanbad is rarely associated with water. It is known as India’s coal capital, a landscape of mines, industries and expanding urban settlements. Yet, beneath this industrial identity lies another Dhanbad, one where aquifers sustain millions, ponds continue to recharge groundwater, streams silently carry the burden of urbanisation, and communities negotiate water every single day.

Over the past several years, my work with Megh Pyne Abhiyan (MPA) across rural and urban Dhanbad has convinced me that the district is much more than a mining region. It is a microcosm of Jharkhand’s water realities. The challenges that emerge here—groundwater depletion, contamination, urban flooding, disappearing recharge spaces and climate uncertainty—mirror those confronting the rest of the State. At the same time, Dhanbad has also become a testing ground for innovative solutions. Five stories from the district offer valuable lessons for reimagining water governance in Jharkhand.

The first story comes from rural Dhanbad. Across the blocks of Baliapur, Tundi and Purbi (East) Tundi, covering seven gram panchayats and thirteen villages, MPA’s groundwater assessment found what villagers had always known: groundwater is the backbone of everyday life. It supports drinking water, household needs and agriculture. More importantly, the assessment revealed that local communities possess an intimate understanding of their aquifers. They know when hand pumps begin to fail, which ponds once recharged wells, how mining has altered drainage, and how rainfall has become increasingly unpredictable.

What was striking was that villagers did not merely describe problems. They proposed solutions. Rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge, the revival of traditional ponds, improved irrigation and safe drinking water emerged as their priorities. Their responses remind us that groundwater governance cannot depend solely on engineering designs and hydrogeological maps. It must also recognise local knowledge as a valuable planning resource. Communities are not passive beneficiaries; they are indispensable partners in water management.

A very different story unfolds in Bartand, Dhanbad, inside my mother’s home, called Uttarayan. Since 2018, this residence has quietly become a living laboratory for understanding groundwater. Rainfall has been measured every day, rainwater harvesting carefully documented, and groundwater levels in a dug well systematically monitored. During this period, nearly 5.8 million litres of rainwater have been harvested to recharge the shallow aquifer, while seasonal groundwater fluctuations have improved by almost eleven feet between May 2018 and May 2026.

The significance of Uttarayan extends far beyond one household. It demonstrates that water consciousness begins with measurement, not assumptions. When people measure rainfall, monitor groundwater and observe recharge, conservation becomes evidence-based rather than symbolic. Imagine if every school, college, government office and public institution in Jharkhand became a similar water observatory. Such citizen-generated datasets would not only deepen scientific understanding but also strengthen the Government’s Catch the Rain campaign through informed public participation.

The third story shifts from one home to an entire city. It began with an inspiring initiative called the Gang of Twenty, a group of students from Carmel School, Dhanbad, who started engaging with local water issues. Their enthusiasm sparked wider conversations about groundwater and eventually contributed to Dhanbad being selected as one of the pilot cities under the National Institute of Urban Affairs’ Shallow Aquifer Management (SAM) programme. Implemented by the Dhanbad Municipal Corporation in partnership with MPA, and mentored by Dr Himanshu Kulkarni of ACWADAM, Pune, and S Vishwanath of Biome Environmental Trust, Bengaluru, the initiative marked an important shift in urban water planning.

Instead of viewing groundwater as an invisible reserve beneath the city, the pilot treated the shallow aquifer as an asset that could be mapped, monitored,



protected and recharged. Recharge interventions and groundwater monitoring were undertaken at Jeevan Jyoti School and Bera Colony in Dhanbad Circle, Bhagatdih and Neeche Mohalla in Jharia Circle, and Laxmi Colony in Sindri Circle. Subsequent monitoring showed encouraging improvements, with groundwater remaining available for longer periods during the summer months. The experience demonstrates that even rapidly growing mining cities can improve groundwater security when urban planning begins with the shallow aquifer rather than ending with pipelines.

Urban groundwater, however, cannot be protected without addressing sanitation. This is perhaps one of Dhanbad’s most important lessons. In the absence of underground sewerage systems, drains, streams and rivers frequently become carriers of sewage. Stormwater drains meant to convey rainwater gradually turn into wastewater channels, contaminating surface water and threatening groundwater quality.

The lesson is straightforward but often ignored. Water supply, drainage, sanitation, rivers and groundwater cannot be planned separately. Healthy drains, streams and wetlands are not vacant land waiting for development. They are essential urban infrastructure that supports recharge, reduces flooding and protects public health. Sustainable cities will emerge only when sanitation and groundwater are planned together.

The final story takes us back to rural Dhanbad, where the challenge is not water availability but water safety. In Gharbar Panchayat of Baliapur Block, studies conducted by MPA in collaboration with the School of Environmental Studies, Jadavpur University, found widespread fluoride contamination in groundwater. In several habitations, more than half of the drinking water sources exceeded the permissible fluoride limits. Significantly, this situation persisted even after piped water supply had reached many villages because people continued to depend on groundwater for convenience, reliability and everyday needs.

This experience reminds us that water security cannot be judged simply by counting household tap connections. Safe drinking water depends equally on water quality, continuous monitoring and informed community behaviour. Addressing fluorosis requires an integrated approach involving hydrogeological investigations, groundwater quality surveillance, safe alternative water sources, rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge, nutrition, public awareness and institutional convergence. There is no single technological fix.

Taken together, these five stories point towards a larger shift that Jharkhand must embrace. Groundwater remains the invisible foundation of water security across rural and urban landscapes. Traditional ponds, dug wells, wetlands and drainage channels are not relics of the past but living ecological infrastructure. Water challenges differ from one landscape to another, making hydrogeology and local context central to planning. Most importantly, water quantity, water quality, sanitation, climate resilience and community participation are inseparable.

Dhanbad therefore offers Jharkhand something far more valuable than isolated stories. It provides evidence that a different model of water governance is possible, one that begins with understanding aquifers, respects community knowledge, encourages citizen science, integrates institutions and protects the ecological systems on which all water security ultimately depends. As climate change makes rainfall more erratic and water increasingly uncertain, Jharkhand’s next generation of water governance must move beyond delivering water schemes to securing water systems. If these lessons from Dhanbad are scaled thoughtfully, they can help build a State that is not merely water-supplied, but truly water-secure.

The writer is the Managing Trustee of Megh Pyne Abhiyan

The notion India needs to be Viksit Bharat



AMITABH RANJAN

India stands at a historic inflection point. It is the world’s fastest-growing major economy, a digital innovation leader, and a geopolitical force of increasing consequence. Yet the journey from a rising power to a truly developed nation cannot be measured through GDP figures or infrastructure statistics alone. The defining question is: what guiding principle will sustain India’s transformation into a Viksit Bharat by 2047? The answer lies in a simple but profound idea: Rashtra Pratham — Nation First.

Rashtra Pratham is not a slogan. It is a governing philosophy that places the long-term interests of the nation above sectional, political, institutional and personal considerations. Every successful nation in modern history—post-war Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Germany—achieved development only when governments, businesses and citizens aligned around a shared civilisational purpose. India’s ambition requires no less: a national consensus that transcends electoral cycles, ideological divisions and short-term interests.

Beyond economics: The character question

Development is not merely an economic phenomenon. A developed nation emerges when excellence becomes the norm rather than the exception. India has excelled in technology, medicine, entrepreneurship and public administration—yet the translation of individual excellence into institutional excellence has remained elusive. The challenge has never been the absence of talent; it has been the absence of a culture that consistently places national and institutional interests above narrow personal gains.

The consequences are visible across sectors. Bureaucratic inertia delays nationally important projects. Political polarisation obstructs reforms whose benefits transcend party lines. Academic institutions remain constrained by administrative rigidity. Corporate R&D investment stays below potential. Citizens demand better public services while overlooking civic responsibilities. In each case, the underlying challenge is not capability but orientation. A Rashtra Pratham mindset asks one consistent question: What serves the long-term interests of the nation?

Three arenas for Nation-First action

Consider innovation. India aspires to become a technological leader, with impressive achievements in space, digital infrastructure and pharmaceuticals. Yet national R&D expenditure remains well below that of leading innovation economies. Private capital gravitates towards low-risk investments; universities remain disconnected from industry; and regulation inadvertently discourages experimentation. A Rashtra Pratham approach would reframe innovation not as a commercial activity but as a national imperative, rewarding risk, strengthening academia-industry collaboration, and recognising scientific excellence as a patriotic contribution to nation-building. The same principle applies to governance. India’s administrative institutions have been the backbone of democratic continuity, but a twenty-first-century economy demands greater agility, transparency and outcome orientation. Administrative reforms must be understood not as an internal bureaucratic exercise but as a national priority. When governance improves, its benefits ripple across every sector—business, education, healthcare and social welfare alike.

Corporate India must equally recognise that wealth creation and nation-building are complementary, not competing, objectives. India’s entrepreneurs have built globally respected companies and a thriving start-up ecosystem. However, nations become developed not simply by borrowing technology but by creating it. The ensuing phase of development calls for wholehearted commitment to advanced manufacturing, deep-tech and long-term capital creation. Corporate India has the wherewithal to drive this transformation. It may appear difficult, but choosing to do so would be among the most meaningful expressions of Rashtra Pratham.

Citizens as nation-builders

No national transformation can succeed without people’s active participation and contribution. A developed nation is built by millions of everyday decisions made by ordinary people: respecting public spaces, following rules, paying taxes honestly, recognising merit, conserving resources and participating constructively in civic life. The difference between developed and developing societies more often lies in civic culture than in government policies. Viksit Bharat, therefore, demands not only institutional reforms but also a paradigm shift in civic consciousness.

There is also a deeper civilisational dimension here. India is not merely a modern nation-state; it is one of the world’s oldest continuing civilisations. Concepts such as Lokasangraha (welfare of society), Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah (well-being of all) and Yogakshema (collective prosperity) highlight the idea that the flourishing of an individual cannot be viewed separately from the development of society as a whole. Rashtra Pratham is therefore not a borrowed political doctrine but a contemporary expression of the civilisational ethic that has long shaped India’s global perspective.

Purpose over potential

India is sitting on unprecedented opportunities. Demographic strength, technological capability, entrepreneurial energy and cultural confidence have created conditions previous generations could hardly have imagined. Yet history is replete with nations that possessed immense potential but failed to fulfil it because collective purpose yielded to fragmented interests. The countries that succeeded were those that cultivated a shared commitment to national advancement. The journey to Viksit Bharat will not be completed by government schemes alone, nor by economic growth in isolation. It will be achieved only when every institution and every citizen internalises one conviction: that the nation’s long-term interests must remain paramount. That is the essence of Rashtra Pratham.

And the most enduring lesson of development is that nations become great not when they merely dream of prosperity but when they organise themselves around a purpose larger than themselves. For India, that purpose is clear: Rashtra Pratham — Nation First.



The writer is an alumnus of NESa, Washington, DC, and Vice Chairman, PanIT Alumni India. He is associated with the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi, as Registrar

AI and the vanishing first job: India’s emerging mobility challenge



RAVI POKHARNA

per cent of current work activities in the US, primarily within white-collar sectors, could be automated by 2030. Analysis by Anthropic (2026) and Stanford University (Brynjolfsson, Chandar and Chen; 2025) found that while AI-exposed occupations, such as computer programmers and customer service representatives, have not yet experienced significant rises in unemployment, hiring for younger workers in these roles has slowed measurably. This signals an important shift: firms are not eliminating jobs at scale, but they are reducing hiring at entry level. The layoffs may not come, but the offer letters may come more slowly.

The jobs are safe, the ladder is not

At first glance, India appears relatively insulated. Forty-three per cent of the workforce remains in agriculture, with large shares in construction (12 per cent), retail and transport (18 per cent)—sectors where physical presence and human judgement remain indispensable (PLFS, 2025). AI will not pour

concrete, repair a power line or manage a kirana counter anytime soon.

But India’s growth story has not been driven by these sectors alone. It has been powered by the steady expansion of formal services: IT-BPM, customer support, finance operations, analytics and the growing ecosystem of Global Capability Centres (GCCs). These sectors have historically functioned as engines of aspirational mobility, absorbing educated youth into formal employment. Yet these are precisely the domains where AI is now performing core tasks: writing code, handling customer interactions, processing data and managing workflows. The risk, therefore, is not where India is today, but where it is trying to go.

The most consequential shift is unfolding at the bottom of the pyramid. Entry-level roles in IT services, BPMs and analytics have traditionally operated as training pipelines. Firms hired fresh graduates with low initial productivity, invested in structured training, and scaled them into higher-value roles over time. AI is compressing this model. With AI assistants enabling developers to work faster and autonomous agents resolving most routine customer interactions, firms now require fewer entry-level workers to produce the same output. The result is not mass layoffs, but a structural decline in fresher hiring. In a country where 8-10 million individuals enter the workforce annually (World Bank, ILO), this is a systemic challenge.

Why this matters more for India

India’s youth labour market was already fragile before the AI transition. The graduate unemploy-



ment rate of 11.2 per cent is more than three times the overall unemployment rate of 3.1 per cent (PLFS, 2025). More than 45 per cent of employed graduates are overqualified for their roles (CMIE, India Skills Report 2025). Entry-level wages in IT-BPM have stagnated for over a decade, with starting salaries in the ₹3.5-4.5 lakh per annum range (TeamLease, 2024-25). AI risks amplifying all three trends: fewer formal-sector entry points, higher skill thresholds for hiring, and slower and more unequal wage progression. The first job is more than employment; it is an economic bridge. It shapes income trajectories, household aspirations and urban mobility. When that bridge narrows, the effects ripple across the economy. This is not a conventional jobs crisis; it is a mobility crisis.

A familiar technological moment

The advent of AI today is comparable to the arrival of computers in the late 20th century. Computers did not eliminate work; they transformed it. Every sector, every business and every activity

became computer-powered. Productivity surged, new industries emerged, and those who adapted gained disproportionately. India seized that moment. Tech services companies, in particular, helped position India as a global IT powerhouse. That wave created millions of jobs and gave India a competitive advantage in the global economy.

AI presents a similar inflection point, creating opportunities for India’s next generation of technology leaders to build for the world. But while AI opens new frontiers, it is also narrowing the entry ramp. For policymakers, the priority should be to incentivise entry-level hiring through apprenticeship-style schemes, tax credits or wage subsidies for firms hiring fresh graduates, while expanding the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) into white-collar sectors as part of a national “first job” guarantee.

Skilling policy must shift from degrees to task-level capability, moving beyond generic coding or AI literacy towards skills that complement AI (for example, problem framing, client management and domain expertise). Job creation must be accelerated in less AI-exposed, labour-intensive sectors such as healthcare, tourism, logistics and the green economy to absorb surplus educated labour. Finally, India needs a real-time labour market observatory that tracks hiring trends, wage movements and occupational demand. In addition to macroeconomic indicators such as the PLFS, high-frequency labour market intelligence is required. For businesses, the imperative is adaptation, not contraction. Firms should redesign entry-level roles by breaking jobs into AI-assist-

ed and human-critical components while retaining structured junior positions focused on judgement, coordination and client-facing tasks. This must be accompanied by institutionalising “AI + human” workflows, where employees are trained not just to use AI tools but also to supervise, validate and integrate them.

AI productivity gains must also be measured responsibly, avoiding their use purely as a cost-cutting lever and instead tracking whether adoption is strengthening or eroding organisational capabilities. Finally, deeper partnerships with academia are essential, including co-designing curricula, offering live projects and enabling early exposure to AI-integrated industry workflows.

AI is not eliminating work yet, but it is reshaping who gets access to it. The evidence from advanced economies offers India a narrow but valuable window. This disruption is not sudden; it is gradual, and it begins at the bottom of the ladder. By getting ahead of this curve through proactive policy, business adaptation and bold entrepreneurship, India can ensure AI augments its demographic dividend rather than renders it obsolete. The lesson from the IT revolution is clear: technological shifts reward early movers. This is the moment for the new-age Narayana Murthys to build the next generation of AI enterprises that serve the world while creating new career pathways for millions of jobseekers.

The writer is Executive Director, Pahle India Foundation. The article includes inputs from Kuntala Karkun, Senior Visiting Fellow, Pahle India Foundation

DECCAN
Chronicle

14 JULY 2026

Need for J&K statehood is vital; don't lose focus

Stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its statehood, along with hollowing out Article 370 of the Constitution, was an act of sleight of hand by the NDA government at the Centre. The BJP may claim justification for doing away with the constitutional link that had bound the Indian nation to the state of Jammu and Kashmir because it had long been part of the agenda the party placed before the people of the country; but to strip a state of its basic status to achieve a political end was a deception played on the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the people of India and the Constitution itself.

Article 1 of the Constitution is not only the foundation of that document but also the cornerstone of the entire array of principles this nation is founded on. It states in no uncertain terms that 'India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States'. The framers of the Constitution had no doubt in their minds that the very idea of India is founded on federal principles and that the states are its foundational units. There are indeed provisions to make and unmake states as the country moves forward so that the interests of the people are better served.

The boundaries and even the names of the 28 states classified into four categories that existed when the Constitution came in force in 1950 have been changed several times. The changes, however, were made to reflect the aspirations of the people. In fact, the Constitution was mindful of placing popular demand above the opinion of the state legislature in that Parliament was empowered to carve out new states without the consent of the existing state legislature, evidently taking into account possible resistance to division.

Every single principle of the Constitution and every constitutional propriety was violated when Jammu and Kashmir was bifurcated into two Union Territories in 2019. The move was followed by an assurance by the nation's leadership, through the voices of the Prime Minister and the Union home minister, that its statehood would be restored in the near future. The government gave the impression that elections to the state Assembly would be the marker: once an elected government came to power, statehood would be restored. However, it was not to be.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah was at his diplomatic best over the past two years when he chose not to adopt a confrontational course with the Union government on the question; he counselled patience even among his own party colleagues believing that the Union government would fulfil its promise to the state and to the nation. He has now called for a march to the national capital on July 20 to press for the demand.

The BJP's response to the call, and to the demand itself for statehood has been one of obstinacy and arrogance. Instead of addressing the issue the Chief Minister has raised, the party is now offering excuses for not walking the talk. The party knows fully well that such a response will an equally shrill response from the other side, which will offer the saffron party a further excuse to delay the decision. It would be advisable for Mr Abdullah to stay the course instead of allowing attention to be diverted from his genuine demand.

The BJP would also do well to remember that history has not been very kind to the dispensations that sought to impose their writ on this country through skulduggery and arrogance; respecting democratic norms and acquiescing in the people's wishes are in order instead.

Resilience wins at Wimbledon

It is said of great players that they find the way to victory, which is exactly what Jannik Sinner did in retaining his title at Wimbledon. Having dealt with an almighty scare in the first round from the virtually unknown Miomir Keckmanovic, who took him to five sets, the Italian became the first man in 48 years to survive and win the cup at London's SW19.

Resilience has been the remarkable quality in Sinner's journey to a fifth Grand Slam in the final of which he did not have to face his fiercest competitor in recent slams in the young Alcaraz who is yet to recover from injury. The German Alexander Zverev has stepped up in Alcaraz's absence, winning a maiden grand slam in the French Open and jousting with world No. 1 Sinner.

In a final that was developing into a typical Wimbledon classic of strapping athletes backing a booming service with precision in the first two sets that went into tiebreakers, Sinner just about got the better of Zverev. In one remarkable point he fell but regained his balance to keep the ball in play and find the winner to ultimately prevail in the second set tiebreaker.

Sinner had already hit a high before the final in demolishing the all-time great Novak Djokovic in straight sets without giving him an inkling of a chance. Ironically, Zverev too had fallen heavily on the wearing grass and wasn't the same again after his opponent had sportingly given him a helping hand to get up. Wrapping up matches by wearing down opponents with precision backing perseverance in sticking to percentage play is Sinner's speciality. There were colourful stories on the distaff side too with two Czech players coming through a quality women's field in which the top 20 players seem equally capable of beating each other. It was the young Linda Novoska who took the shield from British royalty soon after she won a battle against her own nerves. At 6-2, 5-2, she was on the verge of a historic win over Karolina Muchova when the very thought of victory seemed to consume the 21-year-old.

Resilience was the much-needed quality there too as Novoska clawed back to save three break points in the first game of the final set and didn't look back as she let her powerful serves take over again before joining a long list of Czech champions beginning with the incomparable 9-time Wimbledon winner Martina Navratilova, who was present to watch her fellow Czechs in the three-set final.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

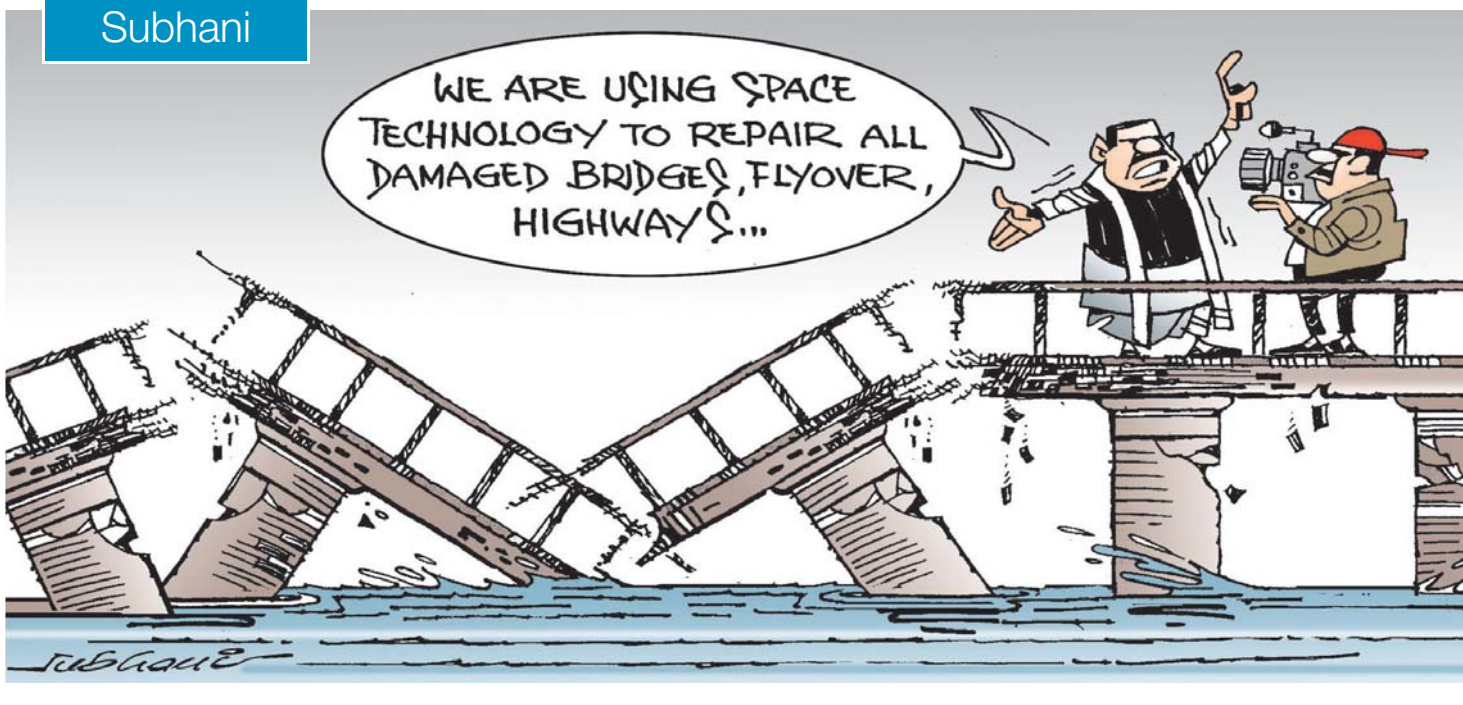
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Subhani



Beyond mangoes: Tackle Dhaka's swing to Beijing



Wasbir Hussain

Does it change India's security calculus? The answer is yes. The Northeast is no longer India's distant frontier or its periphery.

Diplomacy has its symbols. And Bangladesh has once again chosen mangoes. In recent weeks, Dhaka has dispatched crates of its celebrated fruit to Indian leaders, reviving the tradition of "mango diplomacy" that seeks to project warmth between the two neighbours. Such gestures are welcome as they keep the communication channels alive and soften political edges.

But statecraft cannot be guided by the sweetness of mangoes.

For even as Dhaka extends symbolic goodwill towards India, it is quietly moving closer to China. During Prime Minister Tariq Rahman's recent visit to Beijing, discussions with President Xi Jinping included the proposal for a China-Bangladesh-Myanmar Economic Corridor — a project that, if realised, would carry consequences extending far beyond trade. For India, and especially for the Northeast, it should set off strategic alarm bells.

This is not about Bangladesh having friendly relations with China. Every sovereign nation has the right to pursue multiple partnerships. Nor is it about opposing infrastructure or economic development. The issue is that China rarely invests without a strategic target.

From Pakistan's Gwadar Port to Sri Lanka's Hambantota, from Cambodia to the Indian Ocean, Beijing has demonstrated that economic corridors are not merely commercial ventures. They create political leverage, deepen dependence and gradually expand China's strategic influence.

A China-Bangladesh-Myanmar corridor would stretch from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal, passing through one of Asia's most volatile regions. It would bring Chinese influence closer to India's vulnerable eastern frontier while strengthening Beijing's presence around the Bay of Bengal.

Does it change India's security calculus? The answer is yes. The Northeast is no longer India's distant frontier or its periphery. It is central to New Delhi's "Act East" policy,

politically explosive for decades. Border management is non-negotiable, but diplomacy is equally important. The manner in which deportations are carried out matters as much as the decision itself. If Bangladesh feels publicly embarrassed or politically cornered, anti-India sentiment becomes easier to mobilise. That is precisely the environment in which China thrives.

Beijing does not need to weaken India militarily if it can gradually weaken India's political influence among its neighbours. India's response, therefore, must avoid two extremes. The first is complacency — the belief that Bangladesh will always remain India's closest partner because of geography and history.

The second is panic — the assumption that every Chinese investment automatically represents a strategic defeat. Neither approach serves India's interests. Instead, New Delhi needs a strategy built on confidence rather than insecurity.

First, India must accelerate connectivity projects that directly benefit Bangladesh as well as the Northeast. Delayed infrastructure weakens credibility. Faster delivery strengthens partnerships.

Second, India should deepen economic integration beyond government agreements. Greater private investment, manufacturing partnerships, power trade and digital cooperation create long-term interdependence that no outside power can easily replace.

Besides, New Delhi should address Dhaka's economic vulnerabilities by expanding preferential market access and resolving non-tariff barriers. This can give Dhaka immediate benefits by boosting its export capacity and foreign exchange reserves.

Third, New Delhi should institutionalise security dialogue with Dhaka specifically on developments in Myanmar. The instability west of the Chindwin River affects both countries. Intelligence sharing, coordinated border management and joint monitoring of transnational crime should become routine rather than

episodic. India must also closely monitor Chinese investments in sensitive infrastructure along its borders as well as the Bay of Bengal, ensuring that local security interests are safeguarded through proactive diplomatic engagement with Dhaka.

Fourth, India must avoid reducing Bangladesh policy to domestic electoral politics. Migration may be a legitimate political issue inside India, but bilateral relations cannot become collateral damage in state-level political contests. Strong borders and strong diplomacy are not mutually exclusive.

Most importantly, India should stop assuming that goodwill accumulated over the past decade is permanent. Much of the remarkable improvement in India-Bangladesh relations rested on exceptional political trust. That era has changed. New leaders bring new priorities, new calculations and new external partnerships.

The relationship must now be sustained by institutions, economics and shared strategic interests — not merely political chemistry. Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman had chosen Malaysia as the destination for his first official visit after assuming charge, followed by a visit to China. Will India be his next port of call? That's the big question.

Bangladesh remains indispensable to India's Northeast. It offers the shortest access to the sea, the most practical transport routes and enormous economic opportunities. Equally, India remains Bangladesh's largest neighbour, a major trading partner, an energy supplier and an indispensable security partner.

Neither country benefits from strategic estrangement. That is why New Delhi must engage Bangladesh with confidence, not complacency; with firmness, not hostility; and with realism, not nostalgia. Mango diplomacy has its place. It reminds neighbours of shared history and a common culture. But the real test of diplomacy lies elsewhere. While mangoes occupy the headlines, Beijing is quietly shaping the map. India cannot afford to focus on the fruit while ignoring the corridor.

Wasbir Hussain, author and political commentator, is editor-in-chief of *Northeast Live*, *Northeast India's only satellite English and Hindi news channel*. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS

RAM TEMPLE

The foremost question that remains in the public mind is why the alleged theft of temple donations has not been addressed at its root (*No role for govt in Ram temple CEO, July 13*). . So far, the only visible action has been the reported arrest of eight lower-level individuals, reportedly without an FIR. The priority should be to identify and apprehend all those responsible, including anyone who benefited from the alleged theft, frame appropriate charges, and initiate legal proceedings.

Buddha Jagdish Rao
Visakhapatnam

TREMORS IN VIZAG

The mild tremors that shook Visakhapatnam early on Sunday morning caused concern among residents (*Tremors rattle Vizag nearly areas, July 13*). While the exact cause requires scientific investigation, the incident highlights the need to examine environmental factors affecting the city. Over the past decade, rapid population growth and large-scale residential and industrial development have led to excessive extraction of groundwater. At the same time, much of the rainwater flows into the sea instead of being conserved through lakes, canals, or reservoirs. The government should prioritise rainwater harvesting and restore or create new lakes by reclaiming encroached water bodies wherever legally feasible.

D. Ravi Kumar
Visakhapatnam

DOCTORS' ANGST

There was a palpable angst for the APJUDA towards the government proposal to extend the retirement age of professors from the existing 63 to 65 or 70 years due to shortage at the top of teaching faculty (*Fill vacant posts , not extend service: Doctors, July 13*). The problem cannot be solved by postponing the filling up of vacant posts at junior level of assistant professors and several eligible staff will be denied professorship by several years with seniors sticking to their chairs due to new proposals, if materialises. With a huge backlog of unemployed qualified doctors waiting in the wings for a just beginning, the proposal to crown old seniors will lead to heartburn and frustration. In the present scenario, it will be better to drop the idea and take up filling of vacancies with the available qualified doctors.

Parthasarathy Mandadi
Tirupati

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Aakar Patel



Of NRC & SIR: How governments' use of arbitrary powers put citizens in a fix

One common trait in lawless nations is the high levels of anxiety against arbitrariness. Medieval texts tell us this has always been the case in our parts. Cruelty is couched as process and millions put through torture. Special Intensive Revision forms are being handed out across India. It is impossible on a first reading of this form, no matter how educated the reader, to understand what one is required to do, even though it is a single page.

We are told by the executive and the judiciary that putting us through this is not only reasonable but required and necessary. Of course, we have been down this road before.

In 1998, the Governor of Assam, a retired military man named Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha (Retd) sent a note to then President K.R. Narayanan where he referred to the situation in alarming language: "Large-scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this state. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. Successive governments at the Centre and in the state

have not adequately met this challenge."

