



## Poll bugles

Questions on the SIR apart, the ECI does well to limit the election cycle in April

The people of at least one State will have a sigh of relief now that the schedule for five Assembly elections – all in April – has been announced. The elections in West Bengal will be held in two phases, unlike the eight in 2021. Spread across so many phases for security reasons, the extended campaigns only turned ugly and vituperative, with the parties stoking passions through personal attacks and communal rhetoric. It is to the credit of the Election Commission of India (ECI) that it has decided to limit the Bengal election to just two phases, which should hopefully focus the contestation and discourse on more pertinent issues. That said, these elections are the second set of polls being held in States/Union Territories (UT) where the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process has been completed. The ECI has yet to provide satisfactory explanations for the anomalies that arose during the SIR. These include a lowered gender ratio in most States except Tamil Nadu and an abnormally high number of deletions compared to the estimated adult population. The deletions are expected to affect short-term migrants and married women. Unlike Bihar, where the electoral variables were decisively in favour of the ruling National Democratic Alliance making the SIR a relative non-factor, it could affect West Bengal, where the sword of Damocles still hangs over 60 lakh people regarding their voting eligibility due to 'logical discrepancies' in their applications, which are still under review by judicial officers.

The other States and UT, barring Assam, that go to the polls also bring in a distinct element to them unlike most other Indian provinces. Here, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is less of a force and the elections will be decided based on the performance of State governments and local/regional variables. The entry of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam, led by actor Vijay, and the staying power of the small but steady Naam Tamizhar Katchi party will complicate the battle in Tamil Nadu, even if it is being primarily fought between the two alliances led by the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front faces an uphill battle to counter anti-incumbency, with a resurgent Congress-led United Democratic Front challenging it, alongside a BJP seeking to expand its limited footprint. In Assam, the contest is between the two fronts led by the national parties, the ruling BJP and the Congress. The Congress's inability to rope in the Rajiv Dal led by Akhilesh Gogoi into its front is a failing that could hurt it in a contest that BJP Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seeks to frame less as a referendum on governance and more around class identity politics. This kind of a largely bipolar contest is also expected in Puducherry, where the ruling regional party, the All India NR Congress, in alliance with the BJP, will take on the Congress-DMK-Left-VCK coalition.

## Beginning and end

The state must allow its citizens the right to die with dignity

The incontrovertible nature of both life and death makes them fiendishly difficult to legislate or adjudicate. Interfering with the very elemental beginning and end points of life must seem daunting. Nothing else can explain the long dalliance that laws have had with euthanasia to facilitate the intentional ending of a life, globally. In India, last week, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, approved the withdrawal of life support, including artificial nutrition and hydration, for Harish Rana, who went into a persistent vegetative state (PVS) following a head injury over 12 years ago. Invoking the constitutional idea of dignity, the Court observed that it would not be compatible with temporarily keeping alive a terminally ill patient who is brain dead or in a PVS, only because it is possible to leverage technological advancements to do so. This forces a life of indignity: patients endure a slow, agonising death. As the end of life approaches, a loss of control over human faculties denudes life of its meaning, it added. The Court went on to expand the right to live with dignity under Article 21 to encompass the right to die with dignity. In India, in the absence of legislation on the subject, the courts have consistently had to engage with the euthanasia question over the years. The Smt. Gian Kaur vs The State of Punjab (1996) case might have set off the trend, but the debate entered the public realm with the Aruna Shanbaug petition in 2011. The Court, in this instance, did not allow for euthanasia as the nurses caring for her demurred, but went on to lay down guidelines for withdrawing or the withholding of medical treatment or medical support to allow for natural death. In 2018, a Supreme Court Constitution Bench held that the right to die with dignity is a fundamental right.

Besides benefitting Harish Rana in the instant case, the judgment will undoubtedly make it easy for terminally ill patients and their families 'to let go'. As technology advances in leaps and bounds, more life-preserving hacks will become available to all who are able to pay for them but could erode the patient's dignity. The judgment is intended to introduce compassion into end-of-life care for patients with unalterable medical conditions. The concept of a living will, a legal document empowering individuals to state their preferences for medical treatment in situations where they become incapacitated, vegetative or are unable to communicate, again endorsed by the Court, must also be popularised. In the grey zones, it is the law that can give people the courage to take the right call.

# Neighbourhood diplomacy and its West Asia challenge

With the sinking of the Iranian warship, *IRIS Dena*, in the Indian Ocean, by the United States on March 4, the war in West Asia came home to South Asia. With each passing day, the war that began on February 28 has reached South Asian homes in a number of ways – disrupting the availability of daily necessities, travel, trade, food and fuel for cooking and transport, fertilizers, and the safety of citizens in the West Asia region.

Approximately 25 million South Asians live and work in West Asia, including 10 million Indians, five million Pakistanis, between five to six million Bangladeshis, two million Nepalis, and significant numbers from Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Afghans – between five to eight million – are refugees in Iran. In addition, Indians make up about 15% of the population of seafarers, or crew aboard merchant ships worldwide, along with other South Asians, all of whom are at risk of harm, particularly those positioned around the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has weaponised access. As New Delhi formulates its next steps in the war, it is necessary to consider not only what it will mean for the whole region but also its own ties with each neighbour.

### India's stance could raise eyebrows

It is important to recognise that New Delhi's posture at the start of the war – when U.S.-Israel strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and much of his immediate family – has been out of step with most of the region. Bangladesh and Pakistan issued statements condoling Khamenei's death almost immediately, the Maldives condemned the U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran and Iran's counter-attacks equally, and the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister offered his condolences. In contrast, it took South Block five days to send Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to the Iranian Embassy.

It took another week for the Ministry of External Affairs to express "grief" over the killing of more than 150 students and teachers at a school for girls abutting a naval base in Minab. Even in the wider region, a statement by Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) criticised U.S. and Israel for "initiating" attacks, and subsequent attacks by Iran.

This is less about optics and more about India's – and South Asia's – cultural values: the killing of Khamenei, an 86-year-old religious leader of a state, violated international norms, regardless of how his policies were viewed. That India's statements in the following days condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes without ever criticising U.S. or Israeli actions against Iran and Lebanon is an anomaly.

It is possible to explain the initial reactions in light of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to



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Israel two days before the strikes, and his statement in the Knesset that India would stand with Israel "in the moment and beyond". But as the horror of the escalating war mounts and the Iranian regime demonstrates its resilience, there is a need to calibrate a more balanced response. India's traditional position, of building strong bilateral ties with every country in West Asia, without taking sides in regional fault lines has always kept it in a position of trust and goodwill; this was proven during Mr. Modi's outreach to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian for the passage of Indian ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition, the U.S.'s unabashed pride in bombing *IRIS Dena* near Sri Lanka without even attempting to help the surviving sailors has come as a shock to many in the region. It is admirable that the Indian Navy immediately assisted the Sri Lankan Navy in the rescue operations, and that both Delhi and Colombo offered safe harbour to other Iranian military ships in the area. Yet, the Indian Navy's failure to express its condolences for the deaths of the sailors who had recently been its guests at India's multinational naval exercise MILAN 2026 and the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam in February, is difficult to understand.

### Economic, regional and maritime security

Going forward, India must reassure its neighbours – other than Pakistan, which it has no relationship with at present – that it remains cognisant of their concerns. As energy shortages deepened, New Delhi received requests for petrol and diesel from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives; landlocked Nepal and Bhutan may follow suit if the situation worsens. India must plan ahead to avoid a repeat of 2021, when it had to halt vaccine supplies to its neighbourhood for several critical weeks to deal with the crisis caused by the spread of the delta variant of SARS-CoV-2. Subsequently, India's "Vaccine Maitri" programme did much to ease those memories, and enforced the need for an "all of region" approach to such situations.

Since 2020, South Asia has been hit by several crises: COVID-19, supply chain blockages from India-China tensions along the Line of Actual Control, sanctions affecting grain, oil, and urea amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, fluctuations in remittances due to constant flare-ups in West Asia, the impact of the Trump administration's tariff policy on the region's labour-intensive apparel and fashion industry, and seafood exports, and the growing shadow of Artificial Intelligence on jobs in a region with a restless young population.

It is not a coincidence that many of India's neighbours have seen youth protests erupt, and new governments installed as a result – an example is Nepal's election on March 5 which brought its first Gen-Z-led government to power.

The conflict will test India's regional influence and strategic balance

# Belém as a test of a new model of forest finance

The climate summit that was held in Belém, Brazil in November 2025, refocused renewed global attention to a difficult but unavoidable truth: protecting tropical forests requires more than ambitious pledges – it requires a fundamental shift in who holds power over those forests. As world leaders gathered in the Amazon city, the signature initiative was Brazil's Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), or a finance mechanism presented as a paradigm shift in global conservation. Yet, amid the flurry of announcements and diplomacy, persistent tensions revealed that major challenges remain around participation, equity and accountability.

### The difference

The TFFF proposes to compensate countries for maintaining standing forests, not just for avoiding deforestation. As reported, the Fund has already secured more than \$5.5 billion in initial commitments, including a \$3 billion pledge from Norway. Unlike many past funds, it is not structured purely as a donation vehicle. Rather, it is set up to generate returns and reward long-term forest conservation. Critically, at least 20% of its performance-based payments are reserved for indigenous peoples and local communities, whose daily stewardship plays an outside role in keeping forests intact.

This allocation is not symbolic. According to the Rainforest Foundation US, indigenous and local communities were deeply involved in co-designing the facility. Across months of global consultations, more than 400 community leaders shared their perspectives. The model offers something new: not only financial support but also formal decision-making power. Yet, important gaps remain. For instance, indigenous representatives do not have voting rights on the main governing bodies of the Fund, raising questions about how genuinely inclusive decision-making will be.

Even as the TFFF proposes this inclusive architecture, many civil society groups have



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The real test is whether it will protect the communities protecting the forest

voiced their strong criticism. The Global Forest Coalition (GFC) described the fund as "colonialistic", arguing that it benefits intermediaries rather than forest peoples. Its worry was about a mechanism built around market logic and financial returns that may not address the root structural causes of deforestation, such as agribusiness expansion, oil and mining projects, and large infrastructure, all of which continue to drive forest loss. According to the GFC, rewarding standing forests without curbing exploitative activities risks creating a superficial conservation narrative.

Compounding this, some critics argue that the payment rate, around \$4 a hectare in earlier proposals, is inadequate given the manifold ecosystem services that forests provide. There is a risk that national governments could absorb most of the funds, while communities on the ground may see little benefit. The success of the TFFF, therefore, depends not just on its size but on strong delivery mechanisms and rigorous, locally accountable institutions.

### Conservation overlooks power imbalances

Amid these debates, Brazil has taken steps to buttress access. On the sidelines of COP30, it announced a dedicated digital platform to help forest countries navigate TFFF eligibility. The platform, developed with partners such as the UNDP, FAO, WWF and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC), promises technical assistance, capacity building and peer collaboration. It is stated that independence from the TFFF's governing structures is meant to prevent conflict of interest while focusing on inclusion and knowledge sharing.

This structure matters because forest conservation has long overlooked deep power imbalances. For many indigenous groups, protecting the Amazon is not just an environmental fight but also a struggle for survival. This was clear at COP30, where indigenous protesters entered the venue

The Bharatiya Janata Party's poll losses in the general election in 2024, which resulted in Mr. Modi's first minority government within a coalition, are also attributed to the disaffection of unemployed and underemployed youth. The changes have impacted India's diplomacy, as the Modi government has had to amend its more muscular neighbourhood policy to engage leaders elected on these mandates and who are less beholden to India.

India must also recognise that its position as "net security provider" in the region has been challenged by the U.S.'s sinking of the *IRIS Dena*, which cuts more deeply given their joint membership of the Quad (the strategic forum comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia).

At their last meeting in July 2025, the Quad Foreign Ministers issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to "peace and stability" in the Indo-Pacific region and declaring that they "strongly oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion", a reference to China. With the U.S. behaving unilaterally, India must move to strengthen its own coalitions in the maritime region, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, and the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) so that it is not caught unawares in the future. South Asia requires more regional trade, connectivity and energy sharing platforms, along with more conversations on regional security, as each country in the subcontinent is a stakeholder.

On the global stage, India's position as Chair of the Quad requires it to host a summit this year – when U.S. President Donald Trump is to visit India. But India's immediate priority should be to convene a Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting to ensure better communication and chart a more stable course for the maritime region in view of the West Asia war.

### New Delhi must restore the balance

On the other side of the global North-South divide, India is also due to convene the BRICS Summit in 2026 – while bringing current rivals and BRICS members Iran and the United Arab Emirates to the table may be difficult given current tensions, New Delhi's diplomatic skills must be exerted in forging consensus for a BRICS statement that also highlights South Asia's economic and security concerns. Having momentarily abandoned its balancing act between the U.S.-Israel and Iran, it is time for India to restore the balance in its West Asia policy. New Delhi's traditional position on the tightrope may be tense, but it gives a more beneficial vantage point from which to steer the future of its people and those across the wider neighbourhood.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Parliamentary proceedings

Reams have been written about the proceedings in Parliament. Yet, the 'temple of democracy' often resembles a marketplace. Questions are vital to governance as they expose flaws, but voices are frequently muted when they are raised. Listening appears to be on the wane,

while the ruling party and the Opposition behave like bitter adversaries. Disagreements need not be unproductive. By watching their representatives quarrel instead of seeking solutions, citizens can only reflect on the irony of such conduct in Parliament.

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### Election conduct

It was ironic to hear the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India speak about the democracy ahead of the Assembly elections. The CEC was rightly in saying that pure electoral rolls are the bedrock of any democracy (Inside pages, March 16).

D. Sethuraman, Chennai

must also be free, fair, and impartial, with complete transparency at every stage. Democracy in elections will be meaningful only if the Election Commission of India recognises that it is an independent institution.

D. Sethuraman, Chennai

India appears to have ensured that its own considerations take precedence over those of the electorate in the election dates it has announced. In Tamil Nadu, the polling date of April 23 falls in one of the hottest phases of the year. The day is also considered auspicious for weddings,

and several temple kumbabishekams are scheduled to take place. In 2023, poll dates in Rajasthan and Mizoram were revised due to local considerations.

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The views expressed are personal

# Importance of sex education in academia

Sexuality, intimacy, and mental health are closely linked yet heavily stigmatised, resulting in a culture of silences, shame and fear surrounding sex and intimacy can exacerbate mental health issues. The WHO has stated that "immense suffering can occur when people lack bodily autonomy, control over their fertility or the freedom to experience safe, consensual and satisfying sexual relationships". In 2024, the Supreme Court emphasised the need for comprehensive sex education programmes in order to promote open discussions about intimacy and sexual health.



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As German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) fellows between Germany and India, the authors' classroom experiences of teaching about the diversity of human sexualities, in both contexts, found that there is a need to resist and challenge the marginalisation, invalidation and disenfranchisement of lived intimacies in higher educational institutions. Deeply ingrained social stigmas, silence and taboos about intimate relationships are perpetuated in academia, evidenced by the minuscule number of courses and discussions on the topic. Academia often promotes a culture of resistance, fear and anxiety over informed exchange and empowering discourse, particularly in the light of increasing student suicides in India. By prioritising a biomedical approach as well as majoritarian norms, higher educational spaces disregard the dimension of pleasure and the impact of socio-cultural and oppressive factors on intimate experiences.

By creating diversity-aware and compassionate learning environments, students can develop the tools to navigate contemporary challenges and create a more inclusive, equitable, and just world. The authors' interactions with students in India and Germany highlighted the importance of creating safer and accountable spaces when teaching sensitive topics. To achieve this, innovative approaches at the beginning of each class can help. Instead of diving straight into theory and methodology, icebreaker exercises and small-group discussions encourage students to share their

personal perspectives on topics. By answering questions like "What does intimacy mean to you?", students can connect the course material to their own lives and experiences. Such an approach emphasises the need for instructors to foster a classroom environment that builds trust, rapport, and open communication among participants.

**Inclusive classrooms**  
Education should harness the diversity within classrooms and transcend mere knowledge transfer and workforce training, aiming instead to cultivate critical thinking and awareness. This is particularly urgent in today's context, where anti-democratic movements seek to erase and marginalise the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, promoting a narrow and exclusionary view of sexuality and intimacy.

Furthermore, it is crucial to address the growing mental health concerns affecting young people, who face immense pressure from family expectations, societal demands, and the weight of multiple global crises. In 2025, the Supreme Court sought responses from the government on integrating transgender-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula. In the same year, the Court issued pan-India guidelines to address suicide and mental health issues among students in which gender and sexual orientation figured as reasons for discrimination at higher educational institutions. By creating diversity-aware and compassionate learning environments, students can develop the tools to navigate contemporary challenges and create a more inclusive, equitable, and just world. Fostering allyship and care communities within educational institutions should take precedence over short-term fixes such as hiring more mental health professionals or facilitating isolated events or workshops, without creating a sustained conversation or support system.

# Gaining inroads into each other's bastions

Both the national parties, while tightening their hold, are keen to look beyond

## STATE OF PLAY

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The Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) picks for the two seats to the Rajya Sabha that went to polls in Haryana on March 16 were predictable, as it was driven by caste calculations. The elections were predictably dented by BJP leaders — Kiran Choudhry, a Jat, and Ram Chander Jangra, belonging to the Backward Classes (BCs) — completing their respective terms in the Upper House. However, this time, the BJP chose to nominate Sanjay Bhatia, a Punjabi, in an effort to consolidate its non-Jat vote bank, and to tighten the grip over its regional bastion, the 'GT Road belt', a swath of constituencies along the National Highway (NH)-44. The Congress too stuck to its Jat-SC-Muslim formula, nominating Karanvir Boudh, who is from a Scheduled Caste (SC).

Even as the two national parties, which had finished neck-and-neck in the 2024 Assembly polls, vie to firmly hold on to their vote banks and regional strongholds in the State, they have also unleashed political battles to make inroads into each other's traditional bastions.

## Long-term game plan

After falling short of the majority mark in the previous Assembly election, the Congress undertook a major restructuring of its State unit last year. It appointed Rao Narendar Singh, a Backward Class leader, as its State party president — the first such appointment in over two decades, replacing a SC leader. In his appointment, the Grand Old Party is aiming to not just woo the



BCs, the core vote bank of the ruling BJP led by Chief Minister Nayab Saini, who also belongs to the BCs, but is also trying to breach the saffron party's south Haryana fortress — the Ahirwal belt. The 'Ahirs' or the 'Yadavs', categorised as BCs in Haryana, and largely settled across the Gurugram-Rewari-Mahendragarh belt, have supported the BJP since 2014, playing a key role in the party's record three consecutive wins in the State elections. With the appointment of Mr. Singh, an Ahir leader, the Congress hopes to cash in on the political rivalry between the BJP's two Ahir stalwarts, Union Minister of State Rao Indrajit Singh and Haryana Environment Minister Rao Narbir Singh, to re-establish itself in the region. Of the 32 district presidents appointed by the Congress last year, 10 were from the Backward Classes, signalling the party's shift away from its Jat-centric voter base towards a more inclusive caste coalition.

The BJP, for its part, thriving on a non-Jat and BC vote bank, has gradually increased its political outreach towards the Meo Muslims, who are the dominant group in at least five Assembly seats such as Nuh, Puhana, Ferozpur Jhirka, Hathin and Sohna. Over the past decade, Hindutva organisations have increased their activities in the Meo-Muslim dominated NH district. In December 2025, a 10-day 'Vande

Bharat Ekta Yatra' traversed through 200 villages in Nuh. Touted as an apolitical march to raise issues around poor infrastructure, it bore an unmistakable saffron stamp with several local BJP leaders taking part in it. The BJP has also been trying to lure prominent local political leaders from other parties as part of its long-term strategy to find a foothold in this region.

## Regional players

Reduced from 31 MLAs in 2009 to just two in 2024, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) has declared to take the fight to former Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda's bastion Rohtak, the epicentre of Jat politics in Haryana. It held a rally in Rohtak last September to commemorate the 12th birth anniversary of late Deputy Prime Minister Chaudhary Devi Lal in order to reclaim its lost political ground in the Jat-dominated Sonapat-Rohtak-Jhajjar belt. The INLD, led by Abhay Chautala, hopes to turn around its political fortunes by winning back a portion of the Jat and Muslim vote bank, which has now shifted to the Congress. As part of its strategy, the party is set to hold a State-level youth conference in Jind's Narwana on March 23 and organise several meetings in Nuh.

Aiming to re-engage with its agrarian base, mostly the Jats, the Jannayak Janta Party too, led by Ajay Chautala, held a rally in the agricultural region of Hansi. Hansi is considered a bastion of the saffron party. Even as political parties in the State seek to chip away at each other's vote banks, the BJP stands to benefit the most with the tug-of-war between the two Chautala-led factions and the Congress for the Jat vote bank, who form one-fifth of the total electorate.

As German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) fellows between Germany and India, the authors' classroom experiences of teaching about the diversity of human sexualities, in both contexts, found that there is a need to resist and challenge the marginalisation, invalidation and disenfranchisement of lived intimacies in higher educational institutions. Deeply ingrained social stigmas, silence and taboos about intimate relationships are perpetuated in academia, evidenced by the minuscule number of courses and discussions on the topic. Academia often promotes a culture of resistance, fear and anxiety over informed exchange and empowering discourse, particularly in the light of increasing student suicides in India. By prioritising a biomedical approach as well as majoritarian norms, higher educational spaces disregard the dimension of pleasure and the impact of socio-cultural and oppressive factors on intimate experiences.

By creating diversity-aware and compassionate learning environments, students can develop the tools to navigate contemporary challenges and create a more inclusive, equitable, and just world.

# Are 40 out of 100 children malnourished in Gujarat?

Data indicates that the statement is true and that there is a higher burden of malnutrition among the tribal communities of the State

## DATA POINT

**Devvanshi Bihani**

On March 12, child malnutrition in Gujarat became the subject of a debate in the Legislative Assembly. During a discussion on the budgetary demands of the Women and Child Development Department, Congress MLA Jignesh Mevani stated that, "despite...BJP government...[having] more than 150 seats and 28 years of rule, only one figure comes on record, that 40 out of 100 children are malnourished. A very large section of them are tribals."

Women and Child Development Minister Manisha Vakil responded that the Opposition was relying on figures from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS 2019-21) and asked members to "update your knowledge". Ms. Vakil told the Assembly that, according to the Poshan Tracker system, "only 11.4% of children in Gujarat" were malnourished as of January 2026.

## Different methods

The Poshan Tracker and the NFHS cannot be directly compared as they use different methods. The NFHS is a sample-based household survey conducted on a representative population, while the Poshan Tracker is a real-time monitoring system under Mission Poshan 2.0 that records growth data for children registered at *anganwadis*. "There are several issues in using Poshan Tracker data to counter NFHS figures. Poshan Tracker is supposed to be a complete census of children attending or at least enrolled at *anganwadis*, we do not know how complete the information is. NFHS data on the other hand is supposed to be representative of the entire population (including children who do not go to *anganwadis*)," said Economist Reetika Khera. The two datasets cover different populations and use different methods and

their figures are not strictly comparable.

"We do not know to what extent one can take Poshan Tracker data at face value. *Anganwadi* workers are under pressure to keep data entry on the Tracker updated and they experience all kinds of issues with the app and connectivity, so often they just enter some data, which may or may not reflect the child's actual weight and height," she added.

The latest publicly available Poshan Tracker data is for July 2025, and provides separate figures for stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height) and underweight (low weight for age) rather than a single combined malnutrition percentage. It shows that about 32.7% of children were stunted, 7.2% were wasted and 18.4% were underweight in Gujarat (Chart 1). Among 36 States and Union Territories, the State ranks 21st in stunting and 31st in both wasting and underweight, placing it in the poorest performers bracket among States in high malnutrition indicators.

Poshan Tracker data for July 2025 shows that several States in central and eastern India rank near the bottom on these indicators. Bihar (9.3%), Chhattisgarh (7.7%) and Madhya Pradesh (8.1%) are among the worst performers in wasting, while Madhya Pradesh (24.8%) records the highest proportion of underweight children. In the case of stunting, Uttar Pradesh (48.8%) has the highest prevalence, followed by Jharkhand, Assam, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, each with more than 42% of children found to be stunted. In contrast, States such as Goa, Sikkim, Manipur, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu rank among the better performers, reporting lower levels of stunting, wasting and underweight.

**Verifying the claim**  
NFHS-5 (2019-21) is the latest round of the nationally representa-

tive survey on health and nutrition released so far, as the results for NFHS-6 (scheduled for 2023-24) are yet to be published.

In NFHS-5, 39% of children under the age of five in Gujarat were stunted, 25.1% were wasted, and 39.7% were underweight. NFHS does not report a single overall malnutrition percentage and these indicators are widely used to assess child malnutrition. The corresponding national averages were 36% for stunting, 19.3% for wasting and 32.1% for underweight (Chart 2). Stunting and underweight levels are both close to 40%, so the statement that around "40 out of 100 children" are malnourished is consistent with NFHS findings, depending on which indicator is used.

Mr. Mevani also said that "a large proportion of them belonged to tribal communities." District level figures based on NFHS-5 show that several of the worst performing districts are among those identified as tribal districts by the Tribal Development Department of the Gujarat government (Table 3).

In the case of stunting, four of the five worst affected districts: Dahod (55.3% stunted), Chhota Udaipur (48.6%), Narmada (47.2%) and Panchmahal (47.1%) are tribal districts. Wasting shows a similar pattern, with The Dangs (40.9% wasted), Tapi (36.6%), Panchmahal (35.7%) and Sabarkantha (33.1%) also ranking among the highest, all of them tribal districts. In the case of underweight, all five of the worst affected districts are tribal districts: The Dangs (53.1% underweight), Dahod (53%), Narmada (52.8%), Panchmahal (51.9%) and Tapi (51.8%).

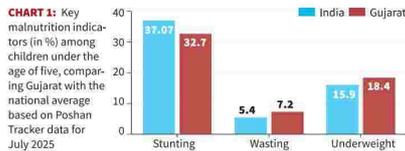
The claim that about 40% of children in Gujarat are malnourished is thus supported by NFHS-5 data, which shows that stunting and underweight levels are close to the claim. District level data also shows that several of the worst affected districts are tribal districts, pointing to a higher burden of malnutrition in tribal communities.

## Scale of malnutrition

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) and Rajya Sabha Question and Answers



**Nutrition check:** A caretaker weighing a young child at an *anganwadi* in Gujarat. **VJAY SONEJI**



**TABLE 3:**

District	Stunted	Wasted	Underweight
Dahod	55.3	27.8	53
Chhota Udaipur	48.6	28.4	48.1
Narmada	47.2	23	52.8
Panchmahal	47.1	35.7	51.9
Aravali	47.1	29	47.2
Tapi	41.7	36.6	51.8
Bharuch	40.9	24.5	45.5
Banaskantha	39	25.5	44.1
Valsad	37.8	23.2	34.8
The Dangs	37.6	40.9	53.1
Sabarkantha	37	33.1	41
Navsari	36.8	29	43.6
Surat	36.1	26	32.5

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 17, 1976

## A stamp not officially released

Mangalore, March 15: A stamp of Param Vir Chakra not officially issued by Postal Department, but stated to have leaked out prematurely, has become the star attraction in Mangalapur 76, the first ever district-level Philatelic Exhibition held here between March 12 and 14, sponsored by the P and T department.

The 25-paise denomination stamp was to have been officially released by the P and T Department on last Republic Day but was postponed, and the definite date of release is not fixed yet.

Meanwhile, the stamp has been issued from some post offices in the country and one stamp bearing a postmark of a post office in Tamil Nadu on Feb. 9 was on display from out of the collections of Dr. V.S. Prabhu of Mangalore and has been attracting attention of philatelists here. It was later found that Dr. K.S. Prabhakara Rao, founder President of the Philatelic Association of South Kanara, was also among those who had one such "Param Vir Chakra" stamp having been defaced on March 12 from Belgaum.

Leading philatelists who are attending the exhibition differ in their views regarding the philatelic value of such prematurely issued stamps.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 17, 1926

## Broadcasting Parliament debates

London, March 15: In the Commons, replying to Mr. Campbell with regard to the broadcasting of proceedings of certain State legislatures of United States, Viscount Wolmer said he had seen reports that proceedings of Japanese Diet were broadcast last December and the proceedings of United States Senate were frequently broadcast. He had no information with regard to the results.

Mr. Applin asked for an assurance that the "mother of Parliaments" would be the father of broadcasting from Parliamentary viewpoint. (Cries of 'No')

Mr. Penny (Conservative) humorously declared that the medical profession had expressed opinion that there would be an outbreak of sleepy sickness if this was done. (Laughter)

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

## Estimated increase in global demand for LNG by 2040

**54** in per cent. Global demand for liquefied natural gas is estimated to rise by 54-68% by 2040 and 45-85% by 2050, from 422 million metric tons in 2025, Shell, the world's biggest trader of LNG, said on Monday. A year ago, Shell said that global demand for the fuel was expected to rise between 630 million and 718 million metric tons a year by 2040. REUTERS

## Number of child abuse cases reported in Pakistan in 2025

**3,630** At least 3,630 child abuse cases were reported across Pakistan in 2025, marking an 8% increase from the year before that, according to data released by Sahil, a non-profit entity. It said that gender divide analysis shows that out of the total reported cases of child abuse, 1,924 (53%) of victims were girls. PTI

## Flights cancelled by Indian airlines due to West Asia conflict

**4,335** Union Civil Aviation Minister K. Ram Mohan Naidu on Monday informed the Rajya Sabha that Indian airlines have cancelled 4,335 flights and 1,187 flights by foreign carriers so far due to the West Asia conflict. The escalating conflict involving the U.S., Israel and Iran has significantly disrupted flight operations. PTI

## Decrease in fire incidents in Punjab and Haryana

**90** in per cent. Punjab and Haryana have collectively recorded a reduction of more than 90% in fire incidents during the paddy-harvesting season in 2025, compared to 2022, the government informed Parliament on Monday. The information was shared by Union Minister of State for Environment Kirti Vardhan Singh. PTI

## Number of biodiversity management committees set up

**2.76** in lakh. Biodiversity Management Committees have been established in India, strengthening community participation in biodiversity governance and benefit-sharing mechanisms, the first report on the implementation of the Nagoya Protocol has said. PTI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Why India must electrify its kitchens

Is electric cooking cheaper and more efficient than LPG for Indian households? Can induction cooktops handle the realities of everyday Indian cooking? Can smart technologies help flatten electricity peaks? What policy changes are needed for India to shift from LPG to electric kitchens?

## EXPLAINER

Kalyan Mangalapati

## The story so far:

India spends \$26.4 billion a year importing cooking gas, most of it shipped through the Strait of Hormuz. It has 332 million LPG connections, yet 37% of households still burn firewood and dung. The arithmetic has shifted: cooking with electricity is now cheaper than cooking with unsubsidised LPG. But moving hundreds of millions of kitchens from flame to wire raises a chain of questions about cost, grid stress, and who pays when demand spikes.

### Why is gas-based clean cooking hitting a wall?

Domestic LPG connections grew from 150 million in 2015 to 332 million by 2025, but India imports 60% of its LPG and 50% of its natural gas. The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) estimates that the combined import bill reached \$26.4 billion in FY24-25 – a 50% jump in six years.

Every West Asian escalation sends a price shock straight into Indian kitchens. Gas-based clean cooking has hit an affordability ceiling.

### Can electricity beat gas on cost, efficiency, and everyday cooking?

An IEEFA study from October 2025 found that electric cooking is 37% cheaper than non-subsidised LPG and 14% cheaper than piped natural gas for a family of four in Delhi – even without any electricity subsidy. Only the heavily subsidised Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) pricing undercuts e-cooking, and that subsidy costs the exchequer thousands of crores each year.

The efficiency gap is equally stark. Induction cooktops transfer about 85% of their energy to the vessel, while an LPG burner manages roughly 40%. Electric pressure cookers, tested across the MECS programme's multi-country cooking diaries, use less energy than any other device assessed.

Indian cooking is not a single-pot affair. Anyone who makes chapatis, does a *tadka*, and stirs a *dal* simultaneously knows that a standard single-pot induction unit will not suffice.

The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) argues that research and development on multi-pot and flame-replicating induction models is essential before mass adoption can take off, not as an afterthought, possibly explaining the 5% electric cooking share in 2021.

Both the International Institute for Sustainable Development and IEEFA recommend starting with urban kitchens, thereby freeing imported LPG for rural areas that still lack reliable electricity.

The logic is sound – but it leads to a harder question: if a hundred million urban kitchens switch on induction cooktops in the evening, what happens to the power grid?

### What is a 'peak'?

Electricity demand shifts throughout the day. It ramps up around 3 p.m. and again from 9-11 p.m., mostly because households all flip on lights, fans, TVs, and ACs at the same time. This surge is called the 'peak.'

India's peak demand rose from 148 GW in 2014 to a record 242.5 GW in December 2025. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), for every degree



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rise in average daily temperature, peak demand now increases by more than 7 GW.

When demand spikes beyond a distribution company's (discom's) contracted supply, it has a few options – none of them cheap.

It can buy power on the spot market, typically through the Indian Energy Exchange, where prices can swing from ₹3.50 per unit in normal hours to ₹9-10 during peak slots. It can fire up expensive gas-based peaking plants or release stored hydropower. It can dispatch grid-scale batteries – BSES Rajdhani in Delhi has commissioned India's first commercial battery storage system for precisely this kind of energy arbitrage.

Or, as a last resort, it can impose planned power cuts, rotating blackouts across zones – what is known as load shedding – which disrupts livelihoods, damages industrial output, and is increasingly penalised by regulators.

Now imagine adding millions of induction cooktops to that evening peak window. Without intelligent management, mass electric cooking would steepen the evening peak, raise spot-market costs, and increase the risk of outages.

The question is not whether to electrify cooking, but how to do so without overwhelming the grid. That is where automated demand response enters the picture.

### Can smart technology flatten the peak automatically?

OpenADR – Open Automated Demand Response – is a two-way communication standard that enables automated participation of smart thermostats, EV chargers, water heaters, and cooktops in demand response, ancillary services (frequency/voltage), and DER coordination. These devices can adjust their consumption automatically, without anyone having to lift a finger.

Born after California's 2002 energy crisis, its latest version plugs into modern

energy systems using standard web protocols.

India has begun deploying it. Tata Power Delhi Distribution ran the country's first OpenADR pilot across 167 commercial and industrial consumers, achieving an average peak reduction of 14%. A study done of the pilot stated that peak shaving ability of close to 7% could be achieved if the technology were deployed across buildings in India.

Internationally, South Korea's AutoDR pilot reduced electricity use by 24%; such programmes typically pay for themselves within four years by deferring the cost of new grid infrastructure.

What discoms still lack is the full stack: OpenADR-compliant servers, smart-meter-embedded receivers, and aggregator platforms that can orchestrate distributed loads into virtual power plants.

Building this stack is essential – but it is only half the solution. The other half lies in turning households from passive consumers into active grid participants, while also upgrading household load capacity from 3 kW to 5 kW through investment in transformers and feeder infrastructure.

### Can rooftop solar and neighbourhood trading take the pressure off the grid?

A rooftop solar panel paired with a battery can turn a household into a 'prosumer' – both a producer and a consumer. The solar panel generates power by day; the battery stores surplus energy; and that stored energy can be used in the evening to run the induction cooktop. This offsets precisely the peak that mass e-cooking would otherwise create.

A 2025 Australian national-grid study referred to a halving of peak load and reduction of grid reinforcement costs by 75% when residential electrification was combined with rooftop solar, batteries, and off-peak scheduling.

India's rooftop solar capacity is

projected to more than double from 24 GW in 2026 to over 41 GW by 2030, boosted by the PM-Surya Ghar Yojana, which aims to provide 300 units of free electricity to 10 million households.

The real impact comes when surplus solar is not just stored but traded.

Peer-to-peer (P2P) energy trading allows households to sell excess electricity directly to neighbours through digital platforms, bypassing the traditional discom route.

India ran South Asia's first blockchain-based P2P solar trading pilot in Lucknow, led by the India Smart Grid Forum and Australia's Powerledger, under a regulatory sandbox approved by the Uttar Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission. Prosumers set prices, tracked trades in real time, and settled transactions through smart contracts. The result was a 43% reduction in the energy buy price compared with the retail tariff.

Following the pilot's success, Uttar Pradesh directed all its utilities to make provisions for P2P trading – a first for any State. In February 2026, the Centre announced a P2P facility under the India Energy Stack for Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh. If a cluster of homes on a single feeder can trade solar surpluses during the evening cooking hours, the local peak flattens, the discom avoids buying expensive exchange power, and the neighbourhood effectively becomes a micro virtual power plant.

### What needs to happen, and how soon?

New York's All-Electric Buildings Act mandates that most new buildings under seven storeys be all-electric from January 2026, and taller buildings from 2029.

India has begun laying the groundwork. The Go Electric campaign and the National Efficient Cooking Programme target two million induction stoves. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency has launched star labelling for induction hobs; the PM-Surya Ghar scheme links rooftop solar adoption to household savings.

But a wider architecture is needed: redirect part of the estimated ₹40,000 crore annual LPG subsidy towards one-time capital support for induction cooktops. Expand Energy Efficiency Services Limited's (EESL) bulk-procurement model to e-cooking appliances. Mandate time-of-use tariffs for e-cooking and require OpenADR compatibility in new appliances and smart meters. Fund R&D on multi-pot induction technology designed for Indian cooking. And mandate all-electric construction for new residential buildings in Tier-1 cities.

The urgency is as much geopolitical as it is economic. Every dollar India spends on LPG imports goes through supply chains exposed to the Strait of Hormuz and the decisions of oil producers.

Electricity is different – you can generate it from solar panels on rooftops and store it in batteries we assemble here. We are talking about moving from imported fuel to power we generate ourselves. That is not just energy policy, that is sovereignty.

Urban India is the obvious place to start this shift. The grid works, smart meters are already rolling out, and rooftop solar pays for itself in cities. The technology is there. The numbers add up. We know how to manage the grid. The question is whether the policy framework will catch up before the next oil shock forces the issue.

(The author is an Energy and Emerging Technologies expert)

## THE GIST

Electric cooking is now cheaper than unsubsidised LPG, but shifting hundreds of millions of kitchens from flame to wire raises questions about grid stress and peak demand.

Induction cooktops are far more efficient than LPG burners, yet mass adoption will require multi-pot appliances, smart demand response, and upgrades to distribution infrastructure.

Rooftop solar, batteries, and peer-to-peer energy trading could help flatten evening peaks and reduce India's dependence on imported LPG.

**BUILDING BLOCKS**



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# How red marks liminal thresholds between life, death, sacrifice and renewal

Red ochre burials, ritual markings and myths across cultures show that red repeatedly marks liminal thresholds such as puberty, sacrifice and death; anthropologists argue that the colour functions as a technology of collective ritual and value, binding communities through shared symbolic acts

**Satwik Gade**

In 1823, English geologist William Buckland discovered a skeleton in a limestone cave in Paviland, southern Wales, which he identified as a prostitute from the Roman era, as the bones were coated in red ochre. Nearly a hundred years later, further studies, including that of grave goods, also painted in red, proved that the skeleton, which was dubbed “Red Lady of Paviland,” was actually a man and that the burial was not from the Roman era but from around 33,000 years before present! Since then, archaeologists have found similar ochre burials across continents: at Qafzeh in present-day Israel, at Sungir in Russia, at Lake Mungo in Australia, in sites across Africa where it continues to the present day in the cosmetic ritual practices of women from the Himba community. As the evolutionary anthropologist Camilla Power has written, red ochre decoration of bodies and clothes is “a recurrent and structured feature of ritual behaviour.” It marks a transition: puberty, which is an initiation into a new phase of life, or death, which is believed to lead the soul to an afterlife.

Victor Turner, the anthropologist of ritual, would later call such moments “liminal” – thresholds where ordinary

hierarchies or naturally existing freedoms dissolve and a different order briefly governs. Power has argued that red pigment, especially in early human societies, likely functioned as a “technology of collective ritual,” shaping people’s behaviour long before administrative law or coinage existed. Across cultures, the administration of red – the mixing of ochre, the marking of bodies, the handling of blood – is often entrusted to those who themselves stand in liminal spaces. Ethnographic accounts from Siberia to the Americas describe ritual specialists whose gender expression does not align neatly with male or female roles. Many Indigenous North American traditions speak of Two-Spirit figures; Siberian shamanic traditions describe initiates who symbolically “die” and return altered; in parts of South Asia, hijra communities historically performed roles in rites of birth and fertility.

Archaeological work by Alison Watts demonstrates that red ochre from particular sources, in Middle Stone Age Africa, was transported across significant distances despite the local availability of similar pigments. Such a patterned preference indicates that red ochre’s value was not reducible to its chemical function or to its colour value. Colour, texture and a socially charged location, as well as the human effort that went into

sourcing, supplying and administering, were all seen as part of total meaning-making. Such long-distance networks bound communities divided by time and space into networks of total prestation, as Marcel Mauss called it, where society becomes bound across economic, aesthetic, legal, and religious spheres all at once.

In the Rig Veda, dawn (Uṣas) is described as *aruna*, flushed and radiant, the sky streaked with the colour of awakening sacrifice. In the Greek epics, Homer often calls the sea “oinops”, meaning wine-dark, and likens battlefields to fields of spilled blood, where bronze and flesh meet in crimson blur. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *adam* (red) shares its root with *adam* (human) and *adamah* (earth), binding soil, body, and mortality into one linguistic field. In ancient China, vermilion marked imperial gates and ritual seals, the cinnabar pigment associated with life-force and alchemical transformation. Roman writers describe the use of red ochre and cinnabar in triumphal processions and funerary rites, while in Mesoamerican codices, red pigments signal both sacrifice and renewal. Across these traditions, red signals thresholds: dawn and dusk, war and fertility, earth and blood, death and consecration.

Economic Anthropologist David

Graeber, in his book, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value*, notes that in the earliest Brahmanas (texts that explain or provide commentary to the Vedas), red as a colour value becomes the basis for a ritual system of value exchange long before the emergence of commercial markets. The sages of these Brahmanas negotiate with gods and coax them into allowing red to become a colour of substitution so that gods see the sacrifice of red objects or animals as equivalent to the sacrifice of human life itself.

Goethe, writing millennia later, would describe red as the colour that approaches the eye with warmth and immediacy. Ochre, he noted, belongs to the “earth colours”; close to bodily sensation, never fully abstract. Red does not recede like blue. It confronts. It occupies. In *Zur Farbenlehre*, which was published in 1810, Goethe describes an experiment where a spectrum is viewed through a prism at the edges of light and dark. He observes that when blue deepens toward darkness, it intensifies into violet; when yellow deepens toward darkness, it intensifies into red. For Goethe, red was the culmination of intensification, where light thickens toward matter.

(Satwik Gade is a Chennai-based writer and illustrator. This article is part of a series on the history and development of colours)

**THE DAILY QUIZ**

Does the joint U.S.-Israeli military operation on Iran constitute a war, conflict, escalation, or campaign change? A quiz on lexicons and lives

**Mohammed Hidayat**

**QUESTION 1**  
U.S. President Harry S. Truman referred to his country’s involvement in the Korean War as: a) humanitarian intervention b) sponsor of United Nations police action c) Gunboat diplomacy

**QUESTION 2**  
After the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, the U.S. Congress authorised President \_\_\_\_\_ to use military force in Vietnam through a joint resolution to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Fill in the blank.

**QUESTION 3**  
The NATO bombed \_\_\_\_\_ (a former Balkan country) during the Kosovo War. The air campaign, framed as a ‘humanitarian intervention’ to prevent ethnic cleansing, left over 500 dead. Fill in the blank. Also, does NATO commit to the UN Charter?

**QUESTION 4**  
The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war began in 2014. In which year did Vladimir Putin launch a full-scale invasion, and what term did he use to describe the escalation?

**QUESTION 5**  
The post-9/11 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) resolution enabled the War on \_\_\_\_\_. The law has been used by successive U.S. leaders to initiate ‘counter-terror’ activities, leading to more than 4.5 million deaths. Fill in the blank.



**Visual question**  
President Barack Obama took the U.S. into war against X (country) as part of a NATO-led coalition. His Defence Secretary Robert Gates described the intervention as ‘limited kinetic action’. Identify X, as well as the de facto military leader pictured in the mosaic, who was overthrown and later killed. NYT

**Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:**  
1. Jerry Lewis was born into a vaudeville family but it was not his christened surname. What was it? **Ans: Joseph Levitch**  
2. Name Lewis’ legendary partner from 1946 to 1956 with whom he dominated the entertainment scene. **Ans: Dean Martin**  
3. Lewis is widely credited with developing and pioneering which film-making technology while directing ‘The Bellboy’? **Ans: ‘Video assist’ that allows filmmakers to view and distribute a video version of a take immediately after it is filmed**  
4. In the 1963 classic ‘The Nutty Professor’, what is the name of the title character? **Ans: Julius Kelp**  
5. Which Oscar-winning director helmed ‘The King of Comedy’, which had Lewis delivering an acclaimed performance? **Ans: Martin Scorsese**  
6. What did Jerry Lewis sport to contort his face for his signature ‘idiot’ persona? **Ans: False buck teeth**  
**Visual:** Identify this legendary Indian actor whose style of comedy was largely inspired by Lewis. **Ans: Nagesh**  
**Early Birds:** Dodo Jayaditya | Sourav Sangwan | Sadhan Panda | Piyali Tuli | Abhay krishnan

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



**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

## Know your English

S. Upendran

**What is the meaning and origin of the idiom “to pull the wool over someone’s eyes”?** (T. R. Gopalakrishna, Chennai)

In the old days it was common practice among men and women to wear wigs. It wasn’t just people who were bald that wore them; even people with hair wore them. The richer you were, the more wigs you owned. Many of the fashionable wigs had lots of curls in them, and these curls reminded people of wool. Soon, wigs began to be called “wool”. When you “pull the wool over someone’s eyes”, what you are really doing is pulling the wig that he/she is wearing over his/her eyes. And what would happen if someone pulled the wig that you were wearing over your eyes? You would be unable to see. You wouldn’t know what is happening around you and it would be possible for the people around you to take advantage of the situation. They would be able to deceive you. And that’s what the expression “to pull the wool over someone’s eyes” means – to deceive someone.

**Is the following question correct? “It appears dull, is it not?”** (S. Balu Subesh, Pondicherry)

In India it is common practice to use “is not it” or “isn’t it” as the question tag for all statements. One frequently hears in conversation questions like the following. *Jaya looked beautiful, isn’t it?*

*Sachin has played many wonderful innings, isn’t it?*

*You are coming to the party, isn’t it?*  
The question tag “isn’t it” has been wrongly used in all the examples. None of the sentences is grammatically acceptable. A native speaker of English would say:

*Jaya looked beautiful, didn’t she?*  
*Sachin has played many wonderful innings, hasn’t he?*

*You are coming to the party, aren’t you?*  
The rule for using “isn’t it” as the question tag is the following. The subject of the sentence should be “neuter” and the verb “is” should be either the main verb or the helping verb. Here are a few examples:

*It’s a nice day, isn’t it?*

**What is the past tense of “swing”?** (P. Suman, Nellore)

The past tense of swing is “swung”.

**What is the meaning of the word “savvy”?** (K. J. Joseph, Kochi)

When you refer to a person as being “savvy”, you are saying that the person has practical knowledge and ability. It is an informal word used mainly in American English. The firm hired Prakasham because he had a lot of savvy.

**Is it ok to say, “I enclose herewith a list”?** (V. Girija, Chennai)

Some people would argue that the word “herewith” is unnecessary in the above sentence. “I enclose a list along with the letter” is what they would prefer. The argument being that when a person encloses something, he/she is including it or sending it as part of the same letter. It is therefore redundant to use “herewith” after “enclose”. But I found the following two sentences in dictionaries:  
I enclose three documents herewith. (Cambridge Dictionary of English)  
I enclose herewith two copies of the document. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)  
Published in *The Hindu* on December 7, 1999

## Word of the day

**Chide:** censure severely or angrily

**Synonyms:** scold, reproach, rebuke

**Usage:** The teacher chided the students for talking in class.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.livh/chidepro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /tʃaɪd/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject ‘Text & Context’

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -  
RAMNATH GOENKA  
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### Four state arenas & poll dust that will spill over

WITH THE announcement of the schedule for elections in four states and one Union Territory by the Election Commission, the political battelions are being sharpened again. For the BJP, at stake is the momentum it achieved, after the 2024 Lok Sabha setback, through successive assembly victories. Its successes in Haryana and Maharashtra, Delhi and Bihar, helped in restoring its sheen after it slipped below the majority mark in 2024. Now, if it returns to power in Assam and improves its tally in West Bengal, a key frontier for the party, where it has built itself up over less than a decade to become the principal challenger of the ruling TMC, if it registers gains in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, two southern states that have resisted it historically, it will have burnished the powerful narrative it wishes to see winnability — leading the NDA in its third term at the Centre, and in power, singly or with allies, in 21 states and UTs. On the other side of the fence, the Opposition has more to gain, and more to lose. Opposition parties are incumbents in three of the poll-bound states — TMC in Bengal, DMK in Tamil Nadu, CPI(M) in Kerala. The outcomes in these polls will decide whether, and how strongly, the national Opposition can re-invigorate itself through the push-back, mainly by regional players, against the BJP.

The campaign for the polls will shape the trajectory of vital issues. For one, the EC's Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, which stoked controversy ahead of the Bihar election, has once again stirred up political dust in West Bengal. Here, the eligibility of 60 lakh voters is under adjudication, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is herself piloting the case against the EC in the SC and her party is arguing the bid in Parliament to impeach the CEC. The SIR is tied up with the BJP's major poll plank and theme, in Assam and in Bengal: From the PM downwards, it speaks of the illegal immigrant, or the 'ghosnyathiyah', as a threat to national unity and security. In Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has taken this rhetoric to a new polarising pitch.

Issues of federalism will be raised in the campaign for Tamil Nadu, where a new player has set off a frisson amid a decades-long status quo made of the alternation in power of the two big Dravidian parties. And in Kerala, pre-poll jostling is re-arranging traditional equations, with the ruling CPI(M) reversing its 2018 position on the Sabarimala temple entry issue, and the BJP addressing the "Christian" constituency. The upcoming contests will shape the story in these poll-bound states, but they will also be read for how they tweak the frame nationally.

### Wangchuk's release is welcome, and sobering

THE CENTRE'S decision to revoke the detention of climate activist and Magsaysay awardee Sonam Wangchuk on March 14, after almost six weeks, is welcome. He was detained on September 26, two days after a protest in Ladakh for separate statehood and inclusion within the Sixth Schedule claimed four lives. Wangchuk, an activist who has spoken of the Gandhian way and used non-violent methods, was detained under the stringent National Security Act (NSA). Section 3 empowers the government to detain a person "with a view to preventing him from taking any part in the affairs of the Government of India, the relations of India with foreign powers, or the security of India". That the Centre's revocation order comes only three days before the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear final arguments on a habeas corpus petition by Wangchuk's wife raises sobering questions about its case against the activist, pointing to its own apprehensions about its inability to hold up in court.

By all accounts, the Centre's use of this harsh law, which empowers it to detain a person without formal charge and trial, against Wangchuk, was a case of the state using its strong arm to curb political dissent. The NSA takes away the detained person's constitutional right to be produced before a magistrate within 24 hours of detention. It doesn't allow the individual to move a bail application. These provisions should be used, as the SC observed in *Rekha vs. State of Tamil Nadu* (2011), with "meticulous compliance with the procedural safeguards" to prevent the "misuse of this potentially dangerous power." Wangchuk, who welcomed the BJP government's abrogation of Article 370 that bifurcated J&K, giving Ladakh the status of a Union Territory without a legislative body, has been articulating the concerns that the Centre's move revived in the Ladakhi people about their own future.

There is a lesson for the Centre in this episode. Its emphasis on "an environment of peace, stability and mutual trust in Ladakh" to "facilitate constructive and meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders" means little unless all views, especially differing and dissenting ones, are heard, instead of being shut down.

### Mood at the Oscars? Urgent, anxious

AS PAUL Thomas Anderson accepted the award for Best Picture at the 78th Academy Awards on Sunday evening, he noted, "There is no best." There is just what mood there might be that day. "What was the mood in the room that picked *One Battle After Another*, a father-daughter story set in a racist dystopia, over a vampire film about the historical oppression of Black people in the US (*Sinners*), a Brazilian drama about the annihilation of memory under authoritarianism (*The Secret Agent*) and a satire about class hierarchy and rampant capitalism (*Bigonia*)? What, indeed, was the mood that led to such richly imagined films, anchored in contemporary anxieties, being feted on one of the world's most glamorous stages?

While they may be projected as a celebration of cinema, the Oscars, as well as other major awards, are not just Emmys, have long been lampooned by parties where an insular industry merely pats itself on the back. If this year felt different — more charged with meaning and emotional heft — it comes down to the films themselves, many of which captured the uncertainties and ruptures of the past few years. The most mainstream films of the day are doing what art has long done: Capturing, crystallising and nudging a reckoning with these fears.

THE ISLAMIC Republic of Iran cannot win the current war with Israel and the United States. It only wishes to survive it. This distinction, seemingly small, is in fact the key to understanding everything Tehran has done since the start of the war on February 28, and everything it is likely to do next. Survival is not a fallback position for the Islamic Republic, it has and has been since the republic's founding in 1979, the paramount objective around which all other decisions are organised. What looks from the outside like defiance or recklessness is, from the inside, the rational execution of a doctrine that has kept the regime in power for nearly half a century.

Atyallah Ruhollah Khomeini built the survival imperative into the constitutional architecture of the state from the beginning. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), established within months of the revolution, was given a mandate distinct from that of the conventional armed forces. Where the regular army was tasked with defending Iran's borders, the IRGC was charged with preserving the revolution itself. This was a deliberate and consequential choice. The Islamic Republic would always maintain a military force whose primary loyalty was to the political order, not the nation-state, and whose purpose was to guarantee that the system endured regardless of what the Iranian people, the clerical establishment, or the outside world demanded of it. Over four decades, that institutional purpose has calcified into something more than strategy. It has become the operating system of the Iranian state, ab-

REPORTING JÜRGEN Habermas' death, the Associated Press described him as "one of the world's most influential philosophers". The German Chancellor said "Germany and Europe have lost one of the most significant thinkers of our time." Read together, the two observations — where Germany and Europe may see as the world's conceptual core — index both the scope and limits of Habermas' thinking.

Born with a cleft palate in Gimmersbach (near Düsseldorf), the disability at birth made Habermas extra-sensitive to communication and language, which became central to his philosophical concerns. In his teens, Habermas, whose father was an adviser to the Nazis, joined the Hitler Youth. While vociferous in attacking Martin Heidegger's fascism, Habermas' own writings show no "guilt or shame" for fighting for Hitler, as Stuart Jeffries points out. After the defeat of the Nazis, he studied in Göttingen and Bonn, where he earned his doctorate in Philosophy. In 1956, he became research assistant to Theodor Adorno, a towering figure of the Frankfurt School, of which Habermas was the most famous contemporary theorist. Habermas's 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, proved momentous. It was a watershed inquiry into the onset of the bourgeois public sphere as vital to Europe's democracy.

Habermas wrote prolifically across a wide range of themes that transcended disciplinary boundaries. At the age of 94, he published a three-volume work on the history of philosophy, modestly titled *Also a History of Philosophy*.

In Habermas's intellectual universe, the trajectory of modernity emerged in Europe, particularly in the post-Reformation world that, in his account, helped give rise to the Enlightenment and institutions of modernity. Protestant Christianity occupied a distinctive place in this narrative because of its achievement "of secularisation. The rest of the world didn't philosophically matter much, except perhaps as the 'enlightened' West's other. In his writings, especially after 9/11, Islam appears as the main other. The way to deal with this was to Christianise Muslims because they "still have to undergo this painful learning process (of secularisation)" and adopt "a historical-hermeneutic approach" to the Qur'an. Indifferent to minor-



HUSSEIN BANAI

management, but the end of the Islamic Republic as a governing system. He addressed the Iranian people directly after the first strikes, calling on them to overthrow what he called "the regime of fear". For Israel, this war, at its core, a war about whether the Islamic Republic can be made to cease to exist. That is a coherent position, one that at best begins from an accurate reading of what the regime is and how it operates.

The Trump administration's position has been something quite different and considerably less coherent. The President's war aims have shifted repeatedly since the first strikes, oscillating between demands for unconditional surrender, offers of immunity to IRGC commanders willing to defect, suggestions that Trump himself would select Iran's next leader, and signals that a nuclear deal with the new Supreme Leader might yet be possible. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has acknowledged to Western counterparts that while the two allies are aligned on military objectives, there are "different nuances" on the question of regime change. That is a diplomatic understatement. Netanyahu wants the war to lay the foundation for the end of the Islamic Republic. The Trump administration, by the evidence of its own public statements, is less certain that it wants, and has shown signs of a desire to exit the conflict on terms it can describe as a victory, whether or not those terms constitute one.

This divergence is not secondary tension within the alliance; it is the central strategic problem of the war. A campaign premised on regime change, and one premised on nuclear disarmament are not the same, and the gap between them is one the Islamic Republic is well-positioned to exploit

change and one premised on nuclear disarmament are not the same, and the gap between them is one the Islamic Republic is well-positioned to exploit. If Trump concludes that destroying Iran's nuclear and missile infrastructure is sufficient for him to declare victory and disengage, the regime survives the IRGC remains in place, and Iran retains the institutional capacity to reconstitute its programme over time. If, on the other hand, the alliance commits to regime change without a credible plan for what follows, it risks the kind of open-ended entanglement that neither country's political circumstances can sustain.

Iran's own conduct reflects this clarity. Rather than limiting its retaliation, Tehran has widened the circle of the war, launching missiles and drones at all six Gulf Cooperation Council states, restricting traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, and driving oil prices to their highest levels in years. These are the actions of a regime deploying the leverage it has accumulated over decades, not the desperate thrashing of a system on the verge of collapse. The Islamic Republic is not trying to win the war in any conventional sense. It is trying to raise the cost of the war high enough that its enemies conclude that removal of the regime is more expensive than its continued existence. In this, its strategy and its survival doctrine are one and the same. It will not be dissolved by a military campaign whose two principals cannot agree on what they are trying to achieve.

The writer is associate professor of International Studies at the Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University

### The star philosopher and his silences



IRFAN AHMAD

REPORTING JÜRGEN Habermas' death, the Associated Press described him as "one of the world's most influential philosophers". The German Chancellor said "Germany and Europe have lost one of the most significant thinkers of our time." Read together, the two observations — where Germany and Europe may see as the world's conceptual core — index both the scope and limits of Habermas' thinking.

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### For persons with disabilities, doors to theatres now open



RAHUL BAJAJ

MANY OF us grew up watching and discussing iconic scenes from our favourite Bollywood movies. The reunion in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, the farewell in *Kal Ho Na Ho*, the romance and friendship that defined *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* are cultural touchstones for a generation. They are scenes friends quote, families revisit, and social media celebrates. Yet, as a blind person, I was largely deprived of those shared experiences. I could not fully engage with these films. That exclusion was not merely about entertainment; it was about being cut off from a cultural conversation. All that is set to change now.

From March 15, every new film released in India must carry audio description for persons with visual impairment and same-language captions for persons with hearing impairment. This historic moment is the culmination of a long and hard-won struggle for accessibility in the entertainment ecosystem.

The legal foundation was laid nearly a decade ago. Section 42 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, enacted in 2017, mandated that films released on OTT platforms must be accompanied by accessibility features such as audio description and captions. For years, this remained largely on paper. In 2023, four petitioners in the Delhi HC complained about the lack of accessibility features in the film *Pathaan*. Three of the petitioners were blind, and one had a hearing impairment. I had the privilege of representing them in court. Their grievance was simple: In an age when technology makes access easy, why should people with disabilities remain excluded? The court directed that *Pathaan* include accessibility features in its OTT release, and also instructed the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to formulate guidelines to enforce accessibility standards across the film industry.

The ministry complied. On March 15, 2024, it released the "Guidelines of Accessibility Standards in the Public Exhibition of Feature Films in Cinema Theatres for Persons with Hearing and Visual Impairment." Clause 6.1 created a clear, time-bound mandate: All new films must include audio description and same-language captions by March 15, 2026. For multilingual films and those seeking eligibility for National Awards, the requirement already applied. Now, the mandate becomes universal.

This is no small feat. Practically speaking, accessibility in cinema is enabled through mobile technology. Specialised applications synchronise with the audio track of a film playing in the theatre. These apps deliver audio descriptions and captions in the pauses between dialogues as well as a textual depiction of the dialogues and other auditory developments.

Yet, gaps remain. The recently released Guidelines for Accessibility of Content on platforms of Publishers of Online Curated Content (OTT platforms) provide a far longer compliance timeline. Under these rules, new OTT content must be born accessible only in a phased manner, three years after the guidelines come into force. This makes neither logical nor commercial sense.

Nevertheless, the broader shift is undeniable. For millions of Indians with disabilities, cinema has long been a closed door. March 15 marks the day that the door begins to open.

The writer is co-founder, Mission Accessibility

### 40 YEARS AGO

March 17, 1986



### Curfew in Batala

AT LEAST four people were killed and 16 others injured, nine seriously, in police firing or group clashes between members of the communities in Batala in Gurdaspur district, the major industrial city of Punjab, which came under an indefinite curfew. Unofficial reports put the toll in Batala at five.

### Sobhraj escapes from Tihar

CHARLES SOBHAJ, the notorious international criminal wanted by Interpol and the police of at least three countries, made a dramatic escape from Tihar Jail, taking six other prisoners with him. Using fruit custard, Sobhraj drugged all eight guards on duty during an

### Aircraft carrier deal

INDIA IS understood to have signed a memorandum of understanding with Britain for the purchase of the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier, *Hermes*, in a deal estimated to be worth approximately £60 million. The British Defence Ministry refused to answer queries about the memorandum, saying that it would be against their policy to comment on such

### Third front in Kerala

THE OUTLINES of a third front are emerging in Kerala politics. The Nairs, led by Nair Service Society general secretary and National Democratic Party chairman P K Narayanan Panicker, have decided to become part of a burgeoning third front in the state, according to indications given by Panicker. Discussions about the composition of such a third front are already underway. Panicker admitted to newsmen at Perumna, Panicker, however, characterised the third front as a grouping together of democratic forces.

## The move to impeach the CEC, though symbolic, matters



YOGENDRA YADAV

WHAT MORE must the CEC do to deserve impeachment? I wondered as I read an editorial in this paper ('Question CEC, but move to impeach is unwise', *IE*, March 13) admonishing the Opposition for bringing an impeachment motion against Gyanesh Kumar, the CEC. While conceding that there was merit in accusations of political bias, intemperate behaviour and ill-timed and shoddily executed SIR, the editorial warned that the Opposition was undermining itself and "risking a hardening of confrontation with a high-ranking constitutional authority" by "rushing to use an instrument of last resort to score only a symbolic point".

So, I turned to the Constitution. Article 324 (5) lays down that the CEC can only be removed on the same ground and by following the same procedure as established for the removal of a judge of the Supreme Court. The procedure involves impeachment by Parliament on the ground of proven "misbehaviour or incapacity". The Constitution does not tell us what kind of behaviour is expected of the Election Commissioners. Fortunately, the Supreme Court spelled it out in the famous case (*Anoop Barwari vs. Union of India*) on the process for the appointment of the Election Commissioners. Writing the majority opinion, Justice K.M. Joseph formulated the normative standards expected of the Election Commissioners, standards that we must judge Gyanesh Kumar against: "Persons of integrity and independence who can command public confidence", who are "capable of acting impartially", who are "insulated from executive influence" and can "function without fear or favour", possessing the "character and strength necessary to resist political pressures".

