Beyond religiosity

Better crowd regulation could have prevented the Kolkata pandal tragedy

This year's Durga Puja in Kolkata was meant to be truly special. The first after the Bharatiya Janata Party formed the government in West Bengal, Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari wanted the pandals to showcase his party's commitment to Hindu religiosity as well as to demonstrate the efficiency of the administrative machinery under him. He made it a point to highlight that the number of pandals in the State had increased by 25% over last year to more than 57,000. He was a visible presence at pandals across the city. Union Home Minister Amit Shah was in Kolkata as well to add heft and leverage to the puja's popular appeal. But disaster struck at Kolkata's Girish Park area on Saturday, as 19 people lost their lives in a stampede that could have been avoided with better organisation and crowd regulation. Both the police and the puja organisers failed to anticipate the sudden surge of the crowd at the venue.

Puja pandals, just like Mumbai's Ganapati installations, are often sites of creativity and festivity; they have generally been accident-free despite the participation of a large number of people. The *Chorbagan Sarbojanin Durgotstab*'s theme this year was Beyond Sound. With a narrow entry and exit, the creators apparently sought to give an experience to visitors that involved controlling the light falling inside. The surrounding lanes were narrow city gullies that cannot hold two cars at the same time. Unanticipated too – at a time of retreat of the monsoon – was the rain that struck India's east coast with heavy thunder and lightning in the evening. As people barged into the pandal seeking safety – visitors keep moving inside the Durga Puja pandals typically – the organisers requested people to leave fearing that the structure might collapse. Packed crowds can be incident-free only if sudden surges of movement, often triggered by panic, are avoided throughout. In Kolkata, panic apparently stemmed from the announcement regarding the safety of the structure, though the fear about the structure's safety was justified. The effort should have been to wean the crowd away in a regulated manner. The government has promised an inquiry and deterrent follow-up action. There is the question of whether in the government's drive to make the celebrations spectacular and grand, safe management practices got ignored at the event. Although Mr. Adhikari said the police helped rush the victims to hospitals, he also indicated that only temporary home guards had been posted at the pandal. Effective deployment of experienced police personnel may have helped avoid the tragedy.

Treacherous waters

Access to safe transport is of utmost importance in remote villages

River crossings on stretches of the Ganga in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are notoriously unsafe as poorly lit, unregistered boats ply with bare access to lifesaving equipment. Overcrowded vessels, operated by untrained or underaged people, add to the risks, and enforcement action only follows an accident. These boats are not the preserve of the poor but are also used by government personnel, teachers, and bank employees: many areas lack reliable alternatives, making the riverine journeys the sole option. On October 13, at least 13 children drowned when a country-made boat capsized in Raghopur, in Bihar's Vaishali district, after setting off at 8.30 p.m. for a memorial feast in an adjoining village, even though rides are prohibited post sunset. The boat was visibly dilapidated, including a hole in the deck through which it drew water, and was being operated by a young boatman. There were at least half a dozen other people on the vessel when it capsized despite its reported capacity having been five. The riverine tract in Raghopur is continuously shaped by sediment deposits and has historically been hard to access, especially during the monsoons. Raghopur lacks all-weather roads, and has a history of being isolated during floods. The first section of the Kachchi Dargah-Bidupur bridge, between Patna and Raghopur, was ready in June 2025, but the monsoons still flooded the approach road and blocked access. The overarching motif across these episodes has been a consistent lack of safer alternatives, including the general paucity of public transport. A choate regulatory framework, including the Model Rules 2011 under the Bengal Ferries Act 1885 and the Inland Vessels Act 2021, has also not prevented training programmes and inspections from lagging behind the proliferation of unsafe transport practices.

That all those who drowned on October 13 were children deepens the sense of tragedy. In general, children warrant additional, more sensitive socio-economic support. The Bombay High Court had recently upbraided the Maharashtra government for failing to arrange transportation for over 200 children from villages near Chandoli National Park and Sahyadri Tiger Reserve; they had to walk several kilometres to reach school, braving the risk of wildlife encounters. Such precarity persists in Hingoli, Palghar, and Nashik in Maharashtra alone; similar situations have also been created by school reorganisation programmes that do not sufficiently account for children's safety when shuttering infeasible facilities. The children who drowned in Vaishali were not headed to school, but the risk exposure is paramount. The ultimate tragedy is that access to ordinary childhood activities remains contingent, in so many economically disadvantaged communities, on accepting dangers that public institutions already know how to prevent.

Developing minds in a digital world, a changing India



Derick H. Lindquist

Dean of the Jindal School of Psychology and Counselling at the O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, Haryana

Each evening, a familiar scene unfolds in homes around the world. A teenager moves seamlessly between chats, videos, social media, and games on their phone. Homework is completed using the latest Artificial Intelligence (AI) platform. Screens increasingly dominate everyday life. This is a profound change in how developing minds experience the world, learn, and grow.

These changes are particularly significant for India, with approximately 65 crore people under the age of 25 and one of the world's largest and fastest-growing technological ecosystems. Digital engagement by this vast young population continues to grow as education, recreation, and social interaction increasingly move online.

The digital world has brought undeniable benefits, from unprecedented access to information and educational resources to new ways of communicating, creating, and learning. Recent advances in AI have expanded these possibilities even further. Nonetheless, these digital environments have also introduced a powerful and largely unregulated force into children's lives – one we are only beginning to understand.

A brain under construction

Technology itself is not the problem. The concern is constant exposure to powerful digital tools during critical periods of development, when the brain systems underlying cognition, emotion, and behaviour are still maturing. These concerns extend beyond childhood. The prefrontal cortex – which supports attention, working memory, planning, decision-making, and impulse control – continues to mature into early adulthood.

Digital environments provide a dense, repetitive stream of experiences that can shape how brain circuits develop – strengthening some pathways while leaving others underdeveloped. Given the brain's plasticity during early life, such patterns may have lasting effects, shaping how young people think, feel, and act across the lifespan.

Emerging research links high levels of screen time to alterations in brain structure and connectivity. Though revealing, such findings do not establish causation. They do, however, underscore the need to better understand how digital experiences affect cognitive development, including attention, memory, self-control, and creativity.

Social media platforms are particularly appealing during adolescence, when belonging, peer evaluation, and social approval are especially salient. These platforms are designed to capture and sustain attention by exploiting basic features of cognition, emotion, and reward. Short videos, autoplay, infinite scroll, algorithmic recommendations, and social feedback create reinforcement loops that deliver novelty and rewards – likes, shares, and comments – in a rapid but unpredictable manner.

This form of variable reinforcement encourages repetitive checking and rapid attention shifts, potentially making it harder to sustain attention on