Gen. Sinha demanded action "to avert the grave danger that has been building up for some time ... If not effectively checked, (Bangladeshis) may swamp the Assamese people and may sever the Northeast land mass from the rest of India. This will lead to disastrous strategic and economic results."

Gen. Sinha acknowledged he was not basing this assessment on any data. He added: "Unfortunately, today we have no Census report on the basis of which we can accurately define the contours of trans-border movement. Thus, we have to rely on broad estimates of theatrical extrapolations to work out the dimension of illegal migration that has taken place from East Pakistan/Bangladesh." In short, he had no evidence to prove this theory but he felt strongly enough about it just the same to raise it with the President officially.

In 2005, Sarbananda Sonowal, who later became the BJP Chief Minister of Assam, went to the Supreme Court to make the laws governing the identification of individuals suspected to be foreigners harsher. The Supreme Court leaned on S.K. Sinha's speculative note in this case to conclude that Assam was facing "external aggression", which threatened a constitutional breakdown.

The foreigners' tribunals which would determine whether someone should be set free or sent to a jail, were staffed by people given four days of training. They were advocates and retired civil servants hired on two-year contracts. It was before such people that the individuals would have to present their case. The Assam government run by the BJP told the tribunal members what it wanted them to do by not extending the contracts of those who had a low rate of declaring individuals as foreigners.

Individuals who had marked fewer than 10 per cent of the total number of people coming to their tribunal as being foreigners were deemed to be "not satisfactory" and shown to be "terminated". The state government was effectively incentivising its tribunal officers to mark more people as foreigners, and punishing those officers who were not doing so. Such injustice did not receive nationwide, much less global, notice and the matter was limited to the Assamese media.

The crisis snowballed when an Assamese, Ranjan Gogoi, was appointed as the Chief Justice of India. The state, which was then under BJP rule, drew up a first list, excluding over 40 lakh people and then a final list

of those who it was satisfied met the criteria that it laid out. This was the so-called National Register of Citizens.

The list excluded 19 lakh people from it who would now have to line up before the foreigners' tribunals with their papers and prove their citizenship. The majority of these 19 lakh people turned out to be Hindus. This was unexpected because the BJP had believed its own narrative and Gen. Sinha's theory of a state overwhelmed by illegal immigrants, when there was no evidence to show this was the case.

The BJP then decided to scrap the Assamese NRC that it had forced India to spend so much resources and effort on, and forced Indians to spend much resource and effort on. We are now again upon a similar exercise, this time nationwide. Reports of entitlement benefits being scrapped, passports being denied and forms being too confusing have begun coming in. The population is gripped by anxiety against arbitrariness and the cruelty of a state that markets its actions as minimum government.

The writer is the chair of *Amnesty International India*.
Twitter: @aakar_patel

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	77,616.40	0.06
Nifty 50	24,211.00	0.02
S&P 500*	7,542.06	-0.44
Dollar (₹)	95.62	0.30
Pound Sterling (₹)	128.05	0.17
Euro (₹)	109.31	0.34
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	140,949	2.529
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	79.19	4.18
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.733	0.25
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.591	0.022

Bajaj Consumer Q1 net profit surges 84%

Bajaj Consumer Care on Monday reported an 84 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to ₹70.75 crore in the first quarter of FY27 on strong revenue growth. The company posted a net profit of ₹38.28 crore in the first quarter of the last fiscal, the company said in a regulatory filing. Its consolidated total revenue from operations in the first quarter stood at ₹341.57 crore against ₹273.39 crore, it added.



SBI MF targets institutional fund biz growth: MD

SBI Mutual Fund, which aims to mobilise close to ₹10,000 crore via its upcoming IPO, on Monday said it will focus on expanding its institutional fund management business. SBI Mutual Fund provides Portfolio Management Services (PMS) and Alternate Investment Fund (AIF) under the institutional fund management business. The company is going to build more capability and is contemplating a special situation fund, CEO Debasish Mishra said.

Siemens bags ₹263-cr order for rail electrification

Siemens on Monday said it has bagged an order worth ₹263 crore from Rail Vikas Nigam (RVNL) for overhead rail electrification technologies for the Rishikesh-Karnaprayag rail line project in Uttarakhand. The scope of the project includes rigid overhead catenary systems (ROCS) and flexible overhead catenary systems (FOCS) across tunnels, bridges, open routes, yards and associated infrastructure.

Avaada Electro launches 3 GW solar cell line

Avaada Electro on Monday announced the operationalisation of a 3 GW solar cell production line at its manufacturing facility in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The line is part of the company's 6 GW high-efficiency solar cell manufacturing facility, a part of its vision to achieve 12 GW of solar cell capacity. The first 3 GW production line is now operational, while the balance capacity is under ramp-up, the firm said.



Imports outpace exports, trade deficit at \$30.4 bn

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, JULY 13

India's merchandise exports rose 14.35 per cent year-on-year to \$40.4 billion in June, while imports surged 31 per cent to \$70.8 billion, widening the trade deficit to \$30.4 billion. Despite the higher import bill, total exports during the April-June quarter reached a record \$232.73 billion.

Merchandise exports, however, declined sequentially from \$45.20 billion recorded in May. Engineering goods remained the largest export segment, rising 20.74 per cent to \$11.4 billion. Exports of electronic goods increased 18.93 per cent to \$4.9 billion, petroleum products grew 9.19 per cent to \$4.8 billion, organic and inorganic chemicals rose 19.42 per cent to \$2.7 billion, gems and jewellery expanded 34.64 per cent to \$2.4 billion, while rice exports increased 16.48 per cent to \$1 billion.

"Some of the key factors that have contributed to the double-digit growth in exports include free trade pacts with key partner countries, exporters' product and market diversification strategy, and the rising competitiveness of Brand India products," said Pankaj Chadha, chairman, EEPIC India.

BHARAT TEX 2026 TO SHOWCASE INDIA'S TEXTILE VALUE CHAIN

FC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, JUL 13

Over 120 countries, including the US, UK, and Bangladesh, will participate in India's largest global textile event, Bharat Tex 2026, being held from July 14-17. "Over 1,600 exhibitors will showcase India's complete textile value chain, including fibre, yarn, fabric, apparel and fashion, home textiles, technical textiles and ancillary industries," the government said on Monday.

The event will be inaugurated by textiles minister Giriraj Singh on Tuesday. It also expects to draw participation from over 7,000 buyers, 1.3 lakh trade visitors, and showcase more than 20,000 textile products, spread across 1.6 million sq ft of exhibition space.

International exhibitors from 14 countries, including the US, UK, Japan, Portugal, Spain, New Zealand, South Korea, South Africa and Nepal, will participate, alongside institutional representation from the United Nations and European Union.



TATA CAPITAL ACQUIRES MAJORITY STAKE IN YOGLOANS

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI JULY 13

Tata Capital, the flagship financial services company of the Tata Group on Monday announced the acquisition of an 88.6 per cent stake in Kerala based Yogakshemam Loans (Yogloans), an RBI-registered non-banking financial company primarily focused on gold loans.

The proposed all-cash transaction, subject to regulatory approvals, values Yogloans at a pre-money equity valuation of up to ₹318 crore and includes a primary capital infusion of about ₹93 crore to support the company's growth plans.

Following the completion of the deal, it will hold around 88.6 per cent of the company's issued and paid-up share capital on a fully-diluted basis.

KEY TRENDS

INDIA'S total exports, including merchandise and services, rose 7.3 per cent yoy in June.



Among the major destinations registering higher imports from India were Singapore, China, Malaysia, Tanzania, Vietnam and South Africa.

Merchandise imports rose to \$70.8 billion in June from \$54.08 billion in the corresponding month last year.

Consequently, India's merchandise trade deficit widened to \$30.4 billion in June from \$19.1 billion a year earlier. The deficit stood at \$28.2 billion in May.

"Merchandise trade deficit widened as elevated commodity prices pushed up the import bill by 31 per cent in the month. While the uptick

EXPORT DRIVERS

- Goods exports grew 14.35% to \$40.4 bn yoy.
- Gems and jewellery grew 34.64% to \$2.4 bn.
- Engineering goods up 20.74% to \$11.4 bn.
- Organic & Inorganic Chemicals rose 19.42% to \$2.7 bn.
- Electronic goods grew 18.93% to \$4.9 bn.
- Rice up 16.48% to \$1 bn.

in imports in June 2026 was largely broad-based, select items such as oil, electronics, fertilisers and chemicals witnessed a sizeable expansion in the month, albeit partly on account of a low base," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, Ica.

Services exports were estimated at \$33.03 billion in June, up 0.24 per cent year-on-year, while services imports rose 12.7 per cent to \$17.92 billion.

India's total exports, including merchandise and services, increased 7.3 per cent year-on-year in June. During the April-June quarter, total exports were estimated at \$232.73 billion, up 11.37 per cent, while total imports rose 17.5 per cent to \$270.15 bn.

India pursuing trade deal with US: Goyal

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, JULY 13

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal on Monday dismissed reports that India had refused to move ahead with a trade agreement with the United States, calling them "false, baseless and misleading".

"India and the US teams are fully engaged for a trade pact that is balanced, commercially meaningful, and delivers tangible benefits for businesses, farmers, workers, and consumers," he said.

The clarification followed media reports claiming that India had declined to pursue a quick interim trade agreement with the US and was holding out for better terms, particularly on sensitive sectors such as agriculture.

Commerce secretary Rajesh Agarwal also rejected the reports, saying there were no hurdles in the negotiations and that both sides were ready



to sign the agreement when the timing was appropriate.

"We don't see any challenge in India-US trade deal negotiations. The discussions are moving forward within an agreed structure and that engagement between the two sides has been regular," Agarwal said.

In a post on X, Goyal said he had met US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer in New Delhi last month.

Agarwal further said the Indian negotiating team visited the US in May, while the US delegation visited India in June, and discussions were continuing within the agreed framework.

FM asks PSBs to unveil new deposit products for NRIs

FC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, JUL 13

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday asked public sector banks (PSBs) to step up engagement with non-resident Indians (NRIs) and roll out innovative foreign currency deposit products to attract higher forex inflows.

Chairing a review meet-

ing with the heads of public sector banks, Sitharaman stressed the need to proactively reach out to overseas Indians and utilise the opportunities, available through GIFT City for mobilising foreign currency resources.

The CEOs have informed that banks are offering attractive returns on FCNRB(B) deposits, includ-

Inflation rises to 4.38%, rules above RBI target

June number, driven by higher food prices, is highest in 6 months

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, JULY 13

India's retail inflation rose to 4.38 per cent in June from 3.93 per cent in May, driven mainly by higher food prices, said government data.

The June reading is the highest in six months and takes headline inflation above the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) medium-term target of 4 per cent. The RBI is mandated to maintain inflation at 4 per cent, with a tolerance band of 2 percentage points on either side.

Food inflation accelerated to 5.32 per cent in June from 4.78 per cent in May, emerging as the biggest contributor to the rise in consumer prices.

"Food prices account for nearly half of the consumer price index, making them the single largest contributor to the increase in inflation. Besides, prices also remained elevated for operation of personal transport equipment (7.35 per cent) and transport

RISING EXPENSES

- The US-Iran war and a weak monsoon raised prices, causing the spike in consumer inflation in the country.
- Govt mandates the RBI to ensure that the inflation remains at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on either side.

- Food inflation rose to 5.32% in June from 4.78% in May.
- Prices remained elevated for operation of personal transport equipment at 7.35%.
- Transport services for goods rose at 7.70%.

- Rural inflation rose faster than urban inflation.
- Rural inflation increased to 4.74% in June from 4.25% in May.
- Urban inflation accelerated to 3.92% from 3.53%.



Price pressures remained visible in services such as restaurants and accommodation during the month. — SUJAN, Anand Rathi Group chief economist

services for goods (7.70 per cent), reflecting higher logistics and fuel-related costs," the data showed.

Among individual items, ginger has seen sharpest increase in prices, with inflation at 50.41 per cent year-on-year. Tomato prices rose 31.92 per cent, while raisins registered inflation of 20.52 per cent. Inflation in 'other personal effects', which includes jewellery, stood at 50.17

per cent, moderating from 56.35 per cent in May.

Rural inflation remained higher than urban inflation. Rural headline inflation rose to 4.74 per cent in June from 4.25 per cent in May, while urban inflation increased to 3.92 per cent from 3.53 per cent, indicating stronger food price pressures in rural areas.

Economists attributed the rise in inflation to higher food and fuel

prices following the recent increase in global crude oil prices.

"The CPI inflation in June 2026, the first full month after the hikes in petrol and diesel prices, accelerated to 4.4 per cent, slightly higher than our forecast of 4.3 per cent, led by the food and beverages, transport, and restaurants divisions," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, Ica.



SUBMER GROUP TO INVEST \$2 BN IN CHIP MFG FACILITY

Bhopal, July 13: Spain's Submer Group here on Monday announced an investment of \$2 billion (₹19,000 crore) in the semiconductor industry in Madhya Pradesh, a senior state government official said.

This would create nearly 5,000 direct employment opportunities, he said.

"A \$2 billion investment (19,000 crore rupees) in the semiconductor industry was announced today by Spain's Submer Group at the MP Tech Growth Conclave 3.0: GCC - Data Centres and Semiconductors," the official said in a statement.

An email requesting land allotment for a data centre project was received, and 15 acres of land were allotted in the Acharpura industrial area within six days, he added. — PTI

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, JULY 13

Domestic equity markets outperformed their Asian peers on Monday, ending largely flat after recovering from steep intraday losses amid escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

The sharp rise in crude oil futures to \$79-80 a barrel and the rupee weakening weighed on sentiment. However, the market recovered steadily after falling around one per cent in early trade.

The Sensex ended at 77,616.40, up 47.01 points or 0.06 per cent, after dropping 711.96 points during the session to an intraday low of 76,857.43. The Nifty-50 closed at 24,211, up four points or 0.01 per cent, after touching a low of 24,000.2.

In contrast, benchmark indices in South Korea, Japan and China declined by 8.95 per cent, 1.92 per cent and 2.06 per cent, respectively. FPIs remained net sell-

ers, offloading equities worth ₹3,062.27 crore, while domestic institutional investors were net buyers to the tune of ₹2,171.7 crore.

IT stocks led the recovery, with the NSE IT index rising 3.59 per cent. Consumer durables and auto indices gained 1.15 per cent and 0.45 per cent, respectively. The Nifty bank and media indices advanced 0.15 per cent and 2.09 per cent, aiding market's rebound from early losses.

Among the laggards were the Nifty FMCG index, down 1.02 per cent, metal (which fell 0.69 per cent), and healthcare, down 0.26 per cent.

The NSE's India VIX climbed 8.38 per cent to 13.28, indicating heightened market volatility.

"Investor sentiment remained cautious amid renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, which pushed Brent crude prices higher and weighed on global risk appetite," said Ajit Mishra, senior vice-president, research, Religare Broking.



ing on five-year deposits, supported by the suspension of the interest rate ceiling on fresh FCNRB(B) deposits under the

scheme. "The CEOs said there has been significant interest from NRIs residing in Singapore, Hong Kong, West Asia, UK, UD and other overseas jurisdictions," the ministry said.

All the PSU bank chiefs outlined their plans to capitalise on the positive sentiment and accelerate deposit mobilisation during the remainder of the

scheme period. The PSBs also informed that they have put in place customised outreach strategies, including digital channels, to engage with the non-resident Indian (NRI) diaspora and enhance deposit mobilisation.

The banks informed that the International Banking Units are being used for fund mobilisation.

RUPEE FALLS 30 P TO CLOSE AT 95.62 AGAINST DOLLAR

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI JULY 13

The Indian rupee weakened sharply in initial trade on Monday, falling to a one-month low at 95.85 against the dollar as renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East drove a surge in crude oil prices and increased mid-month demand for the dollar.

However, RBI intervention and dollar inflows narrowed the rupee depreciation by 31 paise to help it close the day at 95.62 per dollar. Brent crude rose 3 per cent to \$78 per barrel, keeping markets jittery over the impact of higher energy costs if the tensions between US and Iran escalate.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 95.70 per dollar and traded in a range of 95.57-95.85 during the session. It closed at 95.62 compared to its previous close of 95.32 per dollar, down 30 paise.

"The rupee declined sharply amid a surge in crude oil prices and renewed geopolitical concerns. As a major oil-importing currency, the rupee came under pressure and emerged as the weakest performer among Asian currencies, said Dilip Parmar, senior research analyst at HDFC Securities. In the near term spot it is expected to consolidate within between 94.9 to 96 range.



Getting access to Mythos, other models stays priority

Govt creates AI model sandbox

New Delhi, July 13:

Getting access to Mythos and other advanced frontier models is high on the government's priority, and while talks and processes for the same are on, alternate AI models are also being leveraged for now to track and fix vulnerabilities, IT secretary S Krishnan said on Monday.

Mythos - an advanced AI model developed by Anthropic, has been able to "lay bare" vulnerabilities that existed in the original code of widely-used software programmes but were often left unresolved because they were considered low priority, too costly to fix, or had simply gone undetected, he noted.



"What this gives is an opportunity now to actually identify many of these vulnerabilities and correct them.

Clearly, getting access to Mythos and similar advanced frontier models is very high on the priority of the government, and this is something that we have taken up with our counterparts in the US and with the respective compa-

nies," Krishnan said. There is a process involved, Krishnan said, adding, "We are negotiating that process, we are going through that right now."

Even as the negotiations continue, the government has created a "sandbox" environment using alternative AI models with an estimated 60-70 per cent of the capabilities of the most advanced systems. The objective is to test code, identify vulnerabilities and develop secure workflows before access to more powerful models becomes available.

"You know what the stand of the US currently is, that there are export controls on products of

this nature. What we are instead doing to prepare ourselves is that CERT-In themselves has a sort of a sandbox or a 'war room' where they have other models which they are using, which they believe at about 60 to 70 per cent of the capability of what Mythos can do," he said. The entire exercise is akin to a dry run, he explained.

"We, in a sense, have done a dry run for whenever Mythos is available in order to do it in a secure environment, and at the same time making sure that at least a significant proportion of vulnerabilities have been identified and tackled even without access to Mythos," Krishnan said. — PTI

Indian varsities remain the preferred choice for students from 173 countries

FOR decades together, one has read about how 'bright minds' from India quickly move to developed nations like the US and many in Europe after basic education for ensuring a professionally satisfying and financially rewarding future. In a dramatic change in script, the 'brain drain' phenomenon no longer raises eyebrows as the nation seems to have made peace with losing its best lot of future citizens to serve the cause of the world economy rather than its own. In an interesting sidelight, The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for 2023-24 noted that India's higher education institutions attracted students from 173 countries in the 2023-24 academic year, with 58,134 foreign students enrolled across universities and colleges in the

country, an increase of nearly 20 per cent over the last five years. Nepal continues to send the largest number of students to India while Karnataka is the top destination for students coming over to pursue higher studies, points out a survey by the Ministry of Education. AISHE collects detailed information from higher education institutions (HEIs) across the country through a web-based data capture format (DCF). Institutions upload data on student enrolment, faculty and staff, infrastructure, and examination results, among others on the AISHE portal.

The survey serves as the primary source of official statistics on higher education in India, providing critical insights for policy formulation, planning and monitoring of the sector.

The reasons that have enabled this include affordability, which means tuition and living expenses in India are a fraction of the cost in the US, UK, or Australia. One can study in places like Hyderabad, Delhi, or Karnataka for much less. Many top institutions have globally ranked universities. Premier engineering and medical programmes attract top talent worldwide. Over 240 Indian institutes partner with foreign universities. Students can earn global degrees right in India. Then comes English instruction as many courses are taught entirely in English. This makes it easy for global students to learn and adapt. Lastly, the cultural experience wherein students enjoy a rich cultural history. India is famous for diverse festivals, heritage, and

foods. In 2023-24, the highest share of foreign students came from Nepal (24.1 per cent), followed by the UAE (seven per cent), the US (5.9 per cent), Bangladesh (5.9 per cent), Nigeria (5.5 per cent) and Zimbabwe (four per cent).

The top 10 countries constituted 63.8 per cent of the total foreign students in 2023-24. According to the report, Karnataka emerged as the top destination for international students, with 7,914 foreigners enrolled in its HEIs, narrowly ahead of Punjab (7,902), Maharashtra (6,190), Uttar Pradesh (5,953) and Tamil Nadu (5,694) completed the top five list of institutes hosting foreign students. The highest number of foreign students enrolled in undergraduate courses was at 73.6 per cent, fol-

lowed by postgraduate programmes at 16.8 per cent. A total of 42,779 students were pursuing undergraduate programmes, accounting for nearly 74 per cent of the overall figure. Of these, 27,849 were men and 14,930 women. Another 9,845 students were enrolled in postgraduate programmes, while comparatively smaller numbers pursued diploma, PhD, certificate and integrated courses. India also received foreign students from Lebanon, Burkina Faso, Mongolia, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Chile, among others, in the 2023-24 academic year. The Ministry of Education had launched the Study in India (SI) programme in 2018 with an aim to attract international students to pursue higher education in India.

LETTERS

AI, Smart city and human values

THE article "Can AI help Hyd grow without losing its soul?" (July 13) raises an important question. Indeed, the real question is not whether AI can think like humans, but whether it can help us make wiser choices about land, water and ecosystems. Technology should be used to improve people's lives while protecting Hyderabad's heritage and environment. AI can help in traffic management, healthcare, education, and public services but it should never replace human values and cultural identity. A city becomes truly smart when technology serves its people without erasing its soul.

Tanushree Srikanth, Hyderabad

Govt must address rain deficit in TG

I would like to draw the attention of the authorities to the alarming rainfall deficit across 382 mandals in Telangana. Although the area under kharif cultivation has increased this year, inadequate rainfall has created uncertainty among farmers regarding crop growth and productivity. Many reservoirs also have lower water levels, which may worsen the situation if the monsoon remains weak. The government should take immediate measures by providing irrigation facilities, financial assistance, crop insurance, and promoting drought-resistant crops. Timely action will help protect farmers' livelihoods and ensure food security.

Masanam Renuka Bhavani, Hyderabad

Foreign media deserves a fair deal

THIS refers to "Upholding constitutional values paramount to achieve economic progress" (THI, July 13). Restricting foreign journalists and overseas observers from operating freely within India sends a wrong signal to the international audience, whose confidence we are trying to court through Viksit Bharat. A nation genuinely secure in its governance record should welcome external scrutiny rather than resist it. Streamlining visa and accreditation processes for foreign correspondents and ensuring consistent application of existing rules ought to be prioritised.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore-641671

Go in for sustained, data-driven accountability

THIS is further to "Upholding constitutional values paramount to achieve economic progress" (THI, July 13). The comparison with established democracies is instructive precisely because it is unglamorous: none of them achieved prosperity through spectacle, but through decades of unspectacular institutional consistency. India's 2047 target should be measured not only by GDP milestones but by whether ordinary citizens can criticise power without fear of disproportionate consequence. Civil society organisations could contribute by publishing annual institutional integrity report cards, tracking press freedom, judicial independence and enforcement agency conduct together. Such sustained, data-driven accountability, rather than periodic outrage after each incident, is what genuinely nudges governance toward long-term improvement.

Prajesh Paramasivan, Neelambur-641048

TN needs Parandur airport

THE cancellation of the Parandur airport project in Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu highlights the challenges involved in balancing infrastructure development with environmental protection and community concerns. Large projects often require careful planning to ensure that economic growth does not come at the cost of natural ecosystems or the livelihoods of local people. Many aviation experts and industry leaders opine that a second airport is critical for Chennai to keep pace with Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The existing airport facility at Meenambakkam is nearing its saturation point. Dropping the Parandur project means the state government must identify an alternate site, one that balances the region's massive development needs with ecological and local community concerns.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai-210

Striking the right AI-HI balance

THIS refers to the insightful article "Artificial intelligence should complement human intelligence" (July 13). The piece rightly highlights that while AI is reshaping our world, it must never replace the essence of human intellect and ethical judgment. Indeed, AI must complement, not replace, human intelligence. To ensure economic progress without erosion of human values, we need a robust governance that keeps AI as a tool to augment human capability.

Ragashri Sarabu, Hyderabad

Sinner, the winner

Jannik Sinner has proved his mettle once again by becoming the first player of his country to win two successive Wimbledon titles. With two Australian open and one US open titles under his belt, Sinner has proved big time that he is a tough nut to crack on grass as well. German Alexander Zverev learnt many things the hard way in his title clash on Sunday. Regardless of the unfortunate doping scandal and major injury, Sinner has proved to be a strong title contender into the future.

Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

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BENGALURU ONLINE

High Court brings Bengaluru's historic Century Club under RTI Act

BENGALURU: In a significant ruling, the Karnataka High Court has upheld an earlier order declaring Bengaluru's historic Century Club a "public authority" under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, making its records, activities, and financial dealings accessible to the public. A Division Bench comprising Justice Anu Sivaraman and Justice T. Venkatesh Naik dismissed an appeal filed by the Century Club challenging the order of a Single Judge Bench, which had affirmed the decision of the Karnataka Information Commission. The court observed that land granted free of cost by erstwhile rulers before Independence should be treated as public or government property rather than a private gift.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Socio-ecological concerns hover over Musi Riverfront gamble



PROF. MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR

THE Musi River, which winds through Hyderabad, stands as a silent witness to the city's historic evolution and growth. It was once a vibrant lifeline that boasted of pristine waters. They seem to be from a distant past if one goes by the adverse impact of decades of unchecked industrialization and rapid urbanization and administrative neglect that became the order of the day.

Today, the historic river has been reduced to a heavily polluted urban drain. Coming as a ray of hope has been the incumbent state government's ambitious attempt to reverse this ecological decline and reshape the urban landscape of Hyderabad, riding on the Musi Riverfront Development and Rejuvenation Project. While the state executive views this mega project as a historic opportunity to establish a world-class cultural, ecological, and recreational asset, it has simultaneously ignited fierce resistance. The civil society, environmentalists, opposition political parties, and socio-political forums like the Telangana Republican Left Democrats (TRLD) have united in raising profound concerns regarding the project's financial sustainability, its potential for large-scale human displacement, lack of transparency, and a deeply flawed ecological strategy.

Executive sanctions and blueprint:

Earlier this month, the Telangana government officially marked its intent to commence physical execution by issuing administrative sanctions and cost estimates for the initial phase of

the Musi Riverfront Development Project. The first phase focuses on a 21-kilometer stretch of the river corridor, specifically targeting development within designated Zone-1A and Zone-1B pathways.

The structural blueprint divides this 21-kilometer stretch into two key geographic corridors under an engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) execution model:

Zone-1A: Covering a distance of 9.20 km stretching from Himayat Sagar to Babu Ghat; **Zone-1B:** Spanning 11.80 km from Osmansagar to Babu Ghat.

The administration has projected an estimated cost of ₹7,345.12 crore, specifically dedicated for taking up Phase-1 development activities. A defining and highly controversial attribute of this administrative sanction is the absolute absence of direct state budgetary allocation. The government has mandated that the financial scaffolding of the project must rely entirely on external borrowing and institutional grants:

Massive loan: A massive loan of ₹4,500 crore is being negotiated with the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The balance of ₹2,845.12 crore is directed to be pooled in the form of grants from state-owned corporations, primarily the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority (HMDA) and the Telangana State Industrial Infrastructure Corporation (TGIIIC).

The Babu Ghat-Central approvals:

A pivotal milestone for Phase-1 occurred in June, when the Ministry of Defence officially granted working permission and land clearance for utilisation of defence-held lands in Hyderabad. This clearance effectively eliminated a long-standing legal and logistical impasse between the state and central governments.

Following extensive institutional negotiations over legal and defence protocols, the central government approved the transfer of 83.81 acres of premium defence land under the

Crucially, it completely excludes the massive capital required for land acquisition, compensation, and comprehensive rehabilitation. This omission has fuelled allegations that the project's budget is heavily inflated to benefit private consultancies. The most politically sensitive aspect of the Musi Riverfront Project is its direct threat to the dwellings of thousands of poor and middle-class families living along the riverbanks. Deployment of HYDRABAD personnel for aggressive demolition drives along the Musi riverbed has triggered widespread public anxiety and political backlash.



jurisdiction of the Artillery Centre Golconda. The market value of this land parcel is estimated at approximately ₹533.42 crores. The acquisition of this territory paves the way for the state government's flagship sub-project: the transformation of Babu Ghat into an international-standard socio-cultural and tourism hub named the 'Gandhi Sarovar' project. Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy contends that with Centre's support, the project will move beyond mere concrete construction to become an ecological, cultural, and magnificent public asset.

Debt imperialism vs. development

Despite the bureaucratic momentum, the government's chosen financing strategy has drawn severe criticism from economic analysts and financial experts. Financial analysts warn that because final approvals for the ₹4,500 crore loan from the Asian Development Bank is still undergoing complex institutional negotiations, proceeding with tenders without confirmed debt security introduces severe financial vulnerability. Critics argue that relying completely on heavy external borrowing pushes the state treasury into a deeper debt trap. Ultimately, this shifts the financial burden onto the public through future municipal taxes and structural adjustments.

Furthermore, observers note that the sanctioned ₹7,345.12 crore is strictly earmarked for civil engineering and riverfront beautification works. Crucially, it completely excludes the massive capital required for land acquisition, compensation, and comprehensive rehabilitation.

This omission has fuelled allegations that the project's budget is heavily inflated to benefit private consultancies, leaving the state's actual financial liabilities undressed.

The human cost-Rehabilitation crisis:

The most politically sensitive aspect of the Musi Riverfront Project is its direct threat to the dwellings of thousands of poor and middle-class families living along the riverbanks. Deployment of the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRABAD) personnel for aggressive demolition drives along the Musi riverbed has triggered widespread public anxiety and political backlash. At a high-profile intellectuals' round-table conference organized in Hyderabad by TRLD President and former MLC Kapilavayi Dilip Kumar, prominent social activists, legal experts, and politicians gathered to condemn the government's approach. Blaming the government for giving a miss to the mandatory public hearing and silence of the DPR disclosure, noted human rights activist Professor Haragopal, questioned the ethical basis for advancing a multi-crore mega project while keeping the affected communities completely in the dark. He attributed this to an absolute lack of transparency that is bound to destroy public trust. He argued that democracy requires the state to consult and involve affected citizens before making major structural decisions, rather than enforcing displacement by decree. Echoing these concerns, MLC Ravindra Rao and the TRLD leadership emphasized that no develop-

mental project can be justified if it renders thousands of vulnerable citizens homeless. The forum collectively demanded a strict policy sequence: Comprehensive rehabilitation and project execution in that order. They asserted that the state must secure permanent rehabilitation housing, guarantee livelihood protection, and provide fair compensation at market rates before a single structure is dismantled.