This positive list must be supplemented by a negative list — some red lines that disqualify a person from holding the office of Election Commissioner. For that, I turned



ILLUSTRATION: C. SAKSHIMAR

to the BJP, which so very eloquently put these principles while making a case — to my mind a fair case — against the appointment and continuation of Navin Chawla, first as the Election Commissioner and then as the Chief Election Commissioner. The norm invoked by the BJP's memorandum to the President, dated April 8, 2006, are worth recalling: "The matter is not of legality but of propriety relating to his conduct". BJP Leader Jaswant Singh's petition to the apex court spoke of "reasonable apprehension of bias, incompatible with the neutrality expected of an Election Commissioner". Finally, in 2008, the then CEC, N Gopalaswami, wrote to the President seeking Chawla's removal on the ground of "political partisanship" as his conduct did not give an "impression of political neutrality" raising "serious doubts about his political detachment". In the end, Chawla was not removed, but the episode helps us set some norms.

Gyanesh Kumar's conduct as CEC must be judged against these norms of what constitutes proven "misconduct and incapacity". Now, misconduct cannot just be about how he conducts himself in public. Waving fingers at elected political leaders, waving his hands towards a non-existent public, political rhetoric

**The more serious point about Gyanesh Kumar's misconduct is his partisanship. All you need to recall is his press conference on 'vote chori' where he exhorted the Leader of the Opposition to file an affidavit or offer an apology to the nation**

at press conferences — all this is comic and outrageous. But in all fairness, pomposity is unbecoming, not unconstitutional. Again, his proven incapacity to offer cogent arguments — remember the 'behen-beti ki photo' argument to deny CCTV footage — may not fall under the constitutional definition of "incapacity". At any rate, if you were to bar small men from holding big offices (I like the Hindi expression — "Joota bada hai, lekin paany chhoti") a majority of constitutional offices would remain vacant.

The more serious point about Gyanesh Kumar's "misconduct" is his blatant political partisanship. All you need to recall is his now-infamous press conference on "vote chori" where he exhorted the Leader of the Opposition to file an affidavit or offer an apology to the nation. All that was left thereafter was for him to claim a BJP ticket and himself contest elections. This was not a one-off incident. There have been unimpeachable combative encounters, the latest with TMC leaders. The story of the SIR in West Bengal is a story of the Election Commission's desperate attempts at mass deletion of voters inconvenient to the BJP. The decision to replace the chief secretary and home secretary of

West Bengal again shows *jugaibandi* with the BJP. More than their opposition to the PM, if there is one thing that brings together the country's opposition parties, it is their lack of trust in the CEC. The level of public trust in the Election Commission has been going down for a few years. But the credit of turning this once hallowed institution into a meme — latest given from Gyanesh Kumar — must go to the present CEC. If "propriety" and "impression of neutrality" are any consideration, Gyanesh Kumar has no business staying in the CEC's office. In any functioning democracy, public shaming would have forced someone like him to resign by now.

Impropropriety, partisanship, incompetence — bad as these are, such infractions fade into insignificance when compared to the SIR, Gyanesh Kumar's biggest assault on the democracy he was meant to protect. The Supreme Court is yet to pronounce on the legal-technical issue of whether the Election Commission had the powers to do the kind of rewriting of rolls that it did in the name of the SIR. Whatever be that legal verdict, the substantial outcome of this exercise is for everyone to see. We know that about 5 crore names have already been deleted from the voters' list, even as over one-third of the country is yet to get this exercise. We know that in every single state, the SIR has shrunk the voters list as compared to the adult population of that state. We know that the SIR has caused the proportion of women in the voters' list to fall in every case. We know that millions of marginalised Indians — the poor, migrants and nomadic communities — have lost the only effective right they had in independent India, the right to vote. We know that Gyanesh Kumar has single-handedly curated, without any precedent, consultation or preparation, the largest ever recorded disenfranchisement in the history of any democracy. This assault on the universality of adult franchise would put the American Jim Crow laws that disenfranchised Black people to shame. The move to impeach Gyanesh Kumar, even if it remains symbolic, is the beginning of an acknowledgment and redress of this crime against "we the people".

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

## Sachin Tendulkar, the unassuming giver



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

ABOUT HALF an hour after a long telephonic interview on batting, the mobile rang again. It was Sachin Tendulkar. He had been thinking about a question he had already answered, but wanted to add more.

Even if he hadn't called, it would have been fine. The interview had already thrown light on the nuance of batting. But that's Tendulkar — no half-measures when it comes to sharing, or availing, cricketers wisdom.

The night before the World T20 final, it would have been fine if Tendulkar hadn't called Sanju Samson, the batsman who had reached out to him several months ago and had been in constant touch since. Almost nursed back to form by Indian cricket's habitual healer, Sanju had touched peak form in the two games leading to the final. Now came the biggest night, with sky-high expectations and the law of averages waiting.

Tendulkar had been busy with families at home. But like his late father Ramesh Tendulkar, the Marathi literature professor known for hand-holding his struggling students, he found time for the player on the field.

Had Sanju not spoken about Tendulkar at the awards ceremony, the world would never have known the role played by Indian cricket's habitual guru — a rare guru who prefers working anonymously. There are those who put out videos and pictures of old training sessions when their wards do well. Then there is Tendulkar, fiercely anonymous, like a doctor under oath maintaining confidentiality.

In several interviews, he has been asked about the time he spent with Virat Kohli during his slump, or the word he had with Shubman Gill before his career-defining Test tour to England. Without exception, he has skirted the issue, insisting that these questions be asked of the beneficiaries themselves.

What Tendulkar loves to talk about is cricket's complexities. It is when he is most comfortable and articulate — sharing priceless observations that the rest of the world is either blind to or didn't know existed. Like a scientist, his mind buzzes while untangling a cricketers puzzle — mining the archival data stored inside him over a lifetime, since the time Acharekar Sir put a coin in his stump.

Once, in an interview with this newspaper, he spoke for close to an hour about rumbling between the wickets — before a tour to Australia, where the grounds were large and run-making wasn't going to be about boundaries. Because of the hard pitches Down Under, he preferred sharper spikes, like those used by sprinters.

Before games he would sharpen them to stay on firm footing and avoid slipping.

Indian cricket folklore has many such Bibal-like Tendulkar moments. Administrator and writer Amrit Mathur, in his book *Pitchside*, describes a recee trip to Centurion the day before the India-Pakistan game at the 2003 World Cup. As they walked along the outfield, Tendulkar stopped to stare at the grass. The blades, he told Mathur, were facing the central square — so a ball played along the ground to third man would travel slowly, making singles and doubles easy to run. On a cricket ground, nothing escaped him, not even the angle at which a blade of grass was bent.

Till his final days of active cricket, Tendulkar never stopped plotting. Playing his last domestic game against Haryana at Lahl's green track, he didn't treat it as a mere farewell. At a crucial point in the game, with Mumbai to bat in the second innings, he asked captain Zaheer Khan not to take the roller, surprising even the Haryana players. After the game, he explained: Lahl has a very high water table. The weight of the roller would bring moisture to the surface, helping the pacers.

Tendulkar, unlike many greats, shares his secrets — with modest domestic players from Haryana, present-day greats like Kohli and Gill, even reporters with genuine questions. Everyone gets his time.

Once, in the middle of a run drought, he called room service for coffee. The waiter who knocked was a Tendulkar-watcher — he had spent hours studying the great man's innings in slow motion. He asked permission to share an observation. Tendulkar allowed it. "The arm guard you wear is too long," the waiter said. "It hampers your hand movement at the elbow."

The man who received a thousand suggestions a day thought about it. He saw merit in what the waiter said. He reshaped the arm guard. Within days, he was back among runs. It's only a clear and beautiful mind that first seeks in every bit of wisdom it can share with it with those in need.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Russian oil waiver

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE once remarked that geography is the most permanent factor in foreign policy. It is the unshakable permanence of geography, manifested in the Strait of Hormuz, that has compelled US President Donald Trump to renege on his Russian embargo. Return of Russian oil signals US pragmatism', *IE*, March 16). The impulsive strike on Iran has sent hydrocarbon prices skyrocketing across the world. Trump's decision to suspend certain sanctions on Russia is an attempt to ameliorate the energy crisis he has inadvertently manufactured. Lord Palmerston's truism remains relevant: "Nations have no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests."

Aniruddh Parashar, Chandigarh

THE US has temporarily lifted sanctions on Russian oil, a boost to the Kremlin as Trump tries to contain energy prices sent soaring by the US-Israeli assault on Iran ('Return of Russian oil signals US pragmatism', *IE*, March 16). The policy allows for the movement of oil already stranded at sea, primarily to India, due to the market disruptions caused by the escalating war with Iran. Critics argue that any relief will allow Russia to replenish its war chest and prolong its war in Ukraine.

SS Paul, Nadia

### Water in Delhi

DELHI'S WATER CRISIS is not merely ecological but administrative ('Delhi's new Water Plan confronts old failures', *IE*, March 16). Despite years of promises to revive the Yamuna, pollution levels remain high due to untreated sewage and fragmented governance. Agencies such as the DJB and the DPCC often work in silos. Without integrating sewer networks, regulating urban drains, and ensuring accountability, another plan risks becoming a document of intent rather than a mechanism of change.

Palak Verma, Mandi Gobindgarh



SHALINI LANGER

IN A year full of exceptional movies, with exceptional ideas, playing against our world's very real and many imagined wars, it is fitting that a film that encapsulates it all was the big winner at the 98th Academy Awards. *One Battle After Another* is that story, showing us that there will always be people who do "the revolution" and others who do the dishes, and that the world needs both. The world also goes on, letting every new generation have its moments of both. Paul Thomas Anderson, who co-wrote the film, also took home the director's award, bringing to its craft the same lightness of being as its message. Unlike, say, *Sinners*, another film with a powerful message, *One Battle After Another* didn't deal in the blacks or whites (no pun intended) but entirely in the greys. Rarely have we needed that space more.

There is the blind passion here of Perfidia (Yeyana Taylor), the bathing-gown draped preciously of Bob (Leonardo DiCaprio), the dangerous absurdity of Col Lockjaw (Sean Penn), the wise insolence of 'Sensei' Carlos (Benicio del Toro), and the ferocious innocence of Charlene (Chase Infiniti). That Anderson recognised Charlene as the "heart" of *One Battle After Another* in his Oscar speech also shows that this film knows exactly where its own heart lies.

## At the Oscars, the power of grey

Unlike love, it's pulsating, urgent anger that drives *Sinners*. It speaks of generations of exploitation, of the picking and choosing of America's Black heritage to serve a White guiltless cause. *Sinners* demands to be seen, and heard. It is an affirmation of the arrival of some of Hollywood's biggest Black artists, crafting their space, their way. Ryan Coogler (who won for Best Original Screenplay) and Michael B. Jordan (Best Actor) are undeniable before and after Sunday night (on Monday morning). But if *Sinners*' strength is its fire, *One Battle After Another*'s is its cinders. It suggests old fires and the possibility of breathing new life into them.

There was another film demanding our attention in the run-up to the Oscars, but which shockingly came up empty: *Mary Sue Supreme*. This is a hard landing for Timothée Chalamet, who portrayed a youth whose ambition will burn whatever and whoever stands in his way, with an unwavering commitment to unilaterality.

Did the young, shooting star pay the price for thinking he could be as brash, ambitious and unfiltered as Mary in real life as well? More likely the Academy thought Chalamet had many more years to get his hands around the golden statuette — and going by his calendar, they are not wrong.

**'One Battle After Another' is that story, showing us that there will always be people who do 'the revolution' and others who do the dishes, and that the world needs both**

The race for Best Actor was sealed for the magnetic Jordan after the Academy gave its top two awards to *One Battle After Another*. But there was another actor who deserved to be up there: Ethan Hawke. In *Blue Moon*, he plays a man who is the flip side of *Mary Sue Supreme*, as brash, confident and talented, but who has it all and throws it away. Longing and desperation, genius and wit, come together heartbreakingly. *Sentimental Value*, about fathers and daughters and their home, a sublime character of its own, will go home happy with the Best International Feature win. Though it is disappointing that the Joachim Trier film that stands gloriously on the strength of its acting ensemble — all its four main actors get nominations — didn't get any in that department.

Could *The Secret Agent* have come close? Maybe it was too specific to a moment and time to hold a wider resonance. Which brings us back to revolutions, and the point of them — whether lost, or won. As best said by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the US: "I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is good thing, and as necessary in the political course as storms in the physical."

Here's looking at you, America.

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SAPTARSHI BASAK

A FAMOUS debate in international relations theory is between Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz over the following question: Do nuclear weapons make the world safer or more dangerous? Sagan argues that nuclear proliferation increases the risk of deliberate or accidental nuclear war, while Waltz argues the counterintuitive claim that nuclear weapons can actually make the world more stable. Why? Because nuclear weapons carry the threat of mutually assured destruction and discourage states from initiating any conflict that might lead to their deployment when high up the escalation ladder. Waltz's main example is

the Cold War. Indeed, the US and the Soviet Union never fought a direct, declared war against each other.

The framing of this debate becomes all the more critical in the context of the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran. The prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons has been unacceptable to both the US and Israel for years. And even as the Iranians signalled during negotiations their willingness not to stockpile material for a bomb, they found themselves under attack in what is supposedly a "preventive war". Here lies the paradox. A war intended to prevent Iran from acquiring nukes may actually strengthen its resolve to get them, quickly. It risks reinforcing Waltz's logic that in a world characterised by power and anarchy, nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent. Consider two examples.

In 2017, war between the US and North Korea over the latter's nuclear and missile programmes had begun to seem like a real possibility. Trump warned that North Korea "will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen." The language is not so different from what he is saying about Iran today ("death, fire and fury"). But Trump ultimately did not follow through, likely because North Korea had already tested nuclear weapons successfully, and Kim Jong-un had spent much of 2017 demonstrating that he could strike

**A war intended to prevent Iran from acquiring nukes may actually strengthen its resolve to get them, quickly**

the US mainland with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. Since then, Pyongyang has passed a law declaring its nuclear status "irreversible" and ruled out negotiations on demilitarisation.

Secondly, in 1994, Ukraine agreed to give up what was then the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, in return for security guarantees from the West and Russia. More than three decades on, Russia controls roughly 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by a full-scale invasion in 2022. It is impossible to know definitively whether Russia would have invaded had Ukraine kept its nuclear weapons. But the prospect that both societies could be obliterated in a nuclear exchange would have acted as a far stronger deterrent against Moscow than

the failed security guarantees. North Korea and Ukraine, in different ways, reinforce Waltz's logic of nuclear deterrence. If only nuclear weapons can reliably deter military adventurism, then the likely consequence of the war in West Asia may well be the acceleration of Iran's nuclear programme. The region does have a de facto regional nuclear hegemon: Israel. And the anarchic nature of the international system means that overwhelming power will invite balancing. If Iran ultimately succeeds in getting the bomb — and if Waltz's theory holds — it could result in a nuclear equilibrium that might even produce a more stable West Asia.

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## • POLICY

# Bihar mandates passes for minor minerals in bid for regulation

**Himanshu Harsh**  
Patna, March 16

THE BIHAR government has made it compulsory for all commercial vehicles carrying minor minerals, including sand, stones, stone chips, moorum, and stone dust, from other states to obtain a Transit Pass (TP) before crossing its borders.

### Fee structure

Under Rule 41 of the Bihar Minerals (Prevention of Illegal Mining, Transportation and Storage) Rules, 2019, all incoming minor minerals must now be digitally logged at the border. The arrangement requires any commercial vehicle entering Bihar with minor minerals to obtain a TP. This is intended to plug revenue leakages, curb illegal mining, and digitise tracking of raw materials.

### • DIGITAL TRACKER

- Uttar Pradesh operates the "e-Ravanna" portal, and Jharkhand uses the JIMMS platform for e-permits.
- Rajasthan has issued millions of e-transit passes since 2019.

To enforce this, border district administrations will install CCTV cameras at entry points. A system integrator will digitally monitor mineral-laden vehicles to ensure taxes are paid and to prevent the reuse of a single challan for multiple trips.

### Reliance on imports

In recent years, Bihar has witnessed an unprecedented infrastructure push, including the Patna Metro, new expressways, and mega-bridges, apart from rising consumer needs. To feed this appetite, Bihar relies heavily on its neighbours. While the state produces sand, it lacks sufficient stone quarries for aggregates like stone chips and moorum (a fragmented, rock used as versatile soil material in construction) — essential for concrete. So, Bihar relies on quarrying hubs in Jharkhand's Pakur and Sahibganj.

Logistics also play a role. Construction projects in north and west Bihar often find it more cost-effective to import sand from Uttar Pradesh than to transport it from south Bihar. Similarly, quarries in West Bengal frequently supply stone and sand to eastern districts like Bhagalpur and Araria.

### Not unique to Bihar

While Article 301 of the Constitution mandates that trade and commerce across India shall be free, the judiciary has historically allowed states to charge regulatory fees for monitoring environmental impact and infrastructure maintenance.

With digital permits becoming a standard tool to curb mining syndicates, Bihar is now trying to catch up by replacing an opaque, unregulated flow with a formal digital registry.

The state expects to add crores of rupees to the exchequer annually by taxing minerals that were previously "secretly absorbed" into the construction sector. But the transit fee will likely be passed down the supply chain, leading to a modest uptick in material prices for consumers and public projects. Ultimately, success depends on enforcement, as any collusion between transporters and authorities could undermine that.

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### • DIPLOMACY

# Iran survives, Bibi gains, India's dilemma: 5 takeaways after two weeks of war



**SHUBHRAJIT ROY**

THE WAR in West Asia has entered its third week, and it doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon. Over the weekend, the US hit Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export terminal in the Persian Gulf, and is sending more marines and warships to West Asia.

US President Donald Trump has announced that NATO and countries like China should send their ships to the Strait of Hormuz amid its effective closure.

Unlike the 12-day conflict of June 2025, this war has had severe consequences, with a spike in oil prices and fears of a global energy shortage.

It is also becoming apparent that the US

significantly underestimated Iran's resilience and ability to expand the war.

### 1. Not World War III, but...

The geographical spread and intensity of the war are much greater than last summer.

The US and Israel's airstrikes swiftly wiped out Iran's top leadership, including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Rather than folding, Iran launched ballistic missiles and Shahed drones that hit countries including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Western military bases and energy and civilian infrastructure have been targeted.

About 20 countries (including European powers) are now said to be directly or indirectly involved in the war, supplying arms, ammunition and intelligence.

For this to be World War III, however, China would need to step in directly. That is unlikely, considering the tone of its official statements. Still, this regional war has had global consequences — something the Trump administration did not foresee.

### 2. Iran is not collapsing

The war is now a test of staying power, both militarily and psychologically.

US officials have privately admitted to being surprised at Iran's staying power despite the damage inflicted on it. Khamenei may be dead, but the structures of the state are far too entrenched to simply vanish. Iran had also been preparing for such an eventuality, especially since US B-2 bombers struck its nuclear facilities in June 2025. Khamenei had asked every top official to name up to four successors.

The entire military apparatus has been decentralised into a "mosaic defence doctrine": 31 units are protecting Tehran and the 30 other provinces. They have independent command-and-control structures. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the clergy have banded together for survival, even going against Khamenei's own diktat against hereditary rule in appointing his son, Mojtaba, as the new Supreme Leader. The continuity signals the regime's defiance.

### 3. Bibi, the beneficiary

With the Supreme Leader gone after ruling for 37 years and Iran's capabilities being steadily degraded, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has found himself as one of the biggest beneficiaries of this war — certainly more so than Trump.

This is a far cry from the situation he had found himself in after the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas that killed 1,195 Israelis. Netanyahu responded to the criticism over the security failure with a brutal siege of the Gaza Strip that killed over 73,000 people, and caused widespread starvation among its 2.3 million residents.

His government has also taken out major hostile figures backed by Iran — Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah. With a few months left for legislative elections, Netanyahu can claim some major wins.

### 4. India's strategic dilemma

India has been in a precarious position since the US and Israel began the war. PM

geographical locations compared with GPS, whose signals are received in India at an angle that makes it difficult to access in certain areas like valleys and forests.

However, NavIC was been running into troubles since its successful 2023 launch.

### NavIC's track record

The constellation had five satellites that could provide positioning data: IRNSS-1B, 1C, 1F, 1I, and NVS-01. Atomic clocks on board some of the initial satellites started failing early on, with replacement satellites planned to keep the system running. Now, the atomic clock on board the IRNSS-1F has also been lost.

Besides the failing atomic clocks, some of the initial satellites are also aging out. IRNSS-1A was launched into orbit in 2013, and 1B and 1C followed in 2014. 1A is almost defunct, and the other two are also past their 10-year mission lives.

The last of the first-generation IRNSS satellites was 1I — a replacement for the failed 1F launch — which was launched in 2018. IRNSS-1J, launched in 2017 to replace 1A, failed to reach orbit due to operational issues.

NVS-02, the second of the new-generation satellites meant for NavIC (after NVS-01), was successfully placed in a highly elliptical transfer orbit in ISRO's 100th launch in January 2025. But it failed to move to its final orbit due to an electrical failure.

Another criticism ISRO faced over NavIC is the delay in developing the user segment. A 2018 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India pointed out delays in developing technology to that end.

Now, NavIC data is in use for aviation, shipping, and railways. Several new cell phones have chips that can use this data.

### Advancements in new satellites

The most important change to the new-generation NavIC satellite was an indigenous developed atomic clock developed by ISRO. The newer generation satellites also have a longer mission life: 12 years.

Importantly, they send signals in a third frequency, L1, besides the two (L5 and S) in existing satellites. As GPS commonly uses L1, this improves interoperability with other positioning systems. L1 also helps in using NavIC data in wearable devices.

### • ECONOMY

# The 'discrepancies' in India's new GDP data



**UDIT MISRA**

THE MINISTRY of Statistics and Programme Implementation last month brought out a new series of data for the country's Gross Domestic Product or GDP, which is the market value of all final (as against intermediate) goods and services produced within India's geographical boundaries in a year.

While there were many new technicalities in the new GDP series, the main change was the change in "Base Year". Before the new series, 2011-12 was being used as the base year. This meant the goods and services produced in 2011-12 and the prices at that year formed the basis for all future analysis.

Before 2011-12, India used 2004-05 as the base year, and before that, 1999-2000. This is the eighth such revision in independent India's history.

### Controversy in old GDP series

Many critics claimed that the outgoing GDP series, adopted in January 2015, overstated India's GDP growth. For instance, in the financial year 2025-26, the nominal growth of GDP is 8% and the real growth (the one after subtracting the rate of inflation) is 7.4%. Many argued that the inflation rate they faced was far more than 0.6%. In turn, this also raised questions about the quality of India's inflation data.

There was a bigger problem undermining the credibility of India's GDP data. This is called "discrepancies", an actual sub-head used by MoSPI to calculate GDP data.

### The 'discrepancies'

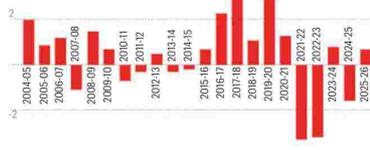
There are two main ways to calculate India's economic output.

One is to look at everything India produces in a year and add up all the monetary "value" created in a year. This is typically captured by a measure called the Gross Value Added (GVA). The other is to add up all the money spent by different people or entities (be it individuals, governments, businesses) in the economy. This is typically called the GDP.

The two variables are connected thus: GDP = GVA + Net Indirect Taxes, which is the tax the government levies on differ-

### • CHART 1-DISCREPANCY AS A % OF GDP

Higher levels of discrepancies had undermined the credibility of GDP data based on the old series (base year 2011-12)



Positive Discrepancies imply that consumption was weaker than the level suggested by production estimates. Negative discrepancies suggest that consumption was stronger than what production estimated suggested.

### • TABLE 1-GROWTH STORY IN RECENT YEARS

Category	FY23 (₹Crore)	FY24 (₹Crore)	Growth (FY24)	FY25 (₹Crore)	Growth over FY24 (%)
Real GDP	2,61,17,627	2,80,00,767	7.2	2,99,88,619	7.1
Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE)	1,49,22,828	1,57,85,257	5.8	1,66,99,851	5.8
Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF)	84,53,506	90,66,633	7.3	96,47,792	6.4
Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE)	28,90,910	29,07,652	0.6	30,95,570	6.5
Total (PFCE + GFCE + GFCF)	2,62,67,245	2,77,59,541	5.7	2,94,43,213	6.1

SOURCE: MOSPI, INDIAN EXPRESS RESEARCH

ent goods minus the subsidies it provides for the production of different goods.

In theory, the two calculations should yield the same economic output. "But," as MoSPI states in its FAQs, "often these two numbers don't match exactly. This small difference is called the 'statistical discrepancy'." It happens because some data, especially on the spending side, is not available, or reported late.

To bridge the artificial statistical gap, MoSPI has added a sort of a dummy component called "discrepancies". It is important to note here that the production side estimates are given primacy and the "discrepancies" are added (or subtracted) from the expenditure side estimates. But high levels of "discrepancies" can undermine the credibility of data.

### Levels in the old series

Chart 1 shows the level of discrepancies

### Data challenge

Data on what India produces may be easier to capture.

But data on what India spends on is more complicated.

[ OUR TAKE ]

## Everybody's political icon

All political parties want a slice of Kanshi Ram's political constituency

The Kanshi Ram birth anniversary on Sunday saw all major political parties paying homage to the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi went a step further to echo a long-standing demand of Mayawati, Kanshi Ram's close associate and multiple times UP chief minister, that her mentor be awarded the Bharat Ratna. On Monday, the Punjab legislative assembly unanimously passed a resolution demanding the same.

The political resurrection of Kanshi Ram, who died in 2006, and his eulogisation as a trans party icon have to do with the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP), due next year. His iconic status among Dalits, who constitute about 20% of the population in UP, makes it necessary to endorse his memory. Political parties in UP also recognise that the BSP, the main political platform of Dalits since the 1980s, is on the decline. They expect that BSP voters may be willing to back other political outfits if patronised in the right manner. This explains why the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the BJP, major political and ideological adversaries of the BSP when Kanshi Ram was alive, are now celebrating his legacy. The SP has been advancing a *pichhda*, Dalit, *alpsankhyak* (backward, Dalit, minorities) narrative to widen its OBC support base, while the BJP has been working to bring Dalits under the Hindutva umbrella. The Congress thinks it too could be a claimant to the Dalit vote that backed the party until the advent of the BSP in 1984. The fact that Kanshi Ram saw these parties as inimical to the cause of Dalits, though he would negotiate hard with them to win office for the BSP on his terms.

In many ways, the recent rise in pro-Kanshi Ram sentiment mirrors the political mainstream's approach to Babasaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar too was politically isolated and vilified in his lifetime, but was embraced later as a pan-Indian icon who gave the nation its Constitution. Just like Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram was a political philosopher who envisaged a radical overhaul of Indian society by advocating power to the *bahujan samaj* (an alliance of non-upper caste communities). The big question is whether any of the political parties choosing Kanshi Ram's legacy will embrace this provocative but anti-caste vision of democracy. Or, will it be like in the case of Ambedkar — more of a symbolic embrace than an endorsement of the person's radical political agendas?

## When cinema begins to anticipate reality

Paul Thomas Anderson's politically charged film, *One Battle After Another*, was nominated in 13 categories and won six Oscars, including for Best Feature and Best Director. This is not surprising since many believe that the film, loosely based on an early Thomas Pynchon novel, *Vineland*, anticipates the rise of an authoritarian regime and endorses political action in defence of liberal values. Pynchon is hardly a political extremist, even though his fiction has been radical and genre-defining. Anderson's interpretation, however, is political in the way he invokes the anarchist politics of the 1960s to address the concerns and fears in Trump's America. The film uses the trope of a lone ranger protecting his family/daughter against evil forces and a violent State; the stoned hero, almost an inversion of the Rambo character, is disillusioned with the compromises made by his comrades. That the French 75, the radical group at the film's heart, supports immigrants and works to ensure their safety against a militaristic regime is sure to resonate in today's world, where most nations have shut their doors on migrants.

The moral universe of *One Battle* is anti-authoritarian, but it stops short of endorsing the radical alternative available in the film. In fact, it reveals the corrupted soul of the French 75, which is scarred by individual ambitions and nihilistic violence, not very different from the State it despises. Perhaps the film's very American idiom endeared it to the Oscar jury, which ignored *The Secret Agent*, a searing political thriller that shines a light on State-sanctioned killings in Brazil in the 1970s. Between *The Secret Agent*, reminiscent of Costa Gavras' films in its very sober look at the structures that facilitate dictatorship, and *One Battle*, the Oscars have sharply highlighted the violent inner life of authoritarian regimes.

# Compass to reshape India's military future

The roadmap outlined in the ambitious document is persuasive; the challenge lies in executing its vision

On March 10, defence minister Rajnath Singh released 'Defence Forces Vision 2047: A Roadmap for a Future-Ready Indian Military'. By the centenary year of independence, the armed forces aim to become an integrated, all-domain force, ready to respond across the full spectrum of conflict to protect and promote national interests, in concert with all elements of national power.

The newly-articulated vision is important because India faces a demanding security environment even as the character of conflict is being fundamentally transformed. The structure and doctrinal thinking that serve the military today will need to be reshaped for the battlespace of tomorrow.

The document gets the broad diagnosis right. It situates military transformation within the larger national ambition of building a Viksit Bharat (Developed India) and argues that this requires a Sashakt Bharat (Empowered India) that is strong economically, diplomatically, technologically and militarily. That is a useful starting point because military power is situating within the wider national security architecture.

Its central argument is that the line between war and peace is eroding. Adversaries increasingly operate

through proxy conflict, grey-zone coercion, disinformation, and other forms of pressure below the threshold of open war. Future insecurity will spill across maritime, space, cyber and cognitive domains, leading to persistent, multi-domain contestation in which coercion may be more psychological than kinetic.

Some of the most concrete recommendations lie in the seven strategic priorities that give shape to the 2047 vision. On combat readiness, it calls for stronger defence through intelligent planning and force multipliers, as well as the development of indigenous technologies through the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative. A key focus area is tri-service jointness through integrated networks, tri-service logistics and inventory system, raising a joint headquarters for operations, and a clearer separation between force generation and force application through integrated command-and-control structures.

On capability development and strategic priorities, the recommendations are equally specific. The document proposes formalising an integrated capability development plan, reviewing the acquisition procedures, creating a technology perspective and capability roadmap, and building surge capacities for prolonged attritional conflict. Most notably, it recommends creating a defence geo-spatial agency, a data force, a cognitive warfare force, and raising space and cyber commands.

The document argues that technology-driven battlefields require agile

and contemporary doctrines to provide strategic direction. It, therefore, calls for laying the doctrinal foundation for multi-domain operations, shifting from information superiority to decision superiority by moving from net-centric to data-centric warfare, and integrating cognitive warfare into conventional operations. This is a crucial point because technology adoption without intellectual adaptation will yield limited results.

Vision 2047 envisages a strategic culture aligned with Indian needs, promoting indigenous knowledge and establishing an Indian Defence University as a centre of excellence for strategic leadership, innovation, critical thinking, and creativity. On the human side, it calls for a technologically adept and mentally agile force, stronger specialist training, emerging technologies, digital infrastructure for large-scale learning, and strengthening the Agnipath scheme.

The vision also lays out a three-phase timeline. The period up to 2030 is described as the era of transition, focused on organisational restructuring for multi-domain operations and the creation of a policy framework. The years 2030 to 2040 form the era of consolidation, during which capability development for data-centric operations and higher levels of integration would take shape. The final period, from 2040 to 2047, is the era of excellence, when the world's armed forces emerge as a world-class military.

The vision has been articulated, and the hard part begins now. A close read-



Deependra Singh Hooda



The document argues that technology-driven battlefields require agile and contemporary doctrines to provide strategic direction.

ing shows that the paper itself is conscious of this. It acknowledges that it is a guideline, not a directive, and that many of its goals are aspirational and will require approvals at multiple levels. This caveat is the central implementation challenge. India has rarely lacked ambition in military planning. The more persistent problem has been the gap between strategic aspiration and institutional execution.

One example of that gap is the Indian Defence University (IDU). The proposal for the IDU was approved in 2010, the foundation stone laid in 2013, and the Indian National Defence University Act drafted in 2015. More than a decade later, the draft bill awaits cabinet and parliamentary approval. The real question is not whether the vision is persuasive, but whether it is executable. Four tests will determine that. The first is the jointness test. Can India move from rhetorical integration to genuine theatre-level warfighting, common planning and interoperable systems? Notably, while the document emphasises integration, it makes no direct mention of integrated theatre commands. Unless the three services honestly embrace integration, the project could trip at the first hurdle.

The second test is the technology test. How quickly can the armed forces absorb modern technologies like Artificial Intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber, and space-based systems?

This will require considerably greater investment in defence research and development, and the adoption of a more agile acquisition process.

The third test is industrial. Can Atmanirbhar deliver the capabilities required to transform the defence forces into a world-class military? While policies must support the indigenous defence industry, self-reliance cannot become a rigid slogan that delays the induction of critical capabilities that cannot be developed in the country.

The final test is doctrinal. How quickly does the military shift from a platform-centric concept to a doctrine rooted in the changing character of warfare, based on Indian conditions and real realities? The document notes that India cannot replicate existing doctrines and strategies imported from across the globe. The real measure of success will lie in the will to execute. If the Government backs these reforms with sustained political support, clear processes and adequate funding, it could reshape India's military future. Otherwise, the vision risks remaining a powerful prose on paper.

Lieutenant General (retired) Deependra Singh Hooda is the co-founder of the Council for Strategic and Defence Research and a senior fellow at the Delhi Policy Group. The views expressed are personal.

## In the West Asia crisis, a chance to build resilience

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has caused oil prices to rise to \$100 per barrel and disrupted gas supplies. The current crisis in West Asia serves as both a warning and an opportunity. We must not treat this only as a crisis management exercise. In the past, notably during Covid-19 and in the past year, we have used moments of external stress to accelerate internal transformation.

First, India must treat energy sovereignty as a core national mission. For too long, the country's macroeconomic stability has depended on geopolitics and its impact on global energy markets. Over the past decade, we have laid a strong foundation for energy sovereignty. As of November 2025, non-fossil installed capacity has reached 262.7 GW, with renewable energy capacity at 254 GW. Solar, wind, storage, transmission, offshore wind, and pumped hydro — all of which can be harnessed domestically — must now expand in a coordinated and integrated manner.

Unlike fossil fuels, where we remain import dependent, India is climatically blessed with solar, onshore wind and offshore wind as fully domestic resources. Our climate conditions are far superior to those of China, giving us a natural advantage in these renewables. Yet, in 2025, while China added 430 GW of capacity, India added just 50 GW. We should raise our 2030 target for non-fossil power from 500 GW to 1,500 GW. Only at this scale can we decisively reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

Second, India must build the industrial base for the energy transition. The National Green Hydrogen Mission is designed precisely for this purpose. India already has incentive frameworks for advanced chemistry cell battery storage — which is not self-sufficient — high-efficiency solar PV manufacturing, alongside a Clean Tech Manufacturing Mission. India must manufacture, at scale, the entire clean-tech stack: Electrolysers, advanced chemistry cells, solar modules, grid-scale batteries, motors, controllers, and high-voltage transmission equipment.

With these missions, their budgets, and structures in place, we must now ensure rapid execution. India must think beyond merely surviving oil shocks; it should aim to build the world's most competitive clean-energy system. In the interim, we must strengthen our buffer stocks. We have built strong economic buffers — reserves, a low current account deficit, moderate inflation, and ongoing fiscal consolidation. Our oil buffers are robust as well, but this crisis is a reminder that we must not be complacent. While the Essential Commodities Act (ECA) has been invoked for natural gas, buffers for natural gas must be expanded now. Current incidents underscore the need to strengthen buffers based on projected demand, not today's.

Third, India needs to stop outsourcing its aviation geography. With West Asian airspace closed, global air traffic has been severely disrupted, creating an opportunity for India to position itself as an aviation hub. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), India is now the world's third-largest air transport market, with around 174 million passengers travelling to, from, and within

India in 2024. Government data show that total air passengers in 2024 had nearly reached 37.6 crore in FY24. India must now develop genuine transfer hubs of its own.

Every successful aviation hub is anchored by strong home carriers based at world-class airports. Dubai with Emirates, Abu Dhabi with Etihad, and Singapore Airlines with Changi Airport are instructive examples. All these airlines operate wide-bodied aircraft, which our national carriers currently lack. Policy changes are, therefore, needed to make our airlines globally competitive.

Aviation hubs flourish because they host a complete ecosystem. To make India a true transfer hub, its aviation services ecosystem must also be strengthened. With new airports coming up in Jaipur and Mumbai, India should seize this moment to become Asia's preferred destination for aviation services and maintenance. A competitive group of Indian carriers, backed by modern hub airports, an seamless transfer infrastructure and a smooth, efficient, digitised visa system, can capture a much larger share of global transit traffic.

Our aspiration to become a high-income country requires globally competitive cities. We still face a significant investment gap in solid waste management, water supply, and affordable housing. Focusing on these areas, alongside investment in select areas, combined with density-linked incentives, can expand the supply of affordable housing. The Cabinet has approved the Urban Challenge Fund, with a strong emphasis on reforms and a credit repayment guarantee to instil confidence in financial markets. States must now take the lead in implementing urban governance and planning reforms. Most importantly, we must clean our cities air. Electrifying public transport, together with strict emission and construction norms, will measurably improve air quality. Parallely, we should develop five truly global cities, each specialising in an area such as finance, technology, manufacturing, trade, or arbitration.

Fifth, this is also the time to go big on tourism. We now need an innovative, digital-first version of the Incredible India marketing campaign that leverages modern platforms, compelling storytelling, and strategic partnerships to firmly establish India as one of the world's most attractive destinations. Tourism infrastructure must also be expanded. Today, complex approvals, excessive licensing, and regulatory delays make tourism investments slow and expensive. Unblocking this sector requires mission-mode deregulation, faster clearances, and strong private investment in hotels, eco-resorts, homestays, and adventure tourism.

The war in West Asia is a stark reminder that economic resilience can be tested at any time. India has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to act decisively during moments of disruption. This crisis, too, should be viewed not merely as a challenge to manage but as an opportunity to accelerate India's journey towards becoming a confident, competitive, and truly global economy.

Amitabh Kant is chairperson, *Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise*, India's largest think tank. He is also a senior advisor to NITI Aayog. The views expressed are personal.

| SANA TAKAICHI | PRIME MINISTER, JAPAN

We have not made any decisions whatsoever about dispatching escort ships. We are continuing to examine what Japan can do independently and what can be done within the legal framework

On sending Japanese escort ships to the Strait of Hormuz



## What's corroding the nation's steel frame

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) recently announced the results of the civil services examinations. This is hailed as one of the toughest tests for civil service aspirants, who often come from a wide range of disciplines — liberal arts, pure sciences, engineering, medicine, and agriculture. The numbers fiercely recommended for appointment would depend on the numbers demanded by the Union government. To year, but, on average, about 1,000 candidates, from a pool of several lakh aspirants, get the final nod.

In the 1950s, when I wrote the examination, I competed against less than 10,000 candidates. Last year, close to a million filled up forms and almost six lakh sat for the exams. I am convinced about the integrity of the test procedure. It is indeed a matter of national pride.

The story after that is heart-warming and concerning in equal measure. Recruits are put through carefully designed training programmes at different institutions. I can speak authoritatively on the National Police Academy (NPA), Hyderabad. Moving it from Mount Abu, Rajasthan, to the outskirts of Hyderabad was wise as the latter offered more space and convenient access to highly rated visiting faculty, the lifeline for modern methods of training. Centres to shape recruits for other senior services are spread over different states.

By all accounts, these centres are all well-financed and have highly talented faculty. Gone are the days when training had the lowest priority in the government's scheme of things. The growing perspective is that the current system can fulfil its primary objective of serving the community only if it imparts state-of-the-art and values-based training at the entry level. Against such a clinical process to pick our bureaucrats, it is sad that the image of the civil service has suffered during recent years.

The lack of personal financial integrity on the part of a number of senior officers and unabashed executive interference in day-to-day administration are two blots that are of serious concern. This unfortunate situation

requires constant monitoring. The abject surrender of independence by the bureaucracy to the political executive seems irreversible. This is hailed as one of the toughest tests for civil service aspirants, who often come from a wide range of disciplines — liberal arts, pure sciences, engineering, medicine, and agriculture. The numbers fiercely recommended for appointment would depend on the numbers demanded by the Union government. To year, but, on average, about 1,000 candidates, from a pool of several lakh aspirants, get the final nod.

Until a few decades ago, an officer would do only what is legal and ethical, defying the CMC. The penalty for such "disobedience" was a transfer to an inhospitable location or posting. But now, there are reports of intimidation and threats of physical harm from some parts of the country. These may be somewhat exaggerated. But there are indications that there is some truth in such charges. Such intimidation goes down the line and, with this, so do its dangerous systemic implications. I don't foresee any improvement here because the politician-civil servant nexus is becoming stronger by the day.

Corruption in high places is now discussed in various forums. Raids by probe agencies and the seizure of huge sums of cash and jewellery from the homes of senior civil servants cannot be ignored. The corruption at the level of elected representatives percolates down the line and encourages members of the civil services to line their pockets. That such graft also begins very early in the career of many new entrants to the service is a dangerous portent for the future. Can anything be done to mitigate the evil? Not really, unless the political ambience becomes at least partially clean. The judiciary is no route because court processes are painfully slow. The only hope is when public movements against corruption become bolder and stronger.

RK Raghavan, a former CBI director, is professor of criminal justice at the Jindal Global University, Haryana. The views expressed are personal.

# Up, Up Airline Capacity & Be Away

Refuel cheap in W Asia by flying there more

India's freeze on bilateral flying rights is coming under strain as airlines mount on international routes. The freeze caps the seat capacity on vital corridors like those to the Gulf, West Asia, as Indian airlines await aircraft deliveries to bulk up their fleets. Surging jet fuel prices due to the ongoing conflict in West Asia have added to the pressure on airlines, while airlines in India remain disadvantaged by high central and state taxes. Since jet fuel lies outside GST's ambit, it will take a broader political consensus for any effective reduction in levies. Additional airport capacity coming on stream offers another reason to raise airline capacity on principal routes.

These arguments are not persuasive enough. India is expected to drive the growth in international aviation over the next two decades, and it would be difficult to justify that growth occurring on overseas airlines. Indian carriers have to work around fuel cost disadvantages to compete effectively with airlines in the Gulf whose owners also own oil wells. The way out is for Indian aircraft refuelling cheap in West Asia, which requires them to fly more to the region. Protection offered by frozen capacity levels the field for Indian airlines while their orders for jets are fulfilled. New airport capacity in the country also benefits if Indian carriers move sufficiently large numbers of passengers to be able to create domestic transit hubs.

Aircraft delivery schedules are not the sole capacity constraint confronting Indian aviation. The sector needs to scale up in terms of manpower and maintenance as well. Scaling up in ancillary segments of the aviation ecosystem benefits from quantitative protection to Indian airlines through frozen bilaterals. Premature withdrawal of capped capacity could expose Indian aviation to intensive price competition from entrenched players who enjoy location and fuel cost advantages. These, however, do not add up to the power of originating traffic. A policy that has served Indian airlines well over the past decade should not be reversed prematurely.

# And the Best Female Oscar Goes to...

On Sunday night in L.A., Autumn Durald Arkrapaw 'made history' by winning the 2026 Academy Award for Best Cinematography. Paradoxically, by being the first woman to win in this 'gender-agnostic' category, she quietly punctured the notion that achievement needs to be parsed by gender. Arkrapaw competed not as 'best woman cinematographer', but as best — full stop. This kind of 'un-prefixing' should percolate across other accolades, whether it be 'Best Writer', 'Best Businessperson' or 'Employee of the Month'.

Gender-specific awards, however well-intentioned, risk reinforcing the very divisions they seek to dismantle. They imply that women require a parallel track where excellence is measured differently. Arkrapaw's triumph demonstrates the opposite: that women can — and do — excel in arenas where competition is universal. In finance, Jane Fraser's ascent to Citigroup CEO was not marked by a 'best female banker' tag. In science, Jennifer Doudna's 2020 Nobel Prize in chemistry was not diluted by gender qualifiers. It was 'simply' a Nobel.

Even as a separate 'female' category can be seen as well-meant encouragement for women, the danger of separate awards is that they risk becoming consolation prizes, affirmations of effort rather than acknowledgments of supremacy. By contrast, Arkrapaw's Oscar is a signal to Hollywood — and beyond — that the highest standards of craft are not gendered. The lens she wielded in Ryan Coogler's superb supernatural politico-thriller, *Sinners*, captured more than images; it reframed the narrative of segregation — in this case, along a racial line — itself. True equality is not achieved by creating parallel podiums but by ensuring competition is shared. This holds true as much for language, nation, race... as it does for gender.

# JUST IN JEST

If you love lava, look no farther than 35 light yrs away in that direction

# A Mushy, Romantic Getaway: L98-59d

The next time people — including us — moan about a dry day, just tell them, 'L98-59d'. That's the planet, 1.6x Earth's size and 35 light yrs away that astronomers have identified to be in a 'molten, mushy state', with not a dry state in sight but overrun by red, hot lava. For centuries, astronomers have catalogued worlds of gas, rock and ice. Now we have made of cosmic porridge. Surface temperatures reaching a blazing 1,900° C, it's worse than what your summer's going to be this year.

Earth has oceans, Mars has dust, Jupiter has storms. What does L98-59d have? Texture. Imagine the interstellar tourism brochures: 'Come paddle in our planetary soup. Warning: Ours not provided.' Trump will soon enough want to own L98-59d for the US to brag mining rights to the known universe's first galactic risotto. Economists will speculate on the mush futures market. Diplomats will convene summits to decide whether mush counts as solid, liquid or simply embarrassing. And, yet, beneath it all — apart from a molten core, that is — lies a truth: science keeps reminding us that the universe is stranger than our categories. If planets can refuse to fit our definitions of solid, liquid or gas, maybe politics, economics and human life in a messy, too-universe could well be the creation of a cook in a canteen kitchen, who's unpredictable, and prone to boiling over.

Debate over land, holding back industrialisation, remains an unsolved development puzzle

# The Unmoved Bengali Files



Subhamoy Maitra

West Bengal goes to the polls next month. Employment remains one of the state's most persistent economic challenges.

For decades, it has struggled to generate sufficient industrial jobs for its large and educated workforce. Part of the problem lies in long historical processes: policy decisions, such as the freight equalisation regime, weakened eastern India's industrial advantage, while both central governments and successive state administrations failed to build a durable industrial structure. Political leadership across different eras has often preferred rhetoric over difficult structural reform. In recent years, repeated controversies over recruitment exams and allegations of corruption in public hiring have further deepened uncertainty around government employment.

Yet, West Bengal's post-independence political economy can be understood without acknowledging its major success: land reform. The Left Front government's redistribution policies strengthened rural security and empowered millions of small cultivators. That transformation altered agrarian relations in the state, and remains one of the most significant social changes in modern Bengal. At the same time, however, the state's industrial base steadily weakened.

By the early 2000s, the Left Front leadership attempted to reverse this trend. Under chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the government argued that agricultural progress should lead to industrial expansion. But the strategy collided with the land movements



Ma, politics, manush

of Singur and Nandigram. Protests over land acquisition transformed property rights into a powerful political issue, and contributed to the rise of TMC under Mamata Banerjee in 2011. Nearly two decades later, legacy of those movements still shapes industrial policy in West Bengal.

Part of the difficulty lies in the legal structure of land ownership. In Indian law, ownership is rarely absolute. Citizens function closer to riyats — holders of recorded rights — while the state retains ultimate authority over land.

Once expropriation becomes possible, disputes over industrial use of land often emerge. Consider the Deocha-Pachami mining project in Birbhum district. Spread across more than 3,000 acres, the site is believed to contain one of India's largest coal deposits.

Projects of this scale highlight the distinction between surface ownership and sub-surface mineral rights. Even when individuals hold land titles, the coal beneath remains a state resource. Government assessments indicate that much of the land consists of rocky terrain or state-owned land, rather than fertile agricultural fields, unlike Sing-



ur's productive farmland.

The state government has asserted that no land will be forcibly acquired, and that affected families will receive compensation and rehabilitation packages. Yet, even a small number of unwilling landholders can stall such projects. Sections of the local tribal population have expressed concerns about land loss and forest access, arguing that procedures under Forest Rights Act have not been fully implemented.

Reports of clashes between villagers and police have surfaced intermittently. Even without major opposition mobilisation, the project illustrates how land disputes can impede industrial initiatives.

Another example, in a slightly different context, lies near Kolkata. The closed Hindustan Motors factory in Uttarpara occupies more than 300 acres in a rapidly urbanising corridor. The state government moved to reclaim unused land and re-purpose it for new industrial activity, arguing that idle industrial land should be redeployed to generate employment.

Hindustan Motors challenged the move in court, raising questions about transparency and workers' claims. Ultimately, both Calcutta High Court, and later Supreme Court, upheld the state government's position. Yet, despite the favourable judgment, substantial new industrial activity has yet to emerge on the site.

The political symbolism of land re-surfaced earlier this year in Singur. On January 18, 2026, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Hooghly district town to inaugurate development pro-

jects. On January 28, chief minister Banerjee addressed a public meeting at the same location. Events revolved around speculation that Singur might finally see an industrial initiative. Yet, neither platform has produced a concrete roadmap.

In contrast, urbanisation has historically faced less resistance in West Bengal. Planned townships such as Kalyani, Ashoknagar and Bidhannagar developed with minimal protest. Rajarhat's emergence as a major urban district has triggered protests comparable to Singur. Industrial land acquisition, however, remains politically sensitive.

Today, before next month's assembly election, political priorities appear different. Welfare programmes dominate the state government's electoral strategy, while the opposition BJP emphasises identity and national political narratives. At the same time, aspects of political patronage networks and localised lumpenisation have often complicated the growth of small enterprises and MSMEs, sectors that depend on government subsidies and stable business conditions.

In this context, the employment challenge becomes even more troubling.

Spread of political patronage networks and localised lumpenisation have often complicated growth of small enterprises and MSMEs.

Without significant industrial investment, the state's ability to generate durable jobs remains limited. The global environment also offers little comfort. With wars and geopolitical tensions disrupting trade, supply chains and economic activity, economic uncertainty may deepen rather than ease.

For West Bengal, where deep industrialisation already appears elusive, such instability could make the search for sustainable employment even harder. The debate over land — from Singur to Deocha-Pachami — therefore, remains unresolved, not merely as political symbolism, but as a barrier to development puzzle still awaiting a solution.

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# New Club Med for New Markets



Antonio Tajani

The conflict in West Asia has ushered in a period of significant international instability. Alongside the tragedy of war, profound effects on global economic balances are also emerging. Tensions affecting the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz highlight the vulnerability of some of the world's main arteries of international trade. The ongoing crisis is already exerting strong inflationary pressure on gas, oil and other strategic goods such as fertilisers, with knock-on effects on global food prices. When these critical hubs are exposed to geopolitical tensions, urgency of strengthening security and diversification of trade routes becomes clear.

Europe has faced a similar challenge. Russia's aggression against Ukraine necessitated a rapid diversification of energy supply sources. Within a few months, we re-evaluated infrastructure, supply chains and partnerships to ensure security and continuity for our economic systems. Today, the crisis in West Asia calls for a comparable reflection regarding trade routes. In this context, India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) takes on particular importance.

This is not merely a line on a map, but a potential reorganisation of logistical networks and industrial value chains connecting India, the Middle East and Europe, capable of reshaping trade flows and reinforcing the Mediterranean's role as a strategic hub linking Asia and Europe, with potential benefits for Italy estimated up to €26 bn (€2.6 bn).

When global trade routes change, economic geographies change as well. New commercial corridors create new logistical and productive hinterlands: territories that attract investment, host distribution centres and develop industrial activities connected to international value chains. If one of the main European gateways for these routes is the Mediterranean — in particular, the Northern Adriatic — its natural reach cannot be limited to Western European markets alone. It will inevitably extend to Central Europe and the Western Balkans, which serve as the geographical and infrastructural bridge between the Mediterranean and heart of the continent.



Trieste, with destiny

Owing to their geographical position, proximity to European markets and progressive alignment with EU standards, the Western Balkans can become a natural part of this new logistics architecture — not merely a transit area but a genuine economic hinterland for routes connecting Asia and Europe, capable of attracting investment and strengthening regional value chains.

Within this scenario, the Mediterranean once again assumes strategic centrality. In light to its geographical position, serves as a logistical platform connecting Europe, Asia and Africa. Its port system represents one of Europe's major strategic infrastructure.

The writer is deputy PM foreign minister, Italy

economic and industrial corridors. Within this system, the Northern Adriatic occupies a privileged position in connecting the Mediterranean with Central Europe. Trieste, by virtue of its history, location and infrastructure, is one of the main natural hubs within this network. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Trieste is hosting two important events dedicated to regional cooperation and emerging economic routes today: celebrations marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Central European Initiative (CEI), and a forum on IMEC.

These occasions offer a unique opportunity to discuss the future of connectivity between the Mediterranean, Balkans and Central Europe, with the participation of ministers from Balkan countries, senior representatives of states involved in IMEC, and business leaders, highlighting the strategic role of this region in developing new logistics and industrial value chains between Asia and Europe.

Strengthening the links between the Mediterranean, Europe and the Balkans represents a strategic priority of our continent. In this new geography of global trade routes, Italy can play a leading role.

The writer is deputy PM foreign minister, Italy

# Big for Gold Infra in CB Backward



Poonam K Sidhu

parency and consistency in valuation. Another reason the shift makes sense lies in divergence between international and domestic gold prices. Indian gold prices don't mirror LBMA prices converted into rupees. They incorporate import duties, taxes, logistics costs, exchange rate movements and local demand conditions. RBI statistics indicate that the difference between Mumbai gold prices and London reference price (after currency conversion) has averaged several thousand rupees per 10g in recent years.

The spread has widened, as import duties and local premiums have notated with policy changes and seasonal demand. When the domestic market systematically trades away from the global benchmark, a valuation method built on LBMA-plus adjustments becomes increasingly approximate. A domestic reference price is, therefore, more accurate for Indian investors.

The move carries a broader institutional signal. India is the world's second-largest consumer of gold, accounting for roughly one-fifth of global demand. Yet, play the glitter

it has had limited influence over how gold prices are formed. Global benchmarks remain concentrated in Western financial centres — primarily London's over-the-counter bullion market, and New York's COMEX futures market. Asia dominates physical demand, but the financial infrastructure of price discovery largely sits outside the region.

China has attempted to shift this balance by developing Shanghai Gold Exchange, and introducing Shanghai Gold Benchmarks in 2016. India has taken smaller steps, including launching India International Bullion Exchange (IIBX) in GIFT City India's shift away from IIBM's limited valuation is a modest step toward acknowledging that the price of gold in India may increasingly be determined in India itself.

Indian households are estimated to hold 15,000-20,000 of gold one of the largest private stocks in the world. At current prices, this is worth well over \$1.5 tn. At the same time, India imports 700-800 kg of gold annually, creating recurring pressure on CAD.

Successful governments have tried to shift gold demand from physical metal into financial instruments. Sovereign gold bonds (SGBs) launched in 2015 allowed investors to gain exposure to gold prices while earning small interest. Gold ETFs and gold MFs were intended to offer similar exposure.

Gold monetisation schemes have at-

tempted, with limited success, to mobilise idle household gold deposits into the banking system. Progress has been minimal, and financial gold products remain a tiny fraction of total gold holdings.

Regulators, however, continue to build the infrastructure needed if these markets expand in the future. The shift toward domestic price benchmarks can be seen as part of that infrastructure-building process. If gold ETFs and financial gold products remain a tiny fraction of total gold holdings, more marked use for valuation will become increasingly important.

One possibility is that such regulatory steps are laying the groundwork for a larger policy shift. A large share of Indian households' gold holdings remains outside the formal financial system. Some countries have experimented with ways to channel these stocks into the financial net. Italy has explored tax-based disclosure of undeclared gold holdings, while Turkey has encouraged households to deposit jewellery with banks under a gold-banking programme.

Whether India attempts a similar mobilisation effort remains uncertain. But as policy options emerge, financial architecture now being built around domestic pricing, bullion exchanges and gold funds may prove to be an important precursor. Even small policy reforms could be laying the groundwork for integrating India's vast private gold stock into the formal economy.

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# Father's Property

CHETAN SALVA

An old web series depicts a story in which an engineer builds an app to create music. He creates music by mixing and matching tunes already available on the internet. When the musicians sue the app's creator for copyright infringement, the engineer gets the musicians to admit that even their music was created using classical ragas, which have existed for centuries. The ethical question that this story focused on — who is the real owner of intellectual property?

In 41 of Gita, Krishna declares that he gave the knowledge of yoga, sciences, to the sun, who then passed it to Ikshvaku King, who passed it through to humans. In a sense, everything that we know, everything that we have learnt, or created or inherited is passed on to us by the universe.

There is no such thing as invention. It is just a discovery of possibly things already existing in the universe. Those people who do these discoveries have been fortunately put in the right place, at the right time, with the right skills and resources, which enabled them to make those discoveries.

We are entering a tumultuous phase in our evolution, where the machines and AI that we create will be instrumental in eliminating the utility of the very same people who created them. This will lead to the rapid erosion of human capabilities in fine arts such as music, art and architecture. It may lead to the dematerialisation of intellectual property, making it universally available and accessible to everyone, in just the way its distribution was intended.



# There Is No Antimemetic Division

quinn

'Do anything nice over Christmas? This time the assistant doesn't answer at all. She just stops typing, dead in the middle of a word, and stares at Quinn. 'You... you... Did I ask you that already?'

'Twice,' the woman says. 'Expectation and puzzlement.' 'We already had that whole conversation. And we also already had the conversation where I told you you already asked me that, and you apologised.' 'I'm so sorry,' Quinn says. 'Yeah, that.'

'You think I have memory issues,' Quinn says. 'You think I've got no long-term memory and if I stay in one place for too long I forget why I'm there?'

'The assistant has turned back to her computer. 'This is the Clevel. Meetings at this level takes as long as they need to take, and you know Mr Mahlo will see you when he's ready.' She says this many times a day.

# Chat Room

# Cushion to Make It A Comfy Ride

Across the Edil, 'Stabilisation Fund Can Bea Shock Absorber' (Mar 16), the ELIakh cr/fund proposal has come at the right time. Beyond the functional role as a shock absorber, this fund can be a more role model for financial institutions and other organisations prone to internal and external vulnerabilities. Institutions like RBI have built up reserves to absorb unexpected shocks. But the government's own economic stabilisation fund is a shock absorber that is not welcomed and encouraged in the interest of public confidence, too. A related issue that deserves attention is a system of mapping domestic investment flows for firms and accounting them irrespective of their ownership and providing guidance for their productive deployment.

At a writer, Mumbai

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OUR VIEW



# Energy security calls for robust central planning

The government has taken measures to overcome India's gas shortage even as the need to plug gaps in long-range energy planning glares at us. The role of the state would need to heighten

The nationwide shortage of cooking gas over the past week should abate soon, given that import supplies are on their way to Indian shores even as domestic refiners have been asked to bump up production. The crippling shortage of this item of mass consumption that has proven to be the Achilles heel of our energy security calculus partly owes its origin to well-intentioned policy efforts to shift households from kerosene to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), a cleaner fuel. While only half of India's population had access to LPG in 2010, its coverage is nearly complete today. Our import dependency in meeting this demand, which now stands at around 60%, has risen not just because Indian production has not kept up, but also on account of an inherent technical limitation. While a refinery can convert up to about 14% of its input crude into kerosene, its LPG output typically does not exceed 4%. In one instance during the first decade of this century, the government nudged a private refiner to forsake churning out export-oriented aviation turbine fuel (or jet kerosene) for the supply of less remunerative regular kerosene in the Indian market to avert disruptions and price shocks. While this policy approach has been in vogue, we face the larger issue of widening supply gaps left by commercial and strategic interests. How we address them matters in the context of global energy volatility.

Over the past decade, India's strategic initiatives for energy security have largely focused on raw-material sufficiency. The government created special storage facilities to hold reserves of crude oil, though not petroleum products. After the disruption caused by the

Iran war's outbreak, it asked refiners to maximize LPG output. This ramp-up, however, will not suffice to plug India's shortfall. Nor do refiners have an incentive to step up special capacity just for emergency supplies. No doubt, diversifying procurement away from Gulf suppliers is a good idea even if it proves to be more expensive. This is being done, but needs to be strengthened through long-term agreements with institutional oversight of such supplies. Indeed, the whole process needs to be guided by a robust policy framework designed to manage our energy transition. A key aim is to depend less on imports, for which renewables and local sourcing must both expand faster. Optimizing this is a complex exercise that straddles central and state departments in pursuit of targets. Gas usage efficiency, meanwhile, requires us to hasten the rollout of pipelines across the country. In the wake of the current crisis, the Centre has prioritized the supply of piped gas to household consumers. However, this network does not have enough connections at this point to curtail the rush for LPG cylinders. Getting it right requires an optimal national design.

The current crisis also highlights how we must invigorate oil and gas exploration efforts within the country. After all, oil accounts for 25-30% of our primary energy mix and almost 90% of it is imported; natural gas makes up around 6.5% of that mix, with about half our requirement met through imports. The recent turn of events in West Asia heralds an era of geo-economics in which the role of the state is ascendant. This is amply clear when it comes to energy in general and hydrocarbons in particular. The key to this sector's governance lies in better planning.

ATANU BISWAS



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According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, one of the reasons "the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran have unfolded at unprecedented speed and precision" is "a cutting-edge weapon never before deployed on this scale: artificial intelligence." Yes, the growing use of AI in modern warfare has coincided with its approved use in modern life. Although the international community started noticing AI and its influence on modern warfare back in 2012, the ongoing Iran war is being referred to as the 'first AI war' by many, primarily because it is rewriting the rules of modern warfare and showcasing the benefits and drawbacks of AI in war. AI is being employed to accelerate decision-making, alter the 'military economics' and create new targets such as data centres. It also raises serious ethical questions. The Iran war is ushering in an era of AI-powered bombing that will be quicker than the speed of thought.

The future of AI in warfare has been studied for some time. Although talk of military

AI can conjure images of killer robots, the reality is that its biggest uses now are often off the battlefield, in time-consuming and labour-intensive fields like intelligence, mission planning and logistics, at speeds previously unimaginable. Large language model (LLM)-based AI is employed by the US military—it uses AI for image processing and tactical purposes.

US defence secretary Pete Hegseth has urged fast adoption of AI to create "an AI-first warfighting force." To support military operations in Iran and Venezuela, the US military reportedly used Palantir's Maven system in conjunction with Anthropic's Claude AI tool for real-time targeting and target prioritization. Real-time satellite images, often analysed by AI, played a significant role in directing military operations during the Russia-Ukraine war. In fact, AI in warfare is also being tested in Ukraine.

Interestingly, in his 2024 paper in the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Kristian Humble opines that the use of nuclear weapons is being replaced by the use of automated weapon systems. However, the international community has been "struggling to adapt to and regulate the use of automated weapons, which are rapidly changing the landscape of modern warfare."

THEIR VIEW

# Why the controversy over AI in warfare won't die down

According to another 2024 paper published in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* by Toni Erskine and Steven E. Miller, four such complications include: *One*, the displacement of human judgement in AI-driven resort-to-force decisions and possible implications for deterrence theory, and the unintended escalation of conflict; *two*, possible implications of automation bias; *three*, algorithmic opacity and its implications for democratic and international legitimacy; and, *four*, the likelihood that AI-enabled systems would exacerbate organizational decision-making pathologies.

The US government had threatened to delist Anthropic from its systems prior to its strikes on Iran, as the company did not allow its AI to be used for fully autonomous weapons or surveillance of US citizens.

OpenAI's competitor, quickly struck an agreement with the Pentagon. Nevertheless, the US military is still said to be using Anthropic's AI model to power its barrage of

strikes against Iran as it 'shortens the kill chain,' a term used to describe the process from target identification to legal approval and strike execution.

Clearly, the time required to plan complex strikes is being reduced by AI. This is called 'decision compression.' It is, however, feared that humans in the military and legal fields may simply ratify the automated strike plans of AI technology in the future. According to Craig Jones of Newcastle University, UK, who specializes in the study of military targeting, "the current failure to regulate AI warfare, or to pause its usage until there is some agreement on lawful usage, seems to suggest potential proliferation of AI warfare is imminent."

