



Wealth of lacunae

Cybersecurity, transparency are non-negotiable in vital installations

The ransomware attack against a contractor involved in the Kudankulam nuclear power project is concerning, even if nothing threatening the plant's integrity was stolen. In 2019, malware was found on the same facility's administrative network, but the NPCIL maintained that the operational reactor network was unaffected. The new incident extends the same theme. India's breach disclosure regime is inconsistent and often plainly opaque. Affected organisations tend to believe admitting a breach will damage public confidence, share prices, contracts, and invite regulatory scrutiny. So, they tend to ease their language in public statements and avoid disclosure until compelled. Many organisations also lack mature incident response capabilities, not uncommonly because they treat cybersecurity as a matter of compliance rather than necessity. So, assessing what data has been affected in the early stages of an attack becomes technically impossible. According to public information, the facility's core infrastructure is unaffected; instead, a group called 'World Leaks' mounted a ransomware attack compromising systems belonging to Reliance Infrastructure, one of the engineering contractors of Units 3 and 4. The data in the incident were hosted by Yotta Data Services, which said it detected suspicious activity on its servers on May 29.

According to open-source intelligence platform RansomLook, the data began appearing on World Leaks on June 11. However, the NPCIL issued a formal clarification only on July 15, following widespread media reports. Some 14.3 GB of files have been released, including the layouts of ventilation systems, floor plans of an alleged "control room", supplier and vendor lists, and insurance paperwork. While the files have not been independently authenticated, the actors and their incentives merit a closer look. The NPCIL has said that the files only pertain to infrastructure beyond the facility's nuclear island. However, such information can still serve so-called intelligence preparation activities. India is the third-most breached country and has already brooked similar attacks against AIIMS Delhi, airlines, and State government portals. In this milieu, the government has positioned Kudankulam as the centrepiece of India's nuclear power ambitions. As CERT-In is conducting an investigation and Reliance and Yotta have shared their findings with the government, CERT-In and NPCIL should also clarify the nature and authenticity of the files, whether data were exfiltrated before detection, and whether any credentials or supplier accounts have been exposed. Radical transparency is impossible here but basic cyber-hygiene and proactive communication are non-negotiable.

Breaching the target

Rising inflation leaves no room for a cut in interest rates

India's retail inflation breached the RBI's 4% target for the first time under the new CPI series, rising to 4.38% in June from 3.92% in May and about 2.7% a year earlier. The latest report reflects a broader pass-through of price pressures that had, until recently, remained concentrated at the producer level, largely driven by spiralling transport and fuel costs since the U.S.-Iran conflict in late February. Consequently, the gap between wholesale and retail inflation has only marginally narrowed. Wholesale inflation (WPI), now based on 2022-23, remained elevated at 9.87% in June, up from 9.68% in May. Fuel and power continued to exert the greatest pressure on producers, recording inflation of 27.4%, only marginally lower than May's 28.18%. As India imports nearly 90% of its crude oil requirements, the value of merchandise imports surged to \$70.8 billion in June from about \$54.1 billion a year earlier, even though import volumes did not rise proportionately. This underscores how imported inflation, amplified by crude prices that briefly crossed \$110 a barrel, has driven systemic price pressures across the economy. The rupee's sharp depreciation during the conflict added to these pressures, although RBI intervention in the foreign exchange market helped cushion the fall.

The transport category merits closer examination. Transport inflation more than doubled to 4.31% in June from 1.75% in May, while the sub-group, "transport services for goods", remained elevated, rising to 7.70% from 7.63%. Another notable pressure point has been restaurants and hotels. Although the government announced a modest reduction in commercial LPG prices earlier this month, it has done little to offset the steep increases through May and June, when the price of a 19.2 kg commercial cylinder in Delhi climbed to around ₹2,930 before easing marginally. The system-wide impact is also evident in food prices, with the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) rising to 5.32% from 4.78% in May. Another significant price pressure on the CFPI that must be factored in is the projection of a deficient southwest monsoon and its impact on agriculture, though the extent will become clearer in the weeks ahead. Meanwhile, despite the Centre more than doubling import duties on gold and silver from 6% to 15% in May, Commerce Ministry data suggest that bullion imports have remained robust amid global uncertainty, contributing to higher jewellery prices and household inflation. Although the ceasefire announced in late June briefly eased crude prices, they have begun rising again. Given continuing geopolitical uncertainty and persistent upstream price pressures, inflation is unlikely to return to the RBI's 4% target soon, leaving no room for a rate cut at the Monetary Policy Committee's August meeting.

Beyond political reshuffles, renew education in India

When Parliament assembles next week, there will be debates, disruptions and legislation. Television studios will reduce complex issues to political arithmetic, and headlines will declare winners and losers. Yet, I cannot help asking whether the true measure of Parliament is not by the number of Bills it passes, but by the questions it chooses to confront and resolve. For the past several days, one such question has been waiting outside its doors. My husband, Sonam Wangchuk, scientist, engineer, educator and social reformer, has been on an indefinite fast. Every morning I watch with growing anxiety as his body weakens. His body is paying the price for a conviction that education deserves the nation's urgent attention. Every day begins with the same silent question: how much longer can his body endure?

This is not merely a family's private concern. It has become a test of our national conscience. Those who choose the path of non-violent sacrifice hope their suffering will awaken society's conscience to a greater purpose. If this fast culminates only in the resignation or reshuffling of the Union Education Minister, India would have reduced an extraordinary act of conviction and personal sacrifice to an ordinary political outcome. Public accountability is the cornerstone of democracy. Ministers must have the moral courage to own their failures and step aside when necessary. But individuals are transient; institutions endure. More important than replacing a Minister is defining an educational future for which every Minister, regardless of party, is held accountable.

Fifteen years ago, around half of India's population was under 25. Economists celebrated this as India's demographic dividend, perhaps the greatest developmental opportunity available to any nation in the 21st century. In one of my articles, I had argued that while India has invested significantly in access to education, it has missed out on excellence. Enrolment has grown, but learning has not been transformed. If India aspires to become a Vishva Guru, it must educate this generation differently. But India seems to have missed the opportunity.

What demographic dividend is
A demographic dividend is realised by producing better thinkers, wisest leaders, confident innovators, skilled researchers and teachers, ethical entrepreneurs, honest public servants and compassionate citizens. This, therefore, is the moment to rise above personalities, parties and politics. Sonam Wangchuk's fast should become the catalyst for a national awakening on the future of education. The question is larger than whether one Minister should resign. It is whether India will dare rebuild the education system that will shape the next century. We need more than a reshuffle – we need reform, renewal, and a renaissance. In my view, that renaissance rests on



Gitanjali J. Angmo

Founder of the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh, and an education reformer and public intellectual working to reimagine education, democracy, ecology and Himalayan futures through grassroots leadership and innovation

10 urgent reforms. First, reform the system of examination. Assessment determines learning. As long as examinations reward memory, schools will teach memory. If examinations reward thinking, schools will cultivate thinkers. Within three years, every examination, from school boards to JEE, NEET, CUET and the UPSC, should progressively evaluate conceptual understanding, application, creativity, analytical reasoning, ethical judgement and real world problem-solving rather than recall. Competency-based assessment should become the national norm.

Second, India must dismantle the coaching culture that it has inadvertently created as a parallel education system. Families spend fortunes on coaching because India's entrance examinations reward repetition more than reflection. Multiple examination windows, greater weightage to school performance and portfolios, and redesigned entrance tests can gradually restore learning to schools and childhood to children.

Respect for teaching

Third, build the world's best teachers: No education system can rise above the quality of its teachers as is seen in Finland, Singapore, South Korea and Japan. India needs a National Teacher Excellence Mission that treats teaching as one of the most respected professions through rigorous preparation, continuous professional development, mentoring, research opportunities and leadership training.

Fourth, every vacant teaching position represents thousands of lost learning opportunities. Vacancies from Anganwadis and primary schools to central universities, IITs, IIMs, NITs and AIIMS should be filled through transparent, merit-based recruitment within three months.

Fifth, reconnect education with society. Education must prepare young people not just for employment but also for citizenship. Every undergraduate should complete a semester of apprenticeship, research, entrepreneurship, rural immersion, community service or industry experience before graduation. Knowledge acquires meaning when tested against reality.

Sixth, India must restore faith in its government schools. Every child deserves an equal education until the age of 13, regardless of income or geography. Laboratories, libraries, sports facilities, digital infrastructure, sanitation and qualified teachers should become guaranteed minimum national standards. This can only happen when policymakers have a personal stake in public education and those responsible for governing public institutions also trust them with their own families.

Seventh, trust educational institutions with greater academic freedom that they deserve. Governments should define learning outcomes and ensure accountability. They should not

micromanage pedagogy, curriculum innovation or research. The world's finest institutions flourish because they are trusted to innovate, collaborate and respond to local contexts. Academic freedom produces excellence.

Eighth, what is measured improves. Transparency is one of the most powerful drivers of reform. A real-time national public education dashboard should be set up, on which every stakeholder can compare schools and universities using verified measures of learning outcomes, teacher vacancies, infrastructure, research output, accreditation, employability, and student well-being.

Ninth, public investment in education should rise to at least six per cent of GDP, accompanied by an increase in research funding to at least two per cent of GDP. Nations become knowledge economies not through aspiration alone, but through sustained investment in schools, universities, laboratories and ideas.

Tenth, educational reform must outlive electoral cycles and not begin afresh every time governments change. India needs an independent statutory national education reform commission that establishes measurable national benchmarks, audits implementation, publishes annual progress reports to Parliament, tracks outcomes across every State/Union Territory and holds governments accountable to measurable outcomes rather than political rhetoric.

Education beyond political divides

None of these reforms belongs to one political party or to one ideology. Every government has contributed something valuable, yet every government has also inherited unresolved structural weaknesses. Education must become India's first genuinely bipartisan national mission. History offers nations only a few defining moments when public attention, moral conviction and political urgency converge. This may be one of them. Parliament will eventually adjourn. But whether the child entering class one this year will grow into an innovator or an imitator, a responsible citizen or a passive spectator depends on the education we choose to build today.

The question before India is no longer who will lead the Ministry of Education. It is whether we, as a nation, have the vision and the resolve to build an education system worthy of our children. That responsibility belongs not to one government or one political party, but to every citizen who believes that education is the foundation upon which every other national aspiration rests.

If Sonam Wangchuk's fast helps us begin that journey, then his sacrifice will not merely have drawn attention to a crisis. It will have helped awaken a nation. History will remember whether we dared to transform a personal sacrifice into a national renaissance. That responsibility belongs to all of us.

A personal sacrifice must inspire India's education renaissance movement

It is not all bad between India and Pakistan

Ever since a letter written by 117 eminent Pakistanis and Indians emerged in the public domain, an acrimonious debate has begun on whether India should reopen dialogue with its neighbour, with most pointing to the inability of Pakistan to ever live peacefully with India. While this is understandable in the aftermath of the Pahalgam horror (2025), the fact remains that India and Pakistan have, on many occasions, shown far greater circumspection than their western counterparts and have also quietly cooperated to a surprising degree. Clearly, there is potential for cooperation. Equally, however, this potential has been hit progressively harder by terrorism.

Wars, yet with restraint

Every foreign correspondent writing on the India-Pakistan relationship, will frame it with reference to their three wars (1947, 1965, 1971). But few realise that during all three wars, both sides made efforts not to bomb each other's cities and civilian spaces. But there were some targets, such as the church at Ambala that was hit in 1965 as Pakistan tried to target the air base. Military historian Rana China notes that the only serious attack on civilian areas was at Chhearta, hours after a ceasefire was called, but originally meant to target a key radar station in Amritsar.

Even in 1971, both sides restricted attacks to military targets, including oil storage sites. Official sources in India note that military casualties for all three wars at 8,211, while Pakistan's broad figures point to some 15,000. Sadly, no credible sources are available for civilian casualties, though accounts of the war show life going on "courageously" in Pakistani towns, with the same fortitude reported from Amritsar, a flash point in all major wars. Consider that Allied air bombing during the Second World War killed an estimated 3,00,000-6,00,000 civilians in German cities under the new concept of "area bombing". Attacks against just Dresden, with hardly any



Tara Kartha

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military value, killed 25,000. Then there was the bombing of Tokyo that killed 1,00,000. Allied planes even mined the seas to deny fishing in "Operation Starvation". Germany was hardly any better, killing thousands but its crimes have been recorded. Those by the West are hard to find, but new "doctrines" of both held human life cheap. In contrast, India and Pakistan militaries kept to a battlefield concept. Once terrorism came into play, all these niceties were set aside. But even as Pakistan suffered terror attacks, including two attempts on General Musharraf's life, in 2003, a third was foiled quietly with Indian intelligence support; that tacitly it acknowledged strong Pakistani action against terrorist groups. True, this was in the aftermath of 9/11, where Islamabad was told to cooperate or 'be bombed back into the Stone Age' according to the General.

Fragile bridges

Yet another instance, after 26/11, President Asif Ali Zardari, instructed his ISI Chief General Shuja Pasha to visit Delhi and cooperate in the investigation. This was flatly refused by the then Chief, General Kayani. A year later U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden was telling the British that Mr. Zardari was afraid of 'being taken out'. Later, the 'Memogate' scandal had Mr. Zardari's fervent appeal for help against the generals. Later, Nawaz Sharif reached out as well, being the first to congratulate Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and attending his inaugural in 2014. Mr. Modi then made a surprise visit to Raikot for a Sharif family wedding in December 2015. In January 2016, the Pathankot attack happened. This time, Islamabad registered a case for investigation. Less than a year later, Mr. Sharif himself was forced out of office on corruption charges that were never proven. Mr. Modi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh all invested significant political capital in reaching out to Pakistan. All three faced failure, with Manmohan Singh particularly reviled for his efforts.

Conflict has made headlines, but quiet cooperation has also shaped India-Pakistan relations

Then came the 2005 nuclear confidence-building agreement, which still holds, with the last meeting held in January 2026. In contrast, arms control agreements between Russia and the U.S. have collapsed. The agreement was tested on March 9, 2022, when India acknowledged that a technical malfunction during routine maintenance led to the accidental firing of a missile into Pakistan. No damage was reported, and Delhi ordered a high-level inquiry.

While Prime Minister Imran Khan and politicians reacted strongly, Gen. Qamar Bajwa's response showed notable restraint. Gen. Bajwa also advocated using Pakistan's geo-economic potential by opening trade corridors with India, possibly due to the country's economic crisis. However, most remarkably, even as India faced Chinese incursions in Galwan, both countries reaffirmed their ceasefire commitment during Gen. Bajwa's tenure, despite the earlier abrogation of Article 370 in 2019.

There are many more instances of cooperation, though not all are publicly recorded. The constant point is that relations deteriorated sharply once terrorism began, initially targeting the military and more recently civilians, as seen in the horrific Pahalgam attack. Pakistan has suffered further as groups it once supported, such as the Taliban, turned against it.

The path to cooperation

In 2025, terrorism rose by 34% amid growing unrest in Occupied Kashmir, the tribal areas and Balochistan. Years of military rule have weakened state institutions. Yet, cooperation remains possible in areas such as glacial melt, stubble-burning alternatives and particularly narcotics trafficking, an area where both countries have previously worked together. The key step is for Rawalpindi to demonstrate clearly an end to its support for terrorism. That could even open the way for a renegotiation of the Indus Waters Treaty to mutual benefit.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Nuclear plant security

The reported data breach involving the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu (Front page, July 16) must be treated as a matter of national security, not as a routine cyber incident. This is not comparable to leaks involving examination

papers or administrative databases. Even if the exposed files relate only to conventional infrastructure, they could still help hostile actors map systems, suppliers, and operational dependencies. An independent, time-bound investigation is essential to establish the

facts, fix accountability, and close every security gap. Equally important is transparent public communication. Confidence in India's nuclear programme rests not only on robust technology but also on the quiet assurance that safety and cybersecurity are never

compromised.
Gopalswamy J.,
Chennai

S. Janaki

It is touching that readers of this daily continue to write about S. Janaki, a testament to how deeply she struck a chord with generations of listeners

making her an undisputed household name. Her timeless Tamil songs such as *Naatham En Jeevanai* (*Kadhal Oiyam*) showcased the depth, clarity, and soul she brought to every note. S. Janaki's voice became the soundtrack of countless lives, carrying joy, longing

and devotion with equal grace. Sung with extraordinary grace and emotion, her songs have left an enduring legacy that will continue to inspire.
Raju Kolluru,
Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh

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Does national recognition come belatedly for south Indian artistes?



T.M. Krishna

Acclaimed
Carnatic
vocalist and
recipient of the
Ramon
Magsaysay
Award



A.R. Venkatachalapathy

Historian and
Sahitya
Akademi
Award-winning
scholar

PARLEY

Legendary playback singer S. Janaki, who passed away on July 11, had declined the Padma Bhushan, arguing that the honour had come far too late in her career. She maintained that artists should be recognised when they are at the height of their creative powers rather than in their old age or after death. A similar debate has long surrounded the Jnanpith Award as well, with critics arguing that several outstanding writers from south India have been overlooked despite their enduring contributions to Indian literature. Are these concerns justified? Does national recognition come belatedly for south Indian artistes? T.M. Krishna and A.R. Venkatachalapathy discuss this question in a conversation moderated by B. Kolappan.

Do you think there is some bias in the selection process? Are people from north India favoured when it comes to recipients?

T.M. Krishna: So, the first thing we have to acknowledge is that the Padma Awards have never been apolitical. Your political affiliation has influenced these choices, and where you come from has definitely influenced them. Secondly, if elections are coming up in a particular State, we can be assured that the Padma Awards will include an extra share of recipients from that State. Whether or not that has any electoral benefit is a different question. In the world of the performing arts, there has always been a great deal of lobbying for these awards. I know artists who have spent a lot of time in Delhi, meeting people in power in order to procure these awards. There is also an overbearing presence of – again, when we say north India, we have to be very careful – circles concentrated, I would rather say in Mumbai and Delhi. The cultures centred around these two cities have an overwhelming influence on the conferring of these awards. Another issue is the conferring of inappropriate honours. People who have devoted their entire lives to their art receive a Padma Shri, whereas others who are younger and whose achievements do not compare receive a Padma Bhushan.

We are talking about the south. We do not talk about the Northeast. Just think about how many artists from the Northeast receive these awards. It is also a question of which art forms are recognised and how they are chosen. What is the process?

There is another set of awards, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards. I think the Sahitya Akademi, at least for a long time, had some degree of independence. The Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards have never even had that level



Last hymn: People pay their respects to veteran singer S. Janaki at Maharaja's College Grounds, in Mysuru, Karnataka, on July 12, 2021.

of independence. They have also been influenced by political affiliation and by whoever is in power. The fact that a few good decisions have been made does not mean the system is sound. Fundamentally, it gives an unfair advantage to people who are closer to the centres of power in Delhi.

A.R. Venkatachalapathy: Sivaji Ganesan never received the National Award for Best Actor. Instead, adding insult to injury, the great artist was given the Best Supporting Actor award. Similarly, M.S. Viswanathan never received a National Award for his near-immortal music. But there is a larger systemic issue that needs to be addressed. Sports and cinema have a disproportionate hold over these awards. Even in the case of S. Janaki, I was not very happy when she refused the Padma Bhushan. There are so many writers and poets who have never been recognised. They would be delighted to receive even a Padma Shri in their 90s. Disproportionate importance is given to sportspeople and film personalities. Third- and fourth-rung cinema stars receive awards, while many of the country's finest artists and writers are overlooked.

M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) was awarded the Bharat Ratna, while many people who made outstanding contributions to India's economy and public life were recognised much later. Do you think the conferring of the Bharat Ratna is influenced by politics?

ARV: Every award is accompanied by politics. Whether it is the Bharat Ratna being conferred on MGR or the Chennai Central railway station being renamed as Puratchi Thalaivar Dr M.G. Ramachandran Central Railway Station – all these are political decisions. Even when the personalities being honoured are truly deserving, if such decisions are taken at particular moments for immediate political gain,



Even when the personalities being honoured are truly deserving, if such decisions are taken at particular moments for immediate political gain, there should be pushback. We should be critical of such timing

A.R. VENKATACHALAPATHY

there should be pushback. We should be critical of such timing. Sachin Tendulkar is a Bharat Ratna. But we find him endorsing commercial products. There is perhaps nothing legally wrong, but I think it is morally inappropriate. A Bharat Ratna has been conferred on figures such as Dr. Ambedkar, Rajaji, Nehru and Bismillah Khan. It carries a certain gravitas.

TMK: There is no question that Sachin Tendulkar deserved the honour. But think about the timing. If I remember correctly, it was around his final Test match. You should not time a Bharat Ratna to coincide with a public event. In my opinion, that is unethical. We can equally ask: where are Sunil Gavaskar and Kapil Dev? They too deserve the honour. But when you time it as a public spectacle, you diminish the award itself. I agree with Mr. Venkatachalapathy that the system is the problem.

ARV: I also think that posthumous awards are acceptable. After all, we can make mistakes, and we do not know when someone is going to pass away. But what constitutes a posthumous award? Can we confer the Bharat Ratna on Thiruvalluvar, Avaiyar, Vidyapati or Tansen? There should be a time limit from the date of a person's death. Perhaps within a year or two after the death of the candidates.

TMK: The Bharat Ratna is not just about excellence. It is also about an individual's contribution to, and presence in, the larger cultural life of the country. That distinction is important. Which is why every great artist need not necessarily be awarded a Bharat Ratna. M.S. Subbulakshmi is a classic example. She transcended every boundary. Amartya Sen, as an economist, similarly transcended national boundaries. They represent India not only nationally but internationally.

But do you think many musicians are overlooked when it comes to the other Padma Awards?

ARV: I would say that the classical arts have received disproportionate recognition when it comes to the Padma awards. But if you look at

other fields, particularly Tamil literature, the picture is different. Apart from Jayakanthan, who received recognition in his prime, the most respected historian from Tamil Nadu today is Y. Subbaraya. He is 86 years old. His knowledge of Chola history and inscriptions is unmatched. But has he been recognised by the Government of Tamil Nadu? Has he even received a Kalaimamani (the highest civilian arts award conferred by Tamil Nadu)?

TMK: Kalaimamani is perhaps the worst example of how an award can be conferred. There have long been rumours that it can be bought. Recipients are simply lined up and presented with awards, sometimes several years' worth in a single ceremony. The State government must be held responsible. It has allowed a State award to become insignificant.

ARV: I agree. All awards should be conferred through a transparent process. The Government of Tamil Nadu confers numerous awards at the time of Pongal. If you look at the list of previous recipients, it is a very mixed bag and it is not entirely clear if any real standard has been applied. There are many problems. But one has to begin by getting the process right.

TMK: Whether it is the State Government or the Central Government, we do not value the Ministry of Culture. So, what is its job? What does it actually do? During the COVID-19 pandemic, through our foundation, we worked to support artists in various districts of Tamil Nadu. The Government of Tamil Nadu does not even maintain a registry of the known troupes representing different art forms across the State. Artists from marginalised communities and practitioners of diverse art forms have no meaningful support system. If the government is not engaging with the cultural life of the State or with its artists, it cannot claim to know them.

ARV: We may have our criticisms of the Sahitya Akademi or the Lalit Kala Akademi but, compared with State-level institutions, they have generally performed better. The Sahitya Akademi, the Lalit Kala Akademi and other such institutions were created on the basis of an autonomous model. Although they were funded by the government, they enjoyed a considerable degree of institutional autonomy. They have failed on many counts, but they have also succeeded in many respects.



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NOTEBOOK

The invisible co-authors

While preparation is essential for reporters to meet a deadline, some stories make it because unacknowledged strangers decide to help

Ishita Mishra

Journalism rewards preparation. But every reporter eventually learns that preparation alone is not always enough. Some stories survive because, at the exact moment things begin to fall apart, someone with no stake in the story decides that they will not let you fail.

End of last month, I was travelling to Om Parvat, situated over 18,000 feet above sea level, in Uttarakhand for a story. Days of rain had left the mountain roads unstable. Near Malpa, remembered for the devastating 1998 landslide that killed at least 60 Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims, villagers say even a brief spell of rain can send rocks crashing down.

They were right. Our vehicle was stopped twice by fresh landslides. The debris blocked the narrow road completely. I paced along the roadside, calculating what every passing minute meant for our reporting schedule. If we failed to reach Dharchula that evening, we would miss the train to Delhi the next day and, with it, the deadline. After waiting for hours, the photographer travelling with me, along with a few stranded passengers, rolled up their sleeves and began clearing rocks and mud with their bare hands. We knew it would hardly make a difference. It didn't.

Then help arrived. An Army convoy happened to be travelling behind us. The soldiers got down and cleared enough of the road for vehicles to move. That day, it wasn't a reporter who got the story home. It was a group of soldiers who probably never knew they had rescued a deadline.

The episode reminded me of another assignment years earlier when I was travelling to Bah, on the edge of the Chambal ravines in Agra. It was an important story scheduled around the launch of the newspaper I then worked for. Just before reaching the area, our cab driver received a frantic call. Another vehicle from his fleet had been stolen on the Yamuna Expressway and his colleague assaulted by thieves. He had to rush to the hospital.

Returning the next day was not an option. I tried calling local contacts, but to no

avail. A villager sipping tea nearby overheard my conversation and offered to help. He called his brother, and the two ferried my photographer and me on their motorcycles, for almost 30 kms. After the road ended, we walked for nearly two-and-a-half hours through the Chambal ravines in the sweltering August heat. There was no drinking water, no mobile signal and barely any sign of habitation. Residents told me no marriage had taken place in the village for nearly 50 years because there was no road, electricity, or phone connectivity. For a brief moment, I wondered whether I had taken one risk too many. I hadn't. The story existed because two strangers decided it should.

Years later, another stranger did the same. While covering a Rahul Gandhi rally at Girdhpuri in Chhattisgarh, heavy rain brought everything to a standstill. Roads were flooded, shops shut early and Baloda Bazar's patchy mobile network disappeared altogether. My laptop battery was almost dead and filing the report seemed impossible. Hours of searching for electricity or internet access led nowhere. While standing under a tin shed outside a wedding card printing shop operating from the verandah of a modest two-room house, I called my editor to say the story might not make it.

The shopkeeper saw me drenched and exhausted and asked the reason for my condition. I shared. He asked me to wait until he finished printing the last batch of cards before offering me his ageing desktop computer. It was painfully slow, but it worked. I wrote my copy, emailed it to the newsroom and met the deadline.

Looking back, what stays with me isn't the landslide, the ravines or the storm. It's something that I was never taught in journalism classes. Reporters like to believe stories are won through persistence, planning and instinct. But sometimes they are carried across the finish line by people whose names never appear in the byline.

Perhaps every byline has invisible co-authors. We just don't know their names.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Conscience of a nation



Holding on: Educator and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk observing an indefinite fast at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on July 9. He joined the Cockroach Janta Party's protest demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, and has been on hunger strike since June 28. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu**

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 17, 1976

A.P. to export handloom shirts to U.S.

Hyderabad, July 16: Nearly Rs. one crore worth of handloom goods are to be exported to America by October, by a new joint sector company formed here to-day by the Andhra Pradesh State Textile Development Corporation and an American firm floated by Indian citizens called India Fashions Incorporated Limited.

The Minister for Handlooms, Mr. K.V.

Kesavulu, told newsmen here to-day that the firm had entered into a deal with a chain departmental store called Sears for selling Indian-made handloom shirts and other handloom material there.

Half of the share in the new capital would be invested by some of the Telugu-speaking Indian citizens living in the U.S.

Two representatives of India Fashions, Mr. Sastri and Mr. Mohan had a discussion with the Minister and the Secretary to Government in the Industries Department, Mr. S.R. Ramamurti, here to-day and finalised details of the agreement to be signed by them shortly. Mr. Kesavulu said the new company would eliminate middlemen.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 17, 1926

Roorkee civil engineering college

Roorkee, July 15: H.E. Sir Malcolm Hailey, Governor of the Punjab, visited Roorkee to-day to attend the annual Convocation of the Thomson Civil Engineering College. After distributing diplomas, His Excellency gave an address in the course of which he referred to the Principal's hope that Roorkee might once more become an Imperial College. As to that, His Excellency could say nothing at the moment.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Value of critical imports identified for manufacturing push

51 \$ in billion, India is seeking to push domestic manufacturing across a pool of items currently worth \$51 billion in imports, as the Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to reduce the country's reliance on overseas suppliers. The nation imported \$775 billion worth of goods in the 12 months ended March 2026, a government source said. REUTERS

Indian seafarers stranded on the west of Hormuz

15,000 India has advised ship managers and owners against deploying Indian seafarers on vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz amid rising security risks. Over 15,000 Indians remain stranded west of Hormuz, according to the Forward Seamen's Union of India. REUTERS

Minimum wage raise in Vietnam planned for next year

7.8 in per cent. Vietnam's National Wage Council will submit a plan to raise the minimum wage by an average of 7.8% across the country's four regions in 2027. If approved, the new minimum wage would range from 4.04 million dong to 5.70 million dong (\$153.86-\$217.08) per month, the government said in a statement. REUTERS

Premium Lilium bulbs planted over past 3 days in Choglamsar

50,000 More than 50,000 premium Lilium bulbs have been planted at Choglamsar Flower Field in Ladakh, with the first bloom expected in the first week of September, the officials said. It is set to become India's largest organised high-altitude floriculture park. PTI

Land approved for Phase-II acquisition for three ports in A.P.

6248 The Andhra Pradesh government on Thursday approved the Phase-II land acquisition of 6,248 acres at a cost of ₹1,638 crore for the development of three ports — Mulapeta, Machilipatnam and Ramayapatnam. PTI

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How serious is Kudankulam data leak?

What exactly was leaked in the data breach? How did it occur? Did the breach affect any nuclear or reactor-related systems? Who was responsible for protecting the data? Why is the leak significant?

EXPLAINER

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

In Wednesday, reports broke out that multiple gigabytes of data pertaining to operations at the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu had been copied and subsequently leaked as part of a ransomware attack. *Reuters* reported that the breach was part of an infiltration into Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group's Reliance Infrastructure Ltd, and contained 14.3 GB of data on the power plant's operations. The data has been hosted on World Leaks, which is a Dark Web site hosted by cybercriminals who infect vulnerable firms with ransomware, threatening to leak the data if the ransom is not paid. The site claimed that the ransom was indeed not paid, and so it leaked the data. *The Hindu* opened the site and reviewed the index of files, which amount overall to 1.2TB, a slice of which pertained to the Kudankulam plant.

Was the reactor affected by the data leak?

"The files do not pertain to the core reactor's operations, which are the most sensitive in a nuclear setup," Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) said in a statement. "NPCIL reiterates that the information claimed to be available in the public domain pertains only to conventional Balance of Plant (BOP) common service facilities and does not relate to any nuclear safety, or nuclear security-related systems or information," it said in a statement.

A spokesperson for the Reliance Group told *The Hindu* that it "was informed by Yotta Data Services Private Limited (Yotta), its third-party data centre service



A view of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. N. RAJESH

provider, of a cybersecurity incident involving an attempted ransomware attack that resulted in a partial breach of data hosted on one of Yotta's servers," and that "Yotta has confirmed that enhanced security monitoring and preventive controls are now in place. The Company has directed Yotta to conduct a detailed investigation and submit a report."

"No ransomware execution, data loss or lateral movement occurred," Reliance said in a stock exchange filing. The files reportedly include multiple drawings of "blueprints and supplier details, meeting and inspection records, equipment reviews," and a \$12 million insurance policy against terrorist attacks, though it is unclear what the premium amount for this insured sum is.

What did Yotta say about the cyber incident?

Yotta, which runs data centres across the country, characterised Reliance as its "customer's private cloud environment," but said it took steps to address the infiltration as it was detected on May 29.

"Yotta's managed endpoint security controls detected suspicious activity on a file server of our customer, Reliance Infrastructure," the company told *The Hindu*. "We acted immediately; the suspicious process was terminated, and the affected server was isolated, preventing the suspected ransomware from executing. Our technical assessment confirmed no evidence of ransomware encryption and no lateral movement to any other server or system within the customer's private cloud environment."

The incident was limited to this single customer-managed server, with no impact on any other Yotta customer or on Yotta's shared cloud platforms, AI cloud infrastructure, datacentre infrastructure or other services."

Why does the data leak matter?

The revelations have sparked "absolute commotion" among top officials at the power plant, even as they downplay the impact of the findings. The plant has commissioned two 1,000 Mwe VVER reactors, allowing for a power supply of up to two gigawatts. The reactors are built in partnership with the Russian firm Rosatom, and the government is planning four more such units, which would triple the installed power production capacity at the facility.

THE GIST

▼ The data has been hosted on World Leaks, which is a Dark Web site hosted by cybercriminals who infect vulnerable firms with ransomware, threatening to leak the data if the ransom is not paid.

▼ Yotta, which runs data centres across the country, characterised Reliance as its "customer's private cloud environment," but said it took steps to address the infiltration as it was detected on May 29.

▼ The revelations have sparked "absolute commotion" among top officials at the power plant, even as they downplay the impact of the findings.

Why is Maharashtra's Ladki Bahin scheme under scrutiny?

What do beneficiary cuts and CAG findings reveal about its implementation?

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:

Ahead of the 2024 Assembly elections, the Maharashtra government launched the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana. Under this scheme, eligible women in the State receive ₹1,500 every month through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). At its peak, the scheme covered 2.43 crore beneficiaries. However, successive rounds of verification over the past two years have led to the removal of lakhs of beneficiaries, bringing the total down to about 1.66 crore women.

The recent information about the removal of lakhs of women from the beneficiaries' list has sparked criticism, and the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has raised concerns about the scheme.

Who is eligible to receive funds under the scheme?

Women who are residents of Maharashtra, aged between 21 and 65 years, with an Aadhaar-linked bank

account, and belonging to a family with an annual income of less than ₹2.5 lakh are eligible to receive benefits under the scheme. Women of any marital status are eligible. However, only one woman per family can avail of the benefit.

The State government has said the scheme is aimed at promoting the economic independence of women. It also seeks to improve their health and nutritional status, and strengthen their role in family decision-making, according to the government. The scheme is implemented by the State's Women and Child Development Department.

What are the red flags raised by the CAG in the latest report?

The CAG said the implementation of the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana during 2024-25 was marked by "significant deficiencies in Budget estimation, expenditure control, and financial management." While the scheme was allocated ₹29,693.09 crore for the fiscal year, the government incurred an expenditure of ₹33,237.24 crore, resulting in an excess expenditure of ₹3,541.16

crore. The CAG described the excess expenditure as "unjustified" and said the Women and Child Development Department failed to provide any specific justification for the overspending. It also observed that funds for the scheme were mobilised by reappropriating allocations from other schemes. For instance, ₹3,490.75 crore was reappropriated from the Lek Ladki Yojana. The State's supplementary Budget also allocated ₹26,200 crore for the scheme.

The CAG said that the scheme undermined the principles of budgetary discipline, financial propriety and legislative control over public finances. It said that "significant excess expenditure remained unexplained" and that large sums were drawn and parked in the Disbursing Officer's Virtual Personal Deposit Account (VPDA). "This indicates that the funds were not required for immediate utilisation and were drawn without actual expenditure needs, contrary to the principles of budgetary discipline and financial propriety," the CAG observed.

"A test check of vouchers exceeding

₹1,000 crore relating to the scheme, aggregating ₹29,732.01 crore, showed that ₹15,586 crore drawn between January and March 2025 was transferred to the Drawing and Disbursing Officer's VPDA," the report said.

Why have so many names been removed from the beneficiaries' list?

At its peak, the scheme had 2.43 crore beneficiaries. According to the Maharashtra government, the number of beneficiaries has fallen from 2.43 crore to 1.66 crore. The government said the names were removed after multiple rounds of verification found that some beneficiaries were no longer eligible. It maintained that there has been no change in the eligibility norms and attributed the reduction to the verification process.

The government also cited that the mandatory e-KYC requirement as a key reason for the drop in the number of beneficiaries, saying many women failed to complete the process. A Shiv Sena leader has now urged the State to extend the deadline for completing the e-KYC process. Meanwhile, the Opposition has accused the government of using the scheme to secure electoral gains. The Congress has demanded the immediate restoration of benefits for lakhs of women who were excluded over e-KYC-related issues, and called for an inquiry into the implementation of the scheme.

The Opposition has also criticised the government for failing to fulfil its promise of increasing the monthly assistance from ₹1,500 to ₹2,100 ahead of the State Assembly elections.

THE GIST

▼ The CAG described the excess expenditure as "unjustified" and said the Women and Child Development Department failed to provide any specific justification for the overspending.

▼ It also observed that funds for the «NO» Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana's «NO» scheme were mobilised by reappropriating allocations from other schemes.

PULSE CHECK

Alexander Zverev's Grand Slam win puts Type 1 diabetes in the spotlight

Diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at the age of four and reliant on insulin therapy and continuous glucose monitoring, Alexander Zverev's rise to the pinnacle of tennis underscores the challenges of competing with a chronic condition while performing at the highest level of a professional sport

Nitika Francis

In June 7, a five-set epic on the Roland Garros clay ended with Germany's Alexander Zverev winning his first Grand Slam title at the 2026 French Open. He also became, on his thirty-fourth attempt, the first German to win a major men's singles title in three decades. He reached the finals stage again at the Wimbledon championships on July 12. And perhaps most of all, Zverev became the first person with type 1 diabetes (T1D) to triumph in this contest.

While he is far from the first elite athlete to live with T1D, his French Open win is an important achievement. T1D is a strenuous condition to manage for a layperson, let alone a sportsperson. Zverev himself has called the process of managing blood glucose levels during a tennis set as "playing two games at once".

Understanding T1D

Like most people with the condition, Zverev was diagnosed with T1D when he was four years old.

T1D is an autoimmune disease that affects the pancreas by destroying its beta-cells, which produce insulin. This is different from type II diabetes, where the body can produce insulin but resists its effects. People with T1D need to take insulin externally to use sugar from food to produce energy.

As the body digests sugars and carbohydrates in food, it breaks them down into glucose, the main fuel for the body's cells. After a meal, blood glucose levels rise, triggering the release of insulin. Insulin helps absorb glucose from the bloodstream for immediate use or store excess glycogen for later use.

Without enough insulin, or when the body can't use it effectively, glucose builds up in the bloodstream, causing hyperglycaemia, or high blood glucose. In the short term, this can lead to increased thirst, frequent urination, headache, blurred vision, and fatigue. Over time, persistently high blood glucose can damage the eyes, kidneys, and other organs.

Managing highs

Tennis is both praised and scorned for its unique and dynamic scoring system: it barely has room for luck yet lends itself to soaring comebacks. A game in which a player leads 40-love can suddenly swing to deuce, which could lead to a long tussle for the advantage point. A player who appears to be cruising towards a 6-3 set win can suddenly find themselves locked in four additional games and a tiebreak.

Concurrently, hyperglycaemia causes energy levels in the body to fluctuate. This is usually managed by injecting insulin into the fat tissue under the skin, wherefrom it is absorbed into the bloodstream and carried around the body. Devices to do this include insulin pens, syringes, and insulin pumps.

The insulin pen contains cartridges with the hormone. A user can set the number of units insulin required and push on the injection button. With enough practice, it can be done discreetly in public places as well. The American Diabetes Association (ADA) has advised pen users to administer the shot in their abdomen.

However, a lack of awareness has led to misconceptions about injecting insulin.



Germany's Alexander Zverev returns to Italy's Jannik Sinner during the men's singles final tennis match on the fourteenth day of the 2026 Wimbledon Championships at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London, on July 12. AFP

Zverev faced such an instance at the 2023 French Open, where a match official told him he could not inject insulin on court because it looked "weird" and that he would have to use his three-minute toilet break for that.

"I said, 'What does it look like? That I'm doping?' This argument makes no sense," he told Eurosport Germany. He added that his bathroom break was not enough and that he generally has to inject around four to five times during a match.

He also caught flak in 2019 for after appearing to check a device inside his gear bag during matches, which was against the rules preventing players from communicating by phone. Germany's Davis Cup captain Michael Kohlmann told DW-TV that Zverev was, in those cases, checking his glucose monitoring device.

Surviving the lows

On the flip side, insulin therapy carries a risk of hypoglycaemia, or low blood sugar. This can lead to loss of consciousness, cardiac arrest or even death if it isn't dealt with. Dealing requires ingesting glucose tablets or eating fast-acting carbohydrates and sugars in the form of juices, sodas or candies.

However, fluctuating sugar levels don't always show symptoms until it is too late, and generally result in loss of consciousness at first.

According to the ADA, 40% of T1D patients are unaware of hypoglycaemia. People with T1D are known to manage the rally between high and low blood sugar with trial and error.

While patients have generally used finger-prick blood tests or glucometers,

continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) devices have become commonplace, and offer more accurate, real-time updates, per the ADA.

CGMs have a sensor in the form of a small piece of material inserted under the patient's skin using a needle. The sensor transmits real-time glucose levels (via a transmitter) to a smartphone app, receiver or insulin pump. A simple computer on the smartphone or the pump decides how much insulin should be injected, how much carbohydrates to consume, etc.

More than a physical burden

Players like Zverev also have to deal with the uncertainty of when a hyper- or hypoglycemic episode could kick in during a match. A 2025 study by researchers at the University of Georgia School of Social Work found that the hypervigilance required to manage T1D often causes burnout and exacerbates mental illnesses.

Hypoglycaemia can also impair sleep efficiency and quality, which are important for sportspersons' mental and physical upkeep. Tennis tournaments, especially the majors, have multiple matches in a week and one-day gaps between matches, which means only small recovery periods.

Recovery nutrition in tennis focuses heavily on restoring glycogen levels through carbohydrates. However, the unpredictable nature of the condition also means there's a risk of a glucose spike, which could leave the athlete without being able to consume the necessary recovery carbohydrates. The physical exertion in a match could later crash the

glucose levels, and render a sleepless night.

Type 1 on the map

Zverev has said he was told he could never become an elite athlete after his T1D diagnosis. He was diagnosed at age four, spent years of his career hiding the condition, and continues to manage it in discreet ways.

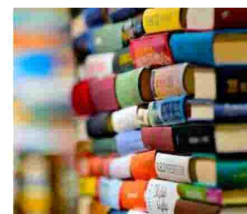
"When something unexpected happens, I've learned to stay calm and trust the systems I have in place," he told Reuters in January this year. Between points and changeovers, he has said he finds himself calculating when next to take a sip from his bottle or have an energy gel.

Among others, he uses CGMs to help regulate his glucose levels. They have been his tools of choice, although his Halle Open match on June 21, which he lost, was also a bump: a malfunctioning glucose monitor gave him an incorrect reading and he injected more insulin than he needed.

He has also advocated for people with T1D both on and off the court, and set up a foundation in his name to support children with types I and II diabetes.

While he has been having a positive impact on how people live with T1D, Zverev's legacy off the court has been chequered.

He settled a legal dispute in 2025 over allegations of domestic violence (which he has denied). The Association of Tennis Professionals also closed an investigation in 2023, stemming from allegations of physical abuse by former tennis player Olya Sharypova, citing insufficient evidence.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

Sorry to have kept you waiting. I hope you weren't bored."

"Not at all. I was thumbing through this old magazine. And I must say..."

"...thumbing through an old magazine! What do you mean by that?"

"When you thumb through a magazine, book or newspaper, you go through it very quickly."

"In other words, you don't read it carefully."

"That's right! Here's an example. I thumb through your physics textbook. I must say that it is very well written."

"Very well written. Good grief! It's probably the most boring book ever written. How about this example? Aruna thumb through her address book and came up with Sandeep's telephone number."

"That's an excellent example. By the way, you can also say 'leafed through'. It means the same thing as 'thumb through'. For example..."

"...while the wife was getting dressed, the husband leafed through the newspaper."

"The examiner leafed through the dissertation."

"Did your Chairman thumb through your proposal?"

"Apparently he didn't leaf through the proposal. His P.A. told me that he went over it very carefully."

"What did the Chairman think of it?"

"He gave it the thumbs up."

"I am not interested in what soft drink your Chairman offered you. I want to know..."

"...soft drink? What are you talking about?"

"You said that the Chairman gave you Thumbs Up."

"I didn't say that! I said that the Chairman gave my proposal the thumbs up. Grow up, will you?"

"Gave your proposal the thumbs up? Does it mean what I think it means?"

"I have no clue what you think it means. When you give something the 'thumbs up', you approve of it."

"I see. How about this example? When Laxman asked his father if he could start building on their new site, his father gave him the thumbs up."

"Sounds great. After I received the thumbs up from my boss, I threw a big party at the Silver Plate. I invited all my friends."

"You didn't invite me."

"That's because you are not my friend! Anyway, did the President of your association get in touch with the Municipal authorities?"

"Yes, the poor man spent nearly five hours there. The good news is, our proposal to widen the roads was given the thumbs up by the local"

"...really? That's wonderful news. By the way, it is also possible to say 'to get the thumbs up from someone'. For example, we got the thumbs up from the local authorities to widen the roads."

"We got the thumbs up from our parents to see Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon."

"After seeing the movie Castaway, Rohan gave it the thumbs up."

"Meaning that he approved of it?"

"Exactly!"

Published in The Hindu on April 24, 2001.

THE DAILY QUIZ

FIFA World Cup: a quiz on FIFA controversies over the years

Joan Sony Cherian

QUESTION 1

In the 2026 World Cup, France entered the quarter-finals after defeating this country. A senator of said country lashed out at one of the French players via social media using racist and dehumanising imagery. Name the country and the French player who took a stand against the racist abuse.

QUESTION 2

In 1998, France hosted the FIFA World Cup. However, before it commenced, a terror plot targeting the tournament was uncovered by intelligence agencies. Which group was plotting the terrorist attack?

QUESTION 3

This South Korean player was suspended by FIFA from two qualifying matches during the 2014 World Cup

for holding up a banner which said "Dokdo is our territory". Dokdo are islets controlled by South Korea but also claimed by Japan. Name the player.

QUESTION 4

Like the last semi-finals, England and Argentina faced each other back in 1986, then in the quarter-finals. A significant geopolitical conflict underpinned the match, making it extremely tense for both sides. What was the conflict? Two goals scored by this Argentinian player in this fateful match are now among the most well-known goals in football history. Name the player.

QUESTION 5

This plastic whistle-cum-horn which is popular in South Africa's football stadiums is a symbol of that nation's sporting culture. However, the intensity of its sound has led many confederations to outright ban them or impose restrictions. Name the instrument.



Visual question: This image showcases a flare being thrown next to a player during a match between Brazil and Chile in the 1990 FIFA World Cup. This player feigned injury alleging that the flare had hit him. Evidence quickly showed that the allegation was false and he received a lifetime ban from football. Name the player. FILE PHOTO

Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- The actor portrayed the adult Damien Thorn, the Antichrist, in the third instalment of this famous film franchise, which centres on a child born to the Devil. **Ans: Omen III: The Final Conflict (1981)**
- Shot in West Berlin, Neill acted opposite Isabelle Adjani in this psychological horror drama, which has attained cult status since its release. **Ans: Possession (1981)**
- Neil took a sinister turn in this sci-fi slasher set aboard a haunted spacecraft, delivering the famously chilling line: "Where we're going, we won't need eyes to see." **Ans: Event Horizon**
- He starred in genre master John Carpenter's lovecraftian homage as an insurance investigator probing the disappearance of a horror writer. **Ans: In the Mouth of Madness (1994)**
- Visual: Sam Neill plays a corporate criminal-cum-vampire who plans to profit from a company that sells blood. Name the film, which stars Ethan Hawke in the lead role. **Ans: Daybreakers**

Early Birds

Tamal Biswas | Siddhartha Viswanathan | Pulkit Sathe | Piyali Tuli | Sudhir Thapa

Word of the day

Votary:

one bound by vows to a religion or life of worship or service a devoted adherent of a cause or person or activity

Synonyms: adherent, devotee

Usage: She is a votary of Gandhian philosophy and lives a simple life.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/votary

International Phonetic Alphabet:

Alphabet: /vɑ:t(ə)ri/

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

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Ahead of the big deal, strike a careful balance

FOLLOWING THE US Trade Representative's proposal to levy tariffs on 60 countries under Section 301 of the US Trade Act, 1974, the government has introduced a new section in the foreign trade policy regarding forced labour. India is not the only country to do so — Indonesia, Canada, Cambodia and Peru have responded with similar commitments after the USTR's proposed tariffs. Simultaneously, India has sought a review of the USTR's proposed tariffs of 12.5 per cent, alleging to inconsistencies in its examination. The country's tariff challenges don't end here. US President Donald Trump's tariff policy is, as of now, operationalised through Section 122 of the Trade Act. However, the 10 per cent universal rate currently levied can only be imposed for at most 150 days (without Congressional approval), which ends on July 24. Trump is trying to reinforce the tariff wall through other pathways. Alongside the investigation into forced labour, USTR is examining the issue of "structural excess capacity and production in manufacturing sectors" in economies, including India. The outcome of that investigation, and if it attracts additional tariffs, is yet to be released.

This, however, is not the only contentious area — energy is another lever. A few days ago, a group of US senators unveiled a new version of the Russia sanctions Bill that proposes to levy tariffs of up to 100 per cent on the top five buyers of Russian oil and natural gas — China, India, Slovakia, Hungary and Azerbaijan. Imports from Russia account for a significant share of India's energy basket. Here, too, New Delhi has taken US concerns on board — PSUs have signed a deal to import 10 per cent of LPG requirements from the US.

In the recent past, the Indian government has pushed through trade deals with countries such as the UK and Australia, as well as the EU. A deal with the US now — the largest economy in the world — will go a long way in reducing the uncertainty that has marred relations between the countries, while expanding trade. The upside for both countries is significant. On its part, the White House will likely continue to exert pressure on India in order to extract maximum concessions. As Delhi moves ahead to expand its market and protect its interests, it will have to carefully navigate its way, mindful of an unpredictable White House.

A game bigger than its grand spectacle

AS SPAIN and Argentina face off on Sunday in what will be their first meeting in the FIFA World Cup since 1966, the finale promises a grand spectacle. Spain's near-impenetrable defence will encounter Argentina's potent attack in a game that will see the long-anticipated meeting between Lionel Messi and Lamine Yamal, whom Messi famously cradled as a baby almost 20 years ago. Yet, whatever the outcome at the New York New Jersey Stadium, this World Cup will be remembered for far more than the team that lifts the trophy.

The tournament's expansion from 32 teams to 48 had drawn criticism, particularly in Europe, on the grounds that it would make the competition less compelling. Far from it, the expanded format has not only made the Cup more inclusive, with Africa and Asia enjoying greater representation, but also produced some of its most enthralling encounters, featuring Japan, Senegal, Egypt and tiny and underrated Cape Verde. Technology was a defining feature of the tournament. If FIFA believed that AI-assisted officiating tools, sensor-equipped match balls and semi-automated offside technology would finally settle refereeing disputes, then VAR (video assistant referee) interventions over contentious fouls and strange offside ensured the opposite. The question is not whether technology belongs in football, but how far its adjudicators should allow it to shape the game's crucial moments. Finally, controversies over immigration, ticketing, the treatment of Iran's national team, and the reversal of Folarin Balogun's red card are a reminder that the World Cup has never been just about football. From Mussolini's Italy in 1934 to Argentina's military junta in 1978, the World Cup has long been a stage on which host governments project prestige and power and legitimacy.

The 2026 edition was no different. Nor are the players immune from it. Following the semi-final victory over England, Argentina now faces the prospect of disciplinary action after its players unfurled a banner backing the country's claim to the Falkland Islands. Yet, for all the debates over inclusivity, technology and politics, the World Cup has ultimately lived up to football's enduring moniker as the beautiful game. Last-minute winners, dramatic comebacks, extraordinary underdog performances and teaming moments of individual brilliance have made sure that the football itself has never been overshadowed. The spotlight now falls on Spain and Argentina.

The mysterious new cousin in the wild

IF A monkey croaks in a forest, with no humans to hear it, does it even exist? Five million years ago, the recently classified *Colobus* genus split from the common ancestor of its closest similar relative. It was only in 2008 that researchers captured blurry photos of the elusive, yellow-tipped monkey that makes a croaking sound at the Lomani National Park in Congo. People from the Balanga ethnic group call the animal — roughly the same size as a rhesus monkey — Likwili, and after years of study and genetic testing, it has now been classified as a new species.

Its population, habits and social life will likely occupy zoologists for years to come. The question, though, is whether the Likwili monkey was better off "undiscovered", where, of course, a chance that the classification of the new species will help conserve it, that knowing it's there may prevent hunting and habitat destruction. Human beings, though, don't have the best record in this regard.

Since the age of European colonial expansion, indigenous populations of entire continents have been all but wiped out by the excesses of "discovery". Animals, once classified, enter the language of the creature that has been discovered so many of them. They will be "conserved". Still, perhaps, some rare mineral or the strategic imperative of a nation-state — far younger than the five-million-year life of the Likwili as a species — makes them part of a utilitarian calculus in which they are simply a variable on a ledger. Meanwhile, let's hope the mysterious new cousin in the simian family croaks away without interruption or interference from its dominating relative.

The Editorial Page

No one did it, it happens: War to exam scandals, pollution to crumbling cities

YESTERDAY, WITHIN minutes, I encountered two statements that seemed to capture the core pathology of contemporary politics. The return of malfeasance or evil without agents. Sonam Wangchuk, on the 15th day of his fast, was outlining the core of his thinking behind asking for the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan: It was to fix accountability and agency for an exam fiasco that affects hundreds of thousands of lives. In a completely different context, I encountered this reflection by one of the sharpest contemporary philosophers, Raymond Geuss, in an essay, "Without Causes," published in *New Left Review*. The essay discusses an interview Hillary Clinton gave on Gaza. There is one striking line in the essay, "When Clinton must refer to conditions on the (Gaza) Strip her sentences breakdown and suddenly lack a grammatical subject: Reconstruction frozen. Investment absent. Civilians trapped in dependency and despair, with reportedly up to 1,000 killed since the ceasefire. We are not told who killed them."

The two examples illustrate the same phenomenon. Across an astonishing range of policy challenges, from war to pollution, exam scandals to crumbling cities, we encounter seemingly causeless phenomena: sentences without subjects. At the international level, our Prime Minister sets the tone. "This is not an era of war," he intones with sagacity, without even naming who the actors are who start the war. You might think this is diplomatic finesse. But it turns out to be a full-blown technique of ruling. If there are no agents behind the action, no one needs to

be held accountable. Your success is not stopping the war, condemning aggression, or upholding the law. Your success is that you can immobilise the need for responsibility altogether without appearing immoral.

Now, just think how useful this strategy is domestically. Sentences without grammatical subjects or in the passive voice can easily make passive citizens. Exam leak. Happens. Cities flooding. Happens. Himalayas crumbling. Happens. Stampedes. Happen. Air Pollution. Happens. Just as we know this is not an era of war, but we don't name who starts it, we also know this is not an era of crumbling cities, polluted air and rivers, disenfranchisement and corruption, and any other evil you can mention. But no one makes it happen.

The beauty of the passive voice is that the government can join the citizens in a common language and a common objective. These days, it has become the norm for government ministers, civil servants, or recently retired decision-makers to write about their departments with impressive expertise. They will outline lofty goals, even share citizens' concerns. But the one thing missing in all that writing is the fixing of accountability. You will read hundreds of op-eds on air pollution, including by policymakers. But no one will name, or shame, as it were, the example, no one will point out who decided to relax pollution norms for coal-fired power plants and why. Who makes the decisions to give clearances to build roads and buildings in ecologically sensitive zones? Was recently at a meet-



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

ing where there was eloquent holding forth on "ease of doing business, especially for MSMEs". But not one policymaker could actually name and explain why particular regulations were put in place or even who put them. If you ask a pointed question, all policy, all events, all decisions suddenly become anonymised through invoking "The Bureaucracy" or "The System" or "The Court" or "Norms". As if policy is made by abstractions, if even made at all.

Now you might demur and say, "Isn't this an age of personalised politics, not events without subjects? Don't we attribute all evils to leaders, Vladimir Putin or Narendra Modi, or Donald Trump?" But the cult of personality is one more way in which accountability gets evaded; it's like holding God responsible. When God is responsible, no one is. The personality is meant to disguise the myriad of actions that go into the making of catastrophes. Yes, the person at the top has to shoulder the blame for setting the norms. But that is also a convenient alibi for not fixing individual responsibility. "Modi" and "Trump" become a vast impersonal force that governs everything, so we can stop interrogating actual chains of decisions.

Now, speaking in euphemisms, without a subject, allows a certain civility. Perhaps in the international sphere, it allows for diplomacy. A culture of individual naming and shaming can also be misused and be cruel. There might be something true to these concerns. But at the present juncture, this really has become a technology for creating a passive world in which everything,

from genocide to environmental destruction, happens. Even well-meaning critics of policy fall into this trap. The crisis of public policy in India is not the crisis of ideas. Most things that require attention are not rocket science. It is the crisis of accountability: Who will name who actually takes decisions and hold them responsible? Everyone has this knowledge, but we choose to anonymise it. Perhaps this is being done to blame participation: It suits all of us not to blame any specific agents, since that also absolves us of any responsibility. It gives us a kind of freedom. It allows us to defer to power without appearing to do so.

Perhaps this is why Wangchuk's demand is important. His insistence on a resignation is not simply about one minister or one examination. It is a defence of the proposition that democratic politics requires a grammatical subject. Before institutions can be repaired, we must acknowledge who specifically broke them. If you want to stop war, you have to name and shame those who start them.

Raymond Geuss may be onto something profound. In his telling, it is not that Hillary Clinton was denying the truth. What she was making disappear was the subject of the sentence. The artful form of modern governance is to acknowledge the truth and yet evade responsibility. Once a society loses the habit of asking, "Who did this?", it also loses the capacity to ask, "Who should answer for it?" There is no democracy without a grammatical subject.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

The woman is out of the building



SUKSHAM TANU

LAST MONTH, the firm Zaha Hadid founded in 1979 and led until her death in 2016 dropped her name. Zaha Hadid Architects became ZHA, in what her successor Patrik Schumacher called a natural brand evolution. What that framing left out was the decade-long legal fight behind it: A licensing agreement under which the firm paid Hadid's foundation a share of its revenue to keep her name on the door, and a court ruling this year that freed Schumacher from that obligation. Frank Gehry's name has stayed on his firm's door for nearly 70 years without a court getting involved. Iraqi-born Hadid — the only woman to ever win the Pritzker Prize — didn't get that courtesy. It is tempting to file the story under "architecture's problem with women", as though the problem is somehow contained to one London firm and one unusually famous case. It isn't. The same instinct — celebrate a woman as an exception, then withdraw the recognition once it stops being convenient — runs through India's own architectural institutions.

In 2023, an architect named Vandana Sehgal came closer than any woman ever to leading India's Council of Architecture (COA), the country's statutory architecture regulator. She lost the presidential election by a single vote. Not once since the Architects Act created the Council in 1972 has a woman held its top job. The closest formal foothold any woman has had is its vice-presidency.

The Indian Institute of Architects (IIA), the older and more storied of the profession's two national bodies, does slightly better — only slightly, and only recently. Founded in 1917, the IIA went 98 years before electing a woman, Divya Khush, as its president in 2015. She served until 2020. Before her and after her, the list of names is a wall of men. This is what happens when institutions built by men, for men, in a profession that has always treated women as guests, are asked to share power. They will let a woman in eventually, symbolically — and then close the door again.

India's architectural establishment likes to imagine that its exclusions belong to a colonial past it has since outgrown. It has not. Consider Perin Jarmette Mistri, who in 1936 became the first woman in India — and reportedly in Asia — to qualify as an architect. She went on to run her father's

firm for half a century, designing everything from Art Deco bungalows to Salvation Army hospitals across two continents. Ninety years later, her name is barely known. Her male contemporaries are still cited as the architects of modern Bombay.

Or, consider Urmila "Eulie" Chowdhury, the only Indian woman on Le Corbusier's team that designed Chandigarh in the 1950s. Chowdhury was the crucial link between Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, and the Indian planners on the ground, fluent enough in French to translate Corbusier's writing and trusted enough to be handed sole charge of major buildings, including the Government Home Science College and the Women's Polytechnic. She also helped design the furniture, including the "Jeanneret chair", that made Chandigarh internationally famous. The Victoria and Albert Museum remains one of the few institutions that has bothered to note Chowdhury's role in that design.

The usual defence of institutions like IIA and COA is that once enough women graduate, representation will follow on its own. The numbers say otherwise. A 2023 exhibition at the Delhi Architecture Biennale found that although women make up roughly 60 per cent of architecture students today, they account for only about 20 per cent of practising, registered architects. Most women drop out because the field doesn't build the career ladder, firm partnerships, or institutional leadership to keep them.

There is a temptation to read Sehgal's 2023 loss as a hopeful sign — proof that change is close, that a woman almost got there. It's worth resisting that reading. "Almost" is not a threshold institutions cross by accident; it is a threshold they cross when they decide to. COA's president is chosen by its own sitting members, in a small internal election, not by a public vote of registered architects. A one-vote margin does not mean the institution is one election away from equity. It means the institution came within reach of a different outcome and chose, by the narrowest possible margin, the outcome that kept its record unbroken. That is not a profession in transition. That is a profession that has learned how far it can let a woman go — and where, every time, to stop her.

The writer is a Dubai-based architect. Her work focuses on sustainability and inclusivity

NATO's transformation opens possibilities for India



SAKTI PRASAD SRICHANDAN

THE 2026 NATO Summit held in Ankara a few days ago confirmed that the alliance is entering a new era of strategic transformation rather than strategic decline. Ukraine remains central, but NATO's ambitions now go much further. It is preparing for a world shaped by long-term rivalry, technological competition and unstable supply chains. This shift matters for India.

The first message from Ankara is clear: Russia will remain NATO's strategic security challenge for years to come. Even in the war in Ukraine ends, NATO has decided that deterrence must be permanent. The second message is that Europe is being asked to do much more for its own security. The US remains indispensable, but Washington is increasingly unwilling to carry the burden alone. The third is perhaps the most important. Modern wars are won not only on the battlefield but also in factories and laboratories. The Ukraine war exposed serious weaknesses in ammunition production, missile manufacturing and defence supply chains. Technology is completing this transformation. AI, cybersecurity, quantum computing, autonomous systems and space capabilities are today's strategic priorities.

India is not a NATO member. But its security environment is increasingly shaped by decisions taken far beyond its neighbourhood. Europe's growing investment in defence opens new possibilities for India's defence industry. Indian firms can become partners in supply chains that are being diversified away from dependence on a few countries. India's ambition to become a manufacturing hub fits well with Europe's search for trusted partners. If New Delhi moves quickly, defence cooperation can become part of a broader technology and industrial partnership. Further, NATO's strategic outlook increasingly links European security with developments in the Indo-Pacific, maritime security, critical technologies and supply chains. This reflects a broader reality: Security today is interconnected. For India, this creates both opportunities and dilemmas. The opportunity lies in expanding cooperation with European countries on maritime security, cyber resilience, critical technologies and defence innovation. The dilemma is Russia, which remains one of India's major defence partners and an important energy supplier. At the same time, India has deepened strategic ties with the US and Europe. As NATO's confrontation with Moscow grows more entrenched, balancing these relationships will become more difficult.