Ecological restoration vs. artificial beautification:

Beyond the socioeconomic disruption, environmentalists argue that the project's core philosophy is fundamentally flawed. During the TRLD round-table conference, former Governor Bandaru Dattatreya shared a poignant historical perspective.

He recalled that during his childhood, the Musi River flowed with clean, waist-deep natural water. It is tragic, he remarked, that decades of unregulated discharge have turned this historic river into a toxic channel filled with industrial effluents and municipal sewage. What about the government's current plan, which focuses heavily on "artificial beautification" rather than true ecological restoration? We need to be warned that traditional water bodies, lakes, and natural catchments that once formed Hyderabad's natural hydrology are rapidly disappearing. According to environmental experts, building expensive concrete embankments, walkways, and commercial zones does nothing to resolve the river's core crisis. True rejuvenation requires preventing industrial chemical waste and untreated urban sewage from entering the river channel in the first place. Critics argue the state should prioritize building a comprehensive network of Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) and enforcing strict pollution controls on upstream industries. Creating cosmetic, concrete structures over a polluted river bed is an ecological failure that prioritizes real estate value over environmental health.

A real estate agenda:

The Musi Riverfront Project has quickly become a central political battleground in Telangana. During the multi-party round-table discussions, which included leaders like BJP MP Eatela Rajender, Congress MLC Addanki Dayakar, BRS MLC Ravinder Rao, and senior Congress leader KK Mahender Reddy, the opposition slammed the ruling administration's true motives.

Ravinder Rao delivered a detailed technical and political outlook of the project. He strongly contrasted the current administration's methods with the approach of the previous BRS government. Rao noted that the previous government successfully developed a 6-km model stretch of the Musi River near Uppal and Nagole without displacing a single family or demolishing any houses. He demanded to know why the current government had refused to explore similar non-disruptive, alternative engineering designs.

Furthermore, Rao levelled serious allegations of land grabbing, claiming the project hides a massive, corporate-driven real estate agenda under the guise of river rejuvenation. He argued that the state's true intent is to clear out poor communities and free up high-value urban land along the riverbank. This land, he alleged, will be handed over to private corporate entities for commercial complexes and luxury real estate ventures. Rao raised a sharp legal and ethical contradiction: if poor and middle-class residences are deemed illegal encroachments on the riverbed, how can the state legally build heavy commercial concrete complexes on those very same plots? Opposition parties have alleged that the manner things are unfolding on the sly, and hiding the DPR from the public, point out hidden motives and double standards in the project's planning.

(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

Is TG justified in hesitating to lift Godavari waters?

P V KONDAL RAO

THE debate over the operation of the Kannepalli Pump House has once again become the centrepiece of Telangana's irrigation politics. The opposition accuses the Congress government of deliberately refusing to lift Godavari waters despite an emerging rainfall deficit, while the government insists that public safety and engineering prudence must take precedence over political expediency. The truth, however, lies somewhere between these competing narratives.

Kannepalli is the first major pumping station of the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme (KLIS), the world's largest multi-stage lift irrigation project. Water is first lifted from the Godavari near Medigadda and successfully pumped through Annaram and Sundilla barrages before reaching the Sripada Yellampalli reservoir. The project was conceived to irrigate nearly 45 lakh acres, stabilise existing ayacut, provide drinking water to Hyderabad and several districts, and support industrial growth. Spread across nearly 500 km with 20 pump houses, extensive tunnels and canals, KLIS

represents one of independent India's most ambitious engineering ventures.

The project, however, suffered a major setback after the sinking of several piers at the Medigadda barrage in October 2023. Subsequent inspections by expert agencies raised questions regarding the structural integrity not only of Medigadda but also of Annaram and Sundilla barrages. Since then, the government has largely suspended large-scale pumping operations pending detailed investigations and rehabilitation works.

Against this backdrop, demands to resume pumping through Kannepalli have intensified during the present monsoon, particularly because Telangana has experienced erratic rainfall in several regions. Opposition leaders argue that sufficient inflows are available in the Godavari region and that failure to lift water now may adversely affect kharif cultivation and lead to drinking water storage. They contend that the Kannepalli pump house itself remains technically capable of operation and should not remain idle merely because downstream barrages require repairs.

The engineering perspective:



The government's position, however, is more cautious. It has consistently maintained that the three barrages will be operated only after rehabilitation is completed and after obtaining the necessary safety clearances from the competent authorities. From an engineering perspective, this argument carries considerable merit. A lift irrigation system functions as an integrated hydraulic chain. Operating one component without complete confidence in downstream structures may expose the entire system to operational and safety risks.

Another important dimension often overlooked in the political debate is economics. Kaleshwaram is not merely a civil engineering project; it is also one of the most energy-intensive irrigation systems in the world. At full capacity, the

project requires nearly 6,000 MW of electricity to operate its massive pumps. Annual power expenditure runs into several thousand crore rupees depending on operating hours and electricity tariffs. Any decision to lift water must therefore balance irrigation needs with fiscal sustainability, especially when downstream reservoir storage remains uncertain.

This does not mean that criticism of the government's approach is entirely misplaced. Agriculture depends on timely decisions rather than technically perfect ones. Farmers cannot indefinitely wait for committee reports while sowing seasons pass. If technical assessments indicate that limited pumping through Kannepalli is feasible without jeopardising dam safety, the government should transparently place those findings in

the public domain and consider calibrated operations. Blanket silence often creates room for political speculation.

Retired engineers familiar with the project have also urged the government to operate portions of the system to mitigate possible drought conditions. Their intervention demonstrates that professional opinion itself is not entirely uniform. Engineering decisions must therefore be guided by rigorous, real-time monitoring rather than political compulsions from either side.

Ultimately, the Kaleshwaram controversy reflects a deeper challenge confronting Telangana. The State invested enormous financial resources in creating an engineering marvel capable of transforming agriculture across northern and central Telangana. Yet infrastructure of this scale also demands continuous maintenance, transparent safety audits and realistic operational planning. The collapse at Medigadda has shaken public confidence, making every subsequent decision politically charged.

Is the Telangana government adamant about not lifting water from Kannepalli? Available evidence suggests that the answer is

'no'. The government's approach appears to stem more from concerns over structural safety and regulatory compliance than from any reluctance to utilise the project. Whether those concerns justify the present level of caution is a matter that deserves open technical scrutiny rather than partisan rhetoric.

The way forward should combine scientific assessment with administrative transparency. Independent experts from premier engineering institutions, the Central Water Commission (CWC) and the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) should periodically publish inspection findings. If selective pumping is technically safe, it should begin without delay. If not, the public deserves a detailed explanation supported by engineering data rather than political assertions.

For Telangana, the real issue is not whether water should be lifted from Kannepalli. It is whether the State can restore confidence in a project that was once celebrated as a symbol of engineering ambition but now stands at the crossroads of technical uncertainty, financial prudence and political accountability.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



COMMENT

Editorials

Hyping up illegal ‘arbitral award’ will only undermine stability in South China Sea

Leveraging its role as this year’s chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines is attempting to hijack the negotiations aimed at concluding the long-awaited Code of Conduct in the South China Sea by pushing for the agreement to be anchored on the illegal and invalid so-called “arbitral ruling” of 2016.

The “ruling” of the Permanent Court of Arbitration is null and void. China did not participate in the “hearing”. It neither accepts nor recognizes the prejudicial and politically motivated “award”, nor will it ever accept any claim or action arising from it.

The distorting of international law by the “ruling” exposes the Philippines’ real intention of pursuing its own selfish interests by fostering divisions and stirring up tensions in the South China Sea.

On Sunday, the United States, Japan and other external forces took the overt step of issuing a joint statement with the Philippines to mark the tenth anniversary of the illegal “arbitral award”.

As the Chinese Foreign Ministry responded in a statement, a decade after its issuance, the so-called “ruling” has not only failed to resolve the maritime disputes between China and the Philippines — it has instead been weaponized by Manila to expand its territorial and maritime claims. Far from contributing to peace, the “ruling” has aggravated regional tensions and furnished extra-regional powers with a convenient pretext to meddle in and destabilize the South China Sea. In effect, it has become a perennial stumbling block to China-Philippines ties and a corrosive force against regional stability. Were the “standards” enshrined in this “ruling” to be applied universally, many nations would find themselves stripped of the very basis for their own maritime claims.

In a separate statement on Sunday, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded to Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi’s remarks “commemorating” the anniversary by raising pointed questions that laid bare Tokyo’s

hypocrisy in backing Manila. For instance, if the “standards” of that “ruling” were applied consistently, how could Okinotori — nothing more than two rocks of less than 10 square meters in the Pacific — possibly justify a Japanese claim to Exclusive Economic Zone and continental shelf of hundreds of thousands of square kilometers?

By the “standards” of the “ruling”, many of Japan’s islands and reefs would likewise have no basis for claiming maritime rights and interests. Since Japan has publicly endorsed the “award”, China has every reason to believe that Japan has accepted the same “standards” and voluntarily renounced the corresponding maritime claims.

As a matter of fact, the more Manila seeks to buttress its position with outside backing, the more clearly it reveals the tenuous legal and factual basis upon which its claims rest.

By attempting to make its illegal claims a prerequisite for pushing ahead with the COC talks, Manila seeks to entrench its unlawful gains by coercing the other negotiating parties into compromise.

As long as the Philippines insists that the “award” is valid and should be anchored with the COC, there will be no way to resolve the disagreements that exist over such issues as the COC’s applicable maritime scope and dispute settlement mechanism provisions. This makes it impossible for any progress to be made in talks over the COC. With this major obstacle unresolved, the claim by the Philippines that the COC can be concluded before the end of this year is both empty and irresponsible.

China is committed to properly managing maritime differences in the region through bilateral dialogue with the parties directly involved. At the same time, the country will continue firmly defending its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea. Any attempt to challenge China’s lawful rights and interests and undermine peace and stability in the South China Sea is doomed to fail.

Hostilities risk spiraling out of control

Barely weeks after the United States and Iran signed the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding, an interim deal intended to end hostilities and create a framework for a broader settlement, the agreement is in jeopardy.

The immediate trigger appears to have been disputes over the interpretation of the MoU’s provisions governing navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Yet the renewed confrontation is not simply another chapter in the rivalry between Washington and Tehran. It has evolved into a three-party strategic contest in which Tel Aviv’s calculations also influence the pace and direction of events.

Israel has never concealed its willingness to prevent any US-Iran accommodation. From its perspective, even a temporary understanding risks reducing pressure on Tehran while leaving “unresolved concerns” over Iran’s regional influence and nuclear issue. Recent reports suggest that Tel Aviv has been “coordinating” with Washington while simultaneously warning Tehran against retaliation. Israel’s strategic intentions differ from those of parties seeking to preserve regional stability.

This matters because the MoU was always less a peace agreement than a ceasefire held together by political convenience. It rested upon ambiguous language, diverging strategic objectives and fragile domestic calculations on both sides. Such pacts survive only when all parties concerned possess strong incentives to preserve them. That condition is disappearing.

Washington’s own calculations illustrate why. The US administration continues to face conflicting pressures. Military restraint satisfies voters weary of endless Middle Eastern crises. Yet any perceived concession toward Iran invites fierce criticism from domestic hawks. Rising oil prices threaten inflation, consumer confidence and electoral prospects, while renewed military action risks producing precisely the energy shock that the earlier agreement sought to prevent. Unsurprisingly, Washington has simultaneously resumed military operations while signaling its willingness to return to negotiations — an apparent contradiction that reflects political necessity rather than strategic coherence.

Military force has repeatedly demonstrated its limitations. Months of strikes have neither fundamentally altered Iran’s strategic judgments nor produced a durable diplomatic breakthrough. Instead, every exchange of missiles further erodes trust while increasing the probability that a miscalculation or third-party action could trigger a broader regional war.

Energy markets understand this reality better than politicians. The world’s consumers ultimately finance every failure of diplomacy in the Middle East. That is why the greatest danger today lies not merely in renewed hostilities but in the gradual normalization of perpetual low-intensity conflict. If the MoU collapses without a credible diplomatic successor, the region risks settling into a familiar yet dangerous equilibrium: intermittent strikes, periodic retaliation, disrupted shipping lanes and repeated diplomatic resets that never address the underlying disputes. Such instability benefits few beyond those who profit politically or economically from permanent confrontation.

As China’s deputy permanent representative to the United Nations Sun Lei stressed at a UN Security Council briefing on the Iranian nuclear issue on Friday, a ceasefire and cessation of hostilities must hold in the Gulf.

“China urges all relevant parties to overcome disruptive factors, refrain from the use or threat of force, preserve and implement the MoU, reach a solution that accommodates the concerns of all parties, lift the sanctions against Iran at an early date, and achieve substantive progress in the political settlement process,” Sun said.

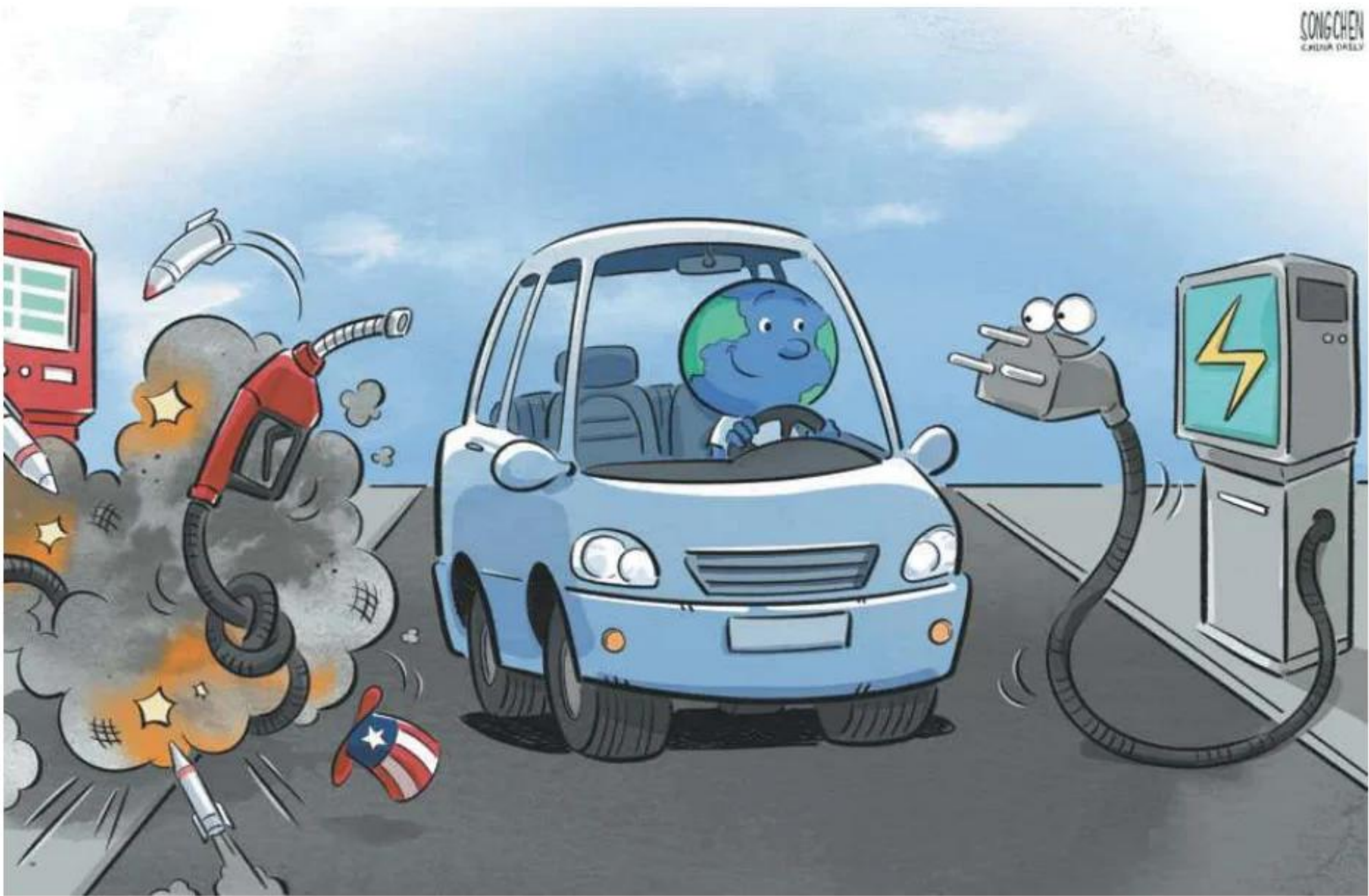
The proper settlement of the Iran nuclear issue must respect the legitimate aspirations and lawful rights and interests of the parties concerned. Iran should continue to uphold its commitment not to develop nuclear weapons. As a non-nuclear-weapon state party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran enjoys the legitimate right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The US should take concrete actions to create conditions for the political settlement of the Iran nuclear issue, Sun added.

The Middle East has accumulated more than enough examples of wars that were easier to begin than to end. Another prolonged US-Iran confrontation will not produce a decisive winner. It will only weaken regional security, unsettle global markets, burden already strained economies and deepen divisions throughout the international system.

The choice confronting related parties is therefore stark. They can allow strategic mistrust, domestic politics and regional rivalries to dismantle an imperfect but valuable diplomatic opening. Or they can recognize that however unsatisfactory the MoU may have been, its implementation remains infinitely preferable to another round of instability. Even a fragile peace is always better than permanent war.

The world should not have to relearn that lesson yet again.

Song Chen



Opinion Line

Precision landing boosts space program, signals self-reliance

As a space journalist who has covered dozens of launches across the country, I long assumed that I had grown accustomed to the routine of countdowns and the roar of liftoffs.

Yet standing atop a building at the Hainan International Commercial Aerospace Launch Center on Friday morning, waiting for the Long March 10B rocket to lift off, there was the same mix of nervousness, excitement and anticipation I felt at my very first launch assignment.

When the first stage was successfully captured by the cable-net recovery system roughly six minutes after stage separation, cheers erupted among reporters.

On the way back to the hotel, I was replaying the recovery footage on loop on my phone, swapping clips and screenshots with fellow reporters. That split second when the booster locked safely into the net is the kind of frame that remains etched in a reporter’s memory for years.

Having witnessed earlier recovery attempts — of Long March 12A and ZQ 3 models — I know firsthand just how formidable the challenge of rocket reusability is. Guiding a massive booster back through the atmosphere with pinpoint precision, reigniting its engine at the right moment, main-

taining aerodynamic stability and executing a controlled recovery require flawless coordination across propulsion, navigation, materials science and real-time command systems.

Previous tests underscored how many variables must align for success. That is why Friday’s breakthrough feels deeply gratifying.

I share the pride of the researchers and engineers at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, whose perseverance turned an ambitious vision into reality.

What makes this milestone even more remarkable is China’s independent path of innovation. Unlike conventional landing on ground pads or offshore drone ships used by the United States and earlier domestic programs, the Long March 10B debuted the world’s first operational sea-based net-capture recovery system. By transferring much of the landing hardware from the rocket to the recovery vessel, engineers reduced dead weight and opened a distinct and potentially cost-effective technical route. It is a vivid reflection of the ingenuity of Chinese scientists and engineers and the country’s growing scientific and technological strength.

Beyond the technical feat, the Long March 10B carries far-reach-

ing strategic significance. Designed to support large-scale deployment of low-Earth orbit constellations and high-volume commercial launch missions, it promises to enhance China’s competitiveness and influence in the global space sector.

More importantly, the Long March 10B is not a standalone model. It is an integral part of the Long March 10 family built for China’s manned lunar missions.

Every commercial mission will validate engine reusability, recovery system reliability and rapid turnaround launch capability, forging a development model where commercial operations feed technological progress for future space missions.

This iterative approach will help build expertise for China’s future manned lunar landings and deep-space exploration.

To be sure, we must remain clear-eyed. A considerable gap still separates China from the US in mature, operational reusable rocket technology, and accelerated, steady progress remains essential.

But after witnessing Friday’s historic success, I have full confidence that China’s space community will keep closing that gap and take its place among the world’s leading space powers.

— ZHAO LEI, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Increasing grain production key to food security

Editor’s note: Last month, China issued a plan to accelerate the modernization of agriculture and rural areas during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period. A key goal is to raise the country’s production capacity of grains to around 1.45 trillion jin (725 million metric tons) by 2030, with an emphasis on both the volume and the quality of agricultural products. Tu Shengwei, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research of the National Development and Reform Commission, spoke to People’s Daily Overseas Edition on why China is pushing to increase both the output and quality of grain production. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don’t necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Food security has emerged as a universal challenge in recent years due to the rising frequency of extreme weather events, a complex and volatile international landscape, and heightened uncertainties in the global grain market.

Thanks to sustained efforts, China has made marked improvements in agricultural infrastructure, machinery and technologies in recent years. Major breakthroughs in agricultural science and technology have lifted the contribution rate of scientific and technological progress to agricultural growth to over 64 percent, placing China among the world’s top innovators in the field. Advanced technologies, including high-end farm machinery, drones and artificial intelligence, are now widely used across production chains, sharply boosting efficiency.

By implementing the latest initiative to raise grain output, enhancing yield per unit area of staple crops, improving the quality of farmland, seeds and machinery, and adopting more efficient farming practices, the country is well-positioned to achieve

the goal of increasing its grain production capacity to around 1.45 trillion jin by 2030.

Increasing the grain production capacity will ensure a sufficient supply of high-quality food. Moreover, grain prices underpin the prices of various other commodities, and ample grain output helps prevent fluctuations in food prices.

Currently, China has a secure supply of rice and wheat, with sufficient stocks of these two staple grains. However, the production capacity for high-quality rice that provides a good mouthfeel, high-gluten and low-gluten wheat remains inadequate. The plan addresses this by calling for an increased supply of these products.

To achieve this, efforts should be made in various fields to expand cultivation based on local conditions and improve mechanisms that reward superior quality with better prices to ensure that premium grain products reach the market effectively.

The plan says the production capacity of corn and soybean should also be boosted. China’s grain consumption pattern is changing. The

consumption of rice and wheat is declining, while feed grains such as corn and soybean are likely to become major drivers of future growth in demand.

There is a significant imbalance between the supply and demand of soybean in China, making the expansion of soybean output a top priority. The supply of high-yield, high-oil soybean should be increased.

Promoting high-yield, high-oil soybean varieties will help expand domestic supply, reduce reliance on imports, and upgrade the country’s grain and oil processing industry.

The plan also calls for strengthening farmland protection and improving farmland quality. Farmland is the cornerstone of grain production and the fundamental resource for securing food supply.

Over the next five years, it is essential to enforce strict farmland protection measures, develop high-standard farmland and enhance farmland water conservancy facilities to reinforce the foundation for grain production.

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VIEWS

Vassil Girginov

When Beijing was awarded the 2008 Olympic Games in July 2001, a seven-year journey began, culminating in the grand opening in the iconic Bird's Nest stadium on Aug 8, 2008.

The seven-year period between awarding the Olympics and their opening allows the hosts to develop and implement their vision of the Games.

The legacy of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games must be seen in the socio-political and economic context of China. In China's bid for the Games, then President Jiang Zemin highlighted the opportunity to advance the Olympic spirit and deepen cultural exchanges between China and the world. Beijing proposed three major themes: "Green Olympics", "High-Tech Olympics" and "People's Olympics".

The concept of "People's Olympics" sought to redefine humanism as a core Chinese cultural value, aiming to construct a moral order to counterbalance the materialism in China's rapid march to modernization and offer an alternative to the commercialization of the Games. China sought to reinterpret Olympic principles, enriching the Olympic spirit and promoting global harmony.

While economic impacts often dominate discussions about the legacy of the Olympics, the intangible impacts, though difficult to measure, are equally important.

The Games were a massive undertaking with an organizing budget of 20.5 billion yuan (\$3 billion) in revenue and 19.34 billion yuan in expenditures, yielding a surplus of over 1 billion yuan.

Twelve of the 37 venues were specifically constructed for the event. The Beijing Olympics were the first to offer full digital coverage globally, allowing hundreds of millions of viewers across the world to follow the action online.

Three intangible legacies of the Games stand out: health, sports policy and education. The organizing committee introduced the concept of "Olympic Health Legacy" and established a system to evaluate the impact of a mass event on the health of the host

Legacy of 2008 Olympics goes beyond economics



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

population.

These included changes in health behaviors of individuals, improvements in public health services and enhancements in the quality of the external hygienic environment.

From 2001 to 2007, 140 billion yuan was spent on environmental improvement, which was far more than the \$12.2 billion promised in the bidding reports.

The Games elevated the role of sport in China and enhanced the status of mass sport. From a poli-

cy development perspective, China's Olympics experience streamlined policy-making and planning for mega events.

The coordination required by the Games fostered policy coherence across public, voluntary and private sectors, exemplified by Beijing's "dual-city" benefit, which reduced venue costs for the 2022 Winter Olympics.

A great deal of organizational learning also took place, with Chinese sports organizations engaging with national and international

sports federations, leading to improved sport governance.

Aug 8 was declared National Fitness Day, when public sports facilities are required to open free of charge to the public, promoting public health and sports participation.

Significant investments were made in mass sport from the lottery public welfare fund, with funding increasing over time.

The Games relied on tens of thousands of volunteers, supported by a large network of "city volunteers" stationed across Beijing, marking a cultural shift toward a formalized civic volunteer network that remains active in major public events.

Public investments, organizational learning, cultural change, and improved policy coherence have advanced sport in China, embracing social and economic values beyond health benefits and political gains.

Education was the chief mechanism for promoting Olympian values. The Beijing 2008 Olympics Education Programme was the largest of its kind in the Games history, integrating Olympian values — excellence, friendship and respect — into the curriculum of over 400,000 schools across China.

The program had three main components, including the Heart-to-Heart international school pairings, Olympic Values Education Programme teaching resources and curriculum integration, and the model schools program across China. It reached approximately 400 million children and left a lasting cultural and civic legacy for China's younger generation.

The Olympics do not belong to a country or an institution, but to all humanity.

When a city hosts them, it enters into a contract: the Olympic Movement allows the host city to invest the accumulated cultural capital of the Games, and, in return, the city promises to deliver certain legacies.

Olympic legacy is not automatically established. Beijing successfully leveraged the opportunities presented by the Games by mobilizing the energy of society to deliver lasting benefits.

The author is a professor of sport management at Brunel University in London, UK. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Reflecting on what remains after the flame goes out

Editor's note: July 13 marks the 25th anniversary of Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games. In a conversation with China Daily journalist Li Wei, Professor Angela J. Schneider, director of the International Centre for Olympic Studies at Western University and the first director of Ethics and Education for the World Anti-Doping Agency, and Zhou Guanpeng, a research associate at the center, reflect on the legacy that remains after the Olympic flame is extinguished. Through the lenses of sport, technology, sustainability and human well-being, they examine how the Beijing Olympics have continued to shape society and the public imagination nearly two decades later.

Li Wei: What do you remember most about the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games?

Zhou: When I think about the twenty-five years since Beijing won its Olympic bid in 2001, I return to several images from the 2008 opening ceremony. Firework footprints moved along Beijing's Central Axis toward the Bird's Nest. Then an ancient sundial appeared. A sundial: the shadow of the sun. It makes time visible by reading the shadow cast by light.

Perhaps Olympic legacy works in the same way. The visible light is easy to see: venues, ceremonies, medals, technology, global attention. The harder question is: After the flame goes out, what truly remains, and whose life does it change?

Schneider: Legacy is not only what still stands after the Games. It is what continues to serve human beings. In my work, I distinguish between performance excellence and human excellence.

The first asks: how fast, how high, how strong? The second asks: what kind of person, community and life does sport help us cultivate?

If we take that distinction seriously, Olympic legacy cannot be measured only by buildings, spectacle or records. We must also ask about human legacy: whom do these achievements still serve? Do they serve athletes and citizens, or only a spectacle that has already passed?

Zhou: The children who watched the fireworks in 2008 may now be parents. Venues once belonging to champions may now belong to students, walkers, skaters and families. More than a century ago, Chairman Mao Zedong warned in *A Study of Physical Education* that sport could have "form without substance".

He did not treat the body as an accessory to the spirit, but as the ground of knowledge, will and moral life. When we speak of Olympic legacy today, do we face a similar question: Is sport merely a ceremony or spectacle to be watched, or a practice people actually live?

Schneider: I would add to that question. Participation is not only a matter of numbers. A crowded venue does not necessarily mean a meaningful sporting culture. We must ask whether people enter the internal goods of sport: the joy of learning skill, the discipline of sustained practice, the confidence formed through effort, and the experience of testing oneself with others under fair conditions. When sport enters daily life in this way, it is no longer only leisure. It becomes part of a fuller human life. Such a legacy is not static. It has to be used, practiced and understood again.

Li Wei: If Olympic legacy is ultimately measured by how deeply sport enters everyday life, how should we judge whether a host city has succeeded? Is it enough that venues remain open, or must they also become part of people's daily habits and social relationships?

Zhou: That brings us to another question: Are we building smarter Olympics, or wiser ones? The scroll sequence in the 2008 opening ceremony offers at least one clue. Painting, writing, dance and music were not separate performances. The body was writing, the ink was dancing, movement became image.

Ancient form and modern technology appeared in the same scene. The point did not seem to be that technology betrays nature.

It seemed to ask whether technology can remain fitting to the body, to rhythm and to meaning. From your perspective, how should technology in sport be judged?

Schneider: I would not begin by asking whether technology is natural or unnatural. That often misleads us, because "nature" is not, by itself, a clear ethical standard. I would ask: what does the technology serve?

If it makes sport safer, fairer and more accessible, reduces waste, and helps more people participate, it can deepen sport.

But if it turns athletes into performance machines, spectators into data consumers, and venues into monuments no longer belonging to city life, it weakens sport. A truly sustainable Olympics is not only more efficient environmentally. It must also be ethically accountable to human beings.

Zhou: So sustainability is not only an engineering problem. Beijing has many visible examples of venue reuse, but a deeper question is whether these spaces have returned to public life. If venues and technologies merely prove that a city is stronger, faster and better organized, they may be smart. If they help ordinary people keep moving, meeting, learning and recovering bodily life, they may become wise.

Schneider: Yes. The Olympic movement is based on a public trust. It does not belong only to committees, sponsors or host cities.

It also belongs to athletes, citizens and future generations. A sustainable venue is one that returns to public life. A sustainable technology supports meaningful effort rather than replacing it. A sustainable Olympic city is not merely more spectacular. It is more fit for better human life.

Public trust means that Olympic legacy must remain open to public judgment: does it give people more chances to move, to meet, and to understand themselves and others through sport?

Li Wei: The third question may be the deepest: when the world is faced with so many challenges, what can the Olympic Games still hold together?

Zhou: In the movable-type sequence, the performers evoked the ideals of "friends coming from afar" and "all within the four seas are brothers and sisters". Then the blocks formed the character *he*, harmony. Finally, the blocks opened, and people appeared from underneath and waved.

That harmony was not produced by machinery alone. It was coordinated human movement. It seemed to resonate with the Olympic ideal: not erasing difference, but forming shared practice within difference.