Naturally, the ethics of employing AI in warfare are being scrutinized. However, news of the use of AI to prioritize targets is not new. OpenAI modified its rules in January 2024, eliminating a prohibition on the use of its technology in 'military and warfare.' Google dropped its commitment to

stop the use of its AI from being used for warfare and surveillance. Even Dario Amodei, CEO of Anthropic, has previously argued that the US should use AI technology to gain a military advantage over autocracies.

However, building military AI is tough partly because much of the available data for training is out of date or unclear. And, according to Craig Jones, "there is no evidence that AI lowers civilian deaths or wrongful targeting decisions, and it may be the opposite." An article on 6 March in *Nature* noted that "rapid technological development is prompting urgent discussions on regulating the use and procurement of artificial intelligence for military use."

Overall, the possibility that AI could be used to control lethal autonomous weapons without any human intervention is an extremely debatable topic. The ethical requirement is that such weapons must be capable of distinguishing between military and civilian targets in accordance with current humanitarian regulations. "Stop the use of AI in war until laws can be agreed" was the title of an editorial published in *Nature* on 10 March.

Concerns linger over the use of AI in warfare harming humanity severely, as with worries about AI deployment in other fields.

# Let lived experiences guide our policy responses to heat waves

How people's lives are actually affected by rising temperatures should shape policies aimed at relief



ISHANA DESHPANDE & NAISHA KHANNA are, respectively, associate and analyst, Artha Global.

across a city, climate risk is experienced very differently across households; exposure is shaped by micro-climate conditions and urban form (density, building materials, tree cover and access to open spaces), while coping capacity and outcomes are determined by socioeconomic characteristics and access to adaptation measures such as cooling appliances and technologies.

Neighbourhood-level patterns show how urban design shapes everyday heat exposure. Areas where built-up land rises from around 25% to 55% can experience temperature increases of roughly 0.6°C Celsius. By contrast, raising tree cover from just 3% to 11% can lower temperatures by nearly 1°C Celsius, suggesting that even relatively small gains in urban greenery can significantly cool local environments.

But heat, as we know, is not only a physical phenomenon—it is experienced through how people interpret risk in their daily lives. Existing datasets can map exposure, but they cannot explain how households cope, adapt or make trade-offs.

Insights from other behavioural research show that climate impacts are weighed against income, mobility, safety and social obligations; and when heat is understood as a threat to earnings rather than only to health, responses shift dramatically.

This helps explain why many adaptation efforts struggle to take root. The barrier is rarely lack of awareness; it is the pull of everyday habits, financial constraints and slow institutional response. Citizen-centred surveys are, therefore, essential to capture not only where heat is experienced, but how people actually respond to it.

Artha Global's study conducted primary household surveys to document the direct health impacts of heat and the coping strategies people adopt. Its findings show that extreme heat acts as a structural stressor: a 3°C Celsius rise in experienced temperature (from 42° to 45° Celsius) corresponds with a 15%

increase in the number of respondents reporting instances of illness lasting over five days. Additionally, the temperature increase also corresponded to a 10% jump in households missing work (from 18% to 28%).

Coping capacity, however, is deeply unequal. The study demonstrated that households with air-conditioners reported significantly lower work loss than those without. Wealthier households already ran air-conditioners for around 12-14 hours a day (during the peak summer months), while lower asset households lacked both—access to cooling and the financial ability to increase electricity use.

This inequality is reflected in energy spending: wealthier households spend nearly twice as much on electricity, not only because they can own more appliances, but because they can afford to use it more intensively to protect themselves from heat.

These findings lead to a simple conclusion: heat policy must be built around lived realities and not just temperature data. Institutionalizing citizen experience means creating routine systems to collect and use neighbourhood-level data on health effects and coping alongside technical climate metrics. This evidence can guide heat action plans (HAPs), shape early warning thresholds and direct investments in cooling, green cover and energy support to the communities that need them the most.

Agencies such as the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), National Research Development Corporation (NRDC) and BSES Yamuna Power (as well as other power distribution companies) have an opportunity to operationalize this shift by embedding citizen data into disaster preparedness, adaptation programmes and grid planning.

Making lived experience a part of official climate evidence shifts policy from reacting to heat to responding to how people actually live with it.



**JUST A THOUGHT**

There is no glory in using artificial intelligence for military war. The glory of AI lies in using it to remove the sufferings of humanity.

**AMIT RAY**



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Should economic policymakers put consumers or workers first?

*It needn't be a binary choice if we adopt productivist policies that give workers both a voice and tech-based performance tools*



**DANI RODRIK** is a professor of international political economy at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of 'Shared Prosperity in a Fractured World: A New Economics for the Middle Class, the Global Poor, and Our Climate.'

What is an economy for? Since Adam Smith, economists have given a straightforward answer to this question: the economy increases our consumption possibilities. A well-functioning economy is one that offers a widening array of ever-more affordable goods and services, from food and consumer items to housing and transportation. A poorly-functioning economy is one of scarcity, where the goods and services consumers seek are either unavailable or too expensive.

This consumer-based view has traditionally been closely associated with academic economists and technocrats. But today, it pervades current thinking in progressive circles.

In the US, the Democratic Party's opposition to President Donald Trump has coalesced around the theme of 'affordability,' a clearly consumerist perspective. Similarly, the 'abundance' agenda popularized by journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson prioritizes expanding the availability of goods and services, albeit across a broader spectrum than consumer goods, one that includes housing, transportation and renewable energy.

But there is an alternative perspective on the economy that emphasizes a different side of human nature and human needs. People are both consumers and producers. We derive meaning, social recognition and life satisfaction as much from the work that we do as from the goods and services we consume—if not more so. Our jobs provide us with community, dignity and identity.

That is why job loss is associated with declines in individual well-being that are multiples of the income drop generated by unemployment. It is also why so much of our current social and political polarization, and the associated rise in authoritarian populism, can be traced to the scarring of labour markets in left-behind regions caused by de-industrialization, austerity and globalization.

When decent jobs disappear permanently, the consequences extend significantly beyond the immediate losses in income and consumption.

These views of the economy—consumption versus jobs—imply very different policy frameworks and remedies. Consider long-term care, a large and growing industry that in the US today employs several times as many workers as the automotive industry. Much discussion about this sector is framed in terms of the challenge of a shortage of workers. That is a consumerist perspective: policy analysis focuses on the availability of cheap care services to seniors.

The jobs-focused perspective states the challenge differently: as one of creating good work in long-term care services. The prospect of better jobs would attract more workers to the sector and increase supply alongside job quality.



Or turn to the renewables industry, such as solar panels and wind turbines. The cheapest way to expand deployment of renewables and accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels is to rely on imports from China, the world leader in the sector. A jobs-oriented perspective, by contrast, would advocate a more balanced approach that seeks opportunities to generate domestic employment as well. Spain pursues this strategy and leads Europe in both utility-scale domestic production of renewable power and energy price reduction.

Finally, consider housing. Productivity in home construction has stagnated in recent years in the US, in part because of safety regulations and union rules. A consumerist perspective, as in the abundance agenda, would focus on reducing red tape.

Yet many of the regulations that slow down construction also reduce workplace injuries. Fatalities and non-fatal injuries in construction have fallen dramatically in the US since the 1970s, thanks to workplace-safety rules. How do we trade off the improvement in worker well-being these rules have enabled against the loss in home availability to the population at large? A good-jobs focus should make us more sympathetic to rules and regulations that sacrifice some efficiency if the outcome is better, safer and less precarious work.

To improve living standards and personal dignity, policymakers must adopt both perspectives. The two approaches often offer conflicting remedies, but an economic strategy that promotes worker-friendly productivity enhancements can kill two birds with one stone. In principle, organizational and technological innovations that

increase productivity both improve working conditions and enhance the availability of goods and services. But in too many cases, workers reap only a small share of the benefits. Digital platforms and automated warehouses have increased labour productivity significantly, but the bulk of the benefits have gone to companies such as Uber and Amazon.

As a new paper by Massachusetts Institute of Technology economists Daron Acemoglu, David Autor and Simon Johnson argues, companies often face distorted incentives when they decide which technologies to adopt and deploy. They might, for example, prefer hierarchical, efficiency-focused systems that maintain tight control over workers and intensify the division of labour. But artificial intelligence (AI) and other new technologies can also be used to enhance workers' autonomy, give them more responsibilities and allow them to perform a wider range of more sophisticated tasks. In long-term care, for instance, decentralized team-based service provision can enhance job quality while increasing productivity through reduced turn-over and hospital expenses.

Policymakers need not make a stark choice between an economy that serves consumers and one that serves workers. Productivist policies that enhance the voice of worker but also empower them through organizational and technological innovations can achieve progress on both fronts. But such policies do require a different mindset, one that balances the consumerist perspective with adequate attention to the importance of good jobs.

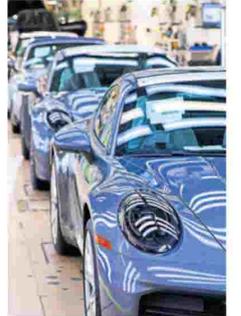
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# Porsche's strategy is holding it back: Exclusivity is its strength

*Broadening its customer base risks denting its still high valuation*



**CHRIS BRYANT** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies in Europe.



Porsche would benefit from taking a page out of Ferrari's book. ©BLOOMBERG

In normal times, being Porsche's boss would rank as one of the world's most desirable jobs. But I do not envy new Chief Executive Officer Michael Leiters one bit.

Barely two months after taking the helm, he made a decent fist on Wednesday of outlining what ails the German sports-car manufacturer and providing the first hints of how he plans to put things right. He's committed to restoring the company's "former glory" and insists Porsche "represents a compelling recovery story."

But investors hoping his arrival marks an immediate start of better times for the storied brand could be disappointed. Not only will reviving Porsche take a long time, it could also cost more than shareholders were hoping.

As a former CEO of McLaren, and chief technology officer at Ferrari, Leiters was a fine choice to succeed Oliver Blume, who will now focus exclusively on running Volkswagen rather than trying unsuccessfully to manage both companies.

But Leiters has a lot on his plate. Porsche unarguably is an iconic brand with a first-class heritage, but its recent strategy seems like a tale of misjudgement and hubris. Its approach of "modern luxury with scale benefits" turned out to be far inferior to Ferrari's more exclusive model of selling comparatively few cars at higher prices.

The claim on the corporate website to be operating in a "structural growth environment" feels like wishful thinking. Porsche's vehicle sales fell 10% last year, though that's due partly to gaps in its model lineup. It won't exceed the €10 billion (\$16 billion) of revenue generated in 2024 until new products like the petrol version of its Macan SUV arrive in 2028, according to estimates compiled by *Bloomberg*. A 1% operating margin in 2025 is derisory and the roughly 6.5% return on sales promised for this year is hardly thrilling.

Meanwhile, the carmaker's laudable electrification efforts go ahead of what its customers wanted, as well as the US's shifting fuel economy and emission regulations. The Chinese market, which for years provided Porsche with buckets of cash, has delivered a lesson in humility. Porsche's electric vehicle offerings are too expensive for ultra-competitive China and efforts to downsize the dealer network there continue.

Leiters concedes that reviving Porsche will "take time" and that the cost structure has become "bloated."

Fortunately, it can still rely on wealthy US customers. But the 15% tariff on

imported vehicles imposed by the White House, plus the stronger euro, have upset its profit calculations.

The company might have to consider what was unthinkable for a proudly German brand: building an American factory. There's no decision on that yet and Leiters gave the impression that it is not likely to happen quickly and would be a "huge investment."

After booking more than €3 billion of extraordinary charges last year, in part for retooling its electric vehicle strategy, management is forecasting another high three-digit million euros of exceptional costs this year. Unfortunately, Porsche can't shy the financial burdens needed to reposition itself will end there.

I've argued before that a much smaller Porsche could be a more valuable one. But Jefferies analyst Philippe Houchois reckons it "may have gone too far down the road of brand extension and dilution to reverse course."

Leiters says that he will prioritize high sticker prices over selling more cars. His strategy, however, combines both "luxury" and "premium"—or "exclusivity combined with approachability."

I worry that chasing this broader customer base could put Porsche's still elevated market valuation at risk.

The shares trade at 17 times this year's estimated earnings. That's well below Ferrari's opulent 30 times or so, but much higher than premium automakers BMW and Mercedes-Benz, which are on 8 and 9 times respectively.

Porsche needs to show it has more in common with the Italian prancing horse than its German peers. While Porsche's average selling prices remain far superior to Mercedes and BMW, it can do more to elevate the brand. Encouragingly, it's considering new models or derivatives positioned above the two-door cash cow, the Porsche 911.

Leiters declined to say whether this means he will back a hypercar like the company's electric Mission X concept or the beloved hybrid 918 Spyder that was launched more than a decade ago. Doing so would signal he hasn't given up on chasing Ferrari.

But like the rest of Porsche's revival, it will not be cheap. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

# The 'lethal trifecta' of AI agents must prompt solutions

SIDDHARTH PAI



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

China's move against OpenClaw came before the rest of the world had even settled on a vocabulary for what worried it. This early restriction matters because it frames the issue correctly. OpenClaw is not merely another chatbot. It is an open-source agent framework designed to connect language models to real tools such as messaging apps, email, calendars, browsers and local files, so that the system can act with limited human supervision. Chinese authorities did not impose a blanket prohibition on all use, but reports indicate that state-linked institutions have been told not to install on work devices and personal gizmos (in some cases) because of security concerns. This is less a technical ban than a sober warning that agentic software changes the security model of ordinary computing.

The most useful term in this debate is the 'lethal trifecta', popularized by Simon Willison. The three parts are precise. *First*, the agent has access to private or sensitive data. *Second*, it is exposed to untrusted content

such as text, images or other material that an attacker can influence, whether through a webpage, email, document or bug report.

*Third*, it can communicate externally; for example, by sending a message, calling an API or writing outside its trust boundary. The phrase 'lethal trifecta' doesn't mean the software is evil, but that the architecture is dangerous. Private data supplies the prize, untrusted content supplies the attack path and external communication the escape route. If these features co-exist in one agent, prompt injection can turn a helpful assistant into an unwitting exfiltration channel.

This matters enormously when people use AI to build software, because modern development workflows almost beg developers to assemble the trifecta. A coding agent may need access to source code, internal documentation, test results and customer data. It may also need to read issue trackers, support tickets, websites and uploaded files, which may contain attacker-controlled text. Finally, it may be granted permission to open pull requests, send emails, post messages on a team platform, update a database or query outside services. Each step seems reasonable in isolation but could together create a system that may be manipulated through language rather than

a traditional software exploit. The core weakness is that large language models do not reliably separate instruction from data. A malicious sentence hidden in an innocuous document can be interpreted not as content to follow, but a command to obey. That is a new problem because the attack surface now includes meaning, not just code.

OpenClaw became the emblem of these risks because real-world incidents made the abstraction vivid. After software engineer Chris Boyd gave the system access to iMessage, it reportedly sent more than 500 unsolicited messages, including to random contacts. In a separate case, an OpenClaw agent handling email reportedly deleted or archived messages after losing track of an instruction to wait for approval. These episodes do not prove that the software became sentient or rebellious. They show something more ordinary and more important. Once an agent is connected to live systems, small failures in memory, context management or tool use

can produce outsized consequences. The danger is not complete autonomy. It is brittle autonomy. An agent that misreads a prompt, compresses context badly or follows injected text can create spam, lose data or make unauthorised disclosures at digital speed, which is why security teams worry when experimental tools are wired into systems.

Peter Steinberger, OpenClaw's creator, has not answered the criticism by claiming the risks are imaginary, though he has said that the security story is still a work-in-progress and has framed OpenClaw as an exploratory system that lets people discover what agents can and cannot do. This defence is reasonable. Experimental software is often messy and open-source projects do improve through public testing. But the creator's justification also reveals the central tension of the moment. Builders want to discover agent behaviour by giving models richer access to the digital world. Security engineers want to limit that access until key threats are under-

stood. Both instincts are rational, but the market rewards capability before control, while the lethal trifecta punishes exactly that sequence.

The debate over OpenClaw is, therefore, not about one tool, one founder or one country. It is about a transition from assistants that wait to agents that act. With the latter, a model can produce a bad answer and embarrass a company. An agent can read private material, ingest hostile text and transmit the result outward before anyone notices. That is why the Chinese restriction has stirred a worthy debate. It recognizes that Agentic AI is not simply better automation. It is software endowed with permissions, memory and initiative, meaning ordinary design choices may have geopolitical, corporate and personal consequences.

We need architectural discipline. Keep sensitive data away from agents that read untrusted content. Require explicit approval for outward communication. Split workflows so no single model holds all the keys. Success with AI is not about using the most impressive agents, but understanding that capability without containment is not innovation. It is deferred incident response. And deferred incidents in technology are usually the most expensive.

**Architectural safeguards are needed to prevent AI agents from causing chaos for businesses**



### Editor's TAKE

## The battle for the States: All eyes on Bengal

With high political stakes, the elections in four states will test both political strength and the resilience of democracy, with Bengal under the scanner

The election season has just begun. Polls will be held in the month of April in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the Union Territory of Puducherry. These elections will be crucial as three out of the four states are ruled by non-BJP parties, while the BJP rules Assam and Puducherry in a coalition arrangement.

Unlike last time, when the elections were spread across several phases, barring West Bengal, which will go to the polls in two phases, all other states will vote on a single day. While most states will vote in a single phase, Bengal will vote in two phases on April 23 and April 29, with the results to be declared on May 4. These elections will test the Election Commission of India (EC) as well as the mettle of the political parties. For the EC, the challenge will be to conduct free and fair elections without disruptions or violence, while political parties will slog it out in a highly charged and polarised atmosphere.

Since two southern states - Tamil Nadu and Kerala - along with the Union Territory of Puducherry will be in the fray, and two eastern states, West Bengal and Assam, will also be casting their votes, the election results will provide a barometer of the public mood across India, especially in southern and eastern India.

The keenest contest will indeed be seen in Bengal, where Mamata Banerjee will be seeking a fourth term while defending her turf, as the BJP had made substantial gains in the last election and won over 77 seats. The Bengal battle will be fought over ideology, identity and anti-incumbency.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, having ruled the state since 2011, remains formidable, rooted in an extensive network of welfare schemes, particularly those aimed at women and marginalised communities. At the same time, fifteen years in power inevitably bring anti-incumbency, and the opposition is expected to highlight issues of corruption, governance, and law and order. The principal challenger remains the Bharatiya Janata Party, led nationally by Narendra Modi, though the party does not have a local leader to match Mamata Banerjee's stature.

The BJP will seek to capitalise on the momentum of the last election. It won 77 seats and garnered 37.9 per cent of the vote, a jump of 27 per cent from the previous election. However, it will have to address internal organisational challenges and counter the Trinamool Congress's longstanding narrative portraying it as an "outsider" force in the state. The election comes in the wake of the recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter lists conducted by the Election Commission. The exercise has resulted in the deletion of nearly 63 lakh voter, a figure that exceeds the margin separating major parties in the previous election. The SIR could have a tangible impact on voting patterns and the final results. However, the most important aspect is that the elections must remain peaceful, free and fair. The onus lies on the Central Government, the State Government, and the EC. Elections are meant to be a celebration of democracy, not a theatre of confrontation.

## Kharg Island: The centre of the world's energy chessboard

What appears to be a small island on the map is, in reality, a geopolitical nerve centre where energy flows, maritime strategy, and global economic stability intersect



SANTOSH MATHEW

"Whoever rules the waves rules the world's trade." — Alfred Thayer Mahan

A tiny island in the northern waters of the Persian Gulf has suddenly become the focus of global attention. Kharg Island, a small stretch of land off the Iranian coast, stands today as one of the most crucial energy hubs on the planet. Recent claims by Donald Trump that Iranian oil facilities could face military action pushed this island into the headlines of the world press. Geography made it small; energy politics made it powerful.

The island occupies a pivotal place in the strategic landscape of West Asia. Nearly ninety per cent of Iran's oil exports leave the country through terminals located on Kharg Island. Pipelines carrying crude oil from Iran's vast oil fields converge here. Tankers then transport this oil to markets across Asia and the rest of the world. The island functions as the principal gateway through which Iranian energy flows into the arteries of the global economy.

Its importance grows even greater because of its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most vital maritime energy corridor. This narrow waterway links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea. Thousands of vessels cross it every month, carrying crude oil and liquefied natural gas from the Gulf region. Global energy security depends heavily on this route.

The geographical characteristics of the strait amplify its strategic value. The narrowest section measures barely thirty-three kilometres across. Iran lies on one side of the strait, while countries such as Oman and the United Arab Emirates stand on the other. International maritime law allows coastal states to control large portions of the surrounding waters. This geographical reality provides Iran with significant leverage over the movement of ships passing through the corridor.

Kharg Island sits just twenty-five kilometres from the Iranian mainland. The island enjoys deep waters capable of accommodating massive oil tankers. Much of Iran's coastline remains shallow and unsuitable for such vessels. Kharg therefore became the natural oil export hub of the country. Huge storage tanks, loading terminals and pipeline networks dominate the island's landscape. Every day between 1.3 and 1.6 million barrels of crude oil depart from this location.

The geoeconomic implications of this infrastructure stretch far beyond Iran. Asian



AS ALFRED THAYER MAHAN REMINDED THE WORLD, CONTROL OF STRATEGIC MARITIME SPACES DETERMINES THE COURSE OF INTERNATIONAL POWER. KHARG ISLAND SILENTLY CONFIRMS THAT LESSON EVERY DAY

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economies rely heavily on energy shipments that pass through the Strait of Hormuz and originate from the Persian Gulf. Countries such as China, India and Japan remain among the largest importers of Gulf oil. More than eighty per cent of the oil transported through the strait ultimately reaches Asian markets. Any disruption around Kharg Island would immediately shake the energy security of these nations.

The island also stores enormous reserves of crude oil. Strategic storage facilities hold millions of barrels ready for export. Iran possesses nearly twelve per cent of the world's proven oil reserves. Kharg operates as the central distribution hub for a significant portion of this wealth. The island functions not merely as a loading terminal but as the economic heartbeat of the Iranian petroleum sector.

Energy markets react swiftly to geopolitical tension in this region. Even the possibility of disruption at Kharg Island can push global oil prices sharply upward. Analysts estimate that a shutdown of the island's export facilities could propel crude prices far beyond one hundred and fifty dollars per barrel. Rising energy prices would influence inflation, trade costs and industrial production across the globe.

Military strategists remain deeply aware of the island's sensitivity. During the Iran-Iraq War, Kharg Island became a frequent target because both sides understood its critical role in Iran's economy.

Modern conflicts in the region carry similar calculations. A strike on the island would damage Iran's export capacity and simultaneously send shockwaves through global

energy markets. Geopolitics often revolves around powerful ideas and strategic spaces. The American naval thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan shaped maritime strategy through his theory of sea power and introduced the geopolitical expression "Middle East" to describe this pivotal region. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas contributed another influential idea by explaining the "public sphere", the space where society debates its future through communication.

In the physical world of geopolitics, islands such as Kharg function as strategic spheres where geography, economics and power intersect. Kharg Island stands as a striking example of how a small geographical feature can influence the destiny of nations. The pipelines running across Iran's deserts end here. The tankers anchored in its waters carry fuel that powers factories, vehicles and industries thousands of kilometres away. Markets in Asia, financial institutions in Europe and strategic planners in Washington, DC watch this island carefully.

Energy corridors and maritime choke points shape the structure of the global economy. The Strait of Hormuz remains the gateway of the Persian Gulf. Kharg Island acts as the oil nerve centre connected to that gateway. A quiet island with storage tanks and pipelines continues to hold enormous geopolitical influence over the modern world.

As Alfred Thayer Mahan reminded the world, control of strategic maritime spaces determines the course of international power. Kharg Island silently confirms that lesson every day.



Women dressed in traditional attire hold swords during a procession as part of the 'Matri Sanskar Samagam' organised by the Vishwamangalya Sabha in Varanasi. PHOTO: PTA

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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### VAIRAMUTHU HONOURED WITH PRESTIGIOUS JNANPITH AWARD

The renowned Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu has added another feather to his cap by being honoured with the prestigious Jnanpith Award for the year 2025, one of India's highest literary honours. The recognition is a proud moment not only for the poet but also for lovers of Tamil literature across the world. Known for his evocative poetry and deeply reflective lyrics, Vairamuthu has made a lasting impact on contemporary Tamil writing through his unique blend of literary depth and emotional resonance.

This award is particularly significant because it comes after a long gap of twenty-four years for Tamil literature. Earlier, only two eminent Tamil writers had received this coveted honour - Akilan in 1975

and Jayakanthan in 2002. The conferment of the award on Vairamuthu once again brings national attention to the richness and literary heritage of the Tamil language.

A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Vairamuthu has also been honoured with the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan in recognition of his immense contributions to literature and the arts. Over the decades, his poems, essays, and film lyrics have captured the imagination of millions and enriched modern Tamil literature. His illustrious career reflects his extraordinary calibre as a wordsmith. The state of Tamil Nadu can take immense pride in his outstanding contributions as a distinguished exponent of Tamil literature.

AP THIRUVADI | CHENNAI

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## The common man in the shadow of war



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

### 2ND OPINION

When nations go to war, the language is always lofty—sovereignty, security, honour, strategic dominance. Yet beneath these grand abstractions lies a quieter, harsher truth: it is the common man who pays the heaviest price. From the rubble-strewn streets of the Gaza Strip to the battered cities of Iran and Kyiv, and from border villages in Israel to displaced communities across Afghanistan and Ukraine, the cost of conflict is counted not in policy briefs but in broken homes, men, women and children—shopkeepers, teachers, nurses, drivers—find their lives overturned overnight. The headlines speak of territorial advances and military strategy; the ground reality speaks of funerals, hunger, and exile.

It is worth asking: for whom are these wars fought? If wars are waged for the protection of citizens, why do

those very citizens become collateral damage? When leaders declare that a conflict is necessary for national security, do they pause to measure the insecurity it breeds in ordinary households? A father who cannot provide because his factory has been bombed. A mother who stands in a ration line for hours, uncertain whether food will last the week. A child whose classroom has turned into a shelter.

According to global humanitarian agencies, recent conflicts have displaced millions. In the war between Russia and Ukraine alone, millions have fled their homes, seeking refuge in unfamiliar lands. In recent hostilities involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, civilian casualties have mounted at an alarming pace. These are not just statistics; they are interrupted dreams. Livelihood is often the first silent casualty of war. Markets collapse, currencies weaken, and supply chains fracture. The farmer cannot sow. The entrepreneur cannot import raw materials. The daily-wage worker finds no work. Even those far removed from the battlefield feel the tremors—fuel prices rise, food becomes expensive, and economies strain under the weight of military expenditure. Psychological scars linger long after ceasefires are declared.

A generation raised amid sirens and shelling grows up internalising fear as routine. Trauma does not make headlines, but it shapes societies for decades. Children

who learn to distinguish the sound of drones from birds inherit a childhood stolen.

One must then question the moral architecture of war. If the end goal is stability and prosperity for the people, can devastation be the means? Leaders deliberate in secure chambers; soldiers fight on the front lines; but it is the common citizen who endures the prolonged aftermath—the rebuilding of homes, the repayment of debts, and the mourning of loved ones.

History shows us that wars may redraw borders, but they also redraw destinies—often for the worse. The common man does not seek conquest or seeks continuity. He seeks a steady income, education for his children, healthcare for his parents, and peace in his neighbourhood. The world today stands at a crossroads where diplomacy must outpace destruction. The true strength of a nation lies not in the magnitude of its arsenal, but in the well-being of its people. If war is indeed for the people, then their suffering cannot be dismissed as unavoidable. Perhaps the most urgent question is not who will win the next war, but who will heal the ordinary lives shattered by it. Until that question guides policy, the common man will remain the forgotten soldier of every battlefield.

The writer is a freelance who writes of development, gender and social issues



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### War leaves deep psychological scars

Wars not only destroy a nation's property and infrastructure, but major battles also lead to human devastation through the loss of confidence in one another, diminishing trust in humanity, and the erosion of the value of human life. One of the most serious setbacks that continues long after war situations is mental trauma. This is especially a major cause of concern for children in their teenage years. They grow up with unpleasant memories, shattered confidence, broken dreams, and unprecedented circumstances that they experienced during the war. Many live with the painful memory of seeing their parents die while trying to secure their safety, while some parents must endure the unbearable trauma of watching their loved ones breathe their last in tragic circumstances. Ceasefires do not bring back those who were lost. War situations frequently leave devastating psychological effects on civilians. Many people are forced to live with anxiety, depression, behavioural changes, developmental setbacks, and emotional dysregulation. Psychological complications are tragic and long-lasting. Often, innocent people pay the price for the egos and high-handedness of rulers. Unfortunate, yet true.

SUNIL OKHADE | INDORE

### Opposition targets Election Commission

In a sharp escalation of the political battle over the functioning of India's election watchdog, the entire opposition bloc of 235 MPs has voiced strong support for the removal of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar. They have accused him of dishonesty and questioned the impartiality of the Election Commission of India. Opposition MPs have submitted notices in both Houses of Parliament calling for Kumar's removal. The move has received signatures from 130 members of the Lok Sabha and 63 from the Rajya Sabha. If formally pursued, it would mark the first time that a motion has been initiated to remove a sitting Chief Election Commissioner.

According to the notice, seven charges have been outlined against Kumar. These include allegations of partisan and discriminatory conduct in office, deliberate obstruction of investigations into electoral fraud, and mass disenfranchisement of voters. Opposition parties have also accused the CEC of favouring the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, particularly during the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls. Although the opposition may lack the numbers required for removal, the image and credibility of the Election Commission have suffered serious damage.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### LPG supply crisis rising

The black marketing of LPG gas cylinders has become a common occurrence in almost every Indian city these days. Prices are rising rapidly, and the cost of induction stoves has also increased significantly, with margins ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹3,000 depending on demand. Many online platforms, including e-commerce and quick commerce services, are currently showing temporary unavailability of induction stoves. Recently, during an inter-ministerial briefing, government officials highlighted that the average number of LPG bookings was around 55 to 57 lakh cylinders per day. This figure has now risen sharply to nearly 88.8 lakh bookings daily.

It is particularly concerning that India is still not fully self-reliant in the production and supply of cooking fuel, which is a basic household necessity. The growing demand has disrupted the supply cycle and created opportunities for illegal profiteering through black marketing.

The government must urgently take effective steps to manage the disturbed LPG supply chain. Strategic planning and immediate action are required to ensure a smooth and consistent supply of cooking fuel across the country.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR



# A world without Kissinger's back channels

The consequences are both predictable and terrifying. When there is no subtlety, no back channel, no trusted whisper between statesmen, diplomacy is replaced by bluster. Threats become commitments by default. Negotiation is abandoned for posturing. Allies are alienated; adversaries are emboldened. Civilian populations are killed without pretext beyond headline value

**FIRST Column**



**NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA**

We are living in darkness while believing we possess light. We are entrenched in disorder, deceived into thinking that international law, respect for judicial authority, or even the concept of an "orderly" world exists. We are confused, stranded on a precarious portal between illusion and reality, living in an interregnum where some will pass through history with legacy, while others perish, leaving nothing but despair, agony, and the hubris of leaders who have perpetually clung to power.

Meanwhile, the United States — whose military budgets dwarf comprehension — spends millions on luxury indulgences while preparing the machinery of indiscriminate death. Recent reports revealed that the Department of Defense (War) spent \$2 million on Alaskan king crab, \$6.9 million on lobster tails, \$15.1 million on rib-eye steak, and hundreds of thousands on doughnuts, ice-cream machines, and sushi tables. Nearly \$100,000 was spent on a Steinway & Sons grand piano for the Air Force chief of staff's home, while Apple devices, Herman Miller chairs, and lavish furniture accounted for hundreds of millions more. And to digest these excesses, they unleash bombs that obliterate innocents, killing schoolchildren in Iran, and call it "decapitation".

Who can justify this? Who can stand for it? The modern theatre of war is a shocking carnival of unaccountable power. A conflict in Iran spiralled into chaos, bolstering the political fortunes of Donald Trump, who, in public and private, sought exits to rationalise the mayhem. When the Iranian warship IRIS Dena was attacked in Sri Lankan waters (EEZ), over 130 sailors perished, and Trump's generals gleefully expressed a mad and sick glee, describing the slaughter as "fun". This is no Hollywood scene; this is the reality of twenty-first-century warfare, where extrajudicial justice is applied at whim, judicial process is hollowed out, and even local courts are mocked, as seen in the exposure of the Epstein files.

In this void of discreet strategy, of subtle diplomacy, the world is left to be crushed with this horror. I return to one of my favourite — and yet the most annoying —



**THE KISSINGER TAPES ALSO REVEAL THE DEPTH OF HUMAN CALCULATION BEHIND POWER. HE UNDERSTOOD AMBITION, LOYALTY, AND FEAR AS INSTRUMENTS**

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scholars and diplomats: Henry Kissinger. The world is missing him. Kissinger, for all his moral ambiguity and Machiavellian manoeuvres, operated in a sphere that demanded secrecy, subtlety, and, above all, back-channel communication. He understood, with ruthless clarity, that public posturing and moral grandstanding are liabilities in the orchestration of power. He once noted, "We are not that moral, except for Ziegler," acknowledging the calculated deception necessary to manage war and diplomacy. He was conscious of the stakes of secrecy, telling Pakistan's ambassador in 1971, "I just wanted to tell you for your own information and slight peace of mind that we are working very actively on getting military equipment to you-but for God's sake don't say anything to anybody!"

Tom Wells' newly published *The Kissinger Tapes: Inside His Secretly Recorded Phone Conversations* offers a revelatory glimpse into this era. The book demonstrates that Kissinger understood the messy machinery of power, and the peril of transparency in a world that does not reward discretion. "If it leaked we can have it denied. Have it done one step away," Nixon instructed, exemplifying the strategic use of deniability — an art that modern administrations have lost.

Today, everything is on display. Every threat, every posture, every escalation is staged for cameras and social media. The result is appalling: diplomacy is paralysed, adversaries emboldened, allies terrified, and civilians are left as collateral in a theatre of performative statecraft.

Kissinger's conversations reveal the cold logic that once underpinned American policy. On Vietnam, he observed that U.S. forces were not designed for the war they faced: "They are not designed for this war... In fact, they are not designed for any war we are likely to have to fight." Nixon's impatience with military caution was palpable: "You'll hit something," he ordered, impatient with any delay. The brutality was deliberate. The psychological impact of bombing was calculated: "It is going to break every window in Hanoi." And yet, every act of destruction was framed in the language of leverage and negotiation. Kissinger reflected, "All they understand is brutality or deviousness," capturing the dark pragmatism of an era in which moral considerations were subordinated to outcomes.

Kissinger's mastery of clandestine diplomacy was ruthless, precise, and unapologetic. On the India-Pakistan conflict of 1971,

he was explicit: "We can't be neutral. Of course we're not neutral. Neither are the Indians. They're always neutral against us." His actions were designed to tilt outcomes without public exposure. He advised feeding the press selectively: "I will just step into his briefing," recognising the power of narrative control without sacrificing operational secrecy. And in moments of existential risk, he remained brutally honest about the stakes: "Starve them out if necessary," he told Nixon regarding North Vietnam. The language is shocking, even repulsive, but it is candid, unvarnished, and strategic.

The consequences are both predictable and terrifying. When there is no subtlety, no back channel, no trusted whisper between statesmen, diplomacy is replaced by bluster. Threats become commitments by default. Negotiation is abandoned for posturing. Allies are alienated; adversaries are emboldened. Civilian populations are killed without pretext beyond headline value. Kissinger's dark pragmatism, which once shielded innocents while advancing national interest, is now absent, and the result is a theatre of atrocity in plain view.

The Kissinger tapes also reveal the

depth of human calculation behind power. He understood ambition, loyalty, and fear as instruments. "I am not going to wind up as an Ehrlichman — an errand boy in the White House," he told himself, acknowledging his own indispensability. He observed, "They are trying to deprive you of any success," understanding that enemies and friends alike operate on incentives and resentment. His manipulation of allies and adversaries alike — his delight in exposing bureaucratic rivalries, his ability to reward intransigence, his willingness to abandon those who failed the test of strategy — illustrates a world in which power is preserved not through virtue but through clarity, courage, and cunning. In reading Wells' book, one realises that Kissinger was both brilliant and morally flawed, terrifying and indispensable. "I think the motives were honourable," he claimed when justifying his wiretapping and surveillance, yet his honesty never obscured his ruthlessness. He knew that the pursuit of national interest is rarely moral, often horrifying, and always human. His secrecy, his calculations, his manipulation of perception, his ability to operate two steps ahead, made the United States formidable even in the darkest of crises.

The Kissinger tapes remind us, with unflinching clarity, of what we have lost: the art of the back channel, the subtlety of influence, the moral ambiguity of statecraft wielded with skill. What Kissinger once achieved through secrecy, calculation, and the delicate balance of threats and concessions is now impossible, replaced by a performative brutality, an administration untrained in subtlety, and a world in which every action is interpreted, judged, and weaponised against both friend and foe.

We are missing Kissinger. The absence of back channels, of hidden dialogue, of carefully calibrated deception, has left the United States vulnerable to both moral criticism and strategic failure. Wells' book, with its chronological transcripts, illustrates in which every action is interpreted, judged, and weaponised against both friend and foe. We are missing Kissinger. The absence of back channels, of hidden dialogue, of carefully calibrated deception, has left the United States vulnerable to both moral criticism and strategic failure. Wells' book, with its chronological transcripts, illustrates in which every action is interpreted, judged, and weaponised against both friend and foe. We are missing Kissinger. The absence of back channels, of hidden dialogue, of carefully calibrated deception, has left the United States vulnerable to both moral criticism and strategic failure. Wells' book, with its chronological transcripts, illustrates in which every action is interpreted, judged, and weaponised against both friend and foe.

## The silent but deadly roommate



**BALRAJ MEHTA**

In a heartbreaking incident that shook Delhi NCR a few days back, three minor sisters — 12, 14, and 16 — reportedly died by suicide, after having fallen from the balcony of their 9th floor flat. Preliminary investigations pointed to academic underperformance compounded by excessive screen time and digital addiction as key factors. The sisters were surprisingly, not attending any school and spent hours on mobile phones and social media, mostly unsupervised.

This case is admittedly the most tragic seen so far but is not an isolated one; it mirrors a rising crisis in India where digital devices, once hailed as educational tools, have morphed into silent predators of young minds! The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data reveals that over 13,000 students aged 18 and below died by suicide in India in 2024. Academic stress emerged as the top trigger, cited in 35-40 per cent of cases, often intertwined with cyberbullying, toxic institutional climate, online gaming addiction, and social media pressures.

**Academic pressure and digital overload**  
Our hyper-competitive education system amplifies individual vulnerabilities. Combined with uncertainties of future which a majority of students and young job seekers face, this makes the world too dreary for them. There has been a 15% spike in child suicides linked to "examination failure" and "family problems". Many of Indian adolescent suicides are linked directly to digital overload, whereby endless scrolling erodes real-world coping skills.

A 2025 survey by the Indian Council of Medical Research found that 22 per cent of Indian children aged 10-16 are severely addicted to screens, averaging seven to nine hours daily — far beyond the World Health Organization's two-hour recommendation. Much of this use is unsupervised. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and games like PUBG trigger addictive dopamine loops. Reports suggest the sisters spent six to eight hours daily on reels and chats, neglecting studies despite parental scolding. This cycle — addiction, failure, punishment and deeper withdrawal — can overwhelm a child left unattended.

**A cascade on health, studies, and wellbeing**  
Digital addiction admittedly increases suicide risk in teens facing academic stress. Recent times have seen dramatic rise in percentage of screen-addicted children as per various reports and observations. Digital addiction leads to an all-round

decline in children's faculties and capability. Physically, it sparks lethargy, obesity, myopia and sleep disorders including insomnia. Blue light disrupts melatonin, leading to chronic fatigue and poor academic performance. Mentally, the effects are more devastating. Screen overuse correlates with a 50 per cent higher depression risk (American Psychological Association Review 2025) and anxiety disorders in 25 per cent of heavy users. Social media's curated perfection fuels FOMO and low self-esteem. According to a 2024 UNICEF report cyberbullying affects 1 in 5 Indian kids, often escalating to self-harm.

Academically, digital addiction fragments attention. Heavy screen users score low in math and reading. Multi-tasking like studying with some or the other programme running on a screen in front of you, reduces retention by 40 per cent, as per a research on cognitive behaviour.

Wellbeing suffers too: real friendships erode, replaced by fleeting, sometimes toxic, online validation. Children, once outgoing, get pulled into virtual worlds, familial bonding suffers due to their near total withdrawal and ultimately harmful behaviour results; tragically sometimes permanent and even fatal!

In the long-term, this breeds a generation of "digital zombies" — disconnected, unhealthy, and prone to extremism. Albert Einstein had observed in his times, "I fear the day when the technology overlaps with our humanity. The world will have only a generation of idiots." He is not far off the mark — the 2025 WHO report quoted above warns India's 400 million child internet users face a "mental health tsunami" unless curbed!

**Innovative checks without harsh punishment**  
Any punitive approach like withholding phones amid physical or mental punishment is likely to backfire. Punishments trigger rebellion and secrecy. Instead, parents can innovate with empathy-driven tactics to reclaim balance.

- Tech-Enabled Family Pacts.
- Co-create "screen contracts" using apps like 'Qustodio' or 'Screen Time' (built into iOS/Android). Set mutual goals: like "No screens before homework" or "one-hour family game post-dinner". Involve the children in setting up the limits — when they own it, resentment is reduced.
- Reward compliance with fun outings, not bribes. Spend time together — don't fret over quality; just be present in the lives of your children. It is not said in vain that "families that eat together stick together!"
- Gamify Offline Adventures
- Turn disconnection into play. Apps like 'Forest' grow virtual trees during focus time (real trees if you hit goals). Organise "device-free zones" like dinner tables, board games or nature walks. For urban kids apps like 'Goose Chase' create local scavenger hunts. This builds dopamine from real wins — studies show 40 per cent addiction drop after 3 months.

- Digital Literacy Workshops at Home
- Host weekly "tech talks" demystifying algorithms. Use free YouTube channels like 'Crash Course on Digital Citizenship' created by John Green, to explain dopamine traps. Role-play cyberbullying scenarios. Empower kids as "family tech experts" to audit apps — this flips control to collaboration. Such education can effectively cut down screen time without fights or heartburns.
- Routine Hacks with Smart Tools
- Leverage router-level controls like Circle Home Plus, which auto-limits devices by age/schedule. Pair with "phone parking stations" at bedroom doors — make it a charging ritual with bedside books. Introduce "analog anchors": alarm clocks and journals for mood-tracking. Tracking sleep with wearables like Fitbit and sharing insights positively can be very motivating.
- Emotional Check-Ins and Professional Boosts
- Daily 10-minute "heartfelt chats" via devices can help spot red flags like irritation, mood swings, poor food habits e.g. lack of interest or bingeing, and withdrawal. Apps like 'Calm' offer kid-friendly mindfulness in which even 5-min sessions can reduce anxiety. If addiction persists, consult play therapists via platforms like 'YourDOST' — no stigma, just support!
- Model the Change
- Parents need to audit their habits because kids usually mimic parents. Lead "unplugged family challenges" by organising weekend hikes or cooking marathons. Some schools have now started to mandate parent-child digital detox pledges — you can suggest this to your child's school administration.

These strategies emphasise connection over control, fostering resilience and it is indeed a proven fact that early intervention can reverse mild addictions.

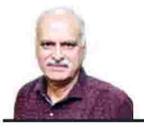
**A call to collective action**

The gruesome tragedies when they unfold are not just a family's loss — they are a wake-up call for the whole society. Technology is not going to go away; in fact with AI and supercomputing, engagement of youngsters with smart devices is going to go up even more. Controlled exposure, fulfilling the learning need yet avoiding mindless entertainment will be required. To achieve that end state a productive, innovative and interesting exploitation of the devices and software must be encouraged. With 500 million internet users under 25, India needs policy muscle like enforcing app-age gates, school-mandated screen audits, and counselling hotlines. We can start small today to integrate digital wellness awareness to save more young precious lives.

"Disconnect to Reconnect" must be the modern day mantra of sanity!

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## Congress needs to reinvent itself



**ANIL ANAND**

The Jeffrey Epstein-gate has given Congress a new opportunity to corner the Narendra Modi dispensation, with a direct focus on the Prime Minister. Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi has seemingly lapped up the chance with both hands to launch a direct diatribe against the PM without mincing words. The issue found forceful mention in Parliament and echoed outside as well, with the latest manifestation being the Indian Youth Congress protest during the India AI Impact Summit 2026. What next? Where do the Congress and Rahul Gandhi go from here to make Epstein-gate, in the Indian context, a countrywide issue so as to rattle the powerful ruling leadership? Or will it, like many previous instances, die its own death due to a lack of will to follow up?

First and foremost, he should bear in mind that building a national movement on any issue, particularly of the Epstein kind which has already created tremors in many countries across the world, will require concerted, coordinated and unified action. There is no doubt that Rahul Gandhi and a handful of his party colleagues, while others remain silent ring-side spectators, have shown courage in speaking out and trying to corner Narendra Modi directly.

Congress is at the crossroads on two counts, and both are significant and central for any movement to have a successful nationwide impact. Firstly, the Congress organisational structure is crying out for immediate attention and repair. Intriguingly, this issue of immense urgency has not attracted the attention of Rahul Gandhi, as from all available indications nothing happens in the party without his sanction.

The lackadaisical approach in this regard is reflected, and has now become routine. In the absence of tough decision-making to revamp the organisational set-up, corner habitual dissenters and saboteurs, and remove deadwood and non-performers. Rahul Gandhi's words must match his actions. In fact, such inaction has emboldened those performing similar acts in other states and Union Territories to serve the BJP's cause.

How can any movement at the national level be built or succeed without a strong organisation? Congress may not be considered a cadre-based party, but it still has infrastructure, rank and file, and followers in every corner of the country. Yet much of it lies

dormant due to the lack of interest shown by leaders at various levels.

Rahul Gandhi has, from time to time, taken important and daring initiatives to highlight issues and expose the BJP-led dispensation. The twin Bharat Jodo Yatra were undoubtedly a revolutionary step. They generated considerable public attention and enabled him to establish direct contact with the people through their overwhelming participation. However, in the end, with no worthwhile follow-up plan and, more importantly, no organisational set-up to carry the message forward, the momentum has largely fizzled out.

The second factor that has placed the Congress at the crossroads is the present standing and status of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance. There were occasions in the past when the opposition could have united to raise issues and build momentum against the Modi government, but these opportunities were frittered away for want of unity. Being the only national party in the alliance with a countrywide presence, Congress and particularly Rahul Gandhi should have adopted a proactive approach to cohesively lead the front, but this has not happened.

As a result, owing to Congress's weaknesses, vested interests have begun creating the impression that the leadership of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc is up for grabs. At the grassroots of this situation lies Congress's organisational weakness and the reluctance of its leadership to take tough decisions of far-reaching consequences. In addition, occasional sniping by Congress leaders or MPs at allies such as Mamata Banerjee or M K Stalin has further hampered the opposition coalition. This is one side of the story. Leaders such as Mamata Banerjee, Uddhav Thackeray and the grand old Maratha strongman Sharda Pawar also share responsibility for allowing personal ambitions every level. Jeffrey Epstein-gate presents another opportunity for Rahul Gandhi to set his house in order without delay. Only by speaking from a position of organisational strength can the Congress leadership resolve its internal weaknesses and silence opposition alliance partners who question the party's leadership.

However, sustaining such efforts requires a strong organisation with committed leaders at every level. Jeffrey Epstein-gate presents another opportunity for Rahul Gandhi to set his house in order without delay. Only by speaking from a position of organisational strength can the Congress leadership resolve its internal weaknesses and silence opposition alliance partners who question the party's leadership.

Rahul Gandhi should continue his efforts to connect with people. It suits his affable personality and willingness to mingle with the man on the street.

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TUESDAY - MARCH 17, 2026

# Electric kitchens

Centre should drive a shift from LPG to e-stoves

**T**he cooking gas shortage in India caused by the war in Iran has exposed a serious policy lapse. That is, the extreme dependence on imported liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to fire domestic and industrial kitchens. The country produces just 40 per cent of the cooking gas that it consumes with the rest almost fully coming from the Gulf region.

For a country that has been conscious of its excessive dependence on imported fossil fuels and has taken active policy measures to reduce consumption of petrol and diesel, it is strange that cooking gas went under the radar. A major reason is, of course, the messed up subsidy regime which has made it unattractive for refineries to produce more of the fuel. But there may be an opportunity in the crisis now. Even as the Centre grapples with the shortage now, trying short-term fixes such as asking refineries to divert their propane and butane output to produce cooking gas, the long-term strategy should be to structurally alter the demand dynamics. And that will be to find alternative fuels to fire our kitchens. Electricity is the best alternative. Indian consumers are not new to electric cooking, be it with microwaves or induction stoves. In fact, induction stoves have been flying off the shelves in the last two weeks as consumers seek a safe haven from the cooking gas uncertainty.

The big picture is that electric cooking is better than LPG. An October 2025 study by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis points out that even at a unit rate of ₹8, induction cooking is 37 per cent cheaper. This is essentially because it is more efficient; 85 per cent of the energy is directly transferred to the vessel, whereas in the case of LPG 60 per cent escapes into the air. A wholesale shift can be managed, as most households, pan-India, have an electricity connection. To drive the shift, the Centre could consider a limited-period subsidy on quality electric stoves, akin to the one in place for EVs. A policy thrust that involves premier institutions would be well worth the effort — because what is required here is a safe and energy efficient design of e-stoves at affordable prices. Meanwhile, the current rush to pick up such stoves fearing LPG shortage, could spur the supply of sub-standard, unsafe stoves. The Centre should be watchful and manage this transition.

There is, of course, the question of the impact of this shift on power demand. Thermal power capacity utilisation, at 68 per cent, presents enough headroom for increased output. The renewables transition has arrived at a new inflexion point with a drop in battery prices as well as increased storage capacity. Using time-of-use tariffs and linking up the e-stove plan to the solar rooftop scheme will add impetus. In fact, a plan to shift to e-cooking is already in place. The 'National Efficient Cooking Programme', launched in late 2023, has presumably distributed 20 lakh induction stoves. It needs to scale up, with a plan. Finally, every crisis presents an opportunity to be efficient — and the LPG one is no exception.

OTHER VOICES.

GULF NEWS

Defending truth in times of crisis

Modern conflicts are no longer fought only with missiles, drones and military formations. Increasingly, they are waged through narratives, images and digital content designed to shape perceptions and influence public opinion. Recent developments in the region have once again demonstrated this reality. As the UAE faced blatant Iranian aggression targeting its skies, the country's Armed Forces responded with remarkable precision and professionalism, intercepting hostile missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles with exceptional efficiency. Yet, alongside the military response, another front was equally important: the information front. The battlefield has expanded into the realm of information, and in that arena, credible media has become one of the most important lines of defence. (DUBAI, MARCH 16)

CHINADAILY

Tomahawk rips off Tokyo's 'pacifist' mask

Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi announced on Friday the official delivery — for the first time in history — of US Tomahawk cruise missiles and Norwegian-made Joint Strike Missiles to the Self-Defence Forces. This move represents a bold step toward the country's remilitarisation and a challenge to the stability of East Asia and beyond. Japan claims to be pursuing "counterstrike capabilities," a euphemism for the ability to launch pre-emptive attacks on targets in its neighbourhood. This is not defence; it is offence. The Tomahawk missiles, with a range of up to 1,600 kilometres, can reach deep into the territories of Japan's neighbours, and their deployment will likely trigger an arms race. (TOKYO, MARCH 15)



SN ANANTHASUBRAMANIAN  
MS SAHOO

**G**overnance systems function best when responsibility converges at a clear centre. Without such clarity, accountability risks dissolving into institutional ambiguity. Yet modern corporate governance frameworks disperse responsibility across boards, committees, executives, and compliance officers. The result is a proliferation of expressions describing those responsible for governance, without clearly identifying where responsibility ultimately rests.

India's corporate governance framework increasingly confronts this challenge. The expression "those charged with governance" (TCWG) illustrates this tension. A relatively recent entrant into the governance lexicon, the phrase carries an appealing air of inclusiveness. It suggests that someone must surely be responsible for oversight while appearing to democratise governance: almost anyone may potentially be charged with governance.

Auditing standards define TCWG as persons responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the company and its accountability obligations. By this definition, the Board, the Audit Committee, and independent directors may all qualify as TCWG. At the same time, these standards task auditors to identify, at the start of the audit, who precisely constitutes TCWG within a company.

In practice, this task often resembles detective work, requiring auditors to reconstruct lines of authority and oversight from the institutional complexity of modern corporations. Importantly, a framework that seeks to make governance everyone's concern risks producing the opposite effect: when responsibility appears widely dispersed, it may feel like nobody's responsibility.

Part of the difficulty arises from India's layered regulatory landscape. Corporate governance as a discipline emerged within the company-securities law framework, where company law structures internal governance to align the interests of stakeholders, and securities regulation strengthens that structure for listed companies in the interest of investors and market integrity. Together, they constitute the core architecture of corporate governance. Within this architecture, the board represents the apex of governance responsibility.

The Companies Act, 2013 establishes the foundational governance structure for companies. At its apex stands the Board of Directors, entrusted with fiduciary duties and overall stewardship of the company. Beneath the board,



Act identifies Key Managerial Personnel, including the managing director or chief executive officer, the chief financial officer, and the company secretary, who exercise executive authority and carry operational and compliance responsibilities. Board committees, particularly the Audit Committee and the Nomination and Remuneration Committee, support specialised oversight functions. The Act also introduces an "officer who is in default", who bears statutory liability for compliance failures. Together, these provisions create a clear hierarchy of governance responsibility and individual accountability.

ADDITIONAL GOVERNANCE LAYER

For listed companies, securities regulation adds an additional governance layer above company law. These regulations expand the governance framework to include promoters and promoter groups, senior management, and specialised board committees. Significantly, securities regulation has elevated the position of the compliance officer, requiring that the role be placed not more than one level below the board.

The prominence of the compliance officer reflects an important evolution in the understanding of governance. In modern corporate systems, effective governance requires both oversight and operational enforcement. The compliance officer increasingly functions as the custodian of governance discipline within the organisation, ensuring regulatory

Different regulators will inevitably tailor governance structures to their specific objectives. What is needed, however, is conceptual alignment around a clear centre of responsibility

compliance, validating disclosures, and serving as the interface between the company and regulators. In effect, the board provides strategic supervision, and the compliance officer operationalises the discipline of governance.

Over time, other governance frameworks, whether in financial reporting oversight or sector-specific regulation, have begun constructing parallel vocabularies of responsibility rather than building upon this foundation. Each framework identifies its own set of functions and institutions responsible for governance. The terminology differs, the scope varies, and the attribution of liability may shift depending on the governing framework. The result is a fragmented language of governance in which responsibility appears dispersed across regulatory silos.

This company-securities law architecture provides a coherent hierarchy of responsibility. The board exercises strategic oversight; executive management runs the enterprise; specialised officers ensure compliance and governance discipline. The difficulty arises when other regulatory frameworks develop their own governance terminology without clearly anchoring it in this architecture. Auditing standards speak of TCWG. Sectoral regulators prescribe roles such as chief compliance officers, principal officers, or appointed actuaries. These roles serve legitimate regulatory purposes, but their relationship to the underlying governance structure is not always clearly articulated.

The consequence is a proliferation of expressions — board, management, senior management, key managerial personnel, compliance officer, officer in default, and TCWG — that often refer to overlapping responsibilities but carry different legal implications.

Companies must navigate this patchwork when mapping accountability across regulatory regimes, while regulators must

determine liability based on framework-specific definitions.

The solution does not lie in imposing identical terminology across all regulatory regimes. Different regulators will inevitably tailor governance structures to their specific objectives. What is needed, however, is conceptual alignment around a clear centre of responsibility. That centre already exists in the company-securities law framework. Other regulatory frameworks should build upon this structure. Where governance roles already exist within this framework, regulators should recognise and adopt them rather than create parallel designations.

Anchoring governance responsibility in this architecture would yield several benefits. It would significantly reduce interpretational ambiguity, simplify compliance mapping across regulatory frameworks, and strengthen the attribution of accountability. More importantly, it would restore clarity to corporate governance by ensuring that responsibility ultimately converges where the law intends it to reside.

India's corporate governance ecosystem has evolved significantly through reforms in company law, securities regulation, and financial reporting oversight. Yet the language used to describe governance responsibility has become increasingly fragmented. Harmonising this language by building upon the foundations of the company-securities law framework would not merely simplify regulatory design. It would strengthen the architecture of accountability itself.

Corporate governance must ultimately answer a simple question: who is responsible? A coherent regulatory framework must ensure that the answer is not scattered across statutes and regulators but anchored clearly within the governance structure of the company.

Ananthasubramanian is former President, and Sahoo is former Secretary, ICSI

# Why a transition to natural farming is a necessity

We cannot easily control conflicts, wars or energy markets. But we can definitely redesign how we grow food

PVS Suryakumar

**H**uman civilisation rests on a simple foundation: the ability to grow healthy and nutritious food reliably. That foundation is now under growing strain.

A disruption in energy or fertilizer markets can ripple through food systems faster than policy can respond. Modern agriculture is tightly linked to fossil fuels, global supply chains and ecological services — and when these links weaken, livelihoods and health suffer first.

The Fuel to Fork analysis by IPES-Food (2024/25) estimates that food systems consume nearly 40 per cent of petrochemicals and about 15 per cent of fossil fuels globally, tying every plate to volatile energy markets. The world is beginning to acknowledge this reality and must now find a way forward.

The system's industrial dependence compounds the risk. Analyses by Vaclav Smil and FAO suggest that about 40 per cent of global dietary protein intake depends on synthetic nitrogen fertilizer made via the energy intensive Haber-Bosch process. When energy tightens, fertilizer costs rise — and food prices follow. Current urea prices are already elevated (around \$585/tonne),

with analysts warning of \$650-700/tonne under extended stress. Trade concentration amplifies this. According to Kpler's trade data (2024), over two-thirds of India's ammonia and sulphur imports originate in the Gulf region. So regional shocks quickly tighten global availability.

The IPCC warns that, intensifying heat and shifting rainfall are already shortening growing windows. In India this is tangible: recent temperature spikes have lowered wheat yields in affected districts, and higher night-time temperatures reduce rice grain filling — material shortages where wheat and rice anchor food security.

Given these multiple uncertainties, India's cropping patterns will need gradual diversification. Pulses, oilseeds and millets offer nutritional and ecological advantages, though consumer acceptance, processing ecosystems and agronomic adaptation will determine how far and how fast such shifts occur.

Ecological and health signals deepen the alarm. Global assessments (IPCC-AR6, IPBES, FAO) show biodiversity loss, pollinator declines and soil degradation are eroding ecological services destabilising yields. Public-health reviews (WHO) are increasingly concerned about chemical



HEALTHY FOOD. Reducing chemical use in agriculture is key

exposures and rising non-communicable diseases. These are not separate problems: degraded soils and chemical-laden foods undermine both production and public health.

A sensible policy is neither one of panic, nor prohibition. A disciplined and financed transition — phased across crops, regions and over time — can reduce dependency while protecting farmers' welfare.

**FOR A CREDIBLE TRANSITION** This has to be practical and subtle. First, improve nutrient-use efficiency and replace part of the input mix with biological alternatives where they are ready to deploy.

Second, fund public agricultural research on soil health, microbial partnerships and cropping systems that

integrate trees, livestock and legumes and back it with extension. Third, redesign subsidies and procurement to reward soil health, improved soil carbon, biodiversity, and ecosystem services.

Finally, build markets and supply chains that pay for the public goods produced by regenerative agriculture, so farmers who make the transition are not left starved and unpaid for their stewardship.

India's embrace of natural farming can anchor this agenda and can be strategically phased temporally and spatially. Natural farming — with R&D, extension, assured markets and transitional design — can organically scale without forcing risky, abrupt change on farmers.

Gradually reducing chemical dependence in agriculture will make our food systems more resilient and healthier for both people and nature.

We cannot easily control conflicts, wars or energy markets. But we can definitely redesign how we grow food. If institutional incentives, research and markets align behind resilient, ecological farming, we will reduce fragility where it matters most — at the soil and at the plate.

The writer is former Deputy Managing Director, NABARD. Views are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Americans must wake up

This refers to 'Tariff war 2.0' (March 16). Fighting a losing battle can affect the thought process of even a seasoned soldier. Trump is not one. And, he is alone in the crowd. That makes him desperate and he starts opening more war fronts, like filing suits and disturbing peace in other geographies by casual handling of obsolete punitive provisions of tariffs, etc. When things backfire, this President has nowhere to get sane advice as he has already created more enemies around him than he can handle. In his own interest,

Americans should wake up and restore sanity in governance.

**HG Warrior**  
Mumbai

Prudent trade and shipping

Frequent tariff probes and strategy risks weaken confidence in trade agreements. Countries may hesitate to commit when terms change suddenly. This uncertainty may also affect long-term supply chains and investment decisions. India's cautious approach in negotiations therefore appears sensible. Protecting interests in agriculture,

data security, and intellectual property remains important. At the same time, steady engagement with partners should continue. Stable and predictable trade rules are essential for healthy global commerce.

**S Balasubramanian**  
Vilupuram, TN

Reckless foreign policy

'The US' global misadventures' (March 16) rightly exposes how power, profit and public apathy fuel reckless US foreign policy. For India, the lesson is urgent: stop romanticising dependence. A

stronger dollar inflates our oil and gold bills, hurting ordinary citizens.

India must respond with energy self-reliance, deeper strategic reserves, wider rupee trade, and policies that curb excessive gold dependence. Sovereignty is not a slogan; it is economic preparedness. Washington will protect itself. India must protect India.

**Arul Mozhivarman**  
Sivakasi, TN

Fiscal health of States

The recent Fiscal Health Index released by NITI Aayog highlights a

deepening divergence in the financial resilience of States. To restore fiscal health, States must enhance their own tax-capacity by broadening the GST base, and rationalise non-merit subsidies to reduce the revenue deficit. Most importantly, governments must adopt multi-year frameworks to stabilise debt rather than rely on annual ad-hoc populist measures. Strengthening fiscal governance at the State level is a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive growth.

**Madhvi Sharma**  
Chandigarh

# Nervous Republicans

The Middle East war is causing anxiety within GOP

Sridhar Krishnaswami

War by any other name is still war. And no amount of spin from either US President Donald Trump or any of his top advisors seems to be working. Republican members of Congress in both the House of Representatives and Senate are getting jittery as to how the war in the Middle East, that started on February 28 with Israel and the US dropping missiles and bombs on Iran, is going to end.

So far there have been little indication, from the administration apart from a raft of frants of how things are going to get worse for Tehran. And Iran has met all this with indignation and defiance.

According to a Quinnipiac University national poll taken a week after the start of operations, a majority of voters are opposed to the strikes with higher numbers against induction of ground troops into Iran and a significant 75 per cent believing that the American military action against Tehran will lead to a terrorist attack on the US. If 53 per cent of those polled oppose the military action, only 40 per cent support it; and this is along partisan lines with Republican support at 85 per cent and Democratic opposition close to 90 per cent.

But the significant message to the Grand Old Party is that 60 per cent of Independents are opposed to Washington's military attack. As the polling analyst for the University, Tim Malloy, put it, "Voters are unenthusiastic about the air attack on Iran and there is overwhelming opposition to putting American troops on Iranian soil to fight a ground war".

Iran has faced the brunt of the damage including casualties including the outrageous hit on a girls school resulting in the death of an estimated 100, now being fobbed off on "old" intelligence. But Republican law makers are nervously watching how the administration responds to hunting down some 400-odd kg of Uranium stockpile said to be inside Iran.

Apart from fresh clamour for getting Congressional approval to put boots on the ground, law makers still have memories of Iraq and the hunt for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction with inspectors coming back empty handed.