This is why India's policy of strategic autonomy remains relevant. It should avoid the temptation to set NATO into motion through the prism of the Ukraine war. NATO is evolving into an organisation where defence, technology, industry and economic resilience are increasingly interconnected. That evolution will shape global standards, defence innovation and strategic partnerships. Instead of asking whether NATO is relevant to India, policymakers should ask: How can India benefit from Europe's security transformation while preserving its strategic autonomy? Done well, India can gain economic and security advantages from the transatlantic rearmament wave. Handled poorly, the same wave could push New Delhi into costly dependencies and strategic choices that weaken the autonomy it has worked hard to preserve.

The writer is assistant professor, Centre for European Studies, SIS, JNU

40 YEARS AGO

July 17, 1986



PM says UCC Bill ready

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, said that the Government was "ready" with a Bill for a voluntary uniform civil code. Disclosing this during his meeting with the leaders of opposition parties on the eve of Parliament's monsoon session, the Prime Minister, however, did not give any further details about the proposed legislation. Nor did he say whether the Bill would be introduced during the monsoon session.

China rejects intrusion charge

CHINA REJECTED as "unjustified" a strong Indian protest over an intrusion by Chinese frontier personnel into Indian territory in the

in the Sumerong river valley area in the eastern sector last month. "This area has always been in Chinese territory," he not only well known internationally but also located on the Chinese side of the line of actual control," a foreign ministry spokesman said.

Sri Lanka to reframe proposal

THE SRI LANKA government agreed to reformulate some of the proposals with regard to the vexed issue of land settlement following talks between a Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) delegation and the Lands Minister G. M. Dissanayake. TULF secretary-general A. Amirthalingam, said they discussed with Dissanayake the provisions contained in annexure "C" of the government proposals on land

settlement for resolving the ethnic problem.

No bomb in Pakistan, says US

THE US insists Pakistan should not have the bomb. Notwithstanding Soviet allegations to the contrary, despite recent American newspaper reports, and despite the refusal of US administration spokesmen to comment on a US newspaper report that stated CIA sources had claimed that Pakistan is very close to possessing a bomb, if it does not have one already. The officials refused to comment on a section of the same report saying Pakistan had enriched uranium at its Kahuta plant in excess of the 5 per cent ceiling, set in 1984 by President Ronald Reagan as a condition for continuing the \$3.2 billion aid package.

Sir Keir's premiership will be remembered for the rapidity with which it turned backbenchers into a coalition of the unwilling. — *The Guardian*

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



Private players are making their presence felt in health and education. What are the implications?

Remember who real stakeholders are



SHAILAJA CHANDRA

PRIVATE EQUITY in health and education is to be welcomed. Several lakh crores are being invested by foreign and Indian PEs, especially into hospitals, diagnostics and home healthcare services, and to a comparatively lesser degree, into education. Groups such as Apollo, Fortis, Max, Manipal and Narayana account for less than 5 per cent of India's total private-hospital beds. Care continues to be delivered by smaller, fragmented facilities. But the infusion of equity into corporate hospitals marks two things: India has the capacity to provide quality care in health, and the country has a huge market, both Indian and international, which will assure wholesome returns.

For over three decades, policy has encouraged private investment in hospitals and allied sectors. Public hospitals have not been able to meet rising demand. India needs thousands of additional hospital beds, diagnostic facilities, specialised medical services, rehabilitation centres, home-care services and medical colleges. Without such private investment, India will struggle to meet the healthcare needs of an ageing population. The issue is not whether private investment is good or bad, but whether India has built institutions that allow investors to earn legitimate returns without leaving patients capable of the pursuit of profit. Private equity funds carry a fiduciary duty to deliver attractive returns to their investors within a defined investment horizon. PEs have no mandate to protect patients. Their focus is almost exclusively on financial performance. Hospital boards typically track EBITDA, margins, occupancy, average revenue per occupied bed, return on capital and growth. This is neither improper nor unusual: Capital seeks returns, and boards must show financial progress while ensuring compliance with SEBI's listing obligations and the Companies Act.

However, the government has the responsibility to ensure that returns are achieved not merely through cost-cutting or expansion, but through efficiency and quality. Unlike other industries such as banking, telecom, electricity, and civil aviation, healthcare has no independent regulator with statutory powers, appellate processes, reporting obligations, penalties, or mechanisms for public accountability. Private equity's demand for high returns can push hospitals to raise charges for common procedures, use aggressive billing practices or restrict access through selective insurance arrangements. Transparency on both costs and outcomes is therefore essential.



DEEP PAL AND SUKANYA THAPLIYAL

RECENTLY, E-RICKSHAWS in Delhi suddenly began stalling in the middle of the road. It turned out that one could use certain Chinese apps to disable their batteries by exploiting their Battery Management Systems (BMS). The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) swiftly had Google and Apple remove the errant apps. The apps were diagnostic tools for technicians to remotely monitor battery health, diagnose faults, and perform maintenance. Certain BMS units accepted Bluetooth credentials with weak or default credentials, allowing unauthorised users to access critical functions. The issue is not where the software originated, but that batteries are now software-defined, connected systems. Vulnerabilities can disrupt operations or disable critical equipment. This is a significant problem: Such systems support power grids, telecom tower systems, warehouses, ports, industrial automation, and defence platforms.

This only requires hospitals to disclose the relevant information on a public portal.

Because healthcare cannot be judged by consumers at the point of purchase, patients cannot assess the necessity or quality of treatment in advance. They remain unaware of which institutions have lower infection rates, better surgical outcomes, fewer readmissions within 30 days, offer shorter waiting times, or show higher patient satisfaction. Hospitals often resist the idea of such transparency, arguing that they already operate under checks such as NABH and JCI accreditation. While these are valuable, they are voluntary. They have no authority to mandate disclosure of standardised data on quality and outcomes.

Hospitals also point to the multitude of laws they already comply with — the Clinical Establishments Act, the National Medical Commission's directives, the Drugs & Cosmetics Act, the Pollution Control Acts, and a host of labour, labour, and environmental regulations. They lament the fragmentation of oversight, but fragmentation is precisely the problem. None of these statutes mandates that hospitals provide patient-centric data in a transparent, comparable format.

Other countries, too, allow private equity investment in the hospital sector, but they regulate outcomes. England's Care Quality Commission inspects both National Health Service hospitals and private hospitals. Its reports are public. In the US, hospital-level information is published on mortality after common conditions and procedures, readmission rates, hospital-acquired infections, complications, patient experience scores and emergency department waiting times. This allows patients to compare hospitals.

Investors know that every year their hospitals' performance will be compared with others. Once hospitals know that their mortality, infection rates, readmissions, patient complaints and average charges for common procedures will be publicly compared, market discipline begins to work. PEs know all this, but why should they raise it? They will follow it through their boards once it becomes a statutory requirement. The education sector is more fragmented. Private equity has entered through privately-run universities, K-12 chains, coaching businesses, and ed-tech platforms. The risks include M&A-led expansion, premium schools for affluent families, steep fee increases, coaching that crowds out education, and standardised teaching that discourages questioning. When universities treat students mainly as customers, intellectual development suffers.

The challenge before the government is not to discourage investment but to ensure that patients and students remain at the centre of the health and education systems. Institutions already collect outcome data. Government now needs the resolve to direct that it be made public.

The writer is a former health secretary and former chief secretary of Delhi

More education entrepreneurs needed



MANISH SABHARWAL

INDIA HASN'T created mass prosperity although its magnificent creation of mass democracy because of an uneasy relationship with entrepreneurship in general. But this relationship is particularly emotional in the private provision of public goods like education and healthcare, where idealism picks solutions that are moral, simple, obvious, and wrong. Our default position in education should be idealism without illusions for five reasons: Supply, biodiversity, meritocracy, excellence, and honesty.

Supply: Princeton Professor Avinash Dixit's suggestion that life is second-best at best implies a pragmatic acceptance that the most expensive school is no school. Ideological debates over school ownership (private or public), domicile (domestic or foreign), funding (loans, savings, or private equity), and structure (firm, company, or trust) are redundant because India will never have enough good schools. But the only way to discover good schools — those that reconcile the conflicting objectives of cost, quality, and quantity — is massively increasing supply and competition. Only half of our kids are left in government schools; if anything constitutes the infrastructure of opportunity and should be free in a country, it is K-12 education. Yet, the private sector now teaches 120+ million students. Millions of India's poor parents pay something to avoid something free.

Biodiversity: Goodhart's Law holds that when a metric becomes a goal, it ceases to be useful. The state's failure to fix government schools stems from confusing school buildings with building schools. This obsession with hardware over software, like performance management, organisational culture, and governance, fails to deal with coaching factories, soft skill acquisition, multilingual instruction, exam leaks, nursery-school interviews, entrance exams that eliminate rather than select, seat shortages, uneven teaching quality, and unemployability.

Cracking this complexity requires inspiration from Hayek's discovery principle: Unlike infrastructure, educational quality cannot be mandated; it must be discovered through competition, experimentation, and replication. Entrepreneurs making many independent and diverse tries with differing goals, strategies, and resources will not solve our education problems but will surely catalyse the innovation that could.

Meritocracy: India's education regulations prescribe land size, building norms, and legal structures. These make setting up a school or university capital-

intensive, given rising building costs and mispriced land so early in our development (a new Bengaluru or Mumbai school with a reasonable commute will pay more per acre for land than in Chicago). It's unsurprising that most schools are not started by principals, teachers, or education technocrats because regulations are hostile to transparently raising equity capital from financial investors.

This creates an adverse selection among education entrepreneurs — most are politicians or land sharks — because success requires upfront capital and lifelong regulatory skills. First-generation entrepreneurs need financial investors; given my policeman father's frugal savings, I couldn't have become an entrepreneur straight after college without venture capital.

Excellence: AI is bringing weaker students to the median while making strong students stronger. The second is accelerating: the power law of 80 per cent of results coming from 20 per cent of the people in technology, innovation, research, and science is shifting to 90/10. Countries that aspire to lead the world will need to complement mass education programmes (that count students) with gifted-student programmes (that weigh them). These programmes are considerably harder and more expensive and often fail in the public sector given the scrutiny of taxpayer funding for uncertain returns and small enrolment. Elite programmes are a better fit for private institutions with risk appetite, diverse objectives, and longer horizons.

Honesty: My unscientific survey suggests that 75 per cent of capacity in K-12, engineering, business, and undergraduate education over the last three decades is legally, but not spiritually, non-profit. This massive mislabelling of organisations confuses parents, confounds regulators, and denies the Indian state legitimate tax surplus. The lack of trust around price vs cost also motivates ineffective price controls: private schools need to cover their costs and invest 20 different fee categories. A dishonest legal structure discourages financial investors who bring superior governance, technology, and management, higher accountability for labour and local safety compliance, and reduced education inflation by funding technocrats.

Educator John Gardner challenged policymakers and entrepreneurs to design education systems that are equal and excellent. The difficulty of this trade-off is dismissed as a lack of idealism by thinkers who don't do a lack of pragmatism by doers who don't think. Historian Thucydides warned us that any army with a big gap between its thinkers and doers will have its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards. The same doer-thinker disease that hurts Indian education has a simple medicine: Idealism without illusions.

The writer is co-founder of Teamlease Services and co-author of *Made in India*

Dear PM, a thousand days of Gaza, many questions for India



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

NOW AND then, we face moments that pose questions whose answers lie beyond notions of nations and borders. Such moments compel us to confront our moral imagination and the choices we make when confronted by unbearable human suffering. Mr Prime Minister, such a moment confronts us now.

A thousand days have passed since the beginning of the tragedy on October 7, 2023. Since then, Gaza has witnessed unprecedented devastation. I have written to you on several other occasions, but this time, I request you to read this letter not as a note from a parliamentarian, but as a message from a fellow Indian who, like you and millions of our compatriots, has inherited a civilisation that has long believed that moral courage is the highest expression of political leadership. This is a moment when the consequences of the Indian state's stance echo far beyond the calculations of diplomacy or the compulsions of statecraft. Experts have discussed military operations, diplomatic negotiations, strategic victories and geopolitical realignments, but I am convinced that future generations will look back at this period as something far more unsettling — as the moment when humanity itself was placed on trial, and much of the world struggled to answer whether its commitment to justice was truly universal or merely selective.

Independent India's greatest strength has been its moral vocabulary. Do we need to remind ourselves that it was Mahatma Gandhi who transformed the language of politics by insisting that the means were inseparable from the ends? This stance was not merely a strategy to achieve India's freedom. Through this insistence, Bapu enabled India to possess and offer to the world a philosophy for humanity. When Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and international solidarity, he was building on this legacy. He consistently positioned India as a conscience-keeper among nations, capable of speaking uncomfortable truths and defending human dignity with our fear. I realised that when Rabindranath Tagore said, "where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high", he may have been describing not only a moral state that every democracy must strive to preserve internally, but also an ethical condition it should push other nations to accept.

The first casualty of every war has always been truth, but what the world has witnessed over these thousand days shows something even more disturbing. We have witnessed how the powerful calibrate truth according to their strategic convenience and ideological preference. Compassion, which ought to arise spontaneously upon witnessing the suffering of innocent civilians, now appears burdened with political qualifications. Is the value of a child's life determined by nationality, geography or the calculations of power? Surely, these are not the civilisational values that India has

aspired to represent.

For decades, the international community painstakingly built a language around human rights, believing that universal principles on dignity would transcend race, religion, nationality and military power. Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian nation, however, compels us to ask whether these ideals remain genuinely universal or whether they have gradually become privileges extended or held back as per the geopolitical interests of powerful states.

Our Constitution has taught generations of Indians that liberty, equality, and dignity are not rewards bestowed selectively, but guarantees flowing from the equal worth of every human being. International law, too, draws legitimacy not from the force of armies but from the consistency of its moral application. No institution can establish its credibility by censoring the powerless. Impartiality alone gives justice its enduring legitimacy.

Bapu reminded us that a seemingly neutral stance in the presence of sustained injustice can mean acquiescence, and eventually complicity, towards such acts. My concerns about what the Indian government has chosen not to do are also because the government's acquiescence has made many Indians weary because their repeated exhortations have had no impact. I cannot stress enough that when remembrance is selective, it stops being a moral lesson and becomes a political tool. If one atrocity deserves eternal remembrance while another is couched with qualifiers, the former is just a partisan story that has forfeited its credibility.

My letter is not an argument against any nation, any people or any faith. I do, however, wish to make an impassioned appeal against the normalisation of collective punishment. My letter is an appeal against the dangerous illusion which holds that overwhelming military superiority can be a substitute for moral legitimacy. It is an appeal against the dangerous loss of the powerful who claim they are "establishing peace" while continuing to inflict prolonged humiliation on an entire people.

Mr Prime Minister, the future of humanity will not be determined by technological innovation, military capability or economic might. It will ultimately depend on the moral capacity of societies to preserve the ability to be disturbed by another human being's suffering, regardless of nationality or geography. Governments will change, and new international alliances will evolve. But no generation has ever been able to evade the judgment of history.

When future generations ask where India stood during one of the defining moral crises of our age, I am sure they will judge the moral turpidity of our times very severely. Have we been able to ensure that our universities, our media, our intellectuals, and our public institutions remained guardians of independent moral judgment or were they reduced to echoes of political convenience? Above all, Mr Prime Minister, we will be judged on whether India dared to push the world to recognise its reflection when it looked into the mirror of its own conscience during these thousand days. With regards,

The writer is Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Engage with Wangchuk

THIS IS a cry of rage at the government's unresponsiveness to its citizens' demands. Government must talk to Sonam, that's its duty, IE, July 16. The peaceful protest at Jantar Mantar, seeking justice in the case of the NEET paper leak and the subsequent student suicides, has been going on for almost a month. It is disheartening to see a government elected by citizens, and entrusted with representing their concerns, become completely indifferent. The presence of Sonam Wangchuk lends legitimacy and gravity to the movement, but we must collectively demand a better education system and a more accountable government.

Anangsha Raiguru, Jorhat

SONAM WANGCHUK's hunger strike is a stark reminder that the government struggles to engage with anyone who disagrees with it. Government must talk to Sonam, that's its duty, IE, July 16. Be it farmers, citizenship law protesters, or now an education reformer demanding accountability, its instinct to silence

rather than dialogue reflects a discomfort with dialogue that is not transactional. Wangchuk's demand resonates with millions of young Indians who have lost faith in a broken system. While the government may dismiss his methods as theatrical, his cause is genuine and his dedication undeniable.

Babru Krishna, Bengaluru

Ocean health

THE SCOTTISH Association for Marine Science completing 175 years of ocean research is a useful occasion to reflect on how little in situ attention India gives to its own marine ecosystems. The sea has a seat at the table, IE, July 16. India needs dedicated, long-term oceanographic institutions with stable funding rather than short-term project grants that make sustained data collection difficult. Government should also be brought into research planning, since fishing communities often possess generational knowledge about changing sea conditions.

Prakash Paramasivam, Neelambar

The cybersecurity lesson in e-rickshaws

nerabilities can disrupt operations or disable critical equipment. This is a significant problem: Such systems support power grids, telecom tower systems, warehouses, ports, industrial automation, and defence platforms. India has robust institutions for cybersecurity guidance, including the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) and the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) for critical infrastructure. However, a coherent strategy for connected battery systems is missing. CERT-In has expanded its focus to guidance on secure software development, coordinated vulnerability disclosure, Software Bills of Materials (SBOMs), and security requirements for original equipment manufacturers against AI-assisted vulnerabilities. But the guidelines are not binding and offer limited guidance on cybersecurity requirements for connected battery products. The NCIIPC protects sectors such as power, transport and telecommunications.

Grid-scale Battery Energy Storage Systems may fall within their remit when deployed as part of designated critical infrastructure. However, connected battery systems in EVs, commercial storage deployments and consumer BMS remain outside its jurisdiction.

Sectoral regulators such as the Central Electricity Authority have sought to address battery risks through fragmented lenses, focussing on organisational cybersecurity or functional safety. The Department of Telecommunications and MeitY have introduced security assurance mechanisms for connected devices. But these mandatory regimes do not specify Bluetooth-enabled BMS and the apps used to manage them. Modern battery systems comprise hardware and software sourced from around the world. Consequently, the security of the battery depends on the integrity of its digital supply chain as much as its physical one.

Global regulations reflect the focus on evaluating digital supply chains. The Secure

Software Development Framework and SBOM initiatives in the US, or the Cyber Resilience Act and the Digital Battery Passport in the EU, audit software provenance, firmware integrity, vulnerability management and lifecycle traceability.

India can draw on these principles: CERT-In guidance on secure software development, Software and Hardware Bills of Materials, vulnerability disclosure, and cybersecurity audits can be incorporated into battery standards. These will allow a battery assembled in India to incorporate imported BMS, firmware, or software update infrastructure developed abroad. Imported hardware can be allowed after rigorous testing and verification of secure software development practices. These will ultimately move the conversation from the origin of technology to its demonstrable trustworthiness.

The writers are policy professionals at Klean Advisory Group

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

DONATION CONTROVERSY

Vaishno Devi 'silver' row: How the shrine stores, guards offerings

Arun Sharma
Jammu, July 16

A COURT in Jammu is hearing a plea claiming possible adulteration and misappropriation of silver worth around Rs 550 crore donated by devotees at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine. The controversy arose from reports that only around 5-6% of the approximately 20 tonnes of the shrine's accumulated silver offerings was found to be actual silver. The complainant sought an investigation into whether devotees had been sold fake silver articles, or whether genuine silver offerings had been diluted and pilfered after their receipt.

What is offered at the shrine?

Each year, nearly one crore pilgrims visit the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine in the Trikuta hills in Jammu division. They commonly donate cash, and gold and silver items. In earlier years, the gold items donated at the shrine each month would weigh a total of ₹2-2.5 kg. But as prices increased over the years, donations of the yellow metal dipped to around a kilo each month.

Meanwhile, offerings of "silver" are at nearly 100 kg each month. This silver is in the form of "chhatars" (umbrellas or parasols), coins or ornaments. These donated chhatars, coins and ornaments have now reportedly been found to contain a very low proportion of the metal. Shrine officials say they have found no purity issues with the gold items donated at the shrine. They say these gold offerings are found to contain 70-75% of pure gold on testing. But these officials also believe that this purity may also decline in the future owing to the increasing prices of the yellow metal and the circulation of 16 gram (gm), 14 gm and even one gm gold jewellery in the market.

PURITY DEBATE

Shrine Board officials say the low percentage of silver does not necessarily imply wrongdoing as the items may not have been of the highest purity in the first place.

But others claim that pilgrims would not deliberately donate 'fake' silver items to their deity.

processing to a government mint outside Jammu and Kashmir. When the melted material was tested to check its purity, it was reportedly found to contain only 5-6% of silver. The rest was cadmium, iron and cheap materials. Cadmium is a cheap, toxic metal that resembles silver.

The question that arises here is this: Were the offerings made by the devotees made of adulterated silver in the first place, or whether any adulteration took place after the donations were made.

How are these offerings tracked at the shrine?

Pilgrims place gold, silver and cash in donation boxes within the shrine complex. These boxes are double locked, kept under 24x7 CCTV surveillance and guarded by CRPF personnel and the guards from the shrine board.

When these boxes get filled, an officer of the rank of Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) and a shrine board official open them and count the cash. The gold and silver items are weighed separately and then sealed in packets for safe custody in a strongroom. The entire exercise is carried out under CCTV surveillance. The strongroom, too, is guarded round the clock by CRPF personnel. After five-six months, when an ample quantity of these gold and silver items get accumulated, they are brought down to Katra town, sometimes via helicopter, under the watchful eyes of CRPF personnel, shrine board officials and the SDM. The seals on the packets are checked and weighed again before keeping them in another strongroom at the shrine board office, again guarded by personnel from a Central Armed Police Force.

What happens to the melted material?

After deriving gold and silver in their pure form from it, the shrine board gets coins manufactured from the government mint itself with photographs of Mata Vaishno Devi inscribed on them. These coins are later sold by the shrine board to pilgrims with a guaranteed purity of 99.9%.

THE ODYSSEY RELEASES TODAY

Nolan's vision and India's screens

Only 41 theatres across the world can project *The Odyssey* in its native 15/70mm format. India doesn't have one



ARAV SHAH

THE RELEASE of *The Odyssey* today marks a landmark technical achievement in cinema — it is the first full length feature film shot entirely on an IMAX camera. Christopher Nolan has advocated that his films be watched on an IMAX screen that projects the analog 15 perforation/70mm film reel developed from the original colour negative (OCN).

While IMAX cameras capture better image resolution and details than others, they are both expensive and inconvenient to regularly handle due to their size and deafening internal motors. To bypass this, Nolan and the IMAX team created a new camera titled the 'Keighley Camera'. This camera is housed inside a novel carbon-fibre casing termed 'The Blimp', reducing the sound of the motors by 30-50%.

India, however, will only screen digital versions of the film.

First, the basics

The 15 perforation/70mm film reel refers to the physical reel where the strip's width is 70mm with 15 perforations or sprocket holes punched alongside its edge. These holes advance the film frames during projection. This technique yields an image resolution equivalent to 18K and a towering 143:1 aspect ratio.

This aspect ratio is the proportion between the width and height of the displayed image. A 143:1 aspect ratio essentially means that the projected film appears taller with a square finish as opposed to the standard rectangular images in most films. This set-up results in each frame of the movie being roughly 10 times larger than a standard 35mm film frame.

Post-production

The Odyssey's OCN was spliced together manually. In a conversation with *The Indian Express*, Andrew Oran, Senior Vice President at FotoKem Labs (dubbed 'Oppenheimer's' prints; only lab that can do features of this length for 15p/70mm) said: "It is true that the film was spliced together by hand, but that all 70mm/15perf. prints were made from the original cut negative." Once the film is captured on celluloid, the post-production process is what sets apart the analog print of *The Odyssey* from other versions. The process largely followed these steps:

- Once the raw film leaves the movie sets, it reaches the lab where it goes through a processor — running through developer and fixer baths — before hitting the drying rack.
- By the end of production, these rolls are digitised and scenes requiring VFX edits sent to the appropriate workshop. After the limited digital edits, these parts of the film are printed back onto the 15 perf./70mm film.

- Then, the negatives are physically cut and glued together by the post-production lab — in this case, FotoKem in Burbank, California.

- The OCN then undergoes a photo-chemical colour correction process.

- The photonegative is run through a contact printer that projects light through the OCN onto blank positive film stock to create the final print. These release prints are then dried after a final chemical bath.

Massive image, massive reels

The labour-intensive process involved



Christopher Nolan shoots 'The Odyssey' on an IMAX camera.

Not all IMAX screens are built the same

The theatre near you may advertise an IMAX screen, but there are multiple variants. The first two, the highest-grade offerings, are not available in India.

IMAX 15/70 MM: Christopher Nolan's recommendation. It reproduces the true analog version of the film. The physical film runs horizontally through a projector. The maximum aspect ratio is 143:1 — which provides the biggest image possible. The resolution is between 12K-18K.

IMAX GT (Grand Theatre) Dual Laser: The only digital IMAX format capable of achieving a 143:1 aspect ratio. It uses two in-synch 4K laser projectors. The resolution is 4K (4096x2160 pixels).

What's an IMAX camera?

- A special movie camera that records much larger and more detailed images than a regular camera.

- Nolan shot the entirety of 'The Odyssey' on the novel Keighley camera — named after two top IMAX executives

in preparing the film ensures that the visual data remains purely analog from the lens to the projector.

"The most intensive period of the post-production process for FotoKem was when we were creating the master printing negatives in all three film formats — 70mm/15 perf., 70mm/5 perf. and 35mm — all at the same time," Oran said. This maintains a theoretical resolution equivalent to 18K — up to three times the fidelity of the best digital cinema cameras available today. This enhanced resolution and aspect ratio delivers a final print weighing approximately 240 kilograms (530-600lbs), requiring a specialised 68-inch transport trailer just to hold the reel.

Our (FotoKem) role in relation to the 70mm/15 perf. release on the IMAX was to provide prints of each of the film's 54 reels to IMAX, who QC-screened and assembled the prints for shipping," Oran said. The official theatrical run-time of 2 hours and 52 minutes comprises more than 17 kilometres of celluloid for a single 15/70mm print.

Differing from standard 35mm film, the 15/70mm film runs horizontally (instead of vertically) through a cinema projector, pulling 15 perforations per frame.

Today, there are only 41 theatres across the globe equipped to project *The Odyssey* in its native 15/70mm format. India doesn't have any such commercial theatre.

What India gets to see

The Indian IMAX landscape is currently populated by three tiers of digital projection: dual 2K Xenon systems, single-lens 4K Commercial Laser (CoLa) and the 4KXT Laser.

Both IMAX CoLa and XT systems are restricted by their architecture and digital systems to a maximum aspect ratio of 1.90:1. The CoLa projector is utilised for medium-to-large auditoriums and is typically paired with IMAX's 12-channel audio system. The IMAX XT system is a newer

and cost-effective solution deployed in retrofitted multiplex screens (typically under 50 feet wide).

When *The Odyssey* — shot to fill a towering 143:1 canvas — is projected onto India's 1.90:1 CoLa or XT screens, the image is expanded horizontally to fit the screen width, but the top and bottom of the frame are permanently truncated.

This does provide an advantage — Indian exhibitors do not receive a 300-kg metal trailer containing sensitive film inside; they receive an encrypted, digital hard-drive (known as a key delivery mechanism) that greatly democratises the distribution of the film.

That one screen in Ahmedabad

Imagine a fully operational, meticulously maintained 15-perforation 70mm IMAX projector and a colossal 143:1 screen (measuring 97 feet by 67 feet) — the likes of which Nolan himself might enjoy watching his creation on.

Located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat Science City (GSC) boasts of exactly such a screen. But GSC, a government-owned venue, has a strictly educational mandate, aimed at fostering a scientific temperament for students and visitors.

Demand and permission issues aside, there are other barriers prohibiting *The Odyssey* from being screened here.

First, the equipment and film prints imported by GSC are likely to benefit from specific customs duty exemptions reserved for educational material. Screening a for-profit feature could violate these import tariffs and breach the institution's charter of focussing on science and education.

Second, the mechanical layout for projection is strictly tailored for short-form content, lasting around 40-50 minutes. Such features require considerably smaller film platters. *The Odyssey*'s 172-minute runtime means that the GSC's platter ecosystem is not engineered to support its weight or spatial demands.

Before watching *The Odyssey*, a primer on the epic

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN's adaptation of *The Odyssey* arrives in cinemas today, introducing one of the oldest surviving and foundational works of Western literature to a new generation of viewers.

Despite its enduring influence, many readers and filmmakers know *The Odyssey* more by reputation than by its story. Written nearly 3,000 years ago, it is a story of homecoming after war, set in a world populated by gods, monsters and mortals. Its themes, characters and adventures have influenced storytelling ever since.

What is *The Odyssey*?

The Odyssey is one of two epic poems traditionally attributed to the Greek poet Homer, and generally dated to the eighth century BCE. The other is *The Iliad*. Today, "epic" is often used to describe something monumental. In literature, however, an epic is a long narrative poem that typically deals with extraordinary figures, heroic deeds and the intervention of gods or other supernatural forces.

The Odyssey's central figure is Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, renowned for his intelligence. The poem follows his long journey home after the war.

Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* have sparked debate about their authorship, triggering what is known as the Homeric Question. Scholars continue to debate whether Homer was a historical individual, a name attached to an oral poetic tradition, or some combination of both.

What's the setting? Odysseus' voyage takes him across an imagined Mediterranean where real places coexist with mythical landscapes. While Troy and Ithaca correspond to real locations in Turkey and Greece, other places belong to legend or remain the subject of debate.

The poem famously opens in *medias res* (in the middle of things), with Odysseus at the start of the Trojan War at the start of Odysseus' journey home but in the middle of his journey. The hero is stranded on the island of Calypso, a goddess-nymph who wishes to make him her husband for all eternity. Back in Ithaca, his wife, Penelope, is staying off

Odysseus' voyage who have taken over the king's palace. Penelope is not merely a passive figure waiting for her husband to return. Her endurance, intelligence and ability to navigate the pressures of the suitors make her one of the poem's central characters.

How does the film differ from the poem? While *The Iliad* recounts the Trojan War, the poem follows Odysseus' decade-long journey home after the war has ended. It is often cited as one of literature's earliest and most influential "hero's journeys". The film, meanwhile, reportedly begins with the episode of the Trojan Horse, in which Odysseus devises the ruse that leads to Trojans dragging a giant wooden horse into their city.

AP reports that the film also includes elements from related stories such as Virgil's poem *The Aeneid* and the play *Agamemnon*, a Greek tragedy by Aeschylus. The film appears to draw on the wider Trojan tradition, rather than being a page-for-page adaptation.

What's the poem's relevance? Classical scholar Emily Wilson, in her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey*, says the poem is the story of a man who is "not" the man, but one of many men — albeit a man of extraordinary cognitive, psychological and military power. She notes that, contrary to the reader's expectations, *The Odyssey* recounts "the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home... For this hero, mere survival is the most amazing feat of all."

SPORT

Argentina's Falklands banner: Political gestures at World Cups and FIFA's rules

Shuvaditya Bose
New Delhi, July 16

WHILE CELEBRATING their 2-1 triumph over England in the semi-final of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Argentina's Lautaro Martinez and Giovanni Lo Celso held aloft a banner that read: 'Las Malvinas son Argentinas.' It translates to: 'The Falkland Islands (Malvinas) are Argentine.' Argentina fans had been banned from carrying Falklands flags into the World Cup semi-final. But its appearance has sparked controversy.

Why is the banner controversial?

The answer lies almost two centuries in the past. The Falkland Islands, or Las Malvinas, as they are known in Argentina, have remained at the centre of a sovereignty dispute between Argentina and the UK since Britain asserted control over the islands in 1833. Argentina argues that it inherited the sovereignty of these islands from Spain upon gaining independence in 1816, and therefore regards Britain's occu-

pation as illegal. In 1982, the two countries fought a 74-day war that resulted in 649 Argentine casualties and 255 British deaths. Officially, Britain continues to administer the islands, with the majority of the residents voting to remain a British overseas territory during a referendum in 2013. But Argentina still considers the British protectorate essential to its national identity.

What are the rules on such gestures?

FIFA's regulations state that any political banner or flags with political messages are strictly prohibited before, after and during a match in the immediate vicinity of the stadium. International Football Association Board (IFAB) regulations also prohibit players from using sporting equipment with political messaging.

FIFA's code of conduct also says fans cannot "curse or chant in a political, offensive and/or discriminatory manner". The world body is currently reviewing the on-field gesture in Atlanta under its rules prohibiting political messaging.



Argentina's Giovanni Lo Celso holds a banner saying 'The Falklands are Argentine'. AP

What have Argentina fans said or done at the World Cup on the dispute?

At the 2026 World Cup, Argentina's unofficial anthem has been 'Muchachos':

En Argentina nací, (I was born in Argentina)
Tierra de Diego y Lionel, (Land of Diego and Lionel)

De los pibes de Malvinas, (Of the boys of the Malvinas)
Que jamás olvidaré (Whom I will never forget)

The last two lines are widely understood to be a tribute to the Argentine soldiers who died during the 1982 war. After the victory over England, the players also celebrated with the chant 'Por las Malvinas, por Diego y por el último de Leo' (For the Malvinas, for Diego, and for Leo's last one)

Have Argentina fans made references to the Falkland Islands earlier?

Something similar took place during Argentina's friendly match against Slovenia in 2014. On that occasion, the players stood behind a banner with the exact wording of the one held up on Wednesday. On that occasion, FIFA had imposed a non-sporting sanction on Argentina. The federation was asked to pay 30,000 Swiss francs.

Have players made political gestures at World Cups before?

Yes. At the 2018 World Cup, for instance, Switzerland's Xherdan Shaqiri and Granit Xhaka celebrated goals against Serbia by making the Albanian double-headed eagle gesture with their hands. Both players have ethnic Albanian roots linked to Kosovo, whose independence Serbia does not recognise. FIFA imposed a fine of 10,000 Swiss francs on both players.

During the 2022 World Cup, meanwhile, Serbia were fined 20,000 Swiss francs for a banner they had hoisted in their dressing room which showed Kosovo as a part of Serbia and read: "No surrender."

At the same World Cup, German players had covered their mouths with their hands ahead of a match, in a symbolic gesture to convey that FIFA were forcibly silencing players. The football body had warned teams against using OneLove armbands, celebrating gender inclusivity, with the tournament being held in Qatar, where same-sex relationship is criminalised.

FIFA did not sanction Germany for the protest.

'NO CENTRAL SUBSIDY FOR LAND ACQUISITION TO SET UP CHIP PLANTS, STATES EXPECTED TO TAKE LEAD'

Govt not keen to cover land, tech transfer costs in new chip scheme

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, July 16

UNDER THE next phase of India's ambitious Rs 1.27 lakh crore Semiconductor Mission, the Central government may not offer subsidies to companies arising out of technology transfer costs, with the prevailing thought being that calculating such expenses is complicated. The *Indian Express* has learnt.

The Centre may also no longer offer subsidies for land acquisition to set up chip manufacturing plants, as state governments are expected to take the lead on that, a senior government official said.

Under the first iteration of the scheme, there was a provision for the government to cover a portion of technology transfer costs that approved companies may incur, but a senior government official said that it has been removed under India Semiconductor Mission (ISM) 2.0. Even though the provision existed under ISM 1.0, such disbursements were not made, it is understood.

"The reason we have de-

cided to not offer subsidies on technology transfer costs is because when we were evaluating proposals under the first leg of the scheme, there was a realisation that such transfer costs are quite opaque. It is almost impossible to reliably calculate the exact amount, so we have made changes accordingly," the official said, requesting anonymity.

Technology transfers are an important element in companies setting up semiconductor manufacturing operations in India, because many participants may not have access to such technology in-house. For instance, Tata Electronics, which is setting up a chip fabrication plant in Gujarat, is getting the manufacturing technology from Taiwan's PSMC.

These reconsiderations also point to the broader theme of India's shifting priorities under its new chip incentive scheme. The new policy is expected to place greater reliance on subsidising chip design, and the broader ancillary industry.

"In terms of our priorities for the new scheme, first would be chip designing, then bringing the broader supply chain

TECH TRANSFER COSTS

TECH TRANSFERS are an important element in firms setting up semiconductor manufacturing operations in India, because many participants may not have access to such tech in-house

UNDER THE first iteration of the scheme, there was a provision for government to cover a portion of tech transfer costs that approved firms may incur

BUT A senior government official said the provision has been



removed under ISM 2.0. Even though it existed under ISM 1.0, such disbursements were not made

ecosystem to India, and then subsidising building of new chip manufacturing units," a second official said.

On Wednesday, the Union Cabinet approved ISM 2.0 with an outlay of Rs 1.27 lakh crore. Under the first scheme, India managed to attract 12 chip-making plants, including a fabrication facility being set up by the Tata Group.

The country's foray into semiconductor production and

packaging has been outlined as a strategic move by New Delhi to insert itself into the global chip supply chain and establish the sector to deepen domestic value addition in its electronics sector. Semiconductors—used to power devices from toasters to fighter jets—have become a critical resource amid heightened geopolitical tensions over the last few years.

By 2029, India expects to achieve the capability to design

and manufacture chips required for nearly 70-75% of domestic applications, and by 2035, the country aims to be among the top semiconductor nations globally.

Compared to the first iteration of the ISM, government incentives for semiconductor manufacturing plants have been slashed in ISM 2.0. For instance, the first scheme carried a uniform capex subsidy of 50% for fabs and assembly plants. However, under ISM 2.0, silicon fabs will receive a subsidy of 40%, and other fabs will get 35%. Similarly, the incentive for advanced packaging has been kept at 35%, and 25% for conventional packaging.

Under the new scheme, the government will offer grants and may also take equity in large companies and start-ups that design semiconductor chips, which rank higher on strategic and commercial parameters. The government's investment will depend on whether these companies are able to raise money from private equity investors.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

How a new subsidy plan hopes to build an Indian smartphone brand

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, July 16

India smartphone shipments market share



SOURCE: COUNTERPOINT RESEARCH

INDIA MAKES almost every smartphone sold in the country. But when it comes to the names on those phones, Indian companies are conspicuously absent. A new Rs 62,500 crore mobile phone manufacturing scheme, approved by the Union Cabinet Wednesday, hopes to change that.

Under the new scheme, a five-year follow-on to the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for smartphone assembly, which helped India successfully localise production, the government is focusing on local sourcing to boost domestic value addition, and on design and R&D by Indian brands, along with incentives linked to the export of smartphones. Union IT Minister Ashwini

Vaishnav said. For building Indian brands, an additional incentive at the rate of 3% on eligible sales will apply for design and R&D of the product under the scheme.

The push to build an Indian smartphone brand also signals that the government's ambition for the electronics sector is moving beyond simply attracting factories and boosting assembly. Having established India as a major manufacturing base, New Delhi now wants Indian companies to move deeper into the value chain—into product design, research and development, intellectual property, component ecosystems and brand ownership.

Though a long-term plan, what the government is essentially looking to subsidise help propel an Indian smartphone brand is the immediate cost disability it may have against well-established competitors, particularly from China.

"We expect that four or five Indian companies will be inter-

ested in building a mobile phone brand that can compete with others on quality and price. But, they may have a cost disability of 10-15% initially, so through the new scheme, the government is looking to bridge at least 5-6% of that," a senior government official said.

Why an Indian smartphone brand

The push to build an Indian smartphone brand is rooted in a larger gap in India's electronics story. The country has succeeded in attracting global companies to manufacture mobile phones at scale, but much of the value generated by the industry, from product design and intel-

lectual property to branding and technology, continues to be owned by companies headquartered elsewhere, where, though Indian companies like Tata Electronics and Dixon are establishing themselves in the contract manufacturing sector.

The government's new mobile phone manufacturing scheme hopes to explicitly address this gap by supporting Indian brands, with the stated objectives of achieving technological sovereignty, capturing a larger share of the economic value generated by the sector and creating Indian patents in design and research

and development. This is important because manufacturing alone does not necessarily translate into control over an industry. A phone assembled in India may still be designed elsewhere, use foreign-owned intellectual property and be sold under a foreign brand. The government now wants Indian companies to move up this value chain. The scheme, with its Rs 62,500 crore outlay over five years, is intended to deepen domestic value addition, strengthen supply chains and improve global competitiveness, while providing incentives on eligible mobile phones.

The policy also reflects the limits of the first phase of India's mobile manufacturing push. Production-linked incentives helped attract global manufacturers like Apple and expand India's capacity to make phones, with the country emerging as a major manufacturing and export base. But India has not produced a smartphone brand with comparable scale and global reach. The new scheme is an attempt to fill that gap, to ensure that the next phase of growth is not only about more phones being made in India, but also about Indian companies owning the design, technology and brand behind those phones.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Govt plans tighter fuel-economy norms, credit market from FY28

Sourav Anand
New Delhi, July 16

THE POWER ministry has proposed a tougher five-year fuel economy regime for passenger vehicles from April 1, 2027, tightening fleet-average consumption targets while allowing carmakers to use carbon-neutrality benefits, super credits and a compliance-credit mechanism to meet the new standards.

The draft Corporate Average Fuel Economy-III norms, circulated for stakeholder consultation, will cover M1-category passenger vehicles manufactured or imported for sale in India between 2027-28 and 2031-32. The existing CAPE-II norms are likely to expire on March 31, 2027.

Under the proposed framework, the fuel-consumption target will progressively decline from 3,996 litres per 100 km, equivalent to 94.76 gCO₂ per km, in 2027-28 to 3,327

litres per 100 km, or 78.90 gCO₂ per km, by 2031-32.

Compliance will be assessed across two blocks, comprising an initial three-year period followed by a second block of two years. The phased tightening is intended to provide automobile manufacturers a predictable regulatory path for developing and deploying more fuel-efficient models.

In a significant change, the ministry has proposed Carbon Neutrality Factors for ethanol, biofuel and compressed biogas for the first time. The mechanism will permit specified reductions in declared tailpipe carbon dioxide emissions based on a manufacturer's compliance is assessed.

At the current, ethanol-blending level, an 8% Carbon Neutrality Factor has been proposed. For compressed biogas and biofuel, the reduction will be linked to the prevailing actual

blending level.

Manufacturers will also be eligible to claim compliance benefits of up to 9 gCO₂ per km for approved fuel-saving technologies, with the benefit capped at 1 gCO₂ per km for each technology.

The draft provides super credits while calculating fleet-average fuel consumption for battery electric vehicles, range-extended electric vehicles, plug-in hybrids, strong hybrids and flex-fuel vehicles, giving manufacturers additional flexibility to expand cleaner vehicle portfolios. It also proposes a credit-and-debit system similar to the mechanism in the recently circulated draft amendment to the CAPE-II norms.

The proposed regime combines steadily tighter fuel-consumption targets with incentives for alternative fuels, electrified vehicles and fuel-saving technologies. FE

SPECIFIED NON-FINANCIAL ASSETS

RBI introduces SNFA category, bars banks from selling assets back to defaulters

George Mathew
Mumbai, July 16

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has introduced the concept of Specified Non-Financial Assets (SNFAs) in the event of loan defaults and mandated that disposal of such assets should primarily be through public auctions under SARFAESI Act principles and prohibited resale to the original borrower or related parties.

SNFAs refer primarily to immovable properties that banks acquire when borrowers fail to repay loans. Such assets typically include residential buildings, commercial properties, industrial land or other real estate accepted by banks in settlement of outstanding debt.

The RBI has issued the Third Amendment Directions, 2026 under its Commercial Banks—Resolution of Stressed Assets Directions, 2025. The new regulations establish a comprehensive framework for how banks should acquire, value, manage and dispose of non-financial assets obtained from defaulting borrowers.

According to the new directions, banks may acquire an SNFA only after a borrower's loan has been officially classified as a non-performing asset. The acquisition must involve either full or partial settlement of the bank's outstanding exposure. In cases where only part of the loan is settled through the transfer of property, the remaining debt



Specified non-financial assets are immovable properties that banks acquire when borrowers fail to repay loans. REUTERS

will continue to be treated under restructuring norms, ensuring that banks maintain appropriate provisioning and risk management standards.

The RBI has introduced strict valuation guidelines to prevent overvaluation. Every acquired property must be recorded at the lower of two values—the net book value of the extinguished loan or the distress sale value determined independently by at least two external valuers.

Banking experts believe this conservative valuation method will reduce the possibility of inflated asset values appearing on bank balance sheets while encouraging more realistic financial reporting. FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

UPI payments over Rs 2k to big merchants may see 0.5% MDR

New Delhi: The Centre may reintroduce a merchant discount rate (MDR) on UPI transactions of Rs 2,000 and above for large merchants to compensate banks and payment service providers for rising operational costs and technology investments, sources said.

The proposed MDR on UPI payments accepted by large merchants won't exceed 0.5% of the monetary value, a source said. However, merchants and businesses with an annual turnover of up to Rs 1.5 crore are likely to be exempt from the levy, irrespective of the transaction amount. A decision on the proposal is expected within a month, the sources added.

Larger merchants are better placed to absorb the MDR or pass on the cost to customers, whereas small businesses have limited ability to do so, the government reckons. FE

BRIEFLY

SBI Funds IPO attracts bids worth Rs 3.1 cr

Mumbai: The initial public offering (IPO) of SBI Funds Management Ltd witnessed overwhelming investor interest, closing with an overall subscription of 1.66 times on the final day of bidding and generating demand worth nearly Rs 2.97 lakh crore. The issue received bids for Rs 18.93 crore equity shares against the 12.45 crore shares on offer, according to cumulative subscription data available on the BSE and NSE. The IPO was priced in the band of Rs 545-574 per share. ENS

'Social protection' now covers 100 cr citizens

New Delhi: India's social protection coverage increased to over 100 crore citizens in 2026, up from 25 crore in 2015, according to Union Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh Mandaviya. The minister, in a post on social media platform X on Wednesday, highlighted the landmark validation of the country's social security landscape by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). "India breaches 1 billion mark in Social Protection Coverage!" Mandaviya wrote on X. PTI

Tech Mahindra Q1 net profit rises 28.4%

New Delhi: IT services company Tech Mahindra on Thursday posted a 28.4% year-on-year rise in its consolidated net profit for the June quarter at Rs 1,465 crore. The company's revenue from operations was up 17.7% at Rs 15,712 crore during the quarter just ended. Total headcount at 146,760 was 863 people lower quarter-on-quarter, while the IT attrition stood at 11.8% on an LTM (last twelve months) basis. In dollar terms, the Q1 FY27 revenue at \$1,660 million came in 2.2% higher sequentially. PTI

I-T Dept adds foreign income data to AIS

New Delhi: The Income Tax Department has started displaying information on foreign assets and income to the taxpayers on the income tax e-filing portal as per information received under the Automatic Exchange of Information (AEOI) framework. The tax department is currently displaying information for 2022, 2023, and 2024 in the Annual Information Statement of taxpayers. Information for 2025 will be visible in the AIS once it is received in September or October, sources said. FE

Avoid deploying Indian seafarers in Strait of Hormuz: DG Shipping

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, July 16

IN THE wake of escalating security concerns in the Gulf region, the Directorate General of Maritime Administration (DGMA), under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, has directed shipowners, ship managers and recruitment agencies to avoid deploying Indian seafarers on vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz until further orders.

The DGMA advisory, issued

on July 15, comes against the backdrop of a series of attacks on merchant ships and a worsening security environment in the Persian Gulf, raising fresh concerns over the safety of thousands of Indian seafarers employed on international cargo vessels.

The circular said the safety, security and welfare of Indian seafarers, along with the protection of Indian ships, remain central to the mandate of the maritime administration. It noted that recent attacks on merchant

vessels—including Mombasa B, Al Bahyah, GFS Galaxy, MT WEDYAN and AL REKAYAT—have significantly heightened the risks faced by commercial shipping operating in the conflict-affected region.

The advisory said incidents resulting in casualties among Indian seafarers, coupled with continuing attacks on merchant ships during the ongoing conflict, have made it necessary to adopt enhanced precautionary measures. FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

THE LEAK INCLUDES A 14.3 GB DATASET COMPRISING 18,997 FILES RELATED TO THE KUDANKULAM NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

Kudankulam files on dark web: Inside the alleged data leak

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, July 16

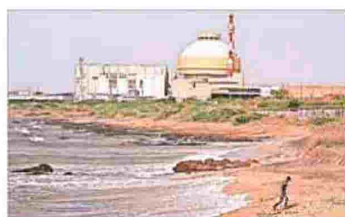
FOR MORE than a month, a large cache of files purportedly linked to the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant have been available on the dark web. The data, leaked by ransomware group World Leaks, is purportedly linked to Anil Ambani-led Reliance Group, whose subsidiary, Reliance Infrastructure Ltd, was awarded the Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) contract in 2018 for the plant's non-nuclear common service facilities, known as the Balance of Plant (BoP).

The leaked data, accessed by *The Indian Express*, includes a 14.3 GB dataset comprising 18,997 files related to

the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. These files are part of a much larger cache of 1.2 terabytes containing over 858,000 files purportedly linked to the Anil Ambani-led Reliance Group.

A search in the leaked dataset using the term "KKNPP"—an acronym for the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant—retrieves numerous internal documents, including inspection records, engineering design files for various plant facilities, minutes of meetings, and correspondence between Reliance Infrastructure and the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) on project execution and construction-related matters.

While *The Indian Express* could not independently verify the authenticity of these



The leaked dataset is largely related to Units 3 and 4 of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. REUTERS

documents, a spokesperson of Anil Ambani-led Reliance Group told this newspaper that there had been a "partial breach" of its data on a server hosted by third-party data

centre service provider Yotta, and the government had been informed about the incident.

In a statement to *Reuters*, Yotta also maintained that it had noted suspicious activity

on May 29 on a server it hosts that belongs to Reliance Infrastructure. It said the activity was immediately terminated and the suspected ransomware execution was prevented.

Following reports of data breach, state-owned NPCIL, the plant's operator, also clarified that the leaked information does not pertain to any nuclear safety or security systems and the compromised data relates only to the plant's conventional service facilities, for which Reliance Infrastructure Ltd was awarded a contract in 2018.

Located in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant consists of six units of Pressurised Water Reactors of VVER design, which were established in technical collaboration

with Russia.

The first two units (KKNPP Units-1 & 2) are already in operation, while Units 3 and 4 are still under construction and are due to be operational by 2027. The remaining two units are at different stages of progress.

The leaked dataset is largely related to Units 3 and 4 of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant and contains documents associated with the EPC contract executed by Reliance Infrastructure Ltd.

From tender documents and involves to engineering drawings and design files for various structures, the folders appear to be organised according to different aspects of the project.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

MARKETS



NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA. GOLD PER 10G. SILVER PER 1KG. CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF JULY 15, 2026

Ethanol, A Fuel, Not THE Fuel of Choice

Consumer choice + environmental outcome

India's ethanol programme is being presented as a runaway success. Gains are real: lower crude oil imports, foray savings, higher incomes for farmers and sugar mills, and an E20 blending target achieved ahead of schedule. As an energy security strategy, it has undeniable merit. But good policy becomes bad policy when success turns into dogma. Ethanol is no longer being promoted as one option in the decarbonisation toolkit, but as the solution. It isn't. Every litre of ethanol delivers less energy than petrol, meaning motorists travel fewer kilometres on a tank. Consumers are effectively being asked to pay the same—or more—for fuel that offers lower mileage. If that's the intended trade-off, it should be stated openly, not murmured behind blending mandates.

The bigger concern lies beyond the fuel pump. India's ethanol story has shifted from sugarcane to maize, with grain now driving production and reshaping agricultural markets. Land is moving away from pulses and oilseeds towards maize, while food, feed and fuel compete for the same crop. The result is mounting pressure on food prices, rising edible oil and pulse imports, greater stress on groundwater and ecosystems, and fresh distortions in cropping patterns.

Yes, India needs to clean up vehicular pollution and bump up energy security. But the goal should be cleaner mobility and diversification, not just higher ethanol consumption. That means allowing hybrids, EVs, cleaner ICE and sustainable biofuels to compete on environmental merit. Consumers shouldn't face a false choice: buy ethanol-laden fuel or pay more for the 'normal' stuff. Public policy must protect consumer choice and be driven by measurable environmental outcomes. Not by replacing one rigid dependence with another.

Time to Engage with Post-NATO 1.0 Europe

Europe has taken a concrete step to take charge of its defence. On Monday in Paris, a coalition of 10 countries announced their intention to coordinate efforts to produce anti-ballistic missile systems. The context is supporting and defending Ukraine against Russian attacks. But the announcement says much more. It signals loud and clear that Europe's serious about getting its act together. It's an important step toward gradually building broader European defence cooperation, after knowing the trials and tribulations of being near-completely dependent on the US.

Many European leaders, the French in particular, have been pushing the idea of a continent-wide defence cooperation. It is where Donald Trump's prevarication on Ukraine has ironically helped—not to mention, the US president's less subtle than his predecessors' demand that non-US Nato members step up their defence spending. Europe's quest for 'strategic autonomy' is not a repudiation of the 77-year-old post-WW2 pre-Cold War treaty—not yet, at any rate. It is 'Nato Plus One', creating options by putting the organisation on a firmer footing with future US administrations as well as diversifying Europe's defence partnerships.

Individual countries in the continent have already raised their defence spending. This coalition now hopes to consolidate Europe's fragmented defence industry. This structural pivot that can reshape Europe's macroeconomic policies, industrial base and geopolitical posture also provides an opportunity for India that it must pursue. India can certainly play a role in the development of this gestating military-industrial complex for mutual benefit. So far, New Delhi has been agile in its engagement, evident from defence co-development and co-production partnerships with several European countries. The anti-ballistic missile coalition is more than a group to produce interceptors to protect Ukraine from Russian attacks. It is the beginning of a readjustment of global order. India would do well to get on this revolving, evolving security carousel.

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India's GCCs create world-class research, but rarely own the IP that generates future wealth

Time to Score Own Goals



Chandrika Sovantkar

India's innovation problem does not end with how little its companies spend. It ends with how little its researchers create. Much of the current debate is whether India spends enough on research. An equally important question is whether research performed in India accumulates as an Indian asset.

Research is an activity IP is an asset. Countries compete not only in performing the first but also in owning the second. The country's largest research ecosystem offers an answer: GCCs, the units MNCs establish in India to carry out their research, engineering and operations, number 217, employ 2.36 mn professionals, and generate \$86.4 bn in revenue. The optimism rests on flows: captive exports of \$164 bn in FY26; industry projections of value addition rising from \$88 bn to \$190 bn by FY30.

Not one figure measures what accumulates, or to whom. Business services, with R&D the fastest-growing element, make up 28.4% of services exports, up from 19% in FY14. When research is an export line item, India is, by definition, selling the research. The buyer keeps what the research produces. The patent and product settle on the purchasing balance sheet, and the export receipt is the full and final discharge of India's claim.

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Consider the mechanics of a typical captive R&D centre. It bills its parent on a cost-plus basis agreed upon with tax authorities, typically in the mid-tens. The invoice records a service transaction, IP generated through that service is owned by the parent company which captures future commercial returns. Mercedes-Benz Research & Development India (MBRDI), with more than 8,500 engineers, is among the largest examples of the model. India's claim ends with the service invoice.

The settlement repeats at every level. The engineer's claim on the invention is discharged by salary and a one-time patent bonus, since royalties are rare and contracts exclude revenue-sharing on assigned patents. The Indian entity's claim is discharged by the cost-plus invoice. The country's claim is discharged by the export receipt. India's claim ends with the export receipt. India's claim ends with the export receipt.

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Sold, to that non-Indian entity there

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The distinction is not between exploitation and fairness. Every participant in the chain receives the consideration contracted for. The missing asset is not income but ownership, and future income accrues where the consumer economy grows around the salaries, and the growth is real. What it does not do is leave behind an asset that earns after the work stops.

Industry has begun conceding the point, talking of a 'reverse IP migration', a phrase that inverts its own meaning, since the invention migrates in while the title migrates out. Nasscom's GCC Council acknowledges that legal ownership typically rests with the parent, which retains oversight of design, and that core product definition remains guarded at HQs. Strategy can be redesigned by the next board. The cannot, which is the real challenge.

FY30 projections never ask whether South Korea converted through conglomerates that moved from assembly to ownership of design. Taiwan's factories moved from manufacturing capacity to ownership of process technology. China spent on its own account. India's precedent is its IT services industry, which converted hosted work into owned companies, but never into owned product.

A coupon can be re-secured by the payer. A principal, once built, stays with the builder. The capability centre stays. The patent migrates. The value compounds with the parent. The most difficult question is not how large India's GCC coupon becomes, but whether India ever comes to own the bond.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Soul Power

BRANHA KUMARI ASHA

Any action is possible when our soul and role work together. The soul is the master that does the role. We often forget this and focus only on the role we play. We need to focus on our inner being and experience its core qualities of innate peace, peace, love and positivity to infuse our worldly role with soul power. We need to strike a right balance between the two to increase the success rate of our worldly roles in personal and professional lives.

Your role could be of any type. Even a profession that you work on the office that is going to last a month is an example of a temporary role you have to play. There are many other roles like getting your child's homework done and preparing food for the family.

Any such role will consist of some or all these aspects—the physical body, various tasks, interaction with people or relationships, mediums such as information, technology and other objects, time, knowledge of everything connected with the role including the aspects that make up the role. All these aspects are physical in nature. The power that these aspects possess makes us call it a role power.

As soon as we step into our role each day, our aim is to be successful, but to achieve that, our entire focus falls on power of the role, neglecting soul power. We spend a lot of time and energy in streamlining all aspects of the role, not realising that our purpose could be easily achieved if our focus is not merely on role power but also on soul power that sustains and strengthens our role's success.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Late-Night Sports-Watching

Watching late-night sport alone feels illicit, yet wholesome. The world has gone to work in distant memory, and you sit in the glow of the television, a conspirator in a private drama. The match—whether the World Cup final in the US, or England India Test cricket at Lord's—is unfolds as if staged solely for you. The solitude sharpens the senses. Every pass, every shot, every replay acquires an intensity that daytime distractions dilute. You are free to mutter commentary or cheer without embarrassment, to groan without wit.

Silence of the house becomes the perfect stadium acoustics, amplifying the roar of distant cheering. The focus is high; your TV-screened earspools. You are also deliciously out of sync with the rest of the world. While others seemingly sleep, you are awake, living in a parallel timeline where goals are scored, backhand returns are swung. The clock ticks past midnight, but fatigue is banished by sheer adrenaline.

The ritual is both indulgent and ascetic: indulgent in its defiance of bedtime, ascetic in its solitary devotion. When the game is done, the world resumes its slumber, but you carry the afterglow of a contest witnessed 'in secret'.

Chat Room

I Can Talk Indlish, I Can Walk Indlish

Apropos the Edit, 'English, As In Indian As Languages Come' (Jal 16), English has become an integral part of our lives. The language has readily absorbed hundreds of Indian words, such as bungalow, jungle, pyjamas, guru, avatar, verandah, lodi, kharab, and many others demonstrating that Indian writing in English has carved a distinguished place on the world literary map. Interestingly, such as the BBC World Service and the British Council have played a pivotal role in popularising the language through broadcasting, education, literature and cultural exchange. English is now also an Indian language, shaped and enriched by our linguistic diversity, literary excellence and cultural traditions. Naveen Tharoor Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj



Who Needs Roads When There's Air?

One cannot but be in awe of Nitin Gadkari's borderline genius. Borderline, because he's got an off-the-charts idea without outlining any timeline or providing technical details. His latest pitch to unclog city traffic is not more asphalt but less of it: aerial pod-based transit, electric vertical take-off and landing contraptions—pushpak vimanas, no less. The man whose day job is to get potholes fixed proposes to simply soar them. All this reminds us of Elon Musk. Elon's 2013 white paper on 'Hyperloop Alpha' imagines capsules gliding at near-supersonic speeds through vacuum tubes, carrying both passengers and freight. It promises collision-free, weather-proof travel at 2x speed of planes. Sounds very Gadkarian, actually.

Both men, in their own way, are prophets of escape. Gadkari wants us to levitate above India's battered highways. Musk wants to burrow beneath California's clogged freeways. One is a minister of roads who dreams of flight. The other, a carmaker who dreams of tubes that don't necessarily need to be spaced. But the minister may have a better chance of making his seemingly fantastical plan a reality than his private sector American counterpart. One, we, as a society, are more attuned to plans, especially fantastical ones. Two, who doesn't want to believe a government man who promises a bypass above terrestrial chaos?



Anil Padmanabhan

Last week, India received rains it had been waiting for all of June, when the monsoon typically makes landfall. Large parts received intense downpours, more than halving the cumulative seasonal deficit that had climbed to a worrying 40%.

On the face of it, this was a welcome turn of events. The rains also addressed a deeper problem: they arrived all at once, instead of being staggered as is the norm. These periods of intense bursts of rainfall interspersed with prolonged dry spells are gradually becoming the new normal. So, the basic assumption about the progress of the monsoon, which accounts for over 80% of India's annual precipitation, appears to be broken.

Without predictability weather patterns are now a lottery. This means the assumed relationship between agriculture and industrial demand can't be taken for granted. As a result, a volatile climate and extreme weather make farming that much riskier, and managing industrial demand that much more unpredictable.

Consequently, watching the shrinking or widening cumulative rainfall deficit would be a case of missing the wood for the trees. Worse, the growing frequency of extreme weather events is testing the ability of urban

India and its new, big-ticket economic infrastructure to withstand such shocks.

According to an Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, study, there has been a staggering 3x rise in widespread extreme rain events over India during the 65 yrs leading up to 2015. Similarly, data compiled by Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters reveals that instances of extreme weather have gone up almost 5x—from 71 in the 1970s to 350 in the first decade of the 21st century.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this situation has only gotten worse. For example, in 2010, a cloudburst over Leh caused immense damage.

► 2013 Unprecedented, continuous rainfall and cloudbursts from June 15 to 17 in the higher reaches of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand caused Chopta Lake in Rudrapur nagar to overflow and inundate Kedarnath.

► 2014 Prolonged rainfall across

Kashmir Valley in early September caused Jhelum to overflow, all but drowning Srinagar.

► 2018 Kerala witnessed its worst floods in 100 yrs, displacing an estimated 1 mn people and causing unprecedented devastation. One trigger was excess rain—250% above normal.