Schneider: That is important. What sport gives to ideals is practice. Harmony in sport is not the absence of conflict. Competition itself is conflict under shared constraints. Fair play, as I understand it, is not merely following rules or being polite. It is respect for the game.

Respect for the game changes how we see opponents. An opponent is not an enemy to be eliminated, but a necessary partner in the pursuit of excellent sport. Without a worthy opponent, one cannot truly test oneself.

Zhou: Then harmony is not sameness, but coordination within difference. It does not imagine a world without conflict. It asks conflict to enter rules, limits and mutual recognition.

Schneider: Yes. Two athletes may come from divided countries, speak different languages and carry different histories. Yet in competition they can recognize one another through shared rules.

That recognition is limited, but it is real. It cannot solve geopolitics, but it can teach a disciplined way of living with others and the world. The value of the Olympic Games is not that they make the world suddenly agree. It is that they allow people, while difference remains, to enter a practice shaped by rules, respect and effort.

Zhou: So the twenty-fifth anniversary of Beijing's successful bid should not be only a memory of success. It should become a question: after the ceremony ends, can the city, its venues, its technologies and its citizens continue to practice this deeper legacy?

Schneider: That is the key question. If we must name it, since 1993 I have called it the "spirit of sport" which is based on the internal goods that create the joy of sport.

But I would not use that phrase as a slogan. It means skill, fair challenge, meaningful effort, respect for opponents, and the cultivation of a fuller human life. Beijing's most lasting Olympic legacy will not be measured only by buildings that still stand, but by what still moves: bodies, habits, public spaces, shared memory, and the continuing possibility that competition can become a practice of human flourishing.

The light once illuminated a city; the shadow tells us whether that light still gives direction to human life.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Sun Dan

When China found its own rhythm

When Beijing won the right to host the 2008 Olympics on July 13, 2001, I was a girl with a dream and little sense of how profoundly that moment would shape my life.

Twenty-five years later, I have lived that transformation from several vantage points: as an athlete who won China's first Olympic silver medal in rhythmic gymnastics in 2008, and as the head coach who led the Chinese team to Olympic gold in Paris in 2024, ending more than four decades of European dominance in the event.

Yet the most important change was not the medal. It was the moment China stopped asking how to look more like everyone else.

For much of its history, rhythmic gymnastics was governed by a distinctly European aesthetic. Movement, music and choreography were judged against conventions that emerged largely from Eastern Europe.

Like many latecomers to the sport, China began by studying those standards, hiring foreign choreographers and trying to narrow the gap.

It was a necessary stage of development. Before a country can contribute to a global language, it must first learn to speak it.

But eventually a different question emerged: If sport is a universal language, why must we speak it with a borrowed accent? Why could the world not encounter contemporary China through this sport?

The answer was not to drape routines in obvious national symbols. Cultural confidence is not costume design.

Over the years, my colleagues and I built a long-term archive of Chinese cultural materials: classical dance, traditional music, historical imagery and regional

artistic traditions.

We took athletes to museums and historical sites, invited experts in Chinese dance and folk music into training camps, and studied international judging rules with equal intensity.

Our goal was not to make routines that looked "Chinese" at first glance. It was to create works whose emotional logic could be understood anywhere.

When audiences watch a routine inspired by Dunhuang murals or ancient Chinese poetry, they do not need prior knowledge of Chinese history.

They need to feel wonder, tension, serenity or strength.

Cultural expression succeeds internationally not when it demands explanation, but when it creates recognition.

That is why routines such as *Flying Apsaras*, *Heroes of Heaven and Earth*, *Water Dragon's Chant* and *Phoenix Soaring to the Sky* were designed around universal emotions while drawing on distinctly Chinese artistic traditions.

In recent years, I have noticed a subtle but meaningful shift in how international judges and coaches respond.

Chinese routines are no longer treated merely as interesting variations from the periphery. Increasingly, they are discussed as creative references in their own right.

This reflects a broader change in China's relationship with the world.

For a long time, Chinese culture was often observed, analyzed or categorized from the outside. Today, in some fields, it is beginning to influence how the conversation itself is conducted.

True confidence is not insisting that one's culture is unique. It is understanding global rules well enough to participate fully while still speaking in one's own voice.

That voice, however, would mean little without a second transformation: the move from heroic endurance to scientific training.

When I was preparing for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, success depended largely on relentless repetition and personal sacrifice. My generation owes an enormous debt to coaches who built the foundation of Chinese rhythmic gymnastics through sheer perseverance.

As a coach, I have come to see that modern elite sport requires more than determination. It requires evidence.

Today our program integrates physical conditioning, rehabilitation, sports science, nutrition and psychological support into a unified system.

Training decisions are increasingly guided by data rather than intuition alone.

Just as important, we pay closer attention to the long-term physical and mental well-being of athletes whose careers span childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

That shift has changed the meaning of coaching. A coach is not simply a technician correcting movements; a coach is a long-term guardian of human development.

I often tell my athletes that a group routine succeeds only when different personalities learn to move with one heartbeat. We do not train every athlete identically.

Each receives a development plan tailored to her technical weaknesses, temperament and future potential. The goal is not uniformity, but unity.

This evolution has also been accompanied by greater openness to the world.

China has benefited enormously from international exchange. We learn from foreign coaches, judges and training systems,

while increasingly sharing our own experience with overseas colleagues who come to China to observe and collaborate.

Sport is one of the few arenas where civilizations can engage one another without requiring complete agreement.

A common set of rules creates space for different cultural expressions to coexist. China's contribution should not be to reject international standards, but to enrich the diversity that exists within them.

Looking back, the 25 years since Beijing's Olympic bid was approved trace not only my personal journey, but also the journey of Chinese women in sport.

More women now serve as head coaches, researchers, administrators and participants in international sports governance.

That change is not simply a sporting achievement; it reflects a broader expansion of opportunities for women in Chinese society.

When my athletes tell me they see in me a confident and capable Chinese woman, I regard that as a responsibility greater than any medal.

China once entered rhythmic gymnastics as a student. Today it enters as a participant with something of its own to say.

We will continue to learn from the world and to pursue scientific excellence. But we will also continue to present Chinese culture not as a museum piece, but as a living, evolving source of creativity.

Olympic gold may have announced our arrival. Finding our own voice is what made the journey worthwhile.

The author is the head coach of the Chinese Rhythmic Gymnastics Group Team. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

OPINION

Liberal Arts is becoming relevant again in AI age



SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The writer is Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

THE doomscrollers have already had their day with the liberal arts. What is the purpose, cynics argue, of learning to write, paint, or play an instrument, if artificial intelligence can make a piece of music or write a novel within minutes?

At first glance, they do have a point. Multiple AI models have been known to produce art and entire stories written by chatbots. As the models continue to improve and self-learn, it may be difficult to distinguish between human- and machine-produced products. In such a scenario, the liberal arts, with their focus on organised writing, thoughtful discussions and creative output, seem to be outdated.

And yet, counterintuitively, the liberal arts are making a comeback, albeit gradually.

In fact, experts suggest that consumption on the Internet itself has peaked. There is only so much that is attractive about 30-second reels of cats playing piano or the latest food trend.

Expressing oneself has been a human instinct from the beginning of time. Evidence for this comes from prehistoric cave paintings, Sumerian writing and texts on palm fronds. All this historically indicated

the need to document mercantile trade, but also to reflect on human pain, aspiration and achievement.

Today, AI may write, but there is something incomplete about its style, which is defined as ‘frictionless, repetitive, and pretending to sound profound’. The sentences are too perfect, smooth and complete. In short, it is exactly what human writing is not. There is tension, struggle, variation and change in voice when we write – AI completes each idea with total confidence in itself. It is literally too good to be true.

The increasing distrust of AI-generated writing is exactly why liberal arts are seeing an upsurge. While mechanical writing may be everywhere, it is now important to actually learn how to use these ideas, how to synthesise them, and even communicate them with a specific audience and their own unique level.

These are not skills that AI can ever master. A high school student in Mexico is not the same as an 18-year-old in Fiji, for example, as they both have vastly different backstories and cultural frames. Knowing such variations is a human skill, not a digital one.

Institutions and companies will also require humans with emotional intelligence,

Whether it is philosophy, literature or languages, the questions raised have been about ‘how’ and ‘why’ of concepts, ideas and trends. It asks fundamental questions like the meaning of existence and the truth about the universe. These are nuanced ideas that cannot be answered in simple binary terms.

those who can understand human psychology and go beyond the broad strokes and generalisations that AI can muster up.

It is also important to understand the ethics of using content generated by third parties. Nuanced questions like whose novel it is when written by a human and AI together, or who gets the copyright and royalties when music is solely produced digitally, cannot be answered by AI – there are just too many variables. This requires critical thinking, application of theories to specific contexts and experimentation with emerging ideas.

This is exactly what liberal arts were doing all along. Whether it is philosophy, literature or languages, the questions raised have been about ‘how’ and ‘why’ of concepts, ideas and trends. It asks fundamental questions like the meaning of existence and the truth about the universe. These are nuanced ideas that cannot be answered in simple binary terms.

As an article in Forbes magazine said, these are “enduring human skills in uncertain and rapidly evolving times”.

Liberal arts have always taught us to understand a changing world. Today, we will still have to turn to the humanities to help us face and cope with this latest challenge.

RESIDENTS
RECALL ESCAPE
FROM DEADLY
SPANISH WILDFIRE

ALFONS LUNA

As flames raced towards the Spanish village of Bedar, Manoli Ramos received a desperate order from the mayor: run to the church and ring the bells to warn residents of the danger closing in.

“We rang the bells many times so people would know,” the 72-year-old Bedar town councillor said in the nearby town of Los Gallardos, where she has sought refuge since the blaze broke out on Thursday. Twelve people died after getting trapped in vehicles and as they tried to flee on foot - most of them foreigners, according to officials. The blaze has torn through over 6,000 hectares of land and devastated an area that had become a peaceful refuge for foreign residents, particularly Britons who came to retire or spend holidays among the green hills near Spain’s Mediterranean coast. Many lived in isolated homes outside the village, seeking privacy and tranquillity but potentially making it more difficult to receive warnings or escape as the flames spread.

“Foreigners live scattered outside Bedar,” Ramos said. “They have beautiful homes and their belongings. They like living a little away from the centre.” The authorities suspect the wildfire began when a power line broke as Spain sweltered in extreme heat, creating tinderbox conditions. For Hassan Oulghazzi, the fire first appeared as a dark cloud hanging over his home.

The 52-year-old Moroccan resident, who has lived in Bedar for 16 years, never saw the flames but watched as thick black smoke began to cover the area before police officers pounded on his door. “How could you not be afraid?” he said. “When someone knocks on your door and tells you: ‘Get up, come on, leave here. This is real, you have to go.’” Oulghazzi fled with his wife and daughter without being able to take their belongings. He later went to a municipal sports hall in the coastal town of Garrucha, where evacuees were receiving help from the Red Cross.

But he said his fear was nothing compared with the suffering of those who died.

“Everyone was afraid, but I am really touched by the dead and those who were burned. I really am,” he said. “There are some people I know.”

Officials said some of those who died had not followed orders to evacuate or to shelter in place once the flames got too close. Austin Crilly, an 87-year-old Briton who was evacuated from the affected area, said he has lived through plenty and has learned to accept whatever comes. “I’m old school. — AFP

Tracing Oman’s historic
coastal identity

PEOPLE often assume that borders have always existed in their current form. A map makes that assumption feel reasonable.

However, for much of history, places were understood through daily life rather than through lines on paper. Along the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, the term Oman Coast emerged from this earlier way of seeing the world.

It was not a country and it was not a political claim. It was a practical way to describe a coastal region where people lived, worked, and moved in familiar patterns.

In those earlier periods, the word Oman was used more broadly than it is today. It appeared in descriptions of a wide coastal area linked by language, trade, and shared routines. Sailors, traders, and fishing communities moved between ports that felt familiar even when local leadership differed.

This sense of continuity came from common ways of life rather than from central authority. Clear borders were not necessary for people to understand where they belonged.

Coastal life followed practical needs. Boats left when the weather allowed. Fishing and pearling took place where conditions were right. Markets formed where ships could arrive safely. Local leaders handled local affairs and responded to immediate concerns.

Relationships between communities adjusted over time, shaped by opportunity and cooperation. Influence existed in many forms, but it was not fixed or permanent. Modern readers often look for clear answers that the past does not always provide. Questions about fixed control or permanent rule assume a structure that developed much later. People



DR KHALFAN AL HARRASI

The author is an academic and researcher

at the time lived with overlapping connections to family and local leadership, a workable system shaped by environment and necessity. During the 19th century, outside involvement introduced a new layer of organisation. British treaties and administrative practices led to terms such as Pirate Coast and later Trucial Coast.

These labels reflected external concerns about maritime safety and foreign relations. They were tools of administration and diplomacy. They did not replace local identities or everyday practices along the coast.

The term ‘Trucial Oman’ appeared within this treaty context.

It referred to coastal rulers who had agreements affecting foreign relations. It did not indicate governance from Muscat, and it did not describe a single political unit. Internal authority remained local.

The wording served administrative clarity at the time, even though it can sound stronger when read without context today.

As years passed, written records naturally gained influence. Reports and treaties survived and were later consulted, sometimes without the surrounding context of daily life. This occasionally led to misunderstanding, where geographic description or administrative language appeared to suggest political arrangements that did not exist in practice. Recent

historical work has taken care to clarify these distinctions.

Economic change then reshaped the region. The decline of pearling altered long-standing patterns of work. The discovery of oil increased responsibility and scale. Informal arrangements that once functioned well became less suitable. Security structures became more formal. Treaty systems gradually gave way to political frameworks better suited to changing conditions.

Over the same long historical arc, Oman’s presence was not limited to its immediate coastline. Omani sailors, merchants, and leaders built strong maritime networks that connected Arabia with East Africa and parts of South Asia.

Indian Ocean routes linked ports through trade, diplomacy, and navigation. Places such as Zanzibar and Gwadar became part of this wider world of exchange. This influence was shaped by seafaring skill, trust, and long experience at sea rather than by territorial expansion.

Geography quietly shaped all of this. Mountains influenced movement inland. Deserts limited settlement. Coastlines encouraged exchange. Sea routes supported cooperation. Similar ways of life developed along the shore without requiring political unity. Shared conditions created familiarity, not uniformity.

Seen in this light, the Oman Coast reflects a deep and respected chapter of regional history that developed long before modern borders took shape.

It helps explain how life, movement, and connection grew naturally through trade, navigation, and shared experience, without the need for political claims. This shared past continues to highlight Oman’s long-standing role as a centre of experience, stability, and maritime knowledge.

Nature’s teamwork secrets offer lessons for human society



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHAMI

The writer is author,
translator and
communications
professional

Every morning, before the first commuter fights traffic, before the first office meeting begins, before the first political argument erupts online, a miracle of cooperation is already starting across the planet.

Imagine a world where millions of individuals work together without meetings, emails, performance reviews, or long debates. A world where survival depends not on competition alone, but on collaboration. Surprisingly, this world already exists all around us in forests, oceans, grasslands, and even beneath our feet.

While humans often pride themselves on being the most intelligent species on Earth, animals have spent millions of years refining the art of cooperation. Their societies reveal lessons that are both simple and profound, offering insights into how we can build stronger teams, healthier communities, and harmonious societies.

On the other hand, executives fly across continents to learn productivity from ants. Politicians attend masterclasses on communication taught by bees. Corporate managers queue for lessons in leadership from migrating geese. And social analysts spend hours analysing elephant societies in search of the secret ingredient that keeps communities together. Nature offers these lessons free of charge, but humans rarely pay attention.

For all the technological brilliance, humans remain strangely conflicted about cooperation. We celebrate teamwork

in speeches, but reward individual achievement. We praise unity while often practicing division. We acknowledge that no one succeeds alone, yet we continue to tell stories about individuals. However, the animal kingdom tells a different story!

Beneath our feet, ants are busy conducting one of the world’s longest-running experiments in collective action. There is no ant demanding personal credit for discovering a food source. No ant insisting that a tunnel bear its name. No ant posting updates about its individual accomplishments. The colony comes first.

Humans are taught to stand out, to distinguish oneself from the crowd. But ants have survived and thrived for millions of years by mastering a principle that results emerge when individuals commit to a shared purpose.

A few metres away, a honeybee lands on a flower. After gathering nectar, it returns to the hive and performs a dance. The dance is not a celebration, not self-promotion, but information: “Here is where the food is.” That single act transforms individual discovery into collective opportunity.

Imagine if every workplace functioned with the same instinct. Imagine if information travelled as freely as it does in a beehive. Many of our failures are not failures of intelligence, but failures of communication.

Then come the elephants, philosophers of the animal world. Elephants remember,

Leadership changes hands because the journey matters more than the leader. The truth is that nature’s greatest achievements are rarely individual performances, but collective productions

encourage and help the weak. They circle the helpless, support calves, climb riverbanks and stand beside injured companions. Their behaviour tells that cooperation is not simply a strategy for survival, but also an expression of compassion.

In many human societies, empathy is treated as a soft quality, admirable but secondary. Yet elephant herds reflect that caring for one another is one of the strongest forces holding a community together.

In fact, the best lesson is taught by the geese. Every year, they cross vast distances in a V-shaped formation. Scientists explain this aerodynamics as flying together reduces resistance and saves energy. But the most fascinating detail is not the shape, but the rotation. The bird at the front eventually tires, so another bird takes the lead. No drama, no struggle and no endless contest for authority.

Leadership changes hands because the journey matters more than the leader. The truth is that nature’s greatest achievements are rarely individual performances, but collective productions. The hive succeeds because of the flock. The herd survives because of the group. The flock reaches its destination because every member contributes.

Hence, the next time a flock of geese passes overhead, or a line of ants crosses a sidewalk, remember that you are witnessing something more than instinct. You are watching experts at cooperation. They have been teaching the same lesson for millions of years.

TEEN VENEZUELA QUAKE SURVIVOR MOURNS HER ‘YOUNG FOREVER’ FRIENDS

SARAH KINOSIAN

Maria Alejandra Sanz turned away when she heard rescue workers had pulled the lifeless body of one of her best friends from the rubble of a building levelled by twin earthquakes that struck the state of La Guaira in northern Venezuela last month.

The 17-year-old high school student had lain in near-darkness for 17 hours after the June 24 quakes, trapped beneath the collapsed building in the coastal town of La Guaira where she had grown up.

Of the group of 10 friends who had been preparing a routine for their high school graduation, four did not make it out alive.

“I’m fine,” Sanz said unconvincingly during an interview in front of her former home nine days after the disaster, the Caribbean air still heavy with dust and grief. Earlier that day, rescuers had pulled the body of her friend, Gonzalo Marquez, from the rubble. Then came a string of unanswerable questions: Would her friends have survived if rescuers had arrived sooner? What if she had been with Marquez downstairs instead of fetching him water from her upstairs apartment? Why does she get to go to university, while he is laid to rest?

Raised amid economic collapse, mass migration and authoritarian rule, Sanz and her friends began 2026 believing the US ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro might finally offer a different future. Then came the quakes, which the government says have so far killed over 4,000 people and injured nearly 17,000 others.

Sanz’s troupe had been practicing seven days a week in the month leading up to the quakes, sometimes going until 3 am.

Graduation was in three days. About 20 minutes before the quakes struck, Marquez asked Sanz for water. She went up to the third-floor apartment she shared with her parents, petted her dog Bruna for the last time and was about to reach the water when the building started to shake at 6:04 pm. She moved to the nearest door frame and seconds later was engulfed in darkness as the floors below her gave way. The door frame fell over her midsection diagonally, shielding her from a collapsed wall.

Sanz saw a sliver of light across her fingers and knew she was not buried too deep. She was able to free her feet by slipping out of the oversized sneakers she was given for the dance performance.

“If I have to die, let it be while I’m asleep,” she remembers thinking at the time. Sanz woke to light falling across her hand again and began clawing towards it, wedging her body slowly between chunks of concrete and making a hole she could fit through in the wall above her. — Reuters

Learning to think before we explain the world

ONE of the defining features of contemporary Arab public discourse is not a shortage of information but a shortage of judgment. We have become remarkably adept at producing answers before asking questions, at offering certainty where inquiry should begin, and at explaining the world in ways that reassure us more than they illuminate reality.

Perhaps nowhere is this habit more visible than in our instinctive resort to conspiracy.

Every setback becomes evidence of a hidden plot. Every criticism from abroad is interpreted as an attack on identity. Every success achieved elsewhere is attributed to manipulation rather than competence.

Conspiracies undoubtedly exist; history offers abundant proof. But when conspiracy becomes a universal explanation, it ceases to be analysis and becomes an escape from analysis. This is not an Arab peculiarity; conspiratorial thinking is corroding public debate in Western societies as well, but we owe it to ourselves to confront the version we know from within. A mind that has one answer for every question has already stopped thinking.

More than a thousand years ago, the essayist and philosopher Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi captured this danger with remarkable economy: “The senses are pitfalls, illusions are pathways, and minds are kingdoms.” His point was not to dismiss the senses but to distinguish perception from judgment. Seeing is not the same as understanding. Reason begins precisely where appearances cease to be sufficient.

The distinction is more than philosophical. It is the foundation of civilisation itself.

Consider one of the simplest experiments in physics. To ordinary observation, a feather plainly falls more slowly than a stone. For centuries, this seemed beyond dispute because it agreed perfectly with common experience. Yet, remove air resistance and both



HAMED
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The writer
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and editor

Good judgment is never merely an individual virtue; it is a social achievement. If those responsible for producing ideas lose the capacity for critical judgment, the consequences inevitably spread throughout public life

objects fall at exactly the same rate. When David Scott, commander of Apollo 15, dropped a feather and a hammer on the Moon in 1971, they reached the lunar surface together.

The lesson extends far beyond physics. Civilisation advances not because it trusts appearances but because it develops ways of questioning them. The scientific revolution did not begin with better eyesight. It began with better judgment.

Our intellectual crisis, therefore, is not simply that we misread the world. It is that we inherit the intellectual tools with which we interpret the world without first asking how those tools were forged. We mistake familiarity for truth and inheritance for evidence.

Human beings never encounter reality directly. We see it through language, history, institutions, assumptions, and collective memory. Ideas that appear self-evident in one age often seem naive in another. What appears universal today may tomorrow become merely another chapter in the history of ideas.

If judgment requires more than perception, it also requires more than intuition. It demands that we understand where our concepts come from. Concepts are not timeless truths suspended above history; they are historical solutions to historical problems.

Take the modern nation-state. Whether one ultimately embraces or rejects it is beside the point. The concept emerged from particular European struggles over sovereignty, religion, war, bureaucracy, and political authority. Transporting its vocabulary without understanding the historical conditions that produced it inevitably generates confusion. Concepts travel across civilisations, but they do not travel empty of history.

Much of the Arab world’s intellectual turmoil over the past century reflects this failure precisely. We imported other societies’ concepts together with their arguments, or rejected both wholesale, without first asking what historical questions those

concepts were originally designed to answer. We borrowed conclusions before understanding the problems from which they emerged.

The consequences are not confined to universities or seminar rooms. Misunderstood concepts eventually become misunderstood institutions.

Good judgment is never merely an individual virtue; it is a social achievement. Universities, schools, newspapers, publishing houses, and research centres do more than transmit knowledge. They cultivate habits of inquiry. They teach societies not merely what to think but how to think. If those responsible for producing ideas lose the capacity for critical judgment, the consequences inevitably spread throughout public life.

Every civilisation that has learned to judge well has cultivated three indispensable habits.

Science teaches us to test claims against evidence, even when evidence contradicts intuition. Philosophy teaches us to examine assumptions that evidence alone cannot reach.

The Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakaria understood the political consequences of intellectual decline. He argued that every party in Arab intellectual life shares complicity in what he called ‘the destruction of minds’, a crime, he wrote, graver than anything committed by undemocratic regimes. Minds are destroyed not only when they are forbidden to speak, but when they cease to ask questions; when ready-made answers replace inquiry; when inherited certainty becomes a substitute for evidence.

Al Tawhidi’s insight therefore remains strikingly contemporary. The senses may deceive us. Illusion offers comforting pathways. But minds are not instincts; they are kingdoms that must be patiently built through science, philosophy, freedom, and institutions that reward inquiry over certainty. ocieties do not prosper because they see more than others. They prosper because they learn how to see more clearly. That, more than information or ideology, is the beginning of sound judgment.

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EDITORIALS

Should the fear of soccer-based violence qualify you for asylum in the US?

The World Cup has been joyous, but the game’s fans can be anything but beautiful

The World Cup has been an amazing spectacle and, mercifully, the sport’s notorious hooligans have been largely absent.

As soccer fans well know, hooligans are rowdy gangs that engage in violent behavior on game days. In some soccer-mad countries, they’re not just a nuisance but part of organized crime networks with ties to law-enforcement and extremist political parties.

Bojan Andric, for one, is afraid of them, and justifiably so. Andric was a professional soccer player in Serbia when he had a bad game. The local “Red Devils” crew followed him home, beat him unconscious and continued to threaten him afterward.

Andric requested a trade to a different city, but failing that, he came to the U.S. on a visitor’s visa and petitioned for asylum, a form of legal protection for people who fear persecution in their home countries. Andric claimed he faced persecution in Serbia from the hooligans.

In a thoughtful opinion earlier this month, Chicago’s 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decided against Andric, upholding an immigration court ruling. That probably means he will need to leave the country.

Andric is a sympathetic figure, but his case also illustrates why asylum law is hard. Not every person facing danger abroad qualifies for asylum in the United States. The law requires a connection to a protected ground — such as race, religion or nationality — and the courts found that Andric’s case involved violent retaliation over his soccer performance, not persecution because of who he was or what he believed.

Still, the current system is working well, and Congress, not the courts, has to decide whether America’s immigration laws are serving the country’s interests and



Partizan fans light fireworks during a Serbian national soccer league derby match between Red Star and Partizan in Belgrade, Serbia, on April 26. **DARKO VOJINOVIC/AP**

values.

We recognize that under the polarizing Donald Trump administration, comprehensive immigration reform is probably impossible. But it is needed. And the need is especially acute as one-off U.S. Supreme Court rulings roil America’s immigration laws.

Case in point: In a decision last month, the high court ruled that asylum-seekers like Andric who have made it into the U.S. are entitled to apply for asylum and have their cases reviewed. Anyone who doesn’t physically arrive on U.S. soil, however, can be stopped at border crossings with no review of their cases.

The ruling effectively overturned immigration policies that gave vulnerable people an oppor-

tunity to seek protection, whether they were inside the country or at the border. Writing for the minority, Justice Sonia Sotomayor pointed out that blocking asylum-seekers with zero consideration of their plights creates a “perverse incentive” for migrants to cross the border illegally so their cases will be heard.

Whether you support the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown or not, no one should be in favor of giving migrants an incentive to jump the border — not least because of the dangers to migrants themselves. Sotomayor predicted that “more people will die” because of the court’s asylum decision.

We understand the asylum system is prone to abuse, as migrants can live for years in the

country waiting for immigration court decisions. Also, it should be noted that Barack Obama’s Democratic administration, not Trump’s, pioneered the modern policy of blocking asylum-seekers at the border, addressing a surge in Haitian migrants in 2016.

Yet asylum is at the heart of what America stands for in the world. As this page has stated previously, asylum is a core American value that must be protected. “This country since its founding has been a refuge for people facing starvation, war and even pogroms,” we wrote in 2023. “We need to fix the asylum process, not scrap it.”

We voiced that position as Congress considered a bipartisan agreement on immigration reform. Had it gone through, it

would have been the first comprehensive overhaul in decades. Negotiators had outlined an approach to asylum consistent with American values, which included speeding up the process. But for multiple political reasons, no reform was enacted.

Getting asylum in the U.S. is difficult. In Andric’s case, an immigration judge determined his testimony was credible, and he did indeed face serious threats from the hooligans he had left behind in Serbia. (The 7th Circuit ruling doesn’t give his exact arrival date.)

But a personal dispute isn’t enough to support an asylum claim. Andric had to show that he is a refugee in a protected class — unable to return to Serbia on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a certain social group or political opinions.

Andric argued that former soccer players targeted by hooligans were indeed a social group deserving protection, but the judges didn’t buy it. His argument that hooligans were acting against him because he didn’t share their extreme nationalist political opinions also fell flat. “Andric provided no evidence of motive beyond the hooligans’ dislike of his performance,” the court wrote.

As North America has seen with the World Cup, emotions run high when it comes to soccer. The attack on Andric caused facial burns, a skull hematoma and a mild concussion. He lost his immigration case, but it’s not as if he had no case to make, and we support the right of Andric and others in jeopardy abroad to make their cases.

America has long served as a beacon of hope for those facing violent oppression in their countries. People like Andric with credible fears deserve a fair-minded hearing. Anything else would be un-American.

A thousand years later, the Bayeux Tapestry returns to Britain

The legendary Bayeux Tapestry detailing William of Normandy’s 1066 conquest of England was embroidered, most likely by nuns, in England about 1,000 years ago. For centuries, one of the world’s most incredible Medieval works of art has resided in France.

But what’s a millennium between friends (or frenemies, depending on your point of view)?

The tapestry has come “home” to the United Kingdom via a remarkable agreement between France and the U.K. that will put the 230-foot-long account of one of the most dramatic and consequential events in Western history on display in London’s British

Museum. The artwork was transported carefully — verrrrry carefully — on Friday via truck and train from its home in Bayeux in Normandy to London. Museum visitors can view it beginning in September and running until July of next year.

This already is one of the toughest tickets you’ll ever see. Roughly 100,000 were sold the first day they were made available.

So why all the fuss?

The combination of an embroidery that old surviving intact all these years later and its thrilling telling of one of the most consequential battles in all of history just simply doesn’t have an equal.

The tapestry plays out sequentially, illustrating Anglo-Saxon scenes in England, introducing the English King Harold, and then relaying the gripping scenes of the battle after Harold’s forces march to defend the country from William’s invasion in Hastings.

The end result following the killing of Harold and William’s ascension to the throne was the near-elimination over the ensuing years of the Anglo-Saxon nobility and their replacement by French-speaking Norman elites — an anomaly from the usual distillation of cultures that follows a winning military campaign as the spoils are distributed to the

victors. For about 300 years afterward, English kings actually spoke French.

Anglo-Normans produced groundbreaking changes in law and culture that formed the basis for democracy as we understand it today, particularly in the example of the Magna Carta in the 13th century.

In a time of geopolitical strife and cracks in the Western alliances that have served Europe and the United States so well over the last seven decades, it is heartening to see this gift from the French to the British. Discussions about displaying the Bayeux Tapestry in the U.K. have continued on and

off for years, and worries about its fragile state as well as other tensions always stood in the way.

Writing in the Times, French President Emmanuel Macron described the loan as “a tangible expression of longstanding friendship and a sign of our shared desire to see France and the United Kingdom build their future together.”