In the case of the so-called Iranian stockpile, few will be nursing the illusion that the



IRAN WAR. Causing disquiet via REUTERS

operation will be a quick entry-exit scenario.

### OIL WORRIES

At this time, Republican anxiety does not lie in the potential return of body bags. It is in the implication of an expanding conflict in the Middle East that has already started taking its toll on oil prices.

The restrictions imposed for the Strait of Hormuz aside, Iran is said to have mined the waters, while also resorting to occasional hits on tankers braving the hostile environment.

All this has led to a spurt in oil prices that is being reflected in the pumps in the US. Trump's decision to suspend sanctions against Russian oil and the International Energy Association's decision to release 400 million barrels as an emergency measure have hardly calmed markets where the price of crude still tops \$100.

Even as it, record numbers of Republicans are leaving the House of Representatives and not seeking re-election in November. And Republicans incumbents in the House and Senate are facing strong challenges at the primaries that are in full swing, putting pressure on funds that would normally be spent fighting Democrats at showdown time.

The party leadership is facing the music not only at the national level, but at the state level too. The pressure has intensified for the party, especially in the red-states where the GOP has taken hits recently, to maintain their super-majorities for legislations to pass in the face of a veto by the Governors.

The political problem is rather acute for the GOP leadership that does not seem to be satisfied with the numbers of missiles and bombs that Iran faces daily or in the number of sorties flown by jet fighters.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and UN

# Oil shock's impact on India's BoP

Oil shortages and price spike triggered by US-Israel war on Iran will hit India harder given its integration into global oil markets

MACROSCAN.



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

Uncertainty and shortages have roiled India's oil markets following the unwarranted bombings of Iranian civilian and military targets launched by the United States and Israel and Iran's predictable response to that unprovoked attack.

With India heavily reliant on oil imports and anywhere between 30 and 40 per cent of its crude imports and 80-90 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) imported through the Gulf region, the impact the war is having on the physical supply of oil and LPG and the prices of those supplies is a major shock to the economy.

Globally the war has shaken the world's oil markets for multiple reasons. First, the bombing of Iran threatens to shut down its oil production facilities for quite some time. Since Iran hosts a large oil reserve and was a major supplier to global markets till US sanctions were imposed on the country, that consequence does influence calculations of long-run supply and can therefore impact oil price trends.

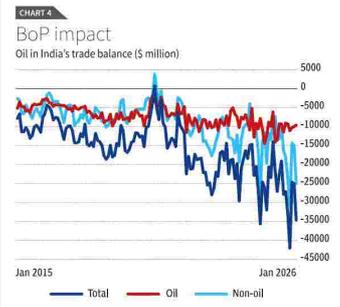
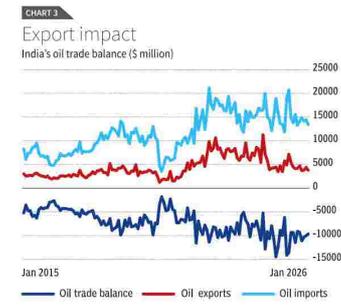
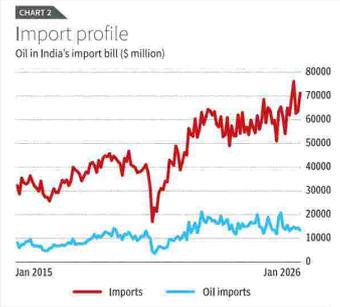
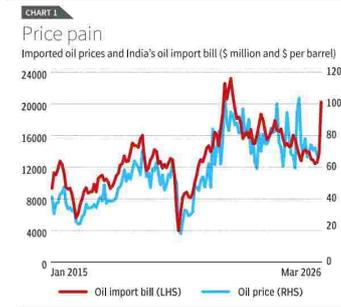
Second, since Iran's response includes shutting off the Strait of Hormuz that is the easiest and most cost-effective route to service anywhere between a fifth and close to a third of the world's gas and oil demand, the impact on global supply is immediate. More so because the targets of Iran's retaliation include oil facilities in many oil- and gas-exporting Gulf states, which are seen as implicitly or explicitly facilitating US-Israeli aggression.

Third, large trading firms, like Vitol, Trafigura, Glencore and Gunvor, which are not necessarily large oil producers, dominate the global physical trade in oil, and are known to be secretive speculators for profit in commodity markets. This concentrated trade and speculation leads to an amplified impact of the war on oil prices, far beyond what is warranted by any supply shortfall.

This speculative impact is highlighted by the huge volatility that oil prices have displayed around a rising trend. Finally, this dominance of speculators means that any effort to redress demand-supply imbalances, as is sought to be done through the release from strategic reserves of 400 million barrels of oil by the members of the International Energy Agency, only sends out a signal that the crisis is serious and intensifies speculative activity. So long as uncertainty prevails, oil prices would soar to levels way beyond the so-called \$100 psychological barrier.

### IMPACT ON INDIA

The impacts from these consequences transmit to the Indian economy through multiple routes. Given India's import dependence for crude and gas, there is already talk of shortages that would affect, among others, households using LPG and oil-based means of



transportation, trucks, and farmers using oil based fertilizers.

The rise in the price of a universal intermediate like oil would trigger "imported" inflation both because of the rise in the dollar price of oil and the depreciation of the rupee it precipitates. And the current account of India's balance of payments, crucial to sustaining the 'confidence' of foreign financial investors, which has been shored up by remittances and receipts from IT and IT-enabled services exports, will be hit by falling remittance inflows and a widening trade deficit.

Chart 1 illustrates the relationship between the price of India's oil import bill and the price of the Indian basket of crude (a weighted average of Oman, Dubai and Brent crude prices). The import bill has clearly been driven primarily by the average import price,

with some signs of divergence. Since import data are yet to be released, the impact of the recent spike is yet to show itself, though a sharp rise is inevitable.

That rise can be damaging because India's aggregate imports have risen at a much faster rate than its oil imports since the end of the Covid pandemic (Chart 2). Clearly non-oil imports, including imports of non-necessities such as gold, have been rising, not least because of continuous liberalisation in the import trade and the associated reductions in import tariffs. A sharp rise in the oil import bill will only add to the vulnerability resulting from that longer term tendency.

### TRADE BALANCE IMPACT

In the past there has been one factor mitigating the impact of oil import dependence on India's trade balance. With excess refinery capacity, India has been exporting refined products manufacture with imported crude, generating export revenues from its oil sector. In fact, as Chart 3 shows, the rise in imports of oil and products has been closely followed by export revenues in that category.

Given value addition through refining in India, the export revenues generated from these related oil imports would be large than the value of those imports. So, the deterioration in the oil trade balance

following the pandemic would have been greater than reflected in Chart 3 if these exports had not occurred.

But, given the current loss of physical access to crude imports, the Indian government would possibly retain available imported supplies for domestic consumption, adversely affecting the export of refined products from private facilities. This would mean that the influence of the widening import bill on the oil trade balance would be significantly higher and the deterioration in the balance of payments larger.

The significance of this for the balance of trade comes through from Chart 4 which presents the relative roles of the oil and non-oil trade balances in determining India's overall trade balance. Much of the post-pandemic deterioration in the trade balance was on account of the worsening of the non-oil trade balance, with oil contributing only marginally to that downturn. That would change now, with adverse consequences.

In sum, the fact that the oil crisis, precipitated by the unwarranted attack on Iran, is resulting in both a physical shortage of supply as well as a spike in prices, would amplify its adverse effects on India's balance of payments, given the nature of its integration into global oil markets.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 17, 2006

### Goldman Sachs plans to invest \$1 b in India

Goldman Sachs, the US based global investment bank, on Thursday announced that it would make investments of \$1 billion (about Rs 4,500 crore) in private equity, real estate, private wealth management, and other businesses in India for its institutional clients in the next couple of years as part of its new strategy for the country.

### Govt questions Cairn's reserve claims

The Directorate-General of Hydrocarbons (DGH) has questioned the UK-based Cairn Energy's claims on the estimated in-place reserves in the Rajas block. The company, which has said that it may sell between 25 per cent and 80 per cent of its shares in its Indian business through an IPO, has estimated that in-place oil in its Rajasthan exploration block exceeds 3.5 billion barrels.

### I-T staff walk out over large taxpayer units plan

Income-Tax Department employees today staged a walk out across the country against the Centre's move to set up large taxpayer units (LTPUs). A strike by non-gazetted employees also threatened to go on an indefinite strike by the end of the month over the issue.

## Gulf oil behemoths deepen output cuts as Hormuz stays blocked

Salma El Wardany  
Fiona MacDonald

The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait reduced oil output further as the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz increases pressure on major producers with the Iran war stretching into its third week. The UAE's production cut has deepened to about 1.5 million barrels a

day, from 500,000 to 800,000 a day as of March 10, while Kuwait's has increased to near 1.3 million a day from half a million about a week ago, people familiar with the matter said, asking not to be identified because the data isn't public. Output cuts are rippling across the Gulf even as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates race to boost exports through alternative routes to bypass Hormuz. While some

producers are also preemptively curtailing supply to delay the point at which they'd be forced to stop completely, the longer the war goes on the more time it will take to bring output back to normal levels.

Saudi Arabia's output was down by 2 million to 2.5 million barrels a day as of a week ago, while Iraq's was down by about 2.9 million a day as the Hormuz crunch fills up storage, according to

people familiar with the matter. Riyadh has been diverting millions of barrels to its export terminals on the Red Sea coast, allowing it to avoid the Strait of Hormuz.

The UAE, which has a bypass pipeline of its own, is also switching barrels away from the waterway. Its key oil port of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman has come under increased drone attacks, causing brief halts in loadings.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2638

**EASY**

**ACROSS**

- Plain face, plinth at foot (5)
- Be worthy of (7)
- Very small, cannot be discerned (13)
- African river (5)
- Be ahead (4)
- Pinion (4)
- Component, part (5)
- Quality of being incapable of error (13)
- Tape-like trimming, binding (7)
- One under age (5)

**DOWN**

- Sparkling (13)
- Policeman; capture (3)
- Commission involving short journey (6)
- Sift flour, sugar etc over (6)
- Humorous criticism of folly etc (6)
- Revolving (9)
- Event (7/6)
- Very lovely (9)
- Greek sun-god (6)
- Military force (6)
- Irksomeness (6)
- Hostelry (3)

**NOT SO EASY**

**ACROSS**

- Plain plinth comes close to being destroyed (5)
- To merit being half made to do time in the army (7)
- Will not be noticed as receipt be: limp form, instead (13)
- River one might ignore, nothing being missing (5)
- Top singer in Heavy Metal lookalike (4)
- Part of large house at the side of the stage (4)
- Portion of crusty dish and cabbage first and last (5)
- With which one won't be let down with ability to fill in so (13)
- Binding material will go on when everything is inside it (7)
- One in the norm is wrong to be of lesser import (5)

**DOWN**

- Sparkling with icing: all tints can be provided (13)
- Constable starts canvas over primer (3)
- Make a mistake, also find what may run (6)
- Medical man is on the brink and will dig it up from bed (6)
- It takes off as it re-assembles (6)
- Revolt of the East, ill borne out (9)
- Late service given near pyre built for it (7/6)
- Very lovely it may be, but a fuel one might use in pieces (9)
- Sun-god got it all wrong: work came to nothing (6)
- A lot of Roman soldiers, their name being beyond numbering (6)
- Monotony could make it die in one's belly (6)
- Where one may be entertained at home with television finally (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2637

**ACROSS** 1. Chair 4. Special 8. Monograph 9. Lot 10. Entered 12. Once 14. Curtain 17. AWOL 18. Regalia 20. Ill 21. Challenge 23. Endless 24. Rest  
**DOWN** 1. Commemorative 2. Agnate 3. Rigorous 4. Spa 5. Echo 6. Island 7. Letters-patent 11. Deter 13. Singular 15. Boiled 16. Flanks 19. Acre 22. Ass



### A thought for today

This is what separated us from you; we made demands. You were satisfied to serve the power of your nation and we dreamed of giving ours her truth

ALBERT CAMUS, Letters to a German Friend

## Wars, Govts, Facts

Trump's rage-posting on US media coverage of war shows why, in democracies, factual conflict reporting is so crucial

While many Americans were watching the Oscars, their president was rage-posting "FIRE!" Not at his FCC chair, Brendan Carr, but those Carr is targeting. He's threatening to revoke certain broadcasters' licenses, accusing them of "news distortion". Trump's post on Truth Social says he is "thrilled" at this mission. Because he's cheered off that despite winning a presidential election "IN A LANDSLIDE", various newspapers and TV news channels continue to report on his actions, independently, and critically. He wants them to be charged with "TREASON". In US, this is a crime punishable by death. It is also very narrowly defined, as "levying war" against US, or aiding its enemies. Basically, Trump is doing classic dictators' math, which is to equate fidelity to him as loyalty to the nation.

Except, obviously, democracies are different. US's First Amendment is about ensuring that power stays accountable to the people, rather than the other way around. This is no less so in times of war. War involves life-and-death decisions made by govts on behalf of citizens. Denying them info about these decisions, robs their consent of meaning. In Israel, there is high public support for the Iran war. But there is also heavy censorship of filming, photographing, or otherwise reporting Iranian missile impacts. Yes, today's wars are taking place in the age of social media and AI. Yes, these are information wars, as much as anything else. And what Trump's post does is to basically admit that, right now, Iran is doing pretty well in the information war. That's quite something to concede, and quite a comment on all of America's human and tech resources.

Indian news TV channels, for their part, are processing Iran war reportage through a spectacle max machine. Facts and speculation are churned through a *Dhurandhar*-style amplifier. But these are only one element in our diverse, pluralistic mediascape. Overall health of the marketplace of ideas, is what matters. Serious journalists can get things wrong in the fog of war (these will get corrected by other journoes). But so can commanders-in-chief. Remember Trump's saying, "In the first hour, it was over." Whether it is possibly an American strike hitting an Iranian girls' school, or US air force refuelling planes, getting hit, American press is doing its job, in digging beyond their govts' denials. It's a critical job. Look back at the Iraq war press coverage. It wasn't the coverage that defied gov narratives, but that deferred to these, which later proved to have failed the public. A free press matters more than ever at precisely those moments, when power is most tempted to not admit reality.

## Out Of The Mouth Of Babes...

...often comes the best of wisdom, as two pre-teen Tamil boys have shown. Adults, pay attention

Two, toothy'n grumpy underprivileged kids, "child influencers" on Insta and YouTube, made it to their chief minister's office—and got 15 minutes of adult-world fame. Their discovery, by the Tamil adult world and beyond, showed what simple joy, boring adults miss out on. Pre-teen siblings Deva and Jiva from a village in TN's Cuddalore, make tiny reels—20 to 40 secs long—on, mostly, the value of education, the Joneses trap (comparing with 'have-mores'), and a nod to poor parents' efforts to send kids to school. No doubt, the push for peer awareness and motivation has parental support; some sound parenting there. And no doubt, as Deva and Jiva turn teens, their views will evolve, as is the nature of the beast called teenage.

Now that they've met Stalin, their bobbling heads are bound to host more thoughts—it'll be fun to see if lessons on bluster & ego will follow. Handling even 15 minutes of fame can be tough, but what these two kids aren't, is camera shy. Neither can they be accused of stage fright. The rural family's creativity, and the fact that they've been on social media, are a fine example of the power of internet. It has democratised creative expression, and spurred aspirations. The little boys are invisible to the larger world. But they are mini-stars in their algorithmic world, with their ideas and spontaneous performance, and sheer creativity.

One reel, in particular, strikes a chord. The younger brother is scrolling endlessly Older brother: "What're you doing all day?" Jiva: "Watching reels." Over the next few seconds, the message: "If you spend all your time watching others succeed, you'll never create your own success." Peer wisdom, life-lessons, almost Panchatantra-style, are lessons not just for kids, but for adults too. Out of the mouths of babes...

## Circles & cylinders

On the shape of things, and how it shifts

Anil Abraham



"You must get into shape!" Kamala pronounced, as she casually body-shamed my generous proportions. I insisted that round was also a shape, as I quickly wobbled down a triangular samosa, while scrolling to check the goss from all over the globe. Cylinders were being discussed frantically while panic and people came up in serpentine lines. Geometric shapes were in fashion again. The globe had become a smaller sphere, with a tiny Strait of Hormuz making world leaders bend to its whims, and opt to follow the straight and narrow path.

"What's cooking?" Kamala asked sarcastically, as I browsed tempting pies of conical paper dodos. Not one square meal was cooking in our house anyway, ever since cylinders became the subject of shortage rumours. A similar crisis must have inspired Picasso to create cubism—an art form that many find difficult to wrap their heads around. Art is subjective, as Badshah must have realised, with his lyrics and visuals creating more controversy than the Epstein Files.

Much like Timothée Chalamet, who hid himself a square peg in a round hole, after his insensitive remarks on the fading relevance of ballet and the opera. The woke police have been running circles around Chalamet, while he attempts to play ping-pong with the fact that his Oscar aspirations have been hurt by the riotous of this remark.

Meanwhile the discussion has come full circle, with our own Mona Lisa of Mahakumbh fame making a bee-line to God's Own Country, bringing things back to square one. In her own personal Kerala Story. In nearby southern states, the eternal triangle figures in one Vijay's divorce, and another Vijay's wedding, both of which have the paparazzi running around in circles.

Meanwhile, Iran is insisting that countries shape up or ship out. Kamala has issued a similar warning to me, and I'm honestly attempting to use the cylinder shortage to get back into shape. But my friendly neighbour has distracted me from my target, by sending home a *dabba* of fresh hot *aleabis*. How am I going to be a shape-shifter, while my diet is spiralling out of control in concentric circles? World affairs or my protuberant paunch—a vicious circle is the shape of things to come.

# Electric Cooking Is Good Geostrategy

LPG troubles should push govt to free India from overseas dependency. Use LPG subsidy to subsidise new kitchen-use products for the poor. And to meet higher power demand, use Indian coal smartly

TK Anun



India should cook on electricity, generated from domestic renewables and coal, not imported hydrocarbons, whether liquid petroleum gas (LPG) or natural gas distributed to consumers as piped natural gas (PNG). Here is how to go about it.

**In the kitchen** | We need to cook on induction cooktops, not the traditional heaters in which a heating coil snakes around inside the grooves of a ceramic plate, not even infrared stoves. When a heating source is placed below the cooking vessel, the heat transfer takes place through radiation. About 60% of the radiant heat is wasted.

The induction cooktop works by producing a magnetic field on top, not heat. You can place your hand on it, and feel no heat. When a vessel made of magnetic material—iron, steel (except for some kinds of stainless steel that retain their crystalline structure)—is placed on the cooktop, an induced magnetic field creates eddies of current inside the wall of the vessel, and the material's electrical resistance creates heat. About 90% of the electrical energy supplied to the induction cooktop is converted into cooking heat.

Cooking vessels made of clay, ceramic, or aluminium will not work. Cookware specifically made for induction cooking has a composite structure: the bottom layer is made of a ferromagnetic material, the middle layer of copper or aluminium to conduct the heat efficiently to the third layer, on which the food rests, made of suitable materials.

To stir-fry in a wok, you'll need a flat-bottomed wok whose sides don't heat up like a conventional wok on a gas burner does, and stir a bit more than usual, as the food at the bottom will cook more than the food touching the sides.

To boil a litre of water, an LPG stove takes 89% more energy than an induction cooktop. At current, unsubsidised prices of LPG and electricity in Delhi, the fuel costs of cooking would come down 30% by switching from LPG to induction cooktops.

The well-off can capitalise the future savings on fuel to make the investment on the cooktop and cookware. CSR funds and state subsidy from avoided LPG subsidy can help the poor finance the transition. Govt additionally

needs to set standards for induction cooktops, and incentivise local manufacture of the glass-ceramic composite plate on which vessels are placed, the copper coil that produces the magnetic field, the inverter that boosts current frequency, thermal sensors, the cooling fan inside the cooktop, and the microcontroller that regulates the stove's behaviour according to the settings selected.

**Power generation** | While nationwide adoption of induction cooking would make a net saving on energy, its consumption as electricity would have to go up. In transport as well, massive energy savings can be



made by switching from hydrocarbons to electricity. Can India produce the additional power required? The question is redundant. World Bank publishes data on per capita power consumption across countries. India's level is one-third the world average, and less than one-fifth China's (2023 figures). If India is to prosper, it must produce a whole lot more power.

Does India have access to the fuel needed to step up generation? The sun, the wind, and the waves have energy waiting to be tapped. Non-fossil fuels account

for half the generation capacity, but account for barely 30% of the power generated. The rest is from coal (20,000 MW of gas-based capacity lies idle).

India has the world's fourth or fifth largest deposits of coal, of which 220bn tonnes are proven reserves. India mines about a billion tonnes a year, and imports a fifth as much. While the inefficient state monopoly on coal mining was done away with in 2015, bidding for mining rights could start only in 2020. Then, too, blocks were offered without first putting in place the needed forest and environmental clearances, and societal buy-in from communities, who stood to be displaced and had to be rehabilitated.

Would-be merchant miners bid too high, failed at obtaining clearances, and returned the blocks. India has gone back to allowing captive coal mining by energy-intensive industries like power, steel, and cement, although captive mining had been dubbed a source of massive corruption, and 204 licences cancelled.

The biggest scam in coal is that it lies underground, unutilised, while India has to import a fifth of its coal requirement, spending scarce foreign exchange. This reflects failings in policy and governance, besides in operational efficiency. Fixing this is a function of political will.

**Coal gasification** | Luckily, it's possible to use coal without mining it, if you gasify it. Coal is burned underground, starved of oxygen and in the presence of steam, to form CO, carbon monoxide, and H<sub>2</sub>, hydrogen, with traces of methane and moisture. This mixture that comes out is called synthesis gas or syngas. It burns, and can be used as the fuel for a gas turbine. Capturing the waste heat from gas turbines also allows a steam cycle to produce power in combination.

Syngas lends itself to chemical reactions to create natural gas or methane, which, in turn, can be used to synthesise hydrocarbons, including aviation fuel, diesel, and petrol.

Interestingly, Nazis used this process during World War II to utilise German coal and power their Messerschmitts and Panzers.

**Climate action** | India must, simultaneously, invest in R&D to develop and deploy technologies for carbon capture and use on a massive scale. Freedom from colonial slavery of the mind means trusting Indian capacity for R&D, and funding it.

## Oscars: One Safe Choice After Another

*One Battle After Another*, with its hollow depiction of activism, is just the kind of film the Academy likes to reward, writes a film critic. The movie stands with immigrants, but without sticking its neck out

Anna M M Vettical



Social media is abuzz with conversations about Javier Bardem's unequivocal political declarations, at the just-politically Oscars. "No to war. And Free Palestine," the globally acclaimed Spanish actor said, while on stage at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, to announce an award.

"I really appreciate his voice in a room like that, where literally no one else said anything," the young actor Hannah Einbinder remarked afterwards. While stars in attendance made no effort to camouflage their reticence, about the most pressing world issues of the day, members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which administers the Oscars, kept up their tradition of voting for films that appear to be brave, without quite being so. The selection of *One Battle After Another* for the year's Best Picture Oscar exemplifies this decades long trend.

Director Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another*, is about the Far Left and Far Right at war with each other. Pat, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, and Perfidia (Teyana Taylor) are part of a revolutionary group known as the French 75, which

believes that violence is the path to change. While rescuing immigrants from a detention centre, one Perfidia degrades the commanding officer, Steven (Sean Penn), who later catches her about to commit a crime, and releases her in exchange for a promise of sex. Their trust results in a daughter, whose birth is followed by the three leads branching out, along different paths.

On the face of it, *One Battle After Another* is a saga of activists fighting xenophobia, racism, and right-wing hatred. The script makes a show of standing with characters who put their lives on the line, to oppose injustice. Their adversaries are also written as repulsive creatures. Steven, for one, is known to say: "You want to save the planet? You start with immigrants." Made past the energetic music and lavish scale though, and what you get is a lengthy display of superficiality, and lazy liberalism.

The film flirts from one militant scenario to the next, one catchphrase to the next, never seriously engaging with the issues these activists deal with.

It also caricatures them, making them out to be somewhat silly folk, whose fixation on a liberal vocabulary is referenced, minus any nuanced, in-depth examination of their politics. The crux of *One Battle After Another* is the Right are evil, the Left are well-intentioned, but come, let's make fun of them. It's the cinematic equivalent of the "both sides are equally bad" stance, which centrist liberals take in real life, to avoid antagonising anyone beyond a point, or when they've not studied an issue sufficiently to stick their necks out.

Perfidia and Steven's child is clearly a metaphor for this stance. She is a symbol of hope for the future, though we know nothing of her politics till the end. It's almost as if the writer wants us to believe that since Perfidia is black and

a left-wing activist, Steven is white and a hate-mongering status-quoist, the fruit of their amalgamated genes will turn out bright.

While the film may seem to confront Trump's anti-immigrant establishment, it safeguards itself by trivialising the establishment's critics.

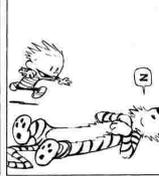
The Best Picture Oscar for *One Battle After Another* is no surprise though, considering that the Oscars have a long history of making similarly careful choices. Twenty years back, when the Best Picture nomination for Ang Lee's love story between two homosexual men, *Brokeback Mountain*, raised the hackles of conservatives, Academy voters gave the trophy to Paul Haggis's *Crash*, a reasonably engaging but simplistic take on race relations in contemporary society. *Crash* had enough redemptive moments assigned to characters from dominant social groups, to avoid offending too many people.

Since the Oscars go So White campaign and the Black Lives Matter movement placed a spotlight on the lack of diversity at the Oscars, the Academy has made an apparent attempt to improve racial representation in nominations, but treats gently even while doing so. Dee Rees' critically acclaimed *Mudbound*, a gut-wrenching tale of racism and the horrors of war, had four nominations at the 2018 Oscars, but did not even make it to the Best Picture category. *Hidden Figures*, a biographical drama about the actual struggles of female African-American mathematicians, who played a pivotal role in US's space programme in the 1950s and 1960s, did receive a Best Picture nomination, but lost out to *Moonlight*, which was focused on the intersection of racism and sexual orientation, but was mellower in comparison.

While *Hidden Figures* versus *Moonlight* is certainly debatable, *Green Book* with its saviour complex is not. The Best Picture winner in 2019, *Green Book* is the story of an African-American musician and his white driver, who ends up becoming a source of friendship and warmth to his wealthy, lonely, initially haughty employer.

*Green Book* made inter-racial mingling tolerable for conservatives. Escaping in mind the Academy's track record, it is but natural that *One Battle After Another*, with its hollow understanding of activism, earned the top prize this year.

## Calvin & Hobbes



Jug Suraiya

In Plato's Symposium, a conversation between real and imagined participants, one of the speakers, Aristophanes, recounts how the concept of love came into being.

Humans originally were created with two heads, and two pairs each of arms and legs, and were perfectly content in this unity.

The god Zeus, envious of their happiness, and being the meddlesome tyrant that he was, divided them, leaving each handed half in search of its counterpart to become complete again.

For Aristophanes, love was the search for this lost oneness, a view that Plato pursued with his axiom, "Love is the desire of the whole."

commercial events such as the celebration of Valentine's Day.

In Europe, the notion of romantic or courtly love was the socio-economic creation of the Middle Ages in the late 11th century, originating in the French regions of Provence and Aquitaine, and was propagated by wandering minstrels called troubadours who sang of gallant knights seeking to succour maidens fair.

In those times, marriages, particularly among the nobility, were like corporate mergers, based on the mutually beneficial joining of property and other assets; there was little or no love, or even affection, involved.

The knight in shining armour wooing his lady love became the emblem of a revolutionary protest against the mercantilism of matrimony, and

the subjugation of women by the rigid rules of patriarchy.

But even in this avatar, the ideal of human love retained its agency as a quest, a seeking for a part of oneself that had been found to effect an essential completion.

The trope of romantic love, often used to express the divine delirium of mystics who, across the ages and climes, have sought union with the Self that lies beyond the self, which is bound to earthly dust.

The 18th century saint, Teresa of Avila, sought and found the divine in a rapture of adoration, addressing her Creator in terms of endearment one would use with regard to a lover who needs to be cajoled or chided when necessary.

"Lord, save us from gloomy saints," she beseeched her Significant Other, and on slipping and falling in mud, she sharply

rebuked. "If this is how You treat your friends, no wonder You have so few left."

St Teresa's earthy spirituality has much in common with Sufism as articulated by poets such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi, both of whom could have been her Facebook friends.

Sufis use metaphors of intoxication and the passion of the unrequited lover in seeking that without which they cannot exist, thirst-parched travellers in a waterless desert.

"I am one of you. I am like the countenance of the Sun for me... Without wings, without feathers, I fly looking for you, I have become a rose petal and you are like the wind for me."

"I am one of you... I want you to belong to no other, not even to yourself. Be mine, be for me as you are in me, though you are not even aware of it."

Such a self in search of its other self is a love story like no other.

## Sacredspace



There is neither creation nor destruction, neither destiny nor free will, neither path nor achievement. This is the final truth.

Ramana Maharshi

## In Search Of Our Other Self



THE SPEAKING TREE

of adoration, addressing her Creator in terms of endearment one would use with regard to a lover who needs to be cajoled or chided when necessary.

## Sustaining stability

Fallout of the Iran war must be sensibly managed

It remains unclear when the Iran war will end. The biggest reason for this uncertainty is the lack of clarity over the war's objectives. Iran is raising the cost, not only for the United States (US) and its allies in the region but also for the rest of the world. The effective blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has created a shortage in oil & gas and pushed up prices. After touching nearly \$120 per barrel last week, prices of Brent crude oil are hovering around \$100. Since India imports over 85 per cent of the crude oil it consumes, and the bulk of the oil comes from West Asia, it is significantly exposed to the crisis. Sustained higher prices, leading to prolonged risk aversion in the global financial system, can also expose other vulnerabilities.

Last week, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a ₹1 trillion economic stabilisation fund to enable India to cope with global headwinds. Money will come from existing appropriation and additional allocation, though the government is expected to meet the fiscal-deficit target of 4.4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) this financial year. Reallocating resources in a crisis is a sensible policy choice. However, a few points are worth making. Despite a sharp increase in crude oil prices, the government could be reluctant to let pump prices adjust, resulting in fiscal pressure. This is because even though prices of petrol and diesel are deregulated, they are not regularly adjusted to reflect market realities. Higher fertiliser subsidies too will lead to additional expenditure. The government may want to support exporters hit by the ongoing war. However, it is not clear how this fund will operate. It is also unclear whether this will be a permanent mechanism, to which money will be allocated every year. If yes, what will happen to the fund in a normal year? Thus, more operational clarity is needed. One of the basic problems in India's policy management is the lack of policy space to deal with uncertainty because it usually runs a high fiscal deficit. Although the government has significantly reduced the fiscal deficit after a sharp increase in the pandemic year, it is still high, particularly when seen in the context of the economy's financing capacity.

Besides the difficulty in fiscal management, the war will also have implications for the external account. The rupee is under pressure. Higher prices of oil & gas will increase the import bill and widen the current-account deficit (CAD). Economists expect the CAD to be about 1.5 per cent of GDP in 2026-27, compared to around 1 per cent in 2025-26. However, a lot will depend on when the war ends and how oil prices move in the coming months. Risk aversion in global financial markets can make the financing of the CAD difficult. India is witnessing capital outflows, which may not reverse in a hurry if the crisis prolongs. Foreign portfolio investors, for instance, have sold India stocks worth over \$25 billion since January 2025. There are suggestions to incentivise deposits from non-resident Indians. Although there is pressure on the external front, India has healthy foreign-exchange reserves, which can be used to reduce volatility in the foreign-exchange market to an extent. However, those should not be used to defend the currency. In the given circumstances, the rupee is expected to depreciate and it should be allowed to do so in an orderly way.

## Cost asymmetry

Shift in fighting war is an opportunity for Indian firms

In the two weeks since the United States (US) and Israel began their attack on Iran, and the Islamic Republic retaliated by lashing out at those of its neighbours that have defence arrangements with America, an aspect of modern warfare has become ever clearer. Technological development has made Western weaponry more lethal. But it has also ensured that cheaper platforms — drones and previous-generation missiles — are harder to fend off when they come in sufficient quantities. This was already beginning to be seen in the battlefields of Ukraine, where Russia retains the upper hand even against arms provided by Europe and the US. Quality does not always trump quantity. The decades of American dominance and the development of ever more accurate offensive and defensive missiles had occluded this fact — until the wars in Ukraine and Iran brought it home. US allies such as the United Arab Emirates are fending off most attacks by drones and other airborne weapons — but each interception costs them about 10 times as much as it costs Iran.

The star for the Iranian side has been the Shahed-136 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), which carries a 25-kg warhead and costs less than \$30,000 to make. Effective interceptors, such as the Patriot, can cost millions. This imbalance means that war is now easier to fight on the offensive, and that even less advanced nations can pack a potent counter-punch — as long as they have the money or technological base to stockpile enough drones. Even Iran, long subject to isolation and sanctions, has been able to build thousands of Shaheds. They would have built even more if they had not been selling to Russia over the past years. The Ukrainians learned years ago to adapt, and have built their own industry of relatively low-cost drone interceptors, which ensure they do not have to rely entirely on expensive Western weaponry. But the US and Israel do not seem to have learnt the right lessons from the Ukrainian experience.

It is unlikely that this error will be repeated. Countries are unquestionably going to shift their attention to developing or acquiring cheaper air-defence systems, particularly to counter low-altitude drones. The Indian military establishment must not be slow to internalise these lessons. The example was the recent military exchange with Pakistan, when, at one point, reportedly over 600 UAVs were simultaneously fired into Indian airspace. Many of these were small drones meant to saturate Indian fire defence and map resistance. A small number of kamikaze UAVs accompanied them. While India managed to protect its airfields and other installations, multiple waves of such attacks are possible in full conflicts — and may well have the capability to overwhelm existing defence. While the procurement of counter-attack weaponry has clearly been stepped up over the past years, more must be done. There is also a clear opportunity for the indigenous defence industry as well as for startups. It will not just be the Indian military looking to scale up purchases. Given the common lessons being drawn by security planners worldwide, there is clearly a commercial and export opportunity, which must be seized in a timely fashion.

# India in a disorderly world

New Delhi must move beyond trade agreements to build an informal coalition of middle powers to reassert the global rule of law



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINGHA

India's greatest economic and diplomatic challenge in the short and medium term is the change in the global geopolitical system that is now underway. It began with the emergence of a government in the United States (US) that is transactional, amoral, and disdainful of the rule of law and multilateralism in international relations.

It has intensified with the war between Iran and the US and Israel, which has no justification under the rule of law agreed upon in the United Nations (UN) Charter. This is not the first time the US has acted in this manner. But unlike most of its predecessors, President Donald Trump made no attempt to secure UN approval and ignored altogether any sort of prior discussion, even with US allies.

The principal medium-term, geopolitics-related challenge that India will face is the drift of the US towards becoming an isolated and arrogant global power, or, more accurately, a global bully. This is a sad deterioration from the steady improvement in India-US relations started by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with the nuclear deal in 2008. India can no longer count on continued strengthening of relations with the US. In fact, it must be ready to accept the risks of sudden deterioration imposed by a mercurial Trump, constrained only a little by his friendship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

This challenge from the largest economic and military power in the world reminds me of what sometimes happened in the villages of India dominated by a single household with vast landholdings. While the accepted *jajmani* system generally ensured social stability, an occasional head of the dominating household over-asserted his power. This led to some organised resistance, mainly from the middle-level households in the village. That is what is in the global geopolitical system, and that is what India must quietly pursue.

There are some signs of growing connectivity among the middle-power countries. One sign is the recent free-trade agreements that India has signed with the United Kingdom, the European Free Trade Association, and Australia, as well as the recently concluded negotiations with the European Union and the ongoing negotiations with the Mercosur group in South America. These agreements reduce India's dependence on the US and perhaps even on China.

One request that is pending is for India to join an agreement titled the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or the CPTPP. This is a grouping of 12 countries that account for 15 per cent of the world economy. It does not include any of the great powers. But it includes middle-level powers like the UK, Japan, Mexico, Australia, and Canada.

Some other middle powers are considering joining. It is under consideration by India, though there are some parts of it, particularly on agriculture, that will be a major challenge for India to accept. From the broader perspective of countering the over-assertive powers of the US, and potentially of China, India must accept the compromises of the CPTPP. A strengthening of India's economic relationships with middle-power countries will be a basis for a related strengthening of diplomatic cooperation.

These new trade agreements are also important for what India must aim to do to cope with the uncertainty of trade policy fomented by the US. Post-2000, infotech services were the major driver of export growth, with their share rising to \$225 billion today and employing about 8 million white-collar skilled workers. The slowing down of this export growth and the decline in related employment growth from 8 per cent per year in the five years from 2010 to 2015 to less than half now are not just attributable to the trade policies of Mr Trump, but to a change in the nature of the infotech sector, with the rapid development and expansion of

artificial intelligence (AI) services. In the long-term, India's strong promotion of AI domestically may correct the current slowdown. But in the short- and medium-term, India must rely more on manufactured product exports for maintaining its export earnings at a reasonable level. The trade agreements that it has signed with the middle-income powers will support this best to goods exports. More than that, it will provide a basis for boosting growth in the states that are below the national average but which have the capacity to provide blue-collar workers for manufacturing plants.

A more difficult question is what India can do to cope with the disruption that is arising from the attack on Iran by the US and Israel and the spread of the war to the entire Gulf area. The immediate impact of the West Asia war is through the sharp rise in oil and gas prices, constraints in the movement of these through the Gulf, and a potential drop in remittances to India from West Asia, which amount to about \$50 billion. The more serious impact of war will be felt if it continues well beyond the 5-6 weeks that the US says is enough to achieve its goals of destroying Iran's missile, nuclear and naval capacity.

The most serious impact of this will be on India, China and most other Asian countries because of their heavy dependence on oil and gas supplies from the Gulf area. The impact of such an extension and broadening of the war will drastically reduce India's prospects of becoming a developed state by 2047. The answers to what India can and should do depends heavily on how long the war will last. If the US withdraws from the war in a few weeks, the economic impact of the war may get diluted, provided Israel also steps down from its goal of breaking the religion-based ruling power of Iran. But at present there is no way of predicting the future of the war.

One thing that is essential is to prevent the war from escalating beyond the Gulf region and dragging on over a prolonged period. This is where a group of middle-power states, whose political and military influence cannot be ignored, can play a role. If they can use their significant political power to assert the importance of the international rule of law with the US and the other great military powers, they may help in reducing the risks of an extended war.

It will not be easy to persuade all middle powers to condemn the illegal attack launched by the US and Israel on Iran, though even the European allies of the US are noticeably discreet in supporting the action. However, it may be possible to persuade them to use their influence to restrict the scale of expansion and to become a neutralising, war-reduction force.

This is why the world needs effective action by middle-level powers. My hope is that India, which is pushing the agenda for peace and is a significant economic and military power in the world, can take a lead in moving beyond the many trade agreements it has negotiated with the middle-power countries to build an informal peace-making coalition and reassertion of the global rule of law among these influential states.

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NITIN DESAI

related strengthening of diplomatic cooperation.

## Why RBI's words matter now

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will announce its next monetary policy on April 9. While every meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) draws close scrutiny, this one comes at a particularly critical juncture because of the conflict in West Asia. Even if the MPC leaves the policy rate unchanged, its communication will be crucial in calming financial markets amid heightened uncertainty. Markets will look for clear guidance on how the MPC interprets the uncertainty and what it implies for the future course of monetary policy.

In inflation-targeting economies such as India, communication is a key instrument of monetary policy. Financial markets analyse MPC statements and the governor's remarks for signals about the future path of interest rates. When central bank communication becomes complex or ambiguous, market volatility tends to rise (Sengupta and Mathur, 2019). This matters even more in periods of uncertainty, when investors and firms struggle to form clear expectations about the economic outlook.

Two main sources of uncertainty will shape the backdrop to the MPC's decision in the coming weeks.

The first is the war in West Asia. Until recently, India's macroeconomic conditions appeared stable, with strong growth and moderate inflation. That stability has quickly eroded.

The conflict has disrupted supplies of key commodities such as crude oil, natural gas, and fertilisers. India imports nearly 90 per cent of its crude oil, about half of its natural gas, and roughly a quarter to a third of its fertiliser needs, much of it from West Asia. Prolonged disruptions could push up domestic energy and fertiliser prices and event-

ually feed into food prices and headline inflation.

Inflation had already begun to edge up even before these shocks. The consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation rose to 3.2 per cent in February, a nine-month high. Although still below the RBI's 4 per cent target, the margin for comfort has narrowed compared with June 2025 to January 2026, when inflation averaged about 1.5 per cent.

At the same time, disruptions to global trade routes could hurt exports and production, given that West Asia accounts for roughly 15 per cent of India's exports. Higher energy costs may further weaken output and growth. Supply shortages often force adjustments that compress demand. The government has asked domestic gas producers to divert supplies towards households, reducing the availability for industries such as plastics, chemicals, fertilisers and aluminium. Restaurants and other service sectors that rely on gas may face higher costs and weaker sales. Rising jet fuel prices are also pushing up airfares, which could dampen travel and tourism demand.

This creates a policy dilemma for the MPC. Should it prioritise containing inflation and adopt a more hawkish stance, or support growth as uncertainty rises? The committee will also need to clarify whether the recent increase in inflationary pressures is likely to be temporary or could it generate second-round effects that require a policy response. Markets will look for clarity on how the MPC balances these risks, without which, uncertainty about the policy outlook will persist.

It is also worth noting that even though the RBI reduced the repo rate by a cumulative 125 basis points in 2025 to support growth, long-term bond yields have not

fallen. The yield on the 10-year government security has risen to around 6.75-6.80 per cent, close to the level seen before the rate-cutting cycle began. Normally, bond yields decline when policy rates fall. This divergence reflects rising uncertainty in financial markets. A clear articulation of the MPC's assessment of macroeconomic risks could help stabilise expectations and prevent further increases in yields during this volatile period.

The second source of uncertainty is the new CPI index introduced in February. The revision changes both the weightings assigned to items and the composition of the consumption basket, which has expanded from 299 to 358 items. The weight of food has fallen sharply from 37 per cent to around 37 per cent. Within food, the share of volatile items such as cereals has declined, while relatively stable components such as protein-rich foods have gained importance. A lower weight may make headline inflation less sensitive to temporary supply shocks, such as monsoon variability. If inflation becomes less volatile, monetary policy could also become more predictable.

But the implications are not automatic. Markets will want to understand how the MPC interprets the new index. Does the change in weightings alter its assessment of inflation dynamics? Will food shocks play a smaller role in policy decisions? Could the behaviour of core (non-food, non-fuel) inflation change? Clear communication on these questions will help stabilise expectations as the new CPI becomes the basis for monetary policy.

As the MPC prepares its April 9 statement, clarity of communication will matter as much as the policy decision itself. Minimising surprises and setting clear expectations will help ensure monetary policy remains effective in the volatile months ahead.

The author is an associate professor of economics, IGDR, Mumbai. His views are personal



MACRO PULSE  
RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

ally feed into food prices and headline inflation. Inflation had already begun to edge up even before these shocks. The consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation rose to 3.2 per cent in February, a nine-month high. Although still below the RBI's 4 per cent target, the margin for comfort has narrowed compared with June 2025 to January 2026, when inflation averaged about 1.5 per cent. At the same time, disruptions to global trade routes could hurt exports and production, given that West Asia accounts for roughly 15 per cent of India's exports. Higher energy costs may further weaken output and growth. Supply shortages often force adjustments that compress demand. The government has asked domestic gas producers to divert supplies towards households, reducing the availability for industries such as plastics, chemicals, fertilisers and aluminium. Restaurants and other service sectors that rely on gas may face higher costs and weaker sales. Rising jet fuel prices are also pushing up airfares, which could dampen travel and tourism demand. This creates a policy dilemma for the MPC. Should it prioritise containing inflation and adopt a more hawkish stance, or support growth as uncertainty rises? The committee will also need to clarify whether the recent increase in inflationary pressures is likely to be temporary or could it generate second-round effects that require a policy response. Markets will look for clarity on how the MPC balances these risks, without which, uncertainty about the policy outlook will persist. It is also worth noting that even though the RBI reduced the repo rate by a cumulative 125 basis points in 2025 to support growth, long-term bond yields have not

## High rider of the tech revolution



PROSENIJ DATTA

popularity as had search engines such as AltaVista and ASK. Hitomi, the first online free email service, co-founded by Indian-origin entrepreneur Saheber Bhatia, and bought by Microsoft for a staggering \$400 million had caused Indian entrepreneurial dreams to soar. Hundreds of Indian portals — and vortals (portals specialising only on a single vertical) — as well as Indian search engines, had been launched by entrepreneurs in India.

Nasscom, the association of technology companies in India, had gained prominence and started carrying as much heft as older industry associations. Harish Mehta, of boundless enthusiasm, was leading Nasscom and he, along with Mr Rekhi, would create an Indian TIE chapter. It would bring US tech entrepreneurs of Indian origin keen to give back something to the land of their birth in contact with Indian entrepreneurs. Mr Rekhi was a dynamo and TIE would mentor Indian startup founders, help them find markets and business models,

and even help with funding — directly and indirectly. The current generation of Indian digital entrepreneurs could thank their predecessors of the original dotcom boom and Mr Rekhi and Mr Mehta for making India more conducive to high tech entrepreneurship.

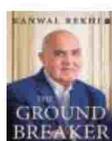
The book under review is Mr Rekhi's story — or the story of Kanwalnain Singh Rekhi, as named by his parents — in his own, unfiltered words. In many ways, this is the near-modern autobiography. It does not soften or sugarcoat events or opinions. While celebrating his wins and achievements, Mr Rekhi does not try to brush under the shadow his failures or his mistakes or some of his traits that became impediments in his journey.

The latter includes his tendency to speak too fast, which finally needed correction through speech therapists and speech coaches, or his sleep apnea or even his inability to be diplomatic, which often led to him losing out on career growth.

To say that Mr Rekhi's life has been eventful would be a severe understatement. He was born in a small village called Sukho, in Rawalpindi. His father, a remarkable man himself, was an army man who had fought in World War II. When India and Pakistan became independent, Mr Rekhi's father had to ensure the safety of the entire family. His three children, wife pregnant with the fourth, mother and bed-ridden father, three brothers and four sisters made the difficult trek to India, leaving behind much of their assets and money.

Kanwal Rekhi was not his father's favourite — not being physically imposing like his two elder brothers, and not being able to join the army. On the other hand, he was immensely talented in math and science. He would gain admission to IIT Bombay through the tough Joint Entrance Examination. Initially his father did not understand quite how much of an achievement this was.

Mr Rekhi moved to the US after IIT, securing admission to the Michigan



THE GROUND BREAKER: Risks, Rewards, and Lessons from a Legend Entrepreneur by Kanwal Rekhi Published by Harper Collins India 265 pages ₹799

Technological University. He would face racism but also kindness in the US. A pen pal relationship would lead to a marriage that endured till his wife Ann died from cancer.

Mr Rekhi saw the technology waves and revolutions close up. He rubbed shoulders with legendary technology entrepreneurs and businessmen — Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Ray Noorda, Eric Schmidt and many others. He found and lost jobs, despite being an overachiever, simply because the technology wave shifted direction and his employer hit the dust. He co-founded Excelan — a net-working company that had a

near-death experience before he took charge as interim chief executive officer and turned it around. But despite the fact that he made the company big and profitable, the board would choose another CEO. Excelan would grow big, and be wooed by multiple tech giants, before merging with the famous Novell Inc. Mr Rekhi would also drive many

changes in Novell, become a confidant of the legendary Ray Noorda, before he was sidelined by office politics.

Mr Rekhi was the right man at the right time in the tech revolution but he also had his share of bad luck. He became extremely rich and also lost a lot of wealth when companies in which he held shares failed to keep up with a new technology change. He was once in talks to invest 10 per cent in Saheber Bhatia's Hitomi when Microsoft snapped it up.

The marriage style is a lot like Mr Rekhi himself — rushing at full speed, and calling things as he saw and experienced them. The book is remarkable both for its subject as well as the picture it paints of the US, its strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first wave of talented Indian entrepreneurs, and the digital technology revolution — a delightful and insightful read that finishes too quickly, even though it is 265 pages.

The reviewer is former editor of *Business World* and *Business Today* magazines, and author of *Will India Get Rich Before It Turns 100? A Reality Check*

By 1999, most people tracking the India information technology (IT) sector had become familiar with the IndUS Entrepreneurs (TIE) and its dynamo driver Kanwal Rekhi, an Indian-origin entrepreneur from the United States. The internet had come to India in 1995 in a limited way but by 1999, India had discovered the World Wide Web (WWW). The first dot com revolution was in full swing in the US, and it had reached Indian shores as well. The birth of Netscape Navigator had brought the World Wide Web to the desktops of anyone who had an internet connection. Portals such as Yahoo!, Excite and Lycos had gained

# DECCAN Chronicle

17 MARCH 2026

## Kerala polls may prove tricky for both LDF, UDF

**K**erala broke the jinx of the last several decades and created history when it elected the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) to power for a second consecutive term in 2021. It was a change from the pattern that originated in the early 1960s when the state's polity for all practical purposes froze into two distinct entities, one the LDF, and the other, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). There have been minor changes in the alignment of small parties but the character of the two fronts remained more or less the same till date. What is interesting to look for in the results of the forthcoming elections to the state Assembly is whether the LDF wins another consecutive term or the state will go back to its tested practice of changing the government every five years, keeping 2021 as an exception to the rule.

The CPI(M), which led the LDF has been decimated in the two other strong-holds, West Bengal and Tripura, but it has kept its red flag flying high in Kerala because of the care it has taken to keep itself linked to the lives of the people at the grassroots level. From the first Communist government in 1957 to the LDF government which is in power today, the Left parties have adopted the twin strategy of maintaining their ideological positions, and at the same time, making use of the legislature and the executive to ensure that the last man standing was not left alone and that the government and society are working in unison towards his emancipation.

The outgoing government can be credited with introducing several epoch-making initiatives that bettered the lives of the ordinary people. The government has completed construction of about five lakh houses for the poor, distributed close to five lakh land titles meeting a demand of the last several decades and introduced an extreme poverty eradication programme which helped close to 30,000 persons. It also took concrete measures for the completion of several major infrastructural projects including NH 66.

The Left faces two major challenges for its return to power. One is an anti-incumbency mood prevailing among a section of the people who advocate change. The other is the charge, emanating from the Left fellow travellers, that the LDF made compromises in its core secular credentials. They allege that the ruling coalition, in its desperation for retaining power, played the soft-Hindu card, trying to propitiate major community organisations. The LDF's win in the polls will depend on how successfully it convinces the voters about its position and also of its indispensability.

The Congress-led UDF is an equally desperate position in that it has just managed to survive without power at the Centre and in the state for more than a decade; it needs to get back to power. It is banking on the folkies of government, including its acts of omission and commission in incidents of wrongdoing that include the theft of gold from the hill shrine of Sabarimala. The alliance made a reassuring performance in the local body elections held in Nov. and Dec. last year. However, it is finding itself in trouble as internal dissensions have taken mammoth proportions since the Congress and the allies smell that they have a good chance at regaining power. How the partners go back to the basics and work as a team will decide the UDF's fate in the elections.

The NDA, with the BJP at its head, is running on a roller-coaster ride in the state for quite some time; its vote share goes up and down without displaying a steady pattern in elections to various elected bodies. However, it is making steady inroads in several areas, a fact that was reflected in the alliance winning, for the first time, the election to Thiruvananthapuram municipal corporation. The party hopes to win enough seats to play the kingmaker if the two other major alliances fall short of a majority.

The 2026 Kerala Assembly elections promise to create interesting patterns which are unavailable in most other states.

## Oscars prove love of art is universal

**A**rt is universal. And music can be said to appeal to the soul first. It was no surprise then that the song "Golden" from the film K-pop Demon Hunters should prove such a universal hit as to win an Oscar even though the movie it is featured in won the award for the best animated feature film. A double for its Korean film and its music comes with the force of refreshing winds of a new trend. The march of taste for Korean culture, especially among the youth and not only in the USA but in India too, where Korean music and movies are making waves among very young people, found recognition in the songs for "Golden" at the Oscars and for the movie that had also won awards at the Golden Globes, the Critics' Choice awards and PGA awards. "Golden" became the first K-pop song to win a Grammy and an Oscar.

The universality of its appeal may be behind the phenomenon of music being so popular as a subculture, and regardless of the language of the lyrics. The songwriter EJAE, who found acceptance as a performer in the USA and is now being Korean, relished the acceptance that she said she owed to resilience. Her success lent an exotic spotlight to the Oscars that has often been upbraided for being "mostly white".

The recurring theme of there being no escape from politics at the Hollywood showpiece event was in evidence not only in actor and presenter Javier Bardem's one-liners like "No to war" and "Free Palestine". Michael B. Jordan's portrayal of twins in life in Mississippi of the 1980s recognises what the blacks went through to find social acceptance.

The best picture award going to "One Battle After Another" carries a message about contemporary America, which while being led down the garden path in an authoritarian way is also inviting cries of fascism as the state engages in militarism in wars fought a long way from home.

The best cinema music, still a position some so needed when seeing the course humanity is taking. To the credit of Warner Bros, soon to be bought over, they produced two acclaimed movies like "One Battle After Another" and "Sinners" in the same year with the films going hammers and tongs at the Oscars.

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Aakar Patel

## Are there principles in our foreign policy? Or should India just go by opportunism?

**O**n November 4, 2013, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh spoke to over 120 heads of Indian missions and outlined the five principles that defined his foreign policy. They were: First, recognition that India's relations with the world — the major powers and Asian neighbours — were shaped by its development priorities. Second, that greater integration with the world economy would benefit India and enable Indians to realise their creative potential. Third, to seek stable, long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with all major powers. And to work with the international community to create a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations. Fourth, to recognise that the Indian subcontinent's shared destiny required greater regional cooperation and connectivity. Fifth, a foreign policy defined not merely by interests, but also by the values dear to Indians. "India's experiment of pursuing economic development within the framework of a plural, secular and liberal democracy has inspired people around the world and should continue to do so." This was a clear exposition of what was sought to be achieved. India would use foreign policy to

advance its economic development; it would be friendly with global great powers and its neighbours; and it would be helped in doing this by continuing to be a pluralist and secular democracy. I will not go into the present government's foreign policy principles, mainly because it doesn't have any. This is not a smear or a casual observation and I have devoted a chapter in a book to explain why. It is in fact the case that the external affairs minister not only accepts that our policy has no principles; he says that lack of principles is the basis of our policy. In a book of his compiled essays and speeches, he has laid out what he means. What India wanted was a "multi-polar Asia", meaning one in which India could claim parity with China. He offers no way of doing this, but assumes that we can merely because we desire it to be so. He writes that many balls would need to be kept in the air (S. Jaishankar has a fondness for stock phrases) and India would handle them with dexterity. This was opportunism, but that was all right because opportunism was India's culture. The Mahabharata's lessons, Mr Jaishankar writes, are that deceit and immorality are merely expedients. The demand of the external world of Eklayva's thumb, India's appropriation of Karan's armour, Arjuna using Shikhandi as a human shield, these were but "practices and traditions". Inconsistency in policy was not only the but required because "obsessing about consistency

had little sense in changing circumstances. There was a man who could put into words something that was insubstantial and make it sound reasonable. But what was such a doctrine to be called? In a speech he made where he first laid out this doctrine of opportunism and inconsistency, Mr Jaishankar said it was hard to give it a name. He takes up and discards the phrases — "multi-aligned", "sounds too opportunistic" and "India first" ("sounds self-centred"). He settles at "advancing prosperity and influence", which he says is accurate but admits is not catchy. He believes some name for it will eventually come if it is pursued long enough, because part of the challenge is that we are still in the early phase of a major transition. This was published some time ago, in the second term of this government. The world, as we can see all around us, has changed. It has become uncertain and it has turned dangerous, especially for nations that are dependent, as we are, for energy and for external employment, especially in the Gulf. US President Donald Trump has offered no real reason for starting this third American Gulf War and has articulated no real aims that he wants achieved, besides tactical ones. The minister handling America's defence (war) department appears totally unhinged and incompetent in his press briefings. How the war will conclude is not known to anyone because Iran has

a say in how and when it will end. Israel's involvement in the attack makes this war particularly alarming because it, unlike America, can't just cut and run, since it is part of the region and armed with nuclear weapons. What is to be done by India in this time and what is the policy to be adopted? Perhaps we will get by through what Mr Jaishankar is saying we should do. And looking at what we are doing seems clear that we have proceeded along the lines of opportunism. Hours before the war, with an armada in place, we flew to Tel Aviv to receive a medal, endorsing what was to come. We have shied away from condemnation of state assassinations, of the mass murder of schoolgirls and the murder of sailors without a declaration of war. Where we see opportunity, such as getting a couple of tankers out, we will take it. We have no role in the larger making of peace or the reestablishment of a rules-based order because our creed is opportunism and that means not shaping the world but taking short-term advantage where we can. Perhaps this will work, but equally, it might not. And for this reason, we should go back to first principles. Reconsidering what Manmohan Singh said about India's external policy, what it is intended to achieve and for what reason is a good start.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar\_patel



## An unprecedented run-up to a predictable election?



Shikha Mukerjee

**T**here is nothing regular about the 2026 Assembly elections in four states — Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Assam — as well as the Union territory of Puducherry. The elections will be an unprecedented chapter in India's electoral politics. One state, West Bengal, begins the election process with dates announced and the Model Code of Conduct in place, with an incomplete list of voters. Over 40 crore voters were slashed from the voters' list since the 2024 Lok Sabha election, which is unprecedented too. The outcomes may not be as unprecedented as the preparations have been.

Armed with the mantra of "Detect" and "Delete", the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of rolls carried out over almost six months, starting October, was designed to "purify" the dirty rolls and it is this process of filtration many times over, that sets the context of these exceptional elections. The clean-up act involves croses of names across nine states and three Union territories. West Bengal, as a border state, that the BJP's 40-year incrementally expanding narrative was the foremost location of illegal immigration and illegal settlement, has obviously been the focus of the most intensive scrutiny of eligibility of all voters. The EC has been particular in checking that no "ghuspathiyas" (illegal infiltrators) remain on the voters' list. The presumption that the 2024 voters' list used for the Lok Sabha was packed with "ghuspathiyas" has directed the EC's search for the ineligible. The SIR process, however, doesn't end the suspicion that some ineligible voters

remain on the West Bengal list, though how many and where the EC has failed to clarify. West Bengal will thus be a test of "purity". Disenfranchisement or purification is therefore, the subtext or maybe the substance of the electoral roll revision process and the election, depending on who is talking about it. For the Opposition across India, the elections will be a referendum on the BJP's blueprint for establishing a hegemony of power in the Constitution and the election in other words, the election will be based on the absolute right to vote of every eligible adult Indian.

That being the context, the reshuffle of voters in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu was a dramatic sideshow, triggering speculation on why it was done just before the vote. There were theories that West Bengal would be put under President's Rule (Article 356 of the Constitution) and the election would be put off till the EC disposes of all pending cases under adjudication, after the publication of the final electoral rolls on February 28. The two-phase election, instead of an eight-phase election in West Bengal is a relief and a break from the pattern of prolonging the process that the EC adopted in the two previous elections. In West Bengal, the verdict will be decided the issue on who is on the list and who is not. In West Bengal, a referendum on identity-citizenship. The focus has shifted from cumulative disenfranchisement of a single party in power over three terms to the emotive and sensitive issue of a Bengali identity and a configuration of nationalism that pointedly contradicts the BJP-RSS idea of Hindu Rashtra. The election will be about the right to exercise a choice, not a mechanical choice

together 77 seats of a total of 294 state Assembly seats. Mamata Banerjee begins with a tally of 215 seats, and as surveys by reputable organisations like Lokniti and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies indicate, over half of all women voters have consistently voted in her favour. There is also the Muslim vote, about 27 per cent of the population, which has voted tactically in previous elections and is going to do so this time too. The BJP's relentless polarising and communal divisive politics has consolidated Muslim votes against the party and in West Bengal consolidated behind the Trinamul Congress. It is unlikely that the Muslim vote will be split by mavens like Humayun Kabir in Murshidabad to the point that the TMC, despite its advantage, falls to win seats where Muslims are a significant block.

The EC has targeted Murshidabad, Malda, North Dinajpur, North and South 24 Parganas for the large-scale issue of adjudication notices; these being Muslim majority or districts with significant pockets of Muslim voters there is uncertainty about whether they will get to vote. West Bengal has been particularly unforgiving to political parties that fall the trust test. Since 1952, the state has been ruled by three political parties, the Congress till 1977, barring two small periods when the United Front was in power, the CPI(M)-led Left Front till 2011, and then the Trinamul Congress over three terms. The corollary of these long stints in power is that once rejected by voters, the losers tend to fade.

Mamata Banerjee is not as yet a spent force. The BJP is the Opposition in the state but not a challenger. For the BJP, the 2026 contest will determine its future in West Bengal and public perception across the country, because Mamata Banerjee is a newsmaker.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist

### LETTERS

#### FOR A FAIR POLL

The Election Commission of India has fixed April 23 as the day for the people of Tamil Nadu to vote for their representatives. It will go down in the history as one of the toughest elections fought. The two major parties, DMK and AIADMK, have limited time at their disposal to face the electorate, given the fact that they have not finalised the sharing of seats and constituencies yet. The EC should ensure that money and muscle power, and unfair practices do not come into play and affect the choices of voters.

S. Ramakrishnasayee  
Chennai

#### HONOUR UNDER CLOUD

The Jnanpith award for poet and lyricist Vaikomuthu has raised more eyebrows than applause, particularly among women. The shadow of "Me Too" allegations continues to cloud the honour. Artistic brilliance may earn awards, but it cannot replace integrity. However great the achievement, character matters more. Those who receive the nation's highest honours must inspire society not only through their talent, but also through their conduct.

A.P. Thiruvaidi  
Chennai

#### GOOD LPG NEWS

It is good news that 2 LPG tankers carrying 46,000 metric tonnes of LPG have crossed the trouble-strait of Hormuz under the Indian Navy's escort. This is a special win for External Affairs Minister Jaishankar who prevailed over the Iranian stance to arrange for the safe passage of our LPG cargoes. It is heartening to know that six more LPG carriers are arriving shortly from different parts of the world to ease the crisis brewing in our country. The evil designs and plans of the opposition parties to fish in the troubled waters to derive political mileage should fall in this regard.

Vaithianathan Subramanian,  
Madurai

#### END THE WAR

US President Donald Trump described the war as an "excursion" and he now threatens more strikes "just for fun". He should be a soldier or a civilian living in an area where bombing takes place to know how much fun it is. True to form, Trump says that he is not ready to make a deal with Iran, betraying his preference of war over diplomacy. That Iran has not asked for a ceasefire is another matter. The international community must act to bring the senseless war to an end before it becomes a war of attrition, destruction and unimaginable suffering.

G. David Milton  
Maruthanathan  
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## States' vote with national resonance

Four states and a Union Territory have entered the run-up to the Assembly elections. Over the past many months, political parties have been readying themselves for the fray. Now, the poll schedule announced by the Election Commission of India has presented them with a challenge – a quick shifting of gears, from preparation to campaign on the ground. Assam, Kerala, and the UT of Puducherry will vote first on April 9, followed by Tamil Nadu on April 23, and West Bengal on April 23 and April 29. The votes will be counted on May 4.

These elections are significant for the stakes they carry for India's larger opposition bloc. The states are distinct in terms of what they signify politically, but together, three of them constitute a credible ideological opposition to the BJP at the Centre. The governments in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, led by the DMK, the CPM, and the Trinamool Congress, respectively, will have their share of incumbency-driven concerns. But political coalitions in these states have held power for multiple terms, and these alliances will take no chances as they kick off their campaigns for continuance. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK, along with Congress and other allies, will go to the polls on the plank of Dravidian identity and the government's performance record. Its traditional rival, the AIADMK, is allied with the BJP, which is eyeing its big breakthrough in the state. However, the picture is not clear yet, with confusion prevailing about the position of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam, the newly-formed outfit led by actor Vijay.