Extreme rain events are not unique to India. Researchers estimate that global economic losses from floods exceeded \$30 bn a year in the past decade, with some of the largest losses linked to extreme rainfall events occurring in Asia.

Floods attributed to extreme rain events in India alone accounted for losses of about \$1 billion per year, which is 10% of global economic losses. In our study, we demonstrate that these floods are on the rise due to the occurrence of widespread extreme rains. We find a threefold increase in these widespread extreme events during 1950-2015, the IITM study noted.

Worryingly, the study reveals that average precipitation during the annual monsoon over India has been steadily decreasing since 1950, even while extreme rainfall events are increasing. Undoubtedly, this is a structural shift.

In other words, prolonged dry phases during the monsoon are interspersed with short spells of heavy downpours, causing large-scale damage.

Merely tracking the cumulative rainfall deficit number will miss the worrying pattern of rising extreme rainfall events and their attendant consequences. A UN disaster atlas confirms the conclusions of the IITM study that Asia seems to bear the brunt of extreme weather. It estimates that between 1970 and 2015, 454 disasters were recorded worldwide, with 9,75,622 lives lost and \$2 tn reported in economic damages. Asia accounts for nearly a third of climate- and water-related disasters globally, nearly 50% of all deaths, and 1/3rd of associated economic losses.

45% of these disasters were associated with floods, with 38% with storms. According to the IITM study, the consequences of extreme rainfall in India impact 50 mn people—a third of India's population and more than the entire population of the US. Geographically, the most impacted region is the central belt of India—Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand—alongside Assam, Meghalaya and parts of Western Ghats (Goa, North Karnataka and south Kerala).

Increasingly, the challenge is no longer only about managing and estimating rainfall but also about managing uncertainties, such as the increasing frequency of extreme rainfall. This is the moment for India to revisit accepted paradigms about the monsoon, just as it has done with accepted wisdom regarding its social policy.

The writer is an independent journalist

Let's relook at those paradigms, shall we?

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Delayed justice delivery mustn't hold India back

No, your honour, this is not something that can be dismissed lightly. The huge and growing backlog of cases that are pending before Indian courts must be addressed on a war footing

As the Supreme Court of India resumes its regular routine after an annual six-week summer recess that ended on Monday, this is a good moment to look at one of the biggest problems that has dogged the country's legal system: a huge and growing case backlog. According to the National Judicial Data Grid 2025, the number of pending cases across all three levels of the judiciary is over 56 million, a staggering figure, with over 96,000 cases awaiting disposal at the apex court alone. The pending case list of various high courts exceeds 6.4 million and that of subordinate courts 49.8 million. Clearly, the saying 'Justice delayed is justice denied' is not just a cliché, but an apt description of the state of India's legal system. No wonder the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index for 2025 ranks India below Indonesia, Nepal and Vietnam on overall justice system delivery.

It is not enough to have modern laws. These must be backed by an efficient mechanism for the delivery of justice that, among other things, protects civil and property rights, preserves sanctity of contracts and enforces the rights and liabilities of parties in a timely manner. Today, roughly three-fourths of prisoners in India are under-trials; unconvicted, presumed innocent till proven guilty under the law, yet serving time anyway—often for longer than the sentence they would have got had they pleaded guilty. Almost a decade ago, the *Economic Survey* for 2017-18 devoted a chapter to judicial delays in the context of 'ease of doing business', calling timely justice a "prerequisite for business and commerce." Sadly, very little has changed since. Indeed, till the World Bank discontinued its Ease of Doing Business Index in September

2021, India fared poorly on 'ease of enforcing contracts'. Pendency, delays and injunctions overburden courts, slowing the progress of cases, especially in the economic realm, and exacting a heavy toll from the economy. Tribunals were conceived as a way to relieve courts of some pressure. But the *State of Tribunals Report 2025* of Daksh, a Bengaluru-based legal think-tank, shows that close to ₹25 trillion is tied up in about 356,000 disputes pending at understaffed commercial tribunals. Part of this sorry state of affairs can be blamed on a hugely adverse ratio of judges to population. We have just above 15 judges per million people (*India Justice Report, 2025*), far below global standards. The US has 150 judges for every million, while the European average is around 220. Perhaps it is also time to rethink the practice of court vacations, a relic of our colonial past, when English judges wanted to retreat from the hot Indian summer to cooler climes.

Even as we address the large and growing backlog of cases on a war footing, we must work harder at keeping disputes out of courtrooms in the first place through alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution like mediation. The government, as the country's largest litigant, must do its bit to unclutter the system; it should refrain from trivial legal filings and routine appeals. In the words of Sanjeev Sanyal, member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, India's judicial and legal ecosystem is the "single biggest hurdle" to achieving Viksit Bharat—developed-country status. It also stands in the way of a crucial hallmark of democracy: the basic assurance that every citizen has access to speedy justice. The time has come to chip away at that hurdle before it overwhelms us.

India Inc should give up its fear of boards that show leadership

Many companies still see assertive boards as mounting hostile takeovers. This simply cannot go on



M. MUNEEB & RALPH WARD are, respectively, co-founder of the Medici Institute for Innovation.X, @MuneebMuh; and a global board advisor, coach and publisher.

where the board's primary role is to ensure nobody disturbs the emperor.

The idea that directors might actively shape strategy, question decisions or demand deeper oversight is sometimes treated with suspicion usually reserved for tax raids and investigative journalists. Somewhere deep within business culture lies an ancient belief: leadership is a zero-sum game. If the board gets stronger, the CEO must get weaker. Governance is like a custody battle here.

Conversations on stronger boards follow a predictable script. Someone says they need more oversight powers and someone else warns of 'board over-reach'. But times are changing.

Today's regulators no longer accept the excuse that the board was not 'operationally involved'. Courts, investors and enforcement agencies expect directors to prove both attendance and actual oversight. Which means a board member must achieve the impossible: stay informed enough to be accountable but detached enough not to offend the management.

Globally, the balance is shifting. CEO tenure is declining, shareholder activism is rising and regulatory scrutiny has intensified. In India too, governance scandals have driven home this truth: passive boards are excellent right up until the moment things collapse.

QUICK READ

Board members, once happy to nod along with management, have lately been lurched into an unfamiliar world of responsibility for corporate governance. But leadership isn't a zero-sum game.

Genuine board oversight should not threaten CEOs even if cultural inertia makes them uneasy. Willy-nilly, a company's risk-return strategy needs the guidance of independent minds.

The post-scandal ritual is by now familiar. Regulators ask where the board was. Investors ask why warning signs were missed. Directors rediscover phrases like 'we relied on management representations,' which has roughly the same legal value as saying 'we meant well.' Boards are stepping up now that their liability has grown serious. Most board chairs do not seem pleased with this. It's too much pressure to handle.

Many independent directors of India Inc still operate under an unspoken survival principle: ask enough questions to appear diligent, but not enough to trigger an awkward silence. Founders and CEOs still seem to interpret strong board involvement as a sign of distrust. A request for more information can feel like an accusation. A governance review feels like an intervention.

And yet, the best companies are neither board nor CEO dominated, but those where both understand their roles clearly. They have strong committees instead of ornamental ones. They define what information directors genuinely need, instead of drowning them in 400-slide presentations designed to anesthetize curiosity. They set agendas around strategic risks and do not treat compliance as a ritual. These boards report their expectations to management as rigorously as managers report business performance to boards.

Boards that court irrelevance by being polite put their businesses at risk. The old model survived because markets were slower, businesses simpler and accountancy softer. Enterprises now operate in environments where reputational crises travel faster than official statements and a single failure of governance can erase decades of brand equity creation.

Boards must lead and managements must not take it as a coup. Directors need not do this loudly, nor should they storm into operations like amateur management consultants. They must do something more radical: ask difficult questions early enough to matter.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The pattern produces a paradox. The government publicly expresses concern about judicial backlog while simultaneously feeding that backlog through relentless litigation. The State becomes both the complainant and the cause.

B. V. NAGARATHNA

THEIR VIEW

Why talented employees leave and why that's often okay

DEVINA SENGUPTA



writes on workplaces and education at Mint.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. But when the going is good, should the tough start leaving? There are more than a handful of employees who get jittery when their taut relationship with the employer becomes much too comfortable and predictable. It is like the unsettled feeling one sometimes gets while staring at a placid pool of clear water. There is an irresistible urge to churn the water a bit. Something similar rumbles when all metrics are in the green and there is no reason to quit a job but a gnawing part of you says it's time.

Over the past 15 years of tracking people stories, I have noticed an ingrained concern across companies irrespective of their shape, size and field of business—that of losing their best hires. And this is not about losing them to competition, because those who whisper can be picked up in advance. It is knowing that there may be no incentive that can help sway a valuable employee away from leaving for reasons that don't seem to make sense.

This is probably where companies go wrong: assuming that an increment above the median, an out-of-turn promotion and a companionable workplace are reasons enough for leaders of the pack to stick around. But what top bosses tend to overlook is that such sweeteners are rewards for performance that say little if anything about career growth. And some of the good hands are balking for the latter.

Their grumbles are easy to miss because career growth is often considered a linear path in India Inc—as in, as you ascend the corporate hierarchy (read: change of designation and payscale), it is assumed that you have grown in your profession. It is partially true, but also a myopic way of looking at how a career chart should play out.

If the best performers are looking for growth, then they need to be placated with challenging projects that will either stump them or rewire the way they work. Most firms would scoff at the notion of an out-of-turn spotlight placed on a select few at the cost of disturbing the rest of the pack. This do-not-disturb outlook also has its logic, but it risks losing some valuable talent.

Meanwhile, a good performer—let's call this person A-plus—is stuck in a matrix of routine work meeting targets and getting

the task completed. Almost without fail, A-plus gets the job done. And every single day, A-plus is closer to logging out for good. This individual does have leverage within the business—a good track record, a boss who will negotiate and probably agree to any monetary demands and even a role change—and these are rare trump cards at a time of highly uneven demand across the Indian economy. But they will not work in this case.

For generations, India Inc erred by relying on the cultural conditioning that quitting is a sign of failure and the successful do not let go. This strongly held belief came unstuck during the covid pandemic, as people thought long and hard about work-life balance, work satisfaction and what a job or career ought to look like. While companies and their staff rebooted and reprogrammed themselves, the enticing option of pursuing other interests, whetting one's risk appetite by starting up by oneself, came to be seen by many as doable.

Quitting is no longer associated with giving up, and even if A-plus summons the nerve to wave a white flag, there is no label of defeat attached to it. This could explain why so many top-bracket performers who are well backed up financially seem ready to turn in their papers for no overt reason, pause and then take their next step.

There is a mid-life crisis in careers as well, and in today's world, where there are no swan-songs, retirement ages are seen as just numbers and one can work on flexible time lines as a gig worker, consultant, mentor, etc.

For companies that the urge to explore more satisfying possibilities has been growing. And for the likes of A-plus, the best time to do it is when the cards are favourably decked.

For companies that observe a split in their payroll between employees who are driven to perform and those who seem determined to dodge responsibility for outcomes, retaining the former is critical. The 80/20 cliché, of 80% of

work done by 20% of the employees, has long been cast aside as a joke. But it does resonate in many workplaces. While an employee like A-plus would be eager to take on new initiatives, one without anxiety over slipping, many would rather not veer away from their comfort zone. Predictability at work commands a premium even for some of the better performers—those who at least deftly Parkinson's Law: work expands to fill the time allotted for it.

For many with a couple of decades of work experience on their resume and an investment portfolio, financial stability may not be a good enough reason to hold on to a job. Market crashes need not rattle them. They have seen at least three large ones and have grown accustomed to the crests and troughs of market indices. Some investors can afford to give up their jobs simply because their investments can pay their basic bills, which frees them for other pursuits. Some may bet that walking out, only to return on better terms, is the best path to career growth. Time spent away from desks, presentations and meetings could be used for testing out novel skills to create a resume in which corporate stints could look like stop-gaps. And if A-plus is on the verge of departure, we should wish this person well.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Should Tata Sons go public? Let's hear from minority shareholders

Now that RBI has closed its non-listing option, the debate needs to involve more than the regulator and the group's promoter



M. DAMODARAN & SUMIT AGRAWAL
are, respectively, chairperson, Excellence Enablers, and former chairman, Sebi, UTI and IDBI; and managing partner, Regstreet Law Advisors and a former Sebi officer.

On 24 June, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued its final framework for classifying upper-layer non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), holding the line on the one test squarely within its control. Industry had pushed to raise the qualifying assets threshold from ₹1 trillion to ₹2.5 trillion, which would have lifted Tata Sons and other large NBFCs out of the upper layer entirely. RBI rejected that request. Tata Sons' standalone assets, estimated at ₹1.75-1.9 trillion, clear the ₹1 trillion bar with room to spare, placing it exactly where RBI first did in September 2022—with a stock-market listing obligation whose original three-year deadline expired in September 2025.

A second question briefly looked more contested. RBI's 24 June rules on upper layer classification, built around the asset-size test alone, made no mention of "indirect receipt of public funds," even though its 29 April Amendment Directions had included an explanation in the master direction's definition of "public funds": funds received "not directly but through associates and Group entities which have access to public funds." That apparent omission fed a week of reports on a reprieve for Tata Sons. But it was never real—the explanation sits within the same consolidated master direction that governs upper layer classification, with an effective date of July built-in from the start. Tata Steel, Tata Power and Tata Chemicals together hold an estimated 13-16% of Tata Sons; since all three access public capital markets, that alone keeps Tata Sons classified as an indirect recipient of public funds.

On both tests, Tata Sons is back where RBI first placed it in 2022. What remains open is not a technical question, but an institutional one: whether RBI acts on its own rules or lets Tata Sons' de-registration application sit unresolved indefinitely, handing it through delay while the rules no longer allow it to claim through argument.

Since 2022, the public discussion over Tata Sons' listing has been conducted almost entirely between two parties: the promoter, which does not want to list, and the regulator, which says the rules require it. Noel Tata, chairman of Tata Trusts, has written to RBI opposing a listing, and former office-bearers have made the institutional case in print—that public markets would compromise a century-old philanthropic mission and a long-term investment philosophy that is poorly suited to quarterly reporting. These are not frivolous arguments: Tata Trusts fund a substantial share of India's private philanthropic activity, tracing back to Tata Sons' unlisted structure.

But there is a third party to this debate that has barely had a seat at the table: the minority shareholders of 26 listed Tata companies whose com-



bined market value Tata's own disclosures put at more than \$328 billion as of March 2025, and whose economic fate is more tightly bound to Tata Sons' governance than the debate acknowledges.

Consider what an unlisted Tata Sons has meant in recent months. Shares of TCS, the group's principal cash generator, have fallen to near a 6-year low amid a broader technology sector slump, eroding the value of Tata Sons' principal asset—a fact that matters because Shapoorji Pallonji Group's 18.4% stake in Tata Sons collateralizes its own high-yield debt. Goswami Infratech, an SP Group unit, disclosed to the BSE on 3 July that the exchange had approved pushing the final redemption date of its non-convertible debentures (NCDs) from 30 June to 31 July, the second such extension this year, even as the SP Group seeks ₹25,500 crore in fresh refinancing through a new vehicle, Ezyinvest Investment, after an earlier attempt fell through. That refinancing builds in an unusual 18-month clock, either Tata Sons lists within that window or the SP Group must be able to sell its stake privately at an agreed price, a market-set deadline arrived at entirely outside any regulatory process, and one that exists only because Tata Sons' principal asset cannot easily be converted to cash while the company stays private. None of this shows up in filings that a Tata Motors or Titan shareholder would ever see, even though it has a clear bearing on the financial standing of the entity that appoints their board's chairperson.

A Tata Sons listing would not simply "unlock value" for the SP Group, as the debate is often reduced to. It would require quarterly disclosure of the entity that controls 26 operating companies; independent directors on the board that decides group-wide capital allocation; related-party scrutiny of the intra-group flows that funded a net ₹10,905 crore in aggregate losses

across Tata Sons' unlisted portfolio in 2024-25 (even as Air India and Tata Digital individually lost far more before profits elsewhere offset some of it); and formal governance standards around the succession uncertainty that has left N. Chandrabosekar's reappointment as chairman of Tata Sons unresolved since February, now pushed to an annual general meeting on 18 August. Each of these protections applies to shareholders of TCS or Tata Steel, but none currently applies to the entity one level above.

Tata Sons' own trustees differ: two of the Trusts' vice-chairmen have openly backed a public listing on governance grounds against the chairman's stated opposition—an unusual split for an institution that has prized a single voice at its apex. When a company's own controlling trustees disagree on whether its structure needs more scrutiny, the argument for resolving the question privately comes apart.

The philanthropic-mission argument need not be dismissed. Differential voting rights or governance carve-outs that preserve mission-driven ownership within a listed framework exist in several markets, but they do not entail a permanent exemption from disclosure. India should treat philanthropic continuity and public accountability as compatible design questions, not a binary choice between an opaque private holding company and a conventional listing.

Now that RBI has closed both tests that matter for Tata Sons, asset size and indirect access to public funds, what remains is a question of institutional will: whether an entity of Tata Sons' scale and consequence for India's capital markets will be permitted an indefinite delay through an unresolved de-registration application, even though the case for public accountability is being made with increasing urgency by the market itself.

This is the concluding part of a two-part series.

QUICK READ

The Reserve Bank of India's upper layer NBFC framework has settled the question of Tata Sons' market listing and the interests of voiceless stakeholders should also be taken into account.

Differential voting rights or governance carve-outs are tested ways of ensuring public accountability without dealing a blow to the philanthropic goals of a promoter family.

public accountability as compatible design questions, not a binary choice between an opaque private holding company and a conventional listing.

Now that RBI has closed both tests that matter for Tata Sons, asset size and indirect access to public funds, what remains is a question of institutional will: whether an entity of Tata Sons' scale and consequence for India's capital markets will be permitted an indefinite delay through an unresolved de-registration application, even though the case for public accountability is being made with increasing urgency by the market itself.

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As Starbucks mixes AI in chai latte, what must IT players do?

Indian IT service providers should wake up and smell the AI coffee



ANDY MUKHERJEE
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies and financial services in Asia.

Starbucks is brewing a tempest in a chai latte cup. The coffee-chain is tapping AI to develop-in-house alternatives to systems by Microsoft and IBM that track inventory and manage equipment. The Seattle-based company has been working for several years to replace Oracle's point-of-sale system.

This will be disturbing news in Bengaluru and Hyderabad: Maintaining these very technologies for large multinationals like Starbucks is the bread and butter for the 6 million coders employed by India's outsourcing industry.

The AI adoption craze is looming over what is promising to be another lacklustre earnings season for India's IT service exporters. Last week, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), the biggest among them, reported 0.4% growth in revenue over the previous three months after stripping out currency fluctuations, the slowest expansion in a year. While the company has shed 3% of its workforce in the past year to about 594,000, the spending on third-party specialist contractors to bridge the firm's own skills gaps ate into revenue. Its net profit margin shrank.

At smaller rival HCL Technologies, sales in the three months to June slipped 0.5% quarter-on-quarter after holding exchange rates constant. The management kept its annual revenue growth guidance of 1% to 4% unchanged, but it still ended up shrinking its employee base by nearly 3,300 people—the sharpest contraction in close to two years. For HCL Tech too, a rise in subcontractor costs mitigated the wage savings.

For 25 years, India's software services firms have lured global corporate clients into lucrative contracts to implement and maintain packaged software. Before the arrival of AI tools, it would not have been cost-effective for a firm like Starbucks, whose business is beverages, to take an IBM system out of its shrink-wrap and map it to every piece of kitchen equipment, maintenance schedules and local technicians across a dense network of 40,000-plus stores globally. That is the kind of stuff around which Indian IT vendors have built a \$250 billion exports powerhouse.

Similarly, making sure a multinational can safely add a new local payment method or correctly reflect a discount or tax change has been a lucrative annuity for Indian programmers. They specialize in testing for various scenarios that could make cash registers go down even for a minute. Largely hidden from public view, they keep global supply chains working 24x7 by managing the data pipelines that sync third-party



TCS and HCL Tech results didn't reassure investors much.

inventory tools with an enterprise's own resource planning software. To be sure, these long-term, multimillion-dollar orders have not completely dried up. TCS shares jumped on Monday after the company disclosed that it would be expanding the role it has been playing in managing infrastructure and applications for ABB. The new mandate is to design and run the Zurich-based engineering giant's network as a modern, AI-driven service.

On its part, HCL Tech recently won a \$5.5-year, \$1.14 billion contract to build an AI-driven operating model for a large European engineering and manufacturing conglomerate it did not name.

Still, the pricing of large outsourcing deals in the age of AI remains under a question mark. After all, clients will fully expect their suppliers to use fewer humans—and more AI—to keep their tech infrastructure running smoothly. Accordingly, they will pay them less than before.

As for customers embedding AI in their own workflows, they will probably pay the upfront cost of gathering the unstructured data scattered around their firms and labelling everything correctly. But after a quarter or two, AI agents will use the cleaned-up data to write their own code. The annuity business will have a slow fade, with lumpy AI-related work helping to mask the decline for some time.

Worse, as clients like Starbucks open their own direct engineering hubs in places like Bengaluru and Nashville—using AI to let small in-house teams do the work of large code-writing armies—the middleman's markup becomes an obvious target for cost-cutters.

While the stock market is still giving a thumbs up to any order wins, the NSE IT Index finished June 10% lower than five years ago. Even during the worst of the global financial crisis, pessimism did not run this deep. Maybe the gloom is overdone and US clients will eventually curb their enthusiasm for AI. They may come to realize that even as their token budgets go through the roof, their corporate data and workflows are slipping out of their control and going to frontier AI labs.

However, it is also possible that investors have read the tea leaves right, and it is the IT outsourcing firms that are yet to wake up and smell the coffee. **©BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Reports of London's downfall are highly exaggerated

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

From behind a barrier near King's Cross station in London came a chorus of screams. Ahead of me, a mother pushing a child in a pram peered through the tiny gaps in the fence with apparent alarm. She needn't have worried. The scene unfolding was a group of schoolchildren who had discovered a series of water jets at pavement level and had decided to run between them fully clothed. It was an understandable response to finding an urban oasis amid 35°C Celsius temperature that day.

Earlier that week, an interview at Wimbledon I was doing was briefly disrupted by shrieks and then laughter. At the centre of it was the tournament's hawk, whose job is to scare away pigeons but had landed on the outstretched hands of a group of ball boys and ball girls instead of flying under a ceremonial arch devoted for the purpose.

Both incidents aimed for the opposite of the headlines that bedevil London. Newspapers declare it the phone-snatching capi-

tal of Europe, where feral youth on electric bikes directed by modern-day Dickensian Fagin tap into a global network that resells stolen phones via agents in southern China. A friend in Bengaluru, who is a frequent visitor to the city, resorted to pulling out a phone safety tether from her handbag, suggesting I attach it to my phone for my time in London. At a national level, meanwhile, the UK was being derided as a quasi-banana republic after Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he would be stepping down this month after scarcely two years as premier, paving the way for the seismic change at 10 Downing Street in a decade.

The contrast with the reassuringly civil, good-humoured city I encountered over my fortnight there made me wonder if we can understand a place by reading the news from afar. This is an unsettling question for anyone who values journalism, but more so for someone who worked as a foreign correspondent for much of his career. Since journalism school, I have grumbled about the "coups, earthquakes, famines syndrome" that has long characterized foreign coverage of the developing world.

Now, in an inversion of that critique, the phenomenon applies to the developed

world as well. Ahead of my first trip in several years to the east coast of the US last August, I was warned about the unpredictability of airport immigration and deployment of the National Guard in Washington DC by the Trump administration. My first encounter with the youthful National Guard was one of them courteously holding the door open for me as I entered the ornate railway station in the capital. My scariest moment turned out to be a rehearsal for a wedding in Brooklyn, where I had been asked to be the celebrant. Nervously began catastrophizing that I would be like the bumbling trainee priest played by Rowan Atkinson in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

This summer, the multiculturalism of London, despite the growing popularity of Nigel Farage's anti-immigrant rhetoric, seemed an unconscious everyday celebration—just as it had been when

I lived there in the early 2000s. The list of invitees to the Royal Box for the Wimbledon semifinals last Friday included cricketer Shubman Gill with his sports agent Sebastian Shetty, easily the most interesting guest that day despite the presence of English actors. Surinder Arora, who owns and manages a host of airport hotels in the UK, was there, as was Barclays CEO C.S. Venkatakrishnan and the UK's Lawn Tennis Association head, corporate lawyer Roy Colabawalla. South Asians excelling in Britain are

as commonplace as streetlamps, remarked upon only by gawking tourists. Among the guests brought by Prince Michael of Kent was the renowned criminal lawyer, Afzal Jafferjee, who was schooled in India.

To rework the old cliché, one Wimbledon day doesn't make a British summer. But what the British anthropologist Kate Fox correctly identified as the routine politeness of the British

remains, despite frequent public transport disruptions and delays that I lost count of. Fox purposely bumped into people on public transport to discover that the vast majority reflectively apologise to her. Which begs the question: Fabulous summer exhibitions by Mumbai-born Anish Kapoor and Indian artist Arpita Singh in London are all very well, but when will there be an apology from a British prime minister for centuries of colonialism?

And there is some truth to the headlines of urban dysfunction. Violent crime is down to record levels in both the US and UK, but phone-snatching and shop-lifting are up dramatically over the past few years. Yet, the national cliché I encountered most often in London was people praising how the Indian economy is booming and its middle-class surging. Explaining the distortive effects of a deflator on India's GDP figures and that speaking event by the author of *India Out of Work* was on my calendar this week in Bengaluru would have been a conversation killer. Beyond the gloomier world-view of foreign investors, this is now the prevailing image of India overseas. On balance, I am grateful for that—and that my turquoise phone strap remained a fashion accessory.

QUICK READ

Foreign media coverage of the developing world used to focus on catastrophe. The subject of such concern has flipped, what with scary reports of how life in the West is worsening.

Despite gloomy reports of phone thefts, store lifting and political instability in the UK, a visit can be a reminder of the folly of going only by the news. London hasn't lost its charm.

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FRIDAY • JULY 17, 2026

Inflated worries

RBI can look through the spike in CPI in June

The outlook on inflation is far from sanguine, and yet it cannot be seen as cause for alarm. The retail inflation print of 4.4 per cent in June was not unexpected. It is largely the result of the Iran war, and so far is not broad-based — never mind even if the headline number happens to be an 18-month high. It could edge up further, but whether that leads to a spike in inflationary expectations would depend on the trajectory of the ongoing war.



As far as global bond markets and central banks are concerned, India need not entirely peg its actions on their decisions. Quite apart from the macro being sound, the Reserve Bank of India and the Centre have taken steps to shore up capital flows — creating space for independent monetary policy. It is worth noting that average inflation for the first quarter of FY27 is at 3.9 per cent, below the RBI's projection of 4.2 per cent for the quarter. The RBI has now begun to accord more importance to core inflation which excludes the more volatile food and energy prices. Core inflation held steady at 3.9 per cent in June. If the influence of the sharp increase in gold and silver prices is removed from core inflation, the reading is at a much benign 2.5 per cent. These numbers are likely to lend comfort to the RBI. Besides petrol and diesel, the increase in prices of LPG cylinders and piped natural gas weighed on consumer wallets and made services of restaurants and hotels pricier. Inflation in transport was high at 4.3 per cent, which pushed the prices of all other goods and services, including food items. The higher food inflation of 5.3 per cent was also influenced by higher cost of fertilizers and the seasonal spike in vegetable prices in June. Higher prices of oil and fat in global markets pushed domestic edible oil prices higher.

However, there is uncertainty regarding the trajectory of CPI in the coming months. Though crude oil prices are below their recent peaks, they are still almost 20 per cent higher than the pre-war price level. While the deficit in monsoon rainfall has narrowed in July and kharif sowing is expected to improve, food inflation can continue to apply upward pressure on headline inflation. RBI's CPI projections of 5.1 per cent for the second quarter, 5.9 per cent for the third quarter and 5.4 per cent for the fourth quarter of FY27 have taken these heightened uncertainties into account. However, inflation in gold and silver prices is expected to ease in the coming months since prices are drifting lower and the rally in precious metals occurred in the second half of 2025. Given that the CPI is still below the upper band and the current spike in mainly caused by supply side challenges, the RBI can maintain a status quo in policy rate for now.

A status quo is desirable in view of the Centre's plans to ramp up spending to deal with war-related issues. Businesses could do with some relief in borrowing costs. Monetary authorities, however, will have to be nimble and data-dependent.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

AI APPRECIATION DAY - 2026

WISH YOU...



... WOULD NOT TAKE MY JOB.

PARTHAPRATIM PAL
SURANJANA GUPTA

Tariffs, when calibrated properly, remain a legitimate policy instrument for managing international trade and fostering domestic industrialisation. Because the central goal of industrialisation is to maximize domestic value addition, an ideal tariff structure should impose lower duties on raw materials and intermediate goods, while levying higher duties on finished products.

Cheaper inputs reduce domestic manufacturers' production costs. At the same time, higher duties on final goods shield them from foreign competition.

Together, these incentives encourage local firms to deepen value addition and concentrate on producing finished goods. When this tariff structure is reversed, with inputs facing higher tariffs than finished products, it is called an inverted duty structure (IDS). Under such a regime, the effective rate of protection for downstream firms can become negative, penalizing those segments engaged in higher value addition.

India's aluminium sector currently exhibits an inverted duty structure (IDS), though the inversion does not originate in the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) schedule, which remains — if only weakly — escalated: primary aluminium and intermediates attract a basic customs duty of 7.5 per cent, scrap 2.5 per cent, and finished products 7.5-10 per cent.

FTA DISTORTION

The distortion arises instead from India's preferential trade agreements. Under the India-ASEAN FTA and the CEPAs with Japan and South Korea, duties on most downstream and finished aluminium lines have been eliminated, while primary aluminium — sourced predominantly from suppliers outside these agreements — continues to bear the full 7.5 per cent duty. The Social Welfare Surcharge, levied at 10 per cent of the basic customs duty, marginally widens this wedge: it raises the effective duty on primary metal to 8.25 per cent, whereas a zero customs duty on FTA imports nullifies the surcharge altogether.

Integrated GST, creditable as input tax, is broadly neutral, and quality-control measures apply uniformly. The net effect is unambiguous: finished goods from FTA partners arrive in India at lower landed costs than primary inputs from non-FTA suppliers, resulting in a case of duty inversion.

Import data for FY 2023-24 and FY 2024-25 corroborate this hypothesis. The most pronounced expansion is in HS 7610 (aluminium structures), where imports nearly doubled over the year, from \$234 million to \$466 million. Four of the five largest source countries —



Inverted duty structure in aluminium, a concern

LOPSIDED TARIFFS. The FTA-driven inverted duty structure is impacting downstream MSMEs more than the bigger upstream firms. It should be reviewed

Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Korea — are FTA partners that benefit from zero-duty access under a 10 per cent MFN rate.

Comparable, if less dramatic, patterns appear in foil, tubes and pipes, and cans and drums, where the UAE-CEPA channel dominates. Imports of primary and intermediate goods, by contrast, originate predominantly from non-FTA countries — US, GCC states other than the UAE, Russia, and several EU members — all paying full MFN duties.

This has two consequences: first, Indian downstream manufacturers pay higher prices for their imported primary and intermediate inputs; second, domestic upstream producers can price close to import parity, capturing the rents created by the tariff wall. While this benefits the upstream firms, it negatively affects the much larger universe of downstream firms that use different aluminium products as intermediate inputs.

Moreover, another distinct competitive pressure operates in parallel. China is the leading source for nine of the 16 aluminium products (at HS4 digit level) imported by India. This happens with full MFN duties, in the absence of any FTA with India. Chinese cost competitiveness evidently overcomes the entire MFN barrier. Though independent of the FTA-driven inversion, it compounds the effect on lines where both pressures coexist —

The current tariff configuration is not completely aligned with the stated national objectives of MSME development, and reduced import dependence

notably for flat rolled products and aluminium structures.

INDUSTRY ASYMMETRY

The persistence of this distortion reflects the underlying market structure of the Indian aluminium sector, marked by pronounced upstream-downstream asymmetry. India's upstream aluminium segment is a four-player market, and together these producers account for virtually 100 per cent of domestic primary aluminium output. All these firms are vertically integrated from bauxite through alumina to smelting.

The downstream segment presents a markedly different profile. Beyond the upstream majors' private, the segment comprises thousands of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in extrusion, foil conversion, secondary recycling, and finished articles.

Aggregate midstream and downstream capacity is approximately 4.2 million tonnes, but due to geopolitical issues leading to supply bottlenecks and fuel shortages, utilisation has fallen to 40-50 per cent, according to aluminium Extruders' Association, with extrusions alone running near 50 per cent.

This structural asymmetry generates a corresponding asymmetry in political-economic outcomes. A small number of upstream firms, with concentrated economic interests and effective institutional representation, have proved capable of sustained advocacy; the fragmented MSME constituency in the downstream lacks comparable institutional capacity.

Possibly this asymmetry has contributed to the inverted duty structure of the aluminium sector in India. It is notable that the duty structure disproportionately harms the large number of downstream MSMEs, but it affects upstream firms less, which

have integrated downstream operations and hence depend less on imported inputs.

External market conditions further compound the squeeze. Indian aluminium exports now face substantial entry barriers in two key destinations: the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the US' Section 232 tariffs.

Given that primary aluminium accounts for approximately 80 per cent of downstream production costs, the equivalence of MFN and FTA rates at 7.5 per cent on primary inputs results in pricing disadvantages for exporting secondary manufacturers, particularly MSMEs.

The policy implications are clear. The current tariff configuration is not completely aligned with the stated national objectives of value-added manufacturing, MSME development, and reduced import dependence. The Department of Commerce's ongoing review of India's FTAs with ASEAN and Korea represents an opportunity to address the inversion at its source.

An alternative path — reduction of MFN duties on primary and intermediate goods — would likely encounter resistance from upstream incumbents. A precedent in the steel sector, the export parity price scheme for MSME downstream exporters, attempted to address an analogous distortion with limited success.

What remains incontestable is that a competitive, MSME-driven downstream aluminium industry is integral to the success of India's broader manufacturing strategy, and that correcting the FTA-driven inversion may be a necessary step in that direction.

P. is a Professor, Economics Group, IIM Calcutta; Gupta is former Executive Director, Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC), India. Views expressed are personal

Exporters will have to contend with headwinds

Value gains in petro exports, and adverse trends in farm and smartphones shipments may mar the export show this year

Dipti Deshpande
Adish Verma

India's merchandise exports have displayed admirable resilience despite the ebb and flow of the West Asia conflict, prompting some justified optimism.

However, beneath the headline numbers lie four challenges that could make this fiscal year a difficult one for exports.

First, export resilience may be reflecting value gains rather than volume growth. The on-year growth in dollar value of exports has been heavily influenced by prices. For instance, the 16 per cent growth in exports in the first quarter of this fiscal was driven by a nearly 35 per cent rise in the value of India's oil exports. This increase stemmed from higher crude oil prices, even as export volumes contracted.

The rise in core exports can also be partly attributed to the price effect, as non-energy prices too increased in the wake of the West Asia conflict.

With crude oil prices now down from its peaks, the dollar value of India's petroleum exports could decline. Petroleum products account for roughly 12 per cent of India's merchandise exports.

Second, smartphones and agricultural products — the two large engines of India's exports — have run into headwinds.

The former, which helped sustain overall export growth through successive tariff and geopolitical shocks, is expected to face fresh turbulence during the remaining months of 2026.

The share of smartphones in total merchandise exports rose to 6.7 per cent last fiscal from virtually nil in fiscal 2022.

However, most industry forecasts point to a slowdown in global smartphone demand due to 'chipflation', with shortages of memory chips pushing up device costs. Moreover, these shortages could also affect the production costs of other electronic goods, which account for about 11 per cent of total merchandise exports.

FARM WORRIES

Agricultural exports, accounting for 10 per cent of merchandise exports may also be entering a difficult phase, driven largely by domestic factors.

Yet its fortunes remain closely tied to weather-related shocks and government export curbs aimed at meeting domestic priorities.

This fiscal, a weak monsoon and the onset of El Niño conditions could hurt agricultural output. While marine



EXPORTS. Uncertain times

exports have remained resilient, even in the face of elevated US tariffs, several major agricultural export categories are confronting growing challenges.

Given that agriculture and electronics together contribute over one-fifth of India's merchandise exports, their performance will play a crucial role in determining overall export momentum. Third, global demand forecasts are far from encouraging. The supply-chain disruptions stemming from the West Asia conflict have led to downward revisions in growth forecasts for calendar year 2026.

Global GDP growth is projected to slow to 3.1 per cent in 2026 from 3.4 per cent in 2025.

Fourth, trade policy concerns persist.

Fresh uncertainty surrounding US tariffs — the trade deal with India has been pushed back yet again — could create renewed headwinds for exports. At the same time, European Commission's recent decision to reduce its annual tariff free steel import quotas to address the adverse effect of global oversupply on EU steel market could also dampen certain steel exports from India to the region.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Recent and upcoming free trade agreements (FTAs) provide grounds for optimism. Crisil Intelligence notes that with six agreements signed over the past four years, India now has FTAs with more than half of the world's largest importers. That share is set to rise to nearly two-thirds once the terms of the proposed US FTA are finalised.

That said, it may take time for these agreements to translate into tangible gains.

Experience suggests that exporters will need guidance and support to fully leverage the opportunities created by these deals. Moreover, FTAs merely provide a foot in the door. To derive meaningful benefits from these agreements, India must further strengthen its export competitiveness.

Deshpande is Principal Economist and Verma is Senior Economist, Crisil Ltd. Views expressed 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, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Curbing cyber fraud

This refers to the article 'Perils of unchecked cyber crime' (July 16). At a time when digitalisation is advancing rapidly across all walks of life, it is imperative to strengthen preventive measures. It is essential to make financial institutions' systems and procedures safe from vulnerabilities. As the financial and digital literacy for customers must also be drastically improved. The investigation and fraud detection teams and law-enforcing

authorities must be intensively trained and skilled to nab the culprits and recover the lost money.

YSK Pillai
Changanacherry (Kerala)

IMF agenda

Apropos 'IMF must stick to its core competencies' (July 16), the IMF must focus on macroeconomic surveillance, crisis lending and fiscal discipline of its member countries when they are in jeopardy. But IMF's growing engagement in

climate control funding, gender and other non-core areas not only risks its lending, but also deviates from its core agenda of helping member countries in their economic and financial crisis. IMF must stick to its core competencies and let specialised bodies handle issue like climate change.

NR Nagarajan
Sivakasi

Urea fertilizer policy

Apropos 'Cabinet approves new

investment policy to boost urea fertilizer production by 10 mt' (July 16). The government's decision is a timely and strategic step toward agricultural self-reliance. It aims to reduce costly imports, save foreign exchange, and ensure steady supply for farmers. Yet, the initiative faces several challenges. New plants require heavy capital investment, advanced technology, and reliable gas supply. Existing units operate on thin margins under the subsidy regime, limiting profitability.

Environmental concerns also loom large, as increased production could raise carbon emissions unless cleaner feedstock and energy-efficient processes are adopted. Land acquisition delays and bureaucratic hurdles may slow implementation. To succeed, the policy must balance expansion with sustainability, fair pricing, and modernisation of old units.

O Prasada Rao
Hyderabad

AI is no magic wand

It must be backed by organisational competence

Munesh Sood
Sunita Sood

Artificial intelligence has moved from being a technology story to an economic one. Global tech companies are investing hundreds of billions in AI infrastructure, while governments unveil national AI strategies. The IMF's World Economic Outlook 2026 has identified AI as one of the most significant forces shaping future productivity, labour markets and long-term growth. The excitement is understandable. Yet, economic history suggests technological revolutions rarely translate into immediate productivity gains.

PRODUCTIVITY GROWTH Economists have seen this before. In 1987, Nobel laureate Robert Solow famously remarked that computers were visible everywhere except in the productivity statistics. Despite rapid advances in computing, productivity growth stayed weak for years—a disconnect economists dubbed the productivity paradox.

The paradox was eventually resolved, not because computers became more powerful, but because businesses changed how they worked. They redesigned processes, reorganised supply chains, invested in training and adopted better management practices. Technology created the opportunity; organisations unlocked its value.

Artificial intelligence is likely to follow the same path. Today, organisations have introduced chatbots, coding assistants and intelligent search tools, yet relatively few report meaningful productivity gains. In many firms, AI has simply been bolted onto existing workflows instead of prompting a redesign. Employees still work across disconnected systems, verify AI outputs manually, and spend valuable time hunting for information. The result is automation without transformation.

Productivity depends on more than technology investment—it also depends on organisational capital, management quality, business processes, governance structures and a firm's ability to adapt. Two companies can deploy the same AI model and get very different outcomes, because one has transformed its operations while the other has merely added another piece of software.

Data poses another challenge. AI systems are only as reliable as



BUSINESSES. Must not treat AI as a technology project

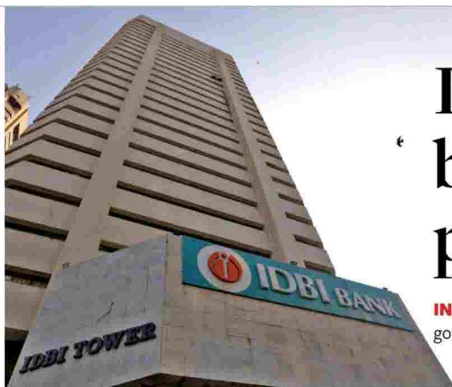
the information they receive, and many organisations still struggle with fragmented databases, inconsistent definitions and duplicate records. If businesses keep treating AI as a technology project rather than an organisational transformation, productivity growth may dissipate despite record investment.

The countries that benefit most from AI may not be those that build the largest models—they're more likely to be those that help thousands of ordinary businesses use AI effectively. India has built world-class digital public infrastructure through Aadhaar, UPI and the Account Aggregator framework, and the India AI Mission reflects similar ambition in artificial intelligence. Combined with a large tech workforce and a vibrant startup ecosystem, these position India well in the global AI economy.

But India's greatest opportunity may not lie in building the next frontier model. It lies in lifting productivity across manufacturing, logistics, healthcare, financial services, agriculture and public administration. India's productivity challenge is less about access to technology than about its diffusion across businesses. While leading enterprises have embraced digital transformation, millions of small and medium enterprises still rely on manual processes, fragmented information and limited digital integration. Since MSMEs contribute roughly 30 per cent of India's GDP and employ over 110 million people, even modest productivity gains across this sector could generate economic value far exceeding that of a handful of high-profile AI breakthroughs.

Investment in AI infrastructure must be matched by investment in enterprise digitisation, data governance, managerial capability and workforce skills.

Munesh is an IRS officer. Sunita is AI expert, IKIR & Co. Views are personal



IDBI Bank's long, bumpy road to privatisation

IN LIMBO. The hunt for a buyer for the combined government-LIC stake in the bank is still on



GANGA NARAYAN RATH
CHIRAYU SHARMA

Some institutions age gracefully. IDBI didn't. Built for one job, forced into another, it nearly broke doing it and had to be pulled back by an insurer that wasn't even in banking. Over six decades on, it's still unclear who it belongs to—the government, LIC, or soon, perhaps, a Canadian investment firm.

IDBI wasn't born a bank. Parliament created it on July 1, 1964, as a wholly-owned RBI subsidiary, with the bill passed almost recklessly fast—introduced and cleared in the Lok Sabha the same day, through the Rajya Sabha within a week, and given presidential assent within a month. The RBI Governor called it “the reserve or apex bank of industry.” Its job: pump long-term credit into India's industrial base.

It quickly became the largest source of institutional credit for big industrial projects—fertiliser plants, cement units, petrochemical complexes—in short the “commanding heights.” This was wholesale, government-directed lending, not retail banking, and IDBI did it for nearly 40 years.

TURNING INTO AN ACTUAL BANK That model collapsed after 1990s liberalisation. Development finance institutions everywhere hit the same wall—no cheap funds, heavy market borrowing, rising competition. IDBI's answer was to become a commercial bank itself. In 2004, Parliament corporatised it into IDBI Ltd, folding its decade-old banking arm back into the parent.

But nobody fixed the balance sheet to match. IDBI Bank inherited a loan book built for industrial financing—chunky, long-gestation, single-borrower loans—without the diversified retail deposit base that normally justifies such risk. It had a bank's liabilities and a project financier's assets, a mismatch that sat quietly for years before it blew up.

THE LOSSES ARRIVE It blew up in the mid-2010s. A nationwide corporate bad-loan crisis hit public-sector banks hard, and IDBI Bank took it worse than almost anyone. By May 2017, RBI placed it under Prompt Corrective Action, restricting fresh lending and expansion. The numbers were brutal: a net loss of roughly ₹8,238 crore in FY2018, gross NPAs near 28-30 per cent of advances, thin Tier-1 capital, and three straight years of negative returns. This was a bank on stretcher.

Before LIC entered, the Centre had already infused roughly ₹10,600 crore in FY 2017-18, on top of about ₹2,200 crore between FY15 and FY17. It helped, but losses kept outstripping the infusions—and continuing to bankroll it clashed with a government trying to shrink its commercial footprint, not expand it.

ENTER LIC

The rescue came, oddly, from the Life Insurance Corporation, which already held a modest stake. In January 2019, after IRDAI's approval, LIC acquired a 51 per cent stake, becoming majority owner. RBI promptly reclassified IDBI Bank as private-sector—a paradox,

The government wanted the roughly ₹66,000 crore deal done by end-March 2026. It missed that deadline — bids reportedly came in below reserve price

since its controlling shareholder was a state-owned insurer.

LIC committed real capital (estimates range from ₹13,000 crore to over ₹21,000 crore across phases) and agreed to eventually cut its holding to around 15 per cent within five to seven years, per insurance-sector caps. Its ownership was always meant as a bridge. The effect was immediate: capital adequacy jumped from 8.14 per cent to 11.58 per cent by March 2019. LIC also gained rights to nominate the Chairman, MD and CEO, and Deputy MDs—real influence, even as regulators insisted this wasn't a conventional takeover.

There was business logic too: IDBI's 1,800-plus branches gave LIC a bancassurance channel, while LIC's agent network and capital gave IDBI what it lacked. The plan: shift lending from concentrated corporate exposure towards retail, MSME and agriculture.

LARGER DISINVESTMENT STORY Indian disinvestment runs on two tracks—strategic disinvestment (selling government stake plus control) and minority stake sales (IPOs, buybacks, no control transfer). The 2021 New Public Sector Enterprise Policy sharpened this: four strategic sectors, including financial services, would retain minimal government presence; everything else would be privatised, merged, or closed. By 2022, PSU boards were even empowered to recommend their own subsidiaries' divestment.

IDBI Bank sits squarely at this intersection—nominally private, majority-owned by a public insurer, and an institution the government has long wanted to exit.

THE SALE THAT WON'T CLOSE

The hunt for a buyer of the roughly 60-61 per cent combined government-LIC stake began with 2022-23 expressions of interest, followed by a long search for a “fit and

proper” promoter. Names in the frame included Fairfax Financial Holdings, Emirates NBD, and (reportedly without a formal bid) Kotak Mahindra Bank. Formal bids arrived around February 2026, with Fairfax as apparent frontrunner.

Ironically, while talks dragged, IDBI Bank got dramatically healthier. Gross NPAs fell from near 20 per cent in mid-2022 to around 2.5-3 per cent by 2025; net NPAs dropped to a sliver of a per cent; capital adequacy topped 25 per cent; profits kept growing. The bank became more valuable while the deal stalled—which only pushed up the government's price expectations, making closure harder.

COLD FEET, COLD MARKETS

The government wanted the roughly ₹66,000 crore deal done by end-March 2026. It missed that deadline — bids reportedly came in below reserve price, with weak sentiment and geopolitical risk cited as reasons to pause. Rumours of cancellation in mid-March 2026 hit the stock hard before being denied; DIPAM confirmed the process continues. Reports suggest the government is resetting pricing to relaunch, with the Finance Minister reaffirming privatisation remains the plan. Employee unions continue pushing back, adding friction.

SO, WHO OWNS IDBI BANK?

Officially: the government and LIC, roughly as they have since 2019. Practically: an institution in limbo—private in classification, public in reality—waiting for a buyer willing to meet a price nobody's agreed to yet. The bank itself is no longer the problem; its books are cleaner than in a decade. What remains is timing, valuation, and political will.

Rath is a former central banker, and Sharma is an independent researcher. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 17, 2006

IFFCO venture acquires 1,000 acres in Egypt

Indo Egyptian Fertiliser Company Ltd, the joint venture between Indian Farmers Fertiliser Co-operative Ltd and the Egyptian state-owned El Nasser Mining Company, has won major concessions for its proposed \$325-million phosphoric acid plant in Egypt with an annual capacity of 5 lakh tonnes. The company has already completed acquisition of 1,000 acres of land and has been granted major duty and tax concessions by the Egyptian Government.

Goldman Sachs picks up 7 pc stake in NCDEX

Investment banking firm Goldman Sachs has acquired seven per cent stake, divested by ICICI Bank, in the National Commodity and Derivatives Exchange Ltd (NCDEX) for around \$23.1 million (₹106 crore). The valuation of ICICI Bank's stake increased almost 50 times in the last couple of years.

Gabon oil block likely to slip from OVL's grasp

ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) has been left behind in acquiring stake in one of the three producing blocks in Gabon held by a listed oil firm of Canada. Sources said that OVL's bid was not found good enough to acquire the assets and indications are that it may finally go to China.

Patrick Sykes
Golnar Motevalli

Iran's lead negotiator defended diplomatic efforts to end the war, pushing back against hardliners urging him to abandon a tentative peace deal and average the country's slain supreme leader.

Negotiation “is not tantamount to compromise” and, alongside military strength, is “part of the strategy of resistance and the safeguarding of national interests,” Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said in an interview on state TV late Wednesday. “We must be able to create a synergy between the military and diplomatic approaches,” he said, adding that “to isolate and select one of these two methods as the sole solution is a strategic error.”

The comments appeared to address Iranian officials who've framed

moderates like Ghalibaf and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi as “traitors” for agreeing to a ceasefire in June that they see as a trap designed to buy time for the US to resume a war Iran was winning. Ghalibaf didn't mention anyone by name, citing instead “questions being asked among the people and various groups,” and urging unity among all Iranians.

INCREASING TENSIONS

His address reflects increasing tensions between Iran's hawks and pragmatists. The latter group want to prioritise economic recovery and see diplomacy as one of the avenues to achieve it. The rift intensified amid the funeral for former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which coincided with the rekindling of attacks between the US and Iran.

The widely attended event, which was shaped as a show of resilience from



SPEAKER. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf taking a pragmatic approach

the Islamic Republic, saw widespread calls for vengeance, including from Khamenei's son and successor Mojtaba Khamenei. He is yet to appear in public since being appointed.

During a speech to mourners, hardliner Saeed Jalili urged officials to prioritise the killers murder of Khamenei's killers over talks on economic issues like the unblocking of Iran's frozen funds.

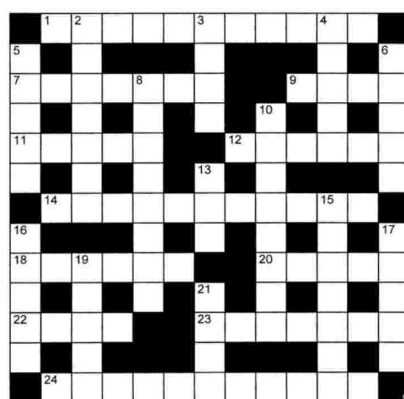
“If you say that we must liberate Iran's assets, well the great asset of our nation was its beloved leadership,” he said. “Today, this nation has a right to defend this position and great capital with revenge. Revenge is the country's right and the duty of those in charge.”

The split also played out on the front pages of the nation's newspapers this week.

On Wednesday, the elected government's official newspaper, Iran, highlighted comments by Ali Khamenei's eldest son Mostafa that “patience is in no way incompatible with taking revenge.”

The June ceasefire effectively collapsed after both sides resumed attacks, with the US reimposing a blockade on Iranian ports and Tehran declaring the Strait of Hormuz shut. Even so, strikes remained far less intense and widespread than during the height of the conflict. BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2695



EASY

ACROSS

1. Disagreement, variance of facts (11)
7. The way one holds oneself (7)
9. Amphibian (4)
11. Be dormant (5)
12. Not attending (6)
14. Arising from differing political ideas (11)
16. Drudges (6)
20. A prize (5)
22. Has a meal (4)
23. Less soiled (7)
24. Defensive metal for warships, tanks etc (6-5)

DOWN

2. As an alternative (7)
3. Large water-jug (4)
4. Bend (5)
5. Involuntary muscular contraction (5)
6. Banded variegated chalcid (5)
8. Truth not established (8)
10. Formally renounce high office (8)
13. Carton (3)
15. In opposition to (7)
16. Michaelmas daisy (5)
17. Embellish (5)
19. Change (5)
21. The maple genus (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Candy prices differ when there's a variance of facts (11)
7. Store up some change for the carriage (7)
9. Ornamental fastening one may get in the throat (4)
11. Go to it for some time off (5)
12. So minded not being there and forgetting about it (6)
14. One sort of ode, with reason, arising from different ways of thinking (11)
16. Works hard at what Britons never shall be (6)
20. Prize for a tied result that is returned (5)
22. Food, popularly, one puts away (4)
23. One who washes will make it so (7)
24. For our part, male may need defensive sheeting (6-5)

DOWN

2. As a replacement it's a den that needs building (7)
3. Large jug that's fresher without its top (4)
4. Line answering to an equation is not straight (5)
5. Mass quietly moving in a sudden convulsive action (5)
6. An entrance made of stone (5)
8. It's not been established how it's taken up over the North repeatedly (8)
10. Sort of bad cat that is surrounded will have to give up office (8)
13. One may have to fight for seats in the theatre (3)
15. Is opposed to a sating of it (7)
16. Flower held up in secret satisfaction (5)
17. Some fuss the Navy takes to deck it (5)
19. In real terms, it may become defective (5)
21. Maple planted out in an acre (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2694

ACROSS 1. Respect 5. Colts 8. Trojans 9. Naked 10. Implicate 12. See 13. Drops 17. Gr. Gladdened 21. Swoon 22. Hapless 24. Scene 25. Sweeten
DOWN 1. Retail 2. Stopped 3. Era 4. Tosca 5. Confessed 6. Likes 7. Slidied 11. Indigence 14. Content 15. Tryts 16. Odds on 18. Grope 20. Aphis 23. Pie

Economy

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2026

IN THE NEWS

INDIA-EU DEAL TO BE SIGNED BY YEAR-END: GOYAL



INDIA AND THE European Union (EU) have agreed to ink the

free trade agreement by the end of this year, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Thursday. Addressing the India-Finland Business Round Table in Helsinki, he said the pact will come into force in the first quarter of 2027.

ITI BAGS ₹856 CR 4G GEARS ORDER FROM BSNL



STATE-RUN TELECOM gear maker ITI on Thursday said it has

bagged an order worth ₹856.39 crore to deploy 4G mobile network for BSNL in the West Zone. ITI Limited has already executed a 4G telecom gear order worth ₹2,640 crore with TCS as a consortium partner for BSNL West Zone.

CBDT raises FY27 cost inflation index for LTCG



THE CENTRAL BOARD OF Direct Taxes (CBDT) has notified the Cost Inflation Index (CII) for 2026-27 (April-March) at 384, up from 376 for FY26. The CII is used to calculate inflation-adjusted long-term gains from the sale of capital assets such as land and houses. The CII will apply from April 1, 2026, and taxpayers will require the number at the time of filing income tax returns in the assessment year 2027-28.

Govt likely to bring bill for MSMEs' ease of doing biz

Govt likely to bring bill for MSMEs' ease of doing biz

THE GOVERNMENT plans to introduce a bill to enhance the ease of doing business for micro, small and medium enterprises and strengthen the mechanism for addressing delayed payments in the upcoming Monsoon Session of Parliament. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Amendment) Bill, 2026, is likely to be taken up for consideration in the session beginning next week.

GAIL reinforces commitment to cleanliness

AS PART OF the nationwide observance of Swachhata Pakhwada 2026, GAIL (India) has undertaken a series of cleanliness, hygiene and community engagement initiatives across its offices, project sites and operational locations throughout the country.

—FE BUREAU & AGENCIES

TALKS ON WITH DATA CENTRE DEVELOPERS, DISCOMS

Power ministry draws AI-era grid road map

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 16

THE POWER MINISTRY is planning to lay a roadmap to ensure energy security for data centre developers, given the huge demand for electricity from this emerging sector.

It has started a dialogue with data centre units, state transmission utilities and distribution companies in this regard.

The deliberations cover reliable supply, dual-grid connectivity, green power, transmission capacity and grid stability, a senior ministry official told FE.

The emerging roadmap is likely to focus on aligning data centre investments with transmission expansion, discom preparedness, green-power availability and storage deployment. With capacity expected to rise more than sixfold by 2031-32, the ministry is seeking to prepare the power system before AI-led investments translate into large electricity loads.

India's data centre capacity is projected to surge from around 1.6 GW currently to 26 GW by 2031-32 and 37 GW by 2040, as the rapid growth of artificial intelligence, cloud computing and digital services drives demand for energy-intensive computing infrastructure.

The discussions involve the Ministry of Power, the Central Electricity Authority, state transmission utilities, discoms and developers, and aim to assess the electricity infrastructure required to support the sharp capacity addition.

"The ministry is discussing the plan with different stakeholders in the data centre sector," the official said. "Reliable power, dual-grid availability, transmission congestion and

PREPARING BLUEPRINT



■ The discussions aim to assess the electricity infrastructure required to support the sharp capacity addition

■ The road map is likely to focus on aligning data centre investments with transmission expansion, discom preparedness, transmission capacity and grid stability

■ Data centres require continuous, high-quality electricity and can add large loads at individual locations

■ India's data centre capacity is projected to surge from around 1.6 GW currently to 26 GW by 2031-32

grid reliability are among the major issues under discussion."

The proposed roadmap will examine how generation resources, transmission networks and local distribution infrastructure can be developed in line with data centre capacity expansion.

Data centres require continuous, high-quality electricity and can add large loads at individual locations. The rise of AI is expected to intensify these requirements as increasingly powerful computing systems consume more electricity and require uninterrupted operations.

Dual-grid availability is a key issue being discussed with developers. Access to separate grid connections can provide supply redundancy and allow facilities to remain operational when one link is affected by an outage, maintenance or network disruption.

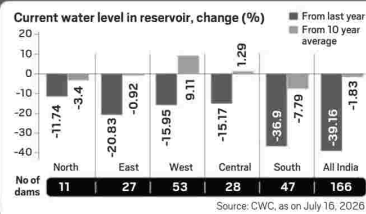
Transmission congestion is also under review, particularly in regions where multiple data centre projects are expected to be concentrated. The ministry is assessing whether existing networks can absorb the proposed loads and where additional lines, substations and connectivity may be required.

Southern states and the western region are among the areas being examined because of their emerging data centre clusters, renewable-energy potential and growing electricity requirements.

The preparedness of discoms will be critical because local distribution networks must provide the final connection to large facilities. Inadequate substations or distribution capacity could affect project timelines even where adequate generation and transmission infrastructure are available.

RESERVOIR LEVELS IMPROVE FOR 2ND WEEK, STILL BELOW 2025 LEVEL

RESERVOIR STORAGE ACROSS the country improved marginally for the second time this season to 34.46% of the capacity on Thursday, from 32.38% reported a week ago, after a revival in monsoon this month. However, overall water storage positions across all the 166 major reservoirs were over 39% below the level prevailing a year ago and close to 2% below normal or a 10-year average level, reports Sandip Das. As per the Central Water Commission, in southern India, 47 major dams are currently at just 28.37%, marginally improving from 24.62% last week, of their combined capacity.



Tighter car fuel-economy norms from FY28

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 16

THE MINISTRY OF Power has proposed a tougher five-year fuel-economy regime for passenger vehicles from April 1, 2027, tightening fleet-average consumption targets while allowing carmakers to use carbon-neutrality benefits, super credits and a compliance-credit mechanism to meet the new standards.

The draft Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) norms, circulated for stakeholder consultation, will cover M1-category passenger vehicles manufactured or imported for sale in India between 2027-28 and 2031-32. The existing CAFE-II

STRICT TARGETS

■ The draft CAFE-III norms will cover M1-category passenger vehicles manufactured or imported between 2027-28 and 2031-32

■ Under the framework, the fuel-consumption target will decline to 3.3273 litres per 100 km by 2031-32

norms are likely to expire on March 31, 2027.

Under the proposed framework, the fuel-consumption target will progressively decline from 3.996 litres per 100 km, equivalent to 94.76 gCO₂ per km, in 2027-28 to 3.3273 litres



■ The move is intended to provide automobile makers a regulatory path to make more fuel-efficient models

per 100 km, or 78.90 gCO₂ per km, by 2031-32.

Compliance will be assessed across two blocks, comprising an initial three-year period followed by a second block of two years. The phased tightening is intended to provide automobile

manufacturers a predictable regulatory path for developing and deploying more fuel-efficient models.

The ministry has proposed Carbon Neutrality Factors for ethanol, biofuel and compressed biogas for the first time. The mechanism will permit specified reductions in declared tailpipe carbon dioxide emissions before a manufacturer's compliance is assessed.

At the current ethanol-blending level, an 8% Carbon Neutrality Factor has been proposed. For compressed biogas and biofuel, the reduction will be linked to the prevailing actual blending level.

Manufacturers will also be eligible to claim compliance

UPI above ₹2,000 may attract 0.5% MDR for large traders

● No levy for biz with turnover of up to ₹1.5 crore

PRASANTA SAHU
New Delhi, July 16

THE CENTRE MAY reintroduce a merchant discount rate (MDR) on UPI transactions of ₹2,000 and above for large merchants to compensate banks and payment service providers for rising operational costs and technology investments, sources said.

The proposed MDR on UPI payments accepted by large merchants won't exceed 0.5% of the monetary value, a source said. MDR is a fee paid by businesses to payment processors for accepting digital payments. However, merchants and

KEY METRICS



businesses with an annual turnover of up to ₹1.5 crore are likely to be exempt from the levy, irrespective of the transaction amount. A decision on the proposal is expected within a month, the sources added.

Larger merchants are better placed to absorb the MDR or pass on the cost to customers,

whereas small businesses have limited ability to do so, the government reckons.

Imposing MDR only on higher-value transactions by larger merchants would not hurt, as transactions of ₹2,000 and above account for just 4% of person-to-merchant (P2M) UPI transactions. In comparison,

86% of P2M transactions are below ₹500, while 10% fall in the ₹501-2,000 range, according to FY26 data.

The government scrapped MDR on UPI and RuPay debit card transactions from January 2020 to encourage digital payments and expand merchant acceptance.