So if you have the means and the time and you seek to serve your inner history nerd, we heartily recommend a trip to London, perhaps over the less-crowded winter, and a visit to the British Museum. It’s a once-in-a-thousand-year opportunity.

ON THIS DAY 81 YEARS AGO: GRANDSTAND GLADIATORS

The foreign relations committee of the Senate has been giving consideration to the question whether the Security Council of the new League of Nations can order American soldiers into action without a declaration of war by Congress.

It is curious that none of the senators called attention to the fact that if the Security Council can’t send Americans it can’t send anybody.

More than two months have passed since fighting on land and in the air ceased in Europe and two or three years have passed since Britain had any considerable need for a naval force in European waters.

... We know that a task force from the Royal Navy has been operating behind ours because there were reports of a number of British carriers receiving bomb hits, but where is the rest of the fleet and what risks is it running and what losses is it taking?

We have been told so often that sometimes we almost can believe that the future peace of the world depends upon close coöperation among the three great allies.

The doctrine apparently has not been preached in Moscow, for where is the Russian army that continues to receive lend-lease supplies from America? Where has it engaged the Japanese? Where is it cooperating? At San Francisco the Russians agreed to fight aggressors. Don’t they regard Japan as an aggressor?

If the one of our so-called allies which has declared war on Japan won’t contribute more than a bare token force to the fighting, and if the other hasn’t even joined in the war, what reason is there to suppose they will take any risks to keep the peace in future?

... While that is happening our allies will be pleased to cheer us on from the grandstand, provided, of course, that free tickets are furnished.

Tribune editorial board, July 12, 1945

EDITORIAL CARTOON



DREW SHENEMAN

OPINION

Blame county’s delayed property tax bills for CPS financial woes, not the state

By Jennifer Custer
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Between mayoral announcements and families settling in for the summer, Chicago Public Schools has been preparing the budget for approval in just a few weeks. As I have attended budget briefings in every corner of the city, people have taken notice of the timeliness of CPS passing a budget. Usually, CPS passes the budget in August, but there is a push this year to pass it in July. While the accelerated schedule is due to the hard work and break-neck speed of the budget staff, the haste with which we are passing this budget is due to the financial calamity waiting at the door if we do not.

If the budget is not passed by July, we will not be able to secure the needed tax anticipation notes, or TANs, to keep CPS open. That is not an exaggeration.

CPS is already facing serious cash-flow pressures due to ongoing delays in Cook County property tax distributions and underperforming year-end financials. 2026 is projected to end with a negative net cash position of approximately \$642 million, with \$914 million in TANs outstanding against a cash balance of only \$272 million. The district’s expenses are outpacing incoming revenue; there is no cash reserve cushion. CPS is reaching the legal limits on available borrowing for 2026. The current \$1.25 billion borrowing capacity is expected to be fully exhausted in August. Without action, operations will cease, paychecks will stop and the start of the school year will be thrown into chaos just as families are ending their summer breaks.

How did we get here? In short, Cook County has delayed a year’s worth of revenue to the district. The Tribune has chronicled how the failures of Assessor Fritz Kaegi to get assessments done on time, along with Cook County’s Tyler Technologies debacle, have led to nearly an entire year of revenues not making it to CPS — and not just our district, but many units of local government in Cook County.

Because CPS is funded almost solely by property taxes, Cook County’s failure cost Chicago taxpayers \$3 billion dollars in TANs and tens of millions in



Chicago Public Schools headquarters on Jan. 14, 2025. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

borrowing costs. Dollars that could have made it to the classroom instead went to useless interest payments.

Last year alone, the five-month delay of the 2025 second installment of taxes cost CPS about \$30 million, or approximately \$220,000 per day at the peak. The two-month delay of the first installment in 2026 has already cost \$10 million to date, or about \$165,000 per day at a borrowing peak of \$1.65 billion. The delays since 2020 have cost the district a total of over \$80 million. And this cost will grow further because of another anticipated two-month delay for the 2026 second-installment property tax bills, which

are being shifted from Aug. 1 to October.

Now, due to another delay, CPS will reach its legal limit for TANs by August. If we do not pass a budget this month, CPS will not be able to talk to banks to secure the money to pay any of its bills.

As we go into the final weeks of the budget process, I urge everyone involved — board members, staff, union leadership, families and concerned citizens — to not engage in brinkmanship on this budget, but to get it done in the time allotted. We cannot have the budget fight we had last budget cycle. Fighting among adults will not lead to any positive outcome for our students. We need to

show our children how adults are supposed to behave: Cooperate for the common good.

While there has been a lot of talk about the money Springfield owes CPS, that is not a complete view of what the goal of education spending from Springfield was supposed to be. It was an aspirational goal for CPS. To Springfield’s credit, Gov. JB Pritzker and the General Assembly increased education spending in this last budget.

In the future, what we need is legislation that holds the county accountable for the borrowing costs related to TANs when it fails to administer tax collection on time — not just for CPS,

but for all Cook County units of local government. Schools, parks, libraries and public safety agencies should be held harmless for failures by a unit of government they do not control.

Following this budget, the Board of Education needs to immediately begin the internal work of optimizing operations of the district by looking ahead to the next fiscal year as soon as possible. Taxpayers, parents and most importantly our students deserve a budget that protects them for years to come.

Jennifer Custer is a member of the Chicago Board of Education who represents District 1B.

Illinois’ public schools are caught in the middle of the pension crisis

By Gregory Kearney
and Joshua D. Rauh
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The truism goes, “Show me your budget, and I’ll show you what you value.” By that common-sense measure, what the state government of Illinois cares most about could hardly be clearer.

Over the past few decades, Illinois lawmakers have been ramping up spending on public employee pensions even as other budget priorities are crowded out. The trend line is unmistakable: Between 2000 and 2020, spending on pensions increased by over 500%, while outlays for services such as child protection, state police and college resources for poor students fell by a third on an inflation-adjusted basis.

The trade-off cuts deepest inside Illinois’ public education system.

Using newly compiled data linking pension contributions to federal annual school finance surveys, we set out to determine how rising pension costs have reshaped school budgets nationwide. Our new U.S. School Employee Atlas tracks the percentage of K-12 education spending that has gone to worker pensions in roughly 12,800 school districts across the country from 2015 to 2023. What emerges is a worsening crisis as pensions consume an ever-rising share of funding, but with some significant variation across the country.

The results for Illinois were especially stark. In 2023, pension contributions absorbed on average of more than 21% of the portion of expenditures related to employees covered by the pension systems (this is spending on instruction, administration, operations and other categories directly linked to covered employees). That is the second-highest burden in the country. Since 2015, this share has risen by more than five percentage points. Adjusting for inflation, Illinois schools’ pension contributions increased by \$1.9 billion over this period, while total associated education expenditures including those contributions grew by only \$1.3 billion.

This has put growing pressure



An empty hallway at Oswego East High School on March 20, 2023. ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

on other important education expenditures. If pension spending’s claim on the budget were still at 2015 levels — 15.3% — Illinois school districts would have had an additional \$1.72 billion in 2023 to use for educational costs with a direct bearing on student learning — think salaries for new teachers, new classroom resources or additional support services such as counselors or teacher aides.

Worse, these numbers probably understate the actual problem significantly. This is because the funding ratios largely depend on optimistic investment assumptions embedded in pension accounting, with the state mostly assuming long-run returns of roughly 7%. And if actual returns fall short of the rosy assumptions, the state’s required contributions made on behalf of school districts will jump.

In our analysis, we addressed this uncertainty by re-estimating Illinois’ unfunded liabilities using market-based Treasury

yields — a relatively conservative benchmark. The resulting change in the projection was substantial. Under this approach, annual pension contributions would need to increase from roughly \$7 billion today to more than \$15.7 billion. That would push the budgetary burden of pension contributions to nearly 37% of all covered employee spending.

Could Illinois tax its way out of a hole that deep? It may be tempted to try, but such a strategy would require a stable or expanding tax base to have any hope of succeeding. In reality, the state is experiencing the opposite trend. Illinois ranks near the bottom nationally in tax competitiveness, and according to the Tax Foundation, it has consistently posted one of the country’s largest net outflows of residents since 2022.

While its situation is already bleak, the state’s problems do not end there. Illinois is one of several states where pension benefits enjoy strong constitu-

tional protections, limiting the state’s ability to adjust past promises that are proving untenable. Article XIII, Section 5 of the Illinois Constitution makes public pension membership “an enforceable contractual relationship, the benefits of which shall not be diminished or impaired.” The Illinois Supreme Court has previously read this as expansively as it possibly could be read. In 2015, the justices unanimously struck down a 2013 reform law signed by then-Gov. Pat Quinn that would have trimmed cost-of-living increases and raised retirement ages, rejecting the state’s argument that a state fiscal emergency justified the reforms.

With that precedent, not only are Illinois pensioners’ earned benefits protected, but so is the formula by which they grow. Unlike the city of Detroit, where federal bankruptcy overrode Michigan’s pension protections, Illinois has no equivalent emergency exit plan. States cannot file

for bankruptcy, leaving the Prairie State in an unusually tight bind. Its current obligations are locked, the tax base is shrinking every year and the courts have eliminated a major lever that could quickly help close the gap.

That does not mean politicians and policymakers are completely powerless, however, and the sooner they act to protect the long-term fiscal health of the state, the better.

While constitutional protections make it substantially more difficult to alter existing pension promises, policymakers still control future benefits and the assumptions used to value them. Illinois already attempted to get costs under control in 2011, moving new hires onto a leaner Tier II plan, which means that today’s shortfall traces primarily to legacy Tier I promises and decades of state underfunding rather than new employees. These Tier II employees are charged the same 9% as their Tier I predecessors while paying so much less that new teachers effectively subsidize older ones, and their benefits fall short of the federal “safe harbor” standard that keeps Illinois teachers out of Social Security.

As such, the answer is not to squeeze new hires more but instead to redesign Tier II as a true hybrid with a guaranteed baseline annuity that satisfies federal requirements, paired with an individual account that lets newer teachers keep their own upside rather than finance someone else’s retirement.

Without reforms of this kind, pension obligations will keep eroding education expenditures, leaving school districts with fewer resources for classrooms, taxpayers with fewer options and students bearing the long-term consequences of reduced education quality.

Gregory Kearney is a research associate at the Hoover Institution. Joshua Rauh is the George P. Shultz senior fellow in economics at the Hoover Institution and a finance professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

OPINION

Trump Accounts are here. Now families need more than a deposit slip.

By Arellana Barela Levenson and Frank Arce
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

When Leslie Moreno-Roacho's son Zaiden became the first child in New Mexico to receive a state-funded Baby Bond, she told a local television reporter the deposit was "a ticket to opportunities. The opportunities I never had."

On July 4, millions of American families were handed the same kind of ticket. Most had no idea how to use it.

That day, the federal government began opening "Trump Accounts" for every U.S. citizen born between 2025 and 2028, depositing \$1,000 in each child's name and allowing families, employers and others to contribute up to \$5,000 a year. The program builds on a quieter wave of state experiments. Connecticut launched the country's first publicly funded Baby Bonds in 2023, with deposits projected to grow to between \$11,000 and \$24,000 by age 18. New Mexico and other states are advancing their own.

That convergence is itself remarkable. A federally backed children's investment program now extends, in modified form, an idea long championed on the left — that intergenerational wealth-building cannot wait for adulthood. In a country starved of bipartisan policy wins, this is one. But opening the account is only the first step.

An account creates access. It does not ensure action.

The case for these programs begins with what wealth actually does.

"The essence of wealth is functional. ... Its real value is what it can do for you," said Darrick Hamilton, The New School economist who first proposed Baby Bonds.

For millions of families, that function has been out of reach. The typical Black family holds just 15% of the wealth of the typical white family, and the average wealth gap between white and Hispanic families exceeds \$1 million per household. You cannot pass down what you were never



President Donald Trump rings a bell to mark the first day of trading for "Trump Accounts" with invited children, NYSE President Lynn Martin, NYSE Chairman Jefferey Sprecher, Susan Dell and others in the Oval Office at the White House on July 6 in Washington. **ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY**

allowed to build.

The research is striking. Education researcher William Elliott III of Washington University has found that a child with as little as \$1 to \$499 set aside for higher education is roughly three times more likely to enroll in college, and more likely to graduate, than a child with no account at all. Even small accounts shift expectations.

The harder question is what happens next. A widely cited 2014 meta analysis found that the conventional financial literacy programs typically paired with these accounts produce only small, fading effects on behavior. Knowing how to balance a checkbook or monitor a credit score is important, but it isn't enough. Real

financial capability — understanding how money grows, how time compounds choices, how everyday decisions connect to long-term outcomes — has to be built and reinforced over years, not delivered in a one-hour module.

Stanford University economist Annamaria Lusardi argues that "financial literacy is as important as the ability to read and write." Like reading, financial literacy has to be taught early and practiced often. If every American child is now going to have an investment account before they say their first word, the country needs a financial-capability infrastructure that grows alongside them.

Critics will note, fairly, that \$1,000 cannot close a million-dol-

lar wealth gap. They are right. But the value of these accounts was never only the dollars deposited. Elliott's research suggests the deeper return is psychological and behavioral: An account, however small, changes how a family imagines a child's future. The challenge now is making sure that imagination is matched by knowledge.

Some of that work has already begun. Dell founder Michael Dell and his wife, Susan, are funding additional \$250 deposits in qualifying ZIP codes through Trump Accounts. Universities, nonprofits and research centers are starting to study how to design the family-side supports these programs need. Far more effort — public, private and philanthropic — will

be required if these accounts are to deliver on their promise.

When Moreno-Roacho called her son's account a ticket, she was right. But a ticket only takes you where you want to go if you know how to use it.

If we get this part right, the children who opened accounts at the start will not just inherit a deposit. They will inherit the knowledge to grow their investment — and one day, the ability to hand it down.

Arellana Barela Levenson is founder and CEO of Cultivar Communities. Frank Arce, Ed.D., is the assistant dean for admissions and financial aid at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Voice of the People

Give teens what they need

Every summer, the same conversation returns to Chicago. Teen takeovers draw headlines, prompt urgent calls for action and spark debates at every level of government. And yet, after three summers, the real question remains: Why do young people keep showing up, and what would give them somewhere else to be?

The answer may be simpler than the debate suggests.

Chicago's young people have been clear: The traditional youth programs many cities lean on, community centers, libraries, the standard summer offerings, have lost their appeal with this generation. That observation says more about this problem than any policy debate has managed in three years. Chicago's young people bring plenty of energy and ambition. What they need are opportunities that take them seriously, push them and connect what they do today to a future they can picture clearly.

For over 15 years, Genesys Works Chicago has placed Chicago Public Schools students in paid corporate internships, backed by real skills training and mentorship from business partners across the city. Our students are not killing time. They are building resumes, professional networks and a tangible sense of where their lives can go, often for the first time anyone has asked them to think that far ahead.

Public safety matters, and the disruption and property damage are real and deserve a real response. At the same time, the proactive side of this equation, what Chicago actively offers its teenagers, deserves just as much attention and investment as any other approach on the table.

We cannot solve a citywide phenomenon alone. No single organization can. But proven workforce development models exist, and they work. They deserve the same level of investment and urgency this city brings to every other part of the conversation.

City leaders, corporate partners and fellow nonprofits all have a role to play, and youth opportunity belongs on the table with the same weight as every other proposal that has come before it.

Chicago's teenagers have already told us what is missing. It is time to act on it.
— *Holly Zann, executive director, Genesys Works Chicago*



A new tool for homeowners

The Cook County assessor deserves credit for making the assessment process more transparent. The Home Value Report and the office's publicly available residential valuation model documentation give homeowners greater insight into how properties are assessed. Perhaps most importantly, the documentation acknowledges that maintaining accurate property data across more than 1.8 million parcels is an ongoing challenge.

The next opportunity is to help homeowners make effective use of the information that is already publicly available.

The Home Value Report helps homeowners understand how their property was assessed. A property data audit tool would help homeowners verify the accuracy of the property data underlying that assessment.

Today, homeowners who want to evaluate an assessment must gather and reconcile information scattered across numerous public records, often requiring knowledge, time and resources many do not have. The Cook County assessor could build on the Home Value Report by developing a tool that automatically audits publicly available property information, verifies both the subject property's data and the factual accuracy of comparable-property information, identifies potential factual discrepancies and organizes objective market evidence.

Such a tool would help homeowners better understand their assessments, verify the factual accuracy of both their own property data and comparable-property information, and determine when

an appeal may be warranted. More importantly, it would improve the quality of information submitted during appeals, creating a valuable feedback mechanism for improving public property data over time.

Providing homeowners with this tool would build on the assessor's commitment to transparency while advancing three principles that should guide every property tax system: equity, transparency and governance. Better tools would lead to better-informed homeowners, more accurate property records, more efficient appeals and greater public confidence in the assessment process.
— *Tony Bonvolanta, Chicago*

Support for renewable energy

Thank you for the op-ed "The Iran gas tax is going to hit American families. But we can change the future" (July 6). The less dependent America is on oil, the less leverage hostile governments will have over us, the cleaner our air and water will be, and the cheaper our electric bills will be.

It's amazing how this is such a difficult concept for Americans to grasp. Corporate greed, corruption and calculated political misinformation stand in the way of progress toward an accelerated clean energy transformation. That stupid calculus means fewer jobs, more inflation, increased health-care costs and a less competitive America in world markets.

Let's demand our politicians provide more support for renewable energy since their point of view appears to be clouded by fossil fuel lobbyists and a stunted vision for the future.
— *Dorelle Ackermann, Mokena, Illinois*

Police disperse a group during a "teen takeover" in Chicago's Auburn Gresham neighborhood on June 6.
ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

lanes, but no one addressed the great opportunity to have a safe and carefree ride along DuSable Lake Shore Drive. Perhaps this is because the cost for two adults is \$69 each (no shirt), plus the additional cost of parking near the drive.

We have done the ride for several years, but the cost for an afternoon of carefree riding strains people's budgets, especially since there are many free bike trails in the forest preserves. If the cost is lowered, more cyclists would be tempted to join in Bike the Drive, and the fundraising goal would still be met.
— *Mary Ann McGinley, Wilmette*

Improving safety on the road

Safety is the excuse for the protected bike lanes, but safety is not increased when first responders are stuck in traffic, while the bike lanes are relatively empty.

When in my car, I am surrounded by metal, but I must still wear my seat belt and have a workable air bag. When I'm on my bike, I am not required to wear a helmet, although I do so, along with wearing gloves. Government officials who holler "safety" should mandate helmets for bike and scooter riders.

Scooter riders are hitting and injuring pedestrians, so for the sake of safety, their speeds should be lowered, if not banned.

Drivers of motorized vehicles must be tested and licensed, so similar requirements should apply to riders of scooters and motorized bikes — again, in the interest of safety.
— *Larry E. Nazimek, Chicago*

I'm glad I read this story

Thank you ever so much for Lisa Schencker's article addressing foodborne illness ("Illness may have some running to the bathroom," July 8).

A timely reading of the Tribune helped me steer clear of purchasing potentially problematic fruit that could have upset my already sensitive stomach. The illness identified as cyclosporiasis as reported can be quite debilitating. It makes one wonder how many other food-related illnesses we never even learn of.
— *Celeste J O'Dea, Oak Lawn*

Call for permitting reform

I could not agree more with the Iran gas tax op-ed by U.S. Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi. Our country should pivot away from dependence on fossil fuels, but, as he laments, President Donald Trump's administration is moving in the opposite direction.

However, there is one bright spot in current climate politics — a rare bipartisan interest in permitting reform that would strengthen and extend the electricity grid. With the midterms approaching, both parties are eager to show their credentials in affordability. A current historic increase in electricity demand will drive up everybody's costs unless offset by a comparable increase in supply.

Fortunately, a surge in renewable and fossil fuel electricity supply can meet that demand, but only if it can gain access to the grid. That access is being strangled by an old and cumbersome permitting process for electrical transmission. There are now thousands of energy supply projects currently in the yearslong queue for transmission permits.

In the name of affordability, both parties in Congress have started negotiations on legislation to streamline permitting. If you want affordable electricity, tell your congressional delegation to get permitting reform done.
— *Albert Wagner, Orland Park*

Cost of Bike the Drive

Several days of letters addressed bike safety and bike

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

An SOS From the Cuban People



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Saturday marked the fifth anniversary of the first island-wide protests against the Cuban military dictatorship in more than six decades. The regime was slow to react to the spontaneous outpouring of dissent. But when it did, it unleashed its trademark brutality. Secret police beat unarmed civilians in the streets, dragged them out of their homes, and loaded them into paddy wagons. Thousands, including minors, were hauled off to jail. Many received yearslong sentences. Despite the horror, there was hope after that stifling summer day. The courage of so many ordinary people surely would awaken the global conscience. It didn't. The totalitarian regime remains in power, repression has spiked again, and the international community still refuses to denounce the state's terrorism against its own people. At the United Nations last week, the General Assembly instead voted overwhelmingly to open debate on U.S. sanctions designed to force political and economic change on the island. Countries like Australia, Germany, Chile and Canada took the coward's way out, abstaining from the vote. El Salvador didn't even show up. This is a disgrace.

The world could help Cu-

bans as it did South Africans in 1994. That was the year apartheid fell, and a good part of the credit went to the broad international pressure on Pretoria. Domestic unrest and global opposition to the system of racial segregation had been growing for years. White attitudes inside the country also had been shifting. Once South Africa ceased to be a Cold War pawn, the economic costs of sanctions imposed by countries across the globe broke the government's resistance.

They need the world's help, the way pressure helped break South Africa's apartheid.

Cubans aren't likely to escape tyranny without a similar leg up from the outside. But that won't happen until countries put aside their obsession with thwarting the Americans and make justice for the Cuban people their priority. July 11, 2021, is a milestone in Cuban history. Something changed that day: Cubans who for years mouthed pieties to the revolution finally quit pretending that any of it made sense. The nation now openly mocks the bearded guerrillas, including Fidel Castro, and their generation. Current dictator Miguel Díaz-Canel, whose wife flaunts luxury handbags, is booed in public. Cubans call him "Díaz Chanel."

The regime knows it's sitting on a tinderbox. Isolated protests across the island break out every day. Demonstrators burn trash in the streets and bang pots and pans. There are some 800 political prisoners. Their treatment is inhumane. At least seven arrested in 2021 have died in custody, according to the NGO Cuba Archive. Alexander Díaz Rodríguez emerged in April from five years behind bars looking like a concentration-camp survivor. Silencing leaders is Job One for the dictatorship, either by death, imprisonment or exile. This month Cubans mark the 14th anniversary of the loss of Oswaldo Payá, a promising opposition figure who died when his car was run off the road by state security agents. Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, an Afro-Cuban artist and a leader of the dissident San Isidro Movement, spent the past five years in a dungeon for his peaceful activism for free speech. He completed his sentence Thursday, but his whereabouts are unknown. He's being held until the government can send him into exile, the Cuban independent newspaper *Diario de Cuba* reported last week. Maykel Osorbo, another member of San Isidro, was arrested in May 2021 and is serving a nine-year sentence. The regime hopes you've forgotten him and his part in the 2021 Latin Grammy winner "Patria y Vida" ("Homeland and Life"). That protest

song, turning the revolutionary slogan "homeland or death" on its head, was wildly popular and more than an embarrassment for the regime. It represented the "dangerousness" of nonconformists that the dictatorship fears. The U.N. never tires of talking about human rights. But what about Cuba's immense human-trafficking network that sends doctors and nurses abroad for bulk payment by governments to Havana? The medical personnel never see the income they earn. The regime pays them a fraction of their market value. They are stripped of their passports, assigned minders, forbidden from socializing with the locals, and in some cases forbidden to go out after 6 p.m. The U.S. has tried to put a stop to this modern slavery. Yet as some countries have ended their purchase of Cuban labor, mindless journalists suggest that Washington is denying healthcare to the needy. That's bogus. If governments want foreign medical professionals in their country, they can hire and pay them directly. It wouldn't cost any more than they pay now and maybe less. The Cubans would be engaged in a voluntary exchange rather than servitude. But this doesn't work for Cubans because they live in a police state and don't have agency. History won't absolve a world that turns a blind eye to these crimes against humanity. Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By William Anthony Hay

One Nation, Under Tories

The Disraeli Myth

By Emily Jones
Princeton, 304 pages, \$39.95

Few British prime ministers besides Winston Churchill or Margaret Thatcher have wide public recognition in the United States. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) is an important exception. Disraeli, who was briefly prime minister in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880, revived the Conservative Party to enable its political ascendancy in the 20th century. His rivalry with William Gladstone of the Liberal Party shaped the mid-Victorian era. Jewish by birth, Disraeli was a departure from the aristocrats and country gentlemen whose party he refashioned. His early flirtations with radicalism and his dandyish style reinforced that difference. Disraeli nonetheless set the standard for a "one-nation conservatism" that aimed to bridge social divides. In "The Disraeli Myth," Emily Jones deftly traces the posthumous remaking of her subject as a conservative icon with appeal beyond Britain. Ms. Jones is a senior lecturer in modern history at the University of Manchester and the author of a book on how Edmund Burke became a symbol for political conservatism. Carefully distinguishing between Conservative (a political party) and conservative (a political temperament), she explores how Disraeli's successors used his image to position Tories as guardians of public well-being.

Disraeli, who admired Lord Byron and cut a similarly romantic figure, began as a novelist whose financial speculations drove him nearly into disgrace. He entered Parliament in 1837. His charm won admirers in high society, and his novels addressed social problems that divided England in a period of economic upheaval. He was a leading figure of the "Young England" movement that advocated for patri-cians to uphold a common good against business or political interests. Disraeli rose to prominence in 1846 when his party split over the decision of Robert Peel, the Conservative prime minister, to end duties on imported grain. The fracas forced Peel's ouster, leaving Conservatives in the House of Commons diminished. Disraeli became their leader and would twice be named prime minister before Queen Victoria elevated him to the peerage as Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876. Critics then and later saw Disraeli as an opportunist—a bit of a chancer, in British parlance. He shrewdly climbed what he called the greasy pole of Victorian politics, with his party not far behind. He laid the basis for Conservatives to dominate British politics from 1886 to 1997, as his successors adapted to an emergent mass culture and wider suffrage. Disraeli wrote fiction throughout his political career, pioneering the social novel alongside Charles Dickens and George Eliot. Particularly in his "Young England" trilogy of the 1840s, he emphasized the divide between rich and poor opened by urbanization and the Industrial Revolution. His writings undergirded his cabinet's reforms in the 1870s to ameliorate living and working conditions. Promoting slum clearance and clean water while preventing adulterated food addressed popular grievances while offering competent, uncontroversial government. His policies reflected a paternalistic sense of responsibility to the whole community rather than its property-owning members alone.

Disraeli's patrician conservatism aimed to unite rich and poor while upholding the common good. It was a useful model for his successors.

Disraeli's "Tory democracy" rejected the division that liberals, radicals and socialists pushed in different ways, trusting the working classes to see their own interests better than the experts or politicians claiming to speak for them. Besides appealing to what Disraeli's later acolytes saw as the people's inclination to a natural order, it reached around preoccupations with transforming institutions to tap into a deeper conservatism. "A mythologized Disraeli," Ms. Jones writes, "provided political, literary and intellectual means by which Toryism could be positioned against an increasingly demonized 'Victorian Liberalism.'" Liberals—and the Labour Party that displaced them—could no longer claim "to be the true party of social reform." Conservatives following Disraeli worked to unite the two nations of rich and poor under one banner by using him as a symbol for that message.

His successors, Ms. Jones shows, refashioned Disraeli the opportunist as a prophetic figure who adapted successfully to the new challenges of modernity. Proponents compared him to such 19th-century statesmen as Germany's Otto von Bismarck and Italy's Camillo Benso di Cavour, both of whom united their countries. The rejection of Victorian moral earnestness after World War I made the colorful Disraeli a more appealing character than his contemporaries, especially Gladstone. A 1929 Hollywood biopic starring George Arliss helped turn Disraeli into a figure of cultural visibility beyond Britain. In 1932 a Tory historian called Disraeli "the recreator of our party," framing Conservatives as the defenders of a democratic politics as totalitarian movements loomed abroad. Conservative intellectuals in the U.S. appropriated Disraeli as an exemplar of temperament and principle. In his 1953 book, "The Conservative Mind," Russell Kirk placed Disraeli in an Anglo-American tradition alongside Burke and T.S. Eliot. Where does Disraeli's example stand now? One-nation conservatism has become more a slogan for populists than a sober-minded approach to competent governance. Disraeli's personality and wit contrast favorably with the manner of today's bland technocrats who combine the temper of Victorian radicals with the tone of Georgian political managers. His brand of patrician conservatism, Ms. Jones writes, "remains one of the most recognizable, if increasingly endangered, traditions within contemporary British political discussion and analysis." She expertly guides readers through the life and legacy of a man who reached beyond a narrow base to challenge a fragile status quo amid unfolding social change.

Mr. Hay, the author of "Lord Liverpool: A Political Life," is a professor and associate director at Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership.



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

Like many Americans, I've spent countless hours enjoying the FIFA World Cup (still sad about Team USA's loss). I didn't grow up playing soccer but did play a lot of football in college. That counts, right? But people I talk to almost all complain about the flopping: Too many players fall to the turf writhing in fake pain to draw a yellow card after the slightest graze by an opponent. C'mon. The easy definition of flopping or diving is faking an injury to get favorable treatment. I've heard World Cup announcers call it trying to "influence the referee." Sure. But really, it's dyed-in-the-wool trickery. I'd love to say it's only a European thing, but it's ever-present in all our lives. What would you call this? Thirty-eight percent of Stanford University undergrads have registered as disabled and are eligible to receive accommodations, including extra time to take tests. The national median is 5.3%. How is that not flopping? U.S. sports aren't immune. Three years ago, the National Basketball Association started penalizing player flopping. That didn't stop the Oklahoma City Thunder's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander from

falling to the floor after every shot in a recent playoff game against the San Antonio Spurs. Football quarterbacks sometimes exaggerate hits to sell roughing-the-passer penalties. War is filled with flopping, feints and trickery. In Operation Mincemeat, the British planted a corpse with fake top-secret documents implying an Allied invasion of Greece and Sardinia to provide cover for their Sicily campaign. Operation Fortitude saw the Allies deploy a faux "First U.S. Army Group" of inflatable tanks and wooden planes to distract from the D-Day invasion. Last year's Operation Midnight Hammer enlisted a group of decoy B-2 bombers to head from Missouri toward Guam while seven other B-2 bombers flew to Iran undetected. There's no flopping or trickery in politics, right? Uh, remember in 2020 when Joe Biden ran as a moderate? Or the Decoy Dan trickery—two Dan Sullivans on an Alaska ballot? Both aimed to influence gullible voters much like players influence soccer referees. An April City Journal report exposed as much as \$12 billion of fraud in California's \$30 billion a year In-Home Supportive Services Program, with lots of disability and elder care that was reportedly fictitious or overbilled. This makes Minnesota's "Learning Center" and Covid fraud flops seem like pocket change. Crypto is all about head

fakes—especially claiming Bitcoin is a "store of value." Crypto is rife with "pump and dump" schemes (see the Trump memecoin, \$75 in January 2025, \$1.63 today). Remember Strategy CEO Michael Saylor famously saying "never sell your Bitcoin?" Wouldn't you know it, the company started dumping Bitcoin in May. Inexplicably, both examples are legal.