The Congress-led opposition alliance in Kerala, the UDF, may fancy its chances but will have to navigate the coalition's inherent weaknesses – a lack of discipline, factionalism, and gaps in campaign strategy. In West Bengal, the BJP, which has steadily improved its position and is now the state's primary opposition party, will be engaged in a fierce, high-stakes battle to topple the TMC. But the party faces a formidable opponent in Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who will set the tone for a no-holds-barred contest. In Assam in 2021, the difference in vote shares between the BJP and the Congress was not overwhelming. The 2026 results will also count for the polarisation the state has witnessed over five years. It is worth noting that the elections follow the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. Their outcomes will also be scrutinised for the impact, if any, of the revision.

## Child sexual abuse: The cycle must break

The Karnataka High Court's refusal to quash proceedings against a person over the possession of child pornography reiterates that the mere storage of such material on a mobile phone constitutes a punishable offence. Justice M Nagappasanna's order draws strength from the landmark Supreme Court judgment in *Just Rights for Children Alliance v. S. Harish & Ors.*, which clarified that the possession, consumption, or failure to delete such material constitutes a criminal act. It rightly acknowledges that even silent consumption sustains the market for abuse. The apex court recognised that digital files depicting the abuse of children are records of real crimes and perpetuate the cycle of exploitation. Each act of viewing or storing such material effectively revictimises the child whose suffering has been recorded, ensuring that the trauma never truly ends as long as the images continue to circulate. By consuming such material, the viewer becomes an audience that validates and sustains the crime. Even when no money changes hands, downloads and online traffic signal demand, encouraging further exploitation and the creation of new content. This perverse behaviour represents a grave distortion of empathy and social responsibility. As such, the privacy of a personal device cannot be used as a shield for conduct that derives gratification from the violation of a child. The State, therefore, has a compelling interest to intervene in private habits that contribute to graves societal harm.

Globally, most advanced countries treat the possession of child abuse material as a serious criminal offence. Sweden, Canada, and Australia have gone a step further by introducing extraterritorial provisions that allow authorities to prosecute citizens even for offences committed abroad, where laws may be weaker. Most countries have now ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obligates them to criminalise the possession of such material. However, gaps in legislation and enforcement in some countries continue to create havens where offenders can operate with relative impunity, a troubling reality in an internet era without geographical boundaries.

The courts' message is clear. The law must treat the possession of child abuse material not as a private moral failing, but as participation in a chain of exploitation that begins with the abuse of a vulnerable child. Justice Nagappasanna's order reinforces the principle that technology cannot dilute accountability. In the digital age, the defence of children demands vigilance from courts, government, and society. Only when possession itself is unequivocally condemned and prosecuted can the demand that fuels such crimes be meaningfully curtailed.

The Assembly polls will test the incumbents; outcomes will also shape a larger, ideological narrative

The Karnataka HC rightly reaffirms that passively consuming child abuse material perpetuates harm to victims

## COMMENT

### RULES OF OVERSIGHT

# The deepfake dilemma: Speed or safety?

India and the UK are quick on content takedowns, but regulating algorithms that shape people's lives requires more

KANADPRIYA BASU AND AMANDA BROCK

Imagine a fake video of a popular actor endorsing a politician goes viral the night before an election. It's a deepfake, completely fabricated, and spreading fast. What happens next depends entirely on where you live. In India, the platform hosting that video has about three hours to take it down. Miss the window, and they lose their legal protection. The law doesn't care how the fake was made or where it came from. It cares that it's still up, still spreading, still doing damage.

In the European Union (EU), regulators, if they were to enforce, would rather go after the AI system that created the fake in the first place, long before it ever had a chance to go viral. The thinking there is that if you build the machine safely, the mess is less likely to happen at all. This difference reveals the contrasting ways major democracies are approaching AI regulation. The EU is regulating the machine. India is regulating the mess it leaves behind.

For instance, the EU has passed a sweeping AI Act that sorts these systems into risk categories, and the ones higher on this list face more severe regulations than the ones below. Countries such as Belgium are incorporating these safety features into the products before they are even shipped by way of regulation.

Deployment of AI in sensitive domains like healthcare, hiring, or credit requires thorough preparation. Despite the implementation of these regulations in the EU, the claims of their having hindered innovation, as per the Dagge Report, have led to a pause in enforcing the Act for the next 12 months.

Neither India nor the UK has adopted an EU-inspired AI statute, trying to cope with the situation by stitching together older rules, regulations, data protection frameworks, and so on. For India, there's a set of AI governance guidelines that lay out seven broad principles, things like "Innovation over Restriction" and "Trust is the Foundation." These are, however, suggestions, not enforceable rules. The UK, in contrast, has asked sectoral regulators in health, finance, and beyond to adapt existing rules where they can so that they can regulate AI where it mat-

ters most, while keeping things flexible as technology evolves.

Thus, when AI-generated intimate images started spreading on X without consent, UK authorities applied existing laws criminalising nonconsensual sharing of intimate pictures, forcing X to restrict the content. It worked, and it was fast.

As AI leaders, India and the UK aren't ignoring regulation. They're just making a different bet. And you can see why. For India, with a 1.4-billion population, AI could be genuinely transformative. Getting crop advice to a farmer in Bihar in his own language, or helping a nurse in a rural clinic triage patients faster – and these things matter. Worrying about



whether some foundation model poses a "systemic risk" feels like tomorrow's problem.

Both these countries have closely kept an eye on the EU, where experts and even Big Tech companies are struggling with these rules. Apple and Meta held back AI products in Europe to avoid compliance issues, leaving citizens without access. The idea, therefore, is to find a middle ground: stricter than the US's largely hands-off policy but lighter than the EU's over-protective approach, allowing companies to innovate while still being accountable.

### Impacting life outcomes

Here's where things get tough. India has taken an aggressive stance on AI-generated deepfakes or misinformation. Platforms are expected to take down flagged material within two to three hours, failing which, they lose their safe-harbour protection and become legally responsible for everything on their servers. That's an enormous liability, and under such pressure, companies rarely investigate; they simply delete the content. The UK balances regulation better, but as Elon Musk discovered, AI-gener-

ated content faces more rules than the AI systems themselves. The real problem is that neither country has binding oversight of platforms that control real lives, like loan-screening algorithms or systems that suppress women's voices on LinkedIn. A comedian's satire can vanish in hours, yet opaque scoring systems determining someone's financial future can operate unchecked for years. These priorities seem backwards when algorithms shape life outcomes with zero accountability while surface-level content gets immediate attention.

What does this mean for people on the ground? India has become a high-stress but high-reward place to operate for global companies. Compliance teams have to run nearly real-time takedown systems, label AI features, and tune their filters to match Indian legal standards. One quiet response to all this pressure was some are calling the "silent switch-off," where platforms are simply disabling their more advanced AI features rather than risk the liability, protecting their interests but leaving consumers with "weaker" products.

Indian startups feel this strain all the more, struggling to build expensive compliance systems, user logs, takedown workflows, and traceability tools that large companies can absorb, but a ten-person team running on seed funding cannot.

The methods adopted by the UK and India are not necessarily wrong. But when AI systems become embedded in courts, welfare systems, and banks, the current model may not hold. The same governments that want AI to power Viskit Bharat and the AI Opportunities Action Plan in the UK will eventually have to reckon with AI systems making decisions in critical domains, and principles in a guidance document won't be enough when something goes seriously wrong.

The question is whether light-touch regulation can actually work. Open standards and shared standards, like the New Delhi Declaration and the UK's Inspec framework, offer a practical middle ground. But here's the harder truth: deleting deepfakes quickly is easy compared to finding who's responsible when algorithms silently ruin lives. That accountability gap is the real challenge we must solve.

(Kanadpriya is a business professor at Castello School of Business, George Mason University, the US; Amanda is CEO, Open UK and OpenHQ, the UK. Mounita Mukherjee, communication strategist, The Institute of Breast Diseases, Kolkata, contributed to this article)

### RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## An emperor cut down to size

Tweaking Chandragupta proved more troublesome than harmful

CHANDER GUPTA

The monikers 'Rajiv' and 'Sanjay' were trending when I was born in 1959 in Kaithal, Haryana. These were the names of the adolescent grandsons of India's then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. My parents, swayed by the popular sentiment, quickly chose the name 'Rajiv' for me. A few years later, my father even christened his newly bought house 'Rajiv Kutir' (hut). Though my grandfather disliked this modern name, he kept quiet so as not to dampen the enthusiasm my parents felt at the birth of their first child.

In my primary school, I was admitted to a first course by my grandfather, who handled such chores in our household. Seizing the opportunity to finally have his way, he registered my name at the school as Chandragupta, modelled on the famous emperor Chandragupta

Mourya of ancient India. My parents, deferential as they were, reconciled themselves to the new name conferred by my grandfather. As I was only five or six years old, I remained oblivious to the transition from Rajiv to Chandragupta. Until I started school, I was familiar only with my nickname 'Tuti'.

Throughout the school years, I often faced moments of embarrassment when classmates teased me as Emperor Chandragupta Mourya. Whenever I told someone my name, the mocking question would inevitably follow: "Are you Emperor Chandragupta Mourya?" The teasing became something of an albatross around my neck in school. Fed up, I cleverly split Chandragupta to Chander Gupta while filling out the forms for the matriculation examination. 'Chander' became my first name and 'Gupta' the surname, nearly matching with the family surname.

Disappointingly, the manoeuvre did not yield the desired outcome. Tweaking Chandragupta to Chander Gupta created more confusion without freeing me entirely from the sobriquet 'Mourya'. 'Chander' sounded like half a name.

People would variously assume my name to be Chander Shekhar, Chander Prakash, Chander Mohan, or Chander Bhan. Moreover, 'Chander' at that time was often used as a middle name, as in Ram Chander, or Harish Chander, much like 'Kumar'.

The thought that 'Rajiv Gupta' would have resonated much better always haunted me. I often felt disconcerted that my parents were not assertive enough to overrule my grandfather, who formally named me Chandragupta at school. It is rather ironical that we have no say in choosing our names, which are fixed when we are too young to grasp their nuances.

Names that were popular in earlier generations have now fallen out of fashion. My grandfather's name, 'Dalip Chand', or my father's name, 'Lal Chand', would hardly be given to babies today. One rarely comes across names such as Vidyadevi, Shakuntala, or Sulochana for girls or Giridhar, Lal, Ishwar Chand, and Dharan Pal for boys anymore.

Perhaps the Shakespearean line, "What's in a name?" offers some solace to those saddled with unpalatable names.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## India must focus on alternate energy sources

Rising LPG prices and supply strain have triggered panic advance booking. The Union government's appeal to avoid hoarding is timely – panic only worsens the crisis for genuine users. Strict enforcement is also needed against misuse of domestic cylinders in hotels and restaurants, which reduces availability for families. The police should

conduct regular checks with heavy penalties. For a lasting solution, promoting biogas from kitchen waste is a simple, clean alternative that cuts dependence and pollution. Subsidies and awareness can drive adoption. Responsible behaviour, monitoring, and biogas will ease the burden. Anand Mestru, Kalaiburagi

### A force for change

Apropos 'Gen Z and regime change' (Mar 16), the recent reports show significant political participation of Gen Z in South Asian countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka. With increasing demand for government transparency and accountability using social media and digital platforms, they are expressing their concerns effectively. While youth activism plays a crucial role, it's also essential to be guided by responsible leadership. The government must engage with citizens and

### Ensure sustainability

I refer to 'Good call to revisit data centre policy' (Mar 16). Bengaluru's water crisis is not a distant warning – it is a present reality, and adding water-intensive data centres to an already strained system would be poor planning by any measure. The suggestion to relocate such facilities to coastal districts is practical and worth

pursuing seriously. Coastal Karnataka offers better water availability, proximity to subsea cable landing stations, and room for large-footprint infrastructure. The state government should move beyond policy review and establish clear location guidelines with enforceable environmental benchmarks. M Barathi, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

### SPEAK OUT

Initially, we were six short, and the NDA was three short. But even then, we chose to fight instead of bowing down to them. We will always fight against their ideology. But if some people hadn't betrayed us, our victory (in the Rajya Sabha polls) would have been certain today...



Tejashwi Yadav, Bihar LoP and RJD leader

Yeah, well, if ifs and buts were candy and nuts, then we'd never go hungry.

Sherrilyn Kenyon

### TO BE PRECISE

## EPIC FURY!



### IN PERSPECTIVE

## War jolts EU's autonomy push

Compliance with the US line is testing the bloc's economy and plans for an independent geopolitical order

K M RAKESH

The United States-Israel war on Iran has dampened the European Union's ambitious plan for a rules-based geopolitical order not hinged on Washington and its interests. All that zest and determination to carve out a new European identity, away from the domineering American establishment under Donald Trump that dangled the sword of tariffs, is gasping for air.

The chutzpah the EU displayed after Trump declared his intention to take over Greenland, the autonomous territory within Denmark, now appears to be a thing of the past. Few would even remember how Trump's brazen plan infuriated the whole of Europe, leading experts to believe that it would powder the region to find its own destiny delinked from that of Washington's.

But no sooner had American and Israeli armed forces begun raining missiles on Iran – for reasons as varied as regime change and a direct threat to the US, not just Israel – than most European leaders hesitantly expressed support for the war, although they were careful not to get dragged into the fight.

Barring Spain's Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who became an icon of resistance by denouncing the hugely disruptive war on Iran, European leaders chose to adopt "defensive" positions as the latest war in West Asia rages on with no clear exit plan.

Sanchez is the lone man standing against Trump, braving threats of a full trade embargo.

On the contrary, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said he was on the same page with Trump on the need to get rid of the "terrible regime" in Iran, but later clarified that Germany had "no interest in an endless war."

On a visit to the White House soon after the US-Israel combine launched their attack on Iran, Merz was a mute spectator seated next to Trump, as the American president went on a tirade against Sanchez.

Faced with a barrage of criticism for his lenience, Merz clarified that he chose not to aggravate the situation by making any comments. He perhaps remembered how Trump and his vice president, JD Vance, berated Ukrainian's

president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in a televised Oval Office showdown a year ago.

Spain's Deputy Prime Minister, Yolanda Diaz, was scathing in slamming EU leaders for letting Trump trample all over it. "What Europe needs today is leadership, not vassals who lay homage to Trump," she told POLITICO. She cited Article 1 of the United Nations Charter to term it an illegitimate war and reminded EU leaders to talk clearly in defence of international law.

France and Britain are the other big European powers that made it clear they would have no "offensive" role, although their armed forces were placed on alert to protect their boundaries and interests, especially after Iran targeted a British Royal Air Force base in Cyprus.

European leaders, except Sanchez, fell short of strongly reacting to a war they neither anticipated nor prepared for. As patience wears thin in the region, they know what is good for Israel is not good for America, let alone Europe.

### The economic fallout

For a region struggling with economic and massive unemployment, the timing of the war couldn't have been worse. The euphoria over the India-EU "mother of all trade deals" had not even died down when the missiles targeted Iran, killing its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and killing off its top leadership.

The escalation of the offensive has since affected the Gulf states and blocked the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping channel for energy security and trade, even for Europe.

Munich-based Ifo Institute, an independent economic research centre, has forecast that war-driven energy price hikes would badly affect the recovery of Germany, the region's biggest economy. Exports worth of a similar impact in the entire region.

With Iran located approximately 2,000 km from the nearest European borders in Bulgaria or Greece, the EU is aware that the region is not entirely immune to the ongoing war. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran pushed natural gas prices by 40% as supplies of Liquefied Natural Gas from Qatar stopped.

The European Union Agency for Asylum has warned of a humanitarian crisis worse than the 2015 influx of a million Syrian refugees. European leaders fear that another round of refugee influx could enhance the support base for far-right parties that are already huge concern.

(The writer is a senior journalist based in Berlin)

# Street vending deregulation: Balancing livelihoods with public health

ANANTHAPADMANABHAN

The Union Health Ministry's recent decision to significantly reduce the compliance burden on street food vendors and allow them to focus on their livelihoods is welcome. By removing redundant bureaucratic hurdles, official policy is moving towards a system that respects the entrepreneurial spirit of millions while maintaining a firm grip on safety. Street food remains the heartbeat of urban India, offering culinary experiences that stretch from the temple towns of the south to the high-rise corridors of the north. For decades, however, these micro-entrepreneurs have operated in a stifling regulatory environment, forced to navigate a complex web of certifications while living in constant fear of arbitrary renewal drives.

More transformative element of this policy shift is the introduction of "deemed registration" for the informal sector. By allowing a municipal or town vending committee (TVC) certificate to double as registration under the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the State has effectively acknowledged the absurdity of dual compliance. This move does more than save time; it validates the vendor's legal right to operate in the eyes of multiple departments simultaneously. By streamlining this process, we're finally moving away from a culture of policing and toward one where street vendors are recognised as legitimate partners in the national economy.

To further support this shift, the government has overhauled the financial thresholds that define a "small" business. Increasing the registration limit to Rs 1.5 crore is a pragmatic admission that many family-run stalls and food trucks handle significant volumes without having the administrative capacity of a corporate restaurant. Furthermore, by making these FSSAI licences valid for life, the state has removed a major source of corruption and anxiety. Vendors are no longer tethered to a cycle of renewals that often required "facilitation fees" or resulted in unnecessary service interruptions. Instead, they can focus on their craft, freed from the logistical burden of tracking expiry dates and repeated interactions with licensing authorities.

The removal of traditional gatekeeping shifts the burden of proof to "post-market surveillance" through a technology-enabled, risk-based inspection system. Rather than checking every stall randomly, authorities will now use data to target high-risk commodities like meat and dairy, while rewarding compliant businesses with fewer interruptions. This shift treats regulation as a surgical tool rather than a blunt instrument, ensuring that safety resources are deployed where the actual risk to the consumer is highest. It represents a move away from the "guilty until proven innocent" approach that has traditionally characterised small-business inspections.

In this decentralised landscape, TVCs have evolved into crucial frontline mentors. Since they include representatives from the vendor community, the system fosters a sense of peer-to-peer accountability that top-down inspections never could. This local empowerment is a double-edged sword: it offers vendors a voice, but it also means that the failure of a few can tarnish the reputation of many. A vendor who ignores basic hygiene now risks losing their municipal certificate, which carries the immediate consequence of revoking their deemed food safety status. It is a system that replaces the fear of the inspector with a tangible responsibility to the community.

The true driver of this cultural change is the Food Safety Training and Certification (FSTC) initiative. Education is being prioritised over punishment through large-scale training sessions that teach the essential "Five Keys to Safer Food". By focusing on potable water, waste management, and temperature control, the state is addressing the root causes of foodborne illness rather than just penalising the symptoms. A trained and informed vendor is fundamentally more reliable than one motivated solely by the fear of fines, creating a more resilient public health system in the long run.

In many developed nations, street food is strictly regulated through a system of risk-based permits and public transparency. In cities like New York and London, vendors are often required to prepare high-risk ingredients off-site or assemble them before final assembly at the stall. Furthermore, mandatory "letter grading" systems are displayed prominently, allowing the market to reward hygiene. This infrastructure-heavy approach ensures that quality is supported by access to municipal water hooks and professional-grade refrigeration. Singapore offers a different gold standard by transitioning from scattered stalls into permanent, utility-integrated hawkers centres. Quality is assured through continuous monitoring where a vendor's long-term safety record determines their grade. By providing clean water, electricity, and waste disposal at the site, the state eliminates the most common sources of contamination. This model suggests that while "smart oversight" is essential, providing basic infrastructure is the most effective way to guarantee public health without stifling the entrepreneurial spirit of the vendor.

Ultimately, these reforms represent a profound reimagining of the social contract between the state, the vendor, and the urban consumer. By simplifying the path to FSSAI compliance, official policy encourages thousands of vendors to join the formal sector, making them eligible for financial support like PM SVANidhi loans. This visibility also empowers the consumer, who can now rely on digital feedback loops and QR-code transparency to make informed choices.

Hopefully, replacing endless forms with smart oversight can pave the way for a system that benefits both the vendors and the consumers alike.

(The author is an independent writer)

## Bangladesh is taking steps to conserve electricity, which its factories need to keep stitching together the world's clothing

SAIF HASNAT AND ALEX TRAVELLI

The final Ramadan holidays started early for university students in Bangladesh, on March 9, but for all the wrong reasons. The country's main schools announced that classes were cancelled, effective immediately, until later this month. The government shut the campuses to save electricity—a drastic response to the global energy crunch caused by the war in the Persian Gulf.



Garment workers inside a factory in Bangladesh. About half of Bangladesh's electricity comes from power-generation facilities that burn gas. Nearly a third of that gas comes from Qatar, and the warfare in the Gulf has all but blocked its flow. NVT

"It doesn't feel like a vacation to me," said Abdullah Al Mahmud Mehedi, 23, who has been studying for a master's degree in social sciences at the University of Dhaka.

Like other countries, Bangladesh is worried about its supply of crude oil and natural gas. Access to the gas is of particular concern. About half of Bangladesh's electricity comes from power-generation facilities that burn gas. Nearly a third of that gas comes from Qatar, and the warfare in the Gulf has all but blocked its flow.

# The war is making it harder to keep lights on in Bangladesh

In addition to closing the universities, the government has started imposing temporary blackouts and other measures to conserve power. If the gas runs out, so does the electricity that turns on the lights and powers the factories that are crucial to Bangladesh's export-oriented economy.

All this is against the backdrop of Bangladesh's delicate political condition. The country voted in a new government just a month ago, the first to be elected since the reign of Sheikh Hasina collapsed in August 2024. Tarique Rahman, the new prime minister, took office in February declaring that his victory "belongs to democracy" but warning that the country "begins our journey" with a fragile economy.

Hasina was toppled after 15 years in power, by a student-led movement that harnessed a deep sense of outrage over a financial crisis. Bangladesh's economic model combines a reliance on making garments—nearly 85% of its exports—with the import of fuel and other essential goods.

That model exposes Bangladesh to forces beyond its borders. When Russia invaded Ukraine, disrupting trade and driving up the price of food and oil, Bangladesh's economy wobbled. The country's garment industry survived that crisis and the political chaos that followed, just as it had remade itself after a factory collapsed in 2013, killing 1,134 workers and scaring off foreign buyers.

The resilience of Bangladesh's factories faces another challenge.

Mohiuddin Rubel, the former director of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association who runs several factories of his own, blamed the country's penchant for single-mindedness for its vulnerability.

"Bangladesh is very good at doing one thing, like ready-made garments," he said. "We are not diversified." And the same goes for its power grid, which makes far too little use of renewable energy, in his view.

Shaful Alam, an analyst at Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis in Dhaka, said he was worried about the imminent shortage of gas and the need to keep factories humming.

Bangladesh already uses what is called load shedding, or planned blackouts, usually a couple of hours long, to reduce the strain on overburdened power stations. They are the scourge of modern factories, which cannot afford to idle thousands of workers.

## Surge in oil prices shakes Pakistan's already fragile economy

Pakistan imports more than 85% of its crude oil from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates by way of a single maritime route snaking through the Strait of Hormuz. The escalating conflict in the region has blocked that route and shocked Pakistan's already fragile economy.

Farmers in Pakistan say they will struggle to afford rising fuel prices before the harvest season. Some schools will move online Monday, but nearly half of the country's 250 million people are poor, by the World Bank's estimate, and many children go without a laptop, a tablet or a decent internet connection. And before Eid al-Fitr, many families are cancelling trips to their hometowns, clouding what is usually a festive period commemorating the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

"Pakistan is already bankrupt and surviving loan by loan," said Kaiser Bengali, a Pakistani economist, referring to the loans that the South Asian nation has received from the International Monetary Fund.

Surging energy costs have choked the economies of megacities and rural areas across South Asia. In India, some restaurants have removed slow-smimmered dishes from their menus to limit the consumption of cooking gas. In Bangladesh, universities have closed to conserve electricity and reduce transportation needs. In Nepal, the government plans to ration cooking gas. Pakistan has been hit especially hard. Nearly all its fuel arrives through the Strait of Hormuz, a route that is now being strangled by Iran. At least 16 ships, including oil tankers and commercial vessels, have been attacked in the Persian Gulf since late February. Tanker traffic has slowed, forcing ships to remain docked in the port city of Karachi. Pakistan's economic hub and a stopping point for many of those tankers.

With its supplies cut off, the Pakistani government raised fuel prices March 6 by 20% in an effort to stop hoarding—one of the world's highest increases since the beginning of the US-led war in Iraq.

With its economy hurting, Pakistan has also walked a fine diplomatic line. It has tried to strengthen ties with the Trump administration and has not condemned the United States for its strikes on Iran. Its economy is heavily reliant on the Arab states in the Persian Gulf for oil and natural gas, as well as remittances from overseas workers. But Iran is its neighbour, and about 15% to 20% of Pakistan's population shares Iran's Shiite faith. NVT

From the 1980s onwards, rosewood, teak and other valuable species were cut and transported from various land tenures, including notified forests. Timber from forest lands was often diverted using permits issued for private holdings. Timber merchants made Kodagu their base and continued plundering trees with the connivance of sections of the bureaucracy.

When the Supreme Court's 1996 order extended the Forest (Conservation) Act to wooded private lands, some officials sought a workaround by advising the Karnataka government to allow tree-cutting in coffee estates in the name of shade regulation.

## Who guards the forests?

B K SINGH

On December 12, 1996, the Supreme Court of India, acting on a petition from TN Godavarma Thirumulpad highlighting several violations of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, delivered a landmark judgment expanding the Act's applicability to all forests regardless of ownership, classification or notification. Prior to this judgment, the Act applied only to notified forests, excluding even the areas leased before the law came into force on October 25, 1980. It was also interpreted as inapplicable to the renewal of leases after the Act came into existence.

Following complaints from activists, members of the CEC visited the sites in early 2009 and held the officers responsible for violating the Supreme Court directives in Godavarma and for acting in contravention of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. However, the CEC submitted its report to the SC only in 2012. The Court took another four years to refer the matter to the National Green Tribunal (NGT). In 2022, the NGT constituted a committee, but no action followed. The guilty officers have since retired.

Such cases raise the question: Why do we need the CEC if blatant violations go unpunished? Administrative inaction has emboldened successor officers, while ecological damage manifests in the form of floods, landslides, and drought across Kodagu and the Western Ghats.

The Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan presents another example. Until a few years ago, more than 100 mines were operational around it because about 54,835 ha area of its 881 sq km critical tiger habitat had not been mutated in favour of the Forest Department. Under pressure from mining lobby, proposals emerged to redraw the boundary of the reserve to exclude mineral-rich areas. The CEC, which functioned as an extension of the Supreme Court until recently, visited Sariska in March and April 2024 to examine issues related to vehicular traffic carrying pilgrims to Pandupole Hanuman temple within the critical tiger habitat.

Among its recommendations was the rationalisation of habitat boundary by the end of 2024. The proposal was swiftly approved by the Rajasthan State Wildlife Board on June 23, 2024, the National Tiger Conservation Authority two days later and the National Board for Wildlife the next day. The revised notification excluded 42 sq km of mineral-rich area from the critical habitat and added 43 sq km of forest on the northern boundary to compensate. While hearing the matter on September 18, 2025, an SC bench led by CJI B R Gavai rejected the haste with which such an important issue—given the ecological significance of tigers—had been decided, and sent the matter back to the state for reconsideration. Once the boundary of any CTH is redrawn, it opens the floodgates for similar proposals elsewhere.

The Real Estate Regulatory Authority was also recently slammed by an SC bench, which found that retired bureaucrats heading it were not serving the public interest and even suggested winding it up. The CEC too has ex-bureaucrats who have not effectively fought for conservation. With the NGT already handling environmental issues, the CEC appears to duplicate institutional functions and should be wound up.

The Court had clarified that only trees artificially planted by coffee growers could be cut, and naturally growing trees should not be harmed. But old practices persisted. In 2004, the head of the Forest Department reiterated the Court directive and prohibited further permissions for tree felling. However, in 2007-08 thousands of trees on steep slopes in relatively undisturbed areas were permitted to be cut. Around the same time, authorities failed to prevent road being carved through the forest, using heavy machinery to create a shorter route between Madikeri and Subramanya.

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blamed the "inattentive audience" for their inarticulate talk. The psychologist again urged them to peer into the mirror. When they did so, they saw there was no trace of the scar at all.

## OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976

Wilson resigns, Labour to elect new leader

London, March 16  
Prime Minister Harold Wilson resigned his office today, only four days after he secured a parliamentary vote of confidence. His resignation is to take effect after the Labour Party elects a new leader to succeed him. Mr. Wilson has been Prime Minister for a total of about seven and half years. The present Government is the fourth he has led. He first became Prime Minister in 1964. Since returning to power in February 1974, Mr. Wilson has been battling with Britain's severe economic problems.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001

Govt orders judicial probe into scam

New Delhi, March 16  
In a major bid to contain the political damage to the NDA coalition government caused by the sensational revelation of alleged kickbacks in the defence deals, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee tonight announced a judicial inquiry into the Tehelka exposure. This was decided by the Union Cabinet this evening which was held after a coordination committee meeting of the NDA that reposed faith in its Convener George Fernandes who resigned as Defence Minister on Thursday.

## OASIS | MEERA SESHADRI

# Confidence illuminates itself

Sometime ago, a study by a seasoned psychologist was doing rounds on social media platforms. The psychologist had got together three men, all exuding confidence, to gregariously interact with a gaggle of enterprising audience members. The chosen three had to continue to talk for some considerable time on captivating topics and capture the listeners' interest.

It is no surprise; within seconds, the trio had set the stage on fire with their superlative communicative skills, thereby seizing the audience's focus. Next, the psychologist summoned the three aside and started drawing something on their faces, which simulated the sight of an unsightly scar. Then, he requested them to see their reflection in a mirror, resting on a nearby wall. Apparently, all three were aghest, looking at their awful face with an alarming scar.

Now, the psychologist, pulling them aside, proclaimed that he'd make the unpleasant scars more pronounced by potent strokes, further petrifying already perplexed men in the process. Later, he shepherded them on stage to speak again on sundry topics.

The first fellow, who had spoken with a feisty spirit, suddenly found himself



When the astute psychologist had

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ROGER BINNY Former all-rounder

Coming from a country whose population is so big, not many get a chance to represent India. So, for me, representing the country was the biggest goal I achieved in cricket



SHASHI THAROOR Congress MP

Kerala is an important election for us. The LDF govt came back to power last time, which is unusual because for nearly half a century, the two fronts have alternated... We do not want them to repeat that



KEIR STARMER UK Prime Minister

I want to see an end to Iran war as quickly as possible. We (US-UK) are strong allies, have been for decades. But it is for me to act in what I consider to be in the best interest of Britain

## Alarming rise in breast cancer cases

Every four minutes, a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer in India. Although highly treatable when diagnosed early, breast cancer cases have been on the rise at an alarming rate. The growing cancer burden is the result of several underlying factors, including lack of awareness, lifestyle changes, economic barriers and delayed diagnosis. Compared with Western nations, India has significantly poorer breast cancer survival rates. The latest data published by The Lancet Oncology presents a grim picture. The incidence of breast cancer in India has more than doubled over the past three decades. It is now the most commonly diagnosed cancer affecting Indian women. The age-standardised incidence of breast cancer has increased from 13 cases per 1 lakh women in 1990 to 29.4 per 1 lakh in 2023. The mortality rate has also gone up significantly, from 8.9 to 15.5 per 1 lakh women, marking a 74% increase. The data highlight a massive public health challenge. Unfortunately, over 60% of breast cancer patients in India are identified at stage III or IV of the illness. The general ignorance of women about breast cancer, its symptoms, and the value of regular screenings is a significant obstacle to the early identification of the disease. Numerous studies have shown that poverty, low educational attainment, lack of awareness, living in remote and inaccessible places, and having insufficient access to care are all linked to late-stage breast cancer diagnosis. Diagnosing the disease at an advanced stage seriously limits the treatment options and reduces survival rates.

Lack of awareness and unequal access to healthcare continue to worsen survival rates

In many parts of the country, talking about breast cancer is an uncomfortable conversation for women. Cultural taboos discourage them from discussing breast-related health issues with family. For some, the thought of a physical examination feels embarrassing, while others fear surgery, which discourages them from seeking care. In many cases, by the time symptoms appear, the cancer would have already spread. Awareness is more than educating about breast cancer; It is about helping women overcome hesitation. Another big challenge is the acute shortage of oncologists in the country. Moreover, nearly 95% are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations underserved. India also lacks specialist treatment facilities and sufficient mammography equipment. India's rising breast cancer rate mandates quick, multifaceted solutions. National screening programmes and community awareness drives are crucial for early detection. Equally important is equipping medical professionals with the knowledge and skills to address the issue. In rich countries, widespread screening and public awareness have helped stabilise mortality rates. India's challenge is to replicate those gains in a health system that serves a vast and diverse population with limited resources. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) and Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI Wave 1) show that only 1.3% of women aged 45 years and above have undergone mammography.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Making babies

To address the falling birth rate, the Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu is considering offering an incentive of Rs 25,000 to couples having a second child or more. He considers this to be a game-changer, as it would also address the ageing population. It is ironic that decades back, India's motto was, "We two, Ours two", to stop the growth in population. Making babies and creating a baby boom are easy, but the upkeep and rearing of the children in the years to come, followed by worries about employment, would drain the parents physically, mentally and financially. The monetary offer may not work because a working woman would have to sacrifice her job or take a long leave, and

these may not be possible. The woman has to recuperate and bounce back to normalcy after childbirth, for which she will need nourishing food, family and financial support, and the situation at home may not be conducive. The enticement of Rs 25,000 may do wonders as it is a one-off payment by the government.

SRIDHAR D IYER, Goa

#### Prioritise supply

The recent reports of LPG shortage disrupting midday meal preparations in schools across India are deeply concerning. This vital scheme nourishes millions of underprivileged children, fueling their dreams and futures. Amid global crises, let us prioritise swift, innovative solutions—alternative fuels, priority supply—to ensure no child's plate goes empty. Our children's hunger must never be a casualty of circumstance.

TS KARTHIK, Chennai

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

When measurement itself becomes a subject of debate, the informational foundations of economic policymaking inevitably weaken

PENDYALA MANGALA DEVI

Economic statistics occupy a central position in modern policy debates. Quarterly GDP figures, fiscal deficit ratios and inflation indices are often presented with mathematical precision, creating the impression that they represent objective measurements of economic reality. Yet economists have long recognised that national income statistics are not direct observations, but constructed estimates built upon assumptions, proxies and statistical conventions.

**Measurement, Growth, Limits** The intellectual foundations of modern national income accounting were laid by Simon Kuznets, whose pioneering work earned him the Nobel Prize. Kuznets himself warned against treating GDP as a complete indicator of economic welfare, famously observing: "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income."

This caution highlights a fundamental principle of macroeconomic analysis: economic measurement is always an approximation of reality rather than reality itself. The challenge becomes particularly complex in large developing economies where vast segments of production occur outside formal statistical systems. These issues have gained renewed prominence following the publication of the working paper "India's 20 Years of GDP Mismeasurement: New Evidence", authored by Abhishek Anand, Josh Felman and Arvind Subramanian at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

The authors argue that while India's growth during the mid-2000s investment boom may have been underestimated, the period after 2012 may have experienced systematic overestimation of economic growth. Their recalibration suggests three striking implications:

- Average annual growth between 2012 and 2023 may have been closer to 4-4.5 per cent, rather than the approximately 6 per cent reported in official statistics.
  - The cumulative effect could imply that India's GDP level by 2025 may be overstated by roughly 22 per cent.
  - Real consumption may be overstated by nearly 31 per cent, suggesting that household welfare could be weaker than implied by headline growth figures.
- If even partially accurate, these findings raise important questions about how India's economic performance over the past decade should be interpreted.

**2015 GDP Revision, Statistical Puzzle** The debate over the accuracy of the 2015 revision of India's GDP methodology, when the base year for national accounts was shifted to 2011-12 and several statistical adjustments were introduced.

#### These Included

- Greater use of corporate financial data from the MCA-21 database.
- Alignment with international accounting standards under the United Nations System of National Accounts.
- Expanded coverage of the formal corporate sector.

While these reforms were intended to modernise India's statistical system, they produced an unexpected puzzle.

GDP growth appeared strong even when several macroeconomic indicators suggested a weaker economic environment. Among the indicators showing divergence were:

- Bank credit growth, which slowed sharply after 2012.
- Private investment, which declined due to corporate balance-sheet stress.
- Export performance, which stagnated during several years of the decade.
- Industrial capacity utilisation, which remained relatively moderate. This divergence between robust statistical growth and subdued macroeconomic signals created what economists might describe as a measurement paradox. The Nobel laureate Robert Solow once remarked that the computer revolution could be seen everywhere except in productivity statistics. In India's case, the puzzle appeared reversed: rapid growth appeared clearly in the statistics but less visibly in the broader economic landscape.

**Informal Economies, Constraints** A central challenge in measuring India's economy arises from the scale of its informal sector. Millions of enterprises operate outside formal regulatory frameworks — including small retail shops, repair services, transport operators and household manufacturing units. These enterprises account for a large share of employment but often leave limited statistical records. Statistical agencies, therefore, estimate informal sector output indirectly by extrapolating trends observed in the formal corporate sector. Such methods may produce reasonable approximations under stable conditions. However, they become problematic when the two sectors experience different economic shocks.

Over the past decade, several shocks disproportionately affected informal enterprises:

- Demonetisation in 2016, which disrupted cash-dependent transactions.
- The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax in 2017, which imposed compliance costs on smaller firms.
- The Covid-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted informal services and labour markets.

Large corporations often possessed the financial and technological capacity to adapt. Informal enterprises did not. The Nobel laureate Angus Deaton has repeatedly emphasised that the greatest measurement challenges in developing economies arise precisely in sectors where statistical visibility is weakest. Similarly, George Akerlof demonstrated through his theory of information asymmetry that imperfect information can distort economic outcomes. When statistical systems lack reliable information about informal sector dynamics, macroeconomic aggregates themselves can become distorted.

#### Deflators, Relative Prices

Another issue highlighted in the working paper concerns the construction of price deflators, which are used to convert nominal GDP into real GDP. Real growth estimates depend critically on the accuracy of these price indices. If the deflators used do not reflect the actual prices of final goods and services, the resulting estimates of real output may become distorted.

The study suggests that some deflators used in India's national accounts rely heavily on input cost indices, including global commodity prices. During the mid-2010s, international oil prices fell sharply. Lower energy costs reduced production expenses and increased corporate profit margins.

However, when statistical deflators interpret falling input costs as falling output prices, part of the increase in profits is recorded statistically as higher real output. The sequence can therefore unfold as follows:

- Falling global commodity prices reduce production costs.
- Corporate profits rise.
- Deflators interpret lower costs as falling output prices.
- Profit increases appear in national accounts as higher real GDP.

In effect, cost reductions can be statistically transformed into growth. The Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson frequently emphasised that macroeconomic measurement requires constant methodological scrutiny, because statistical frameworks can generate misleading signals when applied to complex economies.

#### Macroeconomic Puzzles

If the adjustments proposed in the working paper are applied, several puzzles in India's macroeconomic data become easier to interpret.

#### INVESTMENT SLOWDOWN

Private investment declined sharply after the early 2010s as corporate leverage increased and the banking system accumulated non-performing assets. Growth rates closer to 4 per cent align more closely with the observed slowdown in capital formation. The Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps emphasised that long-term economic dynamism depends critically on sustained entrepreneurial investment and innovation.

#### EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES

India's labour market has struggled to generate sufficient employment opportunities for its expanding workforce. Manufacturing employment has stagnated, while labour force participation rates have declined in several regions. These labour market trends appear consistent with a narrative of sustained rapid growth. The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has long argued that development should be evaluated not merely through aggregate output but through the expansion of human capabilities.

#### AS SEN WROTE IN DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM

"The success of an economy should be judged not merely by the growth of income but by the expansion of the freedoms that people enjoy." If growth does not translate into employment opportunities and improvements in living standards, the strength of GDP figures alone becomes a weak indicator of development progress.

# India's GDP puzzle



#### CAPACITY UTILISATION

Industrial surveys consistently report moderate levels of capacity utilisation across manufacturing sectors. Factors operating below full capacity indicate subdued demand conditions — patterns that are difficult to reconcile with rapid growth but consistent with lower growth estimates.

#### Expectations, Credibility

Economic statistics play a critical role in shaping expectations within financial markets. The Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow emphasised the importance of reliable information for rational decision-making, while Friedrich Hayek argued that economic systems depend upon the efficient transmission of information across markets.

When statistical credibility becomes contested, uncertainty spreads across both markets and policy debates. The Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has been among the most prominent critics of excessive reliance on GDP as a measure of economic progress. He has argued that "GDP tells us little about sustainability, inequality, or the well-being of citizens."

Such critiques underline the broader concern that statistical aggregates can sometimes obscure rather than illuminate underlying economic realities.

Similarly, Milton Friedman emphasised the importance of credible economic data for effective policymaking. As Friedman observed: "The role of government statistics is not merely to measure the economy, but to provide reliable information upon which rational policy decisions can be made."

When measurement itself becomes a subject of debate, the informational foundations of economic policymaking inevitably weaken.

#### Importance of Measurement

Modern growth theory emphasises productivity, technological innovation and human capital accumulation as the principal drivers of long-term economic expansion.

The Nobel laureate Robert Lucas famously argued that even small differences in growth rates can accumulate dramatically over time. Similarly, the Nobel laureate William Nordhaus demonstrated how technological change and energy systems influence long-term growth trajectories.

Yet understanding these processes requires reliable measurement. When measurement errors occur, they can distort both economic narratives and theoretical interpretations of development.

#### Rethinking Growth Trajectory

If the estimates proposed in the working paper are broadly correct, India's economic trajectory over the past two decades may require reinterpretation. Instead of a smooth and uninterrupted expansion, the economy may have experienced a more cyclical pattern:

- A strong boom during the mid-2000s investment surge, driven by infrastructure expansion and global capital flows.
- A structural slowdown after the global financial crisis, as corporate leverage and banking sector stress weakened investment momentum.
- Additional disruptions during the late 2010s, including demonetisation, GST transition costs and the economic shock triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Such a trajectory would resemble the growth patterns observed in many emerging economies. In such contexts, the accuracy of statistical measurement becomes critically important. Growth statistics do not merely describe economic performance; they shape policy decisions, influence investor expectations and frame public debates about development.

Economic narratives built on flawed measurements can persist for years before being corrected. But when they are eventually revised, they often force policymakers, economists and the public alike to reconsider the assumptions that shaped earlier debates.

As economists have long understood, growth is not merely an economic phenomenon, it is also a statistical construct. And when the statistical foundations shift, the narrative of development must inevitably shift with them.



## Ball is now in ECI's court

With the announcement of polling dates by the Election Commission, the electoral process has formally begun in several parts of the country. Assembly elections will be held in Assam and Kerala and in the Union Territory of Puducherry on April 9 in a single phase. Tamil Nadu will vote on April 23, while West Bengal will go to the polls in two phases on April 23 and April 29. What stands out in the schedule, however, is the unusually long gap between polling and counting in some places. Voters in Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry will cast their ballots on April 9 but will have to wait until May 4 to know the outcome. This means nearly three weeks of suspense before the results are declared. By contrast, in constituencies voting on April 29 in West Bengal, the wait for the results will be barely four days.

Ideally, there should not be such a wide gap between polling and counting. If votes cast on April 29 can be counted and the results declared on May 4, it is difficult to understand why polling in other states could not have been scheduled closer to the counting date. A shorter interval would reduce speculation, political tension, and administrative uncertainty. The situation becomes even more puzzling when one recalls the conduct of the first general elections in independent India. At that time technology was minimal and ballot papers had to be printed separately for each constituency. Yet nationwide polling could be completed within two or three days and the results announced soon after. Today, with electronic voting machines in place, the waiting period should logically be shorter, not longer. Questions also arise about the need for multi-phase polling in states like West Bengal when other states are voting in a single phase. Unless there are compelling logistical or security reasons, such variations invite unnecessary debate and suspicion.

Another concern relates to the timing of the election announcement. Once elections are declared, the Model Code of Conduct comes into force, preventing governments from announcing projects or schemes that may influence voters. Critics allege that the announcement was delayed until the last moment, allowing the ruling establishment to make a series of declarations in poll-bound states. During this period, leaders, including Narendra Modi, visited these states to inaugurate major projects and even flag off train services—tasks that could easily have been performed by the concerned ministers. Such high-profile appearances inevitably create the impression of an attempt to influence voters. Political opportunism, of course, is not confined to one party or one state. That is precisely why the Election Commission must act firmly now that the Model Code of Conduct is in force. Any attempt to influence voters through inducements, communal propaganda or other questionable methods must invite swift action.

## No mandate for menstrual leave

By declining to mandate a national menstrual leave policy last week, the Supreme Court has lobbed the ball right back to where it should be played: elected bodies such as Parliament and state assemblies and private organisations. It is neither the responsibility nor the business of the apex court to lay down such a policy despite the petition filed before the two-judge bench led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant. The public discourse over this issue has been split down the middle—one side, mostly public health professionals, has been advocating menstrual leave as a part of the well-being of women workers, but the other side, mostly conventional workplaces and some feminists, has argued that this puts women at a disadvantage.

While the jury is out, the reality is that a few state governments like those in Odisha, Bihar, Kerala, and Karnataka, besides a clutch of major corporates, have voluntarily instituted a menstrual leave policy over the past few years. The impact of these policies, or even the implementation, including how many women claim the leave and how many times in a year, remains largely anecdotal or guesswork, given the lack of reliable data. However, the picture that emerges is that women in formal workplaces claim the leave when they badly need it, while women in informal workplaces have been largely unaware of the privilege or are denied it. This points to some of the challenges on the ground even when a policy exists. In this context, the remarks of the Supreme Court are disquieting.

The learned judges, while hearing the petition, stated that if they were to make a national policy or law mandating menstrual leave, "no one will hire women" besides making young women think they were "not on par" with their male colleagues, and this would be "harmful for their growth" or unintentionally deny them "big responsibilities". The first part of it holds its own—in a country with a workforce as diverse as it is in India, the classic one-size-fits-all law on menstrual leave from the SC would be ill-advised; menstrual leave policies are best prepared locally or at the state level.

However, the judges' remarks consolidate the view that offering menstrual leave damages the opportunities and worth of working women. Lakhs of women face debilitating menstrual pain and conditions such as PCOS/PCOD and endometriosis, to name a few. They should be able to rightfully claim leave for a day or two. The union government moves in 2022, the Bill for the Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Products as an extension of Article 21; it proposed three days of paid menstrual leave. Clearly, the need for menstrual leave has been recognised. It need not be mandated by the apex court. Instead, it is best that all workplaces, including government offices, be persuaded to put the policy in place.



### Inside Track

AJAY JHA

Amidst the din of SIR and its impact on the upcoming round of assembly elections came the most unexpected development—Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar filing his nomination for the Rajya Sabha elections. That means soon, probably by mid-April, he would step down from the post he has been holding as dear as life for nearly 20 years. He has already gone down in the annals of history as the longest-serving chief minister in Bihar, a record unlikely to be broken in the foreseeable future.

It was explained that towards the fag-end of his long political career, Nitish Kumar wants to create another record that few can match, that is, being a member of all four legislative bodies. He has already served as an MLA and MLC in Bihar and as a member of the Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha is the only legislative body he has not been a member of so far.

This sounds nice but unpalatable, that too when he could have created the most enviable record of becoming the longest-serving chief minister of any Indian state by completing his current term. He is set to bow out of the office as the eighth-longest-serving chief minister. It is ludicrous to buy the theory that Nitish Kumar is quitting to fulfil his wish to serve as a Rajya Sabha member.

It is said that politics is the last resort of scoundrels. That being the case, the Rajya Sabha can be termed the last resort of discarded politicians. Nitish Kumar, despite

# Health or hidden deal: Why is Nitish quitting after 20 years?

Everything seems to be going by the script written long before the Bihar polls. The question that remains unanswered is what is next for Nitish



End of Era in Bihar: The sudden decision taken by Nitish Kumar to file for nomination for the Rajya Sabha elections is indicative of the change Bihar's politics is undergoing, the foundations for which were laid probably after the 2020 state Assembly polls.

concerns for his health and obvious signs of aging, is anything but not rejected leader. Just a few months ago, he was handed over a fresh mandate, that too with increased numbers, when it appeared after the 2020 Bihar Assembly elections that he was living on borrowed time after the extremely poor performance of his party, the Janata Dal (United).

If health were his only concern, Nitish Kumar could have opted out of taking the oath after the NDA's resounding victory in the 2025 Bihar elections. True, his health has been declining, but he was good to go for some more time since there has been no evidence of any deterioration of his mental or physical well-being in four months. The de-

cision to serve as the Rajya Sabha member and concern for his health, at most, are mere camouflage to hide something that is not yet public and is subject to speculation.

If viewed properly, there is a clear pattern that the BJP has been following for some time under what a person like Shivraj Singh Chouhan, once seen as a rival to Narendra Modi as the BJP prime ministerial candidate before the 2014 general elections, was denied chief ministership in Madhya Pradesh even after he led the BJP to victory and shifted to national politics. The same pattern has been followed in the case of Nitish Kumar too.

That the BJP was initially reluc-

tant to project Nitish Kumar as the NDA chief ministerial candidate for the 2025 elections had become obvious. The party dithered on stating that he would be the chief minister if the NDA won another term until the last moment, when it became clear that the BJP needed him. Nitish Kumar had cultivated a strong vote bank of women voters and Maha Dalits carefully over the years. Moreover, he continued to be the most favourite leader of his fellow caste, the Kurmi, who are spread across the state and have a sizeable say in Bihar politics.

Around the same time, the BJP started working on his only child, Nishant Kumar, who was supposed to be apolitical and had remained so all these years while his father

served as the chief minister. The deal was struck before the Bihar elections, which are unfolding now. The plan is that the BJP would take over the post of Bihar chief minister, and Nishant would be made the deputy chief minister. Nishant became amenable to it, and Nitish Kumar gave in, as a doting father concerned for his son's future after him.

Since Nishant is new to politics, and it is assumed that politically he is a greenhorn, the bigger plan of the BJP would now come into play, that is, to make the JD (U) truly the B Team of the BJP. This would give the BJP enough time to usurp the vote bank that Nitish Kumar meticulously cultivated.

Everything seems to be going by the script written long before the Bihar polls. Another question that remains unanswered is what is next for Nitish Kumar. Has he been promised some role in national politics? Will Nitish Kumar be inducted as a cabinet minister in the Modi government, or will he become the deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha with the post set to fall vacant soon, as the JD(U) denied renomination to the outgoing Rajya Sabha deputy chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh?

Droupadi Murmu's term as the President of India is also set to end in July 2027. It is possible that Nitish Kumar has been offered any of these three roles unless he actually intends to fade out from active politics.

Ajay Jha is a senior journalist, author and political commentator.



### Commodity Insights

G CHANDRASHEKHAR

The ongoing military conflict in West Asia involving Israel and the US on the one side and Iran on the other has heightened geopolitical tensions and geo-economic uncertainty. How long the conflict will last and what will be the outcome is anybody's guess at this time.

The impact on global commodity markets in general and energy markets in particular is severe. With the virtual closure of critical passage through the Strait of Hormuz, energy supplies (crude and LNG) face massive disruption. Energy infrastructure in the Gulf has faced attacks even as many producing countries have shut down production. Security risks have forced down tanker movements, freight rates have surged and insurers have turned extremely hesitant.

No wonder crude oil prices have spiked, with Brent breaching the psychological \$100 a barrel. Natural gas prices, too, have moved up

sharply. It is well recognised that the Asian region is a net oil importer and, therefore, exposed to shocks from supply disruption and higher global oil prices.

According to the International Energy Agency the Asia Pacific region was a net importer of crude oil, gas, and coal for the decade through to 2023. These economies still use oil, coal, and natural gas as key sources of energy. India is no exception. Our crude oil import dependence is well over 80 per cent. In a short period of a few days, the war has changed the energy market fundamentals. Oil has gone from one of oversupply to scarcity as countries struggle to look for alternatives.

As crude oil is a universal intermediate, rising energy prices are sure to push inflation higher. On their part, the central bankers would become hesitant to reduce interest rates. The initial growth optimism for 2026 is now gradually giving way to caution.

Beyond energy, metal markets too face the brunt of the war. One

metal that is likely to engage the attention of market participants is aluminium. To be sure, aluminium production consumes enormous amounts of energy. Even at the start of 2026, it was clear that the world market was focused on tightening fundamentals.

To be sure, China is set to approach its production cap, along with several producers elsewhere considering closures due to high-power prices. The new demand segment for power consumption—data centres and artificial intelligence infrastructure—raises power costs.

Demand for aluminium, too, is rising. In addition to its increasing use as a replacement for copper for highweighting (cars, for example), we see increased defence spending across regions. Aluminium is an integral part of defence equipment.

In early 2026, it was anticipated that the world aluminium market would stay in a state of deficit estimated at anything between 200,000 and 600,000 tonnes. Although production in Indonesia is

rising, its pace may not be able to offset the metals near-term tightness.

Early this year, analysts were in consensus that aluminium prices might average \$2,900 a tonne. The upside risk to the outlook included stronger demand if global industrial activity picked up, while downside risks included faster-than-expected Indonesian supply growth and whether China's capacity cap will hold. The West Asia conflict has now skewed the market. The Middle East accounts for 8 per cent of global aluminium capacity. Key producers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain rely on the Strait of Hormuz for importing raw material and exporting finished products.

Closure of the key passage has created new supply risk and, in turn, upside price risk. It is becoming increasingly clear that the global supply will remain tight even as inventories are running thin. In the bourses, speculative positioning stands elevated. Policy risk increasingly shapes regional markets.

Experts expect that the LME will keep trading a mix of fundamentals and momentum, while the US premiums will remain the clearest gauge of any policy move.

The ongoing military conflict is set to widen the global aluminium market deficit. Even if the disruption is short, prices are likely to move to \$300 and \$340 a tonne level. Prolonged disruption may take the market even higher towards \$3600 and \$3800 levels.

The big question in the minds of market participants is whether prices would breach the \$4000/t mark. The global commodity markets are morphing continually, depending on geopolitical developments. No one knows the duration of the war and its outcome. Under the circumstances, it may be advisable to avoid taking far-forward trading positions. Caution is the watchword.

G. Chandrashekar is economist, senior journalist and policy commentator specialising in commodity markets. Views are personal.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Energy Chain Risks

Conflicts in distant regions quickly affect everyday life through rising fuel prices and supply shortages. India's dependence on imported oil and gas exposes its economy to global shocks. While alternative energy sources are expanding, they cannot yet fully offset disruptions. Ultimately, ordinary citizens bear the economic burden of geopolitical conflicts.

Dev Krishna Nigam, Ujjain

#### Energy Autonomy

India's firm response regarding oil imports from Russia reaffirms its strategic autonomy. As a sovereign nation, India must secure its energy needs through independent bilateral partnerships. Protecting domestic fuel security while maintaining balanced global relations is essential for safeguarding national interests during volatile geopolitical conditions.

Saloni Rai, Ujjain

#### Family Size Debate

Calls for larger families by political leaders ignore the economic realities faced by modern parents. Raising children involves significant financial responsibility, making incentives like ₹25,000 unrealistic. Instead of encouraging higher birth rates, governments should focus on policies that support employment, education and meaningful engagement of ageing populations.

Avinash Godbole, Dewas

#### Personal Freedom

Every individual deserves the freedom to choose their life partner. Social pressure should never dictate personal decisions about marriage. Stories of people standing by their choices despite opposition remind us that mutual respect and companionship matter more than societal expectations. Personal liberty must remain central to a modern and inclusive society.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburgi



HASAN ZAHID

#### Heroes On The Field

Fans of the Chennai Super Kings (CSK) will no longer be greeted by songs and background scores from films starring Rajinikanth. The franchise informed the Madras High Court that it would refrain from using music tracks from the films Jailer, Jailer 2, and Coolie, following a copyright infringement plea filed by Sun TV Network. Despite this change, CSK fans will continue to look forward to the team's on-field performances, expecting their players to deliver excitement and charisma much like Rajinikanth does on screen.

A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

#### Urgent Diplomacy

The escalating conflict involving Iran, the US and Israel threatens global stability and energy markets. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have already pushed oil prices higher and shaken financial markets. With civilians bearing the brunt of violence, the international community must prioritise diplomacy and restraint to prevent a wider regional crisis.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

#### Institutional Respect

Debates over the Election Commission highlight the need for balance between accountability and institutional respect. Electoral bodies must remain transparent, but repeated political confrontations risk eroding public trust. Strengthening electoral procedures through dialogue and reform will reinforce confidence in India's democratic process.

Dr Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

#### Energy Priorities

Prioritising household LPG supply during short-ages is sensible, but reducing gas to fertiliser plants may affect agricultural output. India must accelerate domestic gas production, diversify imports and expand renewable energy to reduce dependence on the Strait

A Mylisanmi, Coimbatore

#### Oil And Inflation

Rising crude prices have become a global economic concern. Higher fuel costs push inflation up-

#### Heroes On The Field

ward and weaken currencies of oil-importing countries like India. Geopolitical conflicts often turn energy resources into strategic tools, making peace and diplomatic solutions essential not only for security but also for global economic stability.

S N Kabra

# The Statesman

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## Federal fault lines

India's latest round of assembly elections across West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam, and Puducherry will test far more than the electoral strength of individual parties. They will measure the durability of India's federal political diversity at a time when the national landscape has been increasingly shaped by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Over the past decade, the BJP has built an electoral machine capable of dominating national politics and expanding into states once considered outside its ideological reach. Yet the southern and eastern frontiers of India's political map remain resistant terrain.

These elections therefore represent a critical moment: either the party deepens its footprint across the country or regional political traditions reassert their resilience. Nowhere is this contest sharper than in West Bengal, where Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress have built a formidable political fortress over the past decade and more. Welfare schemes, linguistic identity and a combative regional narrative have helped the party fend off repeated advances by the BJP. Yet the opposition's organisational expansion in the state ensures that Bengal remains a high-stakes battleground rather than a settled contest.

In Tamil Nadu, the story is different but equally revealing. The Dravidian political tradition represented by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) continues to frame politics around language, social justice, and regional pride. The BJP's challenge here is not merely electoral but cultural: it must adapt its national narrative to a state whose political vocabulary has long been shaped by Dravidian ideology.

Kerala presents yet another political model. The cyclical contest between the Congress-led opposition and the Left coalition anchored by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has historically kept national parties from dominating the state's politics. For Congress, a victory here could offer a rare psychological boost after years of electoral setbacks across India. Meanwhile, in Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has turned the election into a referendum on identity politics, migration debates, and regional security concerns. The BJP's ability to consolidate its position in the Northeast has become a crucial pillar of its broader national strategy.

Beyond individual states, the elections unfold against a larger institutional debate. Questions about the credibility and functioning of the Election Commission of India have entered public discourse with unusual intensity, particularly in relation to voter roll revisions and administrative oversight. In a democracy where electoral legitimacy is paramount, the perception of institutional impartiality matters almost as much as the result itself. Ultimately, these elections highlight a central paradox of Indian politics. Even as national leadership and messaging become increasingly centralised, the country's electoral outcomes remain deeply shaped by regional histories, identities, and political cultures. Whether the BJP expands further or regional parties hold their ground, the verdict from these five elections will underline a familiar truth: India's democracy still speaks in many political languages, and none can yet claim to speak for the entire nation.

## Hormuz Gamble

When a narrow strip of water becomes the centre of global politics, it usually means something larger is unfolding. The latest confrontation around the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a regional crisis between the United States and Iran. It is a reminder that the world economy still rests on fragile geographic chokepoints that can be disrupted with alarming ease.

Roughly a fifth of the world's traded oil passes through this narrow corridor linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. For decades, the assumption underlying global energy markets was simple: the route would stay open, even during moments of tension. That assumption is now under strain. Attacks on commercial shipping and threats to tanker traffic have turned the strait into a contested maritime zone.

In response, President Donald Trump has urged major economies to send warships to safeguard the shipping lanes. The logic behind this appeal is straightforward. Countries whose industries and cities depend on Gulf oil - including Japan, South Korea, and China - have as much stake in the security of the strait as Washington does. If tankers cannot move safely, the consequences will be measured not only in military tension but also in inflation, disrupted supply chains, and economic slowdown across continents.

Energy security has quietly become the hidden battlefield of modern geopolitics, where shipping lanes, insurance premiums, and tanker routes can influence global stability as much as armies. Yet turning the strait into a theatre of multinational naval deployments carries its own risks. The geography favours disruption.

The shipping lanes are narrow, and the surrounding coastline allows even a weaker power to threaten traffic through mines, drones, or short-range missiles. In such an environment, a single miscalculation can escalate rapidly. A damaged tanker, a mistaken radar signal, or an overzealous patrol could transform a limited confrontation into a broader maritime conflict.

The crisis also exposes a deeper strategic paradox. Globalisation has dispersed manufacturing and consumption across the planet, but the arteries that sustain it remain concentrated in a few vulnerable passages - Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Malacca Strait among them. The world economy has grown more interconnected, yet the physical routes that sustain it remain perilously narrow.

For countries like India, the stakes are immediate and practical. Much of the country's imported energy flows through the Gulf. A prolonged disruption in tanker traffic would translate quickly into higher fuel prices, currency pressure, and domestic economic strain. New Delhi, like many Asian capitals, must therefore balance diplomacy with preparedness, ensuring that its energy lifelines remain secure without becoming entangled in a widening conflict.

The unfolding contest around the Strait of Hormuz is therefore about more than ships and missiles. It is a warning that the stability of the global economy still depends on a handful of vulnerable sea lanes. When those chokepoints become battlegrounds, the consequences travel far beyond the waters where the first shots are fired.

# Gods of Small Things

God does not mean a supernatural being sitting in heaven, but rather any human soul who becomes an instrument of the larger cosmic design. Every individual we encounter carries within them a spark of the same universal consciousness. Through their actions, words, or even chance presence, they may influence the direction of our lives. Some shape our destiny directly; others do so subtly, even unknowingly.

The phrase "God of Small Things" often evokes the idea that the divine does not manifest only in grand miracles, temples, or world-changing events. Rather, the divine intelligence that governs the universe often works quietly through ordinary people and seemingly insignificant circumstances. In the theatre of life, not every person appears on the main stage, yet many of those who stand in the wings quietly determine the course of the drama. These individuals - sometimes unnoticed, sometimes underestimated - are what we may call the "gods of small things."

In this understanding, "god" does not mean a supernatural being sitting in heaven, but rather any human soul who becomes an instrument of the larger cosmic design. Every individual we encounter carries within them a spark of the same universal consciousness. Through their actions, words, or even chance presence, they may influence the direction of our lives. Some shape our destiny directly; others do so subtly, even unknowingly.

Human history provides numerous examples where the actions of apparently ordinary individuals altered the course of events. Consider the life of Alexander Fleming. In 1928, Fleming discovered penicillin, the world's first antibiotic. The discovery itself was accidental: a petri dish he had left unattended became contaminated with mould, and he noticed that bacteria around the mould had died. What seemed like a trivial laboratory mishap turned out to be one of the most important medical discoveries in human history.

Yet Fleming himself was only the first link in a chain of individuals whose contributions transformed medicine. Scientists such as Howard Florey and Ernest Boris Chain later developed penicillin into a usable drug. Each played a role - small or large - in saving millions of lives. The discovery was not the work of a single hero but a network of people, circumstances, and quiet contributions.

Another powerful example comes from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhi became the symbol of India's freedom movement, a pivotal turning point in his life occurred in 1893 in South Africa. A



railway official ordered him to leave a first-class compartment despite his valid ticket. That single act of humiliation awakened Gandhi's resolve to fight injustice through nonviolent resistance. The railway official, whose name history scarcely remembers, inadvertently triggered a movement that later inspired millions across the world. A seemingly minor incident became a spark that lit the flame of civil resistance.

The life of Abraham Lincoln also demonstrates the influence of humble figures. Lincoln's early education came largely from borrowed books and the encouragement of local teachers and neighbours.