Centre raises diesel, ATF export levies by ₹7 per litre; cuts duty on petrol

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 16

THE CENTRE HAS raised export taxes on diesel and aviation turbine fuel (ATF) by ₹7 per litre each from July 16, tightening curbs on overseas sales as escalating US-Iran tensions and disruption risks around the Strait of Hormuz push global energy prices higher.

The Special Additional Excise Duty on diesel exports has been increased by 82% to ₹15.50 a litre from ₹8.50, while the levy on ATF has jumped 93% to ₹14.50 from ₹7.50, according to a finance ministry notification. Petrol exporters received relief with a duty cut of ₹7.5% to ₹2.50 a litre from ₹4.

The revised rates, effective for the fortnight beginning July

TIGHTENED CURBS

■ The Special Additional Excise Duty on diesel exports has been increased by 82% to ₹15.50 a litre from ₹8.50

■ The levy on ATF has jumped 93% to ₹14.50 from ₹7.50

■ Petrol exporters received relief with a duty cut of ₹7.5% to ₹2.50 a litre from ₹4



■ The revised rates will be effective for the fortnight beginning July 16

16, mark the government's latest attempt to retain more transport and aviation fuels in the domestic market while international prices and refining margins remain elevated.

The government first imposed export duties on diesel and ATF

on March 27 after the West Asia conflict escalated and has reviewed the levies every fortnight. Petrol exports were brought under the windfall-tax framework from May 16.

The government clarified that duties on petrol and diesel

cleared for domestic consumption remain unchanged, ensuring that the latest revision applies only to export consignments.

The sharp increase makes diesel and ATF exports substantially less attractive for refiners, strengthening the incentive to supply the domestic market. The move is intended to prevent exporters from benefiting disproportionately from the gap between domestic and international prices after the surge in global crude and product rates.

The contrasting reduction in the petrol levy reflects a product-specific approach rather than a uniform restriction on fuel exports. While diesel and ATF face a ₹7-a-litre increase, the petrol duty has been lowered by ₹1.50.

Kharif sowing down 16% as monsoon stays patchy

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, July 16

SOWING OF KHARIF crops, including rice, pulses, oilseeds and cotton, was down 16% year-on-year at 53.1 million hectares (mha) as of July 10, agriculture ministry data showed on Thursday, reflecting the impact of a delayed and uneven monsoon.

The sown area was nearly 10 mha lower than a year ago, accounting for just 48% of the normal kharif acreage of 110 mha during the period.

Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said contingency plans have been prepared for all rainfall-deficient districts. Cumulative rainfall during June 1-July 16 stood at 231.3 mm, 23.9% below the long-period average (LPA), according to the India Meteorological Department. While the mon-

soon deficit in June was as high as 40%, rainfall in July so far has been 4% above the benchmark.

Region-wise, northwest India (-22%), east and northeast (-36%), central India (-14%) and the south peninsula (-27%) have received deficient rainfall so far this monsoon season.

Contingency plans have been prepared for all rainfall-deficient districts

Chouhan also said there is an urgent need to boost productivity in pulses and oilseeds, as the country relies heavily on imports to meet domestic demand. "If countries without access to genetically modified seeds can get better yields in pulses, why can't India?" he said at the 98th ICAR Foundation Day. Highlighting the wide productivity gap across crops, Chouhan said, "An acre under maize can produce over 100 quintals, against roughly 30-35 quintals for rice and just about five quintals for pulses such as gram or moong."

He said farmers with access to irrigation in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and other eastern states tend to shift towards rice and wheat, while the country continues to import substantial quantities of pulses and edible oils to meet domestic demand.

\$300-bn patent expiries chance for India beyond generics: Niti

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, July 16

NEARLY \$300 BILLION worth of blockbuster biologic drugs are set to lose patent protection by 2030, presenting India with a rare opportunity to climb the global pharmaceutical value chain, according to a Niti Aayog report that calls for a strategic shift from conventional generics to biologics, biosimilars and AI-driven drug discovery.

The report projects the global biosimilars market to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17%, far outpacing the 2% growth expected in traditional generics, while noting that biologics will account for 40% of medicines sold globally by 2035. It also estimates that capturing even 1% of the global biosimilars market — currently valued at \$73.7 billion — could generate annual



revenues of around ₹6,400 crore for India by 2030.

To capitalise on this opportunity, Niti Aayog has proposed a dedicated BioPharmaNext mission to position India as a global hub for affordable biologics, biosimilars, monoclonal antibodies, vaccines, and cell and gene therapies by 2035. It argued that India's pharmaceutical industry must evolve beyond its long-standing dependence on generic medi-

cines and transition towards innovation-led biopharmaceutical manufacturing.

"BioPharmaNext should build on the ₹10,000 crore BioPharma SHAKTI outlay and the network of 3 new National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPER) to drive this commercial ambition with institutional depth," the report stated.

It also recommended deploying AI across the pharmaceutical value chain and creating an exclusive regulatory sandbox for biologics, gene therapies and AI-designed drugs. By leveraging AI-driven drug discovery, large-scale genomics, BioDigital Twins and automated Design-Build-Test-Learn (DBTL) engines, the report estimated that drug development time could be cut by 60-80%, while research costs could decline by 20-30%.

Opinion

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2026

Made in India aircraft

The country is making encouraging progress on smaller, regional aircraft projects

THE POSSIBILITIES OF assembling a civilian passenger aircraft in the country are a policy priority of the National Democratic Alliance regime. Last month, the first Made in India Airbus C295 military transport aircraft had a successful maiden test flight from the final assembly line in Vadodra, Gujarat. In end-October 2022, at the foundation ceremony of this manufacturing facility, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India would soon be manufacturing big passenger aircraft proudly bearing the words "Made in India". On the civilian aviation front, this ambition remains aspirational. However, discernible progress on helicopters and smaller passenger aircraft projects can boost prospects of the Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik (Udan) scheme that provides connectivity to smaller cities. Besides the C295, Airbus and the Tata Group have inaugurated the final assembly line for H125 helicopters that can bridge the last mile for regional connectivity.

Civil Aviation Minister Kijarapu Rammohan Naidu indicated "encouraging progress" in smaller aircraft projects in a media interview. Brazilian aerospace major Embraer and Adani Defence & Aerospace have exchanged an enhanced Memorandum of Understanding to establish a final assembly line for the E175 regional jet with a target to roll out the first plane by 2028. India is expected to require at least 500 aircraft in the 80-146 seat segments over the next 20 years. Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) has partnerships, including collaborating with the Russian company, United Aircraft Corporation, to manufacture the 87-108 seat regional jet, SJ-100. HAL has also conducted the test flight of the civilian helicopter, Dhruv NG. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-National Aerospace Laboratories has completed the design of the 19-seater Saras MK II — the test flight of which is scheduled for the last quarter of FY28.

These regional aircraft projects are bound to strengthen Udan if there is a better alignment between the economics of the aviation business and the imperatives of regional connectivity. Unfortunately, there are serious structural issues as only 7-10% of the Udan routes remain viable once viability gap funding is ended. This funding incentivises private airlines to provide affordable air travel to hitherto unconnected airports in smaller cities. To make it work better, the government enhanced outlays and shifted to a broader aviation infrastructure programme of airport development, operations, and maintenance, including indigenous aircraft acquisition. But the modified Udan still does not resolve demand-side and cost challenges. Smaller aircraft typically have higher per-seat costs and limited tolerance for low load factors. Resolving the economics of this issue is essential for the induction of smaller regional aircraft.

But the higher level of policy ambition on bigger passenger aircraft will take more time to bear fruit. Despite record orders for passenger aircraft from domestic airlines, Airbus and Boeing have resisted policy pressures for final assembly lines citing the critical mass of their investments in engineering, supply chain, and maintenance in the country. Persuading them to set up shop in India needs much greater strategic intent. If the C295 and H125 helicopter deals are taken as exemplars, there is a warrant to similarly reconfigure the historic fleet orders by domestic airlines to ensure that a certain proportion are finally assembled here. Otherwise, there is no deal. But if we have to do it indigenously, making a big passenger aircraft will take more than a decade and substantial resources as China incurred with the single-aisle C919.

The ghosts of the past have changed

TEXTBOOKS, FOR A STUDENT, represent ultimate knowledge — a book that they spend religiously annotating and poring over is, in many cases, no less than scripture. And a majority of Indian students spanning generations have been sufficiently haunted by the omniscient National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) logo prominently featured on almost all books till class 10. So, it was with amusement (and slight vindication from my teenage self) that I saw NCERT in the news, earning ire over its social science textbooks from a variety of sources.

The most recent skirmish was with the nation's apex court itself, as a now-previous version of the textbook for class 8 — which explored challenges faced by the Indian judiciary, especially its significant backlog of 56 million cases. Following a swift rap on the knuckles, the offensive version was promptly retracted and replaced with a suitable edition that removed the "reckless" sections as well as reworded the section on critical thinking — it now asks why justice is important in a fair society rather than why an independent judiciary is necessary.

The change has been debated sufficiently. However, the idea that a scripture could be edited is far more fascinating, as are its effects. With one reprimand, the public interest litigation is now worth 3 marks instead of the factors contributing to judicial backlog — the shortage of judges, cumbersome procedures, and weak infrastructure (2.5 if your answer has spelling errors).

This is not limited to apex court interventions, surely. "Rationalisation" has been a favoured tool for education boards, and the New Education Policy makes it one of its salient features. A "need-based exercise" undertaken to "reduce cognitive load", however, has made the Mughals disappear, minimised the 2002 Gujarat riots, and reminded education boards of the Emergency after 21 years.

Compared to the students that were processed by the schooling system before 2026 (the Central Board of Secondary Education curriculum), the current lot has to deal with a vastly different past. Until 2025, 14-year-olds were required to understand that developments in the West influenced the trajectory of the modern world — the French and Russian revolutions, along with the rise of Nazism, connected the themes of revolution, politics, everyday life, and the global echoes of these events. However, for this year's batch, the past entails the genesis of civilisation in its various cradles and the structure of society that emerged from them; and how Indian knowledge traditions, art, and trade came to be.

Going over this reframed, I also wonder how the events unfolding today will be cherry-picked by education boards even as early as 25 years from now. Will the Covid-19 pandemic warrant a separate chapter? Will the Black Lives Matter movement be a box on a page that teachers would allow to be skipped? Will there be a cautionary tale, complete with five factors that warranted Anthropocene to warn the world; and will Donald Trump receive a dedicated long answer question on how was a peacemaker slighted by the Nobel Committee? Moreover, will future textbooks remember India's tariff negotiations as a diplomatic victory, a reluctant compromise, or merely another section in the shifting balance of global trade?

Standup comedian Kanan Gill, in his special *Yours Sincerely, Kanan Gill*, outlined the premise that the erstwhile education system's focus on "learning by heart" was not misplaced. "Because the ultimate goal of the education system is to replace your heart with a textbook," he says, positing that if this occurs, you can never die as "you have never lived." The present system tweaks this, of course. The textbook heart remains, still beating to the rhythm of the pen-and-paper test. However, it has been rationalised and retooled for an entirely new cohort of learners. It is more ergonomic and less heavy. And yet, it doesn't change the possibility of a 14-year-old being haunted by their history textbook 10 years hence — it only rearranges the reasons for it.



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● COST OF COMPLIANCE

SUPREME COURT'S KOTAK RULING ELEVATES A TIMING RULE OVER THE VERY DUTY IT WAS MEANT TO SERVE

Don't override investor interests

THE SUPREME COURT'S recent decision in the Kotak mutual fund case has caused unease among not only the mutual fund industry, but also among all fund managers, and those who owe a fiduciary duty towards their clients. The term "fiduciary duty" can be vague, and varies with the relationship between the person who owes the duty and the person to whom it is owed, but it invariably involves a duty of good faith, trust, and honesty. In the specific context of fund managers, it requires them to act in the best interest, and for the benefit of the investors.

Kotak MF launched six close-ended schemes, which were to mature during April to May 2019. Out of the ₹1,625 crore collected by the schemes, approximately ₹266 crore was invested in debentures of two Essel Group companies. This was secured by pledging shares of Zee Limited, to the tune of 1.5 times the schemes' exposure. When Zee's price collapsed in early 2019 and lenders across the market began invoking their pledges, the cover fell below the agreed level.

At that point, Kotak MF could either enforce its pledge at once, selling a large block of Zee into a falling market and crystallising a loss of approximately ₹376 crore for its unitholders, or extend the debentures and pursue an orderly recovery. The former option would have further lowered Zee's shares, as well as harmed the other lenders, and the latter option, which Kotak MF chose, resulted in profits to the unitholders.

By extending the debentures, the schemes were not wound up on their maturity dates in April to May 2019, resulting in a breach of the Mutual Fund Regulations. Instead, the unitholders were paid in part, and the balance was paid out by September 2019, about four-



SANDEEP PAREKH

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five months after the schemes should have been wound up. After completing its inquiries, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) penalised Kotak MF, its senior management, as well as the trustees. The Securities Appellate Tribunal, while removing certain directions, largely upheld SEBI's action, which was then affirmed by the Supreme Court (SC) as well.

The ultimate decision taken by Kotak MF and its officers is aligned with their fiduciary duties.

The SC relies on investors' awareness of risk in investing in securities while arriving at its conclusions, and the obligations on Kotak MF under the regulatory framework. Surprisingly, the apex court has missed the central point that Kotak MF was required to act in the best interest, and for the benefit of its unitholders. In fact, the mutual fund regulations mandate that investments are to be taken in the interest of unitholders. Any fiduciary asked to choose between those outcomes on behalf of the people whose money it manages would choose what Kotak MF chose. That is their job.

According to the SC, excusing a profitable breach would incentivise the next one, in a progression from profit to greed and from greed to systemic failure. But this reads conduct backwards, from result to motive. In early 2019 no one knew whether the standstill would hold or collapse. The decision had to be taken under uncertainty, on the information then available, as every investment decision is. A fiduciary who picks the course that appears least harmful to investors, and is later proved right, has not acted out of greed. Prudence is measured before the event, not after it. A court cannot call the outcome immaterial and, in the same breath, read culpability out of it.

The deeper flaw is the assumption that compliance and investor protection always run together. The winding-up rule exists to return unitholders their money on the promised date and to stop a closed scheme carrying open-ended risk. If applied to the letter, Kotak MF would have had to sell Zee's shares in a collapsing market, resulting in the very harm the framework is intended to avoid. The fund's fiduciary duty pulled the other way. When a timing rule and the duty it serves point in opposite directions, the investor protection argument is far from puerile. The harshness of the judgment sends a message: it tells a fiduciary that

A regulatory philosophy that says outcomes are immaterial cannot govern actors whose defining legal duty is to produce good outcomes

the safe course is mechanical compliance even where compliance would hurt the investor. A regulatory philosophy that says outcomes are immaterial cannot govern actors whose defining legal duty is to produce good outcomes.

the safe course is mechanical compliance even where compliance would hurt the investor. A regulatory philosophy that says outcomes are immaterial cannot govern actors whose defining legal duty is to produce good outcomes.

The mutual fund regulations do not contemplate a situation where a promoter-pledge structure collapses 90 days before maturity, because regulations cannot contemplate everything. When the unforeseen happens, we rely on fiduciaries to exercise judgement. Instead, the SC announced that it could not examine the commercial prudence of the decision, and then penalised the decision anyway. It refused to weigh the economics while punishing an economic choice.

Kotak MF used neither, and provided SEBI with limited information until it was asked, days after the first schemes had matured. That may not be ideal, but in the absence of a babysitter rule, is not a legal breach. A pathway similar to what was implemented by Kotak, which SEBI introduced in 2018, called side-pocketing, was not available to Kotak as it was prospective. In economic terms, what Kotak did was nearly the same. What Kotak did was act in a regulatory vacuum, implementing a solution the regulator itself recognised in 2018. Given the above, attaching personal responsibility to senior functionaries of the manager and the trustee is also over the top regulation. Outcomes cannot be immaterial when they would exonerate and decide when they condemn. The rules exist to protect the investor, not the other way round.

Views are personal

Co-authored with **Parker Karia** and **Sudishtha Moorthi**, Senior Associate and Associate at Finsec Law Advisors

Dry monsoon may not spike food inflation



DIPTI DESHPANDE BHAVI SHAH

Respectively Principal Economist and Junior Economist, Crisil

FORECASTS OF BELOW-NORMAL rainfall have cast a shadow over India's agricultural growth and rekindled fears of food inflation. While rains in July have somewhat made up for a parched June, anxieties abound.

The emergence of El Niño conditions raises the prospect of an erratic monsoon, bringing not only rainfall deficits but also bouts of excessive precipitation that can be equally disruptive to agricultural activity. Yet history suggests a weak monsoon is not an infallible harbinger of surging food prices.

A review of three notable weak-monsoon episodes over the past 25 years reveals a more nuanced reality. In years marked by deficient rainfall, agricultural output has typically suffered, but food inflation has not always followed suit.

The contrasting experiences of fiscal 2010, 2016, and 2019 illustrate this divergence vividly. Each period was characterised by rainfall shortfalls and a contraction in crop gross value added (GVA) — which accounts for roughly 62% of agriculture-sector GVA. Yet the inflation outcomes could scarcely have been more different. Fiscal 2010 stands out as a textbook case of monsoon-induced inflationary stress. Seasonal rainfall finished a staggering 23% below the long-period average, making it one of the most severe monsoon failures in recent memory. Compounding the damage, the weak monsoon followed another difficult year for agriculture, deepening the strain on farm output. Consecutive contractions in crop GVA culminated in double-digit food and headline inflation.

The El Niño-induced monsoon failures of fiscal 2015 and 2016 painted a differ-

ent picture. Rainfall deficiencies of 12-14% for two consecutive years once again dragged crop GVA into contraction. Yet, unlike in fiscal 2010, food inflation eased rather than accelerated.

A similar pattern emerged in fiscal 2019. Despite seasonal rainfall ending about 9% below normal and monsoon months recording widespread deficiencies, food inflation remained remarkably subdued even as crop GVA contracted.

These episodes hint at a weakening link between rainfall and food inflation. While the monsoon remains a critical determinant of agricultural output, its influence over retail food prices appears increasingly tempered by policy interventions.

A key factor behind this changing dynamic has been the growing willingness — and ability — of policymakers to intervene swiftly when weather shocks threaten food supplies. Over the past decade, a broad arsenal of measures was deployed to dampen price pressures.

Fiscal 2016 offers a particularly instructive example, the government strengthened buffer stock of pulses, tightened action against hoarding, enabled imports through the Price Stabilisation Fund, and restrained MSP increases. Similar interventions in subsequent years helped limit the impact of supply shocks on retail prices.

Additionally, production-linked measures such as extension of fertiliser subsidies and provision of climate-resilient

alternatives. Banks need to ensure ATMs remain functional and well-stocked, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. At the same time, digital platforms must continue improving security against fraud and cyber-attacks. A balanced payment ecosystem offers greater resilience to public confidence. Financial inclusion is best achieved when every citizen can choose the mode of payment that suits individual circumstances.

— Sakunthala, Coimbatore

Horticulture and poultry products could still face inflationary pressures if above-normal temperatures and heatwave conditions affect yields and production costs

This structural evolution finds support in empirical research. A 2023 RBI Bulletin study reported a non-linear relationship between southwest monsoon rainfall and inflation — even after controlling for agricultural growth — suggesting that rainfall alone is no longer a sufficient predictor of price pressures.

Against this backdrop, while weak monsoon in fiscal 2027 will adversely impact agricultural production, it cannot be a definite predictor of high food inflation. Rainfall forecasts point to a monsoon

that could finish ~10% below normal. Rainfall in June was ~40% deficient — the weakest start since 2014 — and sowing at the end of June lagged on-year levels, particularly for oilseeds, pulses, and cereals.

Aggregate seasonal rainfall may be a less reliable predictor of inflation today but the timing of rainfall could still matter. Since 2012, food inflation has remained above trend in five of the eight years amid deficient June rainfall. Early-season rainfall shortfalls can affect sowing decisions, acreage, crop expectations, and even policy responses, with implications that persist even when monsoon performance improves later in the season.

This suggests that monitoring intra-seasonal rainfall may be just as important as tracking cumulative rainfall. At the same time, policy buffers remain strong. As of May-end, rice and wheat stocks in the central pool remained far above the prescribed buffer norms, while measures such as extending duty-free imports of tur until March 2027 should help ease supply pressures.

However, not all food categories are equally protected. Horticulture and poultry products could still face inflationary pressures, if above-normal temperatures and heatwave conditions, as forecast by the India Meteorological Department, affect yields and production costs. Similarly, higher global prices could keep edible oil inflation elevated.

The broader conclusion, however, is unmistakable. Weak monsoons continue to pose a meaningful risk to agricultural growth. But unlike in previous decades, they no longer offer a definitive road map for food inflation.

Views are personal

ents. Yet the optimism needs a note of caution too, since machine translation still struggles with cultural nuance and can misrepresent tone in politically sensitive contexts. Platforms should invest in better error-flagging rather than assuming fluency equals accuracy. Genuine cross-cultural understanding still needs more than just faster translation.

— Prakash Paramasivan, Neelembur

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

[OUR TAKE]

Wager beneath the mission

The second phase of India's semiconductor mission spells out a realistic ambition for the country

The Union Cabinet's approval of the ₹1.27 lakh crore India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 broadens the government's chip push from the fab to the ecosystem around it. Six pillars now cover chip design, machines and materials, more fabs, advanced packaging, research and development, and the design-engineer pipeline the world is a million short of. Silicon photonics and advanced-node research qualify for support of up to 75%. This is the structural correction ISM 1.0 needed.

That correction comes with unusual candour about limits. The ecosystem, officials said, must first stabilise at 28nm — a mature node accounting for around 70% of global chip demand and running everything from cars to power grids. The advanced range of 7-3nm — an entirely new generation of chips powering today's AI revolution — is on the roadmap for 2032, and sits under research, not manufacturing. Fiscal support has been recalibrated downward too: 40% for silicon logic and memory fabs, from 50% under ISM 1.0. IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's rationale, that a maturing ecosystem needs less subsidy, is a calibration industrial policy rarely admits to. It should be credited.

To be sure, calibration is not sovereignty. The chips that anchor the frontier of the AI economy will not be manufactured on this mission's horizon. Where the frontier itself will sit five years from now is unknowable. The target for 100,000 design engineers over five years is a bet on India as the design and services layer, not as the chip-making sovereign.

The government has answered the sovereignty question by other means. "Hundred per cent self-reliance is difficult," a senior official said, framing the West, especially the US, as a trusted supplier. The phrase deserves attention. Trusted supply chains are today front and centre of geopolitical conversations dominated by the China versus West rivalry. Placing India within the layer of trust that earns access to the bleeding edge of technology is a wager on the interdependent order that built this technology — an order under stress now, but not entirely irrelevant. ISM 2.0 will build the parts of the semiconductor economy India can realistically own. The rest it will buy from partners the government has judged trustworthy. This may be the only wager available on the mission's timeline — and the most realistic. Industrial policy rarely names its bets.

Unacceptable to leave children unvaccinated

Vaccines save millions of lives every year through disease prevention and reduced morbidity. With considerable State and private sector support across the globe, national immunisation programmes are taken to recipients' doorstep in many countries, greatly eliminating the price and access barriers. It is for this reason that the latest World Health Organization (WHO) figure of 13.5 million "zero dose" children in 2025 for the three-dose schedule of the diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus (DPT) vaccine is worrisome. Add to it the under-vaccinated children, and the population of infants outside the cover of full immunisation rises to 20 million. India saw close to 700,000 "zero dose" cases last year compared to 1.6 million such cases in 2023, reversing Covid-19-era setbacks to routine immunisation. India, however, makes for the bulk of the 1.2 million unvaccinated infants left unvaccinated in the WHO's South East Asia Region in 2025. Each unvaccinated child spells failure for the global fight against infectious diseases. In a hyperconnected world, disease outbreaks in distant shores don't remain distant. Pathogens circulating within unvaccinated populations increase risks of mutations, which can undo immunisation progress at home and elsewhere.

The bulk of the zero-dose/dropout populations are in conflict affected or vulnerable countries. The international community, including global bodies, must push for conflict to yield to health care and humanitarian outreach to ensure immunisation coverage remains a bulwark against outbreaks and future pandemics. Countries like India must double down on their efforts to bring immunisation and institutional maternal and neonatal care to at-risk populations. With the synergised heft of the domestic pharma industry and diplomatic outreaches, India can bring health and hope to millions of beleaguered children across the world.

[VITAL SIGNS]

Ramanan Laxminarayan



Old wine, but it's time it promises potency

India's new draft health policy has a stronger implementation pathway but needs to draw lessons on why earlier policies didn't work

India's draft National Health Research Policy, which was released for public comment in July, has notable strengths.

First, the policy draft directly confronts administrative barriers, many of which lie within the department of health research's authority to address. Per the new policy, funding agencies would be required to publish turnaround times from application to project closure. Unspent funds could be carried across financial years. Single ethics review would be permitted for multi-site studies so that the same protocol need not be approved multiple times.

Even if the policy achieved only these reforms and nothing else, it would represent substantial progress over the current situation.

Second, the draft proposes a fundamental rethink of how research should be evaluated. The proposed Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Impact of Research and Innovation Scale extends assessment beyond publications and citations to include clinical translation, policy influence, indige-

nous technology, mentorship and community benefit. The current heavy emphasis on publication counts has tended to favour smaller, often descriptive studies over research with greater translational potential.

Third, the draft proposes treating public-funded research infrastructure as national assets accessible to researchers beyond the institutions that house them. This welcome step has been a major driver of research in other settings, but how this will be implemented in India remains to be seen. Organisations such as the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP) in Bengaluru already provide a successful model for shared scientific infrastructure.

Fourth, the draft recognises that data are now a core component of research infrastructure. It proposes strengthening disease registries and biobanks while promoting secure sharing of health data across institutions. Implemented well, these investments could lower the cost and increase the quality of health research long after individual projects have ended.

Fifth, the policy seeks to broaden where research is conducted, rather than concentrating capacity within a handful of premier institutes. It envisages medical colleges and district hospitals becoming active participants in multicentre research.

Sixth, the draft presents health research as an opportunity to establish India as a leader in clinical research and

affordable medical technologies relevant to low- and middle-income countries. That ambition is well-aligned with India's growing scientific capabilities but will require policies and frameworks that enable data access.

Finally, the policy addresses India's research workforce. India produces only about 15 medical science PhDs per million people each year, remarkably low for a country aspiring to scientific leadership. The draft proposes expanding MD-PhD programmes, creating clinician-scientist career pathways, establishing dedicated research posts within medical colleges, and supporting women and researchers returning from career breaks or from overseas. These are sensible reforms, but tripling PhD production by 2037 is unlikely without a corresponding increase in funding.

These are worthwhile reforms. The question is whether this policy can achieve what its predecessors, the earlier National Health Research Policy, first released in 2007 and revised in 2011, could not.

Once the new language around One Health, Artificial Intelligence and digital infrastructure is set aside, much of the underlying diagnosis is familiar. Earlier policy documents also pointed out that research is scattered across ministries, capacity is locked in a few institutions, medical colleges barely publish, and evidence rarely reaches policy. The proposed solutions have changed little. The 2007 policy also called for faster release of research



India produces only about 15 medical science PhDs per million people each year, very low for a country aspiring to scientific leadership. IT ARCHIVE

grants and reduced bureaucracy. The ideas around mission-mode projects, a standing fund for outbreaks, and research made compulsory in medical colleges have all been proposed before. Even on funding, the idea of allocating 2% of the public health budget to research has been advocated. Yet, nearly two decades later, total health research investment is only 0.024% of GDP. The new policy proposes increasing this to 0.072% by 2037 and 0.15% by 2047. A six-fold increase over two decades sounds ambitious, but even this is achieved, India's investment would still be modest by international standards and unlikely to support the research ecosystem expected of the world's most populous nation.

The current draft promises that public investment "shall rise progressively and predictably," yet it also acknowledges that the department of health research cannot direct the budgets of the department of biotechnology, the department of science and technology, CSIR or the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, all of which finance health research. The policy sets national spending targets without identifying the institutional mechanism that would ensure they are achieved.

To bridge the funding gap, the policy proposes to rely on private and philanthropic funding. The instruments — advance market commitments, chal-

lenge prizes, CSR funding and public-private partnerships — are sensible, but none is new. The draft would be stronger if it explained why mechanisms that have yielded limited results in the past are likely to succeed now.

The current draft is stronger on implementation steps, but is that enough to make a difference this time? Publishing turnaround times for research proposals is a welcome step, but accountability should extend much further. A possible remedy would be to constitute an external body to hold the policy to account. Not the usual assembly of institutional heads, but a mix of scientists, public voices, and working researchers drawn from the bench rather than institutional leadership only, charged with publishing an annual assessment of how far implementation has matched intent. If the department of health research is willing to be judged each year against what it has promised, there is reason to hope this policy can revive India's health research. Without that seriousness of accountability, and a firm financial commitment from the finance ministry, it will join the long line of government policy documents that were filed and forgotten.

Ramanan Laxminarayan is president, One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal

Teja Singh Samundri is a hero for Sikhism & India

There are inheritances that do not come as wealth or possessions but as values, stories, and a sense of duty passed from one generation to the next. For my family, the legacy of my grandfather, Sardar Teja Singh Samundri, is one such inheritance. His name belongs not only to our family history but also to the history of Punjab, the Sikh community, and India's freedom struggle.

On his 100th death anniversary, it is important to remember Sardar Teja Singh Samundri not only as a martyr but also as one of the architects of modern Sikh public life. He was among the founding figures of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), a leading force in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, a champion of education and dalit emancipation, an advocate of an informed public sphere and a defender of Sikh, civic and political rights.

Born in 1882 into a Sandhu Sikh family associated with Tarn Taran and later Samundri in Lyallpur district, he came from rural Punjab, where faith, community and service were closely connected. After serving in the British Indian Army, his deeper loyalty remained with Sikh principles and the dignity of his people. Though he had limited formal education, he possessed remarkable courage, clarity of purpose and commitment to public duty.

The early 20th century witnessed growing demands to reform Sikh gurdwaras, many of which had fallen under colonial regime-backed hereditary *malhants*. Their resources, intended for the *sangat* and *sewa*, were often treated as private property. Reform, therefore, became not merely a religious cause but a struggle for accountability, dignity, and the community's right to govern its own sacred institutions.

Sardar Teja Singh Samundri emerged as one of the most respected leaders of this movement. The establishment of the SGPC, asserted that Sikh institutions belonged to the Panth rather than colonial patronage or private control.

During the Rakab Ganj Sahib agitation in Delhi, when colonial authorities demolished part of the gurdwara's boundary wall, he joined the campaign to restore it. What the British

regarded as an administrative matter was, for Sikhs, a question of religious honour. The successful restoration demonstrated that disciplined, non-violent resistance could compel the colonial government to retreat. His leadership became especially significant during the Gurmukh Morcha of 1922. Through his steadfast guidance, the non-violent agitation evolved into a broader mass movement, drawing support from people across religious and political backgrounds. This strengthened the spirit of unity in Punjab's struggle for religious freedom and the larger national movement.

His sacrifices were also deeply personal. Following the Nankana Sahib massacre of 1921, when the Akali press faced severe financial penalties, he offered surety even at the risk of losing his agricultural land. On another occasion, he pledged much of his land to finance an SGPC legal appeal.

His standing within the Sikh community was further recognised in 1923 when he was chosen among the Panj Pyaras to lead the *kar seva* for cleaning the Golden Temple sarovar. In Sikh tradition, such recognition reflected trust earned through humility, service, and sacrifice.

Education remained central to his vision. He helped establish several educational institutions in Punjab. At a time when women's education was neglected in many parts of society, the establishment of schools at Sarhali and Lyallpur in 1917 was a forward-looking act that demonstrated his conviction that education was not a privilege reserved for a few.

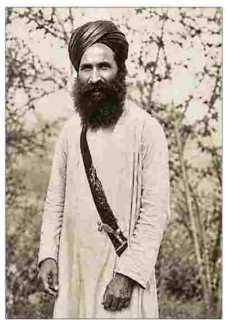
He also recognised the importance of the press. Alongside other Sikh leaders, he supported establishment of newspapers and publications, including *Hindustan Times*, that gave voice to the reform movement and challenged colonial narratives.

His final test came after the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925. The British-imposed Akali and SGPC leaders. Even after the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 transferred control of major shrines to the community, the colonial authorities wanted imprisoned leaders to give written assurances that they would not continue agitation or question the provisions imposed upon them. Many accepted these terms but Sardar Teja Singh Samundri refused. He chose prison over compromise.

He died in Lahore Jail on July 17, 1926, at the age of 44. His passing was mourned by Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Swami Shradhdhanand, CF Andrews, and Sikh leaders across the political spectrum. Master Tara Singh described him as a "Samundri Sikh" (complete Sikh), while Bhai Vir Singh hailed him as a "*param paritra shahed*" (most holy martyr).

Rather than weakening the Akali movement, his sacrifice strengthened its resolve. Today, Teja Singh Samundri Hall within the Golden Temple complex stands as a lasting memorial to his life. More importantly, his legacy endures in the values he embodied, including service without self-interest, courage without hatred and faith without fear. His memory belongs not only to Punjab and the Sikh community but also to India and to every generation that believes institutions rooted in justice, sacrifice and public service are worth defending.

Taranjit Singh Sandhu is lieutenant-governor, Delhi. The views expressed are personal



Sardar Teja Singh Samundri was not only a martyr, but also one of the architects of modern Sikh public life. S. MOHINDER SINGH

[AJIT DOVAL] NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER, INDIA

There's an urgent need for us to... take decisive actions for our mutual benefit, and find solutions... to the vexed problems that we are all facing

Remarks made during the fifth BIMSTEC national security advisers' meeting



Chennai's airport game must take off post-haste

India's airports have seen a dramatic makeover in almost all metro cities and several tier-II towns, largely due to the entry of the private sector into airport infrastructure and management. Those who flew in the 1970s and 1980s may recall how decrepit airport infrastructure made the risk of a beam or an entire roof collapsing seem higher than an aircraft-related incident. Even major airports had a tired look and feel, a signature of the Airport Authority of India (AAI)'s management.

Now, almost all metropolitan airports — Mumbai and the domestic airport, passengers of all ages landing at Chennai airport are forced to haul their luggage and then ride a buggy to a cramped area where they can hail an app-taxi ride or public transport. This is undoubtedly an inconvenience to the lay person since the majority of the arrivals use public transport to travel from the airport to their destinations — it is worse when they have to navigate the busy roads outside the airport's perimeter to board a bus.

One way to fix this is to allow taxis to meet flyers at the exit and make those with private cars and drivers tug their luggage and ride buggies. One is sure that this would make the AAI officialdom find a way out of the present mess quicker than one can imagine.

Flyers complain that the airport feels permanently under construction, owing to its constant need for renovation and upgrades. It lacks sufficient seating, faces prolonged baggage carousel delays, and experiences severe peak-hour gridlocks both within the airport and at the exit. Things are not much better on the airside, with high usage of shuttle buses and trams on the tarmac due to low aerobridge availability. And parking remains just as much a challenge on the airside as on the terminal side.

Not surprisingly, Chennai has been slipping in airport rankings (as recently reported in the

media); indeed, once considered a laggard of the metropolitan airport pack, Kolkata airport frequently threatens to unseat its southern cousin in the rankings, thanks to the latter's stagnant traffic growth and cancelled flights.

Tamil Nadu has paid a heavy price for the failure to expand — ministry sources say that over the last several years, Chennai has lost valuable American-West-Coast-bound daily traffic to Bengaluru, Karnataka, where flyers are ferried directly to the international terminal in brand new cars, at nominal cost. Whether this is due to better pricing or wider availability of routes and options is not clear, but the fact remains that traffic that would have earlier flown from Chennai is now choosing Bengaluru.

Many airlines have withdrawn flights from Chennai due to the airport's capacity and infrastructure bottlenecks. It now risks losing the race to Bengaluru and Hyderabad for a better factor than its inability to compete. The damage done by successive administrations in Tamil Nadu and their refusal to cede control is now well-documented.

Expert projection that the airport, as it exists today, will hit saturation by 2028-2030 should be a reason for worry. The airport, as the previous administration for a new airport, at Parandur (70 km from the heart of Chennai), was rejected by the new dispensation in power in Tamil Nadu, after the project was opposed by local farmers and activists (the site hosts many key wetlands). It is now incumbent upon the new administration to choose from two pathways out of the mess: Identify a brand new site within a reasonable distance from the city, get all clearances, and bid it out to a private player — ideally before 2032 (a Herculean task) — or reverse the rejection of the Parandur site, find ways to mollify the farmers, facilitate solutions to environmental concerns and get the project running at the earliest. A properly conceived and executed public transport linkage must accompany construction, given the distance from the city.

Meanwhile, the new chief minister could send a team (including AAI officials) to visit Colombo airport. Though it doesn't set any groundbreaking standards, the government-run and managed facility should inspire many ideas on how to improve Tamil Nadu's airport game.

Anjali Bhargava writes on governance, infrastructure, and the social sector. The views expressed are personal

The fertiliser gap

New urea policy offers an inadequate fix

The new national policy for urea offers a partial solution to the problem associated with this key agricultural input. It seeks self-reliance in urea production to insulate it from global supply shocks. India imports 25 per cent of its annual urea demand of 40 million tonnes. The war in West Asia and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz saw prices spike 40-50 per cent until China lifted its temporary export ban. The policy aims to set up eight or nine urea plants with a production capacity of 10 million tonnes — the amount currently imported — with tweaks in the incentive structure. These include separating fixed and variable costs, introducing a 12-16 per cent band for calculating return on equity, and mitigating forex risks by converting fixed costs into rupees after four years, based on the prevailing exchange rate. The objective of self-reliance undoubtedly addresses an immediate problem, given the uncertainties of global supply chains for the foreseeable future. But it is inadequate when viewed against the deep-rooted structural issues in India's fertiliser policy.

The core issue lies in the skewed nature of the fertiliser subsidy, which privileges the use of ammonia-based urea (N) over phosphatic (P) and potassic (K) nutrients. While subsidies for the latter two are based on nutrient content, urea is subsidised at a flat rate. A farmer currently buys a 45-kg bag of urea for ₹242, for which the government incurs a cost of ₹2,200 to ₹4,000, depending on whether it is domestically manufactured or imported. Not surprisingly, urea has become the fertiliser most used over the years, driving the annual subsidy to unsustainable levels. Urea typically accounts for the bulk of the fertiliser subsidy, budgeted at ₹1.71 trillion for this financial year. Surging global prices following the hostilities in West Asia are likely to see this figure significantly exceed.

Setting up more domestic plants may reduce this import reliance but there are other issues to consider. First, the government estimates that urea demand is rising by 5 per cent every year. It takes about two years to build a urea plant. Assuming all the new plants come up on schedule to produce 10 million tonnes — the current domestic shortfall — India would still lag behind the demand curve. This predicament was evident in the first urea policy of 2012, under which six units were set up but imports persisted. Second, forex risks in a urea plant come from variable costs, specifically for liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is both feedstock and an energy source, and accounts for 60 to 80 per cent of production costs. India imports about half its LNG requirements, most of it from West Asia, where supply disruption saw prices more than double. This remains a risk for current and future urea plants.

Finally, the national policy skirts the pricing anomaly, which has resulted in the over-use of urea, causing severe soil degradation and concomitant productivity declines. Against a recommended N:P:K balance of 4:2:1, India's ratio is at 9.8:3:1. The obvious solution is to raise urea prices, which has proved politically unrenable, and could hurt millions of small farmers. One solution could be to transform the current direct benefit-transfer model by reimbursing farmers rather than manufacturers, as is done now. Paying a market price upfront before the subsidy compensation flows into bank accounts could prove a salutary check on overuse (and misuse), for which the taxpayer is paying the price.

An unreasonable Bill

Tariffs on Russian oil importers make no sense

A Bill unveiled this week by United States (US) senators — it reportedly has bipartisan support — proposes to impose a 100 per cent tariff on goods coming from the five largest buyers of Russian oil and gas. The Bill is clearly aimed at India and China. The original Bill, led by Senator Lindsey Graham, who recently passed away, had proposed a 500 per cent tariff. Although the Bill is said to have the support of President Donald Trump and it empowers him to waive the sanctions, the proposal does not make sense. The implicit assumption behind such proposals is that they will reduce Russia's exports of oil and gas, thereby denying it funds for prosecuting the Ukraine war. The assumption is incorrect, and the Bill comes at the worst possible time.

The imposition of higher tariffs last year on India for importing Russian oil, along with the so-called reciprocal tariff, did not end the war. Any such move will only complicate the geopolitical situation. The current West Asia crisis, which is affecting the supply of oil and gas, is entirely a creation of the US. The world is paying a heavy price for it. The ceasefire between the US and Iran has unravelled very quickly, though it is not entirely surprising. What the war did was to block the Strait of Hormuz, which enables the flow of about one-fifth of global oil supply. The resumption of strikes from both sides has again practically closed the strait. Although the strikes this time, according to reports, are fairly targeted, unlike the last round of the conflict, things can always change.

In fact, the situation could become far more complicated this time. Oil prices have already climbed more than 10 per cent over the past few days. Large parts of the stockpile from emergency reserves across the world have already been used. Thus, if the supply remains disrupted, it could lead not only to a sharp increase in oil prices, but also affect availability. Thus, it is unclear what the US lawmakers and the administration expect from large energy importers such as India and China. Are these countries expected to live with energy shortages? Notably, one reason why oil prices did not increase to the extent many had expected in the last round of the Iran conflict was that China substantially reduced its imports. Although not much is known about Chinese stocks, it is reasonable to argue that they will not last forever.

It is also worth noting that the continuation of the Ukraine war is partly because of global and American indifference. Ukraine has no choice but to defend itself, but serious efforts are not being made to end the war — either by the US or by other major powers, including Europe. India has had no role in initiating either the Ukraine or the Iran war, so why is it expected to suffer? The Indian government has the responsibility to secure energy supplies and is doing exactly that. Once the Strait of Hormuz is opened and the war ends, imports from Russia will automatically come down. And once the Ukraine issue is addressed, Russian oil will no longer remain a concern. Both West Asia and Ukraine need serious diplomatic engagement. Instead of sponsoring Bills to impose tariffs, US lawmakers must ask why war was funded by the American people are not being resolved. Meanwhile, Indian policymakers need to be alert. India is negotiating a trade agreement with the US and must convey its position convincingly. Like last time, the US will be reluctant to impose higher tariffs on China because of its ability to retaliate strongly. It is India that needs to guard its interests.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Insider capture of India's regulators

Complex markets require independent voices and diverse expertise. India's regulatory architecture is missing both

Economic policy strategy after 1991 tried to reshape the relationship between the state and the market. From a position of central planning, state control, and often state ownership, we have moved towards greater participation by the private sector in production and a regulatory role for the state. This transition necessitated the creation of a new institutional architecture, the Statutory Regulatory Authorities (SRAs).

SRAs have proliferated across the Indian landscape. There are over 20 SRAs at the Union level, and even more at the state level, dealing with things like electricity distribution, real estate development, and water tariffs. SRAs now impinge upon a large chunk of the Indian economy. From pricing telecom spectrum and overseeing the solvency of insurance firms to safeguarding retail investor wealth and determining tariffs on renewable energy, their actions dictate the daily operations and viability of a myriad economic agents. A great deal of state power is now exercised through SRAs. Therefore, good internal governance within SRAs is foundational to India's economic success.

In traditional democratic structures, the powers of the state are separated into three branches (the legislative, the judicial, and the executive) to prevent overreach. SRAs, however, exercise extraordinary, concentrated powers within a single institutional boundary. They wield executive powers to monitor and supervise markets, they generally have expansive powers to write law, and in some cases, quasi-judicial powers to adjudicate disputes and impose penalties. This departure from fundamental concepts of the Constitution demands a commensurate establishment of good internal governance.

Quasi-legislative power here means the authority to write binding rules of conduct that control and regulate

the activities of economic agents. When an elected legislature enacts a law, it is subjected to political debate, multi-party scrutiny, standing committee reviews, and public accountability. When an SRA drafts regulations, it is exercising legislative power, but without those inherent political checks and balances. When officials write law, without these processes, there is a "democratic deficit". A special effort is required to establish checks and balances and to bring people back to the table to restore democratic legitimacy.

The board of an SRA can be a crucial oversight mechanism that can rein in the concentration of power in the legislative and executive actions of an SRA. It requires technical expertise to cope with the fast-changing complexities of each sector. It also requires private individuals drawn from society at large to achieve better democratic legitimacy. All Indian SRAs have members drawn from inside the SRA and part-time members from outside.

How do we fare on these issues today? Let's consider the financial sector SRAs. All of them are headed by former civil servants. All have had persistent vacancies in their boards. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has 11 members on its Central Board. Of these, 2/11 are academic researchers and 1/11 is an external expert. The remaining eight are former or serving civil servants, RBI insiders, or public-sector bankers. With the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), six of its nine members are former or serving civil servants, two are RBI/Sebi insiders and one is a market expert. The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India is a bit better. Of its five board members, two are former or serving civil servants, one is a former PSU banker, and two are private-sector experts. With the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, six of its seven board members are serving or

AARTHIKAM
CHINTANAM
K P KRISHNAN

Jal Jeevan 2.0: From numbers to water

From the ramparts of the Red Fort on August 15, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced India's most ambitious and the world's largest rural drinking water programme — the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM). It aimed to provide tap connections to all 193.5 million rural households by 2024, with a total outlay of ₹3.60 trillion (Central share ₹2.08 trillion). JJM marked a decisive departure from its predecessors by shifting measurement from habitations to individual households, mandating community ownership through Pani Samitis, and building source sustainability into its design. After seven decades of independence, the announcement of India's first explicit commitment to universal rural tap water was indeed historic.

In March 2026, the government restructured JJM as JJM Version 2.0, extending the deadline to December 2028 and enhancing the total outlay to ₹8,690 billion while pivoting the mission's objective from infrastructure linkage to a reliable utility-based service delivery model.

The delivery record to date is remarkable. At launch, only 16.7 per cent of India's 193.5 million rural households had tap connections. By March 2026, coverage rose to 81.6 per cent, adding 125.5 million new connections in under seven years. This resulted in savings of \$5 million hours of daily water fetching time (WHO) and 277,000 villages being certified as Har Ghar Jal (water in every household).

But the same numbers exposed some serious implementation gaps. The 2024 Functionality Assessment, covering 19,812 certified Har Ghar Jal villages across 761 districts, found that 98 per cent of households had a tap connection, but only three in four households received water that met Mission standards of quantity, quality, and regularity. Seven structural faults underlie that gap.

Wrong outcome metric: The mission counted taps installed, not water delivered. The 2024 survey found only 80 per cent of households receiving the minimum quantity norm; barely 76 per cent received safe water. Gujarat and Tripura, despite claiming full

coverage, reported actual functionality rates below half; Haryana's Mewat recorded just 33 per cent available availability. JJM 2.0 corrects this by introducing defined service delivery standards for regularity, quantity, and quality at every governance level.

The ghost tap problem: The JJM dashboard became a vehicle for inflated reporting. Manupur's non-existent connections are the best-documented case. A Lok Sabha reply (March 2026) recorded 18,790 complaints nationwide, with 86 per cent of them from Uttar Pradesh alone. In Rajasthan, officials submitted fake completion certificates in a ₹960-crore bribery and forgery scandal; nearly 2,400 officials faced action and multiple contractors were blacklisted. JJM 2.0's Sujam Bharat, an geographic information system-linked national digital registry assigning every village a unique ID, is designed to make scheme validation mandatory before fund release.

The O&M challenge: JJM 1.0 designed Pani Samitis to become local community-based water utilities, managing both technical and commercial dimensions of water supply, backed by 5 per cent community contributions. It did not happen. Only 12 states had notified operations & maintenance (O&M) policies by 2022-23; by early 2026, this had increased to 23 states. JJM 2.0 makes O&M a hard gate: A Gram Panchayat can certify Har Ghar Jal only after O&M mechanisms and user charges are confirmed operationally by the state.

Sources running dry: The Parliamentary Committee on Water Resources warned in March 2026 that ₹8,690 trillion had been wasted on taps installed on sources that ran dry within one to two years. NASA's GRACE satellite records groundwater declining at nearly a third of a metre every year. The NITI Aayog's own water index shows more than half of India's wells in decline. JJM 2.0's Decision Support System makes source sustainability planning mandatory under Sujam Bharat, reinstating the 30-year source guarantee that JJM 1.0 had bypassed.

INFRATALK
VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

former civil servants, while the one remaining member is a former regulator. Adjacent SRAs like the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India and the National Financial Reporting Authority have similar scores on this index.

The newest kid on the block, the International Financial Services Centres Authority, is supposed to achieve global competitiveness for a financial system within Gift City. While Indian finance is an Ambassador car, finance in Gift City is supposed to be a Ferrari. But when we look at the board composition, all seven of its members are either serving or former civil servants or drawn from other SRAs.

The terminology used for this situation worldwide is "the administrative state", an environment where power is concentrated in the executive branch, and the judiciary and the legislature shrivel away. We have public servants managing SRAs internally and dominating the boards. The insider capture of financial sector SRAs is complete. This contains three problems.

The knowledge problem: The original vision for economic reform was that the state would retreat from central planning, enable a dynamic and competitive private sector, and bring a new level of economic thinking and domain expertise into regulatory institutions. While civil servants and career regulators possess invaluable experience, an insular board devoid of contemporary domain expertise creates a regulatory echo chamber that misses the practical implications of its own rulings on economic growth and innovation. The prime objective in India is to achieve high economic growth. This requires regulatory boards that have domain knowledge and regulatory knowledge from India and from the advanced economies that we aspire to become like in the coming decades.

The political problem: SRAs were intended to create greater policy certainty for private firms. Political power should regularly rotate around different party configurations, but the decisions of regulators should be at an arm's length from the government. When regulatory boards are overwhelmingly populated by former and present government officials, the institutional distance meant to provide objective oversight collapses, rendering the regulator susceptible to government pressure.

The governance problem: If an organisation is controlled by its top management, it creates poor checks and balances. There is a lack of accountability for the leadership, which then makes more mistakes. The job of the board is to exert checks and balances. The board must hold the management accountable. This cannot happen if the board is the management (or, is composed of persons who are unable to demand performance from the management). In the private sector, we have adopted the doctrine that a majority of board members should be "independent directors". These independent voices help ensure that management remains accountable and benefits from external expertise.

It is time to think of a similar statutory mandate for our SRAs. The laws governing SRAs must be amended to prescribe a strong contingent of independent, non-executive members drawn from academia, private-sector industry, law, and consumer advocacy.

The writer is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, and a former civil servant

Procurement failures: A Comptroller and Auditor General of India audit of Karnataka (2024) found 9,342 single bid contracts, tender premiums of ₹5 to 61 per cent above estimates, and no tripartite agreements to enforce quality. JJM 2.0 conditions funds disbursement on reform-linked memorandums of understanding (MoU). MoU stipulations include such MoUs by the close of July. Maharashtra 2026, the 15-day national water campaign (March 2026). The first tranche, ₹1,561 crore to five states (April 2026), was released only after verifying compliance.

Pending bills: Contractors laying Level 1 (bulk transmission), Level 2 (village distribution), and Level 3 (last-mile pipelines) reported payment delays of 6-20 months. In Andhra Pradesh, 750 small and medium enterprise contractors had ₹4,500 crore bills pending for nearly two years. In Assam, another ₹4,500 crore in approved bills remained unpaid. In Uttarakhand, 15,500 schemes reportedly ran on contractors' personal savings. The Centre cut allocations by more than two-thirds in FY25 (revised estimates), resulting in states passing the funding squeeze downstream to contractors.

Funds budgeted, funds parked: This funding cut of two-thirds in FY25 RE (from ₹70,463 crore to ₹22,994 crore), and the suspension of disbursements in early 2026, citing state non-compliance, led to serious consequences. JJM 2.0 replaces automatic fund release with conditionality: Funds flow only after GIS validation and MoU completion. Budget 2026-26 has restored the ambition: ₹67,000 crore, nearly three times last year's revised outlay.

The question is no longer diagnostic or architectural; it is one of execution. JJM joins a long list of well-intentioned central programmes getting diluted as they descended from Raisina Hill to state capitals and then to district offices and gram panchayats.

The intent is laudable, but it is honest and purposeful execution that will write India's epochal domestic water story.

The writer is an infrastructure expert. He is also the founder & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation. With research inputs from Vrinda Singh

The evolution of 'love jihad'



ARUSHI BHASKAR

Few trends in India deserve as much urgent academic attention as the fear and panic surrounding "love jihad", or the conspiracy theory that Muslims are systematically seeking to marry Hindu women with the sole agenda of converting them to Islam and forcing them to raise Muslim children. The success of movies such as *The Kerala Story* (2023) and, more importantly, the laws targeting alleged forced conversion in

place in many Indian states, make Sameena Dalwai's latest, *Love Jihad: A Feminist Retelling*, the need of the hour. The book utilises data, academic research on caste, gender and their intersection and the author's family history and experiences to illustrate the changing socio-cultural landscape of India.

In a particularly moving anecdote, Ms Dalwai describes how the Konkani Muslim community, from which her father's family came, has slowly lost its sense of syncretism. "The exposure to the Arab world and the dogma of Wahabism has pushed Konkani Muslims towards conservative religious doctrine," she explains, presenting an opportunity for readers to reflect on how their own communities have changed over time, with religion and conservatism coming to occupy a more central position. "It is not religiosity itself but

the growing culture of religious consumption on all sides that has made factions relationships between religious communities inevitable," she adds.

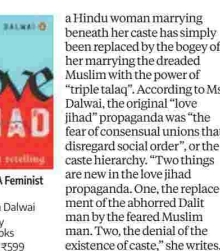
Ms Dalwai's tone is usually sarcastic, irreverent and even flippant, but at certain points it becomes poignant, reminding the reader that the author is talking about her own experiences, which cannot always guarantee authorial detachment.

Another interesting aspect of the book is its attempt to situate the fear of "love jihad" in pre-independence history. Ms Dalwai cites historian Chatur Gupta, whose work on United Provinces (today's Uttar Pradesh) in the 1920s depicts the outrage of upper-caste Hindu communities in response to Dalit women marrying Muslim men and converting to Islam, "be it for romance or escape from their painful

lived reality". Additionally, Census data from the late 19th century revealed the actual numbers making up different castes and communities, shifting perspectives towards power and unity in the subcontinent.

Ms Dalwai then discusses how the Hindutva project seeks to create a singular Hindu identity through inter-caste marriages, which under traditional Hindu society were frowned upon and punished. This relatively new trend can also be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century, when there were instances of the Hindu Mahasabha conducting marriages between Dalit women and upper-caste men to keep the former in the Hindu fold.

Through this, the reader is made aware of how the "love jihad" narrative is old wine in a new bottle — the spectre of



Love Jihad: A Feminist Retelling by Sameena Dalwai
Published by Penguin Books
201 pages ₹599

a Hindu woman marrying beneath the caste has simply been replaced by the bogey of her marrying the dreaded "Muslim" with the power of "triple talaq". According to Ms Dalwai, the original "love jihad" propaganda was "the fear of consensual unions that disregard social order", or the "fear of the 'other' as things are new in the love jihad propaganda. One, the replacement of the abhorred Dalit man by the feared Muslim man. Two, the denial of the existence of caste," she writes.

Ms Dalwai's preoccupation is with unpacking the words that make up "love jihad". She goes into some length to explain what "love" is in India — "a forbidden pleasure and an illicit activity" — and comes to the conclusion that it is indeed a battle, "as it takes effort, anguish and perseverance". She also describes the

concept of "jihad" in Islam and how it means "total surrender" to God. She explains the theology in an accessible manner, and shows how religion can't be judged by its worst proponents. In fact, she concludes the book with this: "We all come here for only one reason, even though our paths and expressions vary — and that reason is to learn how to love and how to receive love. This is the essence of being human beings." This is a moment of sober reflection, one that is devoid of manufactured optimism. It reminds the reader that there is always a higher cause worth fighting for, and that should be the foundation stone for every kind of activism.

And it is activism that she prescribes as solution to the madness engulfing Indian society today. According to her, grassroots activism needs to replace key-board activism, along with charting out a space for Bahujan intellectuals in the mainstream. Only then, she believes, do we have a chance at countering the forces behind the "love jihad" panic.

CONTRAPUNTO

Rocket science has been mythologised all out of proportion to its true difficulty

— JOHN CARMACK

Free The Third Tongue

Why have a policy for a third language? Leave it to schools to decide

The Supreme Court has spoken up for students, parents and teachers, voicing deep concern over introduction of a third language in Class 9 in CBSE schools. A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and R Mahadevan orally asked Centre to not have a third language in Class 9 level. They were dealing with a TN petition against setting up Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, which follow a three-language policy. The issue of CBSE's new policy is in CJT's court. Frankly, three-language policy is hardly an issue that should have reached SC, in the first place. But it did. The policy's ramifications have given rise to new matters that have also reached courts.

The bench's remarks are exactly the commonsense approach that policymakers and education ministry should have stumbled upon themselves. There was no way the hurriedly put out My circular—making three-language framework compulsory, mid-session, for Class 9 students—would stand scrutiny. Leave aside SC, students

and schools could have told powers that-be the unreasonable pressures such a policy places on students and resources.

The three-language framework—where English has been made the 'foreign' language, plus two regional languages—is proving to be a bugbear. This need never have been the case. No one has argued against teaching multiple languages as part of school curriculum. More the languages a child can learn, the better—school education is meant to expand children's minds to world's literature, culture, science, and riches and the horrors it has to offer. But it is feasible that all schools across all economic and social strata, regions and communities offer children such avenues of learning? No. Hence, two languages—one the pan-India link language that is English, and proficiency in which is crucial in the world of work, in India and overseas, and a second language, the regional tongue, which boosts early learning and encourages children to learn other languages too. Dubbing regional language 'mother tongue' is also fraught, given modern society's multi-ethnic backgrounds.

As for a third language, it isn't as if children aren't exposed to it—foreign or Indian regional. They are, in schools that have the resources to teach, and enough students interested. Teaching a third language should be left entirely to school capacity and students' wish. It is the tunnel vision and parochial attitudes of politicians and policymakers that make learning a dirge. The best policy for a third language is not to have a policy at all.

Give Talent Space

Isro needs stronger gravitational pull, not sealed doors, to address problem of staff attrition

Attrition is not a new problem for Isro. In 2006, it lost 187 newly trained scientists. Mainly due to better pay in the private sector. Now, about 100 have quit in the past few months. TOI reported on Thursday. Can we shrug it off as more of the same? No. As we wrote on Monday, the space race has become intense, and SpaceX, with its reusable rockets, has cornered most of the commercial pie. Isro's share in the satellite launch market has slipped below 2%. Beyond that, there's space exploration. Everybody's aiming to land on Moon, and Mars is the next frontier. India has its own manned mission—Gaganyaan—lined up. So, this is a bad time to be losing people.

But Department of Space's response to the problem won't work. Making it hard for staff to walk out maintains bench strength without translating into output. Instead, DoS should address the root of dissatisfaction. In 2017, when Isro had lost a few hundred people within three years, its former chief Madhavan Nair had cited lack of new projects, innovation, and organisational vision as reasons. Insiders say the organisation has a morale problem on its hands again. With the difference that there are plenty of private sector opportunities around.

Bright scientists and engineers need freedom to attempt new things, and fail. But if failure leads to limbo, self-worth and job satisfaction are affected. Bureaucrats can't understand this, and one hopes they aren't calling the shots at Isro. It would be a mistake to run Isro like, say, Food Corporation of India. So, two things the organisation must immediately give scientists are meaningful work and operational autonomy. Their pay also has to be competitive. As for those who still want to leave, they should be allowed to go. We're a free country.

OMG, it's OTP!

The so-called One Time Password has come to rule our lives

Jug Suraiya



I was faced with an impossible problem. It was an OTP, a one-time password, which was acting not like a password but like a stop word, which was stopping me from getting the mandatory PUC for my car, which was up for renewal on that very day.

I was on a visit to London and my car was in Gujarat where I live. I had my car driven to a petrol pump to have the PUC check done. The petrol pump said that to get the PUC check I would have to submit a 6-digit OTP which I'd get on my mobile.

I hovered anxiously by my phone. OTP aaya?, asked the petrol pump. Nahin aaya. I replied.

Waiting for the OTP was like waiting for Godot. It never came. Despite repeated attempts spanning over four hours. The petrol pump said that this was quite common if the OTP was not for the owner of a vehicle, but for all of us, what with pollution being a major health hazard.

To emphasise this the law imposes a penalty of ₹10,000 and/or six months' imprisonment on those who fail to get it done in time.

But why, if not in God's name in Godot's name, do the powers that-be require the applicant for a PUC to submit an OTP before the PUC can be issued?

The OTP, which is strictly speaking isn't a password but a pass number—is a necessary safety precaution against increasing incidents of financial hanky-panky in commercial transactions. But getting a PUC isn't like buying something online using your credit card, or seeking information from your bank about your account, or anything of a confidential nature that could be misused by scammers.

The OTP has become a digital age Open Sesame, a Khulja Simsim, to enable you to enter a sanctum sanctorum, the entry to which is forbidden to those not in possession of the magical mantra.

OTPs have become omnipresent in our lives. Don't ask why an OTP should be required for a PUC. Because if you do, you'll have to submit another OTP to get an answer to your query about the OTP.

Genius, German, Falklands-Malvinas

Argentine & English football writers give their take on Messi, England's coach & football as war



Marcela Mora y Araujo

One of the many novelties of this World Cup is that entire squads stand on the pitch for the national anthems before kick off. Until now, only the starting 11 did. At England vs Argentina, missing fans booed and hissed each other's hymns. A poignant start to the match that had been endlessly hyped through the preceding days as the mother of all sporting rivalries. This was war, it felt like in the stadium, the crowd roar echoing the killer instinct look on the players' faces.

In a sense this tournament is a Messi bucket list. So, the fact that he had never before faced England is non-negotiable. The man has been hitting a new 'wow' with every appearance. And without a doubt, defeating the Royal Empire is a great tick on his bucket list.

England scored first. Argentinean faces, Japanese faces with Argentinean face paint, and the faces of all manner of self-identifying Argentinean fans sporting all colours of the Messi shirt fell silent. The England contingent celebrated, fans and players alike rolling in revelry. Meanwhile, in the middle of the pitch is a figure bent over itself, the head tucked into the bended knee. Was Messi praying? He slowly stretched one bent leg, raised slightly and adjusted something, the ankle maybe, or the calf. Stretched a little, bounced a little, got up, turned around, and repeated exactly the same movement on the other leg.

Carlos Bilardo, Argentina's manager in 1986, a World Cup amply referenced in previews of this fixture, told players not to celebrate goals because the opposition could use to their advantage. It's as if Messi did exactly this, celebrating himself and the game using the English goal celebration for Argentina's benefit.