The bad habit is also common in school, politics and business.

Not always for stocks. Investors and CEOs go on TV all the time to tout stocks—the inverse of flopping. It's called "talking your book." It becomes illegal when you trade against your public pronouncements. Andrew Left of Citron Research was convicted in June of securities fraud for touting stocks, then quickly selling them after they ran up, pocketing over \$20 million. He faces up to 25 years in prison. He's appealing. Is there flopping in business? Sure, but not as much as you think, because it's hard to maintain. Yes, there was Theranos and "fake it till you make it" Elizabeth Holmes. She never made it. Executives at both OpenAI and Anthropic constantly spouted about the existential threat of artificial intelli-

gence. Plus, we heard about the pending AI job-apocalypse and the need for universal basic income to support the unemployed masses playing videogames in their basements. Fake pain. In May, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said, "I'm delighted to be wrong about that." Gee, thanks—not much different than popping up after flopping on the soccer pitch. Speaking of faking an injury, the always-pending "climate crisis" turned out to have been a flop, an excuse to extort green subsidies from gullible taxpayers and force us to use paper straws. No doubt, flopping is a form of victimhood. The antiracists' "you have to be racist to fight racism" was a flop in a class by itself, fodder to extract "equity" rewards. Add environmental, social and governance grievances to a long list of fantasy flopping isms—remember speciesism? You can't flop your way through life. Resist the urge. Years ago I figured out that on Wall Street, all you have is your reputation. Everyone is one call, text or click away from knowing everything about you. You can flop, trick or cheat anytime you want, but only once, and then no one will do business with you again. Increasingly in our interconnected, instant-access world, that's true of life as well. Your reputation matters. Don't be a World Cup-class flopper. Write to kessler@wsj.com.

School Choice Succeeds in Arkansas

By Tommy Schultz

A new report out of Arkansas on its Education Freedom Accounts program shows that school choice works—and good policy matters. Participating students are thriving, whether they enrolled in a private school, microschool or home school. In the program's second year, its students outperformed nearly 60% of students nationwide in math and English on standardized assessments. The Education Freedom Accounts program is now the most financially accountable major program in the state. An audit of nearly a million lines of data in the state's program found not a single dollar lost to fraud. Every questionable charge (5% of the transaction amounts in one review period) was flagged and rejected before a cent went out the door. Compare that with Medicaid, which lost more than \$1.5 bil-

lion to improper payments in Arkansas in a single year, nearly five times the entire annual expenditure of the education program. Education Freedom Accounts give priority to the core costs of a K-12 education—tuition, which accounts for 81% of spending, plus curriculum, supplies and testing—with sensible caps limiting transportation and extracurricular expenses to no more than 25% each of a single account. Parents know exactly what they can and can't buy, and every purchase runs through one of three channels the state Education Department reviews and approves. Good design also built a real marketplace. Nearly every private school participates, alongside more than 2,100 approved providers of tutoring, curriculum and therapy. The program's successes have protected it from attacks by teachers unions. For the

second cycle in a row, opponents of the program failed to gather enough signatures to challenge it with a November ballot measure. Education Freedom Accounts are widely popular. After the first year of the program, student participation almost tripled. In its second Education Freedom Accounts show results both academically and financially.

school year, 36% of program students had disabilities. Now, nearly 50,000 students use an account, and support continues to grow: A recent poll found that 66% of voters back the program, with support among K-12 parents at 81%—a 20-point jump from 2023. This isn't a coincidence. It is the predictable result of

pragmatic policymaking by Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Arkansas lawmakers. More than a dozen other states have built robust, sustainable school-choice programs on the same foundation: clear rules, sensible phase-in, fund preapprovals, and resources dedicated to core academic expenses. Without these guardrails, school-choice programs are doomed to fail. Strong, accountable legislation defends against teachers unions' lawfare and ballot measures (in which they engineer massive public-employee turnout). Thirty states are on track to expand school choice with the new federal Education Freedom Tax Credit in 2027. More should opt in. The newest data out of Arkansas show it's a no-brainer: The program is accountable to taxpayers, and students are thriving.

Mr. Schultz is CEO of the American Federation for Children.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Lindsey Graham, 1955-2026

The death of Lindsey Graham on Saturday at age 71 is a loss for the country and the cause of global freedom. The South Carolina Senator was a vocal stalwart of the shrinking band of Republicans in Congress who believe U.S. national security requires both a stronger military and American global leadership.

The four-term Senator was seeking re-election this year and had recently returned from another of his many trips to Ukraine. An Air Force veteran, Graham often traveled abroad to understand conflicts firsthand, and he was especially influential with leaders in Europe and the Middle East.

He was a longtime advocate for Ukraine as it sought to defend itself against a marauding Russia. In a fitting final accomplishment, he announced last week that he and other Senators had agreed with President Trump on a bill to sanction nations that buy Russian oil and gas. An appropriate Senate tribute would be moving this bill quickly to the floor for a vote.

Graham was also clear-eyed about the threat from Iran's revolutionary regime and its implacable desire to build a nuclear weapon. He was skeptical that Iran would honor any agreement with the U.S. And the regime is vindicating that view by the day as it violates the ceasefire and the "memorandum of understanding" it negotiated with the U.S.

The Senator was also a leading supporter of Israel, though not without criticism of those on the Israeli right who don't want any accommodation with the Palestinians. One of his longtime diplomatic goals was getting Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel and join the Abraham Accords.

The press and Democrats accused him of abandoning his principles by supporting President Trump after criticizing him while running against him for President in 2016. But Graham knew exactly what he was doing. He actually liked Mr. Trump personally. But his larger cal-

culation was that by supporting the President he could compete for influence with Sen. Rand Paul and other isolationists who sometimes have Mr. Trump's ear.

He was more successful on that score behind the scenes than most people in the media understand. In the first term he lobbied Mr. Trump against such potential mistakes as withdrawing all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Syria, South Korea and Europe.

In the second term he has been a crucial counter voice to Vice President JD Vance and others in the Administration and Congress who said Ukraine was a sure loser against Russia. Kyiv doesn't look like a sure loser now. And as Budget Committee Chairman, Graham pushed for more military spending to enhance U.S. deterrence around the world.

His legacy on domestic policy includes steering the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court as Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Some readers may recall his stemwinding and much-needed rebuke of Democrats in 2018 for their assault on Brett Kavanaugh for uncorroborated accusations.

We had differences with Graham on his backing for the plaintiffs bar and such ideas as cap-and-trade for climate change. But he was one of those politicians, too rare in politics these days, who dealt with criticism as a happy warrior. He understood he needed allies for the next fight.

The D.C. medical examiner's preliminary report pegged the cause of death as an aortic tear. But given that Iran, Russia and other adversaries benefit from his death, we hope officials ensure there was no foul play. An autopsy may be warranted. The Administration should not want conspiracy theories to proliferate.

As Mr. Trump and many others around the world are saying, Graham was a patriot whose work on behalf of liberty will be missed. Will other Republicans pick up his fallen baton? Someone needs to.

The Senator was an influential voice for U.S. global leadership.

One Secret of Mamdani's Success

We've been telling you for years about the flight of taxpayers from New York, so it's nice to get confirming evidence from the New York State Comptroller's office of all places. Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli rolled out a new migration dashboard on Friday that proves the point—and may explain why this taxpayer flight is leading to the political rise of socialists.

The data provide more evidence that pandemic lockdowns fueled an exodus from the state, with 112,458 tax filers on net vamoosing in 2020. That's one in every 100 resident taxpayers. Another 95,679 on net moved out between 2021 and 2024. These figures include only tax filers, not the broader population, some of whom don't pay state income tax.

While out-migration has slowed in the last couple of years, high earners and married people continue to leave in large numbers. The data show that 13,662 taxpayers—roughly 1 in 1,000 resident taxpayers—on net left the state in 2024.

"The greatest net loss of taxpayers was among married filers with incomes between \$100,000 and \$500,000—a net loss of 8,200, or more than half of the total net out-migration, in 2024," the comptroller's office says. The highest out-migration *rate* was for households

making \$500,000 or more—about one in 100 of whom moved out that year.

The data underscore how the state's high taxes and cost of living drive out top earners as well as middle and upper middle class families. Other flight propellants include New York City's poor public schools and disorderly streets. Enrollment in New York City public schools has fallen 117,800 since 2019.

But here's the political irony, which the comptroller's office calls "one positive post-pandemic trend": An influx to the state of single tax filers. These include the young urban progressives who form New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's base and propelled his socialist comrades to victory in Democratic primaries last month.

Progressive policies in New York City and other big cities are driving out the moderate and conservative voters who have historically been an electoral check on bad governance. The New York voters who made George Pataki Governor in 1994 and Rudy Giuliani mayor in 1993 now live elsewhere.

These are the taxpayers who pay the bills for the welfare state and public unions. Good luck funding universal child care and socialist housing with the taxes from graduate students and community organizers.

to \$176,600 a year for full-time work), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Registered nurses make an average of \$78.37 an hour (\$163,500 a year). The program arbitrarily favors some workers over others. A doctor at a nonprofit hospital is eligible, but not one who works in private practice.

The program has ironically also made it harder to recruit doctors to rural areas and teachers to low-income schools. That's because it is more generous than discrete loan forgiveness programs that Congress established for those workers.

More broadly, it encourages students to pursue expensive degrees in fields that are less likely to lead to productive employment (e.g., community organizing) because they know they can get most of their debt forgiven if they work for government, a university or a nonprofit. This is another subsidy for colleges.

Enter President Trump, who last year sought to bar forgiveness for employees of organizations that have "a substantial illegal purpose." Left-leaning groups and Democratic Attorneys General sued, claiming the restriction was ambiguous and could include nonprofits advocating for diversity, equity and inclusion. Judge Amir Ali agreed.

"If Congress wished to give borrowers credit for loan payments made while they work only at certain section 501(c)(3) organizations or wished to delegate to the Secretary the authority to make such determinations, it knew how to do so," Judge Ali wrote. "Yet Congress chose to offer no caveats or delegations when it defined 'public service job.'"

Fair enough. This means it's up to Republicans in Congress to enact reforms so taxpayers don't end up underwriting the degrees of Zohran Mamdani's supporters.

Forgiveness favoritism for public workers has cost some \$91 billion.

A Student Loan Subsidy for Government

A federal judge recently blocked the Trump Administration's effort to rein in a giveaway for higher-education graduates who work in government or social advocacy. The message to Republicans in Congress is to get with it and limit this student-loan subsidy favoritism.

The 19-year-old Public Service Loan Forgiveness program is the monster progeny of George W. Bush and Nancy Pelosi. Its initial goal was to encourage young people to pursue jobs in government and at nonprofits, though these lines of work no longer need subsidizing, if they ever did.

Graduates can have their debt discharged after working 10 years for government or a 501(c)3 nonprofit and making modest payments during that time. As of January, the government had discharged \$90.6 billion for some 1.2 million borrowers, averaging \$75,000 per person. The aggregate limit for undergraduate loans is \$31,000 for students who are dependents, so this means most beneficiaries have advanced degrees.

The left-leaning Student Borrower Protection Center estimates that more than nine million workers—roughly a quarter of federal student loan borrowers—are eligible for the program. An Education Department report last year found that the biggest beneficiaries are employees in K-12 schools (28%), higher education (15%), and healthcare nonprofits (12%).

There's scant evidence that such employers are struggling to hire. State and local government, healthcare and social assistance have accounted for most of the country's job growth in recent years. These workers, by and large, aren't low-paid, even if some might earn more if they chose different careers.

K-12 public school teachers earn on average \$84.66 an hour in total compensation (equal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What I Saw While Working for Todd Blanche

Former Attorney General Bill Barr is right that Todd Blanche has the judgment and experience to lead the Justice Department ("Confirm Todd Blanche at Justice," op-ed, June 26). My view comes from a different vantage point: I worked beside him every day.

As Mr. Blanche's chief of staff, I saw what leadership looked like when the cameras were off. I sat in meetings where the facts were contested, the legal questions were difficult and every available course carried consequences. Mr. Blanche listened, pressed for candor, challenged assumptions and demanded that recommendations be rooted in law and fact. He welcomed disagreement, but once a matter had been fully considered, he made the decision and took responsibility for it.

Before serving as Mr. Blanche's chief of staff, I served as his sherpa during his confirmation process for deputy attorney gen-

eral. Behind closed doors, Democratic senators told him he was uniquely qualified for the job and praised his judgment and experience. When the vote came, none supported him. The contrast was hard to miss: privately, Mr. Blanche's qualifications were acknowledged. But publicly, politics intervened.

That experience matters because the Senate has more than a resume before it. It has a record of leadership under pressure. As deputy attorney general, Mr. Blanche directed the department's day-to-day operations. As acting attorney general, he leads it.

I was in the room. I watched him lead. Mr. Blanche has the judgment, experience and character to serve as attorney general. The Senate should put politics aside, recognize what many already know and confirm him.

BRIAN NIEVES
Washington

New Jersey's Mikie Sherrill Needs Tocqueville

The July 8 editorial "New Jersey Makes a Medicaid Money Grab" and Jon Hartley's July 8 op-ed "Tocqueville Deserves a Washington Statue" deserve to be read together.

The editorial concludes by asking, "Who cares if these policies destroy jobs and make more people dependent on government rather than helping them become self-sufficient?" Alexis de Tocqueville anticipated this concern nearly two centuries ago.

In his book "Democracy in America," written after his 1831 visit to the U.S., Tocqueville observed that America's strength rested not primarily in government but in its local communities, churches, volun-

tary associations and civic engagement. He also warned against what he described as a "soft despotism"—a gradual expansion of government that encourages citizens to rely increasingly on the state rather than on themselves, their families and their communities.

Whether one agrees with the editorial's conclusions or not, Tocqueville's warning remains remarkably relevant. I hope New Jersey Gov. Mikie Sherrill takes the time to read "Democracy in America." She may find that Tocqueville's observations are as timely today as they were in 1831.

PATRICK HENRY
Torrance, Calif.

Let the Cameras Roll at the Supreme Court

Ben Sasse has made an apples-to-oranges comparison when dismissing the idea that cameras belong in federal courtrooms ("Keep Cameras Out of the Supreme Court," op-ed, June 25).

Supreme Court justices and their lower-court colleagues serve for life. Unlike members of Congress, who run for office every two or six years, federal jurists have no professional incentive to play to the cameras and trawl for clicks.

Justices who want to stake out their lane in American cultural or civic life can, and are doing so, in their opinions or in their books. Any justice who pines for the spotlight can give as many interviews and speak at as many law

schools as he or she likes.

One retired judge who had cameras in her courtroom told me that only once did an attorney get out of line; she put him in his place and such behavior never happened again. Another former judge told me he was concerned about cameras for the first 30 seconds after they were turned on, but then he became engrossed in the case and forgot about being recorded.

Then-judge Amy Coney Barrett was on the bench the first time the Seventh Circuit brought cameras in, and their presence didn't change the argument.

Doubtless other attorneys and justices would also have the same reaction: maintaining decorum while allowing Americans in the 21st-century to use 20th-century technology to become more engaged with the work of our most thoughtful public servants.

GABE ROTH
Executive director, Fix the Court
Falls Church, Va.

A Socialist Welfare Takeover

Jason Riley outlines the disastrous effects of the welfare state on the black population and family ("Socialism and the Decline of the Black Family," Upward Mobility, July 8). He finishes his column with the warning that, "Socialism isn't the answer." But if the political class is asking how they insure the votes of an entire group of voters in perpetuity, they have the answer: socialist welfare policy.

The young American voter and 1960s hippy voters cling to the myth that, under the socialists, they are better off than the middle class. Mr. Riley can list the horrendous statistics socialism brings, but the media and the far left successfully blame capitalist America for our problems. Smiley New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani comes across as a savior.

JOE BOCCUZZI
Tomball, Texas

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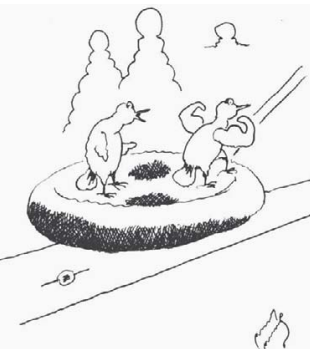


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Pepper ...
And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“Get over yourself, Carl.
The birdwatchers left an hour ago.”

OPINION

Iran Is Too Weak to Make Peace

By John Bolton

The U.S.-Iran memorandum of understanding and its cease-fire were effectively dead-on-arrival. Donald Trump and his top advisers now acknowledge their demise, but the agreement was never viable, ironically, because the U.S.-Israel military effort was so successful. Tehran doesn't have a government in any coherent sense. In national-security affairs, it has no authoritative decision maker or process that produces binding governmentwide decisions. In Iran, the answer to Robert Dahl's famous question, "Who governs?," is: We don't know, and neither do the Iranians.

The U.S.-Israel strikes so successfully decapitated the leadership that no one has authority to negotiate.

The strikes decimated Iran's highest government levels. Civilian leadership is in tatters. Even the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' command and control over its components is uncertain, due in part to Iran's longstanding defensive strategy to decentralize authority, which it executed at the war's outset. Among the clerics and their oligarchical families, there is discord over what comes next after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's killing. What exists instead of a government is "heads of authority" with various kinds of clout and vulnerability. They compete for power, but none can consistently dominate, today or in the foreseeable future. This disarray explains why some in Iran are again reportedly plotting to murder Mr. Trump, while others are

still negotiating with his representatives. Iran's governmental disgregation has enormous implications for how Washington deals with Tehran. It is precisely our success in so effectively shattering its leadership and destroying instruments of its state power that precludes the current "regime" from functioning cohesively. This conclusion (or hypothesis, if you prefer) is unpalatable to those who are determined to play down the damage caused by our attacks out of either sympathy for Iran or antipathy toward the U.S. or the administration. They fear admitting the devastation of authority in Iran, with the attendant repercussion that regime change might be near. Considering Iran's behavior, however, certainly on national-security issues, regime disintegration is the only consistent explanation for its erratic post-strike actions.

The civilian officials running Iran's negotiations are among the weakest surviving actors. President Masoud Pezeshkian is a functionary, selected in haste in 2024 to replace Ebrahim Raisi, whose helicopter crashed into a mountain. Raisi was once a potential successor to Khamenei, whereas Mr. Pezeshkian was merely a safe pair of hands. His position is so tenuous that he is reported to have been physically attacked during Khamenei's funeral, a lengthy ritual of mourning and anti-U.S. propaganda that likely strengthened the IRGC. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Ghalibaf is a repeatedly failed presidential candidate who heads a body that has had almost no impact on Iran's governance since its establishment in 1980. Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi runs a department with al-



Iranian leaders during a ceremony at the coffins of Iran's slain Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his family members in Tehran, July 3.

most no role in domestic politics and is among the last to know what the IRGC is doing. The problem is evident: U.S. negotiators are talking to people who can't deliver. On July 8, after calling Iran's team "scum," Mr. Trump said his representatives could continue talking if they desired, but he saw no value in it. This could indicate that our representatives have fallen prey to the twin maladies of moral equivalence (seeing the disputed positions as equally justifiable) and mirror imaging (thinking their interlocutors are also looking for a fair, reasonable solution). Even Iran's "moderate" diplomats don't suffer these frailties. Washington also ignored or misread current Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei's comment that while he would allow the memorandum of understanding, he opposed it "as a matter of principle." His father often made similar statements, saying it

was "not smart, wise or honorable to deal with Washington." U.S. administrations have repeatedly failed to grasp that the Iranians mean it when they call their leader "supreme." To be sure, we can't know how much of any given day the young Mr. Khamenei is compos mentis. In the meantime, the IRGC is firing missiles at American bases and other targets in the Middle East, attacking ships in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and attempting to rebuild Iran's nuclear program and terrorist proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah. This should surprise no one. It was critics of the U.S.-Israeli strikes who were loudest voicing their fears that the war would strengthen IRGC power. The cease-fire experience proves the futility of negotiating with authorities who can't change this reality. Mr. Trump will have either to accept indefinite frustration and uncertainty or to resume large-

scale offensive operations, not merely tit-for-tat reprisals. Reimposing sanctions on Iran was correct, but is at best a partial fix. America should stop looking for "moderates" to bolster and "hard liners" to isolate. In Iran, we are dealing with civilians whose predecessors have patiently sweet-talked successive U.S. administrations into acquiescing to Iran's nuclear-weapons project. Those who want to defy us militarily simply ignore what is negotiated. The sweet-talking civilians don't have weapons or control over the nuclear program, but the others do. Hence the chaos in the Gulf. We can face this reality now or after November's elections. The right course is to act swiftly, reimpose the blockade and choke off Iran's

oil revenues. Continued uncertainty in the Gulf could well keep oil prices elevated before November regardless of negotiations or cease-fires. If we delay, Tehran's hand will be stronger, having gained more time and billions of dollars in new revenue. Even if the president punts until after the elections, this remains the only intelligible path forward. In international affairs, Iran has no real government. This is a good thing. We caused it, and we should finish it. The first step is to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, by force if need be. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte supports U.S. strikes against Iran and predicts European allies would also agree in time. The next move is Mr. Trump's.

Mr. Bolton served as White House national security adviser, 2018-19, and is author of "The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir."

JD Vance and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week



LIFE SCIENCE By Alysia Finley

Who had a worse week, Democrats or JD Vance? The Democratic Party's progressive poolbaths spent last week trying to wash Graham Platner out of their hair after a woman he dated accused him of sexual assault. Democrats can only hope voters move on as quickly as they have. The vice president, meantime, experienced a series of misfortunes reminiscent of the classic children's book "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." The cease-fire he negotiated with the Iranian regime went up in smoke. His foreign policy of retreat and defeat took another blow after Russia banned diesel exports due to fuel shortages caused by Ukraine's long-range strikes on its refineries. Then President Trump diverged from him by signaling increased support for Ukraine. To cap it off, hedge-fund magnate Ken Griffin, a major Republican donor, said he'd favor Secretary of State Marco Rubio in a matchup between

the two for the 2028 GOP presidential nomination. Oof. Unlike Alexander, the vice president's travails are a result of his own doing. Mr. Trump on Friday declared the cease-fire with Iran "over," though the regime never abided by it anyway. The president said earlier in the week, "They violate the agreement every day. They lie. They cheat. They kill people." Didn't Mr. Vance herald peace in our time after negotiating the memorandum of understanding with Iran last month? Apparently, he didn't understand the regime with which he was negotiating. "I think that they see there's a real opportunity here to turn over a new leaf so long as they do the right thing," he said. "We have the cards, and if they don't honor the commitment, we'll figure out what to do when we get there." Now we're there. It didn't take long. The Iranians began firing at ships transiting through the Strait of Hormuz a week after the deal was signed. "Upon the signing of this MOU, the Islamic Republic of Iran will make arrangements using its best efforts for the safe passage of commercial vessels, with no

charge for 60 days only, from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Oman, and vice versa," the agreement says. As a real-estate developer, would Mr. Trump have ever leased a property on the condition that tenants "make arrangements" using their

His 'understanding' with Iran is in tatters, and Trump has diverged from him on arming Ukraine.

"best efforts" to pay rent—and only for 60 days? Yet Mr. Vance insisted that the regime would understand that operating in good faith was in its best interest. "They want to have a much brighter future," he said. But the regime's vision of a brighter future entails nuclear weapons that allow it to control the region, not prosperity for its people. Nonetheless, Mr. Vance projected optimism about "coalescing with both the hard-liners and the pragmatists behind the idea, not just

that they want a peace deal now, but that 47 years of Iran policy toward the United States has been a mistake." Reports last week of a new Iranian plot to assassinate Mr. Trump argue the contrary. Iran's leaders understood Mr. Vance's aims better than the other way around. They knew Mr. Trump was losing patience with the war as midterm elections approached. They have squeezed the desperation to bring an end to the war for all it was worth. After the administration lifted its blockade and sanctions, the regime cranked up oil exports, which allowed it to rake in billions of dollars to finance its terrorism. Mr. Vance might have expected such a result. In October 2024, he criticized the Biden team for easing sanctions on Iran and releasing restricted assets in the hope that doing so "would make the Iranians a better partner, would maybe get them a little bit more on the trajectory to being a reasonable country. That's not happening. They're just using that money to buy weapons that they launch against Americans." Exactly. In his new book, "Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith," Mr.

Vance derides "globalists" as "misinformed" and "naive." He explains his opposition as a senator to military aid for Ukraine as a matter of realism: "The gap between Ukraine's and Russia's abilities to project military power was vast, and we lacked the capacity to enable the Ukrainians to close that gap—and keep it closed—all by ourselves." Nobody has argued that the U.S. on its own should prop up Ukraine. The Europeans have assisted mightily. Ukraine's ability to push back Russia in recent months and hobble its energy infrastructure and military supply chains has undercut Mr. Vance's thesis. Who's naive and misinformed? Equally naive and misinformed is his view that the government can revive a more traditional American culture with trade protection and industrial policy and by retreating from the world. Which may explain Mr. Griffin's preference for Mr. Rubio. Mr. Vance might dismiss Mr. Griffin as a "business elite" who "worships" the market, as he does other traditional Republicans. But Mr. Griffin represents a sizable share of Republicans whom the vice president alienates at his own political risk.

Socialists Lead Democrats Into the Tea-Party Trap

By William M. Daley

It's easy to think Donald Trump molded today's Republican Party. After all, he oversees a revamped government that prosecutes political enemies, conducts foreign policy by coercion, and endlessly tries to undermine public confidence in U.S. elections. But Mr. Trump ascended largely because an earlier political force—the tea-party movement—had cleared a path for him. Its extremist philosophies and refusal to compromise initially seemed too radical to go far. But its fiery energies eventually transformed the GOP into a hard-right party with no room for a John McCain, a Mitt Romney or even a Ronald Reagan, let alone the voters who might support them. Democrats are fooling themselves

if they think a similar hijacking can't happen to their party. Recent Democratic primary successes by socialist candidates in New York, Colorado and the District of Columbia should alarm Democrats nationwide. We need viable candidates who can win this fall's crucial midterm elections and regain the White House in 2028. How far beyond the mainstream are the Democratic Socialists of America? The organization's website denounces capitalism as an exploitative system that must be replaced with "democratic socialism." "We want to collectively own the key economic drivers that dominate our lives, such as energy production and transportation," it says. It calls for tuition-free higher education, "Medicare for All," "freedom for all incarcerated peo-

ple" and allowing workers "to freely migrate between countries to seek employment without restrictive immigration controls." It seeks to "defund the police by rejecting any expansion to police budgets or scope of enforcement while cutting budgets annually towards zero."

Extremist candidates make it harder for a party to win and make a victory perilous for the country.

Zohran Mamdani, a self-described democratic socialist, gained global attention when he was elected New York City mayor last year. Now he is helping the movement's candidates win Democratic primaries for the U.S. House, and they may claim some Senate and gubernatorial nominations as well. Backed by Mr. Mamdani, socialist candidate Darializa Avila Chevalier ousted a four-term incumbent from an Upper Manhattan-based district. She has a history of lobbying mean and sometimes vulgar barbs at mainstream Democrats and ordinary patriots. "I forgot to get napkins so I just wiped my hand on the American flag behind me," she wrote in a since-deleted 2019 social-media post. Ms. Chevalier shrugs off such remarks as "the past," but Republican candidates nationwide will try to wrap them around every Democratic candidate's neck. It's important to note that Demo-

cratic Socialists of America is "an activist organization," not a political party. It is trying to have it both ways—and sometimes succeeding—by running in Democratic primaries without adopting the party title or, in many cases, its priorities. Democratic voters are facilitating these moves. Mainstream party activists had better wake up soon to the threat. Some might say it hardly matters whether socialist firebrands like Ms. Chevalier or more-traditional Democrats fill House seats from bright blue Manhattan. This is a mistake. Every socialist elected to Congress as a Democrat will help Republicans vilify the entire party, just as Mr. Trump now denounces "communists." Additionally, hard-left ideologues in Washington will make it harder to forge the type of political consensus and collaboration that our pluralistic government requires. Democrats rightly blame Congress's gridlock mainly on zealous lawmakers from the political right. But our only hope for a better future is that the MAGA fever eventually breaks. When that happens, do we want congressional Democratic delegations that will simply swing us back into angry gridlocks, this time championed by the left instead of the right? Some mainstream Democrats are beginning to speak out, but more must be vocal. "I have profound differences" with Ms. Chevalier, Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro recently said on CNN. "The people who are making a lot of noise, who are engaging in these performative poli-

tics, have to now figure out how to deliver results." Socialists have a longtime hero in Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont. While he caucuses with Senate Democrats, he calls himself an independent and a democratic socialist. Mr. Sanders can't be blamed for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential loss to Mr. Trump. But he did her no favors by challenging her for the Democratic nomination and by criticizing her positions on trade, Wall Street and other issues without permanently joining the Democratic Party. Americans are accustomed to having a socialist, now 84, from the small state of Vermont. But younger socialists are making strong bids in Democratic primaries for statewide offices in crucial toss-up states like Michigan and Wisconsin. Republicans in such places hope for "defund the police" opponents, who are easier to beat. Despite its flaws, the Democratic Party is a vital and venerable institution. It created the New Deal, Social Security, the Civil Rights Act, Medicare and the Affordable Care Act. It's worth fighting for. Socialists with outlandish, fringe platforms and no loyalty to the party are threatening to snatch control, much as the tea-party movement waylaid the GOP more than a decade ago and opened the way for Mr. Trump's MAGA dystopia. What a catastrophe that would be. Democratic leaders and rank-and-file voters must wake up and fight back. Mr. Daley served as U.S. commerce secretary (1997-2000) and White House chief of staff (2011-12).

Opinion

A radical solution for dealing with A.I.

Artificial intelligence should be treated as a public, not corporate, project.

Eric Schmidt
Selina Xu

Humanity is inching along a precarious tightrope. Our world is in the midst of deciding how the artificial intelligence revolution will unfold and what limits should be drawn. Too much caution could waste A.I.'s promise of faster economic growth, greater scientific discovery and more prosperity. Too little caution could unleash labor-market chaos and social disorder. Balance matters. If we get the balance between control and growth wrong at any point, we'll fall into the gorge below. And no country is guaranteed to get to the opposite side.

This is our century's biggest survival challenge.