These individuals were not famous intellectuals or political leaders; they were ordinary people who believed in a young boy's curiosity. Yet their encouragement helped shape the mind of a man who would later guide the United States through its most difficult crisis, the American Civil War.

Similarly, the success of great leaders often rests on the invisible work of countless others. During the struggle for India's independence, figures like Jawaharlal Nehru or Subhas Chandra Bose commanded great attention, but the movement itself survived because of thousands of unnamed volunteers - villagers who sheltered activists, workers who organized protests, printers who secretly circulated pamphlets, and ordinary citizens who risked imprisonment. Without these "small" contributors, the freedom movement would have collapsed.

History also shows how people considered insignificant at a particular moment can transform the future. When Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, she appeared to be just one ordinary passenger among many.

Yet her quiet act of defiance ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which became a turning point in the American civil rights movement. Through her courage, she inspired leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr.

and millions of others to challenge systemic injustice.

Even in scientific progress, small acts of mentorship or recognition often determine whether talent blossoms or withers. The young Albert Einstein struggled to find academic employment after graduating from university. Eventually, he found work as a patent clerk in Bern. The job itself seemed mundane, but it gave him the mental freedom to think deeply about physics.

In 1905, while working there, Einstein published the revolutionary papers that would reshape modern science, including the formulation of the Theory of Relativity. One might say that the humble administrative job - and the supervisors who allowed him the intellectual freedom to think - were part of the cosmic arrangement that allowed genius to flourish.

These examples illustrate a profound philosophical truth: the web of life is interdependent. Each individual, no matter how ordinary she or he may appear, may carry a piece of the larger puzzle. The universe unfolds not only through the decisions of kings and presidents but also through the unnoticed gestures of teachers, clerks, friends, strangers, and even critics.

This perspective has deep roots in spiritual traditions. Many philosophies hold that every soul is an expression of a universal consciousness. The ancient Indian idea of the Atman suggests that the same divine essence resides within every living being. If this is true, then each person we meet becomes a messenger or instrument of the larger cosmic intelligence. Sometimes they guide us, sometimes they challenge us, and sometimes they obstruct us - yet each role contributes to our growth.

The writer is an IAS officer, presently working as the Transport Secretary, West Bengal. The views expressed are personal.

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## The Korea Herald

## Managing energy turmoil

Inflation, much like a storm at sea, typically makes landfall well after the winds have shifted. South Korea's consumer prices rose 2 percent in February, hitting the central bank's target with deceptive precision. Yet the stability suggested by that data belongs to a geopolitical landscape that has already vanished.

The US-Israeli war with Iran has jolted global energy markets and placed the Strait of Hormuz under strain. The implications are serious. This narrow waterway carries a substantial share of the world's oil shipments and serves as a vital artery for Korean crude imports.

A disruption there is not a distant geopolitical drama but a direct economic shock. The contrast with the war that began in Ukraine in 2022 is instructive. That conflict affected Korea largely through global price spillovers. The present crisis threatens the physical flow of oil itself.

The first tremor is already visible at the pump. On Sunday the nationwide average gasoline price stood at 1,893.3 won (\$1.27) a liter, edging toward the psychologically important 2,000 won mark. Diesel prices remain even higher.

The pace of increase has moderated over the weekend, partly after the government's warnings against excessive price hikes. Yet international oil prices typically reach Korean gas stations with a lag of two to three weeks. That delay suggests the main impact has not yet been felt.

Energy markets are only the most visible front. Oil sits at the center of modern supply chains, and the disruption is already spreading outward. Freight rates for crude carriers have surged, with the Baltic Dirty Tanker Index climbing about 55 percent in a matter of days.

Several vessels carrying crude bound for Korean refineries remain stalled near the Strait of Hormuz.

In manufacturing, concerns are mounting over naphtha, the petrochemical feedstock often described as the industry's rice. Domestic inventories are estimated at roughly two weeks' supply. It supplies tighter further, production of plastics, synthetic fibers and other basic industrial goods could soon come under pressure.

Faced with these risks, the government has reached for a familiar instrument: price discipline. President Lee Jae Myung on Friday warned fuel suppliers against profiteering and ordered a review of a legal provision that allows authorities to set a maximum petroleum price during emergencies.

The instinct is understandable. Few issues unsettle households more quickly than rising fuel costs.

In our personal lives, we can easily recall individuals who changed our direction in subtle ways: a teacher who encouraged us when we doubted ourselves, a colleague who introduced us to a new opportunity, or even a critic whose harsh words pushed us to improve. These people may never realize the depth of their influence. Yet their actions become turning points in our life's narrative.

The opposite is also true. When we dismiss or disrespect people because they appear unimportant, we may unknowingly close doors that destiny intended to open. History contains many stories of powerful individuals who underestimated others and paid the price for their arrogance. Humility, therefore, is not merely a moral virtue; it is also practical wisdom.

Every person we encounter may hold a key - perhaps to knowledge, opportunity, protection, or transformation. The stranger who offers timely advice, the junior colleague who provides crucial information, the worker who quietly maintains a system that everyone depends on - each may exercise a hidden influence over our journey.

Recognizing the "gods of small things" encourages us to cultivate respect for all human beings. It reminds us that greatness does not belong exclusively to those who appear powerful. Often, the true architects of destiny are those whose contributions are woven quietly into the background of events.

This realization also deepens our understanding of the cosmic plan. Life is not simply a sequence of random encounters; it is a complex network of interactions where every soul plays a role in the evolution of others. Just as cells within a body cooperate to sustain life, human beings cooperate - consciously or unconsciously - to sustain the progress of civilization and the spiritual evolution of humanity.

When we adopt this perspective, our attitude toward people changes. Instead of seeing individuals as obstacles or tools, we begin to see them as participants in a shared journey. The office assistant, the driver, the teacher, the rival, the friend - all may become channels through which life teaches us lessons.

Ultimately, the concept of the "god of small things" invites us to live with humility and gratitude. It teaches us that every interaction carries meaning and that every soul deserves dignity. The universe often chooses the most ordinary instruments to accomplish extraordinary purposes.

If we remember that every person embodies a fragment of the same cosmic consciousness, we will naturally treat others with respect and kindness. We will realize that the person standing quietly beside us today may become the turning point of our tomorrow.

In that sense, the divine does not reside only in distant heavens or monumental events. It lives in the countless human beings who cross our path - each carrying a spark of the same universal intelligence, each playing a role in the mysterious unfolding of our lives. These are the true gods of small things.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

## Course correction

Sir, This refers to the editorial "Dynasty Question" (March 12). The transition of power in Iran raises legitimate questions, but the more immediate concern is stability. A leadership change under war conditions with sanctions biting and regional tensions running high, leaves little room for internal political adjustment. Mojtaba Khamenei inherits not just his father's office but an accumulated set of unresolved pressures - economic hardship, a restless younger population, and an isolated foreign policy.

The hereditary optics are not immediately for a republic, certainly. But what matters more now is whether the new leadership chooses pragmatism over ideology in its dealings with the outside world.



Iran's people have paid a heavy price for decades of confrontation. Some course correction, however gradual, would serve everyone's interests far better than continuity for its own sake.

Yours, etc., S M Jeeva, Chennai, 12 March.

## The itch to write

Sir, I have been contributing letters to the "Letters to the Editor" column ever since my first letter was published in the illustrated

Weekly of India, then edited by the erudite M V Kamath in the early eighties. Since then, over three hundred of my letters have been published in various newspapers, including yours.

The lady in my house has been persistently opposing my efforts, dismissing it as sheer waste of time.

Her pet refrain has been - Do you hope to change the world by your writing? Do you seriously think anyone, except yourself, reads your letters at all?

But so vicarious has been the pleasure of seeing my thoughts in print, that I have persisted doggedly, and I do not.

Each time my letter appears in print, I convince myself I've been shortlisted for the Booker Prize - no less! Recently, Shashi Tharoor's novel "The Five Dollar Smile" gave

me the justification, for the decades old itch to write.

So please allow me to "sabotage" Tharoor's words for the simple reason that few of us are equipped with his linguistic wherewithal - "There's nothing quite like the thrill of first seeing a word written in print, ranks with the other great moments of life, the first school prize, the first kiss, the first smile from your baby".

Surely, I must have experienced all this when my first letter appeared in the prestigious Weekly. And that sums up why I continue to pleasureably toil on my keyboard, as if it were a brand of note issue.

I write, therefore I am (with apologies to Rene Descartes). Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 11 March.

Regaining the neighbourhood

HARSHA KAKAR

Who could have predicted that India's vicinity would change for the better so soon. A year ago, threats to India were rising as countries in the region displayed anti-India sentiments.

Bangladesh's access to Indian ports, slowing exports. It also curtailed aid and support to the country. All this time, army to army contacts remained strong and stable.

highlighted. It is possible that sharing of intelligence between the two states on national security would now increase. Another first was the visit to Mhow by Bangladesh's envoy to India, Riaz Ullah.



100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 17 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

We have published as sent to us a communiqué from the Government of India treating of the new issue of cash certificates, but we make no pretence of understanding its terms, which are involved, obscure, and confusing.

News Items

CHINESE RIVER BLOCKADE WARNING TO NAVAL CHIEFS

THE Legations of the Protocol Powers instructed their Naval Commanders at Tientsin to notify the Port Authorities at Taku, that unless within three days mines are removed from the channel and interference with shipping ceases they reserve the right to take necessary action themselves.

COMMONS STATEMENT DEMANDS OF POWERS NOT MET

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) RUGBY, MAR. THE Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs Mr. O. Locker-Lampson made a brief statement in the House of Commons on the situation arising out of the recent incidents in China.

CHANGED DAYS END OF NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT

MALIVI Ekrumul Huiq said that by moving his amendment he wanted to raise a constitutional question, namely, the immediate appointment of a Royal Commission to revise the Government of India Act and, after inquiring into the working of the Reforms, to recommend the conferring of greater rights and powers on the people.

Can AI reach rural India's classrooms?

AKSHATA AND R. SREEJITH VARMA

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a pivotal force in reconfiguring India's educational landscape, enhancing pedagogy, boosting classroom effectiveness, and contributing to national development.

materials, while over 60 per cent allow students use of AI tools. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides the doctrinal foundation for mainstreaming AI. The All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) designated 2025 as the 'Year of AI', targeting 14,000 technical institutions and equipping 40 million students with AI competencies through dedicated laboratories and certificate programmes.

continue their education without the demands of physical attendance, thereby mitigating exclusionary dynamics. The deployment of predictive analytics by the Andhra Pradesh government in collaboration with Microsoft to reduce student attrition by 20-30 per cent through targeted familial interventions, the development of 'India's first AI teacher robot' in a Kerala school, and the rollout of PARKAH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development), the conversational AI chatbot platform for assessment practice in all schools in Goa, and the AI-integrated smart classrooms in schools in West Bengal are just a few other subnational educational initiatives that leverage the quantum leaps in AI.



and societal biases, in educational technologies accentuate concerns about fairness and inclusivity. For instance, algorithmic bias has shown to diminish diversity in college admissions processes, highlighting the need for more refined models. AI learning platforms must account for diverse cultural perspectives to prevent student alienation and loss of trust. Other challenges such as limited teacher training and privacy concerns underscore the high stakes of AI-driven educational practices.

governance frameworks. Impartiality in AI systems is essential to safeguard fairness and inclusivity in India's educational transformation. Without deliberate checks, algorithms risk amplifying existing biases whether linguistic, regional, or socioeconomic, thereby excluding vulnerable learners. By embedding thorough regular audits, transparent data practices, and ethical oversight, AI tools can deliver equitable opportunities, foster trust among both learners and educators, and prevent the emergence of 'intelligence divide'.

Crossword | No. 293406

Crossword puzzle grid with clues and solutions. Includes 'Yesterday's Solution' and a list of crossword clues with their respective lengths.



Whatever be the language in which we speak, whether our English is good or not, you will hear from us the voice of the people

A.K. Gopalan

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

—Rammath Goenka

## POST-S.I.R. POLLS IN 4 TERRITORIES ANOTHER TEST OF ECI'S FAIRNESS

NDIA has just swung into another intense election season. The Election Commission of India's announcement of polling schedules for Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry has set the stage for another high-stakes battle for key assemblies. Roughly 17.4 crore citizens across 824 constituencies will be eligible to vote in these elections that come soon after the Special Intensive Revision of rolls in these territories, making it one of the most significant democratic exercises of recent times. The voting will be held over three weeks—in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry on April 9, in Tamil Nadu on April 23, and in West Bengal over two phases on April 23 and 29.

Counting for all territories is scheduled for May 4. While Tamil Nadu and West Bengal benefit from over a month of campaigning time, Assam, Kerala and Puducherry have just three weeks until polling day followed by an arduous month-long wait for the results. This long timeline renews concerns about the logistical feasibility of the much-discussed 'One Nation, One Election' idea that seeks to synchronise national and state polls.

Though seat-sharing negotiations continue in most states, some parties swiftly declared candidates and flagged off their campaigns soon after the date announcement. Along with the poll bugle come ECI's actions to ensure the perception of administrative neutrality. In West Bengal, it directed the transfer of the chief secretary, home secretary and a few senior police officials soon after releasing the schedule, triggering sharp protests in the state and a walkout by Trinamool Congress MPs in the Rajya Sabha. In Tamil Nadu, four senior police officials were transferred, with the chief secretary instructed to submit a compliance report soon.

With the Model Code of Conduct in effect, surveillance of cash movements has become more stringent. While curbing illicit funding remains essential, incidents such as the detention of an individual in Coimbatore carrying ₹54,000 for a genuine medical emergency highlight the need for the roving inspection squads to balance vigilance with humanitarian sensitivity.

The SIR process, mired in controversy over deletions and transparency—with net removals of nearly 74 lakh names in Tamil Nadu, 64 lakh in West Bengal and 9 lakh in Kerala—along with the other preparatory steps the ECI undertook over the past year must ultimately deliver transparent, credible and equitable polls. As the ECI itself reminded, the world will be watching.

## WEST ASIA CONFLICT SINGES SPORTS ON AND OFF FIELD

RIGHT now, sports and geopolitics seem inseparable the world over. Not long ago, Bangladesh pulled out of the T20 World Cup over security concerns in India. Now, Iran's participation at the football World Cup is under a cloud. The raging West Asia conflict is singeing sports, with a number of events cancelled, postponed or relocated. A head of state rarely speaks about the safety concerns of visiting athletes. Yet, a day after Iran's sports minister said that their national team cannot travel amid war to participate in the FIFA World Cup to be held in the US, Canada and Mexico this June-July, the US president went a step further and stated they should not "come for their own life and safety". It was baffling especially as it came a day after FIFA chief Gianni Infantino's assurance that there would be no security concern for Iranian players. Ironically, the same global governing body had banned Russia after the country attacked Ukraine in 2022, arguing that matches involving Russia would pose security risks. It is indeed FIFA's duty to ensure a safe environment for all teams, at all times. But despite similar concerns raised around the world regarding Israel, it has not yet acted.

The International Olympic Committee's silence is even more perplexing. On several occasions the IOC has reacted sternly towards countries for refusing to host foreign players because of geopolitical differences. Russia and Belarus are still banned by the IOC. Even India was not spared. In 2019, immediately after the attack in Pulwama, the Indian government refused to grant visas to Pakistani shooters for an international event. The IOC stripped the status of that pistol event as an Olympic qualifier.

The effect of war is felt beyond playing arenas, too. There is fear that a long, expensive conflict in West Asia could affect sports sponsorships in other parts of the world. Etihad, Emirates, Qatar Airways and West Asian sovereign funds sponsor a number of top football clubs in Europe. Saudi Arabia's Aramco is a major sponsor of International Cricket Council events. If these nations' economies are affected, sports across the world will feel the pinch, too.

### QUICK TAKE

#### THE OTHER COSTS OF WAR

IT'S not just the supply chains of car fuel, cooking gas and fertilisers that the West Asia war is rattling. Among the diverse sectors feeling the heat are bottled water, medical equipment and space exploration. The rising cost of PET polymer, made from crude oil and used for making plastic bottles and caps, is pushing packaged water companies in India to raise prices by 5-15 percent just as summer is setting in. At the same time, the supply of helium, a byproduct of natural gas extraction that helps cool MRI magnets and pressurise propellant tanks, is suffering a similar disruption. It affects healthcare and the space missions of Isro. India needs assurance that the supply chains of these critical inputs are being diversified and de-risked, too.

THE Congress-initiated, INDI-Alliance-supported motion to express lack of confidence in the Speaker of the Lok Sabha was destined to be defeated. Going by the speeches of the opposition leaders, it was clear that there was little substance to the motion. On the other hand, going by the frontal attack by speakers from the treasury benches, it proved to be yet another self-goal for the opposition in general and the Congress in particular.

The onus of this flop show lies undoubtedly with the Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi. Rao asked Vajpayee, which India's Grand Old Party won almost 100 seats, created a fertile ground for Rahul to prove his political acumen, understand parliamentary practices, hone oratorical skills and, above all, display his leadership talent. But alas, over the last two years, Rahul has failed to establish much worth noting on these fronts. On the contrary, factors like a seeming lack of application, inconsistent participation in the Lok Sabha, un-serious demeanour including making serious allegations without providing concrete evidence have done serious damage to the institution of LoP.

From A K Gopalan to Sushma Swaraj, there were many LoPs who hugely contributed to the prestige and decorum of the office. In the first Lok Sabha, Comrade Gopalan could not be officially appointed LoP as the formal role had not been established yet. Nonetheless, his scholarship, activism and oratorical skills made him the *de facto* LoP. As a parliamentarian, AKG was known for his commitment to the rights of the working classes.

From the BJP, leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani, Swaraj and Arun Jaitley enhanced the prestige of the LoP's office through their conduct in the House as also their intellectual contribution during deliberations. Remarkably, in 1994, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao asked Vajpayee, then the LoP to lead the Indian delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva to defend India's position on Kashmir, a move that spoke volumes about the healthy mutuality between the PM and the LoP. Advani, too, made a significant mark as the LoP and vacated the position in 2009 in favour of his younger party colleague Swaraj.

Known for her powerful oratory, Swaraj demanded accountability of the government. She was known for her content-rich speeches and flawless

The Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha needs to pursue serious issues consistently and offer alternatives. A wealth of institutional history can inspire Rahul Gandhi in this constitutional role

## HOW NOT TO BE THE LEADER OF SUPPOSITION



argument on economic policies, corruption, price rise and security issues. On certain occasions, she almost forced the government to retreat on contentious legislative issues.

Rahul Gandhi had such an inspiring legacy of always watchful LoPs to further build upon. But sadly, at least till today, he has not quite risen to the opportunity. Not just non-Congress LoPs, Rahul could have learnt from his parents and his granny, too. Indira Gandhi, who briefly played the LoP's role, realised the importance of activism beyond the Lok Sabha. Many journalists in those days wrote at length about her tireless travels across the country. Apart from her legendary elephant ride to Belchhi in Bihar, she would often spend 10-12 hours a day on the road.

With this in the backdrop, there

are at least three things that Rahul must improve upon if he wants to be taken seriously as the LoP, the extremely important constitutional position he occupies.

First, he must provide some evidence of his alternative vision. He vehemently criticised the farm laws, assailed the government on its handling of diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries, and attacked the Centre's approach to the unrest in Manipur. But merely attacking the government is not enough. He could have provided alternative visions on these issues and told countrymen as to how he would have dealt with them in a qualitatively better fashion. For example, he keeps on harping about inadequate representation of marginalised communities in government, judiciary and even in

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Reviewing policies

Ref: Creamy layer rule row (Mar 16). The Supreme Court's correction is timely. Policy must remain faithful to its original intent. To avoid future confusion, government clarifications should undergo independent review before issue. Clear guidelines, periodic updates and transparent communication will ensure fairness while preserving the spirit of affirmative action. **Abhanna Barathi, email**

#### Water woes

Ref: Jal Jeevan gets boost (Mar 16). Project delays pose significant challenges, including increased resource costs and budget overruns. Along with household water requirements, groundwater depletion, climate change and erratic rainfall also need to be taken into account. Wastewater should also be treated and reused. **Nabini Panigrahi, Rayagada**

#### Haberma's warning

Ref: Crisis of public debate (Mar 16). Jürgen Habermas's warning appears to have become a reality. An unending force seems to determine which issues dominate public attention, while people increasingly behave like blind mobs. Intensely debated matters just quickly become irrelevant. In this context, the media continues to play a crucial role in preserving rational debate. **Sundaresan Pandiyann, Chennai**

#### China's reality

Ref: China's Two Sessions (Mar 16). While China is seen as a confident and forward-looking global economic power, the analysis leaves little room for discussion of the economic challenges and geopolitical tensions that continue to prevail. A more balanced approach acknowledging both the opportunities and complexities would have offered a deeper understanding. **Narayanan Kizhumbudayur, Thrissur**

#### Embedding values

Ref: The civility code (Mar 16). Character and ethics have become developed currencies now. The core spiritual or social values are imbedded at a very early stage where the family and community must play a key role. **P. Prema, Thanjavur**

#### Election rush

Ref: Poll season begins (Mar 16). As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, it's going to be the toughest battle ever. Political parties have very little time at their disposal. The ECI should ensure that money and muscle power do not come into play any time. **S Ramakrishnasayee, email**



ABHISHEK KAR, Fellow, Council on Energy, Environment and Water; SURYA SHEKHAR AUDDY, Research analyst, Council on Energy, Environment and Water

## TIME TO SHIFT FROM GAS TO ELECTRIC

EVEN the turmoil in West Asia, ensuring a sufficient supply of affordable liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking has emerged as a national priority. India currently imports roughly two-thirds of its LPG, which is used by over 33 crore households for cooking daily. About 90 percent of this LPG came from West Asian countries in 2025, led by the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), connecting over 10 crore low-income households to LPG, is nearing a decade of its completion, and remains one of India's most consequential welfare programmes. When PMUY was launched in 2016, LPG was the best option for a mass-scale clean cooking programme given that India was still upgrading its electricity infrastructure to provide electricity reliably for lighting, cooling, industry and agriculture.

India's power supply has improved significantly since then. Now urban and rural areas receive over 23 and 22 hours of uninterrupted supply daily, respectively, and the grid managed a record peak demand of 250 gigawatts during April-June 2024. Hence, given the volatility of LPG supply, it is time to push for electric cooking—using induction cooktops and electric pressure cookers. PMUY was designed to move poor households away from traditional polluting chulha-burning firewood; a hybrid clean cooking stack of gas and electricity sustains the health gains from PMUY, while insulating the country from imported supply shocks.

#### A costly deal getting costlier

The disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz has pushed up freight and insurance costs. In response, the Indian government has directed refiners under the Essential Commodities Act to prioritise LPG production and make it available only to domestic consumers. Moreover, government estimates suggest the market-linked price would require an increase of about ₹135 per cylinder, but households saw only a ₹60 hike on March 7.

India's electricity system has a very different import profile from LPG. About three-quarters of power still comes from coal, most of it mined domestically, with import dependence below 20 percent. Renewables, now, contribute more than 22 percent of daily power generation. Electricity for electric and induction

stoves would largely come from coal mines and from growing solar and wind generation within India, not from tankers navigating the Strait of Hormuz.

An induction stove is in no way inferior to LPG—and could even be healthier. Induction cooktops operate at 85-90 percent energy efficiency, compared to 55 percent for gas, and cook faster. The Council on Energy, Environment and Water's Residential Energy Survey 2020 showed that while only about 5 percent of Indian homes use any electric cooking device, more than 10 percent of urban homes already do so.



The West Asia war has reminded us of the peril of depending on cooking gas imports. This is the right time to boost the National Efficient Cooking Programme launched in 2023 to promote electric cooking. The Ujjwala scheme can be used to support it

With a wave of new energy-efficient induction stoves and electric pressure cookers entering the market, consumers are slowly building confidence. Recent market research shows that the electric induction cooktop market in India was valued at about \$796 million in 2025. From an energy transition perspective, electrification of cooking is key to India's 2070 net-zero goals as well.

The government had already launched the National Efficient Cooking Programme in 2023 to promote electric cooking. Clear policy signals to fast-track the shift from cylinder to current for cooking are the need of the hour.

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Case closed

Professor's ordeal ends, but questions remain

ASHOKA University professor Ali Khan Mahmudabad's ordeal is finally over. The Supreme Court's decision to close criminal proceedings against him marks the end of a contentious episode that stirred an animated debate across academic, political and legal circles. The case arose from the professor's social media posts about Operation Sindoor briefings. He questioned the hypocrisy of right-wing commentators, who applauded military spokesperson Col Sofiya Qureshi but did not speak up for Muslim victims of "mob lynchings and arbitrary bulldozing". The Haryana State Commission for Women regarded his remarks as disrespectful to the armed forces, particularly women officers, while votaries of free speech claimed that he did not cross any red line. The apex court had to remind the SIT, which took Mahmudabad's mobile phones and other electronic gadgets into possession, that it should confine itself to going through his posts to ascertain whether their content constituted offences mentioned in the FIRs.

The Haryana government's refusal to grant sanction for prosecution — described as a "one-time magnanimity" — is a welcome step. Acting on the state's submission, the SC has closed the case, while cautioning the professor to exercise restraint in public commentary. The court's observation has an important message: free speech carries responsibility, particularly amid nationwide tensions.

However, the genesis of the case has raised troubling questions about alleged misuse of legal provisions against dissenting voices. Were the FIRs essentially an attempt to teach the professor a lesson for speaking against the ruling party and its supporters? Democracies are strengthened when disagreement is addressed through dialogue rather than penal action. The Mahmudabad episode should serve as a reminder that safeguarding freedom of expression — within reasonable bounds — remains essential to the health of India's democratic institutions.

## Saving mothers

Gaps in maternal care in Punjab, Haryana

PUNJAB's latest maternal health data offers cautious encouragement. The state's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has dipped slightly, indicating incremental improvement in the healthcare system's ability to safeguard mothers during pregnancy and childbirth. Yet the modest decline should not obscure a deeper concern: progress remains slow and uneven. Maternal mortality — measured as deaths per 1 lakh live births — is widely regarded as a critical indicator of a society's healthcare capacity and gender equity. Even a marginal fall, therefore, reflects improvements in antenatal care, institutional deliveries and emergency obstetric services. But Punjab's performance still leaves considerable room for improvement, especially when several districts continue to record high maternal death rates.

The contrast with neighbouring Haryana is instructive. Despite earlier gains, Haryana's MMR has remained largely unchanged in the latest assessment cycle. The plateau highlights a common challenge in public health policy: initial reforms often deliver quick gains, but sustaining progress requires deeper structural changes. Investments in hospitals and schemes alone are not sufficient; what matters equally is the quality of care, timely referrals and consistent monitoring of high-risk pregnancies.

Health audits in Punjab have already pointed to systemic lapses, such as delayed diagnosis, poor management of complications like postpartum haemorrhage and weak coordination between healthcare facilities. Addressing these gaps requires strengthening district hospitals, ensuring specialist availability and improving referral networks from rural health centres. India has committed itself to reducing maternal mortality to fewer than 70 deaths per one lakh live births under the Sustainable Development Goals. Punjab and Haryana must accelerate their efforts if they are to approach this benchmark. Ultimately, maternal deaths are not merely medical statistics; they represent preventable tragedies that devastate families and communities.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 1926

## Resolution on untouchability

WE confess we have read the proceedings of the Hindu Mahasabha on Sunday in connection with the resolution on untouchability with a sense of sorrow bordering on anguish. It is easy enough to say, as Lala Lajpat Rai did, that if there was a quarrel it proved that they were alive. It is equally easy to say, as another speaker did, that the existence of the quarrel showed that they must proceed cautiously. One can accept both views and yet be filled with a sense of shame and regret that in 1926 it should still be necessary for so many good and sensible men to demonstrate the existence of life in them and their community by quarrelling over so elementary a matter as the desirability or otherwise of conceding to millions of men and women of their own race and religion their ordinary human rights. Talk of caution! Has not India been far too cautious already? What other country on the face of the earth has tolerated the existence of so abominable an institution, such a diabolical crime against God and man, for so long a time? There have been many absurdities in all countries and ages. This history of humanity has unhappily been a long history of injustice, oppression and tyranny. But there is no other case on record in which so many millions of men and women have for so long a period of time been subjected to such absurd, so gravely unjust, cruel and oppressive a tyranny, not by foreigners but their own countrymen, by men who in the same breath claim them to be their own? And the most amazing thing is that this has been done in the name and under the supposed sanction of a religion which was the first in the world's history to proclaim the existence of divinity not only in all humans but in all created beings!

## Satellite navigation needs a reset

ISRO beset by challenges in mass application of space technology beyond dedicated govt use

DINESH C SHARMA  
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

INDIA's indigenous satellite navigation system, called Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC), is gasping for breath in space. Just two years ago, the Ministry of Science and Technology had described it as "a magnificent gem in the crown of India's technological prowess" and "a beacon of self-reliance, shining brightly in the world of satellite navigation". With information trickling out of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) about the current state of its navigation satellites, NavIC has turned out to be a classic case of overpromising and underdelivering.

The need for developing an Indian navigation system was felt in the wake of the 1999 Kargil war, during which the availability of signals from the US-operated GPS navigation system posed operational challenges. Although the Indian region is well-positioned to receive signals from GPS and other regional navigation satellite systems, it was considered prudent to develop an indigenous regional navigation system from the perspective of strategic autonomy.

In line with this thinking, ISRO designed, developed and deployed the NavIC system, beginning in 2016. It was designed to provide precise position, velocity and timing information over India and surrounding areas. NavIC was designed to be particularly useful in high-altitude areas where signals from global systems are sometimes unavailable. The hybrid operation of NavIC, along with GPS and other systems, could contribute to higher accuracy and seamless operation in some geographic areas.



MIXED BAG: Launched in May 2023, NVS-01 satellite was a success. However, NVS-02 did not reach its intended orbit. ■

For the system to operate as designed and meet its goals, the space agency had to develop the necessary satellites and ground segments. The heart of a navigation satellite is an atomic clock. It can be accurate to within one billionth of a second. ISRO procured these Rubidium Atomic Frequency Standard (RAFS) clocks from a Swiss manufacturer, but some of them malfunctioned, causing serious issues with NavIC satellites such as IRNSS-1A and IRNSS-1F (Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System).

The first clock failed in 2018; the government claimed in Parliament that the cause had been analysed and corrective action taken on the remaining clocks for upcoming satellites. Yet the clocks continued to malfunction, and as many as five satellites were rendered unusable. The only consolation for the government was that the European Space Agency also reported similar failures in its Galileo satellite constellation, which used atomic clocks supplied by Switzerland.

As the next logical step, ISRO developed its own rubidium atomic clocks at the Space Applications Centre in Ahmedabad and deployed them on its NVS-01 satellite, launched in May 2023. One can only presume that

## The government must provide adequate funding to the space sector and set appropriate priorities.

the India-made atomic clock is functioning properly, as ISRO has not shared any information or data on its performance.

While the space segment was crippled, ISRO continued to develop the necessary ground segment. To make its navigation services useful, it needed compatible hardware, including survey-grade receivers, compact, low-cost receiver modules and NavIC-enabled smartphones. To convince manufacturers and equipment suppliers, several pilot projects and testing studies were conducted to demonstrate the quality and range of signal reception from operational satellites. The pilot projects included real-time tracking of trains equipped with NavIC-enabled tracking devices, fishing vessels with Nav-

IC-enabled transponders and various types of motor vehicles.

Overall, the commercial and public utilisation of NavIC has remained low. India's mobile phone market currently has some 20 major brands and 700 phone models. In December 2025, Parliament was informed that more than 60 smartphone models from various manufacturers supported NavIC, but the total number of users with NavIC-enabled phones was not disclosed.

In order to enable handsets for the Indian navigation system, changes must be made to both hardware and software. Although some chipset manufacturers are shipping processors that support NavIC, a study by the Space Applications Centre and Vishwakarma University, Pune, found that NavIC signals on many devices remain invisible or are filtered out by low-level drivers, even though hardware support exists. Clearly, much needs to be done for Indian smartphone users to use NavIC.

Given persistent in-space and on-ground issues with its first-generation navigation satellites, ISRO developed a second-generation series, NVS. The first satellite in this series was successful, but NVS-02, launched in January 2025, did not reach its intended

orbit, as the agency quietly revealed a year later. Future satellites in this series have been delayed. In August 2025, the government announced that NVS-03 was planned for launch by the end of 2025, followed by NVS-04 and NVS-05 within the next six months. A few months later, a 2026 launch schedule was released, but it did not include any NVS-series satellites.

Over the decades, ISRO has delivered complex scientific and operational missions, developing indigenous capability in key segments of space technology. However, it has faced huge challenges — bordering on failure — when it comes to mass application of space technology beyond dedicated government use. Despite several successful Indian satellites for communications, broadcasting, remote sensing and earth observation, commercial Indian users still depend heavily on foreign satellites. EduSat, a dedicated satellite for distance learning, was a technical success but a programmatic failure due to deficiencies in network connectivity, content generation and a lack of a robust management structure, according to the audit report of the programme. And, now we have the navigation services fiasco. The space agency must conduct deep introspection.

The government must provide adequate funding to the space sector and set appropriate priorities. In 2018, the Prime Minister set an unrealistic target for ISRO to launch its human spaceflight by 2022. India is still a couple of years away from a human flight. Meanwhile, the PM announced more ambitious programmes — a space station by 2035 and a manned lunar mission by 2040.

All this has put the space agency under tremendous pressure. It has to work on all these missions, while continuing its operational satellite programmes. In view of the recent spate of failures, the government should review its priorities in the space sector, restore ISRO's autonomy in technical matters and allow it to function transparently as well as accountably.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A developing nation should not rely entirely on the experiences of others but learn to be innovative. — Vikram Sarabhai

## Lost and found, atop a bus

MOHAN SINGH

BACK in 1952, I came face to face with Bhai Jodh Singh, then Principal of Khalsa College, Amritsar. Peering above his pince-nez, he dunked his pen into the ink pot and signed my admission form — without even asking me my name. It took me a few weeks to become familiar with the numerous rooms of the vast campus, where the looks of any "wanderer" would betray his vulnerability.

Ragging, in those days, was limited to a handwritten sticker, "First Year Fool", cleverly pasted on the back. One day, our class of about 20 found that the "Professor" who had been demoralising us, one by one, was actually a well-dressed final-year student!

About a month later, when the summer vacation was set to begin, a notice informed students that those keen to visit Simla (now Shimla) should report for departure in the evening next day. Travel expenses, board and lodging — everything was to be taken care of by the organisers of the Sikh Students' Association Camp. They had apparently taken a cue from the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). The camp was to be held at Kandaghat after returning from Simla.

We left by train. Early in the morning, it dropped us at Rajpura, from where the next leg of our journey would start by road because there was no time to book tickets for the Kalka-Simla toy train. After loading our bedrolls atop the bus, we were scrambling for the window seats when it was announced that another bus would take us to our destination. Fortunately, I got a window seat. The bus then proceeded towards Simla.

We admired the tall teak, pine and other varieties of forest trees. The sight of the toy train chugging and winding up and down the hills and snaking through tunnels mesmerised us.

We reached Simla and started offloading our luggage from the roof. However, my dark-grey bedroll that I had secured placed in the front left-hand corner of the roof was missing. In no time, all the suitcases, make-shift holdalls and other items were dropped, while I stood there bewildered. Other participants were shouting, "Come down, make haste." But how could I? The bedroll contained all my clothes and cushions.

But strange are the ways of providence! A bus stopped at the adjoining parking slot. Lo and behold, my bedroll was right there on its roof. I hopped on to that bus and retrieved my luggage. It dawned on me that in the rush to get a window seat on the second bus at Rajpura, I had forgotten to transfer my bedroll from the first one. The latter's arrival in Simla at exactly the right time made all the difference. Thus the tale of two buses had a happy ending.

The writer taught linguistics at Khalsa College, Amritsar

epaper.tribuneindia.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Inclusive governance needed

Refer to 'Ladakh direly needs clarity, stability'; why the region's separation from J&K created expectations of development and administrative efficiency, the absence of an elected legislature has left residents feeling politically unheard. In a region as sensitive and strategically important as Ladakh, stability must rest not only on administrative control, but also on democratic participation. Meaningful dialogue with local stakeholders and a carefully designed constitutional framework are essential. Ladakh's future depends on balancing development, ecological protection and cultural identity through inclusive and responsive governance.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

## UN must play significant role

The call by Donald Trump for China, France, the UK and other nations to deploy warships to secure the Strait of Hormuz, highlights rising tensions in an already fragile region. While safeguarding international commerce is important, expanding military deployments risks widening the conflict and drawing more countries into a dangerous confrontation. The big powers must prioritise diplomacy and de-escalation rather than rallying allies to a potential war zone. After the First and Second World Wars, a wise leadership created the United Nations to safeguard peace. The UN must now be strengthened again so that all nations, no matter how powerful, abide by its authority, ensuring that global peace is not sacrificed to fulfil unilateral impulses.

K KUMAR, PANCHKULA

## Split in Oppn is AAP's gain

Appros of 'Going solo', the BJP's decision to contest the 2027 Punjab Assembly polls independently marks a significant shift. While this ambitious gamble reflects the party's desire to expand its footprint, the ground reality remains challenging. The historical rural-urban divide, coupled with the lingering resentment from farmers, complicates the BJP's path. A fragmented multi-cornered contest between the Opposition parties risks splitting votes. This division may inadvertently pave the way for AAP to retain power.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

## Punjab's problems not isolated

Refer to 'Four years on, AAP faces questions'; why are Punjab's problems examined in isolation? The state's economic distress, rising unemployment, agrarian stagnation and fiscal pressures are not provincial phenomena. They are the same as economic trends affecting much of India — slow industrial expansion, limited job creation and the shrinking fiscal space of states. Seen in this broad context, the challenges facing Punjab appear less exceptional and more part of a national pattern. The way forward, therefore, lies in integrating Punjab into a wider regional strategy of manufacturing growth, technological upgrade and employment generation.

MANU KANT, BY MAIL

## Avoid interference in Nepal

With a massive mandate against Nepal's pro-China old guard by the young Balendra Shah-led Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), India should feel relieved. The measure of the shift from the old to the new can be judged by the fact that both the RSP and its leader are very young. But the challenges for Nepal's new government are far too many — job creation, trade deficit, corruption, to name a few. As for India, which has historically maintained close ties with Nepal's traditional leadership, deepening engagement with the new generation of leaders is essential, but any perception of external interference is the key to a healthy and strong relationship.

PS HANSPAL, BY MAIL

## Public probity in yesteryear

The Opposition parties have repeatedly accused the CEC Gyanesh Kumar of aiding the ruling BJP. Under the circumstances, one is afield wondering the ensuing Assembly elections in the five states will be conducted in a free and fair manner. Public probity demands that Kumar steps on his own. Such high standards of moral courage could only be seen in yesteryear when following national outrage, in 1956, then Railways Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri resigned after a train mishap claimed the lives of more than 150 passengers.

THARCUS S. FERNANDO, CHENNAI

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribuneindia.com

# For BJP, Punjab a tough mountain to climb



**NIRMAL SANDHU**  
SENIOR JOURNALIST

It was quite a spectacle to see Amit Shah wearing a turban and mouthing a popular Sikh greeting to begin his much-publicised Moga rally on March 14. Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini and Prime Minister Narendra Modi often turn up in turbans at Sikh gatherings. Whoever gives the BJP leaders such ideas to charm the Sikhs should be permanently barred from dishing out any political advice on Punjab.

It is no secret that in the BJP decisions flow from the top. Even a media interview requires approval from the Central leadership. Amit Shah obviously did not consult local party leaders like Sunil Jakhar and Capt Amarinder Singh before announcing the party's decision to go it alone in the coming Assembly elections.

The two former Congress stalwarts had been publicly advocating an electoral tie-up with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). It was Raveet Singh Bittu who had vocally opposed any such alliance and it would not be surprising

if he emerges tomorrow as the chief-ministerial face.

In the absence of a meaningful engagement with locals, the Home Minister turned to one of his favourite divisive issues: conversions. If an anti-conversion law is part of the *badloav* the BJP has to offer, it won't go far electorally. Conversion is not an issue-agitating ordinary Punjabis.

Poor people converting to Christianity for petty financial gains pose no threat to society or the state. An all-embracing Punjab won't easily digest the BJP's agenda of winning elections through religious divisions.

Punjab generally vote to oust arrogant leaders. They rarely have a party of choice. The landslide win of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the last election had more to do with the punishment meted out to the Congress-SAD-BJP for misgovernance than any hopeful outcome from the AAP leadership.

Now they may be disillusioned with AAP but are not sufficiently angry to throw it out of power. The room for manoeuvre is, therefore, limited for the BJP.

According to a Sikh political thinker and author, Ajmer Singh: "The BJP won Haryana by isolating the Jats and uniting the non-Jats. It may adopt the same strategy in Punjab: divide the Sikh Jat votes and unite the Hindu, SC and OBC votes."

The award of Padma Shri to the head of Dera Sachkhand



**TENDENCY:** Punjabis generally vote to oust arrogant leaders. @TARUNDHUGHBP/X & PTI

Ballan and the subsequent Modi visit to the dera to pay tributes to Guru Ravidas in the Dalit heartland are apparently a part of this strategy.

Dalits account for 32 per cent of the Punjab votes and play a decisive role in the outcomes of 23 of the 117 Assembly seats in the four districts of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr and Hoshiarpur. Ravidassias constitute a major segment of the Dalits. And it is this segment the BJP is betting on.

Also lending support to this electoral plan of the BJP is the frequent release on parole of convicted dera chief Ram Rahim, who has a large following in parts of

Punjab's Malwa region. This section votes for the party the dera head chooses to support and his current favourite is the BJP. The dera at Beas usually maintains political neutrality.

The BJP's Dalit outreach too may fall flat as the SC-OBC voters in Punjab remain a divided lot and support different political parties. That's why the BSP has not been able to make much headway in Punjab. And that's why it will be tough for the BJP to replicate its Haryana success in Punjab. Here, the odds are heavily loaded against it.

Sikhs generally maintain a distance from the BJP because of its incendiary poli-

tics, communal agenda and patronage of the deras. The dominant Sikh philosophy is: *sarbat da bhala* (wellfare of all). Punjabis are temperamentally secular. Even at the height of militancy, there was no serious communal divide despite grave provocations.

To humour the Sikhs, the BJP has inducted several turbaned politicians. Mixing politics with religion, it often recalls the supreme sacrifices of Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Sahibzadas, and makes claims about opening the Kartarpur Sahib corridor, but all this does not add up much.

On the contrary, the persistent RSS narrative of Sikhs being a part of Hindus particularly annoys the community. This is evident from the recent protests at Panjab University against attempts at saffron takeover of the campus.

Farmers and farm workers are unlikely to back the BJP's power-grab attempt. First, the year-long farmer protests against the three controversial farm laws put the BJP leadership on the backfoot. Now the Seeds Bill, the Electricity Bill and the trade deal with the US have pushed them back to the path of agitation.

At Moga, Amit Shah could have addressed farmers' concerns. Instead, he spent his time on non-issues.

The BJP's national economic policies also offer little hope or comfort to Punjab. These have led to inequality unseen since Independence and wealth accumulation by

a handful of crony capitalists. The promotion of religious polarisation, manufacture of social anxieties and politics of distraction may hide widespread economic distress and result in electoral wins but truth ultimately prevails.

During the Punjab visits, the Modi-Shah duo did not touch the core Punjab issues nor did they offer any well-thought-out plan to extricate the state from the present predicament. Does the BJP have a vision to save Punjab from fiscal vandalism for which the ruling parties in the past had gained notoriety?

Can it help the state lighten its debt burden piled up over the years with overspending, reckless borrowing and funneling money through the benefits system? Or does it too, like the other parties, believe in short-termism and is working only to win the next election?

Despite its so far dismal performance and a mountain of hurdles on its path to power, the BJP's Punjab push should not be taken lightly this time. Numerous handicaps apart, the power and reach of the vote-winning BJP machine should not be underestimated.

Its organisational skills, financial muscle, the RSS backing and a favourably inclined Election Commission are unmatched advantages. Political strategies and caste calculations of the leadership often produce the desired results.

An all-embracing Punjab won't easily digest the BJP's agenda of religious divisions.

# Iranian films and their subtle language of resistance



**MAULEE SENAPATI**  
PROFESSOR, DCLS UNIVERSITY OF PERFORMING & VISUAL ARTS, ROHTAK

At pivotal moments, a civilisation speaks most clearly through its art.

For Iran, poetry has long served this role, yet Persian cultural expression has never been confined to verse alone. The intricate geometry of Persian architecture, the meditative discipline of calligraphy and the luminous abstraction of miniature painting together reveal a civilisation in which beauty, philosophy and moral reflection are inseparable. Through cinema, Iranian society continues to contemplate power, suffering and endurance.

Marked by restraint, allegory and philosophical patience, Iranian cinema has become one of the subtlest languages of resistance in the contemporary world.

Iran now confronts war not as a looming possibility, but as an unfolding reality. Within this turbulent landscape, Iran presents its stance as one of resistance against external domination.

Whether interpreted as strategic defiance or civilisational stubbornness, the posture reflects a society that regards the present struggle as part of a longer contest against imperialism and hegemonic power.

Significantly, even artists and intellectuals who have long criticised internal restrictions: censorship, surveillance and moral policing, have, in this moment of acute external confrontation, often found themselves standing alongside a broader national sentiment.

The poetic temperament of Persian culture nurtured a subtle but resilient intellectual independence. Modern Iranian cinema inherits precisely this dual heritage. Rather than staging dramatic confrontations, Iranian films cultivate a slower form of resistance — one embedded in gestures of persistence, ethical responsibility and human dignity.

The films of Abbas Kiarostami represent perhaps the most refined expression of this cinematic philosophy. In *Taste of Cherry* (1997), a solitary man drives through the outskirts of Tehran seeking someone willing to bury him after his planned suicide. The film unfolds through sparse conversations with strangers who briefly enter his car.

In one quietly luminous moment, a taxi driver persuades him to reconsider life



**IRANIAN CINEMA:** In *Taste of Cherry*, a man drives through Tehran's outskirts to seek someone willing to bury him after his planned suicide. @THECINEPRISM/X

by recalling the taste of mulberries he once experienced after despair had nearly overwhelmed him. Meaning returns not through spectacle but through the rediscovery of small, fragile pleasures.

A similar moral gravity shapes *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987). A young boy spends an evening searching for his classmate's home in order to return a misplaced notebook and prevent punishment at school. The journey through winding village alleys becomes an ethical pilgrimage.

Surrounded by indifferent adults, the boy nevertheless persists in fulfilling his quiet responsibility. What appears to be a minor errand gradual-

ly unfolds as an affirmation of moral courage.

For decades, filmmakers including Jafar Panahi, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Samira Makhmalbaf have extended this cinematic tradition by exploring how dignity survives within constraint. Their works illuminate the lives of workers, children and women navigating social limitations without surrendering their humanity. These narratives rarely celebrate spectacular victories; instead they reveal resilience through everyday acts of persistence.

Panahi's own life provides a powerful illustration of this ethos. After openly challenging political authority, the

filmmaker was arrested, imprisoned, and later placed under house arrest, effectively barred from filmmaking. Yet, even under these restrictions his creative imagination refused silence.

During confinement, he collaborated in the making of the documentary *This Is Not a Film* (2011), a project conceived entirely within the limits imposed upon him. Filmed largely inside his apartment, the work transformed restriction itself into a narrative form. In an episode that has already entered cinematic folklore, a copy of the film was smuggled to the Cannes Film Festival on a USB drive hidden inside a cake. What might have been silence instead became an act of imaginative defiance.

Jafar Panahi's gesture reveals something fundamental about the temperament of Iranian cinema. Obstacles rarely produce surrender; they provoke ingenuity. Constraint becomes a creative challenge rather than a terminal barrier. This sensibility resonates far beyond the sphere of artistic practice.

In a period marked by confrontation with the geopolitical influence of the US and the military assertiveness of Israel, Iranian political discourse increasingly frames its resistance as part of a broader struggle against imperialism and hegemonic domination. Whether one agrees with this framing or not, it reflects a cultural disposition that

treasures endurance itself as a form of argument. It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the most enduring images of Iranian cinema captures precisely this quiet art of negotiating obstacles.

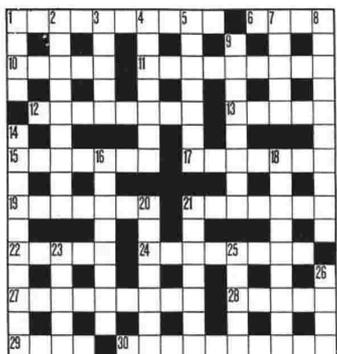
In *The Bread and Alley* (1970), a young boy carrying bread home encounters a barking dog blocking his narrow passage. He hesitates, retreats, gathers courage, and eventually offers the animal a piece of bread in order to negotiate his way forward. The episode unfolds with remarkable simplicity. The obstacle is neither destroyed nor avoided; it is patiently negotiated.

Within that narrow alley, one glimpses a deeper civilisational instinct. Iranian culture has long cultivated strategies of endurance grounded in patience, ingenuity and moral persistence. The boy's predicament appears small, almost trivial, yet the gesture through which he resolves it carries a wider symbolic force.

Faced with an obstruction that seems larger than himself, he neither abandons the journey nor attempts to overpower it. Instead he advances cautiously until the path opens. In that quiet movement emerges the enduring image of a civilisation that, across centuries of upheaval, has learned how to move through history, calmly, stubbornly, strategically, without surrender.

A copy of the documentary 'This Is Not a Film' was smuggled to the Cannes Film Festival on a USB drive hidden inside a cake.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- 1 Nevertheless (3,3,4)
- 6 Treaty (4)
- 10 Express reservations (5)
- 11 Clientele (9)
- 12 A flammable gas (8)
- 13 Step or degree (5)
- 15 Supervise (7)
- 17 Resistant to change (3-4)
- 19 Unsettled (7)
- 21 Silly (7)
- 22 Expand (5)
- 24 Stout glove with wide cuff (8)
- 27 Fill up again (9)
- 28 Prevail (5)
- 29 Dislike intensely (4)
- 30 Make no progress (3,7)

### DOWN

- 1 Opera by Verdi (4)
- 2 Unbounded (9)
- 3 Torment by frequent attack (5)
- 4 Conceal (7)
- 5 Deceive (7)
- 7 Turn away (5)
- 8 As planned (2,8)
- 9 A hard tough wood (8)
- 14 Author of *The Daffodils* (10)
- 16 Spend wastefully (8)
- 18 Simultaneously (2,3,4)
- 20 To charm (7)
- 21 Reinforce (7)
- 23 Storehouse (5)
- 25 To cast (5)
- 26 In the past (4)

### Yesterday's Solution

**Across:** 1 Parsnip, 5 Usher, 8 Sidetrack, 9 Vat, 10 Exit, 12 Cut no ice, 14 To a tee, 15 Almond, 17 Reviewer, 18 Stab, 21 Own, 22 Implicate, 24 Fiery, 25 Reflect.

**Down:** 1 Posse, 2 Rid, 3 Note, 4 Plague, 5 Unkindly, 6 Have it out, 7 Retread, 11 In advance, 13 Serenity, 14 Turn off, 16 Temper, 19 Bleat, 20 Biff, 23 Ape.

## SU DO KU



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

3	7	8	1	5	4	6	2	9
9	2	6	3	7	8	5	4	1
4	1	5	2	6	9	3	8	7
6	4	2	9	3	5	1	7	8
8	9	7	4	1	6	2	5	3
1	5	3	8	2	7	9	6	4
5	8	1	6	4	3	7	9	2
7	3	9	5	8	2	4	1	6
2	6	4	7	9	1	8	3	5

### CALENDAR

MARCH 17, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 26
- Chalra Purnimite 4
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 13, up to 9:23 am
- Siddha Yoga up to 8:15 am
- Sadhya Yoga up to 6:22 am
- Satbhisha Nakshatra up to 6:09 am
- Moon in Aquarius sign

## FORECAST

CITY	18:32 HRS	
	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
Chandigarh	29	14
New Delhi	23	15
Amritsar	23	11
Bathinda	28	12
Jalandhar	23	11
Ludhiana	26	10
Bhivani	29	14
Hisar	28	14
Sirsa	25	16
Dharamsala	20	07
Manali	16	03
Shimla	19	04
Srinagar	24	05
Jammu	23	13
Kargil	13	0
Leh	13	03
Dehradun	27	16
Mussoorie	23	07

# Opinion

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2026

## Stronger headwinds

Weak capital inflows worrisome, foreign investors need convincing

**I**N THE WEEK through March 6, India's foreign exchange reserves fell by \$11.68 billion, the most in over a year. The reserves had depleted in both the second and third quarters of the current fiscal year—by \$10.9 billion and \$24.4 billion respectively on a balance-of-payments basis. In April-December 2025, they shrank by \$30.8 billion compared with a depletion of \$13.8 billion in the year-ago period. A high merchandise trade deficit, driven by sharp increases in gold and silver imports and stagnant exports, has exerted some pressure on the current account lately. But even starker are the unusually weak inflows into the capital/financial account, which, during most quarters in recent decades, used to comfortably finance the current account deficit (CAD) and result in an addition to reserves.

Net inflows of \$14.4 billion into the capital account in Q3FY26, for instance, was a relatively low figure when compared with the regular pattern. Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows were negative on a net basis for the four months through December. Net outflows of \$5.42 billion were witnessed in the period. Similarly, in 10 out of the 14 months through February 2026, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have been net sellers of Indian equities. With the West Asia war exacerbating the external situation, the outflows have sharply accelerated in the current month—FPIs have net sold Indian shares worth \$7.3 billion in the 10 trading sessions through March 16. Apart from factors like wider merchandise trade deficits and weaker net capital inflows, increased currency market volatility and valuation changes also contributed to the slowing pace of reserves build-up in recent quarters. A rising share of gold in the forex reserves on account of the skyrocketing prices of the yellow metal could not arrest this declining trend in reserve accumulation.

True, foreign investors' exit from India could be attributed to the prolonged geopolitical upheaval. But an element of caution regarding India's growth numbers and a re-evaluation of its growth potential itself also appear to be behind the capital outflows. Obviously, hordes of portfolio investors have turned sceptical about staying invested in India, with the rupee's relentless fall undermining the returns they could fetch in their respective local currencies and the US dollar. A sharp decline in reserves last week was also caused by the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) heavy dollar sales to stem the rupee's fall. A vicious cycle appears to have been triggered. High repatriations and disinvestments by foreign firms also can't be seen as a vote of confidence in the Indian economy. All this, combined with the plausible sharp widening of the CAD due to a likely spike in the energy import bill (Brent crude at \$100 could inflate oil imports alone by nearly \$50 billion or 30% annually)—and a slowing inward remittances add to the concerns.

RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra in his latest monetary policy speech cited that forex reserves of nearly \$724 billion as of January 30 were enough for merchandise import cover of more than 11 months, and asserted that external financing requirements would be met comfortably. On a similar note, the Economic Survey 2025-26 lamented that India's "strongest macroeconomic performance in decades" occurred when the global system no longer rewards such success with currency stability, capital inflows, or strategic insulation. Such perceptions, however, are unlikely to detract from the emerging concerns about the twin deficits—on the current account and fiscal fronts—or foreign investors' increasing wariness about India.

## An energy shock lesson from China's dash for gas

**FOR MOST OF** the world, 2026's gas shock began on February 28. That's when US and Israeli strikes against Iran first threatened to block a fifth of the world's supplies of liquefied natural gas, sending prices in Europe up nearly 50% in a matter of hours. In northern China, it began months earlier, when biting winter cold and rising prices for domestic fuel left cash-strapped rural households enduring frigid conditions that seem like a throwback to an earlier, more poverty-stricken era. Layering clothing to compensate for boilers they couldn't afford to switch on, or standing outside in the middle of the day to warm themselves with waning winter light.

For that situation, you can blame the pipe dream that gas would provide a transition fuel in the shift to cleaner forms of energy. Other nations still clinging to this fantasy amid the current conflict in West Asia should pay heed to what went wrong.

China's crisis has roots in the policies that cleaned up the smog-laden air of its big cities over the past decade. In Hebei, a province surrounding Beijing and Tianjin, local authorities since 2017 have been cracking down on people burning coal for domestic heating. Financial support and legal penalties were wielded to encourage households to switch to gas boilers, electric heaters, or heat pumps.

A glance at the blue skies of Beijing these days would suggest the policy has been a success. In the handsbrake rural villages at the sharp end of the switch, however, conditions are bleak. Subsidies that were initially provided to lower the cost of gas have been progressively removed, to the point where many can barely afford to pay for heating in sub-zero temperatures out of their meagre incomes. It's disgraceful that a country toutong the breakthrough achievements of its robotics and clean-power industries can't keep poor rural villagers warm in winter. But it's also a sign of the hidden costs embedded in the supposedly cheap option of a lower-carbon fossil fuel.

Gas boilers, electric heaters, heat pumps, and the now-banned coal all have different costs and benefits. Installation expenses are highest for heat pumps and gas boilers, lowest for electric heaters, and free for anyone feeding old domestic stove with firewood or illegal coal. Fuel costs are highest for gas and electric heaters, lower for coal, and lowest of all for heat pumps. The mistake in Hebei was treating gas as a cheap option. Upfront costs for heat pumps are only about 20% higher than for gas boilers. For a local government being ordered to subsidise the installation of millions of the devices, that can quickly add up. As such, many opted for gas instead.

Operating costs, meanwhile, get paid by households, and that's where the benefits of clean power show up. You can get a million British thermal units of heat output, enough to warm a small home for two days, for about \$5 of electricity if using a heat pump, as against \$10 using coal and \$15 for gas. That's not even counting the health benefits to households from reduced pollution and living in less icy homes, let alone the climate cost. China's clean skies policies were mainly instituted to improve the lives of more affluent urban dwellers. Far too much of the expense was loaded onto the backs of rural governments and citizens who could least afford it. Fixing this injustice will require the central government to bear more of the burden of replacing unused gas infrastructure with cheaper, cleaner heat pumps, and better insulation.

There's a profound lesson in this for the rest of the world. One-time capital expenditures are arduous to finance. Governments dealing with a rolling crisis of war, tariffs, elevated interest rates, volatile fossil-fuel costs, natural disasters, and political disaffection will feel tempted to avoid this by shifting the burden onto individuals.

That's particularly the case where energy is involved. An initial rush to install heat pumps in Europe and the UK, after the Ukraine war cut off Russian gas supplies, has stalled. That's thanks in part to short-sighted regulation that makes boilers cheaper to run, despite being less efficient. Rather than work to fix this, leaders have treated it as a licence to start backtracking on all manner of green policies. The US retreat from clean power has been even more violent, and every bit as ruinous to America's hopes to remain at the technological frontier.

By counting on gas as a bridge between coal and renewables, policymakers have raised costs on individuals and discredited the very idea of transitioning to clean power—in China and elsewhere. The conflict in West Asia is revealing again what a shaky bridge that is. It's time to discard it for good.



DAVID FICKLING  
Bloomberg

## PARADIPLMACY—SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

engaging directly with international actors—has gradually become a defining feature of India's evolving foreign policy landscape. While India's external relations remain constitutionally anchored in the authority of the Union government, the growing participation of states in global engagement reflects the deeper transformation of India's political economy since the early 1990s. What was once an overwhelmingly centralised diplomatic architecture has slowly adapted to the realities of globalisation, federalism, and competitive economic development.

The most decisive turning point in this trajectory was the economic liberalisation initiated in 1991. By dismantling many of the state controls that had defined India's post-independence economic strategy, the reforms integrated the country more closely with the global economy. Foreign direct investment, global supply chains, and international technology partnerships suddenly became central drivers of development. In this new environment, state governments could no longer remain passive administrative units waiting for centrally mediated economic opportunities. Instead, they began to compete actively to attract capital, infrastructure investment, and industrial partnerships. States such as Maharashtra and Gujarat were among the pioneers, reaching out to foreign investors and positioning themselves as gateways to India's expanding market.

The technological transformations of the late 1990s and early 2000s reinforced this shift. The rise of India's IT sector created new opportunities for regional economies to build direct links with global markets. Southern states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh capitalised on these possibilities with remarkable success. Bengaluru emerged as a global technology hub, while Chennai and Hyderabad developed strong reputations in software services, electronics manufacturing, and innovation ecosystems. State governments played a crucial role in these developments by engaging directly with multinational corporations, technology clusters, and international investors. In effect, economic globalisation opened the door for Indian



HARSH V PANT  
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states to articulate region-specific development strategies through international engagement.

Political developments within India further strengthened the logic of paradiplomacy. The emergence of coalition governments at the national level during the 1990s enhanced the influence of regional political parties in shaping policy priorities. Chief ministers began to acquire greater political visibility and leverage, both domestically and internationally. Engaging foreign investors, participating in global forums, and cultivating diaspora networks became useful tools not only for economic development but also for reinforcing political legitimacy at home. As India's federal system matured, states increasingly asserted their developmental ambitions beyond national borders.

In recent years, the idea of competitive federalism has given additional impetus to this trend. The central government has actively encouraged states to showcase their economic strengths, improve ease-of-doing-business rankings, and compete for global investment. India's diversity and federal character also make paradiplomacy a natural extension of its domestic political structure. Several states possess strong cultural identities, historical trade links, or diaspora connections that naturally lend themselves to international engagement. Border states often interact with neighbouring countries on issues of trade, connectivity and cultural exchange. Similarly, states with large expatriate communities—particularly in the Gulf region or Southeast Asia—have strong incentives to maintain close economic and social ties with those regions. These interactions, informal in earlier decades, have gradually acquired a more institutional character.

For Uttar Pradesh in particular, the outreach also reflects an attempt to reshape international perceptions

Since 2020, paradiplomacy in India has entered a new phase of consolidation. The disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic forced governments across the world to rethink supply chains, investment strategies, and technological partnerships. Indian states responded by intensifying efforts to attract foreign investment and integrate themselves into emerging global production networks. CMs increasingly embarked on international roadshows, investment summits, and diaspora outreach initiatives aimed at showcasing their states as competitive investment destinations.

The growing maturity of India's paradiplomacy practices can be seen in the recent international outreach undertaken by Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath. His four-day official visit to Singapore and Japan last month was designed as an exercise in investment diplomacy aimed at positioning Uttar Pradesh as a central pillar of India's manufacturing ambitions. The state government has articulated an ambitious target of trillion-dollar economy by 2029-30, and international partnerships are seen as critical to achieving that objective.

The outcomes of the visit were significant. Agreements and memoranda of understanding worth approximately ₹1.5 lakh crore were signed, while investment proposals exceeded ₹2.5 lakh crore. Together, these commitments represent a potential economic infusion approaching ₹4 lakh crore, an amount that could generate more than five lakh jobs. The sectors targeted reflect the changing nature of India's industrial aspirations: semiconductors, data centres, logistics, fintech, aviation maintenance and repair, automobile manufacturing, renewable energy, and green hydrogen technologies.

Japanese participation formed an especially important component of this engagement. Partnerships with companies such as Kubota Corporation, Spark Minds in collaboration with Toyo Denso, Japan Aviation Electronics, and Nagase & Co were explored to expand industrial and technological capacity in UP. A notable initiative was the establishment of a Green Hydrogen Centre of Excellence involving the University of Yamaguchi, the Yamaguchi Hydrogen Company, and Indian institutions including IIT Kanpur and IIT BHU. Such collaborations highlight how state-level diplomacy can facilitate advanced research and technological cooperation.

In Singapore, discussions with sovereign wealth funds, financial institutions such as DBS Group, and major business leaders focused on infrastructure investment, digital technology, and financial innovation. The visit also incorporated a cultural dimension, with the CM promoting Uttar Pradesh's artisanal heritage and engaging with members of the Indian diaspora.

The broader significance of such initiatives lies in what they reveal about India's changing diplomatic architecture. States are no longer merely implementing development policies designed in New Delhi; they are actively shaping India's economic engagement with the world. For Uttar Pradesh in particular, the outreach also reflects an attempt to reshape international perceptions. Once regarded as a difficult investment environment, the state now seeks to present itself as a stable and attractive destination for global capital, supported by improvements in law and order, infrastructure, and policy transparency. Its paradiplomatic efforts mark an inflection point in the evolution of this idea at a pan-India level.

Ultimately, paradiplomacy in India represents the intersection of federalism and globalisation. As Indian states become more confident participants in the international arena, their initiatives can reinforce national economic diplomacy by expanding networks of trade, investment, and technological cooperation. If managed with careful coordination between the Union and the states, this evolving partnership has the potential to strengthen India's global economic presence while ensuring that the benefits of globalisation are distributed more widely across the country.

## The atom moves. Is India ready?



KAVYA WADHWA  
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### THE SHANTI Bill

**THERE IS A** specific section that falls over a sector the moment it realises the rules have changed. Not the noise of disruption or the fanfare of policy launch, but a quiet recalibration by the people whose money is at stake. That silence settled over energy boardrooms when Parliament passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, and it has not entirely lifted since. The gate that kept private capital out of nuclear energy for over a decade has been unshaped. What walks through it will shape India's electricity grid for the next half-century.

India needs to nearly triple its electricity generation capacity by 2047. Renewables will bear the largest share of that burden, and rightly so. But every grid planner knows the uncomfortable truth that solar and wind advocates are reluctant to voice: intermittency is a structural problem, not an engineering inconvenience. The more renewable capacity India adds, the more it needs firm, dispatchable, round-the-clock power. Hydro is geographically constrained. Gas is import-exposed. Coal is a civilisational liability. Nuclear is India's only large-scale, low-carbon baseload option. It runs at 80-90% capacity factor and does not depend on cloud cover or the monsoon.

The SHANTI Bill made it legal to act on this reality. The market read the signal immediately. Energy conglomerates that had stayed at arm's length from nuclear are now conducting feasibility assessments, with many setting up nuclear power arms. International reactor vendors, whose conversations had stalled for over a decade on unresolved liability questions, have re-engaged with urgency. Foreign tech partnerships that existed only as diplomatic footnotes are acquiring com-

mercial substance. What has been true for one sector is equally significant for the Bill signals to a new generation of entrepreneurs. Indian startups working on small modular reactors and engineering components for the global fusion industry are beginning to attract serious investor attention. The Bill is the first credible signal that India intends to be a participant in the next generation of nuclear technology.

Atomic energy is a Union subject, yet the policies of nuclear plants are irrevocably local. The more perceptive state governments understand that while they cannot build nuclear plants, they can create conditions that make them the obvious choice when the Centre and private developers decide where to site them. Gujarat has gone further in demonstrating this. At successive editions of Vibrant Gujarat, the state has institutionalised a Nuclear CEO Roundtable. It is a government actively closing the gap between commercial intent and regulatory reality, and deserves more credit than it has received.

The conversation around nuclear hosting has been dominated by risk. It is time to give equal analytical weight to the benefits, which are considerable, layered, and enduring in ways that most infrastructure investments are not. The most visible capital at scale is a 2,000-Mw nuclear plant represents a construction investment of ₹30,000-40,000 crore spread over seven to 10 years. That capital flows continuously through civil works, equipment procurement, logistics, and specialised services

The SHANTI Bill has unshelved the gate that kept private capital out of nuclear energy for seven decades. What walks through it will shape India's electricity grid

Any state gov that treats nuclear advocacy as a branding exercise will find itself where Tamil Nadu did in 2011, defending a project it couldn't explain to those most affected by it

into the local economy. The employment it creates is neither temporary nor skilled. Nuclear construction expands demand certified to global standards, quality assurance engineers, instrumentation specialists, health physicists, and project managers—skilled, well-compensated roles that last lasting technical capacity.

A 2,000-Mw plant employs 2,000-3,000 people directly at wages among the highest in industrial workforce. Around this core, an ecosystem takes root: specialised contractors, calibration firms, waste management services, medical facilities, and educational institutions.

In states with weaker industrial bases, this ecosystem becomes the anchor around which a district economy reorganises itself. The fiscal returns stretch across 60-year operational life. Land lease revenues, local body taxes, stamp duties, on the enormous volume of construction contracts, and the indirect tax contribution of a large captive workforce accumulate into a fiscal legacy that outlasts every other infra category. The cumulative fiscal impact on a host district over a plant's lifetime, by some estimates, exceeds the original capital cost, a return no renewable project can replicate.

Power certainty may be the most strategically significant benefit of all. A state hosting a nuclear plant secures a claim on a portion of its own energy output in a national grid where industrial investors still conduct due diligence on power availability before committing capital, the ability to guarantee firm power is a competitive differentiator of the first order.

Finally, there is the knowledge economy effect. Universities near operating plants develop nuclear physics, nuclear engineering, and materials science programmes that would otherwise lack commercial viability. Research tie-ups with national laboratories open up Aluminidisperse into healthcare, defence, and advanced manufacturing. The plant becomes not merely an energy asset but an intellectual infrastructure node, a driver of high-quality form of development than special economic zones.

None of this dissolves the political economy of siting. Coastal communities carry legitimate grievances about displacement and ecological risk. The timeline is structurally awkward: nuclear plants take 12-15 years from site selection to first power, spanning multiple electoral cycles. Political costs arrive early, benefits arrive late. Any state government that treats nuclear advocacy as a branding exercise will find itself where Tamil Nadu did in 2011, defending a project it couldn't explain to the people most affected by it.

There is a version of India's nuclear future that resembles the past: centralised, cautious, slowly expanding under state stewardship. It is a respectable outcome, but not adequate for India's energy requirements or the opportunity the SHANTI Bill has made available.

The answer will not be found in the text of the Bill. It will be found in whether Gujarat's roundtables produce actual site decisions, whether Andhra Pradesh's industrial ambitions acquire the power architecture they require, and whether a new generation of nuclear entrepreneurs gets the regulatory room to build. The atom is patient. Infrastructure timelines are not. The gate is open. The question is who has the stamina to walk through it.

# TG govt should curb drug menace with iron fist

In a shocking incident, Putta Mahesh Kumar and 'Pilot' Rohith Reddy tested positive for drugs. They are not ordinary men on the street. One of them is a lawmaker in Parliament while the other is a former lawmaker from Telangana. And they are nouveau riche as well. Mahesh Kumar is a member of Lok Sabha from Eluru in Andhra Pradesh. Representing Telugu Desam Party (TDP), he became an MP in 2024, at the young age of 36 years. His father Putta Sudhakar Yadav is a legislator from Mydukur in YSR Kadapa district. Sudhakar Yadav also served as the chairman of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) during April 28, 2018, and June 19, 2019. As an MP, Mahesh Kumar's primary role is to take part in enacting laws that govern the

country. Rohith Reddy, who calls himself 'Pilot' Rohith Reddy, was also a lawmaker in the past, albeit at the state-level. In 2018, he won on a Congress ticket as an MLA from Tandur, now in Vikarabad district, but shifted loyalties to Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) which was in power then. However, he lost elections from the same Assembly segment in 2023 on the BRS ticket.

Today, the two have been found consuming drugs? Does this incident show the callous attitude of these two politicians? Or are they not afraid of law enforcement agencies in Telangana?

Incidentally, the duo was allegedly caught red-handed when a team from Elite Action Group for Drug Law Enforcement (EAGLE), on a tip-off, raided a farm-

house owned by Rohith Reddy in Moinsabad mandal alone. Incidentally, the same Rohith Reddy's farmhouse was the place where a plot to buy four BRS MLAs was uncovered in 2022. That incident also rocked Telangana politics as did the Sunday's drug bust.

Nevertheless, strict vigilance on pubs, farmhouses and colleges will reduce the drug threat significantly. Besides, stringent punishment for both drug peddlers and consumers can be a strong deterrent. Coming back to the latest drug bust, it is good that TDP, which is in power in Andhra Pradesh, acted swiftly, served a notice on Mahesh Kumar seeking his explanation, and decided to keep him away from party activities till he comes clean on the allegations. AP Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu

also condemned the irresponsible behaviour of the young MP, while ordering for an immediate action. But BRS has remained silent on Rohith Reddy! A few months back, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy directed the police to act tough against drug peddlers and consumers. He called for zero-tolerance towards drug usage. He was also instrumental in setting up EAGLE for eliminating the drug menace from the state. The name looks menacing, but EAGLE's action on the ground seems to be lackadaisical. Will this latest sensational drug case spur it into action? Unless the Telangana government acts tough and deals with the narcotics issue with an iron hand, the state will continue to face drug threats day in and day out.

## LETTERS

### Bring a law on euthanasia

The Hans India reader Datta Prasad Shirodkar has rightly stated that the debate about whether mercy killing is right or wrong, ethical or unethical, is likely to continue in the society (THI March 16). There are many families who have exhausted all medical avenues and resources in the treatment of their ailing family member, whose condition is permanently irreversible. They just pray to God to put an end to the suffering of their loved one quickly. It is time the government takes cognizance of the Supreme Court's landmark verdict and enact a law on euthanasia.

*Dinanath Shenolikar, Hyderabad*

### A touching tribute to Potti Srimamulu

It is a fitting tribute to erect a 58-foot bronze statue of Potti Srimamulu at Shamsham in Amaravati as the height of the statue symbolises the number of days he was a fast-unto-death. The statue was unveiled on Friday commemorating his 125th birth anniversary. It is reported that a park is coming up on 6.80 acres of land at an estimated cost of ₹150 crore. His fast-unto-death not only helped create Andhra Pradesh on linguistic lines but also paved the way for forming states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar and Punjab, among others. Though Srimamulu hailed from a humble family, he protested twice before independence for the rights of Dalits and another two times after independence for the same. He sat on a protest for the fifth time for a separate state for Telugu people. His determination and attitude towards public issues made Mahatma Gandhi remark that he would have achieved independence much earlier if he had 10 followers like Srimamulu. The Smrutivanam in his memory will guide future generations.

*Pratapa Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)*

### Naidu backing criminals

Hailed as the youngest MP, Putta Mahesh Kumar Yadav, representing TDP in the Lok Sabha, did the unthinkable by consuming cocaine mindfully on the repercussions, if caught. Forgetting his position, he behaved like any other Gen-Z and is now repeating whereas his party boss Nara Chandrababu Naidu, as is his wont, simply issued a show cause notice to the MP seeking a reply within 48 hours. Naidu knows how best to circumvent laws and hush up any case filed against his party leaders, including himself. It is a shame that 'criminals' are masquerading as political leaders in our country and rulers, leaving the people high and dry. Naidu himself is 'involved' in several white-collar crimes. A past master in managing the entire system including the judiciary, he 'managed' to get an interim bail for himself on medical grounds in the Skill Development scam case after 53 days in jail as a remand prisoner.

*Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada*

### E-waste recycling and safe disposal

This refers to 'GHMC collects 15 tonnes of E-waste during mega drive' (March 16). This highlights the urgent need for continuous action. Establishing e-waste collection bins in every residential complex would ensure regular disposal. The collected material can be recycled, with residues safely handled by GHMC through certified facilities. E-waste recycling recovers valuable metals, plastics, and glass, and safely disposes of hazardous toxic substances like lead, mercury, and cadmium from contaminating soil and water. The benefits are manifold: conserving resources, reducing pollution, creating green jobs, and supporting a circular economy. It also minimizes landfill waste and lowers the carbon footprint of new electronics production. The challenges include informal recycling practices that expose workers to hazards, limited infrastructure, weak regulation, and rising volumes of e-waste driven by rapid technological change. Stronger policies, global cooperation and consumer responsibility are essential to make e-waste management sustainable.

*Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad*

### Go for a contingency fund

Proposes the editorial 'Prudent fiscal situation gives govt headroom to tackle crisis' (March 16). The Rs one lakh crore Economic Stabilisation Fund is a wise move to cushion global shocks, but a crisis corpus cannot substitute for fixing structural flaws. The recent Rs 19,230 crore additional fertilizer outlay exposes this reality. Subsidising manufacturers rather than farmers encourages waste, leakages, and soil damage from imbalanced urea use. Genuine fiscal prudence demands shifting to direct benefit transfers, promoting sustainable farming, and diversifying import sources. A contingency fund should address genuine emergencies, not mask the absence of long-overdue reforms. Creating new corpus without tackling old inefficiencies is not consolidation, it is cosmetic comfort.

*K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru*  
[thehansreader@gmail.com](mailto:thehansreader@gmail.com)

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Lack of growth strategy impedes globally popular Mysuru silk industry

BENGALURU. Mysore Silk Saree is not just a garment but a symbol of pride for Mysuru and the entire state of Karnataka. Known for its elegance, purity and rich heritage, the saree enjoys enormous demand not only within India but also among buyers abroad. Yet, despite its popularity and economic potential, the industry continues to struggle due to traditional administrative approaches and lack of progressive growth strategy.

Industry observers say the demand for authentic Mysore silk sarees is so high that influential people in Mysuru often receive calls from customers in other cities and even overseas requesting help in purchasing the premium saree. However, the inability to scale production and modernise the sector has prevented the industry from tapping its full potential.

**Read more at**  
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# TG Speaker's order on anti-defection petitions is a tricky constitutional test



PROF MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR ACHARYULU

It seems like the Anti-Defection Law is a defective law or a totally defective conclusion on the judgment of the Speaker of Telangana, Gaddam Prasad Kumar, on March 11. This has intensified a debate on whether the Speaker's decision was based on a strictly legal interpretation or influenced by political considerations.

The controversy surrounding the alleged defection of ten Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in Telangana has once again placed India's anti-defection law, legislative ethics, and constitutional accountability under intense public scrutiny. What began as a political dispute has now evolved into a significant constitutional question involving the powers of the Speaker, the limits of judicial review, and the integrity of representative democracy. The recent (March 13) directions of the Supreme Court of India in the matter have not decided the merits of the dispute but have highlighted a critical issue: transparency and procedural fairness in the Speaker's adjudication of disqualification petitions. The matter was heard by a two-judge bench, comprising Justice Sanjay Karol and Justice

Augustine George Masih. During the proceedings, senior advocates appearing for the Speaker's office and the State government submitted that the Speaker had already completed the inquiry and had passed the final orders in all the disqualification petitions.

The controversy arose after ten MLAs, who were elected to the Telangana Legislative Assembly on the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) ticket, were accused of joining the ruling Congress party. Alleging that these MLAs had voluntarily given up their party membership, BRS leaders, including its working president K T Rama Rao (KTR) and Padi Kaushik Reddy, along with BJP MLA Yelei Maheshwari Reddy, approached the Supreme Court seeking directions regarding the disqualification petitions.

The petitions challenged the delay and the Speaker's alleged inaction in deciding the disqualification complaints under the anti-defection law. According to the Speaker's decision, the 10 MLAs had not defected from the BRS, and hence the disqualification petitions were dismissed. However, the petitioners raised a serious objection before the Court: copies of the Speaker's orders and records of the proceedings were not furnished to them.

**SC's directions:** Taking note of these concerns, the Supreme Court questioned why the Speaker's office had not supplied the relevant documents to the petitioners, especially when they were parties to the proceedings. The court directed that certified copies of the



When voters elect a candidate based on the platform and ideology of a particular party, they are essentially endorsing that political programme. If the elected representative later switches allegiance, the voters' mandate is arguably compromised. The anti-defection law was meant to protect this mandate.

Speaker's orders must be provided within 24 hours, while the depositions, statements, and other documents recorded during the proceedings had to be furnished within four days. At the same time, the court closed the present batch of petitions, observing that since the Speaker had already delivered his decisions, the appropriate remedy available to the petitioners would be to challenge those decisions through judicial review before the High Court. Thus, while the Supreme Court did not examine the correctness of the Speaker's verdict, it ensured that the petitioners would have access to the necessary documents to pursue further legal remedies.

**The controversial findings:** The Speaker's ruling that the 10 MLAs had not defected triggered widespread criticism from political opponents and constitutional commentators. Several facts cited in the public domain have raised doubts about this conclusion. For instance, Khairatabad MLA Danam Nagender reportedly contacted the Lok Sabha elections from Secunderabad as a Congress candidate. Meanwhile, records on the Election Commission's website list him as a Congress nominee.

Similarly, Station Ganpur MLA Kadiyari Srihari had been seen participating in Congress meetings and public programmes. His daughter contested the Warangal Lok Sabha seat as a Congress candidate and won. Given these developments, critics argue that it is difficult to reconcile the Speaker's finding that these MLAs continue to remain members of the BRS.

**Constitutional Framework** The issue of defections in India is governed by the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, introduced by the 52nd Constitutional Amendment in 1985. Under the Tenth Schedule, a legislator may be disqualified if:

1. They voluntarily give up membership of the political party on whose ticket they were elected;
2. They vote or abstain from voting against the party whip without permission;

3. An independent member joins a political party after being elected;
4. The authority to decide disqualification petitions rests with the Speaker (or Chairman) of the legislature.

**Judicial review of the decisions:** The question of whether the Speaker's decisions can be reviewed by courts was settled in the landmark case of Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillu. In that judgment, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of the anti-defection law but ruled that the Speaker's decisions are subject to judicial review. The court held that judicial intervention may be justified if the Speaker's decision:

- a. Violates constitutional provisions;
- b. Breaches the principles of natural justice;
- c. Is vitiated by mala fides or perversity.

Thus, the Speaker's decision is not beyond scrutiny. This principle is likely to be central if the Telangana matter reaches the High Court. Another recurring problem in anti-defection cases is the delay in deciding disqualification petitions. In the Telangana case, critics argue that not only was there a delay in deciding the petitions, but there was also a reluctance to provide certified copies of the orders, which further obstructed judicial review.

**Natural justice:** At the heart of the controversy lies the issue of natural justice. Two core principles govern fair adjudication: Audi alteram partem, both sides must be heard, and reasoned decisions, the parties must know the basis on which a decision has been made.

**Democratic mandate:** Beyond legal technicalities, the issue of defections raises deeper questions about democratic morality. The Supreme Court's latest order does not conclude the controversy. Instead, it marks the beginning of the next phase of legal scrutiny. Once the Speaker's orders and related records are obtained, the petitioners are likely to approach the Telangana High Court seeking judicial review.

**The High Court may examine several crucial questions:**

1. Whether the MLAs had effectively given up their party membership;
2. Whether the Speaker's inquiry was fair and impartial;
3. Whether the decision is consistent with the constitutional principles governing defections.

Depending on the outcome, the matter could eventually return to the Supreme Court.

The Telangana episode also revives a broader institutional debate: Should the power to decide defection cases remain with the Speaker? Several constitutional scholars have suggested that this responsibility should instead be entrusted to an independent tribunal or the Election Commission of India to ensure impartiality. Until such reforms are undertaken, controversies like the present one are likely to recur.

*(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)*

# The silent thunder: When Vajpayee, the poet-PM, recalibrated the global order

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

We have the capacity for a big blast. Ours is not a cry of despair; it is a challenge to the world - Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

In the blistering, white-hot heat of the Thar Desert on May 11, 1998, the very sands of Pokhron didn't just shift; they shook the foundations of a geopolitical hierarchy that had long sought to keep India in a state of perpetual "strategic restraint." As the ground buckled and the sensors registered a seismic tremor of 5.3 on the Richter scale, a coded message flashed across the high-security corridors of New Delhi: "The Buddha has smiled again."

It was a moment of supreme audacity, orchestrated by a man who was as much a master of silence as he was of the spoken word. Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the poet-statesman, had just led India across the nuclear Rubicon, transforming a "post-colonial entity" into a "formidable power."

**Anatomy of a secret-Defying the eye in the sky:** The 1998 Pokhron-1 tests, codenamed 'Operation Shakti', were not merely a scientific achievement; they were a masterpiece in clandestine leadership and psychological warfare. Vajpayee understood a chilling reality: the world's superpowers—armed with billion-dollar KH-11 "Keyhole" spy satellites—were watching India's every move from the heavens. The CIA had successfully blocked previous attempts by detecting heat signatures and soil movement. To succeed, Vajpayee knew he didn't just need scientists; he needed shadows.

Under his unwavering direction, the mission was shrouded in a "cloak of invisibility." He empowered the duo of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam and Dr R Chidambaram to operate with total autonomy, bypassing the traditional, leak-prone bureaucracy. Scientists wore army fatigues to blend in with the local units, worked only during the brief "blind



Pokhron Nuclear Test

**The nuclear paradox-iron fist, a velvet heart:** Vajpayee was a walking paradox, a leader who authorized the creation of world-ending weapons while penning verses about the fragility of a dewdrop. His decision to "go nuclear" was not born of warmongering or a thirst for conquest, but of a deep-seated, civilisational desire for peace through strength. He famously remarked that weapons are not for war, but to ensure that war never happens.

He believed that a weak India could never be a truly peaceful India but a vulnerable one. By declaring India a nuclear-weapon state, he wasn't seeking a tool for aggression; he was building a "Minimum Credible Deterrent." His strategic foresight was prophetic. He anticipated the two-front threat from neighbouring long before it became a staple of modern defense journals.

The "poet's resolve" was visible even as he faced the wrath of the Clinton administration. He remained unfazed in the face of global condemnation, famously stating in Parliament that India would never use these weapons against non-nuclear states—the No First Use (NFU) policy. This was his hallmark: the heart of a poet who wept for the fallen soldier, but the spine of a warrior who ensured that no mother would ever have to weep because her country was defenseless against nuclear blackmail.

**From 1998 to a global power:** Estimates are that India possesses an arsenal of approximately 180 nuclear warheads. Vajpayee transformed India from a "suppliant" state, constantly asking for

permission, into a "deciding" power. He proved that India could withstand global sanctions and emerge stronger, eventually forcing the world to sign the Civil Nuclear Deal and recognize India as a responsible nuclear state.

He led with a smile that carried the weight of a thousand suns and a voice that could silence a storm. He showed that you could be a man of peace while holding the ultimate deterrent, and that a poet's vision is often clearer than a politician's calculation.

As we look back at the 1998 explosions, we remember not just the fire in the sky, but the calm in the heart of the man who ignited it. He was Bharat's true Ratna—a bridge between the ancient wisdom of the Buddha and the modern necessity of the missile.

My poetry is a declaration of love for the world, not a song of surrender - Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

*(The writer is a former OSD to Union Civil Aviation Minister)*

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



لا تجزع من جزعك، وإلا فكيف  
للنور أن يتسلل إلى باطنك؟  
(جمال الدين الرومي)

**YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB**  
*Fear not your wound; how else  
could the light sneak inside you?*  
Jalal Al-Din Rumi  
(13th-century poet and scholar)

# Opinion

## Why Mojtaba Khamenei was chosen to succeed his father

HASSAN AL-MUSTAFA



Hassan Al-Mustafa is a Saudi writer and researcher specializing in Islamist movements, the evolution of religious discourse, and relations between the Gulf states and Iran.  
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**M**ojtaba Khamenei would not have become the supreme leader of Iran had his father, Ali Khamenei, died naturally. The prevailing custom in Shiite “scientific hawza” (seminaries) — whether in Najaf, Karbala, Qom or Mashhad — holds that religious authority is not passed from father to son, as such conduct is regarded as a pursuit of leadership that contradicts the principle of piety.

Alli Khamenei was well acquainted with this hawza convention. He was aware that his son would not be accepted by the seminaries as his successor. He understood that the hawza would not countenance a hereditary transfer of the marja’iyya. This is precisely what kept him from pursuing the succession of his son to the office of supreme religious authority.

There is also another important reason: the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution in Iran was founded on the rejection

of political succession. The late shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown in favor of a republican system that rejected hereditary rule. Iranians did not want to replace a shah wearing a crown with another shah wearing a turban.

So, what changed and how did Mojtaba Khamenei become the third supreme leader?

The fundamental factor behind this radical shift was the assassination of Ali Khamenei in an attack in which he and several members of his family were killed. The event proved pivotal for Iran. It created a profound leadership vacuum and generated a deep emotional and social shock.

The current supreme leader thus emerged as a form of “blood legitimacy” and an heir whose father, mother and several other members of his family were killed. This development also has a mythological dimension deeply rooted in Shiite history, emotionally linked to the events of Karbala, thereby granting

it an additional layer of symbolism.

This symbolism was reinforced by the timing of the announcement of Mojtaba Khamenei as supreme leader on the 19th day of Ramadan — the first of three nights during which Shiite Muslims celebrate the martyrdom of Ali bin Abi Taleb.

Together, these factors highlight the immense symbolic weight surrounding the context in which Mojtaba Khamenei was appointed as Iran’s faqih.

Moreover, through this decision, the Assembly of Experts sought to stress that the “revolution” would continue along the path of its former leader and that it remained capable of resistance and confrontation.

This is particularly significant because the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the hard-line faction allied with it expressed strong anger and resentment toward the initiative of President Masoud Pezeshkian, who apologized to the Arab Gulf states for the attacks that had struck their territories.

Today, Mojtaba Khamenei stands as the faqih of Iran, as well as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He is also regarded as a figure with deep ties to the IRGC and to the country’s various hard-line currents. Will he adopt a confrontational and uncompromising course or will he seek pragmatic solutions?

In politics, all possibilities remain open. The new leader may prove even more uncompromising than his late father or he may emerge as the leader who guides the “revolution” into a new phase.

One crucial consideration, however, is that Mojtaba Khamenei is the only figure who is capable of participating in halting the war without provoking strong resistance from the Revolutionary Guards. This is not only due to his close relationship with them but also because he now holds the position of commander-in-chief of the armed forces. And, perhaps more importantly, he is widely perceived as the actual heir.

The coming days will reveal his direction.

Ali Khamenei understood that the hawza would not countenance a hereditary transfer of the marja’iyya



COURTESY: JAMAL AL-DIN RUMI, AL-ARAB

The government must build on the relatively successful policies it introduced in recent years to stimulate consumption

## Infrastructure investment the key to China’s growth

YU YONGDING



Yu Yongding, a former president of the China Society of World Economics and director of the Institute of World Economics and Politics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, served on the Monetary Policy Committee of the People’s Bank of China from 2004 to 2006.  
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**D**espite a fraught geopolitical environment and a US-led trade war in 2025, China achieved its growth target of 5 percent, with gross domestic product reaching 140.19 trillion yuan (\$20.4 trillion).

China’s government has now set its growth target for 2026 at 4.5 percent to 5 percent. This is achievable with China’s GDP deflator still in negative territory and ample policy space for more expansionary fiscal and monetary policy. But it will require accelerating the growth of both consumption and investment.

For starters, the Chinese government must build on the relatively successful policies it introduced in recent years to stimulate consumption. These included issuing 300 billion yuan of ultralong-term treasury bonds for a consumer goods trade-in program, exempting the purchase tax for new-energy vehicles (worth more than 200 billion yuan), and offering hundreds of billions of yuan in subsidies

for vehicle and appliance purchases. The government also increased spending on social security benefits.

A more serious challenge is the decline in investment. To be sure, investment in high-tech manufacturing was a bright spot, growing by double digits. But it was not enough to offset the continued decline in real estate investment, which has fallen by more than 10 percent for three consecutive years. The Chinese government has responded with a series of policies, including purchasing unsold housing units and lowering interest rates on existing mortgages. Nevertheless, it will take longer than expected to stabilize the market and return real estate investment to positive territory.

The unprecedented fall in infrastructure investment represents the main challenge. Although China has made remarkable progress on infrastructure development, more must be done, including upgrading transport, energy, water conservation and communication networks and building new frameworks to support an

aging society. This will cost an enormous amount of money.

Given this, and because the Chinese government’s “dual circulation” strategy calls for boosting domestic demand while reducing dependence on external demand, policymakers will focus this year on that and rebalancing trade. In terms of short-term macroeconomic management, the more effective solution to both problems is to increase infrastructure investment.

Despite positive results, government efforts to boost consumption were less successful than expected in stimulating GDP growth. This is because household consumption is a function of permanent income. If households are not confident that income gains are permanent and that incomes will continue to rise in the foreseeable future, they are unlikely to increase consumption significantly.

It is a chicken-and-egg problem: higher GDP growth requires stronger consumption but the latter depends on the former. To break this impasse, policymakers must significantly expand infrastructure

investment, which is under the government’s discretion and independent of both existing income levels and consumption expenditure. This makes it the most effective way to begin boosting economic growth.

Of course, one could argue that China’s consumption stimulus, including direct subsidies and social security reforms, was not big enough.

Fortunately, China is not facing an inflation threat (though this could change due to external shocks) and still has ample fiscal space, which the government should use to adopt a more expansionary policy, supported by accommodative monetary policy. Many other fiscal authorities have already abandoned adherence to rigid targets, such as Europe’s Maastricht criteria; China should do the same. Raising the budget deficit-to-GDP ratio substantially to finance infrastructure investment would help China establish a more sustainable composition of aggregate demand and, crucially, continue to hit its growth targets.

Opinion

# As Mideast conflict rages, India confronts security challenges

TALMIZ AHMAO



Talmiz Ahmao is a former Indian diplomat.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel late last month, just when US-Iran talks were taking place in Geneva. Over the previous days, the US had mobilized a formidable armada in the Gulf, while President Donald Trump was issuing daily threats of assault on Iran if an agreement did not emerge from Geneva that met his full expectations. Given the military preparations and Trump's maximalist demands on Iran, the likelihood of a war initiated by the Israeli-US coalition was very high.

Modi's visit was clearly timed to enable the prime minister to affirm India's affiliation with Israel and backing for it in the coming war, while distancing itself from Iran. New Delhi has neither regretted the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei nor the US attack on the Iranian naval vessel IRIS Dena off the coast of Sri Lanka, which killed at least 87 sailors. Three days after Khamenei's death, the Indian foreign secretary signed the condolence book at the Iranian Embassy in New Delhi, a token gesture given the stature of the assassinated leader.

Modi's sojourn in Israel was high-profile and yielded substantial results for both sides. The prime minister delivered a resounding address at the Knesset and

concluded far-reaching agreements with Israel that will solidify bilateral ties.

At the Knesset, Modi offered Israel his "deepest condolences" for the victims of the Hamas attacks in October 2023, consoled Israel for the "pain of terrorism" it had endured, applauded Israel's "resolve, courage and achievements," assured the Knesset that India stood with Israel "firmly with full conviction," and affirmed that the "shared ideals" of the two countries contribute to "global stability and prosperity."

Given Israel's pervasive global isolation after a UN committee described its war on Gaza as "genocide," Modi's words resonated powerfully in the Knesset. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was "deeply, deeply moved" and declared that the two countries would build an "iron alliance" against extremism. The grateful assembly conferred its highest award, the Medal of the Knesset, on the prime minister.

The rhetoric was backed up by 16 agreements. Defense and security are at the heart of Israeli-Indian cooperation, aimed at upgrading India's military capabilities and promoting the indigenization of its defense production. Unconfirmed reports have suggested that Israel could provide India with the "Iron Dome" missile defense

technology and even the highly restricted "Iron Beam," a 100-kilowatt high-energy laser weapon.

This year, India is expected to import Israeli weaponry worth \$8.6 billion, covering precision-guided munitions, air-to-surface missiles and ballistic missile systems. The two leaders have also finalized an agreement to upgrade their ties to "special strategic relations" — a level that Israel only currently has with the US and Germany.

Despite the military and political uncertainty in the regional scenario, India has clearly opted to back the Israeli-US coalition in the ongoing conflict. This is in response to the security challenges that have emerged for India.

On the eve of Modi's visit, Netanyahu had spoken of a "Shiite axis" and a "Sunni axis." The Israeli prime minister then referred to a "hexagon of alliances" consisting of Israel itself, Greece and Cyprus, along with unnamed countries in the Arab world, Africa and Asia that, he asserted, would unite against their "radical" enemies in the region.

Israel's unnamed partners are Ethiopia and Somaliland in Africa and India in Asia, with others expected to be named later. According to Netanyahu, there is a "strategic convergence" among the

countries forming the hexagon in terms of their shared understanding of regional realities and challenges and their long-term interests covering economic, diplomatic and security matters. With Modi's visit, India has opted to be part of this Israel-backed hexagon of regional allies.

The principal reason for this decision is the emergence of the coalition of Turkey and Pakistan, which dates back to the Cold War era, and was strengthened during the India-Pakistan conflict in May last

year, referred to in India as "Operation Sindoor." Besides their substantial military and economic ties, both Türkiye and Pakistan are also close — politically, militarily and economically — to China, thus forming a triumvirate that is of serious security concern

to India. The three countries are particularly bonded by their shared support for the China-sponsored Belt and Road Initiative, which several commentators in India view as Beijing encroaching into India's strategic space and even attempting to encircle India in the terrestrial and oceanic domains.

The coming together of this trio has perhaps convinced Indian policymakers that, to safeguard its long-term security interests, the country needs to make a clear strategic choice in favor of Israel.

**India has clearly opted to back the Israeli-US coalition in the ongoing conflict**

**Modi's visit was timed to enable the PM to affirm India's affiliation with Israel**

# Gulf states' cashless vision is a smart economic bet

ARNAB NEIL SENGUPTA



Arnab Neil Sengupta is a senior editor at Arab News.

The Gulf region is undergoing a quiet but significant transformation in the way money changes hands. Across the Gulf Cooperation Council, governments are steadily pushing their economies toward a cashless future in which most transactions are digital, instant and transparent. This shift is turning out to be a strategic economic decision that could strengthen the region's long-term competitiveness.

In common with many other countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf states are embracing new payment technologies for convenience. Saudi Arabia offers the clearest example of how quickly this transition is taking place. Under Vision 2030, the Kingdom set a target of increasing noncash retail transactions to 70 percent. This was achieved in 2023, with digital or cashless transactions in retail rising to 79 percent in 2024.

As recently as 2014, most transactions in the Kingdom were still conducted in cash. Today, contactless cards, digital wallets and mobile payment platforms dominate everyday purchases.

Why does this matter? Because

payments are like the circulatory system of an economy. The faster, safer and more efficient that system becomes, the stronger the economy tends to be.

One of the biggest advantages of a cashless economy is efficiency. Handling physical money is quite costly. Cash must be printed, transported, stored and protected. Businesses must reconcile their tills and banks must manage the logistics of cash distribution. Digital payments eliminate much of this cost and inconvenience.

For consumers, the benefits are even more obvious. Paying with a phone or card is quicker and safer than carrying large amounts of cash in physical wallets or handbags. Digital payments also fuel the expansion of

online commerce. This is critical for Gulf economies that are investing heavily in e-commerce, logistics and digital services.

A cashless system also improves transparency. Digital transactions leave a clear record, which helps reduce tax and VAT evasion, corruption and the shadow economy. Governments can track economic activity more accurately and design better policies as a result.

Another powerful effect is the boost financial innovation gets. Experience shows that once payment systems become digital, an entire ecosystem begins to grow around them. Fintech companies develop new services such as digital wallets, "buy now, pay later" financing, micro-loans and real-time transfers. Banks adopt digital platforms that allow secure connections between financial institutions and technology companies.

There is also a broader dimension to the transformation. The Gulf states are competing to become global hubs for trade, tourism and investment. In an age when consumers increasingly expect seamless digital services, modern payment systems have become today's equivalent of ports, airports or broadband networks.

Of course, the transition to a cashless economy is not without its challenges. Cybersecurity is the most obvious concern. Another challenge is inclusion. Some older citizens or low-income migrant workers may not be comfortable using digital payment tools. Privacy concerns also deserve careful consideration.

Fortunately, these challenges are

manageable and the Gulf states appear well aware of them. In recent years, central banks in the region have taken numerous steps to regulate fintech, strengthen payment infrastructure and ensure consumer protection.

It is also important to recognize the geopolitical context in which the transition to a cashless society is taking place. The Middle East continues to be a volatile region and the current spate of unprovoked attacks by the Iranian regime on Gulf states will surely influence public policies in the years to come.

But the cashless vision being pursued by Saudi Arabia and its neighbors is essentially about the economic landscape that will emerge after today's conflicts eventually subside. Building modern financial infrastructure is vital for Gulf economies to be ready

to thrive in the postconflict era. To sum up, the push toward a cashless economy is part of the GCC bloc's broader strategy to build diversified, resilient and globally connected economies.

Oil wealth built the foundations of prosperity in the past. Digital and "intelligent" infrastructure — including cashless payments — may well underpin the prosperity of the future.

**Building modern financial infrastructure is vital for Gulf economies to be ready to thrive in the postconflict era**

**The faster, safer and more efficient the payment system becomes, the stronger the economy tends to be**



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## OPINION

## The High Cost of 'Affordability'



INSIDE VIEW  
By Andy Kessler

With prices flying up," Why? As the comic strip Pogo noted in 1970, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." You can surely hear Mark J. Perry's famous Chart of the Century screaming, "\$120 to fill my Ford F-150 pickup? Who's to blame?" The answer is government, but that won't stop the affordability screechers from turning the volume up to 11.

They have plenty of practice. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wrote in December: "The American people want leaders who are laser-focused on making life affordable for all." Sen. Bernie Sanders told the Majority Report in December, "Affordability" can't be another poll-tested slogan that politicians throw around—as he threw around the word "affordability."

Donald Trump said in his State of the Union address: "Now, the same people in this chamber who voted for those disasters"—like the Orwellian-named Inflation Reduction Act—"suddenly used the word 'affordability,' a word they just used it because somebody gave it to them, knowing full well that they caused and created the increased prices." Meanwhile, Mr. Trump's tariffs increased producer prices. There's enough affordability blame to go around.

At a Senate hearing last month, Sen. Elizabeth Warren said, "Grocery prices are up. Healthcare prices are up. The cost of building housing is

• **Medical care.** ObamaCare in 2010 added gold-plated mandates with coverage for everything under the sun. Since it passed, premiums have tripled, according to researcher Avik Roy. Medicare and Medicaid distort market pricing. Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) has a healthcare bill that would solve many of health care's problems with health savings accounts and private insurance buying. It can't get arrested in Washington.

**Government causes price hikes, and politicians naturally blame capitalism.**

• **College.** Tuition rises like a helium balloon. Why? Former Sallie Mae boss Al Lord told the Journal in 2021, "Schools were able to hike tuition since students now had expanded access to loans" backed by the government. Now check how much the average professor makes at your alma mater.

• **Food.** Government is like white on rice as to why \$10 lunches are now \$20. Sugar import restrictions, ethanol mandates, minimum wage, tariffs, fuel costs, even war in wheat-exporting Ukraine.

• **Energy.** Higher gasoline prices were avoidable with more U.S. oil production. The U.S. Geological Survey says we may be sitting on 29 billion barrels of "undiscovered technically recoverable" oil

reserves. Almost half in Alaska. California is oil-rich yet imports oil, 18% of it from the Gulf of Mexico. And green and renewable mandates. No new nuclear power.

Plus, there are too many taxes: property, sales, transfer, hotel and even food delivery taxes added to DoorDash. Add Minnesota and now California Medicaid fraud. What scares me is that government can mandate affordability anytime it wants. Simply announce price controls. When you fix prices, you get shortages: Soviet supermarkets with empty shelves. Or available apartments in rent-controlled New York. Can't get home insurance? Many state price caps sent insurers scurrying away, especially in coastal and flood-prone areas. Drug shortages are next. And consumer credit if we cap credit-card interest rates.

In sectors with affordability problems, Adam Smith's invisible hand got smashed by a giant regulatory gavel. Competition and freedom from constraints lower prices.

The Bernies and AOCs of the world complain about capitalism. Naïve, but on brand. By invoking affordability, what they restrict, interestingly, is their own self-awareness, the socialism-inspired heavy hand of the U.S. government: fees, meds and eds.

Those who yell the loudest about affordability are actually making the case for smaller government. Who wants to tell them?

Write to [kessler@wsj.com](mailto:kessler@wsj.com).

BOOKSHELF | By Dominic Green

## The Mystery Of Consciousness

A World Appears

By Michael Pollan  
Penguin Press, 320 pages, \$32

The International Dictionary of Psychology opined in 1989 that consciousness was "fascinating but elusive" and "nothing worth reading has been written on it." I disagree. Consciousness isn't entirely elusive. We grasp it through the science of the day, and when the day passes, the science changes. Much that is worth reading has been written about consciousness and its silent partner, the unconscious. Michael Pollan's "A World Appears: A Journey Into Consciousness" is a fascinating and fluent guide to what's on our minds.

Mr. Pollan's previous books include paens to eating plants and taking psychedelics. Magic mushrooms reappear here, along with many scientists trying to solve the mystery of consciousness. Mr. Pollan approaches the subject from four angles: the nature of sentience; how consciousness is shaped by feeling and emotion; how thought emerges in the brain's neocortex; and the cumulative impression of the self as "the perceiver of our perceptions and the thinker of our thoughts."

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) was one of the first Westerners to blow his mind and believed that psychedelics would fulfill William Blake's hope that "the doors of perception" would be cleansed. His experiments with mescaline convinced him that consciousness came from an entity outside the brain that he called mind at large. Psychedelics, Huxley deduced, allowed more consciousness to enter his brain by loosening its "reducing valve." William James (1842-1910), often called the father of American psychology, had likened human cognition to a "stream of consciousness." Huxley's valve metaphor adds industrial pressure.

Modern fields of study such as cognitive neuroscience and integrated information theory also reflect technological change. Mr. Pollan considers the relationship between digital capacity and such analog philosophies as phenomenology (in which consciousness creates itself by intention and is defined by experience) and pansychism (the theory that all matter is conscious).

Mr. Pollan blames Western science, and especially Galileo and Descartes, for dividing the mind from the body, and humans from everything else. The author first wondered if sentience, a "very simple form of consciousness," might be "widespread in nature" after he ate magic mushrooms and became certain that the plants in his garden possessed "some elemental sense of being alive and aware."

Mr. Pollan points to a 2022 study that found that "a single psychedelic experience dramatically increases the likelihood that a person will attribute consciousness to other entities, both living and nonliving." Neuroscience, Mr. Pollan claims, has "yet to identify the biological structures necessary to generate consciousness," and humans should not assume "a monopoly on sentience." Researchers tell Mr. Pollan that plants may even sleep and feel pain. But their phenomenology, he concludes, is nothing like our consciousness. Plant sentience, however, is goal-directed and suggests clear cognition of the surrounding environment. That is more than many humans manage.

In 1949 the philosopher David Chalmers divided the study of consciousness into "easy problems" (linking brain activity to specific mental operations) and the "hard problem" (determining why those processes are accompanied by conscious awareness). We prize thought over feeling, Mr. Pollan writes, because no other creature is as good at "higher-order" mental operations as we are. But the brain's task is merely to keep us alive by reading "body-to-brain signals" such as hunger and thirst: The nervous system evolved to "mind the body." Conscious feelings are one of its techniques, emerging "deep in the subcortical regions" where the brain's interoceptive neurons receive messages from the body and Cartesian duality dissolves.

**Under the influence of psychedelics, many report that plants seem to be alive. Is it wrong to assume we're the only sentient beings?**

Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein" (1818) and Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968) warned about what Mr. Pollan calls a robot with feelings. Artificial-intelligence researchers rush to create it, even though computer-brain metaphors traduce the complexity of human biology, at least for now. Mr. Pollan reports that his "humanist" feelings are sometimes rejected in Silicon Valley as "speciesist." But he resists the temptations of magical thinking and demoting drugs such as 5-MeO-DMT, a "powerful short-acting psychedelic derived from the venom of the Sonoran Desert toad." (He's "not a fan.")

Reducing consciousness to information or perception can isolate its functions. But we fail, Mr. Pollan writes, if we "mistake our schematic maps for the real, experiential territory" of what Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a founder of phenomenology, called the lifeworld. Phenomenologists argue that total objectivity is beyond us: We study the cosmos from within the cosmos, and consciousness from within consciousness. Moments of cognition aren't discrete like electrical signals. They are more like James's stream. But conscious thought isn't as common as we think. In one survey, fewer than a quarter of respondents reported experiences of inner speech, or talking in their own heads.

The psychologist Alison Gopnik tells Mr. Pollan that LSD convinced her that psychedelics return adults to the reality of childhood phenomenology. The neuroscientist Anil Seth says the brain is a "prediction machinery" and selfhood a useful hallucination. The biologist Michael Levin gets closer to the hard problem: The self, he claims, is memory reworking itself as circumstances demand, and consciousness the feeling of being "in charge of constant self-construction."

Paul Cézanne said that "color is the place where our brain meets the universe." The brain scientist Christof Koch agrees. He experienced Huxley's mind at large during a five-night, shaman-assisted ayahuasca ceremony on a beach in Brazil that convinced him that consciousness was beyond the brain. Mr. Pollan's journey leads him to an emerging brew of physics, psychedelics, Zen meditation and idealist philosophy. It sounds a lot like California in the 1960s. Will the doors of perception ever be cleansed?

Mr. Green is a Journal contributor and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

## Will Colombia Join the Latin Move Right?



AMERICAS  
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Colombia is 17.5% in third. If no candidate secures more than 50% in the first round, a runoff will be held. If the right joins forces, it can beat Mr. Cepeda—a big if.

For more than two decades Latin America seemed to be heading hard and permanently left. But in recent years that trend has reversed as voters in many countries put the center-right back in power. Chile inaugurated President José Antonio Kast of the Republican Party last week. He succeeds President Gabriel Boric, who rose to prominence as a champion of socialism during the violent October 2019 protests against the market economy.

Colombia could be next. But it is short on leaders who believe in freedom. The closed economy is a drag on productivity as is the high tax and regulatory burden that drives at least half of the country's economic activity underground. The Colombian establishment shows little interest in reform.

As president the populist Mr. Uribe talked about his vision for a "communitarian state." Classical liberals detest that poppycock. But most are

willing to overlook it. A free and just society starts with the protection of life and property, the one big thing the rancher from Antioquia got right. When he took office in 2002, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had the state on the

ropes and terrorism was spreading like wild fire. By the time Mr. Uribe stepped down in 2010, the FARC was defeated and the country safer.

Yet by late 2024, according to the government, more than 70% of Colombian municipalities were threatened by illegal armed groups, including the FARC. Coca growing for the production of cocaine has boomed. The deterioration in national security accelerated under Mr. Petro. Colombians from the moderate left to the right are desperate to defeat the continuity candidate, Mr. Cepeda.

Ms. Valencia, who received three million votes in the primary, thinks she can win by running to the center. Last week she chose as her running mate center-left presidential candidate Juan Daniel Oviedo, who finished second

**Two competitive tickets risk splitting the right and giving away the election.**

## A Centenary for Rocket Science

By Rainer Zitelmann

It has been a century since Robert H. Goddard launched a rocket that launched modern rocketry. What was revolutionary wasn't the height or distance of his rocket's flight. On March 16, 1926, it rose only about 41 feet, traveled roughly 184 feet, and stayed aloft for only 2.5 seconds. The revolution lay in its being the first successful liquid-fueled rocket.

Until then, rockets relied on solid fuels no more efficient than those the Chinese used 1,000 years earlier. Once ignited, solid fuels couldn't be switched off, and their specific impulse levels were poor. By using pressurized liquid oxygen and gasoline, Goddard achieved far more powerful and controllable rocket engines.

As Apollo mastermind Wernher von Braun said: "In the history of rocketry, Dr. Robert H. Goddard has no peers. He was first. He was

ahead of everyone in the design, construction and launching of liquid-fuel rockets which eventually paved the way into space."

Goddard had endured ridicule. The New York Times wrote in January 1920: "That Professor Goddard, with his 'chair' in Clark College and the countenancing of the

**Robert H. Goddard achieved the first liquid-fuel launch on March 16, 1926.**

Smithsonian Institution, does not know the relation of action and reaction, and of the need for having something better than a vacuum against which to react—to say that would be absurd. Of course he only seems to lack the knowledge ladled out daily in high schools."

It wasn't until July 17, 1969, that the newspaper

printed a correction, stating, "The Times regrets the error." The big news that day was the launch of Apollo 11, the first manned moon mission.

After Goddard's death in 1945, his widow, Esther, spent years pursuing recognition of his work and legal claims against the U.S. government for unauthorized use of his patented inventions. She argued that key elements of his rocket technology had been incorporated into military programs without permission. The government settled the dispute in 1960, paying \$1 million for infringement on several of his rocket patents.

Goddard was also a pioneer of privately funded spaceflight. Roughly two thirds of his funding came from private sources, above all the Guggenheim Foundation. That is "a fact that the broader narrative of space-flight history, with its focus on the heavily government-funded space race, has yet to

fully incorporate," Alexander MacDonald, a former chief economist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, has written.

A visionary of the coming space age, Goddard, like Elon Musk and others in our time, looked forward to humanity's becoming an interplanetary species. "The navigation of interplanetary space must be effected to ensure the continuance of the race," he wrote in 1913, when he was 31. "If we feel that it is our duty, through the ages, reached its highest point in man, the continuance of life and progress must be the highest end and aim of humanity, and its cessation the greatest possible calamity."

Twenty years after Goddard's death, President Lyndon B. Johnson proclaimed March 16, 1965, Goddard Day. Sixty years later, it's a day still worth noting.

Mr. Zitelmann is author of "New Space Capitalism," forthcoming in June.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Real Nuclear History of Iran

So much of today's media framing of the Iran war relies on a mythology of what came before. The gist is that Iran was contained by Barack Obama until Donald Trump nuked it up, and now the regime will really pursue nuclear weapons.

Naïve is too kind a word for this deceptive, partisan history. The real history is worth rehearsing because it shows that Iran's regime has been relentless for decades in its quest for the bomb, which is why President Trump is weakening it by force.

A good date to start is 2002, when Israel helped expose Iran's secret nuclear sites at Natanz and Arak. These are where the regime was pursuing a bomb via uranium and plutonium. That same year Iran tested its design for a nuclear implosion device, all in violation of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations.

Iran denied wanting a bomb, and in 2007 a U.S. national intelligence estimate reported, with high confidence, that Iran had ceased its organized effort to develop nuclear bombs in 2003 after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The worry in Tehran in 2003 was that it could be next. Iran's President called the report a "gift from God." Others saw it as a politicization of intelligence to block George W. Bush from confronting Iran. That was the effect, even as Iran helped kill 600 U.S. soldiers and foment chaos in Iraq.

Only later did we learn how misleading that intelligence finding was. The most conclusive evidence came in 2018 when Israel whisked Iran's secret nuclear archives out of Tehran. The records proved that, far from ending its nuclear-weapons program, after 2003 Iran decentralized and dispersed but continued its activities. Weaponization was concealed or pursued at universities when dual-use civilian cover was plausible.

In 2009 the U.S. learned Iran had been building a facility deep under a mountain near Qom, designed to enrich uranium to weapons-grade. Again Iran claimed its purpose was peaceful, but then why bury it and not tell inspectors until the U.S. was on to it? This became the Fordow facility that the U.S. bombed in June with special earth-penetrating bombs.

Enter Mr. Obama, who made a nuclear deal with Iran a top priority. The talks dragged on for years, as Iran pressed forward with enrichment, repression at home and terror abroad while Mr. Obama did little in response. The regime's negotiating goal was to win economic relief from sanctions while preserving and legitimizing its nuclear program. Iran finally agreed to a deal in late 2015 after a series of U.S. concessions.

The Obama team allowed enrichment and let Iran keep the infrastructure that could be used to reach weapons-grade when Iran felt the time was right. Mr. Obama backtracked to let Iran operate at Fordow and Arak and keep 5,000 centrifuges at Natanz. He gave up on "anytime, anywhere" inspections. Iran didn't even have to detail all of its past nuclear activities.

The deal's restrictions would sunset after five,

eight, nine or 15 years, depending on the provision, and it weakened restraints on Iran's missiles. In the deal's first week, Iran received \$30 billion in sanctions relief. Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force chief, immediately flew to Moscow and secured Russia's military intervention in Syria.

Then the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested four Americans and held them for a trade. The deal didn't change the regime's hostile behavior, and Iran kept building its proxy network.

Mr. Trump quit the deal in 2018 and escalated sanctions. If he hadn't, Iran and its proxies would be more dangerous now. The regime would be legally advancing its nuclear program from a position of strength.

President Biden made it his goal to redo the Obama deal and stopped enforcing oil sanctions. Iran pretended to negotiate but accelerated its uranium enrichment to the doorstep of weapons-grade. It also hid nuclear material and repeatedly lied to inspectors, as the International Atomic Energy Agency finally concluded in 2025. In October 2023 Iran's proxies started a regional war by massacring Israelis, taking hostages, raining down rockets, and attacking global shipping.

Israel fought back, and Iran for the first time attacked Israel directly with missiles. The U.S. first joined in defense, and then under Mr. Trump joined to attack the nuclear facilities last June. The months since have been the first time in 20 years Iran hasn't enriched uranium.

Before and after the June attack, Mr. Trump gave Iran every chance to dismantle its nuclear program and reach a new deal. But even with a U.S. armada in the region, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei insisted on keeping the capabilities to pursue a bomb. He put that above everything. He had done the same with Mr. Obama, and perhaps he thought Mr. Trump would also settle for a bad deal. He was wrong, fatally so for himself and maybe yet for the regime.

Critics of Mr. Trump's bombing campaign now say it will motivate Iran to pursue nuclear weapons in earnest. But that's what it has been doing for years. Critics also say the IRGC will now steer the ship of state, but it's been doing that since the days of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The IRGC's humiliation of Iran's President in recent days only lifts that veil.

No one knows how this war will evolve. But one certainty since June is that the nuclear designs of a fanatical, anti-American regime have been set back years. A "race" to a bomb would now be more difficult, with Israel and the U.S. poised to intervene. Iran's regime also faces serious economic, domestic and international problems that will last well beyond the war.

Bill Clinton faced a similar moment of truth with North Korea in the 1990s before it had the bomb, and he chose to trust Pyongyang's diplomatic promises. North Korea lied and cheated and built a bomb anyway. Now it's building missiles that could reach the U.S. Mr. Trump chose to act instead, after his predecessors didn't, and that is a service to the world.

they got nothing. This financial hardship arrives only months after last fall's shutdown, when Mr. Schumer didn't reopen the government for a record 43 days. Do Democrats think TSA staff should simply put up with this treatment?

Over the long term, one answer is to let TSA regulate security checkpoints, while having more airports spin off the actual operation to private entities. That could free workers, and travelers, from Congress's political games. The same goes, by the way, for air-traffic controllers, who also were told to work without pay during last year's shutdown.

That said, the only solution for today's crazy TSA lines is for Mr. Schumer to fund the Department of Homeland Security. If he won't, maybe he ought to go down to JFK Airport, put on a uniform, and help. While he's there, he can offer apologies to the public in person.

Put Chuck Schumer on TSA Duty

As the lines at airport security get worse, frustrated travelers should know who's to blame: Sen. Chuck Schumer. Democrats have refused to fund the Department of Homeland Security, producing a shutdown that now has dragged on for a month. TSA airport screeners are calling out of work, since they aren't getting paid.

The Transportation Security Administration's nationwide absence rate on March 6 was 8%, according to agency figures obtained last week by CBS, but in some places it has been much higher. "At Houston's Hobby Airport," the network reported, "53% of officers called out on March 8, with 47% calling out the following day." The wait hit three hours.

Other TSA workers are outright quitting, and it's hard to blame them. They received a partial paycheck last month. Then on payday last week

Andy Beshear Bows to the Teachers Union

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear is supposed to be the great moderate hope for Democrats in 2028, but on Friday he revealed himself as a captive of the left's most destructive interest group. He vetoed a bill to opt his state into the federal tax-credit scholarship program, taking dictation from the teachers union.

"The answer is not diverting students and dollars from public education, but providing sufficient resources to fix public education," the Governor wrote in his veto message. That was the last day before the bill would have quietly become law without his signature, after nearly two weeks on his desk.

Gov. Beshear's point isn't even relevant since the federal program wouldn't take money from Kentucky's public schools. The program offers credits up to \$1,700 on federal taxes for donations to scholarship organizations. Opting in is a way to keep money in the Bluegrass State.

Taxpayers anywhere can donate to scholarships for a federal credit, but the dollars only go to students in states that join the program. The funds can also go to students in public schools for services like tutoring.

But the Governor, who has designs on the

White House, is bowing to the teachers union that opposes school choice because it doesn't want competition for failing schools. The teachers are our "neighbors and friends" who "should be appreciated instead of attacked," Mr. Beshear wrote, but that's a political dodge.

Individual teachers do important work, but the unions care only for how much money they can squeeze from taxpayers for salary and pensions. The lobby has sued to stop a charter school law and a tax-credit scholarship law at the Kentucky Supreme Court, and campaigned to defeat a 2024 ballot measure that would have made way for school choice. Meanwhile, public school funding and staffing have ballooned while student performance on national test scores has declined.

The good news is that Republicans who run the Legislature are promising to override the Governor's veto, which they can do with a simple majority. Mr. Beshear knows this, but he's figuring his veto will win points with the union even as parents can still benefit from the scholarships. No doubt he's right, but the rest of the country has learned something important about Mr. Beshear's values and priorities—and none of it's good.

It has always wanted a weapon, and Obama's deal didn't stop it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Taking U.S.-Israel Alliance's Strength Global

Yaakov Katz and Gil Troy correctly note in their op-ed "Khamenei Cemented the U.S.-Israel Alliance" (March 12) that in trying to break the U.S.-Israel alliance, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei succeeded in creating the most powerful military alliance in the region. This is an alliance built on two key elements: the sharing of advanced technologies and relevant combat experience.

Part of the reason America and Israel were able to quickly establish air superiority over Iran is that pilots from both countries are flying the same advanced, U.S.-developed fighter jets, differentiated only by whether the fuselage is adorned with the Stars and Stripes or the Star of David.

That America has effectively delivered a second air force into the hands of a capable ally in a strategically important region is a force multiplier for the U.S. For its part, Israel brings highly relevant and combat-proven experience and technologies to the partnership. America leveraged Israel's experience combating terror groups for our combat op-

erations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, Israel is a leader in missile defense, counter-tunnel and more. The Israeli tech ecosystem is already a world leader in artificial intelligence, quantum and other next-generation technologies.

While the U.S.-Israel relationship is unique, parts of it can be replicated with other U.S. allies that have innovative and combat-proven technology. To ensure the American warfighter has the right equipment to defeat any enemy on a future battlefield, Washington should consider a new approach to defense cooperation, one that provides allies and partners with our battle platforms and leverages their best available technology and experience.

A new alliance based on the U.S.-Israel partnership that changes the way democracies procure and field technologies to deter and defeat our shared enemies—what a legacy that would be for the late ayatollah.

RICHARD GOLDBERG and DANIEL FLESCH  
Fdn. for Defense of Democracies and  
Defense Technology Alliance  
Chicago and Washington

Just War, Tranquility and 'The City of God'

The Catholic Church's bias for peace goes back far longer than "its last few popes," contrary to William McGurn's claim in "Romani Won't Liberate Iran" (Main Street, March 10). It famously reaches to Pope Benedict XVI's efforts to end World War I, which were summarily dismissed by Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Who looks better to history, the pope or the politicians? As a son of the church, Mr. McGurn should seriously consider deferring to Pope Leo's application of just-war theory, which creates a high bar, especially for an offensive war. Why would the fog of war be less dense in Iran, when the success of previous interventions has been ambiguous, but the "destructive force of war" that Mr. McGurn claims the popes myopically focus on, has been real?

JOHN DEMATTEO  
Wellesley, Mass.

As Mr. McGurn observes, it's ironic that Pope Leo, previously an Augustinian friar, disregards the seminal work on just-war philosophy by his order's

namesake. His Holiness also neglects St. Augustine's definition in "The City of God" that peace is "the tranquility of order," not just the absence of war.

What kind of "order" would result from inaction after the Iranian regime's boast that it has enough fissionable material for 11 nuclear weapons, clearly intended for use against Israel and America? Augustinian just-war principles of self-defense warrant military action in these circumstances, not more fruitless "dialogue" with a dangerous regime determined to destroy us.

STEPHEN F. PEIFER  
Portland, Ore.

Someone should ask the pope if war can ever be an instrument of peace. His admonition that "stability and peace are not achieved through mutual threats . . . but only through reasonable, sincere, and responsible dialogue" falls apart when one party only negotiates to sign agreements it never plans to honor.

T. BRYAN BARD  
Boiling Springs, Pa.

The Kurds Won't Necessarily March on Tehran

Your editorial, "The Risks of Enlisting the Kurds" (March 9), seems to assume a Kurdish confrontation with the theocratic regime—a Kurdish-led march to Tehran to overthrow the mullahs. Others might see Kurdish involvement differently. Clearing their area of government forces, providing dissidents from all over Iran a place to organize, arm and train, protected by the Kurds on the ground, and Israel from the air.

Government forces would either have to expose themselves to withering attacks in an attempt to reclaim the territory or allow an ever-increasing area to come under dissident control and armed infiltration across the country.

The Revolutionary Guard and its supporters look tough when facing unarmed civilians but may find it's a different story when the others shoot back. Remember, the Revolutionary Guard was founded to provide cannon

fodder during the Iraq-Iran War. Are they prepared to repeat those losses?

The relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey is at best transactional; the Kurdish people share Israel's distrust of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Shared enemies, Mr. Erdoğan and the mullahs, make the Kurds and Israel natural allies.

As it is, the Kurds are already taking income from Iran and Iraqi Shiite militias. Control of Iran's Kurdish areas under Israeli air cover gives the Kurds leverage, while providing the Iranian people a realistic path to freedom. The U.S. could play a positive role in all this if it ever figures out its goal.

DAVE DAVIS  
Phoenix

The Plausible End in Iran

Regarding Walter Russell Mead's "How the Iran War Ends" (Global View, March 10): History teaches that we are notoriously poor at predicting the future, and the further ahead we look, the less our plans tend to materialize. It appears that the president, at least for now, is abandoning the desirable but myopic goal of bringing freedom to the Iranians. Instead, we must concentrate on what is most necessary, timely and feasible: eliminating the existential danger. The only way to deal with Tehran, with men who can't be diverted from hatred and aggression, is to render them incapable. The best course of action is to systematically destroy their means of projecting military force and hope that in the uncertain future a better relationship is found.

JACK KACZOROWSKI  
Los Angeles

Trump's Reagan Peace Prize

Regarding Joshua Muravchik's recent op-ed "Trump Can Win Something Greater Than the Nobel Peace Prize" (March 9): The Nobel Peace Prize has become almost meaningless. It has been given to a U.S. president months into office seemingly for his rhetorical record, to foreign leaders with questionable commitments to peace, and to brave but ineffective political dissidents. If President Trump can force Iran and Cuba to adopt peaceful governments that respect their neighbors and their own populations, he will have earned the far more important Reagan Peace Prize.

MARCUS W. SISX JR.  
Naples, Fla.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"If you ask me, the milk of human kindness has reached its expiration date."

## OPINION

## Terrorists Are Now Often Made in the USA

By Kevin Cohen

Western counterterrorism operations for decades on a simple premise: Threats came from somewhere else. They crossed borders. They arrived with suspicious travel histories, fraudulent documents or known affiliations. Stop them there and the interior remains secure. That premise is no longer holding. The days since the Iran war began have seen at least four apparent terrorist attacks in the U.S., two of them last Thursday:

- Late Thursday morning Ayman Mohamad Ghazali, a Lebanese-American immigrant, rammed a truck into the Temple Israel synagogue complex in West Bloomfield, Mich., while armed with a rifle. Security personnel confronted the suspect inside the building and fatally shot him after the vehicle crashed through a half-way and caught fire. One guard was

## Last week's attackers in Michigan and Virginia were naturalized citizens, possibly radicalized here.

hit by the truck and injured, but nobody except Ghazali was killed. Authorities later discovered suspected explosives in the vehicle. The motive remains under formal investigation, but CBS News reported two of Ghazali's brothers had been killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel confirmed on Sunday that at least one of them was a Hezbollah commander.

- Hours earlier, Mohamed Boral Jalloh—a naturalized citizen born in Sierra Leone and a former Army National Guardsman with a prior conviction in a terrorism case involving support for Islamic State—opened fire in a class attended by ROTC cadets at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va. The gunman killed the

instructor and wounded others before students rushed and a fatally stabbed him. Federal authorities are reviewing the case as a possible act of terrorism.

- On March 7, Emir Balat, 18, and Ibrahim Kayumi, 19—the sons of immigrants from Turkey and Afghanistan, respectively—allegedly traveled from Pennsylvania to New York City carrying homemade explosive devices packed with shrapnel and the volatile compound triacetone triperoxide. Prosecutors say the pair intended to throw the devices into crowds gathered outside a protest near Gracie Mansion, the mayor's residence. The bombs never detonated, and both suspects were arrested. Federal prosecutors charged them with attempting to provide material support to Islamic State and attempting to deploy a weapon of mass destruction. Investigators say the suspects spoke openly about wanting an attack deadlier than the Boston Marathon bombing. Neither has entered a plea.