The shift in energy was not immediate, but as the chosen reserves for each side got called up, the pattern changed dramatically. As the eminent English football correspondent Henry Winter tweeted: "Good luck to the great Lionel Messi and Argentina in the World Cup final. And good luck to Thomas Tuchel trying to explain those defensive, expensive subs."

Argentina's data expert Marcelo Gantman had viralised, "Molina for Montiel is like turning the batteries around in the TV remote—they're the same old batteries, but somehow it works."

By the fourth quarter, minute 81 in fact, Lautaro Martínez came on for Julián Álvarez. Fernández then equalised in the 85th minute.

Argentinian photographer Eduardo Biscavart captures the impact of every substitution from the sidelines, magical viewpoint, as Argentina responded to England's defensive, making fans creative attacking flair. I thought I saw men flying and Biscavart's images later proved this. As did commentary from further afield, Professor Branko Milanovic, author of *The Great Global Transformation*, put it well: "The balls that Messi was sending out tonight were from a different world. Floating in the air, oblivious to the forces of nature and gravity, until somebody headed them in." From where? Is it, even during the brief moments of English threat, small Argentinean players suspended themselves in the air and headed balls out of the danger zone.

Messi did exactly what Tuchel said he does: surprise with his movement, create moments. If Enzo's scissor-kick was the relief felt by all, Lautaro's winner was ecstasy. He broke down in tears in the post-match interview, struggling to speak, referencing his mother's sacrifice for him to get there.

Messi's own explosive relief was again kneeling in the middle of the pitch, but in a much more aggressive arm punch as opposed to the almost yoga-like position right here where he wanted them. Tuchel's team were better in every facet, nullifying the dark arts of the reigning world champions, using their extra physicality to perfection, and capitalising on the single moment the Argentines let their guard slip.

Branko again: "Argentina as the ambivalence of the multipolar world. It (unjustifiably) defeats Egypt and thus the Global South. But then it defeats England and makes a point for the Global South."

Many are still debating whether or not Argentina is the Global South. FIFA, no doubt, will have to decide whether to fine or sanction the players in some way—in a previous international where they displayed such a flag they were fined. Some, like Argentine influencer Alejandra Kosel, believe that "in a clash between England and Argentina sentiment over Malvinas comes into play. We have to thank football for allowing us to process these passions without going to actual war."



Sean Walsh

To be an English football fan is to suffer. The rest of the world mistakes 'it's coming home' as a battle cry of arrogance, but the song is derived from *Three Lions*, is about 60-plus years of failure. Yet, no mistake, England's 2-1 loss to Argentina in the World Cup semifinal is the single most traumatic event in English sporting history. It's the new No.1, and could hold onto that spot for decades. Few results or moments from the past can even compare.

With five minutes plus stoppage time to go in Atlanta, England led 1-0 and were on their way to a first World Cup final on foreign soil. They somehow lost before the game could even get to extra time. How could this happen? It would be easy to blame the many superstar players in England's ranks. After all, they are the ones who have to go out there and deliver a performance.

But on this occasion, the blame for the choke lay squarely on the shoulders of England's German coach, Thomas Tuchel. He had spent the previous days praising the "mentality"

of his squad, in spite of his awkward tactics and their own muddled individual displays. This time around, there was nowhere to hide, without a win to show for their efforts.

For the 55 minutes that the semifinal was 0-0 until Anthony Gordon's opening goal, England had Argentina right where they wanted them. Tuchel's team were better in every facet, nullifying the dark arts of the reigning world champions, using their extra physicality to perfection, and capitalising on the single moment the Argentines let their guard slip.

And then they reverted to type. Under Gareth Southgate, England were criticised for being too cautious, for letting their foot off the gas, and allowing a positive result to turn negative without much of a fight. But Tuchel's game plan against Argentina was far, far worse than any his predecessors ever devised.

Following Gordon's goal, England stopped trying to attack, period. The new Barcelona forward and would-be national hero was substituted for defender Ezri Konsa. Dan Burn and Nico O'Reilly then replaced Reece James

and Declan Rice, who were carrying knocks. A desperately tired Harry Kane was flanked by Jude Bellingham and Morgan Rogers, who lacked pace and couldn't stretch the game the same way a natural winger could.

As the clock rolled to 85, Enzo Fernández equalised, England finally punished for camping in their own box. Tuchel didn't make any subs to reverse the defensive changes, which invited pressure before Lautaro Martínez struck the dagger blow in added time. Even then, it took until minute 96 out of 102 for Marcus Rashford and Ivan Toney to appear as the Hail Mary solution. Shock, horror, that wasn't enough.

Heading into the second half 'hydration break', Argentina had recorded three shots, but registered a further 12 thereafter. From Gordon's strike to Martínez's header, England had only 12% possession. Yes, these are real stats.

Tuchel drew up a strategy to let Argentina do whatever they pleaded, hoping and praying England could defend their way to victory, like they did against Mexico in the last 16. The major tactical error was the level of opposition quality, and Three Lions ran out of luck this time. What did you think was going to happen letting Lionel Messi have that much time and space?

A team as talented, experienced, and athletic as England didn't need to do that. A manager as accomplished as Tuchel didn't have to set out his troops in that regard. Should a Kane or a Bellingham have done more themselves to win England the game, and carry them up the pitch? Of course, but they were following orders. They had bought into what their manager had asked, and this time he let them down.

The English FA made a power play to hire Tuchel in the hope a supposedly elite manager would get them over the hump, and turn them into winners. Instead, the World Cup final will be contested by two coaches who have never accomplished anything in the club game, and are specialists of international football. Perhaps there's a lesson there.

Tuchel's act of cowardice and self-sabotage will live forever in English infamy. He shall no longer be remembered as the person who led Chelsea to Champions League glory, but the one who denied Three Lions their shot at the World Cup. That's his new legacy.

When 'Mood For Love' Meets 'Not In The Mood'

Lovers fear that their different experiences of desire mean their relationship is failing. But with honest communication about what each of them needs, they can build acceptance and abiding intimacy



Seema Anand

Did you know that Kama Sutra's entire section on love and desire begins with the assumption that lovers rarely have matching libidos? Yet, today, one of the biggest myths about relationships is that if two people truly love each other, they will naturally want sex with the same frequency and intensity. Lovers suffer in silence, rather than face up to how their own experience is nothing like this harmonic idea. As if it so would be to admit that their love is lacking.

The myth, though, has little to do with the facts. Most couples experience different levels of desire at different times. It isn't a sign of failure or selfishness or lack of attraction. It's simply a part of being human. So, stop expecting to experience desire in exactly the same way. Do some straight talking. Not to change each other's desire—desire cannot be 'forced into alignment'—but rather to understand how each of you experiences it. And learn to work with those differences.

Libido is more than just biology. Hormones and good physical health play an important role, but so do factors like stress, sleep, medication, body image, cultural conditioning and, perhaps most importantly, past experiences. Sometimes, what looks like low libido is simply that sex is not pleasurable enough to look forward to.

Many people, particularly women, have never been encouraged to explore what actually gives them pleasure. Instead, we constantly try and fit into someone else's 'rules' of desire, find ourselves endlessly lacking, and then wonder why we can't get excited about an experience that predictably leaves us feeling unfulfilled.

When couples come to me with mismatched libidos,

I usually find that both people are hurting. The partner with higher libido often feels rejected, while the partner with lower libido feels pressured. Neither is 'abnormal' or 'uncaring'. But, unfortunately with a vocabulary that centres blame rather than understanding, neither can explain what they are experiencing. So, it ends up being the same painful conversation, over and over again. You feel turned on, you ask, "Should we?" They say, "Not now." What you hear is, "They don't want me."



WOMAN IN THE YELLOW DRESS: By Tamara de Lempicka

But that is often not what they meant at all.

Kama Sutra reminds us that desire rarely begins in the bedroom. It develops through the day through playful flirtations, conversations, and other shared pleasures. Remarkably, modern research has reached a similar conclusion. For many people, desire is what psychologists call 'responsive'. It doesn't necessarily begin because one of you announced you were "in the mood," but rather

it grows in response to your partner's attention. Being approached out of the blue, especially if someone already feels pressure around sex, can make them tense rather than aroused, and their "no" may simply be a response to that pressure, not a rejection of you.

Instead of asking, "Why don't you want sex?" try asking who creates desire for them. Or what makes them want it and what makes them withdraw. Those conversations will get you far further than arguing about frequency ever will. Neither partner's libido is more normal or more correct than the other's, they are simply different. The challenge is learning how those differences can coexist.

If your libido tends to be higher, there is absolutely no need for you to feel guilt, but neither does every intimate moment need to end in penetration. Because if every cuddle becomes the expectation of sex, it creates immense pressure, a sledgehammer to reduce desire. If your libido tends to be lower, understand and communicate what helps you feel it more. The more clearly you understand each other's needs, the easier it becomes to respond with acceptance, rather than resentment.

But perhaps the most important thing to remember is that none of this is a one-time fix. Even if you began with perfectly matched libidos, stress, medication, pregnancy, aging, and the countless other shifts will change that constantly. Desire changes, and how you find your way back to each other is a conversation every couple needs to keep having, throughout their lives. As Kama Sutra says, mismatched desire isn't evidence of incompatibility, it's simply another skill that lovers need to learn, and practice throughout their lifetime.

The writer is author of *Speak Easy: A Field Guide to Love, Longing and Intimacy*

Calvin & Hobbes



Sumit Paul

Why should we believe in god? Should a thinking mind believe in god? This is a fallacy of the majority. In the worldwide belief in god, two fallacies play a vital role: The Fallacy of Majority and Fallacy of Duration. Our belief in god stems from the majoritarian belief, which is as old as human civilisation. Anthropologically god came into being as primitive humans' survival necessity.

The human mind has a proclivity to be drawn to abstractness. God is a clever abstraction for which believers don't have to offer 'concrete' and irrefutable evidence. It's because of this abstract attribute that god has so many forms. There's no palpable concreteness in the origin and existence of

god. Calling god beyond the cycle of birth and death is a weak explanation for its supposed perennial presence. As rational beings, we should not be content with soothing lullabies but rather strive for a deeper understanding of the world in order to navigate it with intelligence and positivity.

Believing in an anthropomorphic phenomenon called god, without questioning, is not a sign of an evolved mind. Ernest Hemingway aptly said that every thinking person is an atheist. The human brain is very complex. It creates a defence mechanism in the form of an imaginary divine or supernatural power called god. It does this for survival. We invest our

three instincts in the fabrication of god. These three instincts are survival, existential, and psychological. According to well supported theories, we are perpetually in search of a Holy Grail, and god is that psychological and eschatological Holy Grail, helping us meet death anxiety, comforting us when our relationships are in doldrums, and tuning our minds for pattern recognition.

The human brain eventually starts believing in lies that it concocts. The Holy Grail is an evolutionary bias, which started appearing like a reality. Now belief in god has assumed the form of an axiom. For most of us, god is an abstractive truth. We must understand and accept that evolution is not random,

Sacred space

Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.

Rabindranath Tagore

God Is Our Psychological Holy Grail

because individual life forms make choices that enable them to survive and thrive. And collective choices, such as wars, famines, plagues, patterns, and purposes emerge. No gods are necessary for this to unfold.

There's no past life, nor is there a future life. You've this life, which you must use and utilise as god. Moreover, we've been fighting in the name of god since time immemorial. If god does exist, why doesn't it intervene and stop bloodshed?

Faithlessness and godlessness are mankind's evolutionary developments and excruciations. Let us accept them gleefully.

The article is a response to Hasmukh Adhin's write-up, 'Why should we not believe in God' (July 14). Views expressed are personal



Editor's TAKE

India's economy feels the heat of a distant war

The latest economic data suggest that geopolitics is once again becoming a decisive force shaping India's macroeconomic outlook

Four numbers landed within days of each other this month, and together they tell a sharper story than any one of them alone. The rupee has pushed back above 96 to the dollar. Retail inflation jumped to 4.38 per cent in June, breaching the RBI's 4 per cent target for the first time in 17 months. The trade deficit widened to a five-month high of \$30.4 billion. And the RBI, having just passed in June, is now facing market chatter about a rate hike as early as August. Individually, each is explainable.

Together, they describe an economy absorbing a shock it did not create. That shock has a name: the renewed war between the US-Israel coalition and Iran, and the periodic closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world's oil moves. Brent crude, which had drifted back towards \$70 a barrel as an earlier ceasefire held, has jumped back above \$85 after fresh strikes and tanker attacks reopened the conflict. For an economy that imports roughly half its oil from the Gulf, that is not an abstract geopolitical headline—it is a direct hit to the import bill, the currency and the price of everything that moves on diesel.

The trade numbers show this plainly. Merchandise imports rose 31 per cent year on year in June to \$70.8 billion, with petroleum imports alone running well above pre-war norms. Exports grew too, a healthy 15.5 per cent, but could not keep pace, especially with shipping through Hormuz disrupted. The result is a current account under growing pressure, with economists now pencilling in a deficit near 1 per cent of GDP for the fiscal year.

The inflation print carries the same fingerprints. Fuel pass-through from May's petrol and diesel price revisions, layered on to a sharp run-up in vegetable prices, pushed food inflation to 5.32 per cent. Core inflation has stayed comparatively tame, which is the one genuinely reassuring detail in this data set this looks more like an imported cost shock than demand-side overheating.

That distinction matters for the RBI, which now faces a harder version of the choice it ducked in June. Growth is still projected at around 6.6 per cent, and the central bank would rather not choke it off with a hike aimed at a price shock that may partly unwind if the ceasefire holds. But, having just missed its own target, and with economists split between an August pause and the start of a hiking cycle, the RBI has little room left to sound relaxed. None of this yet amounts to a crisis.

Reserves are substantial, the RBI has been intervening in both spot and forward markets, and corporate hedging has hit record levels. But the four indicators are correlated, not coincidental, and they share a single upstream cause that India does not control.

The honest reading is not panic, but vigilance: the next real test is not this month's data, but whether the Strait of Hormuz stays open long enough for these numbers to prove temporary.

Sardar Teja Singh Samundri: A colossus of Sikh awakening

A century after his martyrdom on July 17, 1926, remembering the man whose quiet courage and unwavering principles reshaped the Sikh panth



SARDAR MANJINDER SINGH SIRSA

When the name Sardar Teja Singh Samundri is spoken, it evokes not merely a political figure but a towering moral force whose life reshaped the spiritual and political landscape of the Sikh Panth. The Teja Singh Samundri Hall, at the heart of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) in Sri Amritsar Sahib, stands as a singular testament to his stature. He remains the only individual in the SGPC's hundred-plus-year history to have an institution named after him, a distinction earned not through wealth or political manoeuvring, but through the moral gravity of his character.

Early life

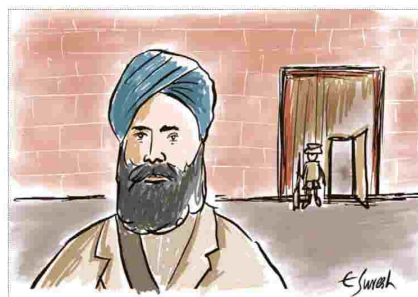
Born on February 20, 1882, in Rai Ka Burj village, Tam Taran district, to Deva Singh and Nand Kaur, Teja Singh emerged from peasant roots in the heartland of Punjab. His formal schooling ended at the primary level, but he possessed profound mastery of Sikh religious texts and historical traditions. His three-and-a-half years of service in the British Indian Army, rising to the rank of Daikdar in the 22nd Cavalry Regiment, instilled in him the organisational discipline and tactical acumen that would later revolutionise Sikh political mobilisation.

Building the Sikh future

Long before "nation-building" became a common phrase, Teja Singh Samundri held to a simple truth: education is the foundation of spiritual and social emancipation. He established two institutions of Khalsa learning: Sri Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa High School in Sarhali, Amritsar district, and a Khalsa Middle School in his native village. Under his initiative, the Khalsa Diwan Bar, a federation of educational and social welfare societies, grew into a network of schools across the Sandal Bar region of Lyallpur district, educating generations of Sikh youth in both modern knowledge and Gurmata principles. He was also among the founding architects of the Akali daily newspaper, recognising that the Sikh renaissance required both institutional power and the power of the written word to awaken consciousness across Punjab.

Founding the SGPC

In 1920, Teja Singh Samundri became a founding member of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, at a time when Sikh gurdwaras lay under the grip of corrupt mahants who had become collaborators with the British colonial power. He was renowned for spearheading the non-violent Gurdwara Reform Movement against mahant control of Sikh shrines under British rule. He consistently refused formal authority, believing that movements decay when individuals overshadow institutions. This principle of "Institutional Humility", the subordination of ego to organisational mission, became the philosophical foundation of his entire life's work. According to Master Tara



Singh, he was "a complete Gursikh", one who believed credibility began with personal restraint and leadership with moral example.

Teja Singh's commitment to equality was not rhetorical. In villages around Amritsar and Tam Taran, he challenged caste barriers by inviting Dalits to draw water from common wells and serve him publicly, an act of quiet social revolution in early twentieth-century Punjab. In an era when such gestures could invite severe social ostracism, Teja Singh's direct action against caste discrimination demonstrated that Sikh theology was not merely spiritual poetry but a blueprint for radical social transformation.

Morchas and mass movements

Even before these movements, in 1914, when the British government attempted to demolish the boundary wall of Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in Delhi, Teja Singh Samundri led a hundred-member jatha in fearless, peaceful protest, compelling the colonial authorities to withdraw their desecration. His moral authority was such that even imperial power bent before it. When the British locked away the keys to the Golden Temple's treasury, he mobilised thousands of Sikhs in Chabian Da Morcha, the Keys Agitation of 1921-22, accepting imprisonment rather than submission. In the subsequent Gurmata Morcha of 1922, as unnamed Sikhs faced the brutality of British law while chanting "Satnam Waheguru", Teja Singh Samundri stood as a philosophical and spiritual pillar, demonstrating that non-violence is not weakness but the ultimate expression of spiritual power. When the SGPC faced a financial crisis that threatened its legal appeal to the Privy Council, falling short by ₹75,000, Teja Singh mortgaged 50 acres of his own ancestral land to bridge the gap. When the case was won after his death, his family refused reimbursement. In an era when public life is often shadowed by private gain, this episode stands in stark moral contrast.

Imprisonment and martyrdom

On October 13, 1923, Teja Singh Samundri was arrested along with 58 other Akali and SGPC leaders by the British government on charges of "waging war against the King-Emperor". Imprisoned in Lahore Fort, he was offered com-

ditional release on multiple occasions but steadfastly refused to compromise on his core principles. By 1923, his stature was such that he was chosen as one of the Panj Piaras to initiate the kar sewa of the Golden Temple sarovar, the first such service since 1842. When he and eleven companions, including Master Tara Singh, refused conditional release, public outrage forced the unconditional release of the remaining prisoners. The British then attempted to divide Sikh unity through elections, a strategy that backfired when a wave of sympathy swept Punjab and Samundri's group secured an overwhelming popular mandate.

While imprisoned in Lahore Fort, Teja Singh Samundri, alongside Master Tara Singh, Bhag Singh, Gurmarch Singh and Sohan Singh Joshi, studied each clause of the Gurdwara Bill presented by Governor Malcolm Hailey. The Bill met all the Akali demands and was signed into law as the Sikh Gurdwaras Act on July 28, 1925, by the Viceroy of India, legislation that bears the fingerprints of Teja Singh Samundri's principled negotiation and intellectual leadership.

On July 17, 1926, while still imprisoned in Lahore Fort, Sardar Teja Singh Samundri attained martyrdom following a heart attack. Master Tara Singh later wrote that Samundri did not become a martyr in death; his entire life was one of martyrdom. He described a man marked by sewa, love, devotion, wisdom and fearlessness, one without enmity, who gave away what he possessed before keeping anything for himself. For him, sacrifice was not an event but a lifelong condition.

A century on

The Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920-1926 stands as one of history's most successful non-violent mass mobilisations, and Teja Singh Samundri was arguably its philosophical and moral spine. He converted what could have been a sectarian dispute into a paradigm of democratic governance, showing that moral authority, disciplined organisation and unwavering principle could overcome imperial coercive power. In an age of performative politics and impatient leadership, Sardar Teja Singh Samundri reminds us that quiet courage, sustained integrity and institutional vision can leave a deeper imprint than public noise. His was not a life of spectacle, but of conscience, and that is why it still speaks.

The Teja Singh Samundri Hall stands as his monument, but his true memorial is written in the democratic institutions he helped create, the dignity he restored to millions of Sikhs, and the template he provided for how spiritual awakening can become a force for social and political transformation.

He remains, in the hearts of the faithful, an eternal beacon for all who believe that conscience is the highest authority, and principle is the truest power. Sat Sri Akal — Victory to Truth Eternal.

The writer is Minister of Industries, Food & Supplies, and Environment, Forest & Wildlife, Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi

PICTALK



Monks perform rituals during the annual Rath Yatra in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. PHOTO: PTI

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SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION

It is now more than twelve years since I stepped away from my techno-managerial career to pursue passions I had long postponed. It had been a professional journey of three decades, one that taught me many lessons which continue to shape the way I look at the world.

During my early years, I believed that I could accomplish much single-handedly. Fortunately for me, I soon realised the folly of that thinking. No individual is an island of excellence, leading large teams meant learning that success comes from helping others take responsibility for their work.

Like many of my contemporaries, I often lamented what we saw as the erosion of ownership among young professionals. Others, however, challenged that assumption. I still remember a senior colleague from my

The meaning of ownership

early years in Railways who had risen through the ranks. He would often remark that many of us in leadership had, in fact, contributed to this decline. During his years as a supervisor, he and his colleagues considered it a reflection on their own capabilities if a senior officer even felt the need to visit the site during a service disruption.

I did not recognise it then, but that lesson had quietly taken root, influencing many decisions I would make in the years that followed. A young engineer working with me had made an error in his calculations, costing us an important contract. I had two choices. I could reprimand him, or I could ask him to learn from the mistake and move on.

I chose the latter. A friend later remarked that I had allowed the young engineer to retain his confidence while accepting responsibility. A sense of ownership evolves when people are encouraged to accept the consequences of their decisions without fear of blame.

The years since have made me more observant of both people and myself. I no longer complain that people lack ownership. What concerns me today is that we may have changed the very meaning of the word. I find people spitting on roads and even on our society's laws. I recall a gentleman who felt my wife had overstepped her boundaries by suggesting that he carry a cloth bag from home instead of demanding a plastic bag from the neighbourhood shop.

I also encounter residents who believe that living in

a society for many years gives them the right to occupy common spaces with their household belongings. Each incident appears trivial in isolation. Together, they reveal how the meaning of ownership itself has begun to change.

Looking back, I realise that ownership meant something very different during my professional life. It meant accepting responsibility for one's actions and understanding how they affected the larger ecosystem. Ownership was measured by the willingness to ask, "How will my decision affect everyone else?"

Today, I feel we have replaced that understanding. Ownership is increasingly interpreted as entitlement—the right to conveniences, facilities, and privileges—without an equally strong sense of responsibility for how our actions affect those around us.

This quiet shift is no longer merely one of civic sense or courtesy. It is a deeper misunderstanding of what ownership truly means. Whether it is an organisation, a residential community, or the planet itself, every ecosystem flourishes only when people accept ownership of their responsibilities rather than merely assert their entitlements.

Perhaps it is never too late to rediscover that ownership begins not with what we claim as ours, but with what we willingly accept as our responsibility.

The writer is a founder of Kala - Crazy About Literature And Arts, is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant

WANGCHUK'S HUNGER STRIKE INTENSIFIES PRESSURE ON THE CENTRE

Activist Sonam Wangchuk has rejected repeated appeals to end his indefinite hunger strike, asserting that he will continue his protest until the Centre initiates meaningful dialogue. He also revealed that some supporters had approached the courts seeking directions to ensure that he resumed eating. While acknowledging that he was feeling physically weak, Wangchuk urged supporters to participate in large numbers in the proposed "Chalo Sansad" march to Parliament on July 20. Appealing to schools, colleges and universities, he described the protest as an opportunity for students to witness democratic processes first-hand and better understand how peaceful public movements function in a democracy. He expressed hope that young

people would actively participate and learn from the experience. The Cockroach Janta Party has been protesting at Jantar Mantar, demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged irregularities in the NEET examination. The organisation has called for a march to Parliament on July 20, coinciding with the opening day of the Monsoon Session. The proposed march is expected to intensify political attention on the issue and could place additional pressure on the Centre to respond to the protesters' demands. The coming days are likely to test the government's handling of the agitation.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

India's hydrogen rail leap

India is entering a new phase of development driven by technology, self-reliance, clean energy and public welfare. Indian Railways has become a symbol of this transformation, modernising its network while improving passenger experience and reducing its environmental footprint.

A major milestone in this journey is Haryana's Jind-Sonepat hydrogen train project, the country's first hydrogen-powered train on a broad-gauge route. Designed and manufactured entirely in India, the project demonstrates that the country is no longer merely adopting technology but also creating it.

Built at a cost of about ₹141 crore, the train will operate on the 89-km Jind-Sonepat section, offering a cleaner alternative to diesel-powered trains by significantly reducing carbon emissions. Supporters view it as a more economical step towards railway modernisation than high-speed rail, arguing that it upgrades transport infrastructure at a fraction of the cost while delivering tangible environmental benefits.

Critics, however, question its scale and pace of implementation. Nevertheless, the project reflects the broader national vision of Viksit Bharat, Atmanirbhar Bharat and Green India.

R S NARULA | PATIALA

Politics over farmers' lives

The ongoing Bidadi township controversy in Karnataka exposes a disturbing display of political opportunism. The Karnataka government continues to push the proposed ₹18,123 crore township project, which threatens nearly 6,500 acres of fertile farmland and around 10 lakh thriving trees.

The project has drawn widespread criticism for treating the lives and livelihoods of nearly 3,500 agrarian families as mere collateral damage in a toxic political turf war. Both the ruling party and the Opposition have allegedly weaponised the 485-day-long protest for electoral advantage rather than addressing the genuine concerns of affected farmers. This is not urban planning; it is predatory land acquisition disguised as development. Reducing the livelihoods of thousands of dairy and coconut farmers to a legacy dispute between political dynasties is deeply disturbing. Development cannot come at the cost of destroying fertile agricultural land, livelihoods and ecological balance. The state government must immediately halt the proposed land acquisition, engage in meaningful dialogue with stakeholders, explore viable alternatives and ensure that people's welfare takes precedence over unchecked urban expansion and concrete jungles.

VIJAYKUMAR H K | HYDERABAD

Clearing the justice backlog

One of the most glaring weaknesses of India's democracy is its painfully slow justice delivery system, reflected in the mounting pendency of cases. More than 5.8 crore cases are pending across courts, imposing an estimated economic cost exceeding 2 per cent of the country's GDP.

To address this challenge, Chief Justice Surya Kant has launched a focused initiative to dispose of long-pending matters through four special benches sitting on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, designated as "non-miscellaneous days".

In the Supreme Court's practice, Mondays and Fridays are reserved as "miscellaneous days" for fresh filings and preliminary hearings. By freeing these four benches from routine admissions, the court aims to devote uninterrupted judicial attention to its oldest pending cases.

Meanwhile, the E-filing Court has become increasingly accessible through e-filing and virtual hearings, leading to a steady rise in fresh cases, which now stand at an unprecedented 75,402. As Justice Kant observed, clearing old cases is essential to restoring public confidence in the justice delivery system and upholding the constitutional promise that justice should never be defeated by the passage of time. Reducing pendency remains central to ensuring timely and meaningful justice.

YASH PAL RAHMAN | JALANDHAR



From population explosion to population decline

With fertility falling below the replacement level and states like Andhra Pradesh offering cash incentives for a third child, India is confronting a very different reality — how to manage an ageing society, a shrinking workforce and a shifting political balance before it becomes old without becoming rich



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE

At Independence, India had only 360 million people, and the population was multiplying fast, with a total fertility rate (TFR) of about 6. Today, the population has swelled to 1.45 billion, but the average TFR is down to only 1.9, below the replacement level of 2.1. The TFR also shows wide regional variations: from 1.2 in Delhi and 1.3 in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal to 3.0 in Bihar, 2.9 in Meghalaya, 2.4 in UP, and 2.3 in Jharkhand, the only states with a TFR above the replacement level. In these states too, fertility has been coming down, albeit slowly. With only 2.4 per cent of the world's landmass, India accounts for 18 per cent of its population. Only a few years back, states like Assam and UP were contemplating punitive measures against families with more than two children, and many states still have a two-child policy in force, including Telangana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha and Uttarakhand. They penalise members of families with more than two children in some way, sometimes debaring them from contesting local elections and sometimes denying them government benefits or employment. Now the clock is turning full circle—in May 2026, in Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu announced a payout of ₹30,000 to couples who have a third child. Evidence from across the world suggests that such incentives barely work in encouraging couples to opt for more children.

According to most estimates, India's population will peak around 2050 at about 1.6 billion and then fall as fast as it grew, to only 1 billion by the end of this century. Given our labour force participation rate of about 43 per cent and our median age of 29, it means our labour force will continue to grow for another 30 years or so, after which the demographic dividend will taper away. Thus, there may not be enough time for India to become a rich country unless growth remains steady at 8 per cent for the next three decades, a near impossibility. Just as China, South Korea and Japan are trying to arrest their fast-declining populations, which are causing them anxiety, India is also getting worried that it will become old before it can become rich.

The worries are visible among the southern states, which have the lowest TFRs. Kerala has a little less than a fifth of its population covered under some form of pension against the national average of 12 per cent; it has now opened a 'Department for Ageing'. It is already closing schools and importing workers from other states. Other states are also catching up. Demographic theories teach that low fertility starts only when a country reaches a per capita income of around \$7,000 in purchasing power parity (PPP), and women become educated and join the labour force, when they have a decisive voice in the family and want to balance work with childbearing and child-rearing. India's PPP per capita is almost double this threshold, and the falling fertility may reflect a surge in girls' enrolment in school since the 1990s. But 90 per cent of Indian women get married and only 33 per cent work, yet the TFR has been falling. Gen Z clearly seems to prefer dogs over kids.

Parents today prefer quality over quantity: the proportion of children in fee-paying schools rose from 31.7 per cent in 2015 to 38.8 per cent in 2025, and even in poorer states like Bihar and UP, this trend is visible. Also, about 70 per cent of Indians live in nuclear families due to urbanisation and labour market demand, which disincentivises larger family sizes. Further, Indian parents' obsession with a boy child also seems to be weakening, and many parents are now content with having only a girl. The Economist points out that parents' thinking is also reinforced by culture, which in turn is shaped by changes in technology and access to information through the deep penetration of smartphones in rural India. The combined impact is that "having fewer children has become aspirational". Contraction in population is now beyond any dispute; the only question is how to manage it.

The declining TFR is already causing social, economic and political strains. Southern states have always relied on labour from the northern and eastern states like Assam, UP, Odisha and Bihar, traditionally in hotels and restaurants. Now migrants are increasingly providing workers for factories, construction, care-



ACCORDING TO MOST ESTIMATES, INDIA'S POPULATION WILL PEAK AROUND 2050 AT ABOUT 1.6 BILLION AND THEN FALL AS FAST AS IT GREW, TO ONLY 1 BILLION BY THE END OF THIS CENTURY. GIVEN OUR LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE OF ABOUT 43 PER CENT AND OUR MEDIAN AGE OF 29, IT MEANS OUR LABOUR FORCE WILL CONTINUE TO GROW FOR ANOTHER 30 YEARS OR SO, AFTER WHICH THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND WILL TAPER AWAY

The writer, a former Director General at the CAG of India, is currently a Visiting Professor at IIM Calcutta

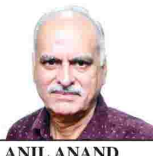
giving, nursing, warehousing and logistics, food delivery, e-commerce, domestic work and security jobs. Southern states cannot possibly survive without migrants, but higher migration has the potential to create resentment among the local population; there are already complaints in some states about the influx of outsiders who cannot speak the local language, as seen in demands in Karnataka for greater use of Kannada in workplaces and on public signage. Rapid population growth in cities such as Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi and Coimbatore is also creating pressure on urban infrastructure, affecting the quality of public service delivery. Ten per cent of Kerala's population are migrants, and there are growing demands for low-cost housing and primary healthcare, which has forced the Kerala government to launch a special health insurance scheme for migrants. Bengaluru has grown from about 6 million people in 2001 to around 15 million today, and the strain on urban infrastructure is visible in water scarcity, interminable traffic congestion, rising rents, and increased pressure on sewage and public transport systems. It is the same tale with other southern cities. The strains are also visible in public finance: the last two Finance Commissions have used the 2011 population instead of the 1971 population as one of the parameters for determining the states' share, and the southern states have been the losers, while the Hindi-belt states have gained on this account. This has caused significant resentment among the southern states, which feel they have been penalised for controlling their populations.

Now the impending exercise of delimitation has turned into one of the most politically sensitive issues, with the southern states suspecting that they would be penalised for implementing national family-planning goals, while the northern states argue that democracy requires equal representation. Both have valid logic: the current distribution of Lok Sabha seats is still largely based on the 1971 Census, even though India's population has more than doubled since then. The five southern states, with about 20 per cent of the population today, account for 24 per cent of Lok Sabha seats while contributing more than a third of the country's GDP and a disproportionately large share of its tax revenues.

A population-based delimitation would inevitably increase the representation of the faster-growing Hindi-speaking states while reducing the South's share of seats, giving it a much diminished voice and influence in central policymaking. To resolve this imbroglio, the BJP came up with a formula for a substantial expansion of the total number of Lok Sabha seats so that every state would gain seats and none would lose in absolute terms, but it could not be carried through for want of the requisite parliamentary support.

The task before the government now is to balance the need for equal representation with federal fairness through consensus, so that no state feels left out. The stakes are enormous, but India's federal compact has weathered difficult tests before. There is no reason why a solution cannot be found through consensus again.

Wangchuk brings Ladakh to national centre stage



ANIL ANAND

In the midst of the short-lived joy of the Ladakhis, with the Union government reneging on some crucial clauses of the agreement accepted in principle after the May 22, 2026, agreement, educationist and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk has given a new twist to the Ladakh issue while adding grist to the Cockroach Janata Party's (CJP's) youth-related issues. He has embarked on an indefinite hunger strike at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, along with six youth activists, to take the CJP's protest against repeated leaks of NEET and other examination papers to the next level. Their sole demand is the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. It is a repeat of what he did a few months back when he sat on an indefinite hunger strike in the cold environs of Leh. His action not only rattled the administration from Delhi to Leh but also added a new dimension to the Ladakhis' agitation for their political empowerment and the protection of their all-encompassing identity. The outcome was his arrest under the draconian National Security Act and his being confined to the hot environment of a Rajasthan jail, only to be unconditionally released after six months of incarceration, with the clear implication that the tag of being 'anti-national' did not stick to him. Wangchuk is brave and astute and carefully chooses his words. He has shown remarkable determination not only in pursuing the Ladakh cause, in the face of attempts by the state machinery to defame him, but also in joining the bigger cause of Gen Z's sufferings due to the malfunctioning of the education system and the government of the day simply looking the other way around. Notwithstanding the opposition by some of his fellow Ladakh leaders, though they are few in number, and the state machinery being busy plotting moves to corner him, Wangchuk seems to have crossed all hurdles with aplomb. There is no doubt that Wangchuk's presence in the CJP stir and his reiteration that education is central to the development of a society and a nation has given strength to the movement, which has entered its second stage. The people of Ladakh (Leh and Kargil divisions) have been fighting for their rights for quite some time, the issue has caught the imagination of the national and international media only sparsely. This is despite the strategic and geopolitical location of Ladakh, bordering China and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, with Central Asia not far away. Their nationalist credentials have been reflected repeatedly in both peace and war. No one can question their role as the second line of defence in every situation. Sitting at Jantar Mantar, Wangchuk has been most speaking about the concerns of students and youth in line with the CJP's narrative, but his very presence on a forum in the national capital, with the eyes of the world riveted on the youth agitation, brings the Ladakh issue—known or unknowingly—into the limelight. Perhaps he chose the CJP route to silently press the issue on the national platform.

By merging the student-led examination protest with the long-standing campaign for Ladakh's Sixth Schedule inclusion and statehood, he has turned a regional matter, albeit one of international significance, into a mainstream issue. After all, the two issues have a common thread in the future of both students and Ladakhis, with education being the vital link. And who better than the renowned educationist and environmentalist Wangchuk, who landed at the Jantar Mantar drama after participating in the international climate movement in Switzerland? As more than a week has elapsed since the CJP started its second leg of agitation at the same place following the Centre's (read Prime Minister Modi's) reluctance to remove the Education Minister, the administration has been handling the situation in a cool and calculated manner, barring the disconnection of electricity and power supply and depriving the protesters of toilet facilities.

Earlier, the agreement with the Centre had raised hopes of Ladakh getting a mechanism to usher in people's rule with an elected assembly spearheaded by a chief minister-like mechanism. Presently, it is a centrally administered Union Territory, which came into being after the state of Jammu and Kashmir was demerged and divided into two UTs—Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir. However, the hopes were short-lived and belied after the Centre allegedly backtracked on the most important part of the May 22 decisions. Nearly a month after their meeting with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), representative groups from Ladakh—the Apex Body (ABL) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA)—upped the ante by observing a complete shutdown on June 23 to protest against the failure to incorporate key points agreed upon during last month's meeting on the Union Territory's political future.

What has triggered the crisis again within such a short span, after hope had been given for the long peace? And why? During the sub-committee meeting with the MHA, the Centre reportedly agreed in principle to consider constitutional safeguards for Ladakh under the provisions of Article 371. The proposal had the following key ingredients, among other things: "A democratic structure for Ladakh featuring legislative, executive and financial powers." "The bureaucracy, including the Chief Secretary, functioning under an executive led by the people of Ladakh." These provisions went missing from the official minutes released by the government after some delay. Ladakh leaders asserted that, by omitting these points, the Centre is employing delaying tactics and renege on its promises. In this backdrop, Wangchuk's arrival at Jantar Mantar to share the platform with CJP activists has also silently given a new dimension to the Ladakh issue, besides raising the profile of the agitation. In his interviews after starting his protest fast, he gave clear indications that he was prepared for a long haul and that he was undeterred by pressure coming from any side. There is no doubt that his commitment both to the Ladakh cause and now to the cause of students and youth, with a thrust on rights and education, is unflinching. His discourse, both in Ladakh and now in New Delhi, is devoid of any political grandstanding, despite the fact that his detractors have been accusing him of being guided by political ambitions. The fact of the matter is that he has successfully contested elections in the past and may be inclined to do so again in future. He is well within his constitutional rights to do so. No issue in a vibrant democracy such as India can be devoid of politics, and more so if the government or the ruling dispensation themselves are inclined to politicise issues in pursuit of electoral benefits, whatever the cost may be, or to sit on false prestige. As Wangchuk has rightly said, the prestige of a government is enhanced if it admits its faults and is prepared to rectify the course in the larger public interest. This is the 'mool mantra' that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government should follow on Ladakh, the CJP and other issues concerning the people's welfare. No matter that a lot of time has already been lost in dithering and clinging to false prestige.

The writer is a political analyst

War-induced momentum for energy self-reliance



ASHWANI MAHAJAN

Following the peace agreement between the US and Iran after the roughly three-and-a-half-month-long Gulf conflict, the Strait of Hormuz—a vital conduit for massive crude oil shipments—has reopened. It is worth noting that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz not only disrupted oil transit but also caused a drastic surge in oil prices. Crude oil prices, which hovered around US \$70-80 per barrel before the war, spiked to as high as US \$126 per barrel during the conflict. Although prices fluctuated, they largely remained in the vicinity of US \$100 per barrel. The public was affected not only by shortages resulting from supply disruptions but also by rising inflation worldwide, driven by soaring oil prices. Even though the US is self-sufficient in petroleum supplies, it was also not immune to the impact of these high prices. Against this backdrop, a global conversation—including within India—began regarding the need to reduce dependence on imported crude oil. The primary question that arose was: Is fuel self-reliance achievable?

Currently, India relies on foreign sources for approximately 88 per cent of its crude oil and imports 50 per cent of its gas requirements. The

sudden shortage of these commodities following the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has put the spotlight on India's energy security, ranging from small restaurants and roadside tea vendors to gas-dependent industrial establishments. Consequently, the country began deliberating on how to achieve self-reliance in fuel and energy.

The seven appeals Prime Minister Narendra Modi made to the nation to conserve foreign exchange—such as using public transport, carpooling and working from home—directly pointed towards reducing the country's dependence on petroleum products. However, it must be understood that while we can save foreign exchange in the short term by consuming less energy, energy self-reliance is the only viable option for the long term. Biogas can emerge as a significant alternative to petroleum gases. India possesses abundant resources such as cattle dung, agricultural residues and household waste that can be used to produce biogas, yet we are currently utilising only about 5 per cent of this potential. Naturally, with concerted efforts, biogas plants could be established at the village or village-cluster level. This would not only meet local fuel needs and reduce reliance on imported gas but also significantly lower fuel costs. Moreover, with minor modifications, vehicles can also be made to run on biogas.

While petrol and diesel have long been considered indispensable for vehicles in the country, we must recall that just a decade ago, India was facing power shortages. Today, however, the entire



nation enjoys 24-hour electricity supply, and a surplus of power is being recorded, especially during off-peak hours. Concurrently, there has been a massive expansion in renewable energy generation capacity.

Renewable energy capacity, which stood at a mere 35 gigawatts in 2014, has now surpassed 200 gigawatts, with an additional 25 to 30 gigawatts of capacity being added annually. Although rising energy prices had previously motivated us to strive for energy self-reliance, the further price hikes and supply disruptions caused by the war have accelerated these efforts. Thanks to the establishment of substantial power generation capacity, India has become virtually self-reliant in the energy sector; in fact, we even generate surplus electricity during off-peak hours. Increased incentives in the form of subsidies for residential solar installations have started boosting power generation capaci-

ty even more. The government is striving to ramp up domestic production of solar and wind energy equipment, such as inverters, to further enhance the potential for expanding power generation capacity. Therefore, the time has come to shift from petrol- and diesel-powered vehicles to electric vehicles. We can readily adopt electric buses, trucks, cars and scooters.

This could lead to substantial savings in petrol and diesel, thereby reducing dependence on overseas sources and consequently, saving valuable foreign exchange. Traditionally in India, automobiles used to run on either petrol or diesel and later on CNG. In the last few years, the use of hybrid cars has also increased, where fuel consumption is lower, as vehicles run partially on petrol and partially on batteries. In more recent times, the use of electric vehicles has started increasing. The popularity of EVs can be seen from the fact that, in June 2026, the share of EVs in the scooter segment increased to more than 10 per cent, while electric cars constituted nearly 8 per cent of total car sales, and this has continuously been increasing over time. Before the war, in January 2026, the share of electric cars in total automobile purchases was hardly 3.6 per cent. Beyond transportation, we can also make greater use of electric cooking appliances, such as induction cooktops. New developments in research on nuclear power generation in the country could further strengthen our energy security. The government is giving a major push to biogas production; furthermore, research and

development are facilitating the compression of biogas, making it easy in vehicles feasible. Such experiments are already proving successful. Overall, it can be said that while efforts towards energy self-reliance were already underway, the conflict between the US and Iran and the resulting surge in oil prices and supply disruptions has provided a significant impetus to this goal. We must not allow this momentum to slow down. The country needs to undertake comprehensive and organised efforts to eliminate its dependence on imported crude oil sources and, consequently, a shift in the mindset of the general public is essential. Entrepreneurs must be encouraged to invest in the energy sector, and the active participation of young people in research and development (R&D) activities must be ensured.

Developing an extensive charging infrastructure is also imperative to popularise electric cars and other electric vehicles across the country. Although there is adequate electricity generation, power supply is frequently interrupted in many areas due to deficiencies in the grid system. The government needs to make concerted efforts to resolve this issue. Despite these challenges, none of them are insurmountable. With well-planned policies, strong willpower and coordinated efforts, India can drastically reduce its dependence on foreign crude oil over the next decade. This is the need of the hour.

The writer is the National Co-convenor of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch and a former Professor at PGDAV College, University of Delhi

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

India's chip bet

Govt must go beyond subsidies

THE Union Cabinet's approval of the Rs 1.27 lakh crore Semicon 2.0 programme and the Rs 62,500 crore Mobile Phone Manufacturing Scheme is one of India's most ambitious industrial policy interventions in recent years. With a combined outlay of nearly Rs 1.9 lakh crore, the government is signalling that semiconductors and electronics manufacturing are no longer merely economic priorities—they are strategic necessities in an era defined by artificial intelligence, geopolitical rivalries and fragile global supply chains.

The timing could hardly be better. From pandemic-induced chip shortages to export controls and the recent disruption in helium supplies amid West Asia tensions, overdependence on a handful of manufacturing hubs has exposed the global semiconductor industry's vulnerabilities. Nations such as the US, Japan, South Korea and China are investing billions to secure technology sovereignty. India cannot afford to remain a passive consumer in this race. The country has a mountain to climb for becoming a world leader: as per industry estimates, the size of the Indian semiconductor market was \$45.50 billion in 2024-25, even as the global market is projected to reach nearly \$1 trillion this year.

Unlike its predecessor, Semicon 2.0 places greater emphasis on indigenous chip design, intellectual property ownership, research and development, advanced packaging, equipment manufacturing and talent development. It's a welcome attempt to nurture a complete semiconductor ecosystem. Also significant is the government's focus on supporting Indian-designed and Indian-owned chips, moving the country closer to becoming a product nation rather than just a manufacturing destination. Ultimately, India's semiconductor ambitions will be measured not by the size of its subsidies, but by its ability to build resilient supply chains, foster innovation and create globally competitive technology enterprises. Policy consistency and faster project execution will be equally crucial. The real challenge begins after the grand announcements.

Falling births

Avoid tomorrow's ageing crisis

INDIA's demographic story has entered a new chapter, and the Supreme Court is right to question the continuing rationale of laws that disqualify people with more than two children from contesting local body elections. Conceived when rapid population growth was a pressing national concern, the two-child norm now appears increasingly disconnected from the country's changing demographic reality. The Supreme Court's observations are backed by the latest demographic evidence. The latest Sample Registration System Statistical Report 2024, released by the Registrar General of India, shows that the national total fertility rate has fallen to 1.9, below the replacement level of 2.1. Only six states—Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand—remain above the replacement level, while Delhi (1.2), Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (1.3 each) have some of the country's lowest fertility rates. Rural fertility also continues to exceed urban fertility, highlighting the uneven pace of demographic transition.

These disparities expose the limitations of a one-size-fits-all population policy. Continuing to penalise citizens for family size through electoral disqualification is difficult to justify when much of India is grappling with declining births rather than runaway population growth. Such laws disproportionately affect poorer and rural families, particularly women, while curtailing democratic participation.

India's demographic dividend—a large working-age population that can power economic growth—will not last indefinitely. States with very low fertility must prepare for ageing populations, labour shortages and rising social security burdens. Those with higher fertility need sustained investments in education, healthcare, nutrition and job creation to convert youthful populations into productive human capital. The time has come to replace outdated population-control measures with evidence-based, region-specific demographic policies. The population debate must now move beyond controlling numbers to managing demographic change with fairness and foresight.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JULY 17, 1926

Rawalpindi riots

WE have seen a copy of a representation submitted by Bhagat Lachmi Narain, Advocate, President of the Rawalpindi Bar Association, to the Deputy Commissioner, regarding the causes of the disturbance at Rawalpindi as well as the manner in which the police are investigating the cases arising out of the riot. We have also seen a copy of the statement sent by Sardar Bahadur Mohan Singh, President, Municipal Committee, Rawalpindi, to the secretary of the Conciliation Board, in which he deals with the question as to how far the erection of the cinema in a street towards the back of the Jumma Mosque and the Sikh procession can be held responsible for the deplorable riots that occurred a day after the procession. Both these statements throw a flood of light on the causes that led to the regrettable happenings at Rawalpindi, and go a long way to disprove the supposition that either the building of the cinema or the Sikh procession was at all responsible for the riots. As to the cinema, it is pointed out that no objection was taken by any responsible Mussalman to its erection until after the construction of the building. The lease of the site was registered by a Mussalman Honorary Magistrate, who is also Municipal Commissioner, and it was clearly stated in the deed that the lease was being granted for the purpose of erecting a building to be used for cinematograph shows.

Ram Mandir theft tests Hindutva plank

Onus on Opposition to corner the BJP in the upcoming session of Parliament

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN
SENIOR JOURNALIST

THE history of Ayodhya's Ram Mandir is one of India's most iconic places of worship—it is shrouded in intrigue, communal conflict, opposing interpretations of past chronicles and intra-religious as well as political rivalry. The last aspect became more pronounced as the temple reshaped the country's political destiny, with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) pulling the strings.

At the temple site stood the Babri Masjid, constructed in the 16th century on the orders of the Mughal Emperor Babur. It functioned as a mosque, although even then Ayodhya's Hindu clerics spread the word that it was built on Rama's "birthplace". To bolster the belief, an idol of an infant Rama was placed inside the mosque's central dome on the night of December 22-23, 1949, by Abhiram Das, a *sadhu* of the powerful Nirmohi Akhara, and his aides, signalling a virtual takeover of the mosque, which was then shut for prayers.

Decades later, an RSS-sponsored campaign led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was adopted and weaponised by the BJP to counter "divisive" caste politics in the Mandal era. The judiciary stamped the seal of endorsement in 2019, declaring the site to be a temple, 37 years after the mosque was razed.

Few questioned the dubious circumstances that culminated in the appropriation and conversion of a mosque site. The Opposition parties which ventured into tricky terrain—the Samajwadi Party (SP) was upfront, while the Congress joined halfheartedly—were eclipsed in the



DONATION ROW : The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust is under scrutiny months before the UP polls. ANI

elections that heralded the arrival of the BJP as a major force in the 1990s.

Months before the 2027 Assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh, the epicentre of temple-mosque polemics and clashes, it seems that for once the RSS, the BJP and the VHP are in a fix over an episode ostensibly of their own making. There is no Nehru, Muslim community or the Opposition to blame for the alleged embezzlement of donations and theft of jewellery that came to the temple as offerings from Rama's devotees.

It's not that the temple project was ever short of funds. Every campaign that the VHP launched in the prelude to its consecration in 2024 saw money and material pour in, but there was never an insinuation of malfeasance. Not until June 5 this year, when some temple employees were caught by security guards with cash in their pockets. An employee accused the State Bank of India (where the money was deposited) staff of miscounting the cash and deleting the CCTV footage to avoid being caught.

Things got murkier after Santosh Dubey, a former *kar senak*, alleged on social media that several gold bricks that came as con-

It seems that Modi and Yogi can be counted on to salvage the situation before the UP Assembly polls.

tributions had disappeared. The Sangh could not dismiss Dubey's voice. Vinay Katiyar, previously a BJP big league who was the Faizabad MP and UP party chief, stated that while "thousands had made sacrifices for Rama", money was never stolen.

In the tangled web of claims and counter-claims that the temple was enmeshed in after the "Pran Pratishtha" ceremony in January 2024, the crux lies in who now calls the shots in its administration and functioning: Delhi or Lucknow?

The Sangh-BJP's dilemma in framing a cogent and credible response was reflected in a statement by the UP Speaker, Satish Mahana, in the Assembly on Wednesday. Mahana remarked that those who questioned "corruption" in the temple's management had "put a question

mark over the entire Hindu community", but added that he was not defending the thieves.

The RSS finally sought to put a lid on the controversy as its general secretary, Dattatreya Hosabale, emphasised, "It is essential to ensure that anyone found guilty after the investigation faces severe punishment." Those were harsh words, especially after the Parivar's long-time *savant*, S Gurumurthy, who chairs the Vivekananda International Foundation (a strategic think tank), claimed in an article that the Ram Mandir Trust's "unprecedented actions also clearly imply that this was a low-level theft, not a high-level scam". It was an attempt at whitewashing the offence.

The Trust, which was headed by a former PMO official and PM MO confidant Nirpendra Misra, ensured that two key members—general secretary Champat Rai and trustee Anil Mishra—resigned once the needle of suspicion pointed towards them.

While Modi, who saw to it that the Trust was controlled by Delhi, remained silent, CM Yogi Adityanath swung into action. He constituted a special investigation team whose preliminary report became the basis for the arrest of eight persons and the resignations

of Rai and Mishra. Yogi—who whose mentor Mahant Avaidyanath once spearheaded the temple Trust—doubled down to steer the narrative from the theft to Hindutva by recalling the firing and killing of *kar senaks* during the rule of Akhilesh Yadav's father Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1990. He alleged that as CM, Akhilesh allowed Muslims to recite prayers at a spot close to the Ram Temple; he also accused the Congress, an SP ally, of employing tactics to delay the temple's construction.

Amplifying or deflating an issue depends as much on the ruling establishment's skill in countering the charges levelled against it as the Opposition's ability to inflate its campaign to a degree where the party in power is ambushed. That hasn't happened so far. Doubtless, the SP, playing for high stakes, raised and sustained the theft issue for a while, but when Adityanath flagged Hindutva, Akhilesh became defensive.

It's not as if the Ayodhya region is a no-go for the SP or the Opposition. The SP's Awadhesh Prasad wrested the Lok Sabha seat from the BJP in 2024; the SP also won the Ayodhya Assembly seat in 2012, ending the BJP's long run.

The Opposition, especially the SP and the Congress, faces its first major test on the temple theft issue in the monsoon session of Parliament. Already crumbling under pressure from the BJP some of the present and erstwhile INDIA constituents are being worked upon to support the 131st Constitution Amendment Bill, which fell through during Parliament's sitting in April. The Opposition suspected that under the guise of bringing in women's reservation in Parliament and the legislatures, the proposed legislation would pave the way for delimitation and gerrymandering of constituencies to help the ruling party.

As of now, an objective assessment from UP is that while the BJP's credibility has been dented by the temple theft, Modi and Yogi can be counted on to salvage the situation before the Assembly polls.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The faith of crores of Ram devotees in the Ayodhya temple should remain unbroken. —Dattatreya Hosabale

Lessons from orderly Bhutan

LT GEN RAJ SUJLANA (RETD)

A different world lies across the border in Bhutan, aptly called "The Last Shangri-La". Peace, order and discipline define this tiny country. In stark contrast, West Bengal's Jaigaon, the entry point, presents a familiar scene—crowded shops, chaotic traffic, stray cattle and dogs, stagnant water and an unpleasant smell. A narrow lane lined with hawkers led us to the immigration point, where a policeman checked our passports and waved us to proceed. An air-conditioned corridor, courteous officials and an efficient immigration process welcomed us into Phuntsholing. The township was clean, orderly and calm. Even the air seemed fresher. As a proud Indian, I could not help feeling somewhat diminished.

Smartly turned-out cops performed their duty professionally. Traffic rules were strictly observed throughout our journey. Speed limits of 25-30 kmph in towns and 50-60 kmph on highways were respected without exception. Well-maintained footpaths and zebra crossings made walking safe and pleasant. The moment a pedestrian stepped onto a crossing, traffic from both directions stopped.

Bhutan's commitment to the environment is equally impressive. Although government policy mandates a minimum forest cover of 60%, the country maintains nearly 70%. The lush greenery supports abundant birdlife, delighting nature enthusiasts. Spotting the now-rare house sparrow brought back memories of the time when these birds were common in Indian homes.

Cleanliness reflected both efficient administration and strong civic sense. There was no litter, no stray animals, and waste bins were used diligently. Garbage trucks followed fixed schedules, and residents deposited their waste directly into them. The same sense of order extended to religious places, where devotees prayed quietly in peaceful surroundings, free from loudspeakers or beggars. Ironically, any disturbance usually came from tourists.

Comparisons can be uncomfortable, but they are sometimes unavoidable. Returning to Jaigaon, we were greeted by noise and chaos, with sewage flowing openly near a place of worship. It is often argued that Bhutan's small population makes governance easier. While that is true, India possesses vast resources—it is the world's fastest-growing major economy—and considerable administrative capacity. Yet weak governance, corruption and poor civic sense continue to undermine our potential. It's telling that the Supreme Court had to reaffirm that pedestrians have the right to use the footpath.

The annual monsoon exposes our shortcomings. Waste accumulates in cities and hill stations, drains overflow and environmental degradation continues despite repeated warnings. Similar concerns have been raised about irresponsible tourist behaviour in ecologically fragile regions such as Ladakh.

Bhutan demonstrates that cleanliness, discipline and environmental responsibility are not merely functions of size or wealth but of governance, civic responsibility and collective will. Its example offers valuable lessons. But are we keen to learn them?

The writer is ex-Commandant, Indian Military Academy

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Making the government listen

Refer to 'Bridge the divide'; Sonam Wangchuk belongs to a rare breed of visionary and patriotic social activists. Voicing the genuine concerns affecting the nation in a self-sacrificing mode is his forte. His fast-deteriorating health at Jantar Mantar—demanding a revamped examination system and the fixing of responsibility for transparent accountability—does not deserve the apparent silence of the ruling dispensation. Ideals of good governance must inspire our authorities to transcend partisan interests. It is the duty of the government to protect his life. His adherence to and practice of Gandhian ideals merit our reverence. Upholding the right to peaceful dissent in a democracy marks him as a mensch. Let us save our menches for posterity.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Govt can't ignore Wangchuk

Refer to 'Bridge the divide'; the government must take serious notice of Wangchuk's protest for educational reforms. Instead of ignoring him. The Cockerroach Janita Party-backed Wangchuk's hunger strike at Jantar Mantar cannot be compared to other protests. It seems that the government lacks the willingness to talk to those who disagree with it. Wangchuk has made his point about the NEET leak and has drawn attention to the flawed educational system so that it can be set right. Any meaningful change will take patience and more committed individuals like Wangchuk who are dedicated to causes that resonate far and wide.

MONA SINGH, AMRITSAR

Reviving Punjab's lifeline

Appropos of 'The chemical cocktail of Sutlej's black, brown waters'; once the lifeline of Punjab, the river sustained agriculture, trade, transportation and countless settlements for centuries. Today, however, it has been reduced to carrying untreated municipal sewage and industrial effluents. Equally worrying is the drastic reduction in its natural flow. At least 4,000 causes of continuous water flow is required to rejuvenate its ecosystem. Ensuring such a volume, with equitable sharing of river waters among riparian states, is essential if this historic river is to be restored to its former glory.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), ZIRAKPUR

Initiative for sailors' safety

Refer to 'Seafarers' safety'; at a time when geopolitical tensions in West Asia continue to endanger vital shipping routes, New Delhi's decision to place the safety and welfare of Indian sailors at the forefront of its maritime strategy is a positive step. Indian seafarers, who form a significant part of the global maritime workforce, find themselves at the centre of a crisis as attacks on commercial vessels, missile strikes and regional tensions threaten their safety and livelihoods. The initiative also reflects India's growing recognition of the strategic importance of its maritime workforce. As global trade increasingly depends on secure sea lanes, safeguarding seafarers becomes not only a humanitarian priority but also a national one.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Doctors' competency affected

Refer to 'Medical education gets a boost as MBBS seats cross 1.36L mark'; the news is a matter of serious concern and alarm rather than applause. In a desperate bid to increase MBBS seats, the government is dangerously compromising the quality and competency of doctors. The commercialisation of medical education has affected the mindset of medical students, making them more materialistic, self-centred, without the values of sacrifice or service. This has turned the humanitarian aspect of medical service into a lucrative business. Rather than increasing the number of seats, serious challenges faced by medical education must be addressed and revolutionary reforms must be introduced before it is too late.

VITULL K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Private medical colleges to benefit

Appropos of 'Medical education gets a boost as MBBS seats cross 1.36L mark'; medical education appears to be inching towards becoming the preserve of the elite as 18 new private medical colleges are being established this year against only seven government ones. The share of seats in private medical colleges has been increasing with each passing year. The government may boast of increasing the number of MBBS seats, but it is doing so at the cost of equity and merit, as everyone cannot afford the exorbitant fees charged by private medical colleges.

RAJESH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

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

Faith, courage, service : Samundri's legacy



TARANJIT SANDHU
LT GOVERNOR, DELHI, &
SAMUNDRI'S GRANDSON

HISTORY often remembers movements through dramatic events and landmark victories, but the individuals who sustain those movements through years of sacrifice are sometimes overlooked. Among the architects of the Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement, few figures embodied perseverance, humility and public service more completely than Sardar Teja Singh Samundri. Nearly a century after his death in Lahore Central Jail on July 17, 1926, his life continues to offer lessons in leadership, integrity and devotion to the common good.

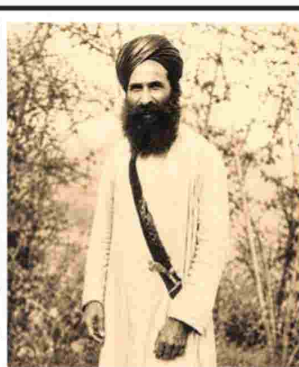
For Sikhs around the world, Teja Singh Samundri occupies a special place in the story of religious reform and community self-governance. He was not merely a participant in the struggle to reclaim Sikh institutions from colonial influence and mismanagement; he was also one of the movement's principal organisers and strategists. His contribution helped shape the modern framework through which Sikh religious affairs are administered today.

Born in 1882 into a farming family in Punjab, Teja Singh grew up in an environment where faith, hard work and community responsibility were deeply intertwined. Like many young men of his generation, he briefly served in the British Indian Army. Yet his lasting commitment was not to imperial authority but to the values of the Sikh tradition and the welfare of the community.

The opening decades of the 20th century were a period of profound challenges across India. Political awakening, demands for reform and resistance to colonial rule were gaining momentum. Within the Sikh community, concern was growing over the management of many historic gurdwaras. Institutions built through the devotion of generations of Sikhs had, in numerous cases, come under the control of hereditary custodians whose administration was



UNMATCHED LEADERSHIP : Sikh leaders released unconditionally from Lahore Jail on September 27, 1926, following the death of Sardar Teja Singh Samundri, paid a moving tribute to their revered leader by placing his portrait at the centre of their first group photograph. Master Tara Singh is seated on the left of Samundri's photo. CREDIT: TARANJIT SANDHU



increasingly viewed as unaccountable and inconsistent with Sikh principles.

The demand for reform was therefore about more than religious administration. It was a question of accountability, community rights and the protection of institutions that carried immense spiritual and historical significance. The movement that emerged would eventually transform Sikh public life and Teja Singh Samundri would become one of its most respected leaders.

His leadership became especially significant during the creation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) in 1920. The SGPC represented a historic assertion that Sikh institutions should be governed by the Sikh community itself rather than by private interests or colonial patronage. Samundri played an important role in building support for this vision and helping establish structures that continue to influence Sikh religious administration to this day.