The Chinese tech executives we met on a trip last month were optimists about the technology, but they were much more conservative than Silicon Valley on how fast the growth of A.I. ought to be. Some were wary about replacing their employees too aggressively with A.I. Others worried that

Chinese tech executives were more conservative about how fast A.I. should grow.

if A.I. became destabilizing, China's entire industry might be reined in by the government. One chief executive even said point-blank that growing more slowly was preferable to going full speed ahead, so as to avoid

a repeat of the Luddite backlash toward the Industrial Revolution, when 19th-century English workers tried to halt the spread of mechanization by storming factories and destroying power looms.

Chinese policymakers are also visibly wrestling with how to encourage growth while preserving social and regime stability, which is the top priority for the Chinese Communist Party. In April, China stopped issuing new licenses for autonomous vehicles after dozens of robotaxis abruptly stranded passengers on the streets of Wuhan. That same month, a Chinese court ruled that companies cannot terminate employees just to replace them with A.I. systems. In June, a new five-year plan pledged to prevent large-scale unemployment risks and to use A.I. to promote job creation. A ban on A.I. companions for minors in China is set to take effect in July.

Although China is no paragon, such actions have helped buoy the population's feelings toward A.I. Around 84 percent of respondents in China said they were excited about A.I., according to a recent Stanford report. Meanwhile, American skepticism toward the technology remains high. Communities are fighting the construction of data centers. Parents worry about children forming unhealthy attachments to A.I. companions. Workers fear being replaced. Policymakers are wary of national security vulnerabilities. Researchers debate catastrophic risks. People are asking a simple question: Will A.I. make my life better, or make it worse?

The question is hard to answer because the benefits of the technology are unevenly distributed and can often feel overhyped. One reason for this, we have called "jagged intelligence," where



A.I. fails at incredibly simple tasks even as it excels in specific areas. So it's hardly surprising that the public mood around A.I. is darkening. Even young Americans who historically embraced new technologies are angrier and more skeptical.

Dismissing A.I. entirely would be a mistake. The technology can help diagnose diseases, predict protein folding, improve farming, forecast disasters better, design new materials, accelerate

scientific and drug discovery and power robots in dangerous environments to improve human safety.

Yet how technology spreads is never inevitable. If A.I. is viewed as benefiting the few at the expense of the majority, then the public will rage against the machine. And A.I. won't be able to make our lives better in the long run if it cannot survive in the short term. The real challenge, then, isn't whether the United States or China will build an

insurmountable advantage over the other. It's whether either can figure out how to realize the benefits of A.I. without ripping apart its social fabric.

Silicon Valley tech executives and policymakers across America are waking up to that fact. States have introduced dozens of bills this year to put safety and privacy guardrails around A.I. The Trump administration issued a new executive order that seeks to give the government more oversight over

new models before they're released to the public. Companies like OpenAI are starting to come around to the idea that strong safety rules can help reverse growing public opposition. But there is still no clear consensus on how the United States should move forward. We need bigger ideas to fix what may soon break.

To get to the other end of the tightrope, we need radical and inclusive solutions. We seek euphemism, maybe to avoid thinking about who is doing the shooting. "Gun violence" encourages us to see Black men who shoot one another not as self-destructive killers, but as people beset by a larger force unrelated to blame.

But we need not euphemism, but action, so that eventually there isn't anything more to euphemize about.

We should think more of initiatives like Save Our Streets, part of a nationwide movement in which former gang members and others who have committed crimes are enlisted to act as experienced mediators between young people on the verge of using guns. A study by the sociologist Patrick Sharkey and co-authors Gerard Torrats-Espínosa and Delaram Takyar has shown that nonprofit organizations that focus on crime and community life can help reduce murder rates. Precision policing or focused deterrence, zeroing in on the tiny percentage of people in a neighborhood committing crimes, rather than canvassing the entire population, has been shown to reduce homicides.

The tragic effects of these shootings, including the convulsive grief of thousands of mothers, demands stark honesty that treats the lives of poor young Black men as reality, not as an abstraction. This includes talking about them rather than around them.

JOHN MCWHORTER is a writer in Opinion and an associate professor of linguistics at Columbia University.

Euphemism won't save young Black men's lives

We don't need to be dainty when discussing urgent problems like shootings.

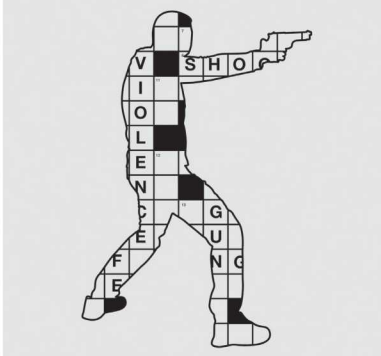
John McWhorter

The Fourth of July weekend in America was "marked by dozens of U.S. deaths from gun violence," according to The Guardian. A few weekends ago, there were 77 shootings in Chicago, with eight fatalities. This set folks scratching their chins about "gun violence prevention."

The term "gun violence" is now so common it's easy to miss how strained it is. "Gun violence" sounds as if guns are committing the violence. The expression artfully excises from the equation the actual person doing this "violence"—the shooter. This passive construction evades the fact of someone's pointing a weapon and pulling a trigger and sending a bullet into a person's flesh and bone. It turns shootings into abstract formless phenomena, like gravity or ultraviolet light. Note in contrast that we never talk about "knife violence" when someone uses a knife to attack others; we just call these assaults stabbings.

The term became much more common in the 1990s, as the horrifying wave of murders and woundings and terror in poor Black neighborhoods began to be seen as a public health issue.

But what started as a matter of framing a general issue became a kind of lexical politesse about a more specific one. In 2023, 60 percent of people killed by guns were Black, and 86 percent of Black homicide victims were killed with a gun. Even as crime has gone down, it is



still tragically ordinary for young Black men to be shot in poor Black neighborhoods, where "Stop the Violence" marches and events are common.

"Gun violence" obscures the vivid picture of something horrible that happens disproportionately in Black

communities. The causes of that disproportion are complex and longstanding.

But there is no need to be so dainty in how we discuss such an urgent problem. And it's not just that particular term. A CBS News headline had it that "Gunfire leaves 7 teens wounded on Chicago's

West Side," as if the gunfire were some mysterious blaze or hailstorm that broke out.

Those who experience the violence are more straightforward, like the resident of Inwood in New York who reported a few years ago that "My block has police on it all the time. There are shootings. There are drug dealers on our corner right now!" "Shootings"—the simple truth of immediate experience.

Before about 1990, terminology about what we now call "gun violence" was often more straightforward. In 1980, sympathetic experts in criminal justice openly referred to "killings" in Los Angeles. The term violence was hardly unknown, but was often accompanied by an actual actor, as in "gang violence."

A "shooting" is urgent, something that turns a head, needs attention. "Gun violence" is description at a remove. Euphemism can feel so right. We imagine that if we create a new term for something, we can get people to think about it differently. Surely more will understand that a "bun" isn't a reprobate if we refer to him as "homeless." I'm just old enough to remember when "homeless" was the new default in the 1980s—it sounded so polite, open-minded. But before long, sentiments associated with "bun" transferred to "homeless." We now have the dismissive slang term "homeless." The key contrast is that if someone said "knife violence" we'd feel as if they were trying

to hide something. It's the same with "gun violence." We seek euphemism, maybe to avoid thinking about who is doing the shooting. "Gun violence" encourages us to see Black men who shoot one another not as self-destructive killers, but as people beset by a larger force unrelated to blame.

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JOHN MCWHORTER is a writer in Opinion and an associate professor of linguistics at Columbia University.

OPINION

The New York Times

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Looksmaxxers really don't care what women think

Kate Manne

Until recently, cosmetic enhancement was the province of women, while men mostly stayed out of the medspa. The power move for men was flaunting girlfriends with \$150,000 face-lifts, not getting work done themselves. But now, the cheek-plumped and chin-sculpted look of Silicon Valley executives and 20-something male influencers alike point to a change: Men are starting to want shiny new faces of their own.

While men still make up only a small portion of cosmetic surgery patients, procedures on men globally are increasing at more than three times the rate for women. Why? Plastic surgeons point to the ubiquity of Zoom and Instagram, and this certainly appears to be part of it. Christa Spears Brown, a psychology professor at the University of Kentucky, explained this way to STAT News: "With the rise in social media and seeing

images that are curated and perfect, men are now living in the same world women have been living in where you're expected to have perfection."

Where is this expectation for perfection coming from, though? The tremendously influential online ecosystem known as the manosphere has an accusatory response: Men in these spaces often complain that women have been empowered by dating apps to reject all but the most attractive among them, and the average man therefore needs surgical intervention to stand out. A sociological review of incel forums noted this representative comment: "There are actually high beauty standards for men, and women choose to go on Tinder" because "they don't want an average- or below-average-looking guy."

The way these men see it, picky women are to blame for their masculine anxieties. But a closer look suggests that the social pressure for men to look a certain way is coming primarily from other men.

A 2024 survey of men's motivations for going under the knife provides useful insight here. The study, which looked at adult men in German-speaking parts of Europe, found a clear overlap between men who had surgery and men who held a traditional view of masculinity. Traditional masculinity was defined by several traits including competitiveness and dominance, having a playboy lifestyle, and pursuing power over others. Men who were highly invested in traditional masculine norms were about twice as likely to get cosmetic surgery, and almost

four times as likely to have a hair transplant.

The researchers concluded, "Men increasingly use cosmetic surgery as a means to assert power, success, dominance and sexual success." No man in the study said he got cosmetic surgery in order to please a partner, they added. Rather, it seemed that cosmetic surgery was a way to increase masculine status.

There have always been men who cared about how they looked — remember metrosexuals? — but grooming used to be more associated with women and gay men. A generation ago, the typical straight man projected indifference about his appearance. He did not buy moisturizer, much less go in for wrinkle treatment. He didn't need to. How he looked was rarely the deciding factor in achieving power, wealth or even sexual success. Now a straight man's appearance seems to be an increasingly important expression of his masculinity. One way of explaining this cultural shift is through a familiar feminist idea: the male gaze. I suggest the male gaze, long trained on women, is turning on straight men too.

The male gaze, a concept popularized by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey, describes the way a woman's body becomes an object for male consumption, transformed into a collection of body parts to be scrutinized. Women often internalize the male gaze by learning to objectify their own bodies. They perform beauty for other women as well as men, of course. But within a patriarchal system, the men in power are the ultimate arbiters of female beauty standards.

Under the male gaze, men's faces have become a new playing ground for a familiar sport. The feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye proposed this dynamic: long ago in her book "The Politics of Reality," "All or almost all of that which pertains to love, most straight men reserve exclusively for other men. The people whom they admire, respect, adore, revere, honor, whom they admire, idolize and form profound attachments to," she wrote, are "overwhelmingly, other men."

Dr. Frye's insight is not just about who straight men like and love and bond with. It is about whose approval they crave: men's. The revealing moment in a New York Times interview with the notoriously looks-obsessed influencer Braden Petre was known as Cavicular, in which he says that knowing he could have sex with a woman might be better than actually having sex, which he describes as a time-suck that "is going to gain me nothing." I suspect that what he's really after is access to women — the part he can show off to other men.

Another thing he shows off is his face. Mr. Petre is a standard-bearer for looksmaxxing, an online community made up mostly of young men in which users upload photos of themselves to forums so that other young

Patricia Rojas

I lawfully lived in America starting when I was 4 months old. I learned to walk and talk there. I went to school there, from preschool through college. My closest friends, my career and my family are all there. America is the only home I've ever truly known.

Yet in the eyes of the U.S. immigration system, I don't belong.

On the fourth of July, while millions of Americans gathered for fireworks and celebrations of independence, I packed my bags and left America. Not because I had broken the law or chosen another country. I left because, after my family and I had followed every immigration rule for 25 years, the archaic immigration system offered me no means to stay.

How is it possible to grow up in America legally but not have a clear path to citizenship? It's the same impossible question confronting more than 250,000 children of long-term visa holders who face having to leave after aging out of the protections their parents' visas once offered them.

My story mirrors many others'. In 2000, while my mother was in her third trimester with me, my father, an engineer in Mexico City, was offered a job in Texas. Because my mother was visibly pregnant, my parents and their lawyers worried that applying for a visa would jeopardize her approval. So my parents made the difficult decision to wait until I was born before beginning our visa paperwork.

I was born in Mexico City in October 2000 and moved with my parents to Dallas four months later as a dependent on their E-2 visa, a type of visa primarily offered to individuals who start a small business employing Americans. Those four months altered my life trajectory:

Had I been born after my family relocated, like both of my younger siblings, I would have been an American citizen today.

For most of my childhood, the distinction between my siblings and me hardly mattered. Like them, I spoke English more comfortably than I spoke Spanish. I watched the Disney Channel, adored One Direction, stayed up too late playing my Nintendo DS, celebrated the Fourth of July, joined school clubs. I was just another kid growing up in a suburb of Dallas. I graduated at the top of my high school class, led student organizations and was admitted to a Texas public university.

When I was choosing where to go to college, I learned that I would soon age out of my protected status. If dependent children living lawfully with their parents on employment-based visas turn 21 before their parents obtain green cards, they are forced to leave unless they secure another visa. Many families have green card applications that remain stuck in years- or even decades-long backlogs, leaving their children with no clear pathway to citizenship. Parents on some employment-based nonimmigrant visas, like the E-2 that my family had, can lawfully renew their visas indefinitely while raising their children, but they have no easy way to convert their lawful status to permanent residence for their children.

When I was 20, I traveled alone to Mexico City during the pandemic to apply for international student visa in hopes of extending my status. Thank-



NABILA REZAKI

fully, it was approved. That visa allowed me to finish my computer science degree, become president of my university's Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers chapter and land an internship that turned into a full-time engineering job.

After I graduated, my student visa expired, but I was allowed three years of work authorization because of my STEM degree. Beyond that, my future rested on the H-1B work visa lottery, in which the demand far exceeds availability.

My employer entered me in the H-1B visa lottery three times in three years. I was never selected. So this month, while Americans celebrated independence, I left for Mexico. I refused to violate the immigration laws I've spent my entire life trying to follow.

I am starting over in a country where I happened to be born but had never really lived. My parents, siblings and friends and even my dog remain in Texas. I found an apartment in Mexico City with roommates my age. Though I was raised bilingually and am very fluent in conversational Spanish, my technical Spanish is weaker than my English. This is one of my main concerns. I'm extremely fortunate to keep my job with my U.S. employer, now from Mexico. But America raised me, provided me with an incredible education

and set me up for a strong career, and I just wish that I could continue to contribute at home.

My story is far from unique. According to the nonpartisan immigrant advocacy group Improve the Dream, whose members include thousands of children of long-term visa holders raised in America, and of which I am a part, there are more than a quarter of a million children and young adults living in America in this situation. When we reach the age of 21, each of us painfully discovers there are few paths to remain in America.

Our families followed the rules, renewed visas for decades and contributed to the American economy. Yet we, the children, often face exile and family separation simply because Congress has not modernized the law. Many of us are forced to leave. Raised and educated there, now some of my peers have moved to work for companies outside the United States. While we are separated from our homes and our families, America loses members of its future taxpaying work force.

Fixing this should not be controversial. The America's Children Act introduced in 2025 by Senators Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky; Alex Padilla, Democrat of California; and several other lawmakers — would provide a pathway for those who have lawfully spent most of their lives in America. It would create an opportunity to apply for a green card for those who were legally raised in America for at

least 10 years and graduated from an American university. It would be, essentially, a 15-year pathway to citizenship.

People often confuse my situation with those who have protection under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Ironically, I could have had temporary protection through the DACA program if I had been undocumented, but the program explicitly excludes anyone with lawful status, even if other requirements are met.

Allowing children who lawfully grew up in America to stay shouldn't be a partisan issue. In 2022 my Texas senator, John Cornyn, seemed willing to work toward a solution. Even President Trump expressed support for a solution like it.

My parents went to America believing that hard work, education and respect for the law would give me opportunities they never had. They kept their promise. I kept mine. I never stopped believing in America, but America's immigration system never believed there should be a place for someone like me.

And it all traces back to four months at the very beginning of my life, four months that I never chose but that determined everything that followed. I hope that Congress fixes this so nobody has to go through what I did and that, one day, I can return home.

PATRICIA ROJAS is an engineer who chose to return to Mexico, despite having lived lawfully in Texas since infancy.

In Sudan, a preventable mass atrocity

KRISTOF, FROM PAGE 1

"Another human rights catastrophe is unfolding in Sudan," Volker Türk, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, warned a few days ago. He added that people in the region are being subjected to summary executions and sexual violence.

"Families have to queue for long hours to get water that is often unsafe for drinking," the Norwegian Refugee Council reports. "Once they manage to bring water home, they must choose whether to use it to drink, cook or wash."

It's not entirely clear if the R.S.F. plans to overrun El Obeid or whether there would be a blood bath if it did. Compared to El Fasher, fewer people in El Obeid are members of the Black African ethnic groups that are R.S.F. targets. It's even possible that the siege of El Obeid is a feint to distract from an attack elsewhere, such as on the Darfur city of Juba.

Still, the risks are immense, and the United Nations Security Council issued a statement last month warning of the "imminent risk of mass atrocities." Leaders are willing to speak about the violence itself. Both the Biden and Trump administrations described the war in Sudan as genocide. The State Department just last month warned of "alarming indications that mass atrocities could be imminent."

But what American, European and United Nations officials won't say openly is that the power behind the R.S.F. is the United Arab Emirates. Although the Emirates denies it, its

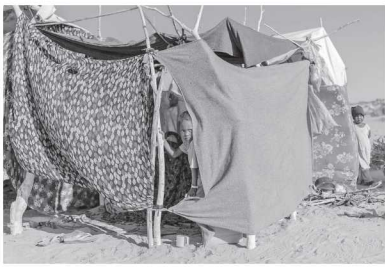
backing of the R.S.F. is well established. Yet the Emirates is rich and influential, so it has become the Country That Must Not Be Named.

Tough public comments and other pressure from Washington and European capitals might shake the Emirates enough for it to tell its murderous friends in Sudan to back off; similar pressure led the Emirates to pull most of its forces out from a brutal war in Yemen in 2019. Instead, world leaders today tiptoe around the Emirates' role.

The Emirates has particularly close financial ties to the Trump family. Last year, Trump's family income surged as the firm created an investment fund tied to the Emirates paid hefty sums for a stake in the family's main crypto company.

Members of Congress, led by Senator Chris Van Hollen and Representative Sara Jacobs, have sponsored legislation that essentially would limit sales of weapons to the Emirates as long as it arms the R.S.F. "This awful conflict could be ended if we had the political will to do so — instead of starting stupid wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya," I share the belief that such a measure could end this catastrophe — but it is languishing from indifference. We should have the fortitude to speak up about human rights outrages whether the responsible party is Russia, China, Israel, America or the Emirates; if you care about human rights in only some places, you don't actually care about human rights.

Sudan isn't getting much attention, partly because the crisis areas are



DAN STOLWITZ/GETTY IMAGES

A refugee camp in the town of Iriba, Chad, that borders Sudan, in February.

difficult to enter. I was organizing a trip to the conflict areas last month, but my route closed at the last minute and I had to put the trip off. Enough information is trickling out for diplomats and aid groups to be able to ring the alarms; it's just that the world is ignoring them.

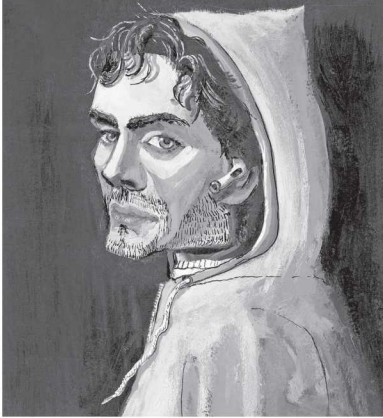
The international community has not started reacting to atrocities and start preventing them," noted Rabab Mohamed Ali Bako, a Sudanese activist originally from El Obeid.

This is an excellent moment to apply public pressure, for the Emirates appears to be lobbying for one of its top

Foreign Ministry officials, Lana Zaki Nusseibeh, to be the next United Nations secretary general.

"This won't end until the Emirates are pressured to stop their advanced weapons superhighway to the R.S.F.," said Nathaniel Raymond of the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, which closely follows the crisis in Sudan. "This war could end in two weeks if the R.S.F. entered an armistice because the Emirates decided it was no longer worth it."

So this is in part on us. We will find the courage to speak up?



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Is the age of Big A.I. coming to an end?

David Wallace-Wells

This month, the Palantir chief executive, Alex Karp, made one of his more remarkable television appearances in what is quickly becoming a notorious run of televised rants.

"Something has gone completely wrong," he declared on CNBC, in an appearance so vivid and manic it was widely described online as a "crash out." He was referring to the whole structure of the artificial intelligence industry, which had been built on top of a value proposition that looked to him like a dead end. The big labs, such as Anthropic and OpenAI, have been overhyping their own closed-source models, he argued, hoarding their value rather than empowering their clients and partners with them.

More than that, he seemed to say the labs were exploiting those clients and partners — private companies and individuals but also militaries and intelligence agencies — by making use of their research and intellectual property. Open-source or open-weight alternatives, which allow considerably more in-house customization and control, were obviously preferable, he suggested, for almost all users.

The big is up," he announced. Mr. Karp is an irresistibly noxious figure, a would-be philosopher king who can't seem to sit still on a TV set or a conference stage as he holds forth about chip chains or tai chi or the woe left. Perhaps even more than Elon Musk, Mr. Karp seems to understand that in an attention-economy economy, the job of an executive is to always be pitching.

He is also perhaps the most visible spokesman of Silicon Valley's increasingly distinct tech sector; and, of course, Palmer Luckey's drone manufacturer, is another of its tent poles. For the last few years, a new Silicon Valley has taken shape in a kind of cluster around defense tech, robotics and artificial intelligence, with the leaders of each sector speaking almost in unison to describe the urgency of an American industrial renaissance and present technological competition with China in terms of a new Cold War.

In this view, which has been mostly embraced by the Trump administration, nothing should be allowed to get in the way of technological progress, and the march of that progress could be measured crudely in capital expenditure.

This is one reason it was so striking for Mr. Karp to be yelling that A.I. was heading in the wrong direction — a presumptively openly bashing the big A.I. labs and the business proposition they represent. Mr. Karp had been softly floating his critique for some time, but the CNBC event looked like a proper coming out. Just one day earlier Palantir had published a kind of manifesto devoted to what it described as the all-important principle of "A.I. sovereignty."

The central argument: Companies should seek to build their own A.I. tools, not just customize those on offer from the frontier labs. This might mean relying on open-source L.L.M.s rather than the proprietary ones on which the A.I. boom has mostly been built in America, but it would amount to a liberating declaration of independence from Big A.I., in which Mr. Karp's estimation was sucking up more value than it was generating.

Mr. Karp isn't exactly a disinterested observer here. In recent weeks, out of a mix of concerns about political vulnerabilities, national sovereignty and privacy, France has announced that its intelligence service is cutting ties with Palantir. The future of the firm's partnership with Britain's National Health Service also seems to be in jeopardy. Mr. Karp was on TV to promote a new partnership with Nvidia that would allow Palantir to develop and sell a distinct set of products to compete with those on offer from the frontier labs — which is to say, in railing against the Big A.I. business model, he was undeniably talking his own book.

But his rant highlighted several genuine and growing questions about the way those big A.I. labs have sold the

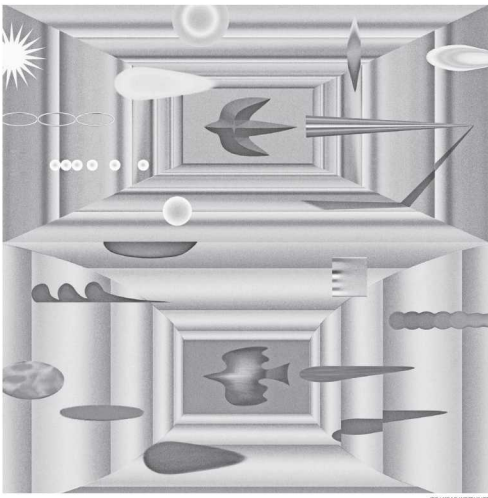


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES HAMILTON

rest of us on their paths to global domination. He is not alone in asking them. And he is not wrong. Even if plenty of indicators suggest that the A.I. economy as a whole is rapidly growing, it looks less inevitable than it used to seem that the big, brand-name labs will be the titan profit engines of that future. Perhaps they will function more like utilities, providing machine intelligence almost like electricity to other innovators, entrepreneurs and enterprises.

The type cycle of the last few years has flourished — and generated a lot of investment — on the supposition that artificial intelligence was the kind of arms race it was possible to outright win, and that enormous or even monopolistic profits would flow inevitably to

the winner. The basic idea was that at a certain point, competition would somewhat naturally come to an end, when the technology would grow so powerful that it could quickly and dramatically engineer its own successor models, producing an exponential liftoff leading quite quickly to what is often called "artificial superintelligence."

Beyond that threshold, the leading L.L.M.s would be so powerful, and would be improving so rapidly, that even small initial advantages would compound quickly into something like a natural monopoly on intelligence, which could then be sold to users at almost any price.

These days, as A.I. boosters have cooled their talk of a jobs apocalypse,

you also hear a little less about artificial superintelligence, now typically short-handed as "A.S.I." But the ongoing A.I. investment cycle is still built on the same underlying paradigm: that historic levels of capital expenditure are justified because the returns from winning the race would be unimaginably enormous.

But can the race even be won? Can any lab open up an enduring advantage over the others, let alone one sufficient to justify a monopolistic claim on A.I. revenue?

Over the last year or so, this logic has come to seem a lot more questionable, in part because, though progress has continued, no model has retained a long-lasting advantage, and plenty of those cheaper, open-source alternatives have kept a pretty close pace with the best-in-class versions. When A.I. companies began raising prices on their premium products to more closely match the cost of producing them, many of their clients balked, realizing that frontier models were not generating enough profit to justify the expense. Partly as a result, corporate uptake of frontier models flattened; much cheaper, open-source models exploded.

This helped illustrate a broader pattern, visible at least since the blockbuster release of a cheap, open-source model from China's DeepSeek in 2025: that even if copycats never quite caught up to the best-in-class standards, they'd also never fall so far behind. The frontier labs have grown so worried about this that they are desperately appealing to Congress to take legislative action against what they say are lesser companies, many of them foreign, effectively stealing their IP through a process known as "distillation."

This looks almost like an existential threat because for most users, even most corporations with capital to burn — it might not make intuitive sense to pay a superpremium for an only slightly

better product. For many, it would probably make more sense to pay a lot less for a slightly inferior product — especially given that, because of the rate of progress, no model is likely to retain its advantage for very long.

This is one reason a growing number of A.I. watchers have begun emphasizing, however impressive the models were, the ultimate impact of A.I. will be determined as much by what is sometimes called "diffusion": how quickly, widely and capably those tools will be embedded in a broader social and economic ecosystem still directed by humans and full of many human bottlenecks.

If that alternative perspective is right, it will make the leading A.I. labs considerably less central to the A.I. future than they have seemed for so long. A draft internal analysis prepared by Treasury Department analysts has reportedly warned that the size of the big A.I. companies represents a systemic risk to the country's economy and financial system, though higher-ups have publicly criticized the report.

A few years ago, it was fashionable to say, as Peter Thiel liked to, that cryptocurrency was a libertarian technology, enabling individuals to conduct even large-scale financial business outside the reach or oversight of any government, and that A.I. was a "communist" technology, by which he meant authoritarian, concentrating and centralizing godlike planning powers into a single machine intelligence whose judgment would presumably supersede even that of the market.

But as we move further into that A.I. future, it no longer looks so clear that we are heading toward convergence like we used to read about in science fiction. Instead, what we have is a more unsettled landscape, which some have called decentralized and democratic and others simply more competitive. The meaning of this technology is not limited to its market impact, of course, and the trajectory could change again. But that is just another reminder of how early in this story we are — that such fundamental propositions about the shape of what's to come might change so profoundly in the space of just a year or two.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS is a writer for *Opinion* and *The Times Magazine* and the author of *"The Uninhabitable Earth."*

A radical solution is required

SCHMIDT, FROM PAGE 9
mental solutions alike. Here's one to treat a populist A.I. agenda that treats the technology as a public project. Just as NASA made space a national mission rather than a private one, the government should now do the same for A.I. to ensure that its benefits reach the public, not just the companies building it. Here are some concrete ways to do that.

One, treat some A.I. profits as a shared resource and distribute them directly to citizens. This can be in the form of a sovereign wealth fund, seeded by contributions from A.I. companies in the form of stock or cash. Prior models for this include Australia's Future Fund, which turned budget surpluses and government shares in a privatized

telecom into a permanent endowment for future generations. Another format would be to reinvest A.I. profits into the younger generation, whose members risk being displaced before their careers even begin, and teach them how to use these tools.

Two, support public-interest A.I. models that the private sector might not be incentivized to build. Examples include models to help citizens navigate government services and benefits, to help them gain legal aid or to help educate their children. We strongly believe in the importance of open-source A.I., which anyone can freely use and modify. That would allow local governments, libraries, small businesses and the like to participate in building, owning, in-

specting and adapting models for their community and privacy needs.

For the government and companies, this means expanding A.I. computing infrastructure, teaching the public how better to understand and use A.I. for personal well-being, and funding genuinely open-source and safe American models. Britain once nationalized electricity; the United States regulated railroads. We've done it before and can do it again.

Three, regulate one area that attracts bipartisan agreement: the way children and teens interact with A.I. Several bipartisan bills have been introduced that propose safeguards for minors, parental controls and penalties for platform violations. Absent regulations, industry is unlikely to police itself, as we've seen in the age of social media.

Our society has navigated and absorbed major technological upheavals before. Those transitions endured politically because reformers and lawmakers built labor protections, social insurance, public schooling and an antitrust law that helped broaden technology's gains. This time around, many Americans have no faith that the benefits of A.I. will be distributed. It is up to policymakers and the companies building A.I. to change that.

A.I. must help people thrive, not merely enrich a handful of companies and leave others behind. If that doesn't happen, people will resist it, slow it and fight over it. That is how a crisis loses its balance on the tightrope.

ERIC SCHMIDT, a former chief executive of Google, is the chairman and chief executive of Relativity Space. SELINA XU leads China and A.I. policy research in Mr. Schmidt's office.



QILAI SHEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
An autonomous car in Wuhan, China. Robo-taxis there have stranded passengers.

Looksmaxxers really don't care

MANNE, FROM PAGE 10
men can scrutinize and rate their facial features according to a pseudoscientific numerical system called the PSL scale. ("PSL" is taken from the names of three incel forums where looksmaxxing originated.) Once rated by their peers, men can learn to improve their assigned value by watching videos demonstrating supposedly jaw-enhancing tongue exercises or by going to a clinic to remove buccal fat.

Looksmaxxing is very obviously a trend created by men for other men, in which men congregate to compare themselves against a standard of masculine beauty codified by male influencers. As in all online communities, it is hard to separate performance from sincerity. But behind language like "mogg" and dubious practices like

"bone smashing" is the real anxiety of boys who are insecure about the width of their shoulders or the prominence of their jawlines.