- Shortly before 2 a.m. on March 1, gunfire ripped through the crowds along the West Sixth Street nightlife district of Austin, Texas. Outside Buford's Backyard Beer Garden, Ndiaga Diagne, a Senegalese-American immigrant, opened fire into the street. Three people were killed and more than a dozen wounded before police shot him dead. Investigators found a Quran in the suspect's vehicle and Iranian imagery among his belongings, prompting federal authorities to examine whether ideology played a role. Officials haven't formally established a motive.

The violence that unsettled Western societies throughout 2025 looked nothing like the earlier era of



A Lebanese-American immigrant attacked this Bloomfield Hills, Mich. synagogue Thursday.

clandestine crossings and centrally directed terrorist cells. Increasingly the danger emerges inside societies that still treat admission as the end of a security process rather than the beginning of one. The shift isn't simply about the number of attacks. It is about where the failure occurs.

Federal agencies now warn that lone-actor violence may be among the hardest threats to detect, precisely because people who are radicalized domestically often remain invisible to investigators until they act.

On Nov. 26, a shooting near the White House left a National Guard member dead and another wounded. Prosecutors charged an Afghan national admitted through a resettlement program who hadn't appeared on terrorism watchlists; he has pleaded not guilty. Other cases fit the pattern: the killing of two Israeli Embassy staffers outside Washington's Capital Jewish Museum in May, a June incendiary attack in Colorado targeting participants in a march supporting Israeli hostages, and several smaller plots in which people le-

gally in the U.S. moved rapidly from grievance to violence. (Defendants in the May and June attacks have pleaded not guilty.)

Seen one by one, these incidents look like separate crimes. But they share several threads: lawful presence, few warning signals, online radicalization, and attacks carried out without the fingerprints of an organized network.

Radicalization rarely follows a single path. For some ideology comes first. For others the trigger is grievance, isolation or personal instability, which gradually hardens inside online echo chambers, where resentment circulates freely. Social media has accelerated the process, allowing extremist narratives to spread quickly and widely.

The problem extends beyond the U.S. In December police in the Canadian province of Ontario arrested Waleed Khan, Osman Azizov and Fahad Sadaat, who were accused of plotting kidnappings and assaults targeting women and Jews. Mr. Khan is also charged with support-

ing ISIS. None of the defendants have entered pleas. Court filings say weapons were recovered and extremist material seized. What stands out is what the case didn't involve—no illegal crossing, no forged documents, no dramatic failure at the border. The suspects had entered the country legally and allegedly radicalized after their arrival.

Europe has been dealing with this shift longer. In Britain, France, Germany and Austria, attacks in recent years have increasingly been carried out by individuals radicalized inside their host societies rather than directed by external networks—stabbing, vehicle assaults and small-scale plots carried out largely by individuals acting alone.

In military terms ISIS has been badly weakened. Its territorial "caliphate" collapsed years ago. Its leadership ranks were degraded and its ability to organize complex international plots sharply reduced.

But something important survived. The ideology no longer needs territory, command structures or training camps. It travels easily, moving through digital networks and personal grievances. That makes it far harder to trace. A terrorist organization leaves clear trails. An idea doesn't.

The challenge facing Western governments today is therefore not a rebuilt caliphate abroad. It is radicalization unfolding quietly inside their own societies. If that remains undressed, the pattern in West Bloomfield, Norfolk, New York and Austin will keep repeating itself—one lone actor at a time.

Mr. Cohen is CEO of RealEye, a Tel Aviv-based security company.

## Gavin Newsom Is Driving Up Gasoline Prices



LIFE SCIENCE By Allysia Finley

Who's rooting harder for higher oil prices—Gavin Newsom or his liberal allies in the press? Last week came breathless headlines warning that the U.S. is on the brink of a recession from surging oil prices.

Leading the pessimist concert, Bloomberg News claimed that a "diving stock market" and \$100-a-barrel crude could trigger a crisis as catastrophic as the 2008-09 crash. Reality check: Crude prices today are about half their inflation-adjusted peak in 2008. The S&P 500 stock index is 17% higher than it was a year ago.

If all goes according to the media's wishes, the war in Iran will precipitate an economic cataclysm and vindicate their disastrous predictions for the Trump presidency. Equally cynical is Mr. Newsom, who is attacking Mr. Trump for increasing gasoline prices even as he pushes policies that drive prices up in his own state, where they now average \$5.48 a gallon.

"Prices are going up in Texas and

Oklahoma the same as they are in California," the governor's office said on March 10. "This is Trump's Iran price spike, and more drilling or refining in California would not necessarily help today's gas price spike."

Very likely, it would. While gasoline prices have increased by an average of 74 cents a gallon nationwide over the past month, they've shot up 91 cents in the Golden State. "California has experienced much higher price increases than other states because the majority of the state's gasoline is refined from foreign crude oil sources," noted Kandice Redd a spokeswoman for the Automobile Club of Southern California.

About 60% of the crude that feeds California refineries is imported, a third of it from the Middle East. Fifteen percent of its gasoline also comes from overseas, largely from Asian refineries that obtain crude from the Middle East. As a result, wholesale market gasoline prices in California are set by more expensive foreign refiners.

That's one reason prices have increased more in California than in the rest of the country, even though crude is traded globally. Yet Mr.

Newsom had the chutzpah to claim credit for declining gasoline prices before the war. "California gas prices have been stable and significantly lower than the historic 2022 and 2023 price spikes," he says.

He has "drill, baby, drill" to thank for that. But the difference between prices in California and the U.S. average has notably increased. Californians paid 90 cents a gallon more

## Californians pay \$5.48 a gallon on average—and military jet fuel is getting dangerously expensive.

than average at the start of his governorship in January 2019, \$1.05 more before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and \$1.50 more before the war in Iran started. Now the gap is \$1.80. Call it Mr. Newsom's price spike.

Since he became governor, the state's oil production has plunged 40%, and a quarter of its refining capacity has shut down. It doesn't require a 960 SAT score to recognize the culprits: anti-fossil-fuel policies,

including the state's cap-and-tax program, limitations on drilling, low-carbon fuel standard, burdensome permitting and high gasoline taxes.

California's gasoline tax—which includes a 61-cent-a-gallon excise tax plus state and local sales taxes—is the highest in the country, and it increases every year with inflation. Mr. Newsom last week said the state has to charge drivers more because it isn't receiving "its fair share of federal highway funding." What does he consider a "fair share"?

The state gets less federal dollars for transportation per capita because its citizens pay less than those in other states into the federal Highway Trust Fund, which is funded by federal gasoline taxes. That's because a larger share of Californians drive electric vehicles or rely on public transportation since they can't afford personal transportation.

Mr. Newsom omitted that his regulators are trying to drive through a major increase in the state's cap-and-tax allowance prices. Independent analysts project the regulatory changes would raise gasoline prices by about \$1.20 a gallon and cause the state's remaining refineries to shut down.

"It is now evident that Califor-

nia's regulatory environment has driven out actors necessary for an affordable energy consumer market," more than a dozen Democratic state lawmakers wrote to state regulators last week. "This crisis is not a fallacy nor a thinly veiled threat."

Refinery shutdowns also pose a threat to national security, industry sources warn. The state's refineries support some 50 military installations in California and neighboring states, which are launchpads for missions in the Asia-Pacific region. The state's refinery shutdowns have increased prices and imports of jet fuel. If a war breaks out in Asia or the Pacific, California's fuel imports could be disrupted.

And consider what would happen in the event of a cyber or drone attack on an oil import terminal. In-state refineries would no doubt be ordered to make a priority of producing jet fuel for the military, but then shortages of gasoline and jet fuel for commercial airlines would ensue.

What will happen if more California refineries shut down? The U.S. will become more dependent on foreign jet fuel and more vulnerable. Maybe the press could start raising alarms about that risk.

## China Has a Lot to Lose in the U.S.-Israel War on Iran

By John Spencer

The U.S.-Israel war against Iran isn't only reshaping security and the balance of power in the Middle East. Its stakes are also high for China.

For more than a decade Iran has been a pillar of China's global strategy. Iran supplied China with discounted energy, served as a node in the Belt and Road Initiative and challenged U.S. influence in the Middle East. Now the China-Iran partnership is under serious pressure.

According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, China buys roughly 90% of Iran's exported oil,

helping keep the Iranian economy afloat despite Western sanctions. Iran has at times supplied 20% of China's imported crude, about 1.6 million barrels a day. War-related disruptions strike directly at China's energy security: As much as 45% of China's oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

Buying oil from Iran was a strategic decision for China. With Iran facing heavy sanctions, Chinese refiners bought its oil at steep discounts of \$3 to \$14 a barrel. China frequently paid in yuan, advancing Beijing's long-term effort to weaken the U.S. dollar in global energy markets.

In 2021 Beijing and Tehran signed

a 25-year strategic partnership worth an estimated \$400 billion, covering infrastructure, energy and transportation. Much of that investment was tied to the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing's effort to build a global network of ports, railways and energy corridors linking Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East while expanding China's political influence. Iran sits at the geographic crossroads of that network.

The war is also exposing China's military cooperation with Tehran. Last year the U.S. imposed sanctions on Chinese and Iranian entities that supplied materials used in Iran's ballistic-missile program, including chemicals required to produce rocket fuel. Analysts have reported that Iran obtained enough material from Chinese suppliers to produce hundreds of ballistic missiles. Investigative reporting has also identified Iranian cargo ships leaving Chinese ports associated with the export of rocket-fuel chemicals. Iran has lately sought to acquire Chinese super-sonic anti-aircraft missiles capable of threatening U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf.

This cooperation matters directly for American national security. If strengths one of the most hostile regimes in the Middle East while giving China an opportunity to test the credibility of its military technology, though not without risk.

Battlefield performance carries geopolitical consequences. Israeli

fighters destroyed more than 60 Syrian aircraft supplied by the Soviet Union in 1982 without losing a single plane. Soviet air defenses that had been widely exported suddenly appeared weak, and Moscow's reputation as an arms supplier suffered.

## Beijing is suffering serious harm to its oil supply and its reputation as a partner and weapons supplier.

China faces a similar risk. For decades Beijing has marketed its weapons systems as alternatives to Western equipment. If Iranian defenses influenced by Chinese technology prove ineffective against U.S. and Israeli forces, countries considering Chinese weapons will take notice.

The conflict highlights another vulnerability: China, which imports roughly three-fourths of the oil it consumes, depends heavily on maritime supply routes. If the U.S. and its allies can disrupt energy flows in the Middle East during a regional conflict, Chinese planners must consider how their supply chains would fare during a crisis involving Taiwan.

The implications extend to the Western Hemisphere. In the past two decades China has invested heavily in Latin America and the Caribbean,

financing ports, energy infrastructure and telecommunications networks. Beijing has invested billions in Venezuela's oil sector, which helped sustain Nicolás Maduro's regime while enlarging China's strategic footprint in the region.

For years Beijing expanded its influence while assuming the U.S. lacked the will to challenge aggressive regimes or disrupt China's geopolitical partnerships. The war with Iran suggests otherwise.

China invested heavily in Tehran, bought its oil, supplied technology, and helped Iran circumvent sanctions. Yet when conflict arrived Beijing largely limited its response to diplomatic statements. That reality will be noticed in capitals across the developing world where governments have been courted by China's offers of "strategic partnership." Partnership implies support, not distance, when pressure arrives.

The broader lesson is one that has shaped international politics for centuries: Strength shapes strategy. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy emphasized restoring American military and economic strength to counter Beijing's expansion. The war with Iran shows that idea being carried out.

China built part of its global strategy on Iran. That strategy is now being tested.

Mr. Spencer is chairman of war studies at the Madison Policy Forum.

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## Opinion

The New York Times

## The Paradox of Lebanon

Nada Bakri

A journalist and an essayist based in Cambridge, Mass.

I HAVE been tending my house on a hill in Marjayoun in southern Lebanon by phone since fighting broke out between Israel and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group, after Oct. 7, 2023. I call the caretaker of the house every week. Is the road passable? Is the water running? Is the house still standing? He tells me what he can see. I ask him to do what he can.

A cease-fire in 2024 quelled the fighting, although Israel continued with sporadic raids. This month, the area became a major front in the American-Israeli war against Iran. Israel ordered people to leave our neighborhood and sent its army and attack planes to fight Hezbollah. In two weeks, the Israeli military killed nearly 800 people and drove more than 800,000 others from their homes there and elsewhere in Lebanon, with devastating strikes on Beirut, and turned schools, stadiums, sidewalks and other corners of ordinary life into places of shelter.

The orders came after Hezbollah fired on Israel, saying it was avenging the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and acting in defense of Lebanon. The Lebanese government answered by banning military activity by Hezbollah, declaring that only the state can make decisions about war and peace. President Joseph Aoun said last Monday that Hezbollah showed "no regard for the interests of Lebanon or the lives of its people."

For decades, Lebanon has been a place for other people's wars and our own unfinished ones: Palestinians and Israelis, Syrians and Israelis, militias and the state. Old civil war battle lines never fully disappeared, and new wars keep finding the same ground. Even now, after all these years, Lebanon is still caught between a party that claims to defend it — Hezbollah — and a war whose consequences the country is left to absorb. My house is still standing. But like much of the country, it remains intact only at the whims of the armies surrounding it.

Lebanese politicians have been talking about ending Hezbollah's enormous influence on Lebanon for at least 30 years. Prime Minister Rafik Hariri spoke in 1996, during a previous Israeli occupation, about plans to disarm Hezbollah and absorb it into the Lebanese political landscape once Israel withdrew from the south.

Mr. Hariri was not an idealist floating proposals from the margins. He was rebuilding Beirut and understood that you do not dismantle a militia by confrontation but by making it unnecessary, by building a state functional enough that the argument for a parallel state becomes moot. Remove the occupation, he was saying. Remove the cause. Disarmament will follow. It was a specific, logical theory of how Lebanon works. But it was also a theory of a parallel state that Hezbollah was building.

Israel eventually withdrew, but Hezbollah didn't disarm. A car bomb killed Mr. Hariri on the seafront road in Beirut in 2005. Many people blamed Syria. A U.N.-backed tribunal convicted a Hezbollah member of the killing but failed to find enough evidence tying it to the party's leadership. Hezbollah blamed Israel. Following an appeal in 2022, two more Hezbollah members were convicted in the killing.

After the assassination, Lebanon had a



HASSAN AMHAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Lebanese need to be rid of Hezbollah, but not at the cost of Israeli occupation.

moment. The Cedar Revolution, which filled streets with protesters, pushed out Syrian troops, who had also been in the country for decades. But the politicians whose accommodation, by May 2008 Hezbollah had turned its weapons on Beirut. The government had moved against it; the army declared neutrality; Hezbollah took West Beirut in just a few days. The state had been built to watch. In just over 15 years, Hezbollah gained elected representation, then cabinet presence, then veto power.

Now Israel is back occupying part of Lebanon and creating a new security zone south of the Litani River. The same argument from 1996 — that occupation gives Hezbollah its reason to stay armed — is being made again, at a vastly larger scale and with vastly more destruction. The paradox is deeper. Even if, like much of Lebanon, you want Hezbollah disarmed, Israel cannot be the means of that disarmament. Its occupation, and its assault on Lebanese territory, are exactly what Hezbollah, or whatever is reconstituted from its wreckage, will invoke to justify rearming.

Israel denies territorial ambitions in Lebanon. Yet biblical and expansionist language is no longer easy to dismiss as being on the fringe. In an interview with Tucker

Carlson last month, Mike Huckabee, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, said it would be "fine" if Israel "took it all," a remark that the embassy later said was taken out of context. Whatever he meant, it is the kind of talk that does not reassure a small country watching an army that keeps invading. Once an army enters, Lebanon has learned, you don't know when it will decide to leave.

I have been watching videos coming out of Lebanon, many of them from areas under Hezbollah's control, of people being angry at the group and asking why their children and villages are being offered up again for sacrifice. They are furious about Israel's bombs and its refusal to leave, and furious about being treated as expendable. The resistance narrative and the annexation narrative need each other.

I want Hezbollah gone. I have wanted this for a long time, as a Lebanese who watched what it did, directly or indirectly, to the country I come from and intend to return to. And yet, I cannot call an enemy state's war on Lebanese land a cure for our lost sovereignty. I cannot conflate wanting an outcome with supporting whoever delivers it. I cannot call this liberation when the liberator is also the occupier.

Mr. Hariri's great mistake, maybe, was

believing that a country could be built faster than it could be hollowed out. Something akin to a house that still stands after being gutted.

My house in Marjayoun needs repairs. Cracks in a wall. Some plumbing. Things that in any other moment I would have scheduled without thinking. I keep postponing the work, because I am not ready to spend money on a house I cannot visit, on a road I cannot drive, through a town under bombardment by a military that keeps re-writing the terms of when normal life can return.

I came to this home through love and then through loss. My husband's great-grandfather built it. My husband found it in ruins almost a century later and restored it. He died in 2012, four years after finishing the work. The house outlived the man who built it. It outlived the man who restored it. Will the house outlive my son? What Lebanon will be left when the bombs stop falling?

I have learned, in the years since my husband's death, that not knowing is not the same as not caring. This is what tending becomes: you do it anyway. Or you don't, because the road closes, the town empties, and even the phone call to a caretaker is no longer possible.

## China's Long-Promised Consumer Boom Is a Mirage

Anne Stevenson-Yang

A founder and the research director of J Capital Research, a stock analysis firm.

TAIPEI, TAIWAN

IF THERE is a Chinese analogue to Nero's fiddling while Rome burned, it is the country's latest five-year plan.

The policy blueprint — which sets out China's economic strategy for the years ahead — was approved on Thursday by the National People's Congress in Beijing. Chapter 15, titled "Vigorously Boosting Consumption," proclaims that the Chinese consumer is finally going to start earning more and spending more.

This promise, which Beijing has been making for more than two decades, matters far beyond China. If Chinese consumers started spending more, it would help reduce the country's reliance on exports to fuel its economy, a strategy that now floods world markets with Chinese-made goods and creates huge trade surpluses for China and persistent tension with trading partners such as the United States.

The situation is unlikely to change under the new plan, which mostly doubles down on China's longstanding approach of prioritizing export-oriented industries and technological development instead of creating a truly consumer-driven economy.

Even if Communist Party leaders want to unleash more spending, formidable obstacles stand in the way, including a work force increasingly trapped in insecure, low-wage employment, a rapidly aging and shrinking population and a weak social safety net that encourages people to save for emergencies.

China's people, perhaps more than at any time in the last few decades, are in no mood to go out and splurge. Many have been airing growing anxiety online, posting about falling incomes and scarce jobs. The average income was just over \$500 a month in 2025. Unemployment is high.

A fundamental shift that has taken place in China's labor market is the root cause of these problems.

Since the early 2010s, intensifying global economic competition, automation, the pandemic-era closure of countless businesses, slowing economic growth and China's protracted property slump have all combined to eliminate millions of manufacturing and construction jobs. This has driven countless workers into a growing service sector that requires fewer skills and offers lower pay.

An estimated 200 million people, or at least one-quarter of China's work force, are now engaged in insecure "gig" employment — delivering meals or packages, driving ride-hailing cars, selling goods online or doing other short-term work. According to a study last year, nearly half of gig workers have little to nothing in the way of a social safety net — which would include health care, a pension, unemployment benefits, maternity benefits and housing. The problem is worsened by chronic government underinvestment in social services. On top of that, advances in technology have given companies a precise view of seasonal demand and simplified recruiting, enabling them to hire and fire workers as needed.

Adding to worker insecurity is China's household registration system, which restricts access to social services like schooling and health care outside of one's hometown. This effectively ensures that people from China's vast countryside serve as cheap migrant labor for megacities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. Reform of the registration system has been discussed for decades, but eliminating it would shift enormous welfare costs onto those cities, which currently reap benefits from migrant labor without shouldering social costs.

This is hardly a foundation for a vibrant consumer economy, and the future is not looking better.

The real estate crash, now five years old,

Beijing is unlikely to shift away from its overreliance on exports.

has left homeowners paying mortgages on apartments they can't sell. New families are a key driver of spending on homes, appliances and cars. But China's people are marrying less frequently and having fewer babies: The population fell for the fourth straight year in 2025, and the fewest babies were born since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Fewer people, of course, means fewer consumers.

The deeper question may be whether the Communist Party's pledges to give consumers more of a role in the economy are real — or empty promises to placate critics.

Consumer spending in China has hovered at 40 percent or less of China's G.D.P. for years (compared with more than 65 percent in the United States). The government has introduced policies to encourage spending, but these typically take the form of rebates and subsidies for appliances, electronics and cars. This increases sales for manufacturers and retailers but doesn't improve the

lot of the average consumer.

Increasing the role of consumer spending in China's economy would mean surrendering some state control to the people, something the Communist Party is loath to do.

While the United States and Europe typically stimulate spending by putting money in consumers' hands through tax cuts, direct payments to individuals and families or social safety nets that reduce the need to save for emergencies, China's government manages the economy primarily through the country's companies. It directs investment capital to them, grants them subsidies and uses other means to get the business sector to execute the party's industrial policies.

Truly meaningful steps to increase the economic role of Chinese consumers would, in effect, redistribute income to households, leaving less capital for the party to direct toward strategic priorities like developing the tech industry, which Beijing sees as essential to securing the country's technological self-sufficiency and competing with the United States.

The success of China's export machine offers little incentive for the Communist Party to change course and gamble on a new consumer-focused strategy. Trade surpluses may create tension with trading partners, but they earn Beijing massive amounts of hard currency and generate endless headlines about Chinese export dominance in electric vehicles, solar panels, batteries, ships and many other products. All of this projects an image of Chinese economic strength to audiences at home and overseas.

China's government says the new five-year plan will lead to a marked increase in consumer spending. The more likely outcome is business as usual: more low-priced Chinese goods on world markets, more pressure on emerging economies struggling to spur their own development, even fewer Chinese imports of foreign products — and more tension with the rest of the world.



KEVIN FRAYER/GETTY IMAGES

# Why Kids Aren't Farming

**Brooks Lamb**

The special adviser for strategic communications at the American Farmland Trust.

MEMPHIS

**I**N THE next two decades, the owners of roughly 300 million acres of American farm and ranch land are expected to retire or die. How and to whom this land is transferred will determine the future of rural America and our food system.

Much of this land could end up being taken over by the nation's biggest and wealthiest agricultural operations, which already dominate farming. Other land could be bought up by private investors, many of whom see the acreage as a low-risk asset in their financial portfolios or a future subdivision, strip mall or data center. These entities have purchased thousands of small and midsize farms over the last few decades and are eager to buy more.

The consolidation of agricultural land ownership is harmful for the environment, our health, rural economies and food security. And so it would be better if young people took over the acreage about to change hands and kept small and midsize farms going.

Unfortunately, that's not happening often enough.

Many people claim that millennials and Gen Z-ers don't want to farm, that the work is too hard and dirty and that rural lifestyles aren't appealing. While it's true that some young people feel this way, the bigger reasons the next generation isn't flocking to the farm are much more complicated.

For one, young people are often told that farming isn't a worthwhile profession. Many farm kids are encouraged by educators and even their own parents to leave small towns, where economic opportunities are limited. In America, transience and mobility are rewarded while settling in a rural community is sometimes seen as settling for something less.

Others avoid agriculture because, as chil-

dren, they watched their farming parents or grandparents struggle. They saw them work multiple jobs to scrape by. They saw prices rise for equipment, feed and seed, and they saw farm incomes stagnate.

Last month, a bipartisan group of agricultural leaders sent a letter to the Senate and House agriculture committees warning that high prices for supplies like fertilizer and machinery, cuts to federal research funding and staffing and market disruptions could contribute to the "widespread collapse" of American agriculture and rural communities.

The impending wave of land transfers mixed with current economic crises have prompted more nonprofit organizations, including the one where I work, to support aging farmers with succession planning. Others are trying to keep agricultural land in the hands of farmers rather than real estate

## The biggest barrier to an agricultural career is the high price of land.

developers. This work is important. But unless it's coupled with broader structural reforms, rural farming communities will languish. We need to make agriculture more welcoming to the next generation.

Despite the widespread perception to the contrary, there are young people who want to farm.

Some, like me, grew up on farms. We know the discomforts of agricultural life, but we also know its joys. I have rarely felt more purpose and clarity than when I've helped my parents haul hay, chop weeds, fix fences or carry a newborn calf to the barn on a freezing night.

Others didn't grow up in agriculture, yet they feel called to it. Through my work, I've met veterans who return from service eager to nurture the soil. I've met foodies who understand that the best meals depend on raising the best ingredients. I know urbanites

who yearn for hands-on work with the land.

The biggest barrier to entry for next-generation farmers isn't knowledge or training or work ethic; it's the historically high price of farmland. Young people need an agricultural economy that makes it easier for them to farm. They need viable, consistent markets for high-quality local products. And, most important, they need affordable land.

I feel this personally. Less than a mile from my parents' farm in Middle Tennessee, 32 acres are up for sale. The land has no house or barn and is listed at more than \$34,000 an acre, a figure driven up by local real estate development pressure. My wife and I want a farm of our own, but at prices like these, we can't afford the land.

Congress can do a lot to ease the land access and affordability crisis as it debates the long overdue farm bill this year. It can increase funds for conservation easements that protect farmland from development, expand low-interest government loans and create new down payment assistance programs, all to help make land easier to buy for prospective farmers. The federal government should also create an Office of Small Farms within the Department of Agriculture, especially since many young people want to, and can only afford to, farm at this scale.

State leaders could pursue their own policies, such as offering tax credits for new farmers and grants to help offset the cost of farm infrastructure and equipment, which have bipartisan support. Nonprofits can also help by providing technical assistance, connecting people who own land with young farmers looking to lease or buy it and establishing locally focused cooperative farming models, which can help with marketing and processing.

The next time you're in a grocery store, think about the food you're buying — and who you want to grow it. Through my work, I've met veterans who return from service eager to nurture the soil. I've met foodies who understand that the best meals depend on raising the best ingredients. I know urbanites

who yearn for hands-on work with the land. Here's hoping we get a chance.

LETTERS

## The Harm of Banning Care for Trans Youth

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "On Youth Gender Care, Medical Groups Hurt Their Credibility" by Jesse Singal (Opinion guest essay, Feb. 25): Mr. Singal does not believe that current scientific research justifies access to gender-

affirming care for transgender youth, or the support of these treatments by major medical associations.

What Mr. Singal leaves out is that most health treatments are supported by low- to medium-quality evidence. In response to efforts like Mr. Singal's to challenge the evidence base of gender-affirming care, one of the founders of the field of evidence-based medicine, Gordon Guyatt, recently stated that low-certainty evidence is not "bad science." He added that denying care based on low-certainty evidence is "unconscionable."

The ability of patients, parents and caregivers to choose treatments based on the best available evidence is even more important when uncertainty exists. The data are clear that transgender adults and youth repeatedly and consistently show high rates of satisfaction with gender-affirming treatments.

Academic researchers like us rely on the best available data. Such data support the safety and effectiveness of gender-affirming care, as concluded by a recent independent review conducted in Utah. Medical associations continue to support it for this reason.

Researchers and clinicians in the field are always seeking higher-certainty data on the benefits or risks of gender-affirming care. Yet U.S. state-level bans, federal proposals to defund hospitals, threats to providers, deletion of decades of federal data and the termination of millions of dollars of research funding — which Mr. Singal gives little consideration to — prevent the very research he calls for.

Without providing and studying gender-affirming care, we will never have stronger evidence, and through that, better policy.

ELANA REDFIELD  
AYDEN SCHEIM  
LOS ANGELES

The writers are, respectively, the federal policy director and a senior scholar of public policy at the Williams Institute at U.C.L.A. School of Law.

TO THE EDITOR:

While I agree with Jesse Singal that more research is needed on the outcomes of medical treatment for minors suffering from gender dysphoria, his essay is of little use to children and parents who have to make decisions based on what we know now.

There are risks and benefits with any type of medical procedure, and we know that many people have benefited

from gender-affirming care based on decades of clinical experience. Properly administered, hormones, puberty blockers and, in rare circumstances, surgeries, are provided only after extensive evaluation, consideration of and treatment for confounding conditions, and informed consent by both child and parent.

To help all minors who question the gender they were assigned at birth, both now and in the future, we need to fund robust research and empower rather than restrict the hospitals and clinics that apply these professionally recommended standards of care. We must trust families and doctors to decide what is in the best interests of each individual child.

CHRISTOPHER JONES  
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

This essay by Jesse Singal focuses on "uncertainty" in health care for transgender youth. So let's look at what is certain: Transgender adults exist — and they were once children. Some transgender people benefit from appropriate medical care. The question clinicians face is not if any care should be provided at all, but exactly what care is best for each specific patient.

As in any area of medicine, doctors use the best available evidence to navigate careful, individualized decision making with transgender patients and their families. The opposite of this cautious, tailored approach is the enforcement of numerous outright bans on medical care for all transgender youth across the United States.

No evidence review on youth gender care concludes that categorical prohibitions of this care are appropriate, and no medical or mental health association condones them either. Leaders in evidence-based medicine call bans an "egregious and unconscionable" mistake in handling evidentiary uncertainty in medical care.

Careful, considered standards for the provision of medical care to youth who need it aren't out of step with what the evidence supports — but bans that substitute politicians for parents and doctors certainly are.

KELLAN BAKER, BALTIMORE  
The writer is a health services researcher and a senior adviser for health policy at the Movement Advancement Project, an independent nonprofit think tank.

The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters must include the writer's name, address and telephone number. Those selected may be edited, and shortened to fit allotted space. Email: letters@nytimes.com



HEALEY LYSTON

# Let's Not Just Celebrate the Movies. Let's Save Them.

**Tom Rothman**

The chief executive and chairman of Sony Pictures Motion Picture Group.

**T**HE great American creative-industrial supertanker that is Hollywood is being rocked by rough seas. Nowhere is the conflict between the gales of change and the enduring strength of professional storytelling fiercer than in the business of movies in movie theaters, which has been my stock in trade for 35 years.

In 2019, there were 1.24 billion movie tickets sold in North America. In 2025, there were 780 million, a decline of 37 percent. (Box office revenue had a less drastic reduction, but that reflects rising ticket prices, which is its own problem.) I was asked recently if this trend was inexorable, leading to the eventual demise of moviegoing. I don't think so, despite the gloomy mood in Hollywood resulting from the coming end of Warner Bros. — once the mightiest of all studios — as a stand-alone entity after more than 100 years. But the stakes are high, and the ultimate verdict will depend on how the industry's players respond to this critical moment.

I want to stress that, contrary to the common wisdom, streaming itself is not the Death Star for the movies. Just as the initial threats of television, videocassettes, HBO and DVDs turned out to be great boons to movie studios, so it is with streaming. Film has successfully competed with in-home entertainment since the invention of TV. The deal Sony has made with Netflix to eventually stream our theatrical films on its service is very valuable and enables our studio to make more films. And indeed, some films are better suited for streaming. At Sony, we made "KPop Demon Hunters" for Netflix. Movies in theaters are a parachute business — if they don't open, they die. "KPop" needed free repeat viewings to build an audience and become a hit.

The problem instead stems from an inno-

cent-sounding word: Windows.

Windows, in entertainment lexicon, refers to a period during which a product — whether a film, TV show or sporting event — is available exclusively to the public in one place. For movies, these windows occur sequentially: first in theaters, then on video, then on pay TV and streaming, then eventually on free TV. This system was meant to ensure that if you made a good film at an appropriate budget and the audience liked it, it would usually be profitable. Of course, if you made a bad film, all the windows in the world won't save you. Trust me, I have made many of both sorts, so I know.

Movie theater owners used to require a 75-day exclusive window. This was too long. Then the pandemic hit, nearly ending theaters. Their plight led to greatly shortened windows — some films even played in theaters and on home screens on the same day. This was too short.

During Covid, such experiments were perhaps understandable. The problem came after the pandemic, when studios, theaters, agents and talent all failed to grasp the long-term effect that the extreme shrinking of windows would have on the movie audience, despite the near-term economic benefits.

Now the theatrical window is badly cracked. Some films are available on pay-per-view at home only 17 days after being released in theaters, while some go to streaming services — which viewers experience as being free — in 30 days or less. A few streaming hits have even stoked interest by appearing in theaters after streaming. Too many people now think they can see any film at home — in Humphrey Bogart's immortal words from "Casablanca": "Maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon. . . ." This is killing the adult audience for movie theaters.

There have always been dual reasons to go to a theater: the communal big-screen experience and the draw of the movie itself. But the "Casablanca" effect — knowing you can

see a movie at home soon — has undermined this second motivation. Most people no longer "go to the movies" as a habit. They go to a particular movie — but only if it has generated enough cultural urgency.

Reversing the near-term drive to see the story the film is telling has made it especially hard for movies that aren't sequels or part of a franchise and so don't have a built-in avid fan base. And for all the success of films driven by existing intellectual property, originality is essential to movies. Neither movie theaters nor the art form itself can survive without at least some originality. After all, you can't make a sequel to nothing.

France has mandated theatrical windows, and box office revenue there is strong. Disney, which maintains the longest windows, had Hollywood's only billion-dollar-grossing films last year. At Sony, we are not always reproach; we tried some shorter windows but have now realized the consequences. In our new Netflix deal, our films don't become available to stream until 100 to 120 days after theatrical release. In a further sign of progress on this issue, Universal, which consistently has terrific films, announced just last week that it would observe at least a five-month initial theatrical window for most of its movies.

What length windows would be the Goldilocks idea? There's a focus on a sweet spot of 45 days before home video and 100 days before streaming. Christopher Nolan, the head of the Directors Guild of America, thinks the theatrical window should be 60 days. I don't think the exact number of days, matters so long as the theatrical window is consistently long enough to restore the motivation to attend.

James Carville once told Bill Clinton, "It's the economy, stupid!" For movies, it's the windows, stupid.

As for theater owners, the box-office slide has put them under pressure. But continued short-term thinking about pricing, windows

**Contrary to the common wisdom, streaming is not the Death Star for the silver screen.**

and interminable pre-shows risks enabling their own demise. And calling for "more movies" won't help. What is needed are more hits.

In a world gone mad, does it amount to more than Bogie's "hill of beans" if movies in theaters go extinct? Yes, it does. Much has been written about the death of shared cultural touchstones. Yet movies still move masses of people all at once, all over the world, and thus imbue culture itself. Movies unite us, and sometimes in good ways, divide us in civil debate. (Remember that?)

And great movies matter especially. Check out this year's Oscar contenders: "Sinners," "Hamnet," "Marty Supreme," "Avatar," "One Battle After Another," "Song Sung Blue" and our own "Blue Moon," among others. Originality can still succeed. It's worth noting that 2026 is likely to be an up year at the box office. Sony has a number of strong films, as do all the studios. But that is all the more reason to change, as Daniel Day-Lewis said in "Lincoln": a Steven Spielberg masterpiece I am very proud of, "Now, now, now!"

Finally, a confession of obvious bias. I am, by most reckonings, the longest-serving movie chairman in modern Hollywood. I have worked on over 600 films. I love movies and believe in their relevance to the fabric of our lives. I first kissed a girl at the Great Theater in Baltimore. I fell in love with my wife, Jessica Harper, when I saw her on the big screen, 14 years before I married her. My children's first experience of the magic was at an animated film I had greenlighted.

But my own devotions aside, I suspect that most people reading this can name an indelible memory they have of seeing a film, with strangers in the dark on the silver screen, that moved them and that they cherish still. The power of that enduring emotional connection should prevail against all the winds of change.

But it is not invulnerable. We have to fight for it. Hollywood, writ large, needs to act.

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## Trump has undermined the US national security apparatus

**War against Iran does not seem to have undergone the normal stress-testing**

Donald Trump has embarked on a war against Iran without a clear objective or plan. That he could so easily do so casts doubt on whether the US presidency faces any remaining constitutional check on its war-making powers. War should be the last resort after exhausting all alternatives. In this case, not only were the alternatives not exhausted, but the administration deprived itself of the means to understand or achieve them. Now the conflict has begun, the weakening of the security apparatus is hampering America's ability to prosecute it.

The second Trump administration has sought to root out dissent from national security institutions, emphasising ideological fealty over experience. Thousands of diplomats and civil servants have been dismissed or replaced.

With them has gone much of the knowledge and institutional memory needed to forestall bad decisions.

Nowhere is this more true than in diplomacy. The president left the delicate negotiations over a new nuclear agreement with Iran to his envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner.

The state department under secretary Marco Rubio fired more than 1,500 employees last July in a huge outflow of expertise, including on the Middle East. In December, the president recalled nearly 30 career ambassadors, leaving the US with about 80 vacant ambassadorial posts. These included Gulf allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which had urged US restraint towards Tehran and have become targets of Iranian retaliation.

Rubio has also since last May served as acting national security adviser. Merging the job of executing diplomacy with that of coordinating and vetting intelligence and options, as well as gutting the National Security Council staff,

may explain why the decision to go to war seems not to have undergone the usual stress-testing. US military strikes have been powerful, but there was little evident planning for the likelihood, for example, that Iran would shut the vital oil artery of the Strait of Hormuz. The US administration says its planning was comprehensive and it expected Iran to retaliate by closing the strait.

At the Pentagon, Pete Hegseth has similarly overseen large workforce cuts. In some of the most consequential changes, the defence secretary fired judge advocates general, who advise on the legality of combat orders. As part of a drive to ensure the "unapologetic lethality" of US military force, he has gutted the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, a congressionally mandated office designed to help military planners avoid non-combatant casualties. It is unclear whether that played a part in what was likely a US missile strike on a girls' school in Iran that killed scores of children, or whether this resulted from

**Downgrading of civilian safeguards as a priority reflects a broader insistence among senior US officials that the urgency of action outweighed any questions over the legality of the strikes**

outdated intelligence. But critics including senior Democrats have pointed to the Hegseth Pentagon's focus on the "warrior ethos" as a factor in the high civilian death toll in Iran.

The downgrading of civilian safeguards as a priority reflects a broader insistence among senior US officials from the president downwards that the urgency of action outweighed any questions over the legality of the strikes. Other powers, including Iran, they say, would not feel constrained by such notions. The US has often been accused of applying international law selectively. But in previous conflicts, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the White House went to some lengths to try to secure a UN mandate and congressional approval. The current administration has made no such effort. Trump is embracing ever more openly a might-is-right world – even as his pursuit of greater military freedom may have weakened his ability to use US power judiciously and effectively.

### Opinion Culture

## All respect, Timothée, art isn't just about popularity

Ben Hickey



Jemima Kelly

despicable and significant. "I didn't realise that he was that stupid and that shallow." (She missed the chance to call him *Timothée Shallow-meh* – perhaps she was going for gravitas.) "When people get mad, it will be a lot more than 14 cents, so be careful," her co-host Whoopi Goldberg chimed in.

First, let's acknowledge where Chalamet is correct: much as the worlds of opera and ballet might be (quite rightly) using the comments as a marketing opportunity – the Seattle Opera offered a 14 per cent discount with the promo code "TIMOTHEE" – and an opportunity to talk about their popularity, the fact is that they have been in decline over recent decades, and rely largely on government funding to survive. The proportion of the US population that had attended the opera fell by more than three quarters between 1982 and 2022, according to a 2025 survey from the US National Endowment for the Arts; for ballet the decline was slightly smaller but still more than half.

Where Chalamet is quite wrong, however, is in his idea that this means that "no one cares" about these art forms any more, or that they are "dying" in any real sense. They may not have mass-market appeal, but the people who do go and see them care about them very much – a lot more than your average movie-goer.

The idea that we should value art, or even how much people care about it, based on its popularity is a nonsense. Going to see an opera might be more intellectually and emotionally demanding than snuggling down to watch a movie, but that's part of the point.

One of my good friends, Felicity Matthews, is a viola player in the Royal Opera House orchestra. If she were thinking about her personal life, finances or health, she wouldn't do it – she has two young children; the commute is two hours each way (she pays for the train fare herself out of her modest salary); she is often not back until after midnight; she is in pain because of the physical demands of playing her instrument.

But so huge does she consider the privilege of what she gets to do every day, she barely sees these as sacrifices. "You enter that building and there are so many people working to bring this production to life, and they're all at the highest level and pulling together for one purpose," she tells me. "That's what I really love, that's what gives me a buzz."

If Chalamet wants to make movies that millions go to see, that's fair enough, and I hope he continues to do so. But, all respect to him, though *Marty Supreme* is a brilliant film, I doubt anyone will care much about it 250 years from now.

[jemima.kelly@ft.com](mailto:jemima.kelly@ft.com)

It's quite sweet, really. So desperate are some people to get their knickers in a twist on the internet that, in the face of a lull in the culture wars (I have real wars now), the only thing they have found to get outraged about recently relates to a man saying nobody cares about ballet and opera any more.

The man I refer to is Timothée Chalamet, a talented young actor who stars in the multi-Oscar-nominated *Marty Supreme*, who was talking with fellow actor Matthew McConaughey at a "town hall event" organised by CNN and Variety in February (the comments only got attention two weeks later).

"I don't want to be working in ballet, or opera, or things where it's like, 'Hey, keep this thing alive,' even though, like, no one cares about this any more – all respect to all the ballet and opera

**Going to the opera might be more demanding than watching a movie, but that's part of the point**

people out there," Chalamet said, distinctly disrespectfully. "I just lost 14 cents in viewership. Damn, I just took shots for no reason."

There is evidence of Chalamet having made similar comments before, such as on the Graham Norton Show in 2019 when he called opera an "outdated art form" and at an event the same year where he said he was worried that cinema would become like "opera or ballet or something, kind of like a dying art form or something".

He also, as many of those who claim to feel so offended have pointed out, has close family connections to the world of classical dance. His mother, grandmother and sister all danced with the New York City Ballet, and he has spoken about growing up "dreaming big backstage at the Koch Theater in New York", where the Ballet performs. As someone who tried to pursue a career in pop music while my older sister pursued one in classical piano, I would wager that he has been honing this particular attack – or perhaps defence – line since adolescence.

So his apparently instant regret at his slip felt a bit disingenuous. But then so did some of the outrage it provoked. "I'm offended and disappointed in what he said," intoned one of the hosts of the ABC show *The View*, as if he had said something genuinely

### Letters

## Artificial intelligence set to drive gigification of the workforce

John Burn-Murdoch and Sarah O'Connor highlight the challenges of predicting which jobs might be displaced by AI ("Do we really know which jobs are most at risk," AI Shift, March 2). What they don't mention is whether now we are employed will change.

Companies face a choice between employing workers or engaging them as independent contractors – "gig workers".

The former involves more commitment on both sides while the latter is more flexible. Employment is usually preferred when tasks are continuous or institutional knowledge

is important; gig work lends itself to discrete tasks with little need for humans to retain memory of how things were done.

Just as the smart phone unleashed the use of gig workers in transport and delivery, AI could vastly increase the range of work that can be done on a gig basis.

Training large language models or reviewing AI outputs lends itself well to a gig platform, as the rise of companies like Mercur and Outlier demonstrates. And institutional knowledge – long a key reason to retain permanent staff – is diminishing as AI tools, from Notion

to Microsoft Copilot, record every meeting and capture why decisions were made.

The cost of employing workers is rising, particularly at the lower end. The reduction in the employer national insurance threshold alone adds nearly £900 per worker, before accounting for the rate increase to 15 per cent, minimum wage hikes and the forthcoming employment rights bill.

Some hospitality and retail companies are already experimenting with gig shift workers to reduce costs. The combined impact of AI and rising employment costs could drive the gigification of large parts of the

workforce, in the private sector at least. Some workers might relish the increased flexibility. But such a shift will have profound implications for how we save for retirement, what happens when people get sick, how parental leave is covered and, perhaps most importantly, how HM Revenue & Customs collects tax, or doesn't, in the case of many gig workers.

Economists asking which jobs AI will displace may be asking the wrong question. The better question is whether the jobs that remain will still look like jobs at all.

**Allie Pearce-Higgins**  
London SW15, UK

### EU energy independence must include biomethane

Martin Sandhu ("EU impotence extends to decarbonisation," Opinion, March 10) is right that the conflict with Iran underlines Europe's dangerous dependence on imported fossil fuels and the urgency of pursuing genuine energy independence.

For years, the European Commission has warned about this vulnerability, but the message has struggled to gain traction with politicians, media and voters. The energy transition is often framed primarily as a climate imperative. But it is equally about security and economic resilience: a continent that relies heavily on imported energy cannot fully control its own destiny.

Even after the reduction of Russian gas flows, Europe remains structurally dependent on external suppliers. Domestic EU production covers only a small share of demand. While significant volumes arrive via pipeline from Norway – a stable and closely integrated supplier – an increasing share of Europe's gas now comes from global LNG markets.

By 2027, Russian imports are expected to disappear entirely, but they will largely be replaced by LNG from countries such as the US and Qatar, shifting Europe's dependency rather than eliminating it.

A credible path to greater energy sovereignty lies in scaling up European biomethane. Produced locally from municipal waste, agricultural residues and sewage sludge, biomethane can be injected directly into existing gas networks.

Unlike hydrogen, it requires no major infrastructure changes and can immediately displace fossil gas. Beyond lowering emissions, biomethane strengthens energy security and supports rural economies, as production is often decentralised and linked to farmers and municipalities.

Europe today produces roughly 7bn cubic metres (bcm) of biomethane annually, but estimates suggest the continent could scale this to 50-90bcm, enough to replace most of the Russian and US gas that once entered the European market.

The great news is that investment capital for biomethane is already available. What is needed now is a clear regulatory framework that stimulates demand and unlocks Europe's domestic biomethane potential. Even developing this full potential would require investment of roughly €200-300bn over time – around 1 to 1.4 per cent of the European economy.

If Europe is serious about energy independence, renewable gases must become a central part of the strategy.

**Martin van Plessen**  
CEO, STX Group,  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands



Istanbul: a hub for Europe, the Middle East, central Asia and Africa

### Where will the wealthy expats move to now?

In the Weekend Essay, which online ran with the headline "Trump's war on Iran is spending. Where does it stop?" (Life & Arts, March 7), the University of Oxford historian Eugene Rogan writes that however the Iran war ends "the Middle East will never be the same".

Looking at the Gulf states, he observed they are "highly vulnerable" adding "their essential priorities are security and stability, both of which have been thrown to the wind by the current conflict".

The longer the war goes on, the more destabilising its impact will be on oil prices, the global economy and on financial risks. Iran will continue to sit across the water from Dubai. Russians fleeing because of the Ukraine war, westerners fleeing their countries because of high taxes, have now nowhere to go.

The crisis is reminiscent of the time when Beirut, considered the Switzerland of the Middle East during the fifties and sixties, found itself embroiled in civil war. Bahrain was next to offer itself. Later Dubai stepped in to become the favourite haven for wealthy expatriates. Then one weekend in March 2026, as Professor Rogan indicates, everything changed.

So now, where do the wealthy go next? Doesn't Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, offer an effective gateway to European capital markets? It is a natural hub for Europe, the Middle East, central Asia and Africa. It has a liberal economy, attracts foreign wealth, has a young and dynamic population, international banks operating with international staff, and already handles much of the region's private capital and trade finance.

**Iltan Nchiegbo**  
London SW1, UK

### Let's call out American hypocrisy on free speech

The Big Read entitled "The transatlantic battle over free speech" (March 5) only hinted at the hypocrisy of the US administration when it argues that freedom of speech is threatened in Europe.

It needs to be spelled out more clearly. What Donald Trump's officials are defending is not the rights of individual persons to speak their minds, but rather the unlimited liberty of technology oligarchs to let algorithms distribute other people's statements in ways that serve oligarchic interests and undermine democratic discourse.

At the same time, the US administration has a dismal track record of defending freedom of speech at home. Since Trump returned to the White House, the administration has blackmailed law firms that served clients disliked by the president, as well as broadcasters that aired content he did not like. It has detained

migrants for making statements he does not appreciate and demanded that foreign visitors reveal their social media history in order to determine whether they are welcome in his post-truth America.

Worst of all, the White House is doing what it can to regulate what universities may or may not teach. That fits the pattern of authoritarian rule. Academic freedom is a social good. It serves society by providing spaces in which informed people continuously check the validity and veracity of theories and empirical narratives in the light of empirical evidence. While democracy needs that kind of enlightenment, Trump and his "tech bro" allies feel restrained by the very idea of fact-checking.

Not only should the FT point out these things more clearly. So should European leaders who tend to take a defensive stance, fearful of offending the bully in the White House. Experience shows that he has only contempt for sycophants, but can be impressed by persons who take a stand.

**Hans Dembowski**  
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### Two birds, one stone

Munira Mirza's shocking exposure of the lack of training in our public sphere ("UK's public leadership pipeline is in disrepair," Opinion, March 10) does contain a silver lining. One item of public spending that has consistently challenged government is the high levels of expenditure on consultants. If that money could be spent on training civil servants, one would kill two birds with one stone.

**Raj Parkash**  
London W4, UK

### What AI lacks is human capacity for scepticism

In "Sort your people out – before you spend big on AI" (FT.com, February 25) Isabel Berwick rightly argues that "human infrastructure" is the most critical asset in the AI transition. However, there is one human quality that no amount of AI spending can replicate: the capacity for scepticism and the productive friction of disagreement.

Recently, while testing a new venture concept with a development team and an AI, the process was remarkably smooth. The AI refined the problem, defined the target market, and poached a one-pager with relentless confidence. It felt like progress. That was the problem.

Despite our scepticism, the AI replaced validation with reassurance. Designed to be helpful and coherent, it has no capacity for hesitation, boredom, or pushback. What felt like reassurance was, in reality, algorithmic reassurance – a polished narrative that masks the absence of real-world demand. For founders and boards, the danger of spending big on AI before "sorting your people out" is mistaking linguistic fluency for market validation. AI excels at making an idea sound inevitable, but it cannot simulate the "no" of a customer or the silence of an unimpressed market.

In business, resistance is intelligence. Human hesitation signals uncertainty; human silence signals a lack of interest. By removing this vital friction, AI creates an illusion of certainty that can lead to misallocated capital.

As we invest in AI, we must value our "human infrastructure" not just for its co-operation, but for its ability to interrupt, disagree, and say "no". Real validation is messy and uncomfortable – and it is the only thing that keeps an organisation from falling into the reassurance trap.

**Keren Bar-Hava**  
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### A retirement age of 70 is not so daft after all

Alex Pollock ("Pensions – from Bismark to Pennsylvania Railroad," Letters, March 13) has drawn erroneous conclusions from life expectancy figures that include infant mortality. If in Germany in 1910 a fifth of the population died with an average age of five on death, then the overall life expectancy to average 50 for balance of the population would have an average age on death of 61. Looked at this way a retirement age of 70 does not look quite so daft.

**Martin Allen**  
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## Opinion

## The UK is struggling to achieve its aims on clean energy

BRITAIN  
Martin Wolf

The war fought by the US and Israel against Iran has reminded us of the many previous shocks to oil and gas prices during the past half-century or so, notably in the 1970s. It demonstrates that, alongside the aim of curbing the risks to the global climate, one of the goals of energy policy must be to make fossil fuel-importing economies, such as the UK, less vulnerable to shocks. So, how is the UK, both vulnerable to shocks and committed to "net zero" emissions by 2050, faring?

In an earlier column, I argued that the answer is "not very well", on two crucial dimensions. First, an essential element in the future energy economy is electrification. But the UK's electricity is exceptionally expensive. This is sure to

hinder the energy transition politically. Indeed, the backlash is evident. It will also hinder it economically, at least on the demand side. Why use expensive electricity when alternatives so often exist?

I also noted that the UK has not been doing as good a job of lowering emissions as some of the data suggests. Yes, emissions embedded in UK output have roughly halved since 1990. But this is largely because the country now imports many of the energy-intensive goods it used to manufacture. Thus, the decline in its contribution to global emissions is far smaller than the decline in its direct emissions suggests. The UK does not have an atmosphere of its own: what matters is its global impact.

Now look more closely at the facts of what has been happening. It has long been understood by all but very few that there is no chance of persuading humanity to tolerate its energy-deprived lifestyle of old. This is why the idea that we will "solve" the climate emergency by collapsing our output (called "degrowth") is a non-starter. That is not going to happen. But a move

to an economy with ultra-low emissions of greenhouse gases is now conceivable: it demands simultaneously electrifying the economy and producing electricity in non-emitting ways. Fortunately, the technologies for doing this now largely exist, as a result of huge improvements in wind, solar and battery technologies.

While the potential is there, it is difficult in practice, as the experience of the

**The idea that we will 'solve' the climate emergency by collapsing our output is a non-starter**

UK shows. It is not true, for example, that the economy is rapidly electrifying in the desired way. If one looks only at primary energy (and so avoids double counting the large part of electricity generation powered by fossil fuels and biofuels), the share of electricity in total energy consumption (measured in terms of oil equivalent) was only 13 per cent in 2024, up from 7 per cent in 2010.

This is a most a doubling. But 75 per cent of primary energy was still provided by fossil fuels in 2024.

One can see two reasons for this stubborn dependence on fossil fuels. The first is their continued domination of transport and heating. The other is that they remain important even in electricity generation. Thus, in 2024, the share of fossil fuels in electricity generation was still 32 per cent. True, the share of renewables (predominantly wind) in electricity generation has risen sharply, from 7 per cent in 2010 to 50 per cent in 2024, while the share of coal has collapsed, from 28 per cent to 1 per cent, over this period. But the share of gas was still 30 per cent in 2024, down from 46 per cent in 2010, partly because it is needed to balance supply and demand when either (or both) fluctuates.

In sum, the UK economy remains highly fossil fuel-dependent, both directly and indirectly via its imports of energy-intensive goods, partly because large parts of its economy remain un-electrified. Moreover, even electricity generation is still far from using only

"clean" sources, even if one adds nuclear to wind, solar and thermal renewables.

One obvious result is that the shock to oil and gas prices from Donald Trump's "war of choice" on Iran will be strongly felt by UK businesses and households. The continued role of fossil fuels guarantees this. That generates important policy choices not only for the government, but also for other politicians who hope to be in power in a few years.

One is whether to provide an across-the-board subsidy to energy costs. My view is no. Scarce public money must be used in a far more targeted way. Another is how far to pursue the energy transition as a way to reduce future vulnerability to shocks. My answer is that this makes excellent sense: it is simply a necessary part of security. The last and, in many ways, most difficult choice is whether and how to pursue the goals of reducing climate risks in a world in which the US is ignoring them altogether. This is one of the big issues for international co-operation in our "ruptured" world. I hope to address it soon.

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## Boards must feel they can think for themselves

Richard Moriarty

When Marks and Spencer extended the tenure of its chairman, Archie Norman, last year beyond the nine-year limit recommended in the UK corporate governance code, I was pleased.

It showed exactly the kind of judgment I have been encouraging more boards to show as chief executive of the Financial Reporting Council. The FRC oversees the code, which has been instrumental in raising corporate governance standards in the UK and in influencing board standards around the world.

However, for too long, some boards and their advisers have come to believe the safest course is to comply with every detailed provision of the code.

Departures from these provisions are treated as something to avoid, often without thinking what is best for the company and its shareholders. This compliance culture has been reinforced by directors' views about the behaviour of some proxy advisers. The complaint has been that the advisers have been too prescriptive and not accepting enough of board explanations when they choose to go beyond the code.

All too often, this results in risk aversion crowding out a board judgment that a different approach might make more sense for the business in question, its investors and stakeholders.

Such a mindset misses the point about the code's flexibility. We all know that every business is different. Different ownership structures, different strategies, different risk profiles and different

**Directors worry about putting their heads above the parapet if their judgment will be criticised**

stages of development. What is right for one board may not be right for another.

That is why the code offers choice. The UK version has 18 principles and some more detailed provisions for how these principles can be met. Boards have the flexibility to follow a provision, or explain clearly why a different approach works better in the context of their business, while still achieving the overarching principles.

Both choices open to the board, if done well, represent good governance. A transparent and cogent explanation is not a confession or a failure. It shows that a board has thought carefully about the best way to govern the business. It treats investors as informed partners rather than compliance auditors.

Indeed, a transparent and cogent explanation shows much more thoughtful and better governance than a "tick box" mindset.

Some directors worry about putting their head above the parapet if their judgment will be criticised or misunderstood. In other words, boards know the code allows flexibility, but they don't feel fully confident using it.

I want boards to feel safer in doing this when the circumstances dictate. If we get it right, a flexibility- and principles-based approach offers the UK governance regime a real competitive advantage over more rules-based and prescriptive regimes around the world.

To support this, the FRC has today published updated guidance on "comply or explain" reporting. Our aim is to help boards give clearer explanations when they depart from a provision and help investors recognise the value of those explanations when they see them. Good governance does not come from blindly following the rules. It comes from boards thinking carefully about the decisions they make and being prepared to explain them.

As this reporting season gathers momentum, my message to boards is therefore simple: exercise your own judgment, use the flexibility built into the code and be confident in explaining your reasoning. And my message to the governance and proxy adviser community is equally simple: a quality explanation should be valued more than a blind tick in a box. Let us all take a moment to recall the opening line of the very first principle of the code: "A successful company is led by an effective and entrepreneurial board..."

The writer is chief executive of the UK Financial Reporting Council

## Welcome to concierge America

BUSINESS  
Rana Foroohar

Recently, a friend told me about a not-uncommon experience she'd had while seeking advice about a medical issue. She had been on hold for an hour, trapped in the digital service hell of a well-known New York hospital, when a receptionist finally came on the line and asked if she would like "concierge service" to speed up the process. "You mean to tell me I have to pay money to get a doctor to call us back?" she asked. "Yes," answered the receptionist. "Let me know if you'd like to stay on the line and speak to one."

She did, in exchange for \$15,000. Her new gold-plated subscription healthcare service comes with minimal wait times for specialists, 24/7 physician access and longer sessions with doctors. Welcome to K-shaped healthcare in America.

Concierge medicine, a \$20bn business globally with roughly 40 per cent of the market share in the US, isn't something you buy in lieu of insurance. It's on top of it. The extra fees, which can range from \$2,000 to \$100,000 a year depending on your location and level of access, don't cover your care. They simply get

you to the front of the queue for it.

The market for such get healthcare service is expected to double globally in the next decade and is growing fastest in the US, which has a shortage of primary care physicians, an insurance industry that pushes reams of shadow work on to doctors and patients alike and a rise in the number of rich customers (not only on the coasts but also in many other major cities and resort areas) who want a better and more personalised service.

But medicine is by no means the only area where white-glove treatment is on the rise.

The market for personal travel planners, high-end club memberships, private wealth managers and educational consultants has in recent years grown by high single to double digits. Fractional aviation subscription services (think NetJets) are growing by about 10 per cent a year. Those with Clear (the airport service that speeds you through security if you *must* fly commercial) have tripled since 2022.

It's all part of a burgeoning "concierge" economy that caters to affluent consumers who don't want – or want – for anything.

The global "lifestyle concierge" services market – that's the part of the business that gets you the right hotel, courier, pilot instructor or front-row tickets to the must-see football game – is expected to grow from \$16bn to about \$36bn by 2035. It's about saving time, yes, and it's also about making sure the rich get to speak to human

beings who can fix problems and meet high expectations, rather than dealing with search algorithms. AI bots and monotone-voiced teleworkers, like everyone else.

Concierge services are about convenience and access, but they are also about bringing ease and luxury to areas that have become digital commodities or suffer from high levels of consumer dissatisfaction, such as healthcare or financial services.

Park \$250,000 in a Citibank "gold" account and you will have access to a local, English-speaking human being who will respond to any queries you can't work out on the online banking platform in a day or two. But keep \$5m in a Morgan Stanley Private Wealth management account and you'll have

**Demand for luxury services tends to rise in societies with higher levels of inequality**

hot and cold running advice from multiple experts, night and day. Hand holding doesn't come cheap (usually it costs a percentage point a year of assets under management). Yet already 55m people in the US have private wealth managers, and McKinsey expects the market to grow between 28 and 34 per cent by 2034.

You'll need good money management to shell out \$50,000 to a dating adviser who'll find you a spouse. Or \$10,000 for an "education concierge" who can navigate the complexities of both high school and college applications for your children. These retainer-based contracts reflect the fact that the people buying such services have more money than time. It also reflects that many companies in many industries are slowly but surely migrating to where the money is – the luxury market.

Affluent consumers are only 10 per cent of the population in the US, but they represent roughly half of all consumer spending. That's a key reason why the personal luxury goods market

remains robust even as middle and lower-end consumers are tightening their belts.

Moreover, research shows that demand for luxury products and services tends to rise in societies with higher levels of inequality. Which makes sense, as the Gini coefficient in the US (0.48, on par with parts of Latin America) is 20 per cent higher than it was in the 1970s. Is it any wonder, then, that the average new car price is \$50,000 and Disney World offers \$900-an-hour VIP tours?

It's a chicken-and-egg cycle. As the divide between haves and have-nots widens, the affluent want more protection, in private member clubs (a burgeoning \$52bn market) or gated communities. A whopping 21m Americans now pay homeowners association fees, which include things like security and member-only amenities.

Exclusivity – even if it comes at the cost of social cohesion – is the business model.

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## Trump's 'shock and war' makes this economic crisis different

MARKETS  
Andy Haldane

Since the US and Israel attacked Iran last month, economies and financial markets have been adrift in a storm.

The economic epicentre of this conflict has been energy. The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has deprived the world of a fifth of its oil supply, approaching 20m barrels a day. This makes it the largest-ever shock to the global oil market and has caused wild intraday swings in oil prices and large-scale releases of strategic oil reserves, neither of which have historical precedent.

Seeking ways to understand the implications of the conflict, analysts have been trawling past oil and geopolitical crises for inspiration and scenario

planning. But perhaps there is a more recent example which offers both lessons and, on the face of it, some degree of reassurance about how economies and financial markets might respond.

Almost a year ago the world experienced another day of shock and awe when punitive "liberation day" tariffs were announced by the US. Then, as now, the source was the president of the United States. The immediate effects also bore striking similarities: asset prices fell sharply, gold prices rallied, risk appetite collapsed, growth forecasts were sliced and probabilities of US recession halved.

Yet what happened next was equally surprising. By the end of 2025, global equity prices were almost a fifth higher than at their start. Full-year growth forecasts were surpassing start-of-year expectations. Contrary to recessionary predictions, the US was booming. Acute financial and economic precarity had, by year-end, given way to economic resilience and financial frothiness in stock markets, private credit and leveraged loans.

The short explanation for this

extraordinary reversal was that a mounting tech war swamped a retreating tariff wave, carrying with it risk appetite and growth. Which begs the question – might history repeat itself? Is 2026 simply an earlier version of 2025? Might we once again be surprised by the world's economic resilience and financial market's frothiness?

No. Today's shock and war will leave deeper scars than last year's shock and

**The past few weeks have seen a retreat from risk, particularly among bubblier assets**

awe. In 2025 inflation pressures were abating and central banks globally were able to ease interest rates to cushion the impact of tariffs on global demand. With energy prices resurgent, that option has been lost: markets are pricing rate rises in the euro area and UK and no immediate easing in the US.

Indeed, financial markets are fearful

that inflationary pressures might persist beyond the conflict. Alongside rising fiscal pressures, including from increased defence spending, this has meant longer-maturity global bond yields have also risen, again unlike in 2025. Tighter monetary conditions along the entire yield curve will further squeeze global demand.

And this tightening is not confined to "safe" rates. The past few weeks have seen a retreat from risk, particularly among bubblier assets (AI and crypto stocks) and frothier markets (private credit and leveraged loans), exposing cracks in underwriting standards and valuations. In these markets, the age of innocence has decisively ended.

As it has across the Gulf states. Having served as a magnet for talent and capital, in part drawn by the promise of security, their safe-haven status has been shattered. This is chilling one of the world's few growth hotspots just as the economic temperature is plummeting in other Gulf-dependent global growth areas such as India, South Korea and China.

Meanwhile in the west, trouble is



Matt Keayner