His commitment was demonstrated repeatedly during major campaigns of the Gurdwara Reform Movement. During the agitation concerning Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in Delhi, Sikhs protested against the demolition of a section of the shrine's boundary wall by colonial authorities. For many observers, the dispute may have appeared administrative, but for the Sikh community, it represented a challenge to religious dignity and historical memory.

His understanding of service extended beyond religious reform. He recognised that education would play a crucial role in the future of Punjab.

The successful campaign to restore the wall became an early example of how organised and disciplined resistance could produce results. It was replicated in Guru Ka Bagh and Chabiyana Wala Morcha.

What distinguished Teja Singh was not only his public leadership but also his willingness to make personal sacrifices for the causes he believed in. Following the Nankana Sahib tragedy and subsequent pressures placed upon the reform movement, he accepted substantial financial risks in order to support Sikh institutions and publications. On more than one occasion, he used his own property and financial resources to ensure that legal appeals and community initiatives could continue.

His understanding of service extended beyond religious reform. He recognised that education would play a crucial role in the future of Punjab. At a time when educational opportunities remained limited for many, particularly for women, he supported efforts to establish schools and promote learning. The creation of educational institutions, including at Sarhali (Tarn Taran) and Lyallpur (Raisalaabad), associated with his efforts reflected a belief that an informed and educated community would be better equipped to preserve its values and shape its future.

Equally significant was his appreciation of the role of public communication. Reform movements depend not only on

activism but also on the ability to inform and mobilise people. The mass leader understood the importance of newspapers and public discourse in challenging official narratives and giving voice to community concerns. His initiatives related to publications connected to the reform movement helped strengthen an emerging Sikh public sphere during a critical period in Punjab's history.

Recognition from the community followed naturally. In 1923, he was selected among the Panj Pyare to lead the kar seva for cleaning the sacred sarovar at the Golden Temple.

The final chapter of his life revealed the depth of his convictions. Even after the passage of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act in 1925, tensions between colonial authorities and Sikh leaders did not immediately disappear. Several prominent Akali leaders remained imprisoned. Officials sought written assurances from detainees regarding future political activity and acceptance of government-imposed conditions. Teja Singh Samundri refused to compromise his principles in exchange for personal freedom.

He remained in jail and died there at just 43 years of age. His death deprived the Sikh community of one of its most capable organisers at a pivotal moment in its history.

Today, visitors to the Golden Temple complex encounter Teja Singh Samundri Hall, a prominent reminder of his contribution. His passing drew tributes from leaders across India's political and religious landscape. Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Swami Shradhanand and CF Andrews were among those who recognised his contribution to the Sikh reform movement and the wider struggle for justice. Within the Sikh community, Master Tara Singh remembered him as a 'Sampurna Sikh' (complete Sikh), while Bhai Vir Singh honoured him as a 'Param Pavitra Shaheed' (most holy martyr). Their words reflected the esteem in which he was held by contemporaries whose respect transcended political and religious boundaries.

In an era when public leadership is often measured by visibility and influence, Sardar Teja Singh Samundri reminds us of a different standard. His legacy rests on the quiet but powerful belief that institutions matter, that principles are worth defending and that meaningful change requires personal sacrifice. Nearly a century after his passing, those lessons remain as relevant as ever.

Pvt defence sector has entered. Now comes the hard part



RISHI AGGARWAL
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
JCB GROUP

ADECADE ago, describing India's private sector as a meaningful force in defence manufacturing required considerable optimism. Today, it requires only the facts.

The private sector now accounts for 23% of India's total defence production, a record, and the third consecutive year of growth. The Ministry of Defence has earmarked 75% of its modernisation budget, amounting to Rs 11.15 million, for procurement from domestic industries. The private sector is no longer at the margins of India's defence story. It is structurally embedded within it.

That is worth acknowledging clearly. But it is also where the harder question begins.

When we decided to enter the defence sector, I still remember the mix of excitement and fear. Our first big breakthrough came when ADRDE, a labora-

ry of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), entrusted us with developing a Heavy Drop System — specialised parachute solutions that are integrated with platforms to support the aerial delivery of heavy military cargo. As a partner, we took on a challenge that had never been attempted in India before.

One phase that almost broke us came after nearly six years of R&D and product development, when it looked like the project was slipping away to a foreign company, even though its bid was almost twice the cost of ours. It was heartbreaking to see years of effort hanging in the balance. But we stayed with it, kept improving, and eventually delivered the solution the Ministry of Defence was looking for.

Growth built on policy access is real, but long-term progress depends on how effectively industry converts policy support into capability. Both the draft DAP 2026 and DPM 2025 reflect a clear intent to strengthen private sector participation by simplifying processes, expanding opportunities and encouraging indigenous manufacturing. Together, these frameworks have levelled the playing field in ways that were unimaginable five years ago. But a level field is not a capability. It is an opportunity. The two are not the same thing.

The private sector's first challenge was



FILE PHOTO

Private industry and public defence establishments are not in competition.

entry. That challenge has been met. The second is far more demanding. Private companies must now move from being policy beneficiaries to being genuine system builders. Procurement access alone cannot make that transition happen.

It demands proprietary R&D, real design authority over the platforms and sub-systems a company produces and the discipline to commit to a domain across market cycles, not just contract cycles. These commitments do not yield returns within a single procurement cycle.

Private industry and India's public defence establishments are not in competition. They are collaborators in a shared national mission. The goal is to build new capability, collectively, until import dependence is no longer a vulnerability India carries. The question is not who gets the contract. The question is whether the contract produces something only you can deliver.

And that is where the uncomfortable truths lie. Some companies entering defence have been building towards genuine technical depth. Others have been optimising for near-term order books, spreading across too many domains without going deep enough in any one.

Focused players building capability in defence sub-systems or specialised aerospace components create a fundamentally different industrial asset than broad-

based contract manufacturers. They build sovereign capability over time, rather than filling a pipeline and moving on.

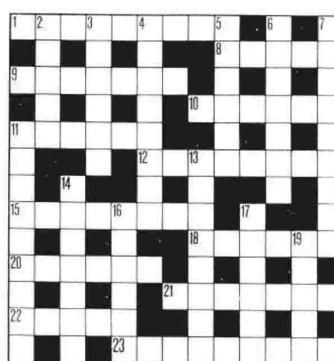
India remains the world's second-largest arms importer, accounting for 8.2% of global imports between 2021 and 2025. That figure sits alongside all the progress. The policy architecture is strong and the procurement momentum is real, but import dependence at this scale reflects a gap that reminds us that the mission is still unfinished. Closing that gap is not a policy problem anymore. It is an industry problem and the private sector must own it.

That ownership begins with a shift in orientation: from contract-cycle thinking to capability-building thinking, and from revenue growth as the headline metric to design authority as the defining one. Revenue growth is encouraging. Design authority is irreplaceable. The companies that achieve both will determine where this industry stands 20 years from now.

India's defence production reached Rs 1.54 lakh crore in FY 2024-25, its highest ever. The long-term target is Rs 3 lakh crore. The distance between those two numbers is where this industry's real work lives.

Reaching that target is not a procurement challenge. It is a capability challenge, and it falls on the private sector to rise to it.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- From the original source (9)
- Another time (5)
- Feeling of uneasiness (7)
- An arachnid (6)
- Recluse (6)
- Unsuccessful (8)
- Exceed (8)
- Recompense (6)
- Complain in low tones (6)
- Find guilty (7)
- Enforcing discipline (5)
- Gain courage (4,5)

DOWN

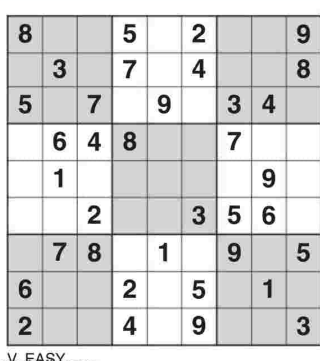
- Mental representation (5)
- Ingratiating (6)
- Tresolute (8)
- A deadening influence (6)
- Effusively sentimental (7)
- Behindhand with payment (2,7)
- Done haphazardly (3,2,4)
- Having conditional release (2,6)
- Scholarly (7)
- Strabismus (6)
- Provoke (6)
- Raise objection (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Build-up, 4 Pupil, 7 Rude, 8 Proposal, 10 High and dry, 12 Benign, 13 Piracy, 15 In any event, 18 Tortuous, 19 Flop, 20 Demon, 21 Laconic.

Down: 1 Berth, 2 Indigent, 3 Parody, 4 Paper tiger, 5 Pose, 6 Lullaby, 9 Gargantuan, 11 Game plan, 12 Bigoted, 14 In full, 16 Topic, 17 Cram.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

4	5	2	1	3	6	9	8	7
8	7	1	5	4	9	6	2	3
9	6	3	8	2	7	5	4	1
1	9	6	3	5	8	2	7	4
5	8	7	4	6	2	1	3	9
3	2	4	9	7	1	8	6	5
7	4	9	6	8	5	3	1	2
6	3	5	2	1	4	7	9	8
2	1	8	7	9	3	4	5	6

CALENDAR

JULY 17, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shukla Samvat 1948
- Ashadh Shukla 26
- Shrawan Purnimite 2
- Hijri 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 3, up to 6:28 am
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 4:43 am
- Wyatapa Yoga up to 10:46 pm
- Magha Nakshatra up to 6:35 pm
- Moon in Leo sign
- Gandmoola up to 6:35 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:25 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:33 HRS

CITY MAX MIN

Chandigarh 38 28

New Delhi 39 29

Amritsar 36 26

Bathinda 38 28

Jalandhar 36 26

Ludhiana 36 28

Bhiwani 39 28

Hisar 38 28

Sirsa 38 28

Dharamsala 31 20

Manali 27 17

Shimla 26 18

Srinagar 33 19

Jammu 32 27

Kargil 30 15

Leh 22 15

Dehradun 32 25

Mussoorie 25 20

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India - founded 1818

Beyond Hype

The stock market's romance with technological disruption has once again collided with an inconvenient reality: even the most visionary companies must eventually be judged by their ability to generate sustainable profits. The extraordinary debut of SpaceX on the public markets and the subsequent cooling of investor enthusiasm offer a timely reminder that valuations built solely on expectations can rarely escape scrutiny forever. Elon Musk has long demonstrated an unmatched ability to attract capital by persuading investors to buy into the future rather than the present. Tesla transformed perceptions of the automobile industry, SpaceX revolutionised commercial space launches, Starlink redefined satellite internet. It is therefore unsurprising that public investors rushed to own a stake in a company seen as operating at the intersection of aerospace, artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure. Yet the first month of trading has exposed a familiar pattern. Investors initially priced the company as a limitless technology platform rather than as a business with substantial costs, uncertain earnings and ambitious revenue projections. Once the excitement subsided, attention shifted to more conventional questions. How quickly can revenues grow?

When will profits come? Can ambitious forecasts survive the discipline of quarterly reporting? These questions matter because financial markets are becoming increasingly vulnerable to narratives overpowering fundamentals. The rapid ascent of meme stocks in recent years demonstrated how social media, celebrity influence and retail participation can drive prices far beyond conventional valuation metrics. While SpaceX possesses genuine technological leadership that distinguishes it from speculative enterprises, its shares are not immune to the psychology that has repeatedly inflated and deflated market expectations. The coming months are likely to prove more significant than the spectacular opening weeks. Public companies surrender a degree of mystique once they begin publishing regular earnings, facing analyst scrutiny and navigating the pressures of shareholder expectations.

Every launch delay, regulatory challenge, pricing decision or acquisition will now be examined not only for technological significance but also for its impact on financial performance. None of this diminishes SpaceX's remarkable achievements. It remains the world's dominant commercial launch provider, its Starlink constellation has established an entirely new communications market, and its long-term ambitions continue to influence the global space industry. Governments, defence establishments and commercial companies increasingly rely on capabilities that few competitors can replicate. But market leadership and market valuation are not identical concepts.

Investors often confuse technological superiority with limitless financial returns, overlooking the execution risks that accompany every ambitious vision. History is replete with companies whose innovations reshaped industries but whose share prices fluctuated dramatically as markets oscillated between optimism and realism. The recent moderation in SpaceX's valuation should therefore be viewed neither as a verdict on its future nor as evidence that its promise has faded. Instead, it marks the transition from aspiration to accountability. Ultimately, enduring corporate value is created not by excitement surrounding a vision, but by consistently translating that vision into earnings, cash flows and sustainable growth. The market's next verdict will depend on SpaceX's ability to deliver these.

Perilous Passage

The Strait of Hormuz has long been described as the world's most important energy chokepoint. It has now become far more dangerous: the focal point of an escalating contest over who can dictate the rules of international commerce. The death of an Indian seafarer and injuries to six other Indians aboard a UAE tanker underline that the costs of this confrontation are no longer confined to military calculations. Civilians who keep global trade moving are increasingly paying with their lives. The latest exchange has pushed the conflict into uncharted waters. Iran has demonstrated that it is prepared to target commercial shipping it considers hostile or non-compliant, while the United States has answered with renewed military strikes and the restoration of its naval blockade of Iranian ports. Washington briefly proposed imposing a 20 per cent charge on cargo transiting the Strait of Hormuz before withdrawing the idea within hours amid criticism and consultations with regional partners.

The swift reversal underscores how even the world's foremost military power cannot reshape the rules governing one of the busiest international waterways without encountering political, legal and diplomatic resistance. This proposal was remarkable not merely for its financial implications but for the precedent it sought to establish. International straits have historically remained open to global navigation under established principles of maritime law. A unilateral decision by any power to levy charges for passage risks transforming a shared international waterway into an arena where strategic dominance is monetised. Iran's response is equally revealing. By insisting that it remains the true guardian of the Strait, Tehran is asserting not simply military capability but political legitimacy. The dispute is therefore no longer about isolated naval incidents. It has become a struggle over authority, deterrence and international recognition in one of the world's most sensitive maritime corridors. For India, the implications are immediate and profound. Nearly two-thirds of India's crude oil imports originate in the Gulf region, while thousands of Indian nationals serve aboard merchant vessels operating through these waters, not all of them on Indian-flagged vessels. Every escalation increases both energy insecurity and the risks faced by Indian seafarers who have no role in geopolitical rivalries. The loss of an Indian sailor is a stark reminder that conflicts fought by states often exact their heaviest toll on ordinary workers. The consequences extend well beyond the region. Oil prices have already reacted, and sustained uncertainty will inevitably feed inflation, disrupt supply chains and complicate economic recovery across energy-importing nations. Governments that hoped the earlier ceasefire had restored stability must now confront the reality that maritime security remains deeply contested. Military superiority alone cannot secure one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Nor can competing claims of guardianship restore confidence among traders and insurers. The Strait of Hormuz requires internationally accepted rules, credible diplomacy and restraint by all parties. Without these, every commercial vessel entering those waters risks becoming another casualty in a conflict whose economic consequences will be felt far beyond the Gulf.

Beyond parlours and boutiques

Dashboards such as the Skill India Digital Hub currently make it easy to find the overall split between men and women for a scheme and comparatively hard to find the trade-level breakdown that reveals where the real gaps sit. Making trade-wise, gender disaggregated data a standard, public, default output, not something that requires digging through an annexure, would make it far harder for a scheme to claim progress on gender equity simply by enrolling more women into the same handful of feminised trades

For years, the standard way to check whether India's vocational training system was getting farther to women has been to look at one number: what share of trainees in a given scheme are female. On that measure, the recent trend looks like good news. Women now make up 56 per cent of all candidates certified under PMKVY 4.0, the flagship short-term skill training scheme run by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, and just over 60 per cent of those trained under DDU-GKY, the rural scheme linked to job placement run by the Ministry of Rural Development. Read in isolation, these figures suggest the gender gap in India's skill training system is closing, and closing fast.

It isn't, and the reason becomes obvious the moment you start counting heads and start asking which trades those heads are sitting in. NITI Aayog's Skill Development, Labour & Employment Division has, in passing, put out a working paper that makes this distinction unavoidable.

Pulling together cumulative enrolment and certification data from Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), PMKVY 4.0 and DDU-GKY, covering periods up to early 2026, the analysis shows that women's apparent dominance in short-term schemes sits on top of an almost total absence from technical and industrial trades. The picture that emerges, examined trade by trade rather than scheme by scheme, is not one of closing gaps but of a skilling system efficiently sorting men and women into separate, unequal tracks.

Start with ITIs, the backbone of India's long-term vocational training system, lasting one to two years, and the main pipeline into manufacturing, construction and engineering. Of the roughly 4.48 lakh candidates admitted between 2019 and 2024, only 12.65 per cent were women. Break that down further by stream, and the imbalance sharpens: women account for barely 5.5 per cent of all engineering trade admissions (electrical, fitter, welder, plumber, mechanic), even as they outnumber men in non-engineering streams such as fashion design, cosmetology and cretarian practice. Trade by trade, the engineering figures are stark: 27 per cent female participation in Motor Vehicle



Mechanic, 2.9 per cent in Plumbing, 3.4 per cent in Fitter, 3.5 per cent in Welder, and 4.8 per cent as Electricians. Meanwhile, trades such as Embroidery, Fashion Design, Dressmaking and Cosmetology are 93 to 99 per cent female, not balanced participation but near total occupational sorting in the opposite direction.

The short-term schemes tell a similar story once you look past the top-line gender split. Under PMKVY 4.0, women make up 65 to 95 per cent of certified candidates in Beauty and Wellness, Apparel, Handicrafts, Food Processing and Healthcare, but their share falls to 20 to 30 per cent or lower in Power, Automotive, Plumbing, Logistics and Mining, sectors that are precisely where India's industrial growth and high-value jobs are concentrated. DDU-GKY mirrors this: women dominate Apparel Made-ups, Beauty and Wellness and Healthcare, but barely register in Construction, Capital Goods, Power, Rubber and Plumbing. What this means is that the scheme-level gender ratio and the trade-level gender ratio are telling two different stories, and policymakers, journalists and even programme managers have largely been reporting the first one. A scheme can report rising, even majority, female enrolment every year while making no dent at all in the occupational segregation that actually determines whether women end up in stable, well-paid, future-facing jobs or in the lowest-paying corners of the services economy.

The economic stakes of getting this distinction wrong are large. The IMF has estimated that removing barriers to female labour force participation in India could lift national wealth by 35 per cent and economic output by 12 per cent. The World Bank separately estimates that raising female participation in manufacturing alone could add about 9 per cent to India's output, and that if female labour force participation across South Asia matched that of men, regional GDP could grow by anywhere from 13 to 51 per cent, depending on whether women also gain access to the same high productivity roles and tools as existing workers.

Both estimates are built on the assumption that women move into the trades and sectors men currently dominate, not simply that more women hold any skill certificate at

all. Counting heads without tracking trades risks declaring victory on a target that has not actually been met.

There is a second, less quantifiable cost. Occupational segregation isn't a neutral sorting outcome; it is the product of pipelines that start narrowing long before a young woman ever applies to a training centre.

Independent assessments of vocational provision under the National Education Policy 2020 have already flagged that the relatively few government schools offering certificate-based vocational courses to girls concentrate almost entirely on tailoring, embroidery and beauty-related trades, largely because of weak infrastructure, a shortage of trained faculty in technical subjects, and uneven rollout across states, not because girls lack the aptitude or interest in other fields.

By the time a young woman walks into an ITI, the menu of trades that she has often already been narrowed by what her school offered, what her family considers acceptable, and what training centres have built for her in terms of toilets, hostels, and transport.

To its credit, the policy response in the past two years has started to target the trade-level problem directly, rather than chasing the aggregate number. The NAVYA pilot, launched in mid-2025 across 28 districts, equips adolescent girls aged 16 to 18 with skills in genuinely non-traditional and emerging trades (drone assembly, solar photovoltaic installation, cybersecurity, CCTV installation, smartphone repair), alongside a life-skills module covering safety, communication and financial literacy.

Recent amendments to the Occupational Safety and Health Code now permit women to work night shifts across all sectors, subject to consent and safety provisions, removing a long-standing legal constraint on women's entry into manufacturing and logistics. And India's vast Self Help Group network, which now mobilises close to 10 crore women, has begun anchoring enterprises in solar panel assembly, LED bulb production and sanitary

pad manufacturing, unconventional sectors for SHGs a decade ago.

State-level experiments offer the clearest evidence that trade level movement is achievable, not theoretical. Odisha's Sudakshya scheme, which pairs tuition waivers with a monthly stipend and hostel rent reimbursement, lifted girls' enrolment in government ITIs from around 7 per cent in 2016–2017 to over 22 per cent by 2022–2023, a near tripling achieved by removing financial and residential barriers, not through awareness campaigns alone. Madhya Pradesh has trained nearly 9,000 rural women as masons under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin housing scheme (PMAY-G), putting them to work in a trade that remains almost entirely male nationally. Kerala's Kudamashree network has pushed women into plumbing, electrical repair, waste management and facility management through its all-women construction and repair groups. None of these is a large share of India's skilling universe yet, but each demonstrates that the binding constraint on women entering technical trades is rarely aptitude. It is infrastructure, stipends, safety, and whether a training pathway leads anywhere near an actual employer.

If there is one practical takeaway from reading this data closely, it is that India's skill-reporting architecture needs to change what it surfaces by default. Dashboards such as the Skill India Digital Hub currently make it easy to find the overall split between men and women for a scheme and comparatively hard to find the trade-level breakdown that reveals where the real gaps sit. Making trade-wise, gender disaggregated data a standard, public, default output, not something that requires digging through an annexure, would make it far harder for a scheme to claim progress on gender equity simply by enrolling more women into the same handful of feminised trades.

India's demographic dividend has long been treated as self-evidently linked to its gender dividend: more skilled women, more growth. The data underlying this latest analysis suggests the link is real but conditional: it depends on which trades women are skilled in, not merely how many of them are skilled. Closing that distinction in how progress is measured may turn out to matter as much as any single new scheme aimed at getting more women into training in the first place.

Jakarta Post

The dangerous labeling of LGBTQ as a threat to national defense

Presidential Regulation No. 111/2025 on the national defense policy for 2025–2029 makes a highly problematic move: it labels the spread of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) culture as a "national security threat" to the nation.

Not only does this clash directly with international human rights standards, but it effectively promotes homophobia and greenlights state-sanctioned hostility against LGBTQ individuals and the activists who stand with them.

This labeling contradicts Indonesia's own legal definitions. Under Article 1(6) of Law No. 39/1999 on human rights, a rights violation is defined as any act,

whether intentional or negligent, and whether committed by regular citizens or state officials, that unjustly limits, obstructs or strips someone of their basic human rights.

Ironically, the very same Presidential Regulation (on pages 35–36) acknowledges that human rights violations are themselves a massive threat to national defense.

The regulation explicitly warns that violating citizens' rights erodes public trust, damages Indonesia's international standing, sparks social unrest, triggers mass protests and ultimately stalls the economy by scaring

off foreign investment.

This glaring contradiction reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the constitutional rights enshrined in the 1945 Constitution. Article 28I paragraph 4 clearly dictates that protecting, promoting, enforcing and fulfilling human rights is the absolute responsibility of the State, and specifically the government.

From a modern human rights standpoint, LGBTQ issues are addressed through the framework of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. A person's sexual orientation and gender identity are core elements of their personal identity, falling squarely under

fundamental rights.

In fact, Article 28E(2) of the 1945 Constitution guarantees every Indonesian the right to freedom of belief and conscience, which includes the freedom to express thoughts and attitudes aligned with their inner convictions.

On the world stage, the definitive blueprint for these protections is the Yogyakarta Principles. Adopted in 2007 right here in Indonesia, this landmark document was drafted by 29 world-renowned legal experts from 25 countries, including heavyweights like former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson and former UN Special Rapporteur Manfred Nowak.

Letters To The Editor

✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Temple theft

Sir, Apropos today's editorial "Trust and Temple" on allegations of theft of offerings at the Ayodhya Ram Temple, embezzlement in Indian temples generally spans two main categories – theft of cash and valuables by insiders associated with its counting and management, and broader political disputes over the management of massive historical temple trusts by state governments or private bodies.

The alleged donation theft at Ayodhya is a major. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) in about a month's time, including the Saharwal and Padmanabhaswamy Temple have earlier faced scrutiny over transparency, gold-plating disputes, and the undisclosed management of temple valuables.

Champat Rai.

This incident mirrors historical pilferage scandals in several places of worship, such as the major 1983 gold theft at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi, and also a long history of political friction regarding the financial transparency and alleged misuse of endowments.

In states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, there are frequent allegations from devotees and political groups that state governments divert surplus temple funds and interest earnings toward secular or administrative purposes rather than reinvesting them into the temples.

In Karnataka, major shrines, including the Saharwal and Padmanabhaswamy Temple have earlier faced scrutiny over transparency, gold-plating disputes, and the undisclosed management of temple valuables.

The editorial rightly describes such allegations of financial impropriety as tests of governance, accountability and credibility to donor-devotees. Adequate surveillance and supervision are necessary to prevent temptation, detect irregularities and ensure complete transparency.

Yours, etc., Sukhendu Bhattacharjee
Shooraphull, 13 July.

Cliches

Sir, The recent *chanda chori* at the Ram Temple – a theft at the holiest of Hindu shrines – should give us pause. For years, Muslims have charged the temple with the "All Hindus are not terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims." This slogan is repeated with such smug certainty that it almost sounds like divine revelation.



But let us apply the same 'logic' to the present scandal: "All Hindus are not corrupt, but all corrupt are Hindus." Absurd, isn't it? Corruption, crime, and terror are not the monopoly of any faith; they are human failings that cross every boundary. Perhaps the Ram temple incident reminds us that slogans don't sanctify truth – they only foster prejudice.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole,
Devas, 14 July.

Why Trump – and others – must read Hemingway

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

2 July marks American Nobel laureate Ernest Hemingway's (1899-1961) 127th birth anniversary. Hemingway's caveats about the mindless killing that war unleashes seem to resonate unannounced in contemporary times, when war has phenomenally gained in prominence as a smart and swift way of global proffering. The geo-political eco-system reverberates with the lust for stupendous profit at the cost of waging wars that destroy lives, ruin the environment and exploit the helpless, marginalized people of the world without impunity. The 21st century wars have now cunningly outsmarted the 20th century ones that killed millions of people for no fault of their own. We are witnesses to wars and conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan. The list goes on and the shift in the theatres of war are significant - Ethiopia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Sahel region, have been identified as among the world's top conflict escalation hotspots by the Global Peace Index 2025.

As 2026 is the year when Hemingway's first published novel *The Sun Also Rises*, that foregrounded the trauma and devastation of war, turns 100, one wonders whether from 1926 to 2026, through these ten decades, civilization has matured and mellowed or escalated into abyssal depths. In mid-2026, we still are witness to mass murders, targeted killings and programmed wars. Terrorism flourishes as a global and local establishment, funded by vested interests, leveraging monetization through the arms trade that is indivisibly linked to the politics of power.

It would be delusional to disagree with Hemingway's anti-war arguments. "The first panacea for a mismanaged nation is inflation of the currency; the second is war. Both bring a temporary prosperity; both bring a permanent ruin. But both are the refuge of political and economic opportunists."

Hence in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, the young men and women of the 1920s, who were absolutely traumatized by the impact of the first world war, were described as "members of the Lost Generation". In an essay in *Esquire*, Hemingway had remarked, "World War I was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought."

Unfortunately, such recall of 20th century wars is not about reiterating historical commentaries from the archives. In fact, the reverse seems to be true. Now, all young people who are directly and indirectly involved in 21st century wars and war-like conflicts, are no longer primarily Europeans and Americans as in the 1920s. Wars raged and are raging in Europe, West Asia, Africa and South Asia. Big wars, middling wars, small wars - are all about the use of highly expensive sophisticated weapons, which are promoted and publicized in the global arms markets, highlighting their gruesome precision.

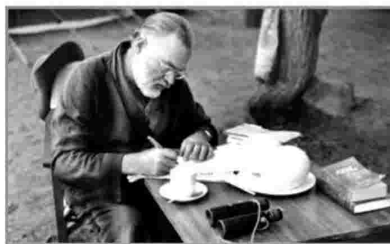
Defense departments are renamed war departments; defense ministers visit countries peddling their latest weapons. Countries which invest in significant yearly purchases of arms receive endearing recognition from global powers who are the world's dominant manufacturers and exporters of war weapons.

A Google check will reveal that Hemingway's birth country is the world's largest exporter of war weapons. Understandably, the world's largest importer of war weapons is Ukraine. Thereafter the world's top global importers of arms are India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Pakistan, respectively. Missing the irony is impossible.

In the war context, Hemingway's observations about patriotism and nationalism ring true: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain... We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through... and read them, or proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory." (*A Farewell to Arms*)

The result of war 'armed-conflict' as phrased by the United Nations, which categorically avoids use of the signifier 'war' is scripted by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, which instead of describing the war front, focusses on the mental fractures in the aftermath of war. Hemingway focused on the psychological catastrophe that war creates. "I got hurt in the war. Oh, that dirty war. We would probably have gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided."

In the 20th century Hemingway was one of the premiere writers who repeatedly and tirelessly emphasized the destructive fallout of war in his powerful and sensitive novels. Beginning with *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's complete disgust about the dehumanization that war creates,



was underscored without any evasive strategies in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* published in 1929. "That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn... You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you."

Furthermore, Hemingway commented, "There is nothing as bad as war... When people realize how bad it is they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy. There are some people who never realize. There are people who are afraid of their officers. It is with them the war is made."

Again, in his essay in *Esquire* in September 1935, Hemingway had stated: "War is no longer made by simply analyzing economic forces if it ever was. War is made or planned now by individual men, demagogues and dictators who play on the patriotism of their people to mislead them into a belief in the great fallacy of war when all their vaunted reforms have failed to satisfy the people they mislead."

In his acclaimed 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's disgust about war was unequivocal, where he had not just commented "Wars are caused by unfettered wealth" but had also stated, "never think that war, no matter how necessary nor how justified, is not a crime. Ask the infantry and ask the dead."

Perhaps in anticipation of the techno-smart hovering drones and their lethal precision, witnessed in our troubled times, Hemingway had written in 1940: "But these, wide-finned in silver, roaring, the light mist of their propellers in the sun, these do not move like sharks. They move like nothing there has ever been. They move like mechanized doom."

Hemingway was a nonconformist writer who protested against war and the politics of war with the courage of his convictions. His active support of the Spanish Civil War is recorded in his play *The Spanish Earth* and the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It would be hard to disagree with Hemingway's claim about his understanding of war, as he had actively participated in both the First and Second World War in various capacities and had directly supported the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s.

I would humbly suggest that in the war-torn 21st century, Ernest Hemingway's novels, letters and non-fictional writings need to be read, cited, researched and referred to by public intellectuals, teachers, students and hopefully critically informed politicians so that the profit and power of war can be confronted with the advocacy of priceless peace movements.

(The writer is former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University and Visiting Professor, Jagiellonian University, Poland.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 17 July 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE Lee Commission recommended that 75 per cent. of the number of officers in the superior railway services should be Indians. This recommendation did not, it would appear, meet with any strong opposition from the railways concerned, possibly because the Indians already in the superior ranks are highly trained and efficient officers, and the Government of India have now drawn up a scheme for providing the necessary recruits, full details of which are contained in a telegram from Simla. But when the Lee Commission deliberately accepted a racial percentage basis as providing a good means of meeting the claims of Indians to have a larger share in the administration of the country, it had quite forgotten that there are several races in India and each deserves a special racial discrimination for itself. Once it is admitted that what ought to be the right of all British subjects to sit for public examination for entry into public service can be qualified for racial reasons, then the Mussalman is entitled to come forward, as he is coming forward, to demand that a definite percentage of the places reserved for Indians should be allotted to him. Looking at the scheme for recruitment to the engineering and other branches of the railway services it is quite evident that very few Mussalmans, indeed, will be able to satisfy the tests laid down.

News Items

MOTOR INDUSTRY

NEW BRITISH CONCERN FOR CALCUTTA

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

LONDON, JULY 17.—The Statesman understands that a number of prominent Indian business men will be invited to join the board of the new Dunlop Company in India. At least one leading British motor firm proposes forming an Indian Company operating throughout India from Calcutta. An efficient service of stations with factory trained mechanics will be available in the various centres.—Copyright.

SIR HUGH LANE'S PICTURES

RETURN CLAIMED BY FREE STATE

(FROM OUR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE.)

LONDON, JULY 17.—The Free State Senate has passed a resolution urging Britain to return Sir Hugh Lane's collection of pictures, valued at £200,000, which are housed in the Tate Gallery.

It will be recalled that after the dispute with the Dublin Corporation over housing the pictures, Sir Hugh Lane bequeathed them to the National Gallery in London in 1915. Later he sailed for America, losing his life on the return voyage. He left an unsigned codicil directing that the pictures should be returned to Dublin. The British Government recently refused to legislate on the codicil, declaring that it created a dangerous precedent.

Mr. W.B. Yeats, speaking in the Senate, declared that they must insist on the return of the pictures to the Free State. Their policy was to remain on the friendliest terms of loyalty, but it was impossible to preserve this attitude if obvious conditions were ignored.

Mr. Yeats contended that the King, when opening the Tate Gallery on June 26 when the matter was sub judice compromised the Free State's claim. He asked whether it was then pointed out to His Majesty that he should be advised on such a matter, not only by the British ministers but by the Governor-General and his Irish ministers.

Mr. Yeats added: "Our claim to the pictures is an important one, but the question involves a much more important issue and one vitally affecting the constitutional position of every Dominion. The British Government might evasively reply to the Free State's claim that it was a moral and not a legal one, and therefore the King was not bound to take cognisance of it, but the moral were the material issues in international questions and caused greater trouble than the legal."

"The day might come," he added, "when some action of the King might prejudice a claim involving a fundamental right."

Mr. Yeats denied that Sir Joseph Duveen received a promise in 1918 that the pictures should be deposited in the wing which he offered to build.

The man who shaped Sikh destiny



MANJINDER SINGH SIRSA

THE Teja Singh Samundri Hall sits at the heart of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in Amritsar. It is a singular honour. In over a hundred years of the SGPC's history, only one person has had an institution named after him. Not for wealth. Not for political manoeuvring. But for moral courage that refused compromise.

That man was Sardar Teja Singh Samundri. He died on 17 July 1926, in Lahore Fort prison. He was not a martyr in death alone. His entire life was martyrdom dedicated to the Sikh panth and nothing else.

Born on 20 February 1882 in Rai Ka Burj village, Tarn Taran district, Teja Singh rose from peasant roots. A primary educated man, he mastered Sikh religious texts and historical traditions profoundly. His knowledge ran deep where formal credentials stopped.

Three-and-a-half years in the British Indian Army shaped him further. He rose to Dafadar in the 22nd Cavalry Regiment. The discipline he learnt there would become his greatest asset. When he turned to Sikh affairs, he brought military precision to institutional building. Teja Singh held one conviction:

education transforms. He established Sri Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa High School in Sarhali, Amritsar district. He founded a Khalsa Middle School in his native village. Through the Khalsa Diwan Bar, a federation he led, schools multiplied across the Sandal Bar region of Lyallpur district.

Generations of Sikh youth learned modern knowledge alongside Gurmata principles. He shaped the Akali daily newspaper into a platform for Sikh thought. Every institution bore his mark: organised, principled, sustained. No fanfare. Just results.

In 1920, corrupt mahants controlled Sikh shrines. These gatekeepers had become collaborators with the British. The gurdwaras needed liberation. Teja Singh became a founding member of the SGPC and led the Gurdwara Reform Movement.

He chose institutional strength over personal authority. He believed movements thrive when institutions overshadow individuals. Leadership meant moral example, not position. Master Tara Singh called him "a complete Gursikh" one whose credibility came from personal restraint and spiritual depth.

In villages around Amritsar and Tarn Taran, Teja Singh dismantled caste barriers. He invited Dalits to draw water from common wells. He asked them to serve him publicly. In early twentieth-century Punjab, this was a spiritual and social revolution at once.

In 1914, the British attempted to

demolish the boundary wall of Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in Delhi. Teja Singh led a hundred-member jatha in peaceful protest. The colonial authorities withdrew. Non-violence had prevailed over imperial might.

The Keys Agitation of 1921-22 followed. The British had locked away the Golden Temple's treasury keys. Teja Singh mobilised thousands of Sikhs in Chhabian Da Morcha. He accepted imprisonment rather than surrender. In 1922, the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha saw unarmed Sikhs face British lathis while chanting "Satnam Waheguru." Teja Singh stood as the philosophical and spiritual backbone.

When the SGPC faced financial crisis threatening its legal case before the Privy Council and was short by Rs 75,000, Teja Singh mortgaged 50 acres of ancestral land. The SGPC won the case after his death. His family turned down reimbursement. The sacrifice was complete.

On 13 October 1923, the British arrested Teja Singh along with 58 other Akali and SGPC leaders. The charge: "waging war against the King, Emperor." Lahore Fort became his prison. Conditional release was offered repeatedly. Each time, he stood firm. Principles were not negotiable.

By 1923, his stature had grown such that he was chosen as one of the Panj Piaras to initiate kar seva

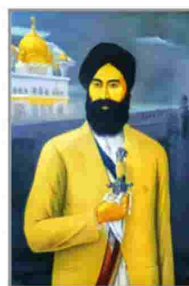
of the Golden Temple sarovar, the first such service since 1842. When he and eleven companions, including Master Tara Singh, spurned conditional release, public outrage forced the British to release the remaining prisoners unconditionally. It backfired. Sympathy swept Punjab. Teja Singh's group secured an overwhelming mandate.

While imprisoned, Teja Singh studied the Gurdwara Bill with Master Tara Singh, Bhag Singh, Gurcharn Singh and Sohan Singh Josh. The bill, presented by Governor Malcolm Hailey, embodied all Akali demands. On 28 July 1925, the Viceroy signed it into law as the Sikh Gurdwaras Act. Teja Singh's intellectual leadership was etched into every clause.

On 17 July 1926, still in Lahore Fort, Teja Singh Samundri died of a heart attack. Master Tara Singh would write: he was not a martyr in death. His entire life was martyrdom: sewa, love, devotion, wisdom, fearlessness. Sacrifice had become his breath.

The Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920-1926 stands as one of history's most successful non-violent mass mobilisations. Teja Singh Samundri was its moral spine and intellectual architect.

He converted a potential sectarian dispute into a model of democratic governance. He demonstrated that

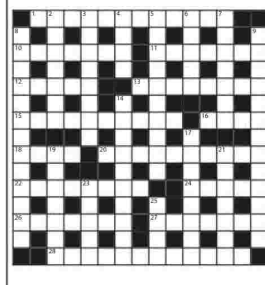


moral authority, disciplined organisation and unwavering principles could overcome imperial power. He did this through quiet work, through personal restraint, and through institutional vision that outlasted his life.

In an age of performative politics and impatient leadership, his life offers a different standard. Quiet courage leaves deeper marks than public noise. Sustained integrity outlasts rhetoric. Institutional strength outlives individual ambition. The hall bearing his name is his monument. His true memorial lives in the democratic institutions he helped create, the dignity he restored to millions of Sikhs, and the blueprint he left for spiritual awakening as a force for social and political transformation.

The writer is a Cabinet Minister of the Government of NCT of Delhi.

Crossword | No. 29323



Yesterday's Solution

WINTER PALACE
ADVERTISING
OCEANIC
SHEEP
FIRE
PETER GORON
INTERVIEW
TUBER
SINGERS
SLEASAM
SIREN

ACROSS
1 Chemical compound by reactor had decayed (12)
10 Heaney's work bedeviled initially by recurrent influenza misery (7)
11 Mocking male ferret in charge nursing a temperature (7)
12 Alfred the Unsure? (5)
13 Singer Buddy regularly sampled by 'Blue star' (5,5)

15 Forgot Ed Balls appearance having priority (10)
16 10 perhaps, a constant in The City (4)
18 Catch sight of English agent (6)
20 Called at Rome on the way back, having a sandwich of sausage (10)
22 Small firm working to contain inflation measure - it could be deadly (8)
24 Partially decrease liberal support for the arts? (5)

26 Frozen marijuana drink (4,5)
27 Ms Zardoa breaking end off musical Irish family's instrument (7)
28 Gadsby Sepp runs off carrying that lady's winter sports gear (12)
DOWN
2 American wily-sounding character short of oxygen acquiring large fan (7)
3 Some nonsense about Brand taking a line in the capital (6,7)
4 Leaders of House admit frankly Trump's a bit of a tool (6)
5 Fraud as Rishi - according to some - admits trafficking stone (10)
6 Played detective about to flip (5)
7 Wyatt touring Florida in headwarmer (7)
8 Left Marie Celeste? (9,4)

9 One climbing Snowdon circles in a weird manner (6,7)
14 He recommends a tiny sample of the oompah remix (not loud) (10)
17 Lid steak unfortunately emitting sulphur gas (4,4)
19 Saw dog biting lead (7)
21 React angrily to the French call of aggression? (4,5)
23 Bread? It's mine, thanks (5)
25 Box Snopy's debut rap collection (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



OPINION



Pakistan's Ground Zero

Deadly lapses

Doomed tax initiative

BY KHURRAM HUSAIN

Caution: danger ahead

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COMMENT

Editorials

New drivers underpin China's economic resilience in face of pressure and challenges

Amid the weakening global economic outlook, China's economic performance in the first half of this year is a bright spot.

Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics on Wednesday show that the country's GDP grew by 4.7 percent from January to June year-on-year. The pace of growth of the world's second-largest economy is in line with its annual target.

China's GDP grew 5 percent year-on-year in the first quarter. Although growth moderated in the second quarter, the economy has remained on a stable footing, with its underlying trend toward innovation-driven and high-quality development unchanged.

The 22.1 percent increase in imports of goods and 13.4 percent increase in exports year-on-year demonstrate the vitality of the country's foreign trade, which, in spite of the rising protectionism and trade restrictions by some economies, continues to drive growth.

A deeper look shows the improving structure of the economy. During the first six months of this year, new drivers, such as high-end manufacturing, the digital economy and the modern service industry, contributed more than 40 percent of the growth, a testament that the country is advancing its innovation-driven progress.

Another telling piece of evidence is the robust expansion of the service sector, which has become a major growth engine. The sector's added value increased by 5.2 percent year-on-year, accounting for over 59 percent of GDP.

The country has intensified efforts to boost the service sector over the years to empower agriculture, manufacturing and other sectors, and create jobs. Even while the service sector is expanding, the country attaches strategic importance to manufacturing, the backbone of the economy. Statistics show the added value gener-

ated by the manufacturing sector accounted for 26.2 percent of the country's GDP, 0.4 percentage points higher than three years ago, the NBS said.

China enjoys unique strengths in its comprehensive manufacturing system, which is the foundation of the country's supply chains, as well as its ability to seize opportunities in global markets and turn out products tailored to the needs of consumers around the world.

The manufacturing powerhouse is now aiming to further consolidate these strengths by investing more in research and development to overcome technological choke points and exploring cutting-edge technologies to upgrade its factories, making them smarter and more eco-friendly.

According to the NBS, the volume of energy consumed per unit of GDP in the first half of this year decreased 1.9 percent year-on-year, as the country continues to maintain competitive advantages in its new energy products.

The country's economic performance is the product of targeted, systematic policies — carefully calibrated to sharpen the competitive edge of high-technology industries while shoring up the resilience of more established sectors.

Nevertheless, future growth continues to face complex external challenges. As Mao Shengyong, deputy head of the NBS, said at a news conference on Wednesday, the authorities should work to strengthen countercyclical and cross-cyclical regulation, further expand domestic demand, and strive to build a robust domestic market to counter the headwinds.

The 4.7 percent GDP growth in the first six months of 2026 was hard-won. It ought to reinforce the nation's confidence that the economy's intrinsic resilience will continue to help the country effectively navigate risks and challenges.

US' Red Sea bluster diplomatic theater

The United Nations Security Council's decision on Tuesday to extend the secretary-general's reporting mandate on Houthi attacks in the Red Sea should have been one of those rare moments when different countries acknowledged a shared interest in the freedom of navigation through one of the world's busiest maritime arteries.

Yet the meeting became noteworthy not for what the UN Security Council agreed upon, but for what one delegation chose to stage. The sharp exchanges between US Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz and China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Sun Lei revealed Washington's persistent habit of transforming multilateral diplomacy into geopolitical point-scoring.

China abstained on the resolution rather than exercising its veto, thereby allowing the reporting mechanism to continue. That alone suggested that Beijing hopes the UN will continue to play its role to help ensure maritime safety in the Red Sea. It made Washington's decision to single out China all the more improper.

Waltz insisted that his remarks — falsely tying China to the supply of dual-use items to the Houthis — were not an "accusation". He then feigned bewilderment, professing to be "struggling to understand why it's offensive" to call upon all member states to intercept such "material", as if the offense lay not in his words but in the very act of taking umbrage at them.

Diplomacy is about context, timing and intent. Declaring that one is not making an accusation while partially citing so-called UN-sourced "statistics" intended to implicate another country resembles the familiar fiction of "No offense, but..." before proceeding to give offense. Waltz's response was a master class in theatrical innocence. An ambassador who lectures the UN about "statistics" and "concerns" somehow cannot grasp the causal chain of the Middle East crisis. It was carefully calibrated to appear "reasonable" while ensuring that the spotlight shifted from the resolution toward China.

China has always strictly abided by and implemented UN Security Council resolutions, and has consistently adopted a prudent and responsible approach to the export of military products and dual-use items, exercising strict controls in accordance with its domestic export control laws and regulations as well as its international obligations, Sun said.

Waltz's professed inability to comprehend Sun's justified rebuttal reveals something deeper: a US diplomacy so accustomed to its own "self-righteousness" that it cannot fathom why others might see things differently. Some US politicians would never pause to consider that the weaponry the US supplies to Israel fuels instability across the Middle East. They act as though the intelligence and

Starlink capabilities the US provides to Israel are somehow exempt from scrutiny. True, the UN lacks the capacity to examine cargo manifests and port records of these US supplies. Yet these very tools — intelligence sharing and Starlink — are the indispensable instruments through which the US and Israel conduct targeted assassinations and "precision strikes".

But the fact is that neither China nor the US benefits from commercial vessels being attacked in the Red Sea. Their disagreement lies not over the objective but over diagnosis.

For China, as Sun said, the Red Sea crisis cannot be divorced from the wider instability engulfing the Middle East. The conflict in Yemen, the unresolved Palestinian question and repeated cycles of military escalation have created conditions in which maritime insecurity has become a symptom rather than the disease itself. Addressing shipping attacks while ignoring these underlying political crises is akin to repeatedly mopping the floor while leaving the leaking pipe untouched.

That diagnosis may be uncomfortable for Washington because it inevitably raises awkward questions about the US' role. Military interventions, sanctions, shifting alliances and proxy conflicts have become features of the Middle East thanks to the US' "concerns". Waltz extolled Washington's "peacekeeping" credentials — ceasefire brokered, initiatives championed. But he omitted the inconvenient context: the very environment the US now seeks to stabilize was profoundly shaped, and in no small measure destabilized, by its own policies. One cannot plausibly claim the credit for extinguishing a fire while resolutely declining to investigate who supplied the kindling.

The distinction also explains the contrasting diplomatic styles. Beijing emphasizes dialogue, Yemeni-led reconciliation, humanitarian assistance and renewed momentum toward a two-state solution to the Palestinian question. Its successful facilitation of the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran before the US-Israeli joint attacks on Iran demonstrated that regional diplomacy need not always proceed through military pressure or bloc politics.

Washington, by contrast, frames regional crises through the prism of strategic competition and transaction. The temptation to link almost every hot-spot issue to a deal through which the US can realize immediate monetary gains may generate domestic political dividends, but it rarely advances real solutions.

The Red Sea suffers from a lack of down-to-earth, solution-oriented political pragmatism. The US cannot play Red Sea sheriff while ignoring its own role as regional arsonist in the Middle East crisis. Diplomatic theater grabs headlines; it does not safeguard shipping.

Luo Jie



Opinion Line

Creating conditions for young people to choose parenthood

When Beijing chose "caring for early pregnancy, nurturing and empowering" as the focus for this year's World Population Day on July 11, some wondered if that was really a priority. Factor in that China's population has contracted, its birth rate has plunged to record lows and the total fertility rate is stuck below the replacement level — and the answer is clearly yes.

On the surface, focusing on providing care in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy seems almost quaint when fewer women are choosing to conceive in the first place. However, this narrowing of focus is not a retreat from the broader fight. It is a calculated repositioning — after years of providing subsidies, extended leave and expanding childcare facilities, it is now not the cost that is the decisive barrier to childbearing, but the anxiety that precedes the very decision to conceive.

Over the past decade, China's pro-fertility policies have largely been aimed at reducing the financial and logistical burdens of raising a child.

The 3,600-yuan (\$531) annual childcare subsidy, the 158-day mater-

nity leave, and the push for affordable nursery slots were all necessary, and all welcome. But these measures are applicable only after a woman has already decided to carry a pregnancy to term. What about the fear, confusion and lack of support that so often accompany that decision in the first place?

That is where early pregnancy clinics come in.

As of last month, China had established 12,226 such clinics — one-stop centers that offer medical assessments, psychological counseling and nutritional guidance to women in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.

The rationale is rooted in both medicine and psychology. The first trimester is the most vulnerable period for both mother and fetus and also the moment when worries — about health, medication safety or how it will affect career, if left unaddressed — can tip a woman toward terminating her pregnancy.

By providing timely, authoritative guidance and emotional reassurance, early pregnancy clinics aim to ease anxieties before they harden into a decision.

The 10-point health education guidelines, published by health authorities this month — covering diet, exercise, emotional well-being and risk avoidance — are also designed to demystify early pregnancy.

Together, they offer young women a clear road map at a time when uncertainty often dominates.

In a country where nearly half of all births are firstborn children — and many couples are navigating pregnancy for the first time — this clarity can be decisive.

Critics may argue that structural pressures — housing costs, job insecurity, education expenses — are still overwhelming. But the strength of this approach lies in sequencing: one cannot address the full chain of barriers if the first link is ignored.

Whether this bet pays off will take years to assess. Yet the direction is unmistakable: in addressing demographic decline, China has stopped simply asking young people to have more children — and has started building the conditions that might make them want to.

— LI LEI, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Application of high-tech key to modern agriculture

Editor's note: China has unveiled a plan to accelerate the modernization of agriculture during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period. People's Daily Overseas Edition spoke to experts, including Zhang Chengpeng, an associate researcher at the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research, on the development of agricultural technology in China. Below are excerpts of the interviews. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

In 2025, the contribution rate of agricultural scientific and technological progress surpassed 64 percent. The new plan has set a target of increasing the rate to 67 percent by 2030. This goal is not a catch-up gain from a low base, but an ambitious advance from an already high level.

This growth does not follow a linear trajectory. When the contribution rate was around 50 or 60 percent, the widespread adoption of individual technologies could generate noticeable gains. At the current level of more than 64 percent, however, the room for further improvement through the diffusion of a single technology has narrowed considerably.

Increasing the contribution rate by another 3 percentage points will require the coordinated application of multiple innovations, including bio-breeding, digital and intelligent technologies, smart agricultural equipment and green production methods.

China's agricultural machinery industry faces structural challenges. It is not sufficiently competitive and lacks high-end products, while mechanization in hilly and mountainous areas continues to lag behind.

At the same time, greater efforts should be made to build a stronger industrial ecosystem, fostering leading enterprises, expanding remote operation and maintenance services, promoting shared-use machinery and improving equipment utilization. Policies on machinery purchase subsidies and operational subsidies

should also be refined, while further expanding openness and international cooperation.

The country's agricultural biomanufacturing industry is at a pivotal stage where strategic opportunities coexist with practical challenges. To overcome existing bottlenecks, China should establish a scientific classification system for the sector, build a comprehensive national innovation framework for agricultural biomanufacturing, accelerate the development of an industry-university-research ecosystem led by enterprises, and formulate coordinated plans for differentiated industrial development.

AI holds enormous potential for agriculture, but many obstacles remain before AI and smart equipment can be widely deployed in the field. General-purpose algorithms often struggle to adapt to different climates, regions and crop varieties. Affordable, lightweight intelligent equipment remains in short supply, while agricultural data are difficult to collect and lack unified standards.

As a result, many AI applications remain confined to demonstration zones and pilot farms. China should strengthen agricultural and rural data infrastructure, build large-scale, multimodal, high-quality datasets, improve data standards and governance, accelerate the development of software and hardware with independent intellectual property rights, and encourage all stakeholders to speed up the digital and intelligent

transformation of agriculture.

Emerging agricultural industries are the new engines of growth, while future-oriented industries represent the strategic frontier that China must secure in its quest to become a leading agricultural nation. Together, they form the technological foundation for building a strong agricultural sector.

Greater efforts should therefore be devoted to expanding emerging industries such as smart agriculture and the resource utilization of agricultural waste, while actively fostering future industries including molecular agriculture, gene-editing breeding technologies, AI-powered foundation models and AI-powered decision-support systems. These measures will inject fresh momentum into high-quality agricultural development.

China has largely solved the challenge of ensuring an adequate food supply and is now shifting its focus toward improving quality, competitiveness and resilience. As the returns from traditional factor-driven growth continue to diminish, new industries and new business models will be essential for creating fresh sources of growth.

Accelerating the layout of emerging and future-oriented agricultural industries will accelerate agricultural and rural modernization, further strengthen the foundations of agriculture and address the remaining weak links in rural development.

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VIEWS

Xu Qi

Illegal 'arbitration award' a political farce

The South China Sea "arbitration" unilaterally initiated by the Philippines in 2013, and the subsequent "award" rendered in 2016, constituted not a legal proceeding but a political farce meant to serve geopolitical goals. Fundamental flaws in both procedure and merit of the so-called award rendered it null and void from the very outset.

By not recognizing the "arbitration", not participating in the proceedings and not accepting the "award", China did not disregard international law but defended its core principles.

The legitimacy of any international dispute settlement mechanism hinges on one fundamental rule: the consent of the states concerned.

Without China's consent, the "arbitral tribunal" violated a fundamental principle of international law.

The "arbitration" also ignored the long-standing understanding between China and the Philippines to resolve disputes through negotiation.

Article 281 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea states that when parties agree to settle disputes by peaceful means of their choice, compulsory dispute-settlement procedures do not apply.

Similarly, Article 4 of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea mandates that disputes be settled through negotiation by the parties involved.

These are legally binding instruments, and the Philippines' unilateral initiation of "arbitration" is a breach of the consensus it had previously endorsed.

In 2006, China made a declaration under Article 298 of UNCLOS, excluding issues related to maritime delimita-

tion and historic rights from compulsory arbitration.

Although Manila avoided using terms like "sovereignty" and "delimitation", all 15 of its claims are related to these core issues.

To bypass China's 2006 declaration, the tribunal reinterpreted the disputes and reframed delimitation as boundary line drawing.

This action contradicted UNCLOS and revealed it was ultra vires. Without China's consent, the tribunal had no jurisdiction over the delimitation issue.

The tribunal's proceedings on the merits also significantly deviated from justice. It misinterpreted Article 121 of UNCLOS on the regime of islands by introducing arbitrary criteria and raising the threshold for what qualifies as an island for China.

This resulted in double standards that favored Manila. Features occupied by the Philippines were assessed under comparatively lenient criteria, while islands and reefs under China's control were downgraded to "rocks" or "low-tide elevations".

A number of international scholars have observed that the tribunal appeared less concerned with interpreting the UNCLOS than with rewriting it.

The tribunal arbitrarily dismissed China's historic rights in the South China Sea, despite their recognition in several provisions of the convention and their independent status under customary international law.

By fragmenting the Nansha Islands into isolated maritime features, it attempted to undermine China's sovereignty claims, reducing them to ownership of individual features.

The tribunal's approach to evidence was also questionable. It violated the

basic legal principle that "he who asserts must prove" by actively gathering evidence for the Philippines while ignoring historical documents submitted by China.

All experts appointed by the tribunal were from Western countries, and their reports were perfunctory and lacked transparency. Given these fundamental flaws, the "award" was null and void and had no legal binding.

Among the first states to ratify UNCLOS in 1996, China has always upheld the international maritime order through actions. It has enacted domestic laws on the territorial sea and the contiguous zone, and on exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf, proactively aligning its domestic legal framework with UNCLOS.

China actively participated in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, fulfilled its obligations under regional fisheries management organizations, supported the governance framework of the International Seabed Authority, and signed and ratified the agreement on the sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction identified by UNCLOS.

This proves that China fully respects UNCLOS and has always strictly abided by its provisions and spirit. Manila's accusation that China "does not abide by the law" is a distortion of China's lawful exercise of its rights under Article 298 of UNCLOS.

The tribunal's politicization of the convention and its attempt to undermine China's sovereignty through judicial overreach was what truly violated international law.

The bilateral agreements between

China and the Philippines and the DOC affirm that disputes should be resolved through negotiations between the parties concerned. That commitment carries significant legal weight.

History shows that negotiation and consultation are the most effective ways to resolve complex boundary disputes.

China and Vietnam successfully delimited the maritime boundary in the Beibu Gulf through negotiations under the UNCLOS framework.

China has also settled boundary issues with 12 of its land neighbors, delineating about 90 percent of its land borders through negotiations.

The South China Sea "arbitration award" was political manipulation disguised as international law. Genuine international rule of law respects state consent and the choices of nations.

The "dual-track approach" proposed by China — under which disputes are settled through negotiation and consultation between the parties concerned, while peace and stability in the South China Sea are jointly maintained by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries — represents the right path to resolve the South China Sea issue.

Guided by this approach, consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea have made steady progress. Regional countries shaping rules and ensuring peace through dialogue is the most effective response to the "arbitration".

The author is the vice-dean of the Academy of Foreign-related Rule of Law at Jinan University, Guangdong province.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Zhao Chunlei

Japan's deep-sea venture a test for global ocean governance

Critical-mineral security might justify scientific exploration, but not ecological shortcuts into the deep sea.

On June 29, the Japanese prime minister instructed relevant ministers to accelerate the development and commercialization of rare-earth extraction from seabed mud within its exclusive economic zone around Minamitorishima (Marcus Island).

This follows a February 2026 announcement that Japan had successfully recovered rare-earth rich sediment from a depth of nearly 6,000 meters in the same area, with a full-scale mining trial expected in 2027.

Tokyo has framed this move as a meaningful accomplishment in strengthening supply-chain resilience and diversifying Japan's sources of rare-earth supply.

Rare earths are essential to clean energy, advanced manufacturing, defense technologies, and digital infrastructure. No country should be denied the right to pursue lawful resource development.

The real question, however, is whether such development can proceed before environmental risks are properly understood, independently assessed, and effectively controlled.

Deep-sea rare-earth mud extraction is an industrial intervention in one of the least-explored and most fragile ecosystems on Earth. Disturbing the seabed may create sediment plumes near the ocean floor.

Any water discharged during dewatering or other processing stages could form additional plumes in the water column, carrying suspended particles and potentially harmful dissolved substances. Ocean currents could carry these materials beyond Japan's EEZ, making the environmental risks potentially transboundary.

Under Article 56 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, Japan enjoys sovereign rights to explore and exploit natural resources within its EEZ. However, these rights are neither absolute nor unconstrained.

Japan is entitled to pursue supply-chain resilience, but not by externalizing ecological risk to the Pacific Ocean and the global marine environment.

The Convention establishes a clear balance: resource development must be exercised with due regard for the rights of other states and in conformity with the duty to protect and preserve the marine environment.

Article 194 of UNCLOS requires states to take all necessary measures to ensure that activities under their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage by pollution to other states and their environment, and that pollution arising from incidents or activities under their jurisdiction or control does not spread beyond the areas where they exercise sovereign rights.

If sediment plumes, return-water discharge, underwater noise, artificial light, or other contaminants from Japan's deep-sea mining affect adjacent high-seas ecosystems or the waters of other states, Japan could constitute a breach of international obligations, entitling affected states to invoke state responsibility.

The credibility of Japan's environmental impact assessment process is therefore central. Article 206 of UNCLOS obligates states to assess the potential effects of activities likely to cause substantial pollution or significant and harmful changes to the marine environment.

For deep-sea mining, an environmental impact assessment must be science-based, independently reviewed, and publicly accessible, not merely a procedural formality completed after political decisions have been made.

At such depths, ecological recovery after deep-sea mining is uncertain and likely to be slow. Many abyssal species have low growth rates, limited dispersal capacity, and narrow habitat ranges. The precautionary approach is thus a practical requirement of responsible ocean governance. Neighboring countries, Pacific Island states, fisheries stakeholders, and the global scientific community all have legitimate interests in scrutinizing Japan's environmental assessment and monitoring arrangements.

This does not mean deep-sea mining should be permanently prohibited. It may become acceptable if advanced extraction technologies can demonstrably minimize seabed disturbance and ecological harm, supported by high-precision, long-term environmental monitoring.

This reminds one of Japan's earlier unilateral discharge of nuclear-contaminated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific, undermining regional trust in its marine environmental governance. The same pattern must not be repeated in the deep sea: deciding first, consulting later, and shifting ecological uncertainty onto neighboring countries and the wider international community.

Addressing the challenges posed by Japan's deep-sea mining venture requires a multilayered response leveraging legal, scientific, financial, and market-based mechanisms. Independent scientific reviews should rigorously evaluate Japan's baseline data, plume dispersion models, toxicity assessments, and monitoring designs. Simultaneously, governments and international organizations need to press for full disclosure of EIA reports and post-operational monitoring data. Finally, global markets are urged to categorize rare earths obtained from unverified deep-sea extraction as high-risk commodities.

Japan is entitled to pursue supply-chain resilience, but not by externalizing ecological risk to the Pacific Ocean and the global marine environment.

The Minamitorishima project must not become a precedent for premature and unilateral deep-sea extraction. Instead, it should push the international community to build a framework that keeps the door open to future responsible development while closing the door on reckless environmental risk-taking.

The author is an associate professor of the Law School, Ocean University of China.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Maya Majumaran

An inclusive vision for shared digital prosperity

As China prepares to host the 2026 World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai, it is sending a message that extends far beyond technology.

President Xi Jinping is scheduled to attend the opening ceremony and deliver a keynote speech, during which he is expected to present China's comprehensive approach to AI development and governance, including policy priorities, a strategic vision, and proposals for international cooperation.

Beijing is positioning itself not only as a leader in artificial intelligence innovation, but also as a champion of a more inclusive approach to AI governance, one that gives developing countries a seat at the table rather than leaving them on the sidelines.

This matters because the future of AI will not be determined by algorithms and computing power alone. It will also be shaped by the rules, standards, and governance frameworks that emerge around the technology.

For many countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, China's message of broader participation, technological cooperation, and shared development is increasingly attractive.