In an interview with an Australian beauty blogger, Jarryd, a 16-year-old in Australia, described how the boys at his school put pressure on each other to build a specific kind of physique: "Women have had that pressure for longer, and it's always kind of been, girls should be slim. But I feel like now there's a lot of gym bros," he said. "If you're the thinnest guy, if you can't lift this much, you're inferior, you're weak."

Though the mansphere blames imperious women for their woes, that judgment is largely coming from inside the house. Women's tastes in men are wildly variable, to be sure, but many

prefer a warm smile to bulging muscles and a snatched face. Men who pour money, time and effort into achieving a looksmaxxer's aesthetic for the sake of attracting women may be in for disappointment. One satirical TikTok video captures the irony of straight men honing their physiques in the gym to snag dates — only to find that their DMs are filled with a chorus of male followers.

It is not easy to escape from under the male gaze. For boys and men, maybe this hard-won feminist tenet can help: You do not have to look a certain way in order to have value.

KATE MANNE is a moral, social and feminist philosopher at Cornell University and the author of "Unshrinking: 'Entitled' and 'Down Girl.'"

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Opinion Society

The great reinvention of Hunter Biden

Ben Hickey



An unlikely internet hero has emerged out of nowhere in recent weeks, one who is managing to make a name for himself through his willingness both to own his troubled past and to “say it like it is” — it usually being Donald Trump’s monarchical pretensions, God-like conception of himself and use of the American presidency for personal gain.

Even more unlikely, the man whom X users are now describing as “based”, a “generational shitposter” and a “straight up . . . maga whisperer” was once one of the most notorious objects of their condemnation and scorn. Those who previously derided him as a “degenerate that should be in prison” from a “scum family” are now lauding his love for his father and inviting him on to their podcasts for cosy bipartisan chats.

I have to hand it to him: the man knows how to troll with the best of ‘em

I am talking, of course, about the only surviving son of the 46th president: 56-year-old disbarred attorney, maximalist painter, recovering drug addict and America’s most infamous “failson”, Hunter Biden. His successful internet-based reinvention was not, I must admit, on my “2026 bingo card”. But I have to hand it to him: he knows how to troll with the best of ‘em.

“I am officially nominating Donald J Trump (@realDonaldTrump) for the Nobel Peace Prize. No President in History has ended the same war so many times,” Biden Jr posted last week in a not-too-subtle dig at the president’s incessant whining that he deserves to win the prize, and his repeated claims to have ended the Iran war. Biden returned to the subject on Wednesday. “OMG! You are not going to believe this,” he posted. “The war with Iran is NOT over. I’d like to withdraw my nomination.”

When long-term Trump adviser and convicted felon Roger Stone claimed that George Conway, the ex-husband of Trump’s former counselor Kellyanne Conway, had spent \$1mn per vote during his unsuccessful bid for Congress earlier this year (he had apparently spent \$6mn on 6,000 votes, so Stone was out by a factor of 1,000), Biden snapped back: “Is this

the same math you morons used to claim the election was stolen.” When one X user posted that “Hunter Biden is still a meth head,” he corrected him. “You mean crack head.”

I don’t agree with all of Biden’s political commentary — such as when he calls fiat currency “a sham” or goes along with Candace Owens’ claims that Charlie Kirk’s assassination and the attempts on Trump’s life were the result of “psyops” during his appearance on her podcast. But some of it is compelling, particularly his calling out of the sleaze of this president and his own progeny.

“I hope everyone had a great 4th of July. I know @realDonaldTrump and family did,” Biden posted on X last week. “250 years ago we declared independence from a king who ran the colonies as a family business. In just 18 months the Trumps have made King George look like an amateur,” he said, before listing a whole slew of lucrative and ethically dubious business dealings the president’s family has been involved in during his second term.

Biden appears able to cut through to those who might usually dismiss anything that a dynastic Democrat or Trump-basher might say — particularly one with his surname. His ability to do so is one reason he is now being touted as a potential presidential contender. While that might sound like a stretch, stranger things have happened. And even if it is, he is nonetheless displaying several qualities that the Democrats could learn from.

Like Trump, Biden is not portraying himself as a moral exemplar, and is owning his past rather than trying to sugarcoat it. As he wrote this week in his newly launched “Where’s Hunter” Substack, “when there is nothing left to hide, something quiet begins to return . . . The permission to stand inside your own life, the whole of it, including the parts that don’t reconcile, and to find that the ground holds.”

He is also — and this is not like Trump at all — unusually willing to show his vulnerability. He combines his trolling with videos of himself talking about being grateful “for all of it” or painting as he talks about his recovery from addiction. Just as importantly, he is willing to engage with people with whom he has profound political disagreements.

What it comes down to is this: Biden is a nepo-baby, but he manages to come across as a real, flawed and often quite funny human being. There might be more to politics than coming across as authentic. But in a world of profound political distrust, in which character often counts for more than policy, it’s not a bad place to start. Particularly for a party that often struggles to communicate outside of its own bubble.

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A three-way nuclear arms race

Today’s world has alarming echoes of the era before weapons controls

For decades the nuclear arms race, terrifying as it was, was a two-way affair. The US and the Soviet Union pushed each other into building thousands of warheads as they strove for parity. But the grim symmetry of mutual assured destruction helped prevent conflict and eventually pushed the two sides towards arms control talks that reduced tensions, and weapons. Now, China’s test firing of a submarine-launched ballistic missile in the Pacific is a further sign that a new arms race is unfolding. And this time it is three-sided.

China’s launch last week was only its third long-range missile test across the Pacific. While Beijing was long content to maintain a minimal nuclear deterrent, the test highlighted the expansion of its arsenal and progress towards the

full “triad” of land, air and submarine-based weapons. It demonstrated Beijing’s ability to project power across the Pacific and reach US targets from bastions close to its own coast.

Beijing no doubt sees a muscular nuclear deterrent as a prerequisite of superpower status. Its build-up is fuelled in part, however, by the collapse of the cold war-era arms control framework. The 2010 US-Russia New Start treaty, which capped deployed strategic warheads at 1,550 each, lapsed this year. Beijing also views US missile defence systems as a threat to the nuclear balance.

But a three-sided arms race is inherently more unstable, especially when two sides, Russia and China, have increasingly close ties. With Beijing’s warhead tally forecast to expand from about 620 now to 1,000 by 2030, US planners fear becoming heavily outmatched by a combined Chinese-Russian arsenal. With no legal caps in place, the temptation will grow for Washing-

ton to start “uploading” on to launchers more of its roughly 1,900 warheads held in reserve. That might in turn prompt Russia, which has about 2,600 in its stored stockpiles, to follow suit.

Seeing the US, Russia and China expand their deployed arsenal could spur others to expand or develop their own nuclear capabilities. Countries across Europe and Asia have already been unnerved by the wars in Ukraine and Iran, doubts over Donald Trump’s commitment to use the US nuclear umbrella to protect allies and Vladimir Putin’s sabre-rattling. The result could be a mushrooming proliferation among smaller countries alongside the race between the three big powers.

The best way to begin stabilising the situation would be for Moscow and Washington to reinstate New Start, pending talks on a new agreement — which, as Trump has insisted, ought to include Beijing. China has maintained it will not join negotiations given its arsenal remains so much smaller, but the US

With Beijing’s nuclear warhead tally forecast to expand to 1,000 by 2030, US planners fear becoming outmatched by a combined Chinese-Russian arsenal

has even less credibility in urging China to engage after allowing its mutual restraints with Russia to expire. To stand any chance of pulling in Beijing, however, the US will surely have to moderate its insistence that talks are aimed at “symmetrical” caps and limited to warheads, not missile defences.

By the same token, it is ultimately in Beijing’s interests to join talks aimed at agreeing sensible minimum deterrent levels. If its own build-up pushes the US to begin uploading stockpiled arms, Beijing could be sucked into punishingly expensive efforts to catch up. Engaging in arms control talks would also bolster its claim to be a “responsible” power.

The current situation, with US-Russian mutual inspections and data-sharing now non-existent and no such agreements in place with Beijing, carries alarming echoes of the pre arms-control era. A new architecture is sorely needed. The fundamental truth remains that the more weapons exist, the greater the risk of a catastrophe.

Letters

Why TV’s future depends on international co-productions

Robert Armstrong is right that viewers increasingly face an abundance of choice — it is also an abundance of consolidation, change and confusion. Yet the bigger challenge may be what consolidation means for the programmes themselves (“The Future of TV: lots of choice, lots of hassle”, Opinion, June 25).

With mergers such as Paramount-Skydance-Warner Bros Discovery’s, and last week’s confirmation of Sky’s acquisition of ITV’s media and entertainment business, the market looks set to become more concentrated

before it becomes more competitive. The inevitable consequences are greater in-house production, tighter budgets and increased risk aversion, placing further pressure on independent producers. Ironically this threatens the one thing that platforms cannot afford to neglect: distinctive content.

The economics of television have changed. A handful of blockbuster British or American dramas can no longer sustain the vast content pipelines that global streaming platforms require. Instead, the UK

should embrace the European model of international co-production more enthusiastically, working not only with continental partners but also with our treaty countries such as Canada, Australia, Brazil and South Africa.

European broadcasters have long shared financing, creative talent and production across borders. While more partners inevitably complicate development, the result is programming designed for multiple audiences from the outset. These stories travel further, recoup investment more effectively and reflect

the viewing habits of audiences who have shown they are perfectly willing to embrace subtitled drama.

In an age of consolidation, platform user experience will of course matter, but remarkable, internationally minded programming will matter even more. Platforms that enable ambitious programmes will be remembered not for serving endless variations of familiar formats, but for expanding television’s creative horizons.

Holly Miller
Director, Percy & Warren, London W1, UK

Nato needs smarter, not bigger, defence

The FT story, “Europe looks to defend itself” (The Big Read, July 7) was timely in that it was published as the Nato heads of government summit was meeting in Ankara. That summit, sadly, will focus on how much money is being spent by and allocated for defence by members. Instead, the real metric is what is actually being bought that strengthens Nato’s overall combat power rather than that of individual states.

Your story hints at what European and Canadian Nato members should do given that, at best, Donald Trump’s intent is to gradually move the US further away from the alliance.

Spending more is not the answer. Spending wisely is. The media is advancing the warning that a desperate Vladimir Putin, unable to secure victory in Ukraine, may turn west. Invasions of one of the Baltic states or one of the Baltic Islands are proffered as possible targets.

If Putin moves west, his army is so depleted he would need the equivalent of the Russian boy scouts to fill the ranks. Regardless, Nato has an affordable and commonsensical solution. That is putting in place an alliance-wide porcupine defence. That defence is predicated on two propositions.

First, by using uncrewed drones, missiles and weapons, along with a counter command and control targeting strategy, any initial assault west by Russia would be blunted and made too costly to consider as a serious option.

Second, given how badly the Russian attack into Ukraine was organised, the ability to attack and disrupt Russian lines of communication is an additional means of making any move west a very bad idea. That means strengthening the Baltic states and the Finnish and Swedish borders to the same ends. Fortunately, Russia is too weak to mount a serious attack from the Black Sea.

The geography is also an advantage. But for this to work, the foundation is not for individual states to bolster their own defences but to increase those of the alliance as a whole in these critical regions.

By concentrating on blunting an initial assault through this combination of prevention and disruption, the Nato alliance will be strengthened. And frankly, if this is done correctly, the only capability the US needs to bring is its nuclear arsenal that would prevent Putin from considering that option.

Whether Nato members can act as an alliance or continue as individual members in increasing defence will be the measure of how well “Europe looks to defend itself”.

Harlan Ullman
Senior Adviser, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, US



Ammonia has potential for shipping as a sustainable, clean fuel source

Resilient infrastructure is money well spent

The World Bank’s decision to retire its target of 45 per cent of annual lending to projects with climate benefits (“World Bank drops climate finance target under US pressure”, Report, June 30) risks making development investments less effective and more costly over time, particularly for poorer and more vulnerable countries.

A climate co-benefit is not a decorative green label. It recognises that a road, power grid, water system or public service can do more than meet an immediate development need: it can also reduce vulnerability to climate hazards, strengthen resilience or keep essential services running through droughts, floods and heat. That is not mission creep; it is sound development and fiscal prudence. The World Bank itself has found that investing in more resilient infrastructure can generate about \$4 in benefits for every \$1 invested.

This matters most in fragile and conflict-affected countries, where development, disaster risk reduction, peace-building and climate adaptation cannot be neatly separated. Syria is a case in point. After 14 years of war, it must rebuild damaged water, power and sanitation systems while facing rising demand, returning populations and worsening heat, drought and aridity. Rebuilding water-inefficient systems from the past, without considering these future changes, would risk locking in higher costs, deeper water insecurity and weaker basic services.

The bank is right to focus on outcomes, not box-ticking targets for their own sake. But climate-blind development lending is not cheaper. It moves the bill to poorer countries later.

Mauricio Vazquez
Head of policy for global risks and resilience, ODI Global think-tank, London SW1, UK

Ammonia can still power shipping industry’s future

Your report on shipping’s tack towards fossil fuels captures a genuine commercial frustration, but significant progress in green fuel technology is on the horizon (Report, July 6).

Ammonia has exceptional potential for shipping and other hard-to-decarbonise sectors as a sustainable, clean fuel source. It is energy-dense, storable, and unlike hydrogen it can be transported at scale using an existing network of dedicated carriers and port terminals — a supply chain foundation no other green fuel can match yet.

The challenges of deploying ammonia in the maritime industry are real, with both combustion and fuel cell options in contention. Currently, green ammonia remains costly, and bunkering infrastructure is still maturing. But cost barriers in emerging energy technologies are not immovable — they are engineering problems, and engineering problems can be overcome with sustained, focused research.

A major research programme under way between scientists in the UK and Singapore is doing precisely that — accelerating progress in direct ammonia solid oxide fuel cells.

The project — led by Nanyang Technological University Singapore and Imperial Global Singapore — focuses on technology that converts ammonia electrochemically without first cracking it into hydrogen. That single step eliminates a costly and energy-intensive process, improving efficiency and meaningfully reducing the delivered cost of power. Coupled with increased research into the synthesis of green ammonia, there is huge potential to advance a low-carbon shipping future.

Fossil fuels may offer temporary shelter commercially, but shipowners should not change course on green fuels.

Professor Stephen Skinner
Department of Materials, Imperial College London/Imperial Global Singapore

A trip down memory lane

James Max (“The unexpected rise of the modern classic car”, FT Money, July 4) neglected to mention the true classics of the late 1970s and early 1980s such as the affordable Renault 18, the irresistible Ford Capri and the ubiquitous Austin Allegro. Those models were the mainstay of motoring stability in those very positive years for both British and European motor manufacturers, before Toyota and Nissan spoiled us with the luxuries of heated rear windows, push-button FM radios, electric front driver and passenger windows. Heated front seats and cruise control were a long way off, let alone sat navs. Nevertheless, thanks for the memory, James!

Cormac Meehan
Bundoran, County Donegal, Ireland

Growth lies beyond the Golden Triangle

Your analysis of the IT sector’s impact on productivity (“Can the IT sector solve the UK’s growth problem?”, The Big Read, June 29) rightly identifies innovation as the UK’s economic lifeblood and superpower. What is frustrating, however, is that our growing innovative regions continue to be overlooked in favour of a small portion of the country.

Nearly 80 per cent of UK venture capital is funnelled into London, Oxford and Cambridge — the Golden Triangle. Yet regional cities like Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester are among the fastest-growing innovation economies in the country. According to our own research with Beahurst, these cities have grown by more than 30 per cent in innovation employment since 2019. By contrast London has only grown 1 per cent as a whole in the same time.

To compete globally as an innovation-led economy, we need to acknowledge the changing geography of innovation and rethink how R&D incentives are allocated and deployed. There needs to be greater alignment between dedicated funding and support and the regions excelling in frontier sectors, such as advanced materials in Manchester, healthtech in Edinburgh or robotics in Birmingham.

By looking beyond the Golden Triangle, we can build on the strengths of our regions and deliver tailored support for early-stage ventures to help them scale here in the UK. True economic resilience lies in backing the regions already driving growth.

Karim Bahou
Head of Innovation, Sister, Manchester, UK

The Clacton by-election cannot settle standards

Nigel Farage says the Clacton by-election will allow voters to judge him. It cannot (Report, July 5).

The issue is not whether he complied with parliament’s declaration rules, nor even whether the people of Clacton choose to return him. It is whether it is right for any MP to accept a £5mn gift from a major cryptocurrency investor and then become one of parliament’s leading champions of the cryptocurrency industry.

Even if the donation were lawful and properly declared, public confidence depends on parliament being seen to be free from the influence of such substantial private financial interests.

The by-election may settle Farage’s electoral mandate, but it cannot settle that constitutional question. Only the parliamentary standards inquiry can do that.

Trevor Lyttleton MBE
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Opinion

AI is not enough to arrest China’s decline

ECONOMICS

Ruchir Sharma



For all the worry about how America has become one big bet on AI, a similar but perhaps more alarming story is unfolding quietly in the other economic superpower. China’s vaunted AI prowess is concealing deep rot elsewhere in its economy. Though many forecasters keep expecting China to surpass the US as the world’s leading economy, its growth peaked in 2021. Since then, China’s share of global GDP has fallen in nominal terms from 18 to 16.5 per cent, while the US share has risen to 26 per cent. China’s growth rate has dropped below the rest of the world, including the US. In real terms, independent estimates now put China’s growth in real terms closer to zero than to the

official target of 4.5 to 5 per cent. Even by the official numbers, AI is not providing a lift big enough to overcome other forces weighing on China, including its shrinking workforce, rising indebtedness, a broken property market, the revival of a meddlesome regulatory state and the resulting exodus of capital and people. China’s population also peaked in 2021. Last year, births hit a record low, and deaths hit a record high. The working-age population is on pace to shrink by 75mn every decade this century. Historically, fewer workers have always meant slower growth; countries with declining populations rarely sustain growth above 2 per cent. And for China, given the scale of its demographic bust, AI is unlikely to replace human workers fast enough to ease the economic blow. Without the AI boost, China would be much worse off. After adding little in the 2010s, net exports now account for about a third of the country’s growth, driven mainly by AI-related goods. But this is a very large contribution to an otherwise weak domestic economy. Chinese hyperscalers are investing \$100bn

in AI this year compared to \$750bn by US rivals, yielding far less of a pop to growth. And though every country now hopes for an AI-driven productivity miracle, the expected boost in China is about a third of a percentage point by 2030, hardly enough to halt its decline. The structural challenges are daunting. In the past five years, China’s augmented deficit (which includes off-

Total debt is nearly 350 per cent of GDP – higher than in the US despite lower per capita income

budget spending) has reached nearly 15 per cent of GDP, higher than any other major country, pushing augmented government debt to 135 per cent of GDP. Unlike the US and most other countries, China has rapidly mounting debts in the private sector as well. Total debt amounts to nearly 350 per cent of GDP – higher than in the US despite China’s much lower per capita income.

The debt problem is partly a hangover of the great property bubble. Beijing responded to the global crisis of 2008 by pumping credit into real estate, which was the main contributor to growth in the last decade. Then the bubble popped, also in 2021. Property prices tumbled and are now at a 20-year low, in inflation-adjusted terms. In new but half-empty developments, including a faux Venice in the north-east, flats can be rented for \$120 a month. As property wealth shrivels so does consumer confidence, and retail sales are falling. The stock market reflects this distorted economy and has gone nowhere for years. Earnings are strong for firms that supply the AI stack and weak for consumer-facing companies. Meanwhile, the government has moved on from property to pumping credit into new manufacturing industries, in effect replacing one debt bubble with another. In late 2020, China launched a stunning regulatory crackdown on its big tech firms. Now, after retreating for a couple of years, an index tracking regulatory pressure is surging again. Giving up on making money in China, multina-

tionals are scaling back operations. Net foreign direct investment is negative. Last year a record \$425bn in capital flowed out of Chinese financial markets. People are leaving as well. The immigrant share of the population is stuck at just 0.1 per cent, a fraction of the share in India (which is just as populous). The number of western expats living in China has fallen markedly. It is historically unusual for a major power to have so little allure for foreigners and foreign money. The growing hype around Chinese AI doesn’t change the fact that 2021 was peak China. Given its demographic challenges and heavy debts, Beijing can’t do much to prop up domestic growth. It has shifted instead to dumping manufactured exports, but the resulting backlash is spreading fast. And AI isn’t a fix for everything. Its impressive powers may be the answer to many problems, but they can’t reverse the forces driving China’s decline.

The writer is chair of Rockefeller International. His latest book is ‘What Went Wrong With Capitalism’

Yes, peer review has problems. Trump’s solution is dangerous

Carlo Ratti



For once, I should thank the Trump administration. It has forced academia to confront a problem that has long needed attention: the shortcomings of peer review. The proposed cure, however, is far worse than the disease. The modern American research system grew out of the vision of a single engineer from my own university, MIT. In 1945, Vannevar Bush proposed a grand three-way bargain: government would fund research; scientists with the relevant expertise would judge its merit; and society would reap the benefits. That arrangement gave us the modern American research university and the long chain of inventions that shape our lives today. But peer review is hardly beyond criticism. It can too easily curdle into peer reassurance; like our woolly cousins, we researchers are not immune to herd behaviour. More fundamentally, every generation of scientists struggles to change its own assumptions. As the German physicist Max Planck suggested, science advances one funeral at a time. There is another more recent challenge: ideological pressures. Under the Biden administration, several diversity, equity and inclusion requirements injected non-scientific criteria into peer review and grant decisions. The Trump administration now seeks to address this. A new regulation currently under consideration by the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requires that, before any federal research grant is awarded, a political appointee certify

Replacing scientific judgment with political alignment puts at risk the very engine of discovery

that the work will “demonstrably advance the President’s policy priorities”. Funding could be revoked whenever political priorities change. The answer to imperfect peer review is better peer review, not political supervision. Replacing scientific judgment with political alignment risks undermining the very engine of discovery. Faced with the risk that a project could be cancelled when the political weather turns, the rational researcher abandons the ambitious idea for the safe one. The boldest discoveries are not banned; they are simply never attempted. What can be done instead? In conversations at MIT, several possible solutions have emerged. Funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation could be encouraged to support a more heterogeneous set of ideas. I propose dividing peer review into two stages: first, verifying the methodological soundness of the research, which could also benefit from recent AI developments; second, allowing the findings to be debated openly within the scientific community. This process of discussion and criticism is one of the great but underutilised strengths of science. It allows ideas to compete over time rather than being decided in advance by a small group of gatekeepers. Funding agencies in New Zealand and Switzerland have already moved in a two-tier direction by awarding some grants by lottery among proposals judged methodologically sound. Elements of this model already exist in another domain of peer review: the process that decides what research to publish. Open-access journals such as Scientific Reports or Public Library of Science focus primarily on methodological soundness, allowing broader judgments to emerge through subsequent citations. These are only some of the reforms that a revised proposal to the OMB could address. But if left in its present form, it risks undoing America’s scientific advantage. In 1658, Sir Thomas Browne captured the cruelty of recorded history, writing: “Herostatus lives that burnt the Temple of Diana, he is almost lost that built it.” We keep a better record of the arsonist than the architect. For much of the past century, America has been the architect of modern science. It would be a bitter epitaph to be remembered for its undoing.

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How to spread America’s wealth

SOCIETY

Rana Foroohar



The wealth gap is a big political issue for Americans. According to a Gallup poll held in March, half of the country worries “a great deal” about how income and wealth are distributed. Perhaps that’s because about the same share of the population doesn’t have the resources to afford all the basics, like housing, food, medicine and healthcare. The winner-takes-all AI economy has only exacerbated these concerns. That’s one reason that Donald Trump rang the bell for both the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq at the White House last week to promote his new “Trump accounts”. These would give every child born between January 2025 and December 2028 a one-time \$1,000 Treasury contribution, as a way of, as Trump put it in his press conference, making a lot of kids “very, very rich”. Will it? In a word, no. With a 5 per cent real annual return, that \$1,000 would be \$2,400 by the time the child is 18. Nice, but by no means transformative. Still, the fact that even Trump (who has done his best to increase the wealth gap in America) is concerned confirms the larger debate in the US over what some

political theorists and economists call the “pre-distribution” as opposed to the “redistribution” of wealth – at a time when inequality is greater than it has been since the Gilded Age. Democratic socialists and many progressives would like to see redistribution, mainly in the form of wealth taxes. Conservatives and some middle-of-the-road Democrats argue that “pre-distribution” – meaning giving more people a bigger stake in equity markets and housing wealth up front, rather than aiming for mass redistribution via taxation – is a better idea. Personally, I think some mix of both will be necessary to preserve social cohesion in a country that feels increasingly like an emerging market in terms of its wealth bifurcation. But in the short term, pre-distribution may be more politically tolerable. The US is, first and foremost, an asset economy. Markets are the tail that wags the dog, and more Americans are invested in them than ever before. Still, the top 10 per cent of the population owns 93 per cent of equity wealth. The asset wealth of the richest (who do most of the consumer spending) fuels inflation in crucial areas like housing. This is only going to get worse, as all the new AI multimillionaires drive prices up even further, particularly in the top markets. If we read our Thomas Piketty and assume that the growth of asset wealth will almost always outpace the growth of income wealth, ultimately creating major political stress fractures in societies, we must think about ways to bring more people into the market in a bigger



way. The alternative is Hobbesian. The only question is how best to do it. One-time government contributions with voluntary additional contributions by families tend to simply replicate existing inequality: rich families can and will put more into the pot. Research has shown this to be the case with, for example, the UK’s now-abandoned Child Trust Fund. Although admirable, it did nowhere near enough to tackle inequality, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Ditto similar experiments in Canada and Australia. The sort of pre-distribution that really moves the needle on inequality involves the ambitious transfer of productive national assets to a broad swath of the population, not small, universal government grants and

Pre-distribution, if it is to work, must not be about throwing the public a one-off baby bond

voluntary family contributions. Think of postwar land reforms in South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, which got rid of subsistence tenant farming, increased farmers’ purchasing power (which drove other areas of the industrial economy) and reduced overall levels of inequality. One might also point to Singaporean housing policy as a good model of paradigm-changing pre-distribution – the state-driven model of near-universal home ownership increased intergenerational mobility significantly. There is also the sovereign wealth fund model. Alaska’s Permanent Wealth Fund, for example, helped reduce poverty by sharing annual income from oil revenues with all state citizens. The obvious productive asset to divide up today is intellectual property and data (which represents the bulk of corporate wealth) and in particular AI, which represents all net corporate capex. Big Tech’s wealth is based on information extraction from humans. So, it is no wonder that middle-of-the-road Democrats like California gover-

nor Gavin Newsom are calling not for universal basic income, but universal basic capital – or UBC – perhaps in the form of technology-based sovereign wealth funds of the kind proposed by OpenAI, the Berggruen Institute and others. This would give citizens a piece of the massive AI wealth being created today. As Newsom put it at an event in May, “We don’t need charity, we need ownership.” The last time America heard this much about the “ownership society” was back in the mid-2000s, when George W Bush pushed for broader home ownership. That ended in tears, as poorer, less creditworthy borrowers became the hardest hit in the financial crisis when those easy loans reset to nosebleed rates. Pre-distribution, if it is to work, must not be about throwing the public a bone in the form of a one-off baby bond or a variable-rate mortgage. It must be about spreading the wealth in a bigger and much more sustainable way.

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The EU has ways out of its budget trap

EUROPE

Martin Sandbu



As Ireland takes on the rotating presidency of the EU’s council of member states, its hardest task will be to advance talks on the bloc’s next seven-year budget. A year ago, the European Commission presented its proposal for the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) to govern EU spending from 2028 on. It made two important choices. One was to shift the structure of spending towards new challenges, away from the formulaic redistribution built into longstanding agriculture and regional subsidies. Another was to keep the overall amount roughly unchanged as a share of the economy. Since then, things have developed along predictable lines. Countries fear-

ful of losing out have fought to reinstate some of the old structure. Net payers have revved up their complaints against profligacy. Consequently, the latest version is less ambitious in both scope and scale, with not as much left over for new priorities – defence, energy, tech – that everyone agrees are important. The Spanish economist Ángel Ubide puts it well: “The European budget is a clear political statement that Europe does not want to compete with China or the United States.” Why is this happening? Because member states cannot escape the traditional political economy of budget talks and have already dug themselves deep into the usual trenches for net payers and net recipients. How Ireland can corral its partners out of this dead end is hard to see, even if the country enjoys a special role as both a net payer into the budget and a long-term beneficiary from agricultural and regional transfers. It may well be an impossible task. That makes it necessary to think about what else can be done. If this budget proves irrelevant for Europe’s

new challenges, alternative financial arrangements will be sought to do the job. We know this from experience. Just this decade, the EU has adopted common borrowing for national unemployment insurance, for joint weapons purchases and for post-pandemic recovery investments – all outside the MFF. An inadequate budget will only intensify the pressure for other means. So what avenues could be explored? Jointly borrowed funds could finance direct spending by the bloc where the MFF falls short One is side budgets and special purpose funds – common pots of money outside the MFF. As with previous cases, these could take the form of joint borrowing granted to member states, or lent, to spend on shared priorities. More boldly, jointly borrowed funds could finance direct spending by the EU in areas where the MFF falls short.

Another approach is using joint borrowing not to spend, but to provide global financial markets with a safe, EU-backed asset. The aim would be to reduce financing costs for member states and build up EU capital markets to boost private sector investment. A permanent EU-backed bond programme at scale would attract global finance and facilitate a redirection of the bloc’s significant savings export into domestic investments. One promising option is a new Spanish proposal for a “European Sovereign Facility” to centralise parts of member-state future debt issuance, with side payments to make whole countries that already enjoy better market terms than EU bonds. This is about as free a lunch for stretched public finances as could be hoped for (Madrid estimates €25bn in savings a year). It would also give a boost to two other agendas – integrating capital markets and enhancing the euro’s international role. A complementary measure could be joint borrowing for an EU sovereign wealth fund investing in frontier industries, as the bloc is now doing, but at much larger scale.

Such alternatives face obvious political economy problems, though not the same ones as the MFF. They would be focused on specific challenges rather than existing, contested programmes, so might resist being reduced to zero-sum calculations of national contributions and receipts. The funds mentioned above were agreed to surprisingly fast. And unlike the MFF, which needs unanimity, it is possible to form coalitions of the willing for other solutions. The Ukraine loan agreed in December was backed by the EU budget but exempts Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic from liability. This side-payment device can be used again to issue EU debt without every member state participating. A larger, bolder budget would benefit all of Europe. But we should recognise the alternatives, which in some respects may be superior. The more marginalised the MFF becomes, the greater the pressure for those alternatives will grow. That in itself should be a spur to give a more ambitious MFF another go.

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