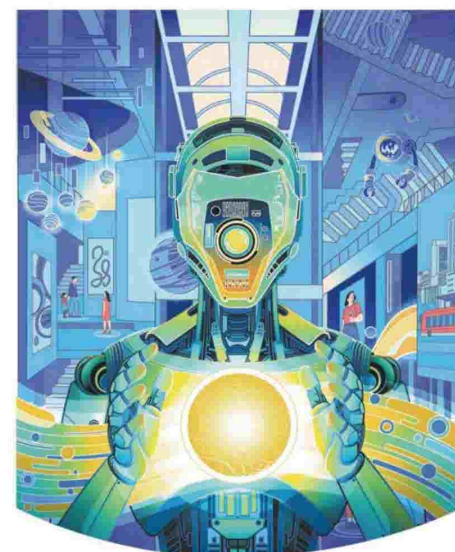
Across the Global South, the AI revolution raises urgent questions about technological sovereignty and inclusion. Many developing countries worry that the technologies, standards, and governance frameworks shaping the future digital economy may be designed primarily by and for advanced economies, leaving them as passive consumers rather than active participants.

Against this backdrop, China's commitment to broader participation, technological cooperation, and inclusive AI governance presents a compelling alternative.

At the heart of this appeal lies China's expanding open-source AI ecosystem. Models such as DeepSeek and Qwen are increasingly viewed as practical tools for countries seeking to participate in the AI revolution without becoming dependent on expensive proprietary platforms.

Their lower costs, strong performance, and adaptability make them particularly attractive to developing nations looking to build sovereign AI capabilities tailored to local languages, cultures, and development priorities.

The benefits are already visible. Across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, startups, universities, research institutions, and government agencies are experimenting with Chinese open-source models to develop applications in education,



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

healthcare, agriculture, finance, public administration, and language services. Small and medium-sized enterprises that previously lacked the resources to access cutting-edge AI technologies can now build AI-powered products and services at a fraction of the cost.

For entrepreneurs, the availability of open-source models significantly lowers barriers to innovation, allowing local companies to compete and create solutions designed for local markets.

Individuals are benefiting as well. Developers, students, researchers and technology professionals can access advanced AI capabilities without paying expensive licensing fees or relying entirely on foreign proprietary systems.

This is helping foster AI communities across the developing world, accelerating skills development and digital literacy. In many countries, open-source models are also being adapted to support local languages and dialects that have historically been underrepresented in global AI systems.

More broadly, the rise of China's open-source ecosystem is contributing to the democratization of artificial intelligence. Rather than concentrating advanced AI capabilities in the hands of a few corporations or countries, it offers developing nations a

more accessible pathway to technological participation.

For many countries in the Global South, this is not simply about cheaper technology — it is about digital sovereignty, stronger local innovation ecosystems, and the opportunity to become creators of AI rather than just its consumers.

Experts say the rapid global adoption of Chinese open-source models is driven largely by their affordability and competitive performance. For many developing countries, these technologies provide access to advanced AI capabilities that were previously beyond reach.

The implications are significant. Countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America can begin building AI systems adapted to local realities rather than relying solely on technologies designed elsewhere.

Whether in education, healthcare, agriculture, or public administration, open-source AI offers a realistic path toward greater digital sovereignty and technological self-reliance.

This approach becomes particularly compelling when contrasted with recent initiatives in the United States such as the "Tech Corps", which aims to support the adoption of American AI technologies abroad. Critics argue that such programs risk reinforcing technological

dependence by expanding the reach of established US technology firms.

China, by contrast, presents its AI strategy through the language of openness, fairness and shared development, emphasizing that the benefits of artificial intelligence are shared more broadly.

For many countries in the Global South, this distinction matters. Their concern is not simply gaining access to AI tools, but ensuring that they have the opportunity to help shape, adapt, and develop those technologies according to their own needs and priorities.

The US, on the other hand, has adopted a more restrictive approach to advanced AI technologies, including export controls and limits on access to certain cutting-edge capabilities.

Critics argue that these measures prioritize technological leadership and competitive advantage, while raising concerns among allies and developing countries about unequal access to technologies that will shape the future global economy.

The upcoming conference in Shanghai is more than a showcase of technological achievements — it is a statement of China's vision for the future of global AI governance. Through the proposed World AI Cooperation Organization, Beijing seeks to create an inclusive platform where developing countries can help shape AI standards, governance, and capacity building.

By promoting artificial intelligence as a global public good, China aims to expand technological cooperation, strengthen innovation partnerships, and build international consensus around a safer, more equitable, and more inclusive AI future.

For many countries in the Global South, this is an attractive proposition. By framing AI governance around cooperation, accessibility, safety, and shared development, China is advocating for a more representative digital future.

At its core, China's AI strategy speaks to a demand that has been growing across the developing world: access without dependency.

Many countries want the benefits of AI without being forced into technological relationships that limit their autonomy or leave them permanently dependent on foreign platforms.

By emphasizing openness, cooperation, and capacity building, China is presenting a vision of AI development that many in the Global South view as more closely aligned with their own development priorities and long-term aspirations.

The author is the founding director of the Belt and Road Initiative Sri Lanka. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

COMMENT & FEATURES

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Leave haredi enlistment

On Tuesday afternoon, the ruling coalition delivered one final punch to the nation's gut on its way out when the Knesset passed a bill freezing the arrests of haredi (ultra-Orthodox) draft evaders for at least six months.

Fifty-eight lawmakers voted in favor, while 54 voted against. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose arrival in the plenum prompted verbal clashes with the opposition and cries of "disgrace" from bereaved families and IDF reservists watching the proceedings, left shortly afterward and did not remain for the vote itself.

This legislation is, at best, an irresponsible attempt at solving one of Israel's most divisive issues. At worst, it is a short-sighted political maneuver designed only to preserve haredi participation in the right-wing bloc for the next election cycle. Instead of finally confronting calls for equality in sharing the burden of national service, the coalition chose to shield one sector from enforcement while asking everyone else to continue carrying that burden.

And, as expected, the High Court of Justice intervened on Wednesday, issuing a provisional order suspending the law's entry into force until further notice. Justice Ofer Grosskopf explained that the order was necessary, among other reasons, because of the implications of freezing enforcement proceedings "with regard to only certain sections of the population."

The court was right to act swiftly to protect equal treatment under the law. Why should an 18-year-old in Bnei Brak be free to ignore a draft order while another 18-year-old, five minutes away in Ramat Gan, could face military prison for doing exactly the same?

If the government hopes to convince Israelis that the High Court is overstepping its authority – an argument many find persuasive – introducing legislation that explicitly creates unequal enforcement is a remarkably poor way to make that case.

It is certainly not unusual for a coalition to rush legislation through the Knesset in its final days before dissolution. But this coalition would do well to remember that it was the government in office on October 7, 2023, and remains responsible for leading Israel through the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, as well as the longest and most demanding war in the nation's history.

Throughout that war, the military echelon has repeatedly sounded the alarm over the IDF's severe manpower shortages. Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Eyal Zamir has warned that the army risks "collapsing into itself" if those shortages are not addressed. In a last-ditch effort to stop the legislation, Zamir warned lawmakers on Monday that implementing the bill would create significant national security risks and said he opposed it "completely and unequivocally."

This government was democratically elected in November 2022, but circumstances have changed dramatically since then. The October 7 massacre and the wars that followed have fundamentally reshaped Israel's security reality. Poll after poll across Israeli media has shown that a majority of Israelis, many of whom have completed mandatory service and continue to serve lengthy reserve duty stints in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank, oppose exempting haredim from military service.

The lawmakers within the coalition who resisted this legislation deserve credit for doing so. Likud MK Yuli Edelstein had already announced he would seek a new political home, months after being removed as chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee for insisting on haredi enlistment. Fellow Likud MK Dan Ilouz is expected to leave the party, while Deputy Foreign Minister Shari Haskel resigned following the vote.

Their principled stance is commendable, yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that it is too little, too late. The Knesset will disperse on Friday, and Netanyahu's government will continue to serve in a transitional capacity until elections are held and a new coalition is formed.

The key issues that have divided Israel for years cannot be settled through short-sighted, last-minute bills pushed through the Knesset. Israelis, regardless of their political affiliation, cannot reasonably be expected to support legislation that even the prime minister could not bring himself to vote for.

The only appropriate course of action now is to leave the question of haredi enlistment to the voters in October.

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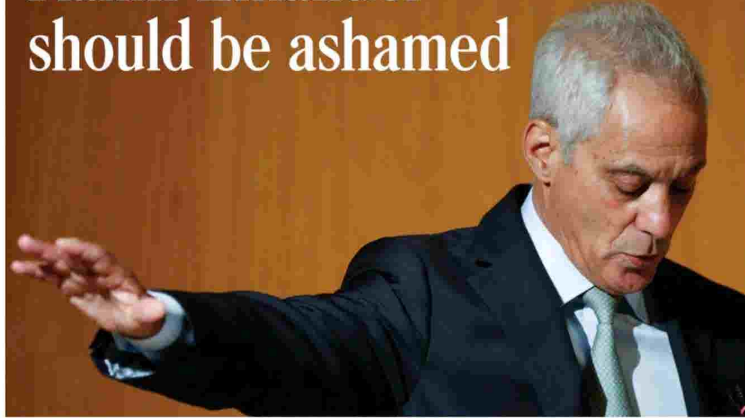
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Rahm Emanuel should be ashamed



FORMER WHITE HOUSE chief of staff Rahm Emanuel attends an event at Tel Aviv University in Tel Aviv, earlier this month. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

• By ELISHA WIESEL

Ten years ago, my father left us.

I stand with you where the names of our people are kept, so they will not be lost. And I speak to you today so that my father's voice will not be lost.

Last week, Rahm Emanuel stood in Tel Aviv and told Israel it has become a pariah, that it has lost the world. That – in his words – "you cannot fight indefinitely against a world that has stopped believing you have the right to fight."

Emanuel is embarrassed by Israel. He is proud of that embarrassment. He should be ashamed.

American Jews and Israeli Jews are family. Have you ever had a family member who embarrassed you? Maybe you don't introduce them to your friends. But do you want them consumed by their enemies?

Can you imagine handing those enemies ammunition – telling your own family it is their fault their enemies want to destroy them? Then be embarrassed by yourself, not by them.

My father could never understand the Jews of America who, in the 1940s, kept celebrating their weddings and bar mitzvahs while Europe's Jews were led to the flames. Were they embarrassed by their weak European cousins?

Today, too many American Jews are embarrassed by the opposite: that Israel is strong enough to defend Jews under attack.

Are some genuinely troubled by the deaths of Gaza civilians? It's understandable. Somewhere between 3% and 5% of Gaza's civilians have died since October 7. Every one of those deaths is a tragedy.

But do you know where else that same share of civilians – 3% to 5% – died in a war that should never have been started? Among the civilians of Nazi Germany, the people who started it.

My father offered consolation to the children of the Nazis. In his address to the German parliament, he said: the children of killers are not killers, but children. He could say that only because the evil their fathers built had

been defeated. Grace was the reward of a victory – not a substitute for one.

Emanuel knows all this. He knows that Hamas vowed it would repeat October 7 again and again.

In 2009, former US president Barack Obama visited Buchenwald, from which my father was liberated, and asked him to speak. My father warned that the world had not learned its lessons – that its approval could never be counted on. My father's moral vision refutes Emanuel's.

The world's approval was never the measure of a Jew's right to live. To make it our test is to unlearn Buchenwald.

Many might have made that mistake in innocence, but Emanuel is not one of them. As the president's chief of staff, he organized that visit and heard that speech.

MY FATHER told his hard truths to the strong, on behalf of the weak. Rahm scolded a nation of ten million from the safety of an American passport, knowing his audience back home would applaud a Jewish lives and far too often

he says we should punish settlers who commit violence. Of course I condemn them, too. But he widens the circle fast – to every bank and every construction company that finances a settlement in Judea and Samaria.

There is a question underneath it we are not supposed to ask. Look at the map. Iraq – a Jewish community 26 centuries old – all but gone. Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen – gone. Over 850,000 Jews were driven out, and an entire region was made Judenrein.

Israel, west of the Green Line, is one-fifth Arab – with Arab towns, mixed cities, and Arab members of parliament. The demand is that Judea and Samaria become one more place with no Jews left in it: the final piece, the map completed. Why does the reflex run only one way?

Is a Jewish presence there a historic claim or a security buffer? Is it a bargaining chip or an obstacle to peace? These are not America's questions to settle. They belong to the Israeli people, who send their sons and daughters to defend Jewish lives and far too often

bury them for it. They have earned the right to decide.

If Emanuel wants problems to solve, let him answer the questions plaguing America. We lurch between denying that migrants are human and denying that a country needs the symbols of their faith, and have been murdered on our own streets by killers who called it anti-Zionism.

Our primaries are captured by extremists, leaving us the terrible choice between those who would abolish the police, and those who shrug when the state's own armed agents shoot citizens dead in the street.

Those questions are hard. It is easier to take shots at Israel.

Emanuel said we cannot fight a world unconvinced of our right to fight. But our right was never the world's to grant. It did not come from the Holocaust, or from the world's guilt. And it does not wait on the world's permission.

I am not a child of the Holocaust. I am the grandchild of Shlomo and Sarah Wiesel, who raised my father with a love of learning, a yearning for Jerusalem, and the moral grounding that made him, in Obama's words, the conscience of the world.

And Israel is not a child of the Holocaust. Its citizens are the grandchildren of Theodor Herzl, a man who looked at a world that offered Jews nothing but second-class citizenship and decided we deserve the same rights as everyone else. Not by permission. By right.

The Jewish people do not wait on the world's belief. For over 3,000 years, we have made profound contributions to the world through values, knowledge, and culture. We refuse to exist conditionally on the world's approval. We hope that the world will accept our existence someday, but in the meantime we resolve to live.

My father carried both that hope and that resolve until the day he died. So let the last embarrassment be the world's – and never, ever ours.

Thank you.

The writer is the chairman of the Elie Wiesel Foundation. He is the only son of Marion and Elie Wiesel.

Cultivating resilience

How the Western Negev and Vietnam could build the future of food security

• By NOAM BEDEIN

There are moments in a new role when you understand, very quickly, why the work matters.

My first week as director of Innovation Diplomacy at Hamitbah (the Western Negev Innovation Authority) began in the field. I organized a diplomatic mission that brought 40 ambassadors and diplomats to the Gaza border communities, part of a global outreach effort, marking the lead-up to the third commemoration of October 7.

What these diplomats encountered was striking: communities alive with agricultural innovation and technological ingenuity, a region that has transformed lived experience into a global model of human resilience. Among them was His Excellency Ambassador Nguyen Ki Son of Vietnam.

Within weeks, I received an invitation to represent Hamitbah at a seminar at the Embassy of Vietnam in Tel Aviv dedicated to high-tech agricultural cooperation between our two countries.

It was, in the truest sense, a first. A first conversation about what might be possible between two nations that have more in common than geography would suggest.

This July marks 33 years of official diplomatic relations between Israel and Vietnam.

The atmosphere in the seminar room was entirely forward-looking. The recent

implementation of the Vietnam-Israel Free Trade Agreement (VIFTA) has streamlined customs and removed tariffs, with bilateral trade on track to reach nearly \$4 billion this year. The question animating the room was where it could go next.

Ambassador Son set the tone with characteristic directness: "My mission is to turn our potential into opportunities, and turn opportunities into actual cooperation and fruitful outcomes."

He spoke of Vietnam's ambition to achieve full developed-nation status by 2045, and of the acute environmental pressures that make that goal both urgent and complex: typhoons, rising sea levels, prolonged droughts, and the slow encroachment of saline water into agricultural zones that feed millions are present realities for Vietnam.

Israeli innovation, the ambassador conveyed, is part of a strategic national response.

"When we talk about Israel and Vietnam, we talk about opportunities," noted Ofer Fohrer, senior director at the Economy and Industry Ministry, perfectly capturing the spirit of the event. With the VIFTA now in force, the pathway for realizing those opportunities has never been clearer.

Fohrer closed with a resounding call to action, affirming Israel's commitment to "build the bridge between Israel and Vietnam so we can grow together and succeed together."

The seminar brought together around 20 Israeli delegates from municipal authorities, kibbutzim, and technology companies alongside more than 80 Vietnamese participants joining online, from local government officials to university researchers.

During the Q&A, the Vietnamese participants asked questions that went well beyond diplomatic courtesy: technical specifications, processing and packaging standards, mechanisms for hands-on training exchanges. It was the focused inquiry of people facing real challenges and genuinely searching for real answers.

The seminar's most quietly powerful moment came from Miss Hong Shurany, chairwoman of the Vietnamese Community in Israel, who shared her personal experience cultivating Israeli crop varieties on Vietnamese soil.

Her words stayed with me: "A nation's advantage lies not in what nature bestows, but in how its people create value from what they have."

When Israeli agricultural technology meets Vietnam's natural potential, she observed, the result is a model of mutual development that neither country could build alone.

When I presented Hamitbah's vision, I began with what seemed like an unlikely comparison. On the surface, the Western Negev and Vietnam could not be more different:

an arid landscape shaped by conflict and scarcity against a lush, coastal, ecologically rich nation.

And yet both regions operate under extreme, recurring, systemic shocks. In the Western Negev, that shock is geopolitical, sudden, severe, and unpredictable. In Vietnam, it arrives as Category-5 typhoons, flash flooding, extended droughts, and advancing saline water.

In both cases, the central challenge is identical: How do you build a food system that continues to function when everything around it is failing?

Standard agricultural technology runs out of answers here. When a typhoon brings down the civilian power grid, standalone sensors and smart irrigation systems become dead weight. They are built for stability. We do not live in a stable world.

At Hamitbah, we build what we call Resilience Tech: an interlocking survival ecosystem of autonomous drones, smart water management systems, and military-grade anti-jamming communications, integrated into a single operational stack.

The result is a farm and a community that remains functional even during total power or GPS blackouts. True food security is the ability of a family, a village, a nation to keep producing food when the worst happens. That demands functional continuity under pressure.

Nothing at Hamitbah was

developed in a comfortable laboratory. It was built in the field, stress-tested under real conditions, and refined through years of operating at the edge of what agricultural systems can bear.

That history is what makes the Western Negev a meaningful resource for a country like Vietnam: a live sandbox where the pressures are genuine and the results have already been proven.

We are proposing a relationship built on that foundation, one in which Vietnamese agricultural needs and realities shape the design of solutions from the beginning, and where they are developed and validated together before being scaled. We are at the very start of that conversation, and we intend to pursue it with full seriousness.

We are deeply grateful to the Vietnamese Embassy for the warmth and vision with which they organized this seminar. It was exactly the kind of first step that points somewhere worth going.

Thirty-three years of diplomatic friendship between Israel and Vietnam is a proud foundation. What could be built on top of it – in agriculture, in resilience, in shared problem-solving – is a story still waiting to be written. And I, for one, am glad to be in the room where it begins.

The writer is the director of innovation diplomacy and strategic partnerships at Hamitbah, the Western Negev Innovation Authority.

32 years since the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires

• By SHIMON AXEL WAHNISH

Some say that the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center was an attack against the Jewish community. Others argue that it was an attack against Argentina as a whole.

Both are right: the attack took place on Argentinian soil and specifically targeted the Jewish community. But I prefer to say that it was an attack against humanity itself. That is the essence of terrorism: to sow fear as a strategy to undermine the very foundations of morality and civilization.

I still remember that tragic Monday, July 18, 1994. I was at home, about 20 blocks from the AMIA building, when at 9:53 a.m. I heard the explosion and felt the walls shake. The images on television showed the unimaginable. Once again.

Barely two years after the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, it was happening all over again: the same enemies, the same terrorists, in the same city. This time with even greater cruelty – 85 lives, ordinary citizens like any one of us, torn from this world, leaving behind grieving families, loved ones, and shattered dreams.

We live in an increasingly polarized world. Evil has become ever more fanatical and extremist, and for that very reason, the forces of good must also become stronger, more united, and more vocal. Today, more than ever, silence is no longer an option; silence is an accomplice to terror.

In a world that too often chooses the comfort of silence, President Javier Milei has distinguished himself through his courageous and unwavering stand against terrorism and antisemitism. He unequivocally condemned the cowardly terrorist attacks of October 7 and firmly



RESCUE WORKERS search for survivors and victims in the rubble left after a powerful car bomb destroyed the Buenos Aires headquarters of the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA), in 1994. (Enrique Marcian/Reuters)



PEOPLE HOLD images of the victims of the 1994 bombing attack on the AMIA community center, in Buenos Aires, last year. (Mariana Nedelcu/Reuters)

defended Israel's right to self-defense.

He designated Hamas and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as terrorist organizations and expelled Iran's chargé d'affaires from Argentina. This year, Argentina also assumed the presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), becoming the first Latin American country to do so.

Whereas previous Argentinian governments signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran – effectively obscuring responsibility for the attacks despite the Argentinian judiciary's determination that the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah were responsible – Milei chose

instead to sign the Memorandum for Freedom and Democracy with Israel to combat terrorism and antisemitism. He then expanded that vision to the entire region through the Isaac Accords.

This final point is especially significant because it is no longer merely a bilateral initiative, but a regional project. Inspired by US President Donald Trump's Abraham Accords, the Isaac Accords seek to establish a strategic framework for strengthening cooperation between Latin America and Israel among those nations committed to defending life, liberty, and democracy, while combating terrorism and antisemitism. Under Javier Milei's leadership, Argentina has become

a regional model and beacon for these values.

Ultimately, President Milei has chosen to place Argentina on the right side of history.

ALTHOUGH TODAY we gather to commemorate the victims of the AMIA bombing, we cannot afford the naivety of a narrow view of history. Terrorist attacks must never be seen as isolated events; they are links in a global strategy of terror.

The bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, the AMIA bombing, the September 11 attacks, October 7, and the long and tragic list of countless other atrocities are all part of the same chain: the campaign of radical Islamist terrorism that seeks to destroy the foundations of Western civilization

and undermine peace, coexistence, and genuine tolerance.

It is no coincidence that in Iran, American and Israeli flags are publicly burned amid chants of "Death to the Great Satan" and "Death to the Little Satan." Intolerance becomes violence, violence becomes terrorism, and tolerance toward that intolerance becomes fertile ground for terror to spread.

As the German essayist Kurt Tucholsky wrote, a nation is defined not only by what it does, but also by what it tolerates. At its core, we are witnessing a profound clash between a culture that glorifies death and a culture that sanctifies life. They speak different moral languages. That is why dialogue with terrorists is impossible: one cannot reason with those

who speak an entirely different moral language.

The Torah teaches: "I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life, so that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

For many years, I wondered why such a commandment was necessary. Would any person in their right mind truly choose death? Today, I believe I have found one possible answer: silence in the face of terror is choosing death.

Tolerance toward terrorist intolerance is choosing death. Every day, each of us must choose life: by raising our voices against terror, condemning terrorism and injustice, standing together to confront them, and doing everything within

our power to defend life, liberty, peace, and stability. Only then can we secure a future for our children, as the verse concludes: "so that you and your descendants may live."

This year marks the 32nd anniversary of that brutal and cowardly attack. In Hebrew, the number 32 corresponds to the numerical value of the word *lev*, meaning "heart." May this open wound move our hearts. May we feel the pain of every victim and every grieving family as our own.

And may we do everything within our power to bring justice and truth into the world, so that we may help heal the heart of humanity and of our society.

The writer is a rabbi and the Argentinian ambassador to Israel.

What were they thinking?

WASHINGTON WATCH
• By DOUGLAS BLOOMFIELD



Iran's most powerful weapon is not the Shahed drone or Fateh ballistic missiles but its ability to strangle the global economy by closing the Strait of Hormuz through which 20% of the world's oil supply passes.

Who in their right mind would have thought they'd never use that weapon if their supreme leader were assassinated by its two most hated enemies as part of a massive war to destroy their regime?

Who believed US President Donald Trump when he declared "in the first hour [the war] was over" and that the Islamic Republic would be crushed and would accept his demand for "unconditional surrender" and a new leader of his choosing?

What was Trump thinking when this week he declared the Strait of Hormuz "OPEN," and will remain OPEN, with or without Iran? It was wide open all before the US and Israel started this war, and now it is open only to ships willing to dodge Iranian attacks.

And instead of free passage, Trump wants to charge "20% on all cargo shipped" to help pay for his fiasco. His bloviating immediately sent oil prices up and the stock indexes down.

Did he think Iran would fold overnight like Venezuela? Did he think he could then sail on to capture Cuba and set up Marco Rubio with his own country?

The strange doings in Washington were just a small component of the "what were they thinking?" march of folly in this surrealistic new world.

What was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thinking when he put Israel's security in the hands of a not-so-stable genius? Partner, schmartner. Trump has cursed, cajoled, and demoted Netanyahu, confident he "will do whatever I want him to do."

Israel was frozen out of negotiations with Tehran, even when they involved stopping it from pursuing Hezbollah in Lebanon, which wanted its country back

from Iran's terrorist proxies.

Trump wants Netanyahu to know who's boss. "If it weren't for me, Israel would not exist," he has said.

US Vice President JD Vance reminded Israel that Trump may be its one remaining friend among world leaders. Netanyahu squandered global sympathy following October 7 with the massive destruction of Gaza and the tens of thousands of civilians killed, injured, and left homeless in its wake.

Did no one think that the world would no longer see Israel as the victim but as the vindictive destroyer?

When it comes to deals, what made the Mossad think it could install former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the new head of the conquered Iran, a Holocaust denier who had demanded the "Zionist regime" must be "wiped off the map?"

What were American Jewish leaders thinking as they saw public opinion turning against Israel and were too quick to blame it on antisemitism and bad PR rather than the policies and destruction of the extremist right-wing Netanyahu government in Gaza and the West Bank and its anti-democratic turn?

And what were they thinking when they viewed campus anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian protests as the same threat to American Jews as the revival of armed neo-Nazi and fascist militias and a major political party that thinks they're "very fine people?"

WHAT WERE they thinking when, instead of listening to the serious concerns of friends, AIPAC and others declared war on long-time supporters of Israel who asked too many questions?

New Jersey Democratic Congressman Tom Malinowski had a long history of support for Israel and even visited once on an AIPAC-sponsored trip. But in the wake of Gaza, he began to question the unconditional aid to the Jewish state.

That was enough. AIPAC wanted him out. It spent more than \$2.3 million to defeat him, although its messaging rarely, if at all, mentioned Israel or the real reason for the attacks.

It blew up in their snuff games when Malinowski was defeated by Analilia Mejia, a progressive who accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. Mejia will likely win the solid blue district in November and vote with her anti-AIPAC mentors, Sen. Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

This wasn't a one-off for the once-vaunted lobby. It had tilted Right for years under the influence of wealthy Republican donors, neocon staffers, and Netanyahu.

They apparently decided they could take the Democrats and Jews for granted – after all, they had nowhere else to go – and focus on the increasingly influential evangelicals and Republican Right.

As one source close to Netanyahu explained, the evangelicals give us their prayers and votes; the Jews give us advice.

What were AIPAC leaders thinking when they dropped the group's long-standing and successful policy of neither rat nor endorsing candidates and set up political action committees (PACs) to not only rate and endorse but to finance as well?

Democratic and independent supporters felt rejected when the first tranche of endorsements was packed with 2020 election deniers and far-right extremists.

Along the way, the lobby went from unknown outside Washington to a campaign liability across the country, with many candidates swearing off "AIPAC money." They went from pursued to pariah. You have to wonder whether they are losing more friends for Israel than they are making.

Who were the Jewish voters who voted for a mayoral candidate who openly questions Israel's right to exist as the world's only Jewish state? Zohran Mamdani, the Muslim mayor of the city with the

world's largest Jewish population, is an ardent supporter of the Palestinian cause and has accused Israel of waging "genocidal war" in Gaza. He won the votes of a third of New York's Jewish voters.

Recent polls show more Americans are sympathetic to the Palestinians than to Israel, and that American Jews approve of Mamdani by a margin of 44 to 32 over Netanyahu.

His message of affordability was much more aligned with traditional Jewish positions than those of his opponents, and his views about Israel apparently just weren't as important.

What were Maine Democrats thinking when they nominated for the Senate a candidate with a Nazi tattoo and a history of sexual abuse?

You might ask the same about Republicans who picked an elderly genital-grabbing philanderer with court judgments against him for sexual assault and accusations of such conduct by at least 18 women. Since he won his election, one might conclude Republicans are more tolerant than Democrats, who quickly dumped their abuser.

When looking at so many boneheaded decisions, you have to ask, what were they thinking? Like when Vance said the country was being run by "childless cat ladies." And when former US president Joe Biden stayed in the 2024 race long after he and everyone else knew it was time to step down.

When Trump nominated attorney general Rep. Matt Gates, who was under ethics investigations for paying for sex with a minor, or Georgia Republicans picked Herschel Walker to run for the Senate despite his history of domestic violence, or Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who likened slavery to an apprenticeship for African Americans.

You can ask, what were they thinking? Maybe it's just that they weren't.

The writer is a Washington-based journalist, consultant, lobbyist, and former legislative director at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

The foreign policy lesson hidden in Lamentations

• By TOVA HERZL

Every year on the fast day of Tisha B'Av, which this year will be marked next Thursday, millions of Jews read the Book of Lamentations to mourn the destruction of the First and Second Temples. What is often overlooked is that the book repeatedly links Judea's national catastrophe not only to military defeat and human suffering, but also to the loss of allies and international standing, which in today's language may be described as "diplomatic isolation."

The theme appears in the very first verse: "How lonely sits the city once so full of people! She who was great among the nations has become like a widow; she who was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal" (Lamentations 1:1).

The opening image is not merely one of grief. It contrasts Jerusalem's former prestige among the nations with its subsequent abandonment. A kingdom that had recently enjoyed influence and status found itself isolated and subjugated to others.

Jewish tradition attributes Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah, who was persecuted in part because he warned against relying on Egypt. In his view, it was Babylon that would determine Judea's fate, and rebellion was doomed. The political leadership dismissed unwelcome criticism and reassured the people that under their guidance, everything would be fine.

History proved Jeremiah right. In 586 BCE, Babylon destroyed the First Temple, devastated the Kingdom of Judea, and sent much of its population into exile.

Scholars debate both the authorship and the precise date of Lamentations, although it is generally associated with that period. Among its most harrowing passages are those describing mothers consuming their own children during the siege. These verses portray not only starvation but the utter collapse of hope and humanity.

ALONGSIDE VIVID descriptions of personal and national suffering, Lamentations repeatedly returns to another theme: separation from other nations and the consequences of standing alone. The book attributes Judea's fate to its sins; it does not ask whether diplomatic isolation caused the destruction or resulted from it. Instead, isolation is presented as an integral part of the national calamity.

In the ancient world, international interdependence was limited, although trade certainly existed. King Solomon imported cedar from Lebanon to build the Temple, and long before that, Joseph's brothers sold him to a

caravan of Ishmaelite merchants. Archaeological evidence confirms that goods moved across land and sea throughout the ancient Near East, yet most households remained largely self-sufficient. Even in that far less interconnected world, Lamentations portrays isolation as a profound national vulnerability.

How much more relevant is that lesson today, when no country, not even the United States and China, which are large and rich in resources, can thrive in complete isolation. That reality applies all the more to a small country such as Israel.

Yet much of Israel's political leadership appears to treat international realities as secondary. Some invoke the biblical phrase, "A people that dwells alone," as though it were an ideal or even an instruction for statecraft. When criticized over Israel's deteriorating international position and challenged with the threat of sanctions, they often respond that Israel can manage on its own.

One example stands out. After the United States temporarily suspended a shipment of certain munitions because of concerns about how they might be used, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared, "If we have to, we will fight with our fingernails." He knows perfectly well that modern war cannot be fought with fingernails. Nor can they be won with bare hands, or even with the sling that David famously used against Goliath.

Instead of bravado, Israel's leaders would do well to listen to today's heirs of Jeremiah: those who warn against the illusion that determination alone can overcome geopolitical realities. Statesmanship requires a sober assessment of Israel's relative strength, of its dependence on allies and cooperation with them, and of the importance of preserving international legitimacy and partnerships.

The Book of Lamentations is not a treatise on foreign policy. Yet it stands as a remarkably engaging reminder that a nation that ignores the limits of its power and loses its network of external support becomes dangerously vulnerable.

One can only hope that Jews will continue reading Lamentations solely as the record of ancient disasters, and only in reference to past leaders who believed they could bend reality to their will, ignored uncomfortable warnings, failed to grasp the price of international isolation, and did not act to prevent it.

The writer was Israel's first ambassador to the Baltic states after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, ambassador to South Africa, and the congressional liaison officer at the Israeli embassy in Washington. She is a graduate of Israel's National Defense College.

How Israel blew US Rep. Khanna's visit



• By SHERWIN POMERANTZ

US Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA) visited Israel last week for the express purpose, as he termed it, of seeing what the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria (the Occupied West Bank, as he called it) who live there are up against.

Who is this person who has internalized such a visceral dislike of Israel?

For starters, Khanna, who represents a district at the southern end of Silicon Valley, and Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY), who was recently primaried out of running for another term because Trump dislikes him, teamed up in Congress recently to fight the integration of the US and Israeli militaries.

Together, they introduced an amendment to the 2027 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to strip funding and tech-sharing programs between the two countries. Thankfully, the leadership of the House of Representatives blocked the amendment from receiving a vote, which Khanna then termed "unconscionable."

Both lawmakers argued, without substantiation, that such integration threatens American sovereignty and avoids congressional oversight while giving no detail as to why they thought this way.

Of course, they both have a history of opposing expanded US involvement in Middle East conflicts. Khanna has also criticized Israel's military conduct in Gaza and opposed funding for the Iron Dome. Khanna is

not a friend of ours, to be sure.

During his visit this past week, he alleged that armed Israeli settlers and military personnel surrounded and detained his vehicle in the village of Turmus Ayya for over an hour. Khanna later criticized the Israeli Defense Forces for protecting the settlers in a taped interview during his aired on DRM news.

He said of the IDF personnel who arrived on the scene to assist: "I saw the arrogance in the eyes of those settlers. 21- and 22-year-olds with guns, laughing that they had detained us. The arrogance of those young IDF soldiers that my tax dollars are funding. It is the arrogance of power, a power that has had no accountability, total impunity, and has created a toxic culture of oppression."

Notice how he conflated the settlers that had blocked the road on which his van was traveling and the IDF troops who came to assist. For sure, settlers living in Judea and Samaria are clearly in violation of the law if they stopped the vehicle in which the Congressperson was traveling and, if that is the case, they should be prosecuted.

Sadly, it is common knowledge that most often there is no accountability for the illegal acts of the settler community. That must change, of course.

Yet according to the IDF's report on the incident, the military spokesperson claimed that Khanna's guide knowingly brought him into a closed military area near Khirbet Zanuta. When notified, IDF troops and police officers intervened after

receiving a report of settlers blocking vehicles. In the words of the IDF: "Upon their arrival, the troops disbursed the Israeli civilians and allowed the vehicles to continue on their way."

Khanna also said: "What people in America are asking is, are you so bought and sold by the establishment and political donors that you cannot see human injustice? So, if you are unwilling to speak up against the genocide in Gaza, the apartheid in the West Bank, then you are morally compromised and we cannot trust you to fight for Medicare for all, or to fight for workers over the billionaires, or to fight for justice and human rights, in the United States."

What a mouthful, eh? In speaking about what he hears from the electorate in the US, he spews forth every canard spoken over the years about what is going on here with presumed linkage to the resultant inability of the voter to trust him because of what his position may be about Israel.

Sadly, that does seem to be the litmus test in American politics these days. Nevertheless, it takes a certain amount of gall to invoke a non-existent genocide in Gaza as something American citizens care about when what they probably really want their representatives to do is to reinstate their full Medicare coverage or fight for the rights of workers in the US.

Yet what is most surprising to this writer is that there seems to have been no official Israeli government escort with Khanna's group as they toured the area. How come?

Congressman Khanna is a known quantity here who is on



US REP. RO KHANNA IS INTERVIEWED BY REUTERS DURING A VISIT TO TURMUS AYYA, NEAR RAMALLAH, IN THE WEST BANK, LAST WEEK. (AMMAR AWAD/REUTERS)

national television in the US often mouthing the same drivel there that he emitted here. So, hopefully, our government knew that this was someone who would make the trip just to stir up more anger at Israel, not only among his district's constituents, but also Americans generally, given that he is now a nationally known political figure.

One would think, therefore, that a well-run Foreign Ministry would make sure that there was someone from the Ministry with Khanna all the time he was in the country. First of all, Israel could then carefully watch what he does, where he goes, and what he says.

But as importantly, if there was an incident such as the one described, whatever the disput-

ed particulars turn out to have actually occurred, the Israeli government representative presumably would have known how to deal with it.

For those who think that it is possible that Israel offered an escort and Khanna or his people refused, that is highly unlikely in my opinion. If that had been the case, it would have surfaced in the resultant news feeds, but there has been nary a mention of such an offer by either side.

Nevertheless, why doesn't Israel have a policy in place that says, while we welcome such visits, we consider them important enough to have a government representative accompany the visitor while in Israel.

If the visitor refuses, he or

she can be denied entry and then go back to his or her country and badmouth us. For the kind of visitor that Ro Khanna represents, that's going to happen either way. So, there is no downside, is there?

The citizens of his district may, of course, honestly believe that Khanna is, as he says, "morally compromised." However, their reasons for feeling that way probably have very little to do with his position on Israel.

My guess is that the good citizens of Milpitas and Sunnyvale in the southern Silicon Valley of California (i.e., the district he represents), given a choice, would prefer that he spend his valuable time and exert his considerable influence on making their lives better and less time

on bashing Israel. Not doing so would do more to make him morally compromised than anything that happens here.

Ro Khanna is no friend of ours, nor does he understand Israel's role as the canary in the coal mine against Iranian aggression. Perhaps when he returns to the US, he should spend more time with the large Israeli tech presence in his district to learn why supporting Israel is as much in the interest of the US as it is in ours.

The writer, a 42-year resident of Jerusalem, is a former national president of the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel, a past chairperson of the board of the Pines Institute of Jewish Studies, and a Board Member of the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM).

A two-pronged blood libel

• By AVNER AMICHAI

Gershon Baskin's recent harangue against "settler violence" and the Israeli government contains not even a hint of serious analysis. It is a sort of exercise in projection that repackages ancient antisemitic tropes.

In fact, Baskin peddles two blood libels: the "Jewish settler violence" blood libel and the "Jewish right-wing extremist politicians" blood libel.

Both aim to demonize and delegitimize more than half a million Jewish residents of Judea and Samaria and to facilitate their ultimate removal through escalating diplomatic pressure, sanctions, boycotts, territorial strangulation, and terrorism, making the heart of the Land of Israel Judenrein.

Whereas medieval libels accused Jews of poisoning wells or murdering non-Jews for ritual purposes, today's version is a carefully constructed inversion of reality amplified by hostile governments, foreign-funded NGOs, the UN, the EU, and fringe Israeli voices, such as Baskin's, who accuse Jewish civilians in Judea and Samaria of waging a systematic "one-sided war" on Palestinians and on Israeli democracy itself.

Baskin has carved out a special place for himself in the pantheon of mouthpieces for hostile foreign forces that seek to terminate the Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria.

His credentials are outstanding: his Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information received millions in funding from foreign governmental aid agencies, including Sweden's Sida, the UK's DFID, the Netherlands' DGIS, Swiss Development Aid, and USAID, to promote a two-state "solution" that would mean the destruction of Jewish communities – first in Judea and Samaria, and Jerusalem, and then in the rest of Israel.

Baskin also serves as co-director of the Holy Land Bond, a UK-registered impact investment fund dedicated to "Palestinian housing... in East Jerusalem" – the capital of Israel, lest someone need reminding.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Baskin's "opinion" is proffered in the perverse language of inherent Jewish supremacism, messianic conspiracy theories, and collective guilt for isolated incidents of Jewish misdeeds. These are the classic tools of antisemitic demonization.

The facts that he so easily disprove Baskin's claims are out there, but he has absolutely no relationship with them: hard data collected and analyzed by Regavim in a report titled "False Flags and Real Agendas" takes apart the prime sources of this blood libel, examining the UN's reporting of over 8,300 "settler violence" incidents from 2016 to early 2023 to reveal the fraud.

Roughly 90% of reports are outright fabrications, malicious misrepresentations, or irrelevant complaints that have nothing to do with violence, nothing to do with "settlers," or nothing to do with Judea or Samaria (the "West Bank").

BASKIN'S CLAIM that Israeli democracy

is on the brink of collapse also holds no water. The rate of indictments against Jews accused of violence is significantly higher than against all other types of offenses, and the rate of crime – of any kind – is lower in Judea and Samaria than anywhere in Israel and among the lowest in the western world. In stark contrast, Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) data documents thousands of Palestinian terror attacks annually – stabbings, shootings, Molotov cocktails, vehicular ramming, stonings, and more – that have killed and wounded hundreds of Israelis.

Decrying the "messianic takeover" of Jewish extremists is rich when it comes from someone who seems never to have heard of jihad, Pay-for-Slay, or "From the River to the Sea."

Nor has Baskin ever heard of the massive program of illegal land grabs that the Palestinian Authority and its European benefactors have been perpetrating against the State of Israel for decades – all well-documented in Regavim reports.

The PA's unrelenting violations of international law – all of them funded and defended by the same European concerns that fund Baskin's various enterprises, as well as Peace Now, B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence, Rabbis for Human Rights, and other Israeli nonprofits of their self-hating ilk – have resulted in a fully armed, commando-ready army at our doorstep, poised for the next October 7.

If this God forbid comes to pass, it will be the culmination of decades of Arab rejectionism enabled by voices like Baskin's that prefer Palestinian "state-building" over confronting our enemies' eliminationist ideology.

Baskin's selective vision is not limited to the facts; it extends to the pervasively selective definition of Judaism he advocates.

"We are losing the Judaism of human dignity," he lamented, without any regard for the rights and dignity of the overwhelmingly law-abiding, idealistic Jewish pioneers of Judea and Samaria or for the elements of Judaism he prefers to ignore altogether, particularly the Divine commandment to reclaim and settle the Land of Israel.

Baskin's universalist quasi-Judaism seeks to sever our covenantal roots, to supplant our national heritage, and to erase the redemptive purpose of our return to our ancestral homeland.

The real war on Israeli democracy is not being waged by a small group of hotheaded Jewish extremists; it is being waged by foreign governments and their NGO proxies who weaponize "international law" against Jews, fund the quiet Arab takeover of Israel's heartland, and demonize Jews and the Jewish State while excusing Palestinian rejectionism and terrorism.

For the majority of Israelis, the lesson of October 7, 2023, is that excusing or ignoring Arab aggression is immoral and dangerous. Baskin's op-ed exemplifies the ideological pathology behind the blood libel, and it behooves each of us to call it by name.

The writer is a diplomatic liaison of Regavim.



ENCOUNTERING PEACE

• By GERSHON BASKIN

Last week, I wrote that we are at war. Not the war of Israel against Iran or Hez-

bollah or Hamas but the war being waged inside Israel and in the occupied West Bank by religious right-wing extremists and their violent settler agencies. Palestinians are the immediate victims, but the real target is Israel itself – democratic Israel.

We are defeating us because they know what they want, and we do not yet act as if we know what to defend.

They want a messianic, halachic kingdom of God. We want a democratic state: an Israel with a Jewish majority; rooted in Jewish history, Hebrew culture, and Jewish self-determination – but a state that belongs equally to all its citizens, as promised in the Declaration of Independence. They want Jewish supremacy. We want equality before the law. They want land without Palestinians. We want a state that protects every citizen and every person under its authority.

This is a struggle over whether Israel remains a democracy; whether it serves the state or a messianic movement; whether the law protects everyone or only Jews; and whether Judaism in public life is moral responsibility or a weapon of domination.

It is time to wake up and acknowledge that there is no democracy with occupation. A state cannot permanently rule over millions of people without equal rights and still call itself a democracy. The occupation corrupts the army, the law, our politics, and our moral language. It creates the space in which violent settlers become instruments of policy. Ending the occupation is not a concession to Palestinians. It is a necessity for saving Israel.

To win, democratic Israelis need moral clarity. Violent settlers are not "hilltop youth." They are political actors using violence to achieve ideological goals. When ministers defend them, soldiers protect them, police fail to arrest them, and prosecutors fail to indict them, the state becomes a partner in the crime. Jewish terrorism is terrorism. A state that does not

protect Palestinians under its control betrays itself, not only Palestinians.

We must defend Palestinians because that is how we defend Israel. The test of Israeli democracy is not how the state treats Jews in Tel Aviv. The test is how it treats Palestinians in Hebron, Masfer Yatta, the Jordan Valley, Huwara, Burin, and the South Hebron Hills. If the army controls their lives, the state is responsible for their safety. If the state permits settlers to terrorize them, democracy is already being destroyed.

We also need legal warfare. Every settler attack must be documented. Every failure of the army or police must be recorded. Every illegal outpost must be challenged in court. Every budget line funding criminality must be exposed. Every official who enables violence must be named. Legal teams, human rights organizations, former security officials, lawyers, journalists, and citizens must work together every day.

We need political organization. The extremists have parties, rabbis, youth movements, donors, media channels, yeshivas, ministers, and a clear ideology. Demonstrations are necessary but not enough. Protest without organization fades. We need a democratic political front whose mission is to save Israel from messianic authoritarianism.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a major part of the danger but not all of it. The deeper danger is the ideological movement seeking to replace democratic Israel with a religious-nationalist regime. This front must be Jewish-Arab. There is no way to preserve Israeli democracy while excluding 20% of Israel's citizens from political power. Arab citizens are not guests. They are citizens. Arab parties are Israeli parties. Arab votes are Israeli votes.

Any democratic coalition that treats Arab citizens as outside the legitimate political camp is already accepting part of the extremists' logic. The next democratic coalition must include real Jewish-Arab

partnership as equal partners in a shared civic project.

Israeli citizens must go where the state is failing: accompany their shepherds; help Palestinian farmers reach their land; bring cameras, lawyers, members of Knesset, rabbis, diplomats, and journalists; and stand between violent settlers and Palestinian families. Nonviolent presence matters. Witness matters. Protection matters.

We must take back Judaism from those who have turned it into a weapon. Judaism is not a license to dominate another people. Jewish history does not justify Jewish supremacy. Religious Israelis who believe in democracy and human dignity must speak louder. A state with a Jewish majority that loses its moral soul will not be saved by more flags, more settlements, more guns, or more biblical slogans.

The IDF belongs to the state, not to the settlers. Soldiers are not private guards for violent extremists. The army must protect every person under its control. Former chiefs of staff, Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) heads, Mossad heads, generals, and police commanders must speak publicly and repeatedly: Settler violence is a strategic threat to Israel.

We must defend free and fair elections. We must not allow Netanyahu or anyone else to postpone them, manipulate them, distort their results, or create a crisis designed to prevent the public from deciding. The next election on October 27 must be a referendum on whether Israel remains a democracy.

Defending elections begins now: protecting the Central Elections Committee, resisting emergency measures abused for political survival, and exposing every attempt to delegitimize Arab voters, Arab parties, or the democratic opposition.

But winning an election is not enough. The next government must be ready from day one to dismantle illegal outposts, remove violent settlers from areas where they terrorize Palestinians, restore the authority of the police and courts, investigate state funding to extremist networks, and return the Civil Administration to professional control before it is eventually dismantled.

It must also put peace with all

our neighbors, beginning with the Palestinians, at the top of the national agenda. Peace must become the organizing principle of Israeli policy, within a framework of regional security, economic development, normalization, mutual recognition, and partnership.

Israel's long-term security will not come from permanent control over another people. It will come from ending occupation and building a regional order in which Palestinians and Israelis can both live in freedom and security.

The final requirement is courage. Many Israelis know what is happening. They know that Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and his allies are not merely another political faction. They know that the violent settler movement is changing the character of the state. But they are afraid – of internal conflict, of being called traitors, of admitting how deep the danger has become.

There is no unity with those who are destroying democracy from within. There is no peace with political violence. There is no democracy without confronting those who seek to end it.

We can win this war. The extremists are a minority. They are powerful because they are organized and because the majority has been passive.

To win, democratic Israelis must become a movement, not a mood. We must defend the law and we must defend Palestinians under Israeli control. Jewish-Arab equality must be part of our national identity. The army must not be politicized. We must stand up for the courts, moral Judaism, and the Declaration of Independence as the foundation of our common civic life.

This is a struggle for the Israel we still believe can exist: democratic, equal, moral, secure, rooted in Jewish and Hebrew culture, belonging to all its citizens, honoring and respecting universal human rights, ending the occupation, and at peace with its neighbors.

The war is already here. The question is whether we finally decide to fight it – and win.

The writer is the Middle East director of the International Communities Organization and the co-head of the Alliance for Two States.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

*This narrow passage I traverse is but temporary;
there is an ocean behind it waiting for me.*

Jalal Al-Din Rumi

(13th-century poet and scholar)

Opinion

Palestinians between a rock and a hard place

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discriminate against Palestinian citizens of Israel, most notably the Nation-State Law. More recently, the Knesset passed legislation that, according to the human rights organization Adalah, provides substantial benefits to residents of towns with Jewish populations of between 35 percent and 55 percent that are classified as peripheral, according to state criteria. The use of Jewish demographic composition as a criterion for allocating state benefits leaves little doubt about the discriminatory logic underpinning such legislation.

Nominally, Palestinian citizens of Israel enjoy equal citizenship. But "nominally" is the operative word. Israel prides itself on being a liberal democracy but no single political party has ever won an outright parliamentary majority, making coalition governments inevitable. Despite comprising roughly one-fifth of the population, parties representing Palestinian citizens have been almost entirely excluded from governing coalitions, with

only one notable exception.

In a political system where influence and resources are largely distributed through coalition participation, this exclusion leaves the Palestinian minority at a profound disadvantage. Symbolically, it sends a message of tolerated but not equal citizens. Without representation in government, their interests are rarely advanced effectively. This sorry situation shows no sign of changing under the present circumstances.

Addressing this crisis should be treated as a matter of national urgency. Israel's political leadership, together with leaders across all sectors of society, must acknowledge the scale of the crisis facing the Palestinian community and declare it a national priority. The immediate objective must be to stop the violence. Beyond that, Israel needs a comprehensive, long-term national program aimed at creating a genuinely shared society. Only then can equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel become the rule rather than the exception.

In the unfortunate reality of Israeli society, Palestinian citizens of Israel attract widespread public attention only under a few circumstances: when crime rates, especially homicides, rise within their communities; during elections, when the Jewish majority wonders how Palestinian parties might affect the formation of the next coalition government; and when one of their political representatives expresses an opinion that challenges the dominant narrative.

Since the beginning of the year, 154 Palestinian citizens of Israel have fallen victim to violent crime. This is a staggering figure but it becomes even more alarming when compared with the 24 homicide victims recorded among the remaining 80 percent of Israel's population. The scale of the crisis, and the daily insecurity and fear experienced in these communities, becomes painfully obvious.

It would be erroneous to place all the blame for the current situation on the

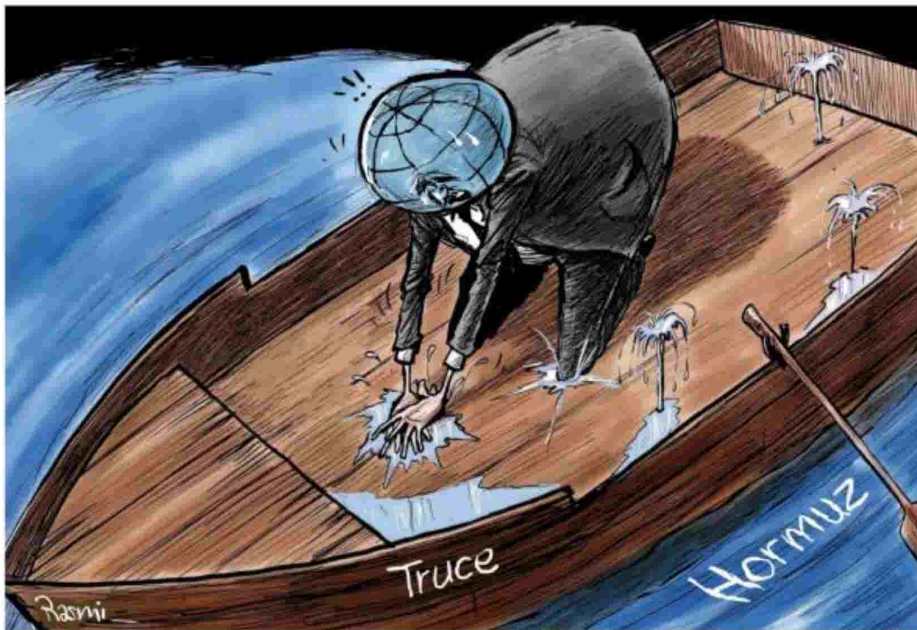
present government. The neglect, discrimination and marginalization of Israel's Palestinian minority have been allowed to fester since the establishment of the state in 1948. Some of this neglect has been deliberate, while much of it reflects long-standing political indifference. However, the situation has deteriorated significantly under the current government.

Reducing the widespread violence requires a genuine partnership between all branches of government.

The crisis is first and foremost a consequence of systemic neglect. Successive governments have failed to address both the immediate security crisis and the deeper social and economic conditions that enable organized crime to flourish and disempower the rest of the society. Chronic underinvestment in public services, discriminatory policies and unequal access to resources have all contributed to the problem.

There is a long list of laws that

There is a long list of Israeli laws that discriminate against Palestinians, most notably the Nation-State Law



COURTESY: AMAL HADJI-SHAHIN AL-JABAR

Buried in the agreement's text was a clause that read as reasonable but proved combustible in practice

How to end the Strait of Hormuz crisis

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More than four months after Israel and the US launched their war against Iran and nearly a month after Donald Trump and Masoud Pezeshkian signed a memorandum of understanding meant to end it, the Strait of Hormuz — not the nuclear file that supposedly justified the conflict in the first place — has become the fault line on which the entire ceasefire now teeters.

There is a bitter irony buried in that fact. When the war began in late February, the strait was open. Tankers moved, oil flowed and the world's most important chokepoint for seaborne crude functioned largely as it always had, even as strikes fell elsewhere in Iran. But now, with the ceasefire collapsing, the Strait of Hormuz is once more shuttered.

Buried in the memorandum of understanding's text was a clause that read as reasonable in the signing room but proved

combustible in practice: Iran would "make arrangements" for the safe passage of commercial vessels and would engage with Oman "to define the future administration" of the waterway. That is not settling the controversy. It is a convenient way to avoid a crucial issue and such ambiguous language does not hold when 20 million barrels of oil a day are riding on it.

Tehran used that ambiguity as a license. If the strait's administration remained undefined, Iran would lose nothing by continuing to act as though it retained a veto over who passes through it and on what terms. Washington read the identical clause as a transition away from Iranian control.

It now hardly matters which side is to be believed because the consequences have long since stopped being about narrative.

What both governments and much of the commentary surrounding this crisis continue to miss is more basic than any of this. The Strait of Hormuz is not Iran's to open or close in reaction to American

misconduct and it is not Washington's to unilaterally patrol and redefine the terms of passage according to its own. It is an international waterway and its legal status does not depend on which government currently feels more aggrieved.

Freedom of navigation and the right of transit passage through international straits are not concessions one side grants the other in a memorandum — they are baseline features of the law of the sea, the kind of norm this ceasefire should have reaffirmed on Day 1, rather than deferring to a later, undefined "arrangement" between two exhausted adversaries.

Trump has now made that confusion explicit rather than incidental. Having spent months insisting the strait would be "permanently toll-free," he has reversed course entirely, declaring that if a final deal is not reached, Washington itself will impose charges on vessels transiting Hormuz — compensation, in his words, for services rendered as the

"guardian angel" of the region.

It is remarkable that a government that spent the earlier phase of this crisis condemning Tehran's fee structure as an illegal imposition on an international waterway is now proposing an identical imposition after deciding it preferred to be the one collecting the fees.

The way out is not another round of talks centered on who violated what first — that argument has no endpoint because both sides have an inexhaustible supply of grievances to cite. Nor is it a contest between an Iranian toll and an American one, as though the only question worth settling is whose flag flies over the collection booth. What is needed is a decoupling of the strait's legal status from the bilateral fight altogether.

The strait was open when this war began. It should not have taken a deficient memorandum of understanding to close it. And its future should not depend on the goodwill of either government.

Opinion

Lebanon's greatest strength is its unity

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Lebanon stands at a pivotal moment in its modern history. The indirect talks with Israel are not simply another diplomatic exercise or an attempt to contain tensions along the southern border. They represent an opportunity to spare the country another devastating conflict and to begin shifting the national conversation from war and confrontation to recovery and reconstruction.

Whether these negotiations ultimately lead to a long-term arrangement or merely reduce the likelihood of another military escalation, one fact remains undeniable: no agreement will serve Lebanon unless it is firmly rooted in the country's national interest and is supported by a united Lebanese front.

After years of hardship, the overwhelming majority of Lebanese, regardless of their political affiliation, share one common aspiration: to live in a country that enjoys stability, security and the chance to rebuild. Another war would not solve Lebanon's problems, it would deepen them.

This is why the current negotiations deserve to be viewed through the lens of national interest rather than political

ideology. The objective should not be to determine who can claim political victory but rather how Lebanon can emerge stronger, more secure and better positioned to focus on rebuilding its economy and restoring confidence in its institutions.

However, diplomacy alone is not enough. Successful negotiations require a country that speaks with one voice. Lebanon has often approached critical national issues while burdened by internal divisions,

competing political agendas and conflicting messages to the outside world. Such fragmentation weakens the country's negotiating position before discussions even begin. A divided nation inevitably finds its leverage diminished, while a united nation negotiates with confidence and credibility.

At this critical juncture, Lebanon's greatest source of strength is not military capability or political rhetoric, it is the ability of its people and institutions to unite behind a single national objective.

This requires transparency, honest communication and an unwavering commitment to the national interest. The government must clearly explain the objectives of the negotiations and assure the Lebanese people that no agreement will

involve concessions affecting the country's sovereign rights, security or territorial integrity. The public deserves to know that every proposal will be evaluated according to one standard alone: whether it serves Lebanon's long-term interests.

Such assurances are essential for creating the trust upon which national unity depends.

Lebanon's political diversity should not become an obstacle to that unity. The

country has always been home to different political movements, religious communities and competing visions of its future. These differences are part of Lebanon's democratic fabric and will continue to shape its political life. Yet there are moments in every nation's history when partisan loyalties must give way to the larger national interest. This is one of those moments.

Whether one supports Hezbollah, opposes it or belongs to any other political current, every Lebanese has a shared stake in preserving the country's security, protecting its sovereignty and creating the conditions that allow future generations to live in peace and prosperity.

Supporting the government's negotiating

efforts should therefore not be interpreted as abandoning deeply held political principles or forgetting the painful chapters of Lebanon's history. Rather, it should be understood as an affirmation that the Lebanese state must remain the ultimate guardian of the nation's interests.

At the same time, support for the negotiations should never mean granting the government a blank check. Citizens have every right — and indeed the duty — to

demand accountability, transparency and regular communication throughout the process. Genuine national unity is built not on blind trust but on confidence that those entrusted with representing the country will neither compromise its sovereignty nor sacrifice its

dignity under external pressure. Lebanon has endured enough conflict, enough political paralysis and enough missed opportunities. It deserves a future in which its people are no longer consumed by the fear of another war but are instead focused on rebuilding their economy, educating their children, attracting investment and restoring the country's historic role as a center of culture, commerce and dialogue in the region.

The current negotiations deserve to be viewed through the lens of national interest rather than political ideology

A divided nation inevitably finds its leverage diminished, while a united nation negotiates with confidence and credibility

What AI governance demands

ANA PALACIO



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Discussion about how to manage the artificial intelligence-driven transition usually boils down to the question of how much regulation strikes the "right balance" between innovation and safety. We do not want to put a bureaucratic lid on progress any more than we want to leave societies to absorb, alone and at speed, the consequences of a technology that is transforming our most basic understanding of work, knowledge, power, accountability and judgment.

But this question is too narrow. Regulation has a crucial role to play but it alone does not amount to governance. For that, we must determine the conditions needed to enable societies to live with AI without being overrun by it.

The first step is to stop thinking of AI as intangible — some ethereal technology that exists in the "cloud" and delivers whatever the prompt demands.

The communities hosting the physical foundations of this supposedly weightless technology are now being forced to confront major disruptions and bear high costs, as their lands are bought, their grids are strained and their water supplies are drained and polluted. Difficult decisions

about zoning, electricity prices and environmental protection must be made.

But AI governance is not just a community-level challenge. The technology is increasingly central to the infrastructure of national power: military targeting, cyber operations, intelligence analysis, scientific discovery, industrial automation, surveillance, financial modeling and political influence. Whoever controls the most advanced models, chips, compute clusters and talent holds not merely a commercial advantage but a strategic one.

This is not lost on the US and China,

which are competing doggedly for AI leadership: each believes that falling behind would leave it militarily, economically or politically vulnerable. Much like with nuclear weapons, the stakes feel existential. This is a

recipe for secrecy, mistrust, preemption and unchecked acceleration.

The risks are compounded by the fact that AI is more diffuse than nuclear technology, more commercially embedded and more broadly applicable.

AI governance must account for all these factors, from the technology's material requirements to its effects on individuals, communities, businesses, labor markets, the environment, national security and

international strategic competition. To this end, a comprehensive architecture of verification-based trust — broader than national AI regulation and more flexible than a classic treaty — is essential.

The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change offers a useful model. It created a living framework encompassing voluntary commitments, mutual pressure, regular updates, reliable measurement and broad participation. But an analogous AI agreement must also reflect a key lesson of nonproliferation regimes: where political trust is weak, it must be supplemented by testing, limits and verification.

The resulting framework would combine the flexibility of climate diplomacy with the discipline of nuclear control. Evolving commitments would be matched by mechanisms for assessing the credibility and impact of those commitments. State action would be accompanied by responsibilities for corporations.

An "AI Paris Agreement" would provide common definitions for frontier models; thresholds for enhanced scrutiny; mandatory incident reporting; shared evaluation standards; protection of model weights; rules for deployment in sensitive sectors; and independent testing of systems that pose risks to cybersecurity,

biological safety, critical infrastructure or military decision-making. Each of these elements would be regularly reviewed and strengthened over time by technical bodies that understand the evolving technology and political bodies capable of imposing consequences when commitments are ignored.

Of course, not every application requires the same treatment. A narrow tool used in low-risk settings requires limited oversight. By contrast, a frontier model capable of affecting cybersecurity, biological design, military operations or the autonomy of critical systems must be subject to stricter requirements and, in extreme cases, intervention.

Some might argue that this would stifle innovation. But no one would board an aircraft or take a new drug if safety depended solely on the goodwill of manufacturers.

Such a framework cannot be presented as a European project, an American instrument or an alliance aimed at countering China. Its legitimacy would depend on inclusion, with countries at the technological frontier, middle powers and developing economies all given a voice.

We must determine the conditions needed to enable societies to live with AI without being overrun by it

No one would board an aircraft or take a new drug if safety depended solely on the goodwill of manufacturers

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Opinion

The agony of being a goalie in the World Cup

Some reasons goalkeepers are willing to face shots in front of 80,000 spectators.

Tim Howard

As a goalkeeper, you are full of anxiety. You're standing there waiting to make a play. You're the only player on the field who has to wait for the game to come to you. Everyone else can go and chase. Even players who don't get the ball can at least make a 40-yard run and affect the game. They can challenge opponents, head or throw the ball in from the sidelines. As a goalkeeper, at least traditionally, you just had to wait for the action to arrive.

Today's game, though, gives keepers more chances to insert themselves into the action. This new approach has changed the psychology of goalkeeping. This point was illustrated starkly last week, in the space of an hour, in the World Cup round of 16 match between the United States and Belgium.

In the second minute of the game, the U.S. goalkeeper Matt Freese vaulted his 6 foot 3 inch frame across the goalmouth to make an acrobatic save against what looked to be a sure goal — a testament to his athleticism. Then, in the 57th minute, he came rushing out beyond the security of the 18-yard box to chest down a long Belgian pass. He deftly swept past the opposing striker, Charles De Ketelaere, and, with the ball at his feet, kicked the ground ball into the goal. There were no more passes it. That allowed De Ketelaere to poke the ball to Hans Vanaken, who then scored on the way to a 4-1 Belgium win.

It turned out to be a fateful decision to try to pass from that spot on the field. I know that sinking feeling. But that's always been part of being a goalie — as the last line of defense we are blamed for every goal scored against the team. But we don't need your sympathy. Making us more vulnerable has made the game better. The way soccer is played today puts goalkeepers farther up the field and having to make more decisions than we did when I first started my pro career. That means more pressure on keepers and more opportunities for mistakes. That means the time is coming when you'll have to watch, and, for goalies, there's the payoff of being more integrated into the team.

When I first began playing in the Premier League for Manchester United and then Everton, team managers would have taken my head off if I had tried to play the ball with my feet, dribbling and passing like goalkeepers routinely do today. For me, the choice wasn't about who was I going to pass to if I came rushing out of the box to get the ball. I was going to kick it 10 rows deep into the stands. There were no decisions to be made. Safety first. That's what I was supposed to do.

The goalkeeper's life began to change dramatically when Pep Guardiola became the manager of Barcelona in 2008. Guardiola and other managers made the goalkeeper the start of the offense, someone who should be drib-

bling and passing the ball as opposed to always booming it long. He brought in the style of being expansive, of having his team take risks with the ball, because he saw that the risks would pay off. In Guardiola's strategy, if his team held onto the ball, dominated possession, they would have a better chance to win.

better chance to win. The sweeper, too, who was expected to be an active part of the new system, Barcelona won everything in sight with his approach, although it didn't hurt that Barca had megastars such as Lionel Messi, either. When Guardiola moved to Bayern Munich in 2013, his goalkeeper, Manuel Neuer, took the idea of an active goalkeeper to higher level: a position that came to be known as the sweeper-keeper. The sweeper is typically the deepest lying outfield player, a defender who also has license to create counter-attacks. Neuer is a sweeper player as well as the goalie; the attack could now start with him.

As a keeper, you then start to believe you're one of *them*. You're supposed to be a very good player with your feet. But you're not one of them. And so, that's the hard part for the keeper, particularly when you get outside of your box, outside of your element.

When you make a horrendous error, you have to act like it hasn't happened.

The risk factor that used to scare the new generation of goalies, which is also why more mistakes are made. We have, as a footballing culture and as team managers, accepted the increase in mistakes as an acceptable price to achieve the tactical advantage this new way of playing affords. Fans are, of course, a little less forgiving, especially when it happens on the big stage like the World Cup. A few days after Freese's slip-up against Belgium, Belgium's keeper made an error that surrendered the winning goal to Spain.

What creates a successful goal-keeper in this riskier environment? When you make a horrendous error, you have to act like it hasn't happened. When you make a bad mistake, let's be honest, it hurts. To try to convince yourself otherwise is actually a bit psychotic. But keepers have to do that. You have to make a brilliant save, and stand up and say, "Yeah, that's just sort of what I do." You have to pretend that the extraordinary is ordinary. There's a mental balance which is so difficult.

I was always willing to take that risk. You know there's a vulnerability to being in the arena. Fight or flight is a real thing. You have to get back in the nets, put yourself in a position where, yeah, I want to face more shots from world class strikers before 80,000 people at the World Cup. You could be

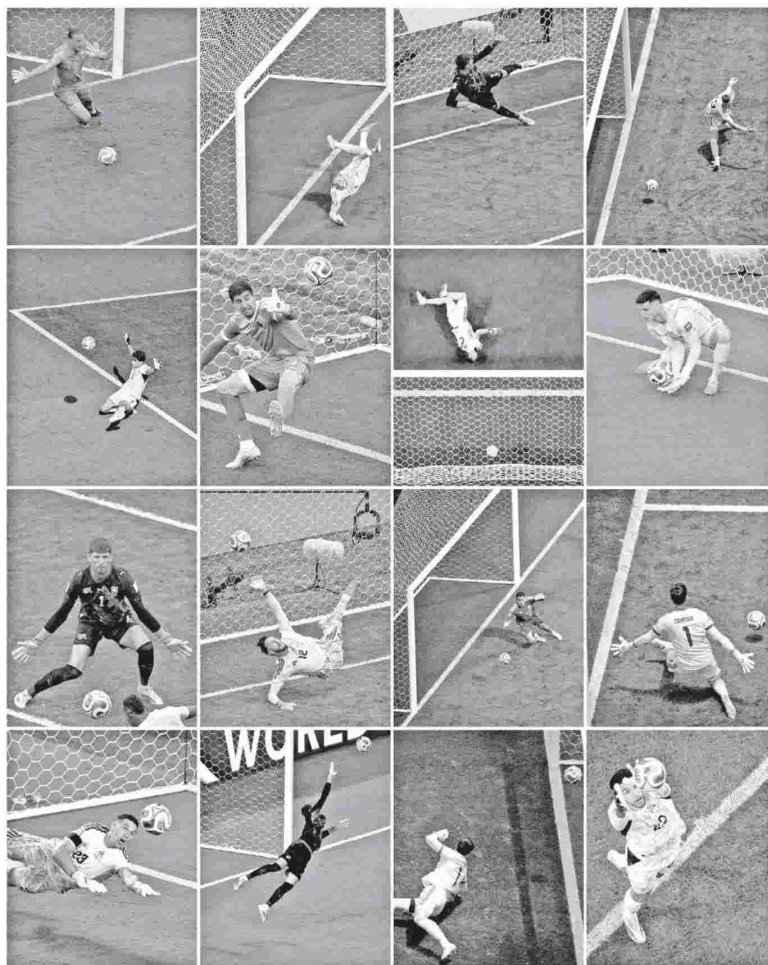


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made to look stupid again. It feels terrible.

But because I knew the other side of failure was glory, and I wanted that, I

chased it. The allure of glory was always big enough to make me want to play in the biggest matches. That's the art and the angst of goalkeeping today.

TIM HOWARD is a studio analyst for NBC Sports and its English Premier League broadcasts. He was previously a goalkeeper who played in three World Cups

Lindsey Graham and the benefits of a devil's bargain

Would the world have been safer if the senator hadn't cozied up to Trump?



Bret Stephens

In the summer of 2015, Donald Trump gave out Lindsey Graham's cellphone number at a campaign rally, leading to a flood of calls. The South Carolina senator replied with a video in which he alternately dropped the phone into a blender, whacked it with a golf club, stuck it in a toaster oven, set it on fire with lighter fluid and found other amusing ways to destroy it.

Vintage Lindsey: witty, folksy, angry and on point. Everyone knows what came next.

Graham flipped from being Trump's most brutal Republican critic to his most ingratiating minion. He claimed to have come around after playing a round of golf with the president and learning he was "funny as hell." But sometimes the mask would slip just enough to show that Graham knew he was trading honesty for influence, a classic devil's bargain. Never was that clearer than on Jan. 6, 2021, when Graham denounced Trump's tactics from the Senate floor: "Count me out. Enough is enough."

Given that Graham's public relationship with Trump began over a phone, it's sadly fitting that it ended with a friendly call between the two men on Saturday, hours before Graham's death and just after the senator had returned from an overseas trip that had taken him first to the NATO summit in Ankara, Turkey, and then to Kyiv for a meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the

Ukrainian president.

That trip represented a string of policy triumphs for Graham. He helped secure Trump's support, after long resistance, for a bipartisan sanctions bill on Russia. Trump had his own friendly meeting in Ankara with Zelensky, in which the president supported Kyiv's deep strikes into Russian territory and agreed to grant Ukraine a license to build desperately needed Patriot interceptor missiles — a striking contrast to last year's calamitous encounter of the two presidents in the Oval Office.

No less important, Trump had a mostly positive meeting with America's NATO partners, after palpable European fears that he would use the summit to withdraw from the alliance. For anyone who values the free world, perhaps no longer hanging on by a thread, these were no small achievements — and, at least in part, they were almost certainly a function of the ardently Atlanticist Graham's steady influence on the president.

They also raised a difficult question for those—including me—who spent years publicly ridiculing Graham for his repeated abuse of facts on Trump. To win would the world today be better off if Graham had stuck to his anti-Trump guns, keeping up a steady fire of rhetorical barbs until the president found a way to unseat him by supporting a primary challenger? If the answer is yes, then the Senate to say, a professorship at Clemson and an occasional seat on a CNN panel, would Ukrainians be safer?

Two years ago, I would have answered both questions with a loud yes. Freedom mustn't be secured abroad while abetting demagoguery at home. Conservatives won't serve their movement's long-term interests by abandoning their moral principles in the interest of their moral principles and all their good sense, simply to curry favor with a



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPH LIBRARIAN PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SERVICE/VA HULT

capricious narcissist. There is nobility, as I wrote about Nikki Haley's losing bid for the 2024 Republican nomination, in fighting to the last ditch.

Then again, I'm a *pundit*. I have the luxury of affecting high-mindedness. This was not a luxury Graham en-

This was not a luxury Graham enjoyed. It's easy to fault politicians for being willing to do nearly anything to stay in politics, but that's true of most anyone who loves his or her line of work. The thornier question, for Graham and anyone else in political life, is how flexible their methods can become before they not only obscure their original convictions but completely erase them.

Liz Cheney offers an honorable exam-

ple of principled inflexibility, except that today her opinions effectively count for nothing. JD Vance is the opposite case: infinite flexibility with no honor. But his views, depressingly, count for a lot. Graham followed a middle path. He wanted power and influence and was willing to abase himself publicly before Trump (and endure the scorn of his former friends) to do it. But he didn't abandon his core belief in the unity of interests of democratic nations against tyrannical foes, or in the need for American power to serve just causes beyond our borders.

Nor did he lose sight of the fact that, in democratic politics, you cannot have

absolute enemies no matter your larger ideological differences. In Kyiv in 2023, he walked side by side with the Democratic senators Elizabeth Warren and Richard Blumenthal, united, if nothing else, in their shared commitment to the defense and freedom of Ukraine.

That image, a rare moment of agreement between Trump's closest Senate friend and two of his bitterest Senate opponents, may be the right capstone for Graham's consequential and colorful career. He believed in big things, many of them important and true, and he didn't let his moral or intellectual self-respect get in the way of advancing them. There's a nobility in that, too.

OPINION

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The Supreme Court is drunk on originalism

Linda Greenhouse

Among all the developments of a confounding U.S. Supreme Court term, there is one that has received the attention it deserves. This was the term when the court's obsession with "originalism" descended into parody.

A vaunted method of constitutional interpretation that conservatives unleashed during the Reagan era, originalism is supposed to constrain judges by placing them firmly in history's grip. Justice Brett Kavanaugh expressed the assumption behind the theory a few years ago: "History is far less subjective than policy." He was seeking to explain, in a concurring opinion in a gun rights case, why only "history and tradition" rather than modern circumstances or concerns, justified restricting the Second Amendment right to "keep and bear arms."

Will the justices continue stumbling through the history books under the fiction that at the end of the road lies objectivity?

How objective is history, really? Let's examine "history and tradition" in action.

Imagine a young man, living with his parents in the Dallas area, who has a steady job and who, like many Texans, keeps a gun at home. He also, a few times a week, uses marijuana. It happens that a federal law known as Section 922(g)(3) makes it a crime for an "unlawful user" of a "controlled substance" to own a gun. The penalty for violating this little-known section of the federal criminal code is a prison term of up to 15 years.

The government decides to prosecute. Faced with coming up with the "history and tradition" demanded by Supreme Court precedent, the prosecutors scramble to respond to the young man's invocation of the Second Amendment in his motion to dismiss the case.

The court's leading precedent in this area, the Bruen decision from 2022, makes clear that "historical tradition" does not refer to what was going on when a challenged regulation was adopted. In the case of the law in question here, that was 1968. No, Bruen means that the government has to come up with an analogous regulation from the era of the country's founding (or, according to some originalists, from the 1868 adoption of the 14th Amendment, through which the Bill of Rights applies to the states).

Given that marijuana was not being consumed in meaningful quantities in America in 1791, when the Second Amendment and the rest of the Bill of Rights were added to the Constitution, nor in 1868, what is the government to do?

The creative government lawyers came up with "habitual drunkard" laws from the 18th and 19th centuries.

These common state laws took obviously inebriated people off the streets and sent them to workhouses or jails, where they had no access to firearms. Is this the best analogue that the federal government, with all the resources at its command, can unearth to validate a modern gun law?

What I have just described is not a hypothetical case, but the actual facts of United States v. Hemani, decided by the Supreme Court on June 18. The government not only lost, but lost unanimously. Not a single justice bought the "habitual drunkard" analogy. While there were four separate opinions, all nine justices agreed that Section 922(g)(3) could not be constitutionally applied to the defendant, Ali Hemani. The "habitual drunkard" laws were not only a flawed stand-in for casual marijuana use, Justice Neil Gorsuch said in his majority opinion. Beyond that, he added, the modern law offered fewer procedural protections than the old ones for the people to whom it applied. While habitual drunks typically had to be adjudged incompetent before losing their liberty, Section 922(g)(3) contains no requirement of addiction or incapacity.

In retrospect, it is clear that Bruen's "history and tradition" doomed the case from the start. When the case was argued, the justices obviously weren't buying what Principal Deputy Solicitor General Sarah Harris was trying to sell.

Justice Samuel Alito noted that most of the drugs that are illegal today were unknown to the Constitution's framers. Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked whether the federal statute would apply to someone who used marijuana at a party "even though the gun is somewhere else."

"That is correct," Ms. Harris replied. Justice Gorsuch wanted to know how the founding era defined habitual drunkenness. "John Adams took a tankard of hard cider with his breakfast every day," he said. "James Madison reportedly drank a pint of whiskey every day. Thomas Jefferson said he wasn't much of a user of alcohol; he only had three or four glasses of wine a night, OK?" The justice observed that "the American Temperance Society back in the day said eight shots of whiskey a day only made you an occasional drunkard."

The argument transcript at this point indicates "(Laughter)." I wasn't in the courtroom for the March 2 argument, but I've seen enough arguments to know that when the core of your position becomes the butt of a justice's joke, it's not a good sign.

Was this the moment when "history and tradition" became parody? Or was it the Hemani opinion itself, in which Justice Gorsuch stolidly marched through the government's defense of the law before concluding that "the government's analogy fails under every measure it asks us to consider." It fell to Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, who was not yet on the court, when Bruen was decided, to speak the obvious truth in her concurring GREENHOUSE, PAGE 11

America's population forecasts aren't grim enough

Lyman Stone

In 1775, a year before the Declaration of Independence was signed, a Harvard professor named Edward Wigglesworth did the math on American population growth and could barely contain his excitement. He had found that the colonists were doubling their numbers every 25 years, mostly through births, and at that pace he projected that by the close of the 20th century there would be "ONE THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTY MILLIONS" people (his capitalization, not mine). A billion Americans, and then some.

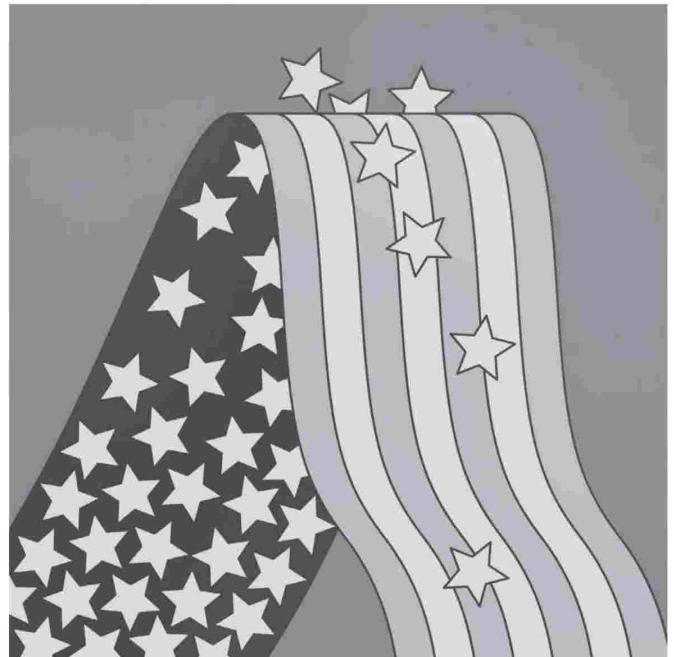
Sadly, there are only about 340 million Americans today. We should be asking not just why we so badly under-shot Wigglesworth's hopes, but also whether our numbers about to start counting down instead of up.

The decline in U.S. birthrates is unlikely to spontaneously reverse. If America's population does decline, it will strain the entitlements system, damage the economy, reduce innovation and entrepreneurship, and cause serious labor shortages. But the majority point of view — held by major institutions like the Census Bureau, the United Nations and the Social Security trustees — is that the United States probably won't face population decline until the 2080s, or even beyond 2100.

That forecast is far too optimistic. The more accurate projection, which I outlined in a recent report for my organization, the Institute for Family Studies, sees the American population beginning to shrink in the 2050s. It is a forecast so grim, it could upend American budgeting and, thus, American politics.

Start with the number that drives everything else. The American fertility rate has fallen below 1.6 children per woman, a record low. Replacement rate, the level that merely holds a population steady before immigration, is about 2.1. If the current trend in shrinking births continues, it's likely that the U.S. population will largely stop growing in the 2030s and begin to decline in the 2050s. Peak America may come before millennials meet their grandkids (if they have any).

There are two major pieces of wishful thinking in the flights of fancy that underpin American population forecasts. The first is immigration. The Census Bureau assumes the United States will have an annual net migration (immigrants minus emigrants) of about one million immigrants through the end of the century. The United Nations and Social Security trustees assume about 1.2 million immigrants a



BENJ. WING

year throughout the 21st century. None of these forecasts are plausible. Net migration under President Trump will most likely turn out to be near zero, and he won't be the last immigration restrictionist in the nation's highest office.

Moreover, birthrates are collapsing across the entire planet, not just in America. The supply of would-be migrants will shrink as more countries run out of young people, and the skilled ones every aging country covets will be fought over. With most countries staring down the same cliff and with emigration from the United States rising, permanent high net migration is more of an aspiration than a forecast.

But the second act of wishful thinking has an even bigger effect. Many forecasters are assuming that current low fertility rates are temporary, that women are merely delaying having children rather than forging it entirely.

But this isn't true: Research shows that delays in childbearing are usually not made up, and, anyway, estimates that take deferred childbearing into account have fallen by just as much as the headline fertility rate.

Up until quite recently, the Social Security trustees' main scenario assumed that fertility rates will rise from now until 2050 and stabilize at 1.9 children per woman. In 2023 the Census Bureau predicted that fertility rates will only gradually decline from 1.54 to 1.58 by 2075. Spoiler: Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has already shown a 1.57 fertility rate for 2025. The U.N. expects that the U.S. fertility rate will be flat at about 1.65 through the entire 21st century. To its credit, Social Security trustees released numbers just last month that revised their expectations down to 1.75 in 2050, but that is overly optimistic. The Congressional Budget

Office is more realistic, but even it predicts that fertility will decline to 1.53, then stabilize.

What evidence supports these predictions? Birthrates have fallen almost continuously for nearly 20 years, an entire generation. They have fallen through good economies and bad, through Republican administrations and Democratic ones, through every tax credit and child-care subsidy.

No matter what you believe to be the cause of falling birthrates, that decline is unlikely to spontaneously reverse: There's no marriage boom on the horizon, young people aren't switching off their phones, housing isn't about to become vastly more affordable, and the decline of religion might have paused, but no great religious revival is in sight. Drawing up budget plans on the assumption that the country has essentially reached its lowest fertility STONE, PAGE 11

On the verge of another forever war

VAEZ, FROM PAGE 1

two countries on a collision course. Tehran believed Washington was using the cease-fire to establish a shipping route through waters along Oman's coast that would gradually neutralize Iran's newest and most powerful source of leverage. The United States viewed such a corridor as insurance against another Iranian closure of the strait.

Deepening mistrust also poisoned the negotiations. After both sides resorted to strikes and counterstrikes to stake out their positions, President Trump declared the cease-fire over, threatened to "finish the job" and used language seemingly intended to validate every Iranian suspicion about U.S. intentions. Tehran clearly concluded that renewed war was inevitable and that it had to close the strait to preserve its most valuable asset.

Perhaps Iranian leaders mistook American brinkmanship for a settled decision to return to all-out war. But by acting on that belief, they helped convert fear into fate, unraveling the understandings in less time than it took to reach them. That is how security dilemmas become permanent conflicts: Each side treats the other's actions as proof of aggression, and its own escalation as an act of defense.

Both countries believe time is on their side. Iran expects oil shocks and market turmoil, as well as the political calendar, to exhaust Washington's resolve. The United States expects financial attrition and military degradation to exhaust Tehran's. Neither has a path to victory. Yet each may feel compelled to prove that it can endure more pain than the other.

That is the logic of a forever war: Each side uses violence to test the other's endurance. War becomes negotiation by other means.

The most plausible off-ramp is a narrow and temporary modus vivendi

over the Strait of Hormuz that gets back to the memorandum. Iran would halt attacks on commercial shipping and accept a transparent notification system of a vessel's origin, destination and cargo to a joint maritime coordination center administered by Iran and the Gulf states. The United States would commit to upholding freedom of navigation as a general matter, but — for the sake of re-establishing regular flows through the strait — would agree on an interim basis to scale back the use of alternative routes as a mechanism for circumventing Tehran. The Gulf states, of course, will worry that

such interim arrangements could become permanent, undermining the principle of freedom of navigation. That is all the more reason for investing in the diplomacy required to reach a more durable arrangement.

It is worth remembering that the United States and Iran are at war over an issue that was not in dispute before the United States and Israel attacked in February. Today's conflict is not the solution to yesterday's failure. It is its offspring.

The lesson here is not simply that diplomacy failed. It is that Washington and Tehran treated the memorandum not as a bridge from war to diplomacy, but as an extension of war by other means. If they allow even this modest understanding to disappear, the next cease-fire will become merely the pause before the next battle — and war, rather than diplomacy, could well become the permanent condition.

ALI VAEZ directs the Iran Project at the International Crisis Group.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KIM HENSEL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY AP/WIDEWORLD AND GENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Confessions of a grade inflator

Frank Bruni
Contributing Writer

I know I'm old because I remember when a B+ was a respectable grade. Now it's more like an indictment. I'm a masochist if I hand down too many of those.

The students getting them may fill out negative course evaluations, which could mean empty seats in my future classes and professional grief. Some students will show up in my office to argue for a more generous appraisal, forcing uncomfortable conversations. That's not because they're snowflakes or brats but because they're smart, motivated, self-protective denizens of a higher-education system in which so many professors dole out so many A's that even an A- is a setback, and a grade-point average of 3.8 instead of a 3.9 can mean rejection from law and medical schools.

They're just trying to keep their most deeply felt ambitions alive, and a B+ is a dagger in hope's heart. Do I really want to wield it? And be the assassin of their dreams?

This month marks my fifth anniversary on the faculty at Duke University. I arrived as more and more Americans began to look askance at higher education, which was often cast in caricature. It's untrue, for example, that professors tiptoe across a minefield of microaggressions, at the mercy of humorless students itching to cancel them for insufficient weakness. The overwhelming majority of the young people I teach are just earnestly trying to figure out the world and their places in it. They're more curious than censorious.

But grade inflation is as bad as they say, and it drains students' transcripts of meaning, deprives professors of agency and turns schools into approval factories. We should be ashamed, and we should fix it.

To do that, we must recognize why it happens: The incentives to join the affirmation jamboree dwarf any incentives not to. There's no punishment, only reward, for being the kindly professor with a goody bag of easy A's.

In my time at Duke, I've had several colleagues tell me that they've awarded all or all but one or two of the young people in their 12-student or 15-student seminars A's — and I do mean A's, minus attached. Not one of those colleagues mentioned, or seemed to fear,

being questioned about their munificence.

Then again, they didn't see it as munificence. They claimed that all of the assignments they received were superb, and they pointed to Duke's acceptance rate, which is down to about 5 percent, as a reason that such uniform greatness should be no surprise. I don't buy it. It contradicts what I've seen, which is work of widely varying quality from students who are gifted in some but not all subjects, who have diligent semesters and lazy ones, who struggle with certain tasks, who were evaluated for admission on a range of criteria beyond just scholastic aptitude.

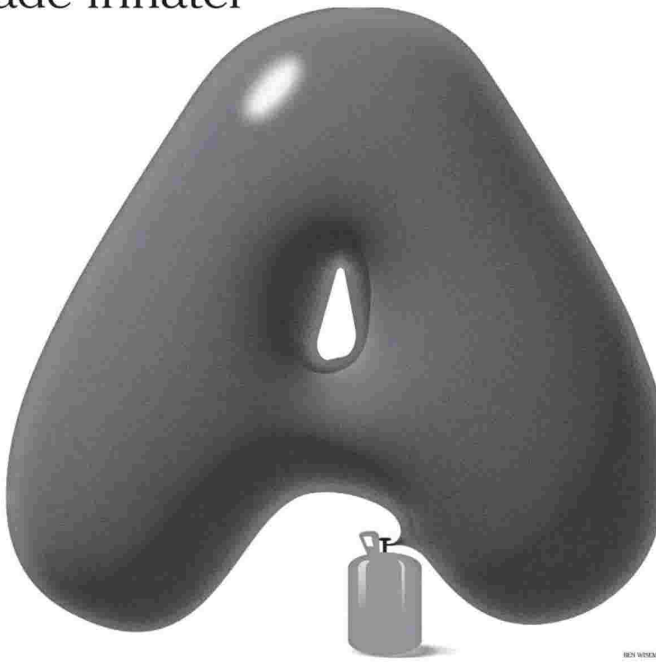
Duke, to its credit, makes its grading data publicly available. Enough Duke students attain a near-perfect or perfect cumulative G.P.A. of 4.0 that last May, seniors needed at least a 3.947 to land in the top 20 to 25 percent of their class in

the university's college of arts and sciences and graduate cum laude ("with honors") or higher. (At Duke, as at most schools, an A is worth 4.0; an A-, 3.7; a B+, 3.3.) Assuming a Duke student took a common allotment of 32 courses over four

years, the student could afford only two B+ grades if the other 30 were A's and only five A- grades if the other 27 were A's.

Duke isn't an outlier. According to a May article by Sarah Rivas in *The Yale Daily News*, Yale College students needed at least a 3.91 G.P.A. to graduate with some form of Latin honors (cum laude, magna cum laude, summa cum laude), which distinguished the top 30 percent of the class. The article also noted that a 2023 report by a Yale economics professor showed that more than 75 percent of the grades routinely given to Yale College students were either A or A-.

Harvard's cornucopia of A's prompted a recent vote by its faculty to limit the number of A's in a given course to 20 percent of the students, with an allowance of as many as four additional A's. That's not so strict: In a seminar of, say, 15 students, nearly half the class — or seven students — could still get A's, and the other eight could still receive grades of A-, for which there's no limit. But in a lecture course of 100, only 24 students could get an A.



It's a start, and other schools should follow Harvard's lead with restrictions and prescriptions of their own, which are a necessary counterforce to the dynamics fueling grade inflation.

It's obvious how we got here. Over recent decades, colleges began to compete ever more aggressively for top students, sprucing up campuses, spicing up dining options and layering on all sorts of amenities to justify price tags that, at some private schools, are near \$100,000 a year for tuition and living expenses. Tough grading isn't much of a come-on and doesn't go over well with customers forking over that much.

Also, child-rearing increasingly stressed positive reinforcement. Then the pandemic hit, professors rightly treaded more carefully and supportively than ever, and we got stuck.

Once everybody starts dispensing A's like so many Pez, everybody else is pressured to do likewise: If they don't, they're giving grades that no longer communicate — to students, to prize committees, to graduate schools — what those grades were intended to signify. I may personally consider an A- a compliment, but if the culture regards it as a gentle remonstrance, am I stubbornly choosing to speak an extinct

language at my students' expense?

To what benefit? No department head or dean will compliment me on my high standards. No formula will interpret and adjust my course evaluations for how generous or stingy I was with A's. My courses will be less appealing. And school administrators generally prefer professors who attract students to professors who repel them.

But fewer A and A- grades wouldn't turn them away if they understood that as a new norm reflecting new limits placed on all faculty. When I taught at Princeton for one semester in 2014, its grading policy — since abandoned —

insisted that no more than about a third of the 16 students in my seminar get A or A- grades. As a result, I was able, assignment by assignment, to give many a B+ and even a B without students feeling victimized and freaking out. I could make important distinctions that showed them precisely how well they were performing, exactly how much they could improve and what true excellence was.

Princeton abandoned that policy shortly after I left; the school and its "grade deflation," as students called it, were hanging out there alone. But if Princeton and Yale and Duke and other renowned universities now emulate Harvard — if enough schools band together — no one of them will feel exposed and need to fret that its students are being disadvantaged, that its campus has become less appealing, that its applications will drop. A 3.5 G.P.A. will be the new 3.9. The law and medical schools will know that.

And at each school, professors will be able to grade students in a more discerning way that treats them not only as customers to be satisfied but also as conscripts to be seriously challenged. Grade deflation would counter many Americans' cynical takes on exclusive schools as permissive playgrounds, better prepare students for the dispassionate and even tough judgments of many workplaces and endow an A with more meaning than it currently has.

Because I want my own students to stretch and because I want an A to make them robustly proud, I'm sparing with that mark, at least by today's standards. I typically award A's to no more than a quarter of the students in any class. But I give A- grades to too many of them, and I often feel obliged to tell students, at the start of the semester, that if they're intent on a G.P.A. close to 4.0, I'm not a safe bet. A few drop the class, and I respect that. Most stay — but they stay knowing what's what, which saves all of us awkwardness and bitterness.

I shouldn't have to issue that warning. I shouldn't be giving only a handful of B+ and B grades. I should be distributing a diversity of marks that speak to the many variations in student performance, even at Duke. It's not that I want to be harsher; I want to be honest. Isn't higher education about the pursuit of truth?

FRANK BRUNI is a professor of journalism and public policy at Duke University.

Population forecasts aren't grim enough

STONE, FROM PAGE 10
point, despite other rich countries' rates being even lower, is nonsensical. I suspect that this error persists because the alternative is too dismaying to put in a government table.

Strip out the imaginary baby boom, and put in realistic migration rates for the Trump presidency and the rest of the 21st century, and the trajectory of the U.S. population is more ominous. If birthrates continue to decline as they have been doing, then fertility will fall to 1.35 children per woman in 2050 and 1.15 by 2100. In that scenario, population growth will be anemic in the 2020s and 2030s, fall to essentially zero in the 2040s and then, starting in the mid-2050s, experience a long, grinding decline. Each generation will be more than 30 percent smaller than the one

before, the work force will shrink beneath the retirees it has to support, and the American century will give way to American contraction.

Only one state in the union, South Dakota, still has a birthrate near the level that would hold its population steady on its own. Every other state is below the line. Most are far below it. In parts of Kentucky, the state where I live, the effects of demographic decline are all too familiar. Entire towns left to be reclaimed by weeds and rust; real estate values drifting downward every year, destroy-

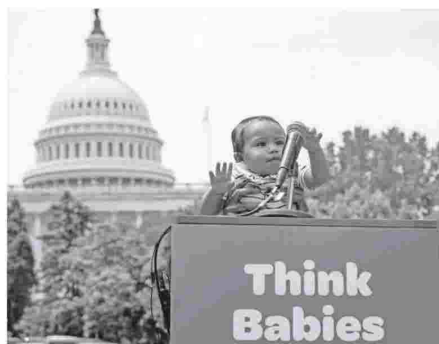
ing the saved-up wealth of retirees; school consolidations that force kids to ride on a bus for over an hour; outmigration by innovative and entrepreneurial people; bitterness among those left behind to watch their civilization rot.

None of this is destiny. Forecasting population isn't like forecasting the weather: People can choose to marry and have children. I can tell you now that the population will peak in the 2050s is precisely because I am describing the path America is on if nothing changes. We can try to prevent this from happening.

Closing a gap this size will not happen through a few thousand dollars of tax credits sprinkled on young families; we have tried pocket change, and pocket change has failed. It will take serious money aimed at the people doing the work of raising the next generation of Americans, an end to the marriage penalties woven through our tax and welfare codes, a surge in building family-size houses on par with the one during the last baby boom and a culture that treats children as a future worth having rather than a lifestyle expense. Those are big asks, but they are things Americans can achieve if they set their minds to it.

Wigglesworth saw exponential growth as the mark of a heroic country. For the first century of the nation's life together, America stayed on that trajectory. Then we spent the past 150 years proving him too optimistic. The question in the year of the country's 250th birthday is how many more birthdays we want it to have, both for its babies and as a country.

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A rally supporting families on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., in June.

Drunk on originalism

GREENHOUSE, FROM PAGE 10
opinion: "Bruen is unworkable."

Although I've had a bit of fun with the Hemani case, a serious question remains: Did it teach the court anything? Or will the justices continue stumbling through the history books under the fiction that at the end of the road lies objectivity?

The answer matters greatly. During the new term that begins in October, the court will decide whether the Second Amendment protects a right to own an AR-15 rifle. Is this the weapon of choice for many mass murders of

the "arms" the Second Amendment gives individuals the right to keep and bear?

Elected officials in Cook County, Ill., which includes Chicago, enacted one of the assault weapons bans at issue in the case decades ago. It argues that history

and tradition fully support its position. Every federal appeals court to have reviewed such a law, including the Seventh Circuit in this case, agrees.

The court's brief also makes a strong policy argument for why the ban is necessary in a major city plagued by gun violence.

If the Supreme Court is moved by neither argument — a distinct possibility, given its recent record — the result will not be simply a failure of constitutional method. Cloaked in "objectivity," it will be a failure of democracy.

LINDA GREENHOUSE, the recipient of a 1998 Pulitzer Prize, reported on the Supreme Court for *The Times* from 1978 to 2008.

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Ukraine's self-defeating reshuffle

Zelenskyy should not turn wartime leadership into a popularity contest

Volodymyr Zelenskyy has earned a place in the history books for his courageous and indefatigable leadership against Russia's brutal aggression. But his political management at home is sometimes baffling, hard to justify and counter-productive. This is one of those occasions.

Zelenskyy has embarked on another cabinet reshuffle, the third since Russia's full-scale invasion 2022. He says it is needed to breathe new life into the government as the war enters a new stage. Exactly why and what for is harder to discern. Zelenskyy, a former actor and TV producer, likes a revolving cast of characters in his administration. But they are very much secondary roles in the Zelenskyy show and the cast list is short. Loyalty and discretion are in

many cases valued above effectiveness. Popularity and profile are detriments.

Yulia Svyrydenko, who was dismissed as prime minister earlier this week, had been in the job for not quite a year. She was appointed as a competent but unassuming administrator. Now Zelenskyy has decided he needs someone with more heft. The new premier is set to be Sergii Korytskiy, the chief executive of state gas company Naftogaz. It is a reasonable choice: Korytskiy is deemed a capable manager who previously helped clean up the state oil company after it was seized from its oligarch owners. One of the most pressing tasks facing the government is shoring up Ukraine's energy system before another brutal winter of Russian missile attacks. Korytskiy's experience will help.

Zelenskyy is reported to be preparing multiple other changes. By far the most important is the possible removal of Mykhailo Fedorov as defence minister after only six months in the job. Fedorov's predecessor also held the role

for only six months. His successor will be Ukraine's fifth defence minister since Russia's full-scale invasion. The rapidly revolving door can only undermine Ukraine's defence efforts.

Fedorov, moreover, has probably been the most successful Ukrainian minister of the past four and a half years. The 35-year-old tech whizz-kid has helped transform Ukraine's fortunes on the battlefield. As digital minister, he was the architect of Ukraine's drone revolution. His genius was encouraging a tech ecosystem that has become the envy of the world with its rapid innovation and adaptation cycles. Fedorov seems to be on the way out for the wrong reasons. True, he has not solved the army's mobilisation problems. Too few Ukrainians want to serve. Those who already do are exhausted and thinly stretched. The answer lies in more compulsion. But that is unpopular and socially destabilising. Zelenskyy has not wanted to grasp the nettle.

In his short time in office, Fedorov has

The rapidly revolving door within government can only undermine the country's defence efforts

at least made a start on manpower, with a plan for big pay rises for frontline troops, fixed-term contracts for new recruits and a path to (eventual) demobilisation for the longest-serving ones. He also started to streamline a cumbersome and bloated ministry.

Fedorov appears to have irked a still Soviet-minded top brass with his modernising, start-up ways, even though innovation and disruption have proved their value in this war. He is respected by western partners and popular at home, especially with young Ukrainians who see him as a committed and honest moderniser. Ukrainian media talk of him as a potential presidential candidate, which appears to be the ultimate sin in Zelenskyy's eyes, as past ministerial sackings have illustrated.

Wartime leaders understandably seek to centralise control and eliminate threats to their supreme authority. But wartime leadership should be about assembling the best team of talents, not rooting them out.

Opinion Asia

Takaichi's \$2.3tn battle with Abenomics

Maria Hargreaves



Quite suddenly, and with indecently little warning either to itself or the outside world, Japan has rung the bell on an ideological prizefight. One way or another Abenomics vs Takanomics will end in a knockout. The unexpectedness of the mence-on-mentor showdown derives from what everyone thought they knew about Sanae Takaichi. Takaichi's ascent was engineered, over decades, through deliberate association with, apprenticeship under and political mimicry of the late Shinzo Abe: a popular nationalist reformer who staked his leadership on monster stimulus, a soft currency and exit from deflationary quicksand. So when Takaichi campaigned big on refashioning policies, constitutional amendment and even hinted at the desirability of a weaker yen, most

weightings in domestic assets – for which read "Buy more JGBs."

Even before the market had a chance to question the practicalities of rebalancing the GPIF portfolio outside its five-year schedule, investors could see this was a new form of verbal intervention in the bond market: an admission of weakness from a nervous government straining to prevent yields on the 10-year JGB edging above 3 per cent. But Katayama wasn't done. She also brought up the idea of allowing ordinary Japanese to put government bonds in their tax-free Nippon individual savings accounts.

These accounts (based on UK Isas) were specifically introduced by Abe to encourage Japan's cash-hoarding "Mrs Watanabes" to shift savings into riskier assets. Nissas were not intended as receptacles for JGBs, which are, as Takaichi is so keen to assert, non-risk assets. Through these three moves, Takaichi has demonstrated a fundamental divergence between Abenomics and her own ideological sense of what Japan should look like, and how to go about making that happen.

At the core of Abenomics was a pressure towards better governance. In the corporate world, that was imposed through governance and stewardship codes (which set higher standards on both companies and investors), explicit empowerment of shareholders and tolerance of activism. Abe, for all his ideological fervour, was not dirigiste; his industrial policy was guided by an acknowledgment that, with good governance, shareholders and market forces might work best for Japan. Takanomics does not appear to share that faith. It may yet be right for Japan, but it must prove itself against Abenomics – and investors may well decide they do not like the change.

Takaichi's industrial policy reveals pre-Abenomics thinking, with no sense that improved governance remains a priority. It embeds the idea that companies should invest according to a government plan. Shareholders who view the market as a better allocator of capital may come to be seen as a problem. By invoking the investment choices of the GPIF, Takanomics revives a past when institutional independence was wafery thin and beholden to politicians, not the long-term interests of the people. Equally, the idea of co-opting Mrs Watanabe to prop up the domestic bond market requires a view of the public that sees them as stooges rather than investors.

Both Abenomics and Takanomics are, despite some internal paradoxes, coherent. As a matter of urgency, though, Japan and the world need to recognise that they are fundamentally different. The clashes we have seen in recent weeks are only going to grow louder and more unsettling.

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Letters

Prevention is the missing piece of mental health reform

With reference to "Britain's unsustainable mental health bill" (FT View, July 10), your editorial team rightly identifies the flaws in how personal independence payments (PIP) are administered for mental health conditions, and the case for more bespoke assessments is compelling. But framing this primarily as a fiscal problem risks misdiagnosing the cause.

The doubling of claims for anxiety and ADHD since 2021 did not happen in a vacuum. It coincided with NHS mental health waiting lists reaching record lengths, leaving individuals

without timely diagnosis or treatment and with few options beyond a benefits claim to acknowledge their condition. PIP was never designed to substitute for care, yet that is increasingly what it does.

The suggestion to prioritise talking therapies and employment support over cash payments is sound in principle. In practice, those services are rationed, underfunded and, in many areas, simply unavailable. The real opportunity lies in embedding mental health expertise where people already are: in schools, GP surgeries,

jobcentres and workplaces, rather than waiting for crises to arrive at a specialist's door. Teachers, employment advisers and primary care staff are already the de facto front line. Training them to identify early distress and connect people to timely support would do more to reduce long-term claims than any reassessment of eligibility criteria alone.

Prevention must also be treated as a fiscal argument, not solely a moral one. The cost of inaction compounds. A young person who receives no intervention at 17 is a far more likely

claimant at 27. Investing in early mental health support in schools and communities is consistent with the OBR's warnings on public expenditure, provided the time horizon extends beyond the next spending review.

Fiscal prudence and humane policy point in the same direction. Both require a system that catches people earlier, rather than one that processes them more efficiently once they have fallen.

Ruth Jacobs, RMN, BSC
CEO and Founder, Certified Minds,
Chessington, UK

When investing starts to look like gambling

Your article "Goldman Sachs limits prediction-market betting for employees" (Report, July 9) highlights a broader challenge facing modern finance: the increasingly blurred boundary between investing, speculation and gambling.

Prediction markets are the latest example of a trend already visible in retail trading. From zero-commission trading in leveraged ETFs to options, financial innovation has made markets more accessible while also exposing less experienced investors to new risks. The issue is not whether innovation should be encouraged, but whether participants understand the risks and incentives behind increasingly engaging, game-like financial products. The appeal of prediction markets is often driven as much by competition and instant feedback as by investment fundamentals.

Goldman Sachs' concerns also highlight wider questions around transparency, conflicts of interest and the use of non-public information.



Financial innovation can improve markets, but trust depends on ensuring that greater access is matched by greater understanding.
Anna Pavlova
Professor of Finance, London Business School, London W1T, UK

Connection requires more than screen-time limits

Clair Barrett is right to suggest that "the rise of social media has coincided with the demise of many spaces for teens" (Opinion, June 20).

The data is stark: since 2010 more than 1,200 youth clubs have closed, and local authority funding for youth services in England has fallen by 76 per cent in real terms, representing a loss of £1.3bn. But as children and teenagers spend 85 per cent of their time outside school, the debate around the ban shouldn't stop at what we're taking away from young people. We also need to think about what we're offering to take social media's place.

Restricting social media may be part of the answer. But we cannot regulate our way to a more connected generation. We need sustained investment in the places, people and opportunities that help young people feel connected, confident and supported.

Jamie Masruff
Chief Executive, OnSide, Bolton, Lancashire, UK

A new football formula

Some years ago the FT published a football formula I created, QM=1/H, where QM is the quality of the midfield and H is inverse proportion to H, the number of times the goalkeeper hoofs the ball upfield from the penalty area. Having watched a lot of World Cup games, I now suggest GF=1/R, where GF is the genuineness of a foul and R is the number of times the victim rolls over after the supposed offence.

John Tinsley
Cambridge, UK

Autism is not an illness

John Burn-Murdoch's July 11 Data Points column seems to treat autism and ADHD as mental health conditions. My family's experience is that they are underlying drivers of mental health difficulties rather than mental health conditions. Framing them this way risks misdirected treatment and poor policy decisions – the very risks he aims to highlight.

Ronald Grover
London E8, UK

OUTLOOK
MIDWEST

What Wisconsin tells us about the Democratic fightback



by Patti Waldmeir

Wisconsin was once known as the most progressive state in the union. These days it's remembered for helping President Donald Trump win two terms in the White House.

Democrats are hoping it's not too late to reclaim the state's leftwing populist tradition. They want to prove that the progressive insurgency in reliably Democratic areas such as New York and Denver can also take hold in the harsher political terrain of the deeply divided Midwest – where the label "socialist" is a much harder sell.

Democratic socialist Francesca Hong currently has a narrow polling lead in the August 11 Wisconsin Democratic primary for governor, as the acrimonious battle for the party's identity moves to the heartland with primaries in the crucial swing states of Wisconsin and Michigan. The Midwest polls come at a fraught moment when Democratic scandals forced progressive Democrat Graham Platner out of Maine's US Senate race, complicating the party's path to success in November's midterms.

Wisconsin is no stranger to progressive politics: the state was the cradle of the American Progressive movement, where reformers such as Robert La Follette pioneered workers' rights and an active state. Milwaukee, its largest city, had socialist mayors for decades until 1960; they were known as "sewer socialists" because of their pragmatic approach to government, focusing on amenities and public

services rather than ideological revolution.

"Socialism is not part of the dim and distant past; in some ways it's part of our DNA", Milwaukee historian John Gurda tells me. "But is there something in the water that makes Wisconsin voters today more receptive? We don't know the answer to that yet," he adds, noting that as a candidate Hong "probably is not going to play well statewide", particularly in largely conservative rural areas.

But Milwaukee organiser for the Democratic Socialists of America Shua Sanchez believes most Wisconsin voters "really don't care so much about the party label" – including rural ones. "They are working-class and respond to an economic populist message. They just want a candidate that will help them pay the bills," he says. Bernie Sanders won 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary, he points out.

Wisconsin voter Alex Lux illustrates that anti-establishment political fluidity: he wanted Sanders for president in 2016 but ended up voting for Trump when his candidate wasn't available. Now he's backing Hong: this year's governor's race, for him, is "the 2016 election I never got to vote in, this is Trump vs Bernie".

But even the Hong campaign admits its candidate is "not really leading with" her socialism, which it acknowledges "can be a non-starter" for some – her policy platform of "permanent affordability" includes

expanding healthcare access and universal childcare.

But it's a fair bet that her Republican opponent will make sure voters hear the word "socialist" loud and clear, political analysts say. Trump has responded to recent Democratic socialist wins by branding the victors "communists", using the word 81 times in the fortnight after leaving candidates won primary victories in June. The analysts point out that "red scare" crusader Joe McCarthy also came from Wisconsin.

And the state's veteran pollster Charles Franklin points out that Hong may be vulnerable to attacks based on some of her recent statements – including saying her "perfect world would be a world without prisons". None of the Democratic candidates have attacked her as too far left or unelectable, he says, but if she reaches the November ballot "you can bet that [Republican gubernatorial candidate] Tom Tiffany will not be shy about it".

Franklin says Hong enjoyed her strongest support among "Democrats who call themselves very liberal" in his latest poll in March – only 10 to 15 per cent of all registered voters. He warns against assuming that recent DSA gains in "deepest blue" places will translate here. "I don't think we've had a fair trial of just how successful this movement can be," he tells me. The state that once helped invent American progressivism may be the test of whether it truly has a future.

The writer is a contributing columnist

Opinion

One answer to EU strategic autonomy is orbiting overhead

Mateusz Szczurek

Europe is having two arguments in two separate rooms and it would make faster progress if it noticed they were about the same basic problem.

In one room, economists debate how to create a common safe asset for the bloc – a deep, liquid stock of high-quality debt to anchor portfolios and strengthen the international role of the euro. There have been some ingenious ideas, from Eurozone jointly issued “Blue Bonds” to “European Safe Bonds” that would repackage member state sovereign debt, to the latest Eurobond proposals. But they all run aground on the same rock: a bond needs a source of repayment, and the EU has never managed to agree on joint resources to provide one.

In the other room, defence officials

debate how to pay for the air defence, surveillance and resilient communication networks that no single member state can build at sufficient scale, leaving Europe dependent on the US. The EU's flagship answer, the €150bn Safe programme, lends money to national capitals to buy their own kit. While it has the upside of expanding the stock of EU bonds, it risks further entrenching fragmentation in defence procurement. Europe today fields a dozen types of main battle tank to America's one.

Safe assets lack a source of repayment. Public goods lack a common owner. A single instrument could supply both: let the EU borrow to build and directly own a portfolio of strategic assets, then recover the cost by charging for their use.

Start with space, because Europe already has this model. The Galileo satellite navigation system is owned by the EU, while Iris², the bloc's new satellite network, will be built and run under European control with a commercial arm alongside. The legal framework is long established. Under the Union Space Programme regulation, the EU owns the

satellites and ground stations outright. The next step would be to extend the model to an integrated portfolio of strategic capabilities – communications, all-weather radar imaging and space-based early warning.

The EU would issue long-dated interest-only AAA bonds at the rate it already pays – about 0.5 percentage points above Bund yields. Member

Start with space, because Europe already has this model with Galileo

states would pay for guaranteed access, much as they already do for satellite services; spare capacity would be sold commercially. On conservative numbers, a €20bn space programme could generate enough revenue to cover its interest bill almost five times over, with an annual surplus near €2.8bn. The debt would be backed by a revenue stream and a productive public asset,

which generic Eurobonds lack, making it a stronger financial proposition.

Because it would pay for itself, it also sidesteps one of the traps that snares European defence: persuading reluctant capitals to fund “someone else's” security. There is no transfer here, no potential liability for those who abstain, no unanimous bargain that has to be struck. A subset of willing states and partners could anchor it, just as they anchor Iris² today. The political question shrinks from “will you pay for another country's defence?” to “do you want to allow the EU to finance a capability that pays for itself?”. That is a far easier yes.

There is even a commercial tailwind. As the reliability of US and Chinese systems becomes questionable – a lesson the war in Ukraine taught vividly – a European service operating under transparent, rules-based governance will attract partners and neutrals.

None of this is costless or risk-free. Commercial revenues in Europe are thinner than for Elon Musk's Starlink satellite system. Competition rules will constrain pricing, while low-orbit

satellites must be replaced every few years. But the programme design would absorb these issues. Replacement would be funded first, ahead of any coupon payments. The asset is best understood as a revenue-generating franchise – with orbital slots, communications spectrum rights, ground infrastructure, an established customer base and a trusted provider.

It could be a part of the newly proposed Multilateral Defence Mechanism or the European Defence Mechanism proposed by think-tank Bruegel, serving as a revenue-generating engine and reducing the amount of capital required. It could also be rolled out relatively quickly through direct borrowing by the EU and without the lengthy process of building a coalition of the willing.

Europe has spent years treating strategic autonomy as an expense. It would do better to treat it as an asset that it can own. The satellites are going up either way. Adorning them with 12 stars on a blue background is a logical thing to do.

The writer is the former minister of finance for Poland

Britain forgets the dull bit of climate change policy

Jill Rutter

Climate change policy divides into two parts. One is mitigation – reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It has huge numbers of advocates (some sceptics too). It attracts political attention and the ambitious. It is the subject of soaring rhetoric and street protests. It has big budgets and its own government department. It is encapsulated in a simple goal: net zero.

Its poor relation is adaptation – the need to adjust the way we live to the reality of a changing climate. No one is out on the street for it – indeed, some climate activists are hostile because they fear it will cloud the goal of reducing emissions. It has no dedicated budget. It is not amenable to a simple target or slogan. When the Department of Energy and Climate Change was created in 2008, adaptation was left with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The people working on it could be counted on the fingers of half a hand. The Climate Change Committee's role on adaptation only came from an amendment to the climate change bill.

And while the UK has reduced emissions, the CCC has consistently called out the lack of progress on adaptation. The foreword to its latest report in May said: “The public is concerned that we are unprepared... What governments have been doing on adaptation clearly isn't working. It is time for change.”

The CCC lays out a whole range of areas the government needs to deal with to become what it terms “well-adapted”. But nothing suggests Andy Burnham is

The Treasury should lead on adaptation planning as an economic and social priority

any more interested than Keir Starmer. There is no indication Burnham will appoint a cabinet big hitter to Defra. It may be as low a priority for him as for the other seven prime ministers since the Climate Change Act passed in 2008. But this summer is a reminder of the cost of failing to adapt. Whether it is arguments over air conditioning or schoolchildren staying home when schools overheat (with economic consequences for working parents), the consequences of cancelling operations due to overheating NHS operating theatres, or how to keep the trains running and the roads open, the clear and immediate costs of not being well adapted are beginning to mount.

But there are longer-term consequences too: how much to spend on flood defence and where; how to ensure those at risk can get insurance; how farming and land use need to change in reaction to hotter summers and wetter winters; how to protect against new diseases taking hold in the UK.

It is unreasonable to expect Defra alone to push this up the agenda of government. The Cabinet Office could house an adaptation unit. But prime ministers have a lot to focus on and there is nothing less powerful than an orphaned central coordinating unit.

There is, however, one institution in government that can force departments to pay attention: the Treasury. At root, adaptation is not an environmental issue. It is an economic performance and value-for-money issue.

Here's how Burnham could stop adaptation being the climate Cinderella. First, treat adaptation as a value-for-money issue. That would focus minds at the top of the civil service and enable scrutiny and challenge of how far departmental plans take account of future climate threats and are resilient to potential changes.

Second, the Treasury should lead on adaptation planning as an economic and social risk, deciding where it is worth spending money and where other options are better to reduce disruption and minimise costs. It can make sure capital spending is resilient to future climate scenarios. It can ensure a common approach across government.

Adaptation suffers from being the dull but essential part of dealing with climate change, a distraction from more glamorous policy. That makes it a natural fit for the Treasury.

The writer is a former senior civil servant and a senior fellow at the Institute for Government

Conflicts of interest are back – and blatant

WORLD AFFAIRS

Alec Russell



As global investors with an eye for an opportunity, it is easy to see why Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump have alighted on the idea of a resort on Albania's coast. It is not just a stunning spot; in the language of American realtors, it is ripe with opportunity on the last undeveloped stretch of the Dalmatian coast.

You can imagine the pitch doing the rounds in New York. To the south are Greece's taverna-strewn Ionian Islands, including the home of *Odyssey*. To the north, Montenegro's coastline is concreted over with hotels. Beyond that, Croatia has a 300-mile treasure trail. Here is your chance to fill in the last piece of the Dalmatian jigsaw. And it's good for Albania!

Well, absolutely it makes sense for what is one of Europe's smallest and poorest countries to try to cash in on its beaches. When I first visited the country in the 1990s, soon after the downfall of communism, I stayed in the drabest of state hotels and remember imagining happily but without much confidence that one day its coast could fund its recovery. But if Donald Trump's political advisers have any say in his entourage's affairs – or for that matter any

good sense – they would be advising his daughter and son-in-law to walk away.

As the list of the Trump circle's business entanglements grows and grows, it seems ever more likely it contains the seeds of the Trump project's decline. As former UK prime minister Boris Johnson found to his cost, it is sometimes a seemingly small scandal that can prove a tipping point.

In Albania, the Trump-Kushner plan has ignited the “Flamingo Revolution”. Nightly protests, backed by the pop star Dua Lipa, were sparked by concerns the project would harm a nature reserve known for the exotic birds. They are now targeting more broadly the prevailing culture of crony capitalism, and a scandal over seemingly corrupt land sales linked to the proposed site.

On one level this Balkan drama may appear remote compared to conflicts of interest over say World Liberty Financial, the Trump-backed crypto venture. But this is about more – or rather even more – than the dear flamings and ambient sleaze. This is about a sense that if you are close to Trump, the normal rules do not apply. In its simplicity and egregiousness, this points to what could be the Democrats' strongest attack line. There is surely fertile terrain here for hearings if they win back the House of Representatives in November.

There is no evidence of wrongdoing by Kushner's consortium. But the signal their plan sends is dire. As the US president's lead mediator in global crises, Kushner is arguably subordinate only to vice-president JD Vance and secretary

of state Marco Rubio in US foreign policy. Yet there he is pursuing a mega-investment overseas, and in a country which is notoriously corrupt.

What has happened to the old principle of government that required you to park business interests – and fill out disclosure forms? When I put that question to a former US foreign service official, they replied that conflicts of interest had become “a feature not a bug” of the system, adding: “I tell old colleagues to keep notes of every meeting and not to get involved.”

Trump probably admires Julius Caesar; after all, the dictator had no time for constitutional niceties. But the US president clearly lacks Caesar's instincts on propriety. When Caesar divorced his wife after allegations of an affair, he sup-

In recent decades at least, profiteering was confined to the shadows. These days it is in plain sight



posedly said his family should be not just “free from guilt but free from the suspicion of it”. That is the issue here.

As Viktor Orbán, the former prime minister of Hungary, learnt when he was defeated in elections in April, if there is one thing that finally alienates voters it is a sense that elites are profiting from power. He could probably have gone on pursuing his nationalist project indefinitely if his circle had not so patently succumbed to greed.

At this point Trump-weary readers will say it is late in the day, if not naive, to sound shocked by such behaviour. The more cynical will rightly add this has always happened behind the scenes. But that is the point: behind the scenes.

The US and indeed my own country, Britain, and most others, have always had conflicts of interest. Joe Biden's son, Hunter, was caught up in such a scandal in Ukraine. But in recent decades at least these have been confined to the shadows. The difference now is that the profiteering is in plain sight. People close to Trump seem willing to flaunt their commercial ambitions.

Take Pakistan, a country that, like Albania, has a weak record in tackling corruption, is dominated by rich families, and has links to Trump's team. Pakistan's de facto ruler, Field Marshal Asim Munir, has met Zach Witkoff – the son of Trump's other lead mediator, the businessman Steve Witkoff – at least twice. And lol Pakistani officials have done fledgling deals with World Liberty Financial, of which the younger Witkoff is CEO and a co-founder.

As for Albania, this investment will probably suffer the fate of another Kushner-backed Balkans project: his plan to build a luxury hotel in Serbia's capital Belgrade was eventually axed last year after a political storm.

But what of America? Will this brazen culture become an accepted standard, normalising the use of public office for private gain? Or will the country respond by erecting stronger safeguards? If the Democrats were smart, this and not anti-capitalism would be their focus in November.

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The UK has a blueprint for innovation. Now it must act on it

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



Anyone needing a shot of optimism about the UK's economic prospects should visit the New Whittle Laboratory in Cambridge. The gleaming £58m building, home to some of the prototype turbojet engines developed by Frank Whittle in the 1930s, highlights the UK's rich industrial past and promises an equally innovative future.

The lab is intent on transforming one of Britain's strongest industries: aero-thermal engineering, which spans aerospace, energy and defence.

As he tours the premises, Rob Miller, the lab's contagiously enthusiastic director, explains that the four steps in the engineering process – design, manufacture, test and iterate – are all being

transformed by new technologies and business models. That presents a unique opportunity for the UK – “aero-thermal is an industry where the UK leads”, he says, noting the success of Rolls-Royce aero engines and UK-made Formula 1 cars. The aim is to cut engineering development time from several years to a few months, or even weeks.

To that end, he has launched the affiliated Bennett Innovation Lab with Elliott Grant, a former executive from Google's innovation arm. Their aim is to create a “hardware unicorn machine” supporting tech start-ups that can grow to more than \$1bn in valuation. In the US, Y Combinator has incubated scores of software start-ups. The Bennett lab wants to do the same for UK hardware. “As AI collapses the cost and speed of innovation, this is where I want to be building the next big thing,” Grant says.

Outside observers are intrigued by the initiative. “I 100 per cent believe that we can dramatically accelerate these engineering processes,” Sir John Lazar, president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, tells me. “But the really, really difficult debate is how you assess

and deal with risk.” The next challenge will then be battling through the “horrible accretion of frictions” that prevents promising UK start-ups from becoming global technology champions.

How to overcome those frictions has been explored in a new book by US entrepreneur Amir Hegazi. *The UK Innovation Blueprint* has contributions from 24 entrepreneurs, investors and policymakers and contains 10 recommendations

Pioneering companies with global ambitions have often had little choice but to sell up to US or Asian buyers

tions on how the country's “conversion gap” can be closed.

Mobilising capital, creating a government delivery machine that can act as the first customer for promising start-ups and easing visa restrictions to attract researchers and entrepreneurs are high on the list. Hegazi himself lost his UK Global Talent visa because of an

administrative misunderstanding over health insurance and has now moved to the UAE.

The most glaring weakness highlighted in the UK and Europe is the lack of risk-taking growth capital. That has meant that pioneering UK technology companies with global ambitions, such as Arm, DeepMind and Oxford Ionics, have often had little choice but to sell themselves to US or Asian buyers.

In the book, Hermann Hauser, co-founder of Anadeus Capital Partners, laments the fact that all 11 European tech unicorns he has backed ultimately relocated to the US. This “predictable and devastating” failure is “the single most important problem”, he argues.

In her contribution, Kate Bingham, who chaired the UK Vaccine Taskforce in 2020, says Britain showed it could innovate, mobilise resources and scale up quickly during the Covid pandemic. Delivery mechanisms employed at the time could be replicated across other sectors today. The three essential ingredients are: creating mission-driven teams; committing public money early to support them; and ensuring govern-

ment departments work simultaneously, not sequentially. The trouble is, she adds, that this way of working is “the opposite of the government's default”.

Sir Keir Starmer's outgoing government appeared finally to have grasped some of these challenges and was acting with increasing urgency. Sadly, the incoming government of Andy Burnham appears more focused on devolution, taxation and redistribution. But if it wants to achieve its wider ambitions, its top priority must be to back enterprise to reignite growth.

Even during the darkest days of the second world war, Prime Minister Winston Churchill struggled to mobilise the government will to develop Whittle's new jet engine. “The challenges the UK now faces are similarly immense,” argues Miller.

Today, at least, Britain is at peace and its tech community has a clear, achievable blueprint for innovation. It is high time to bet big on the country's entrepreneurial talents and turn that blueprint into action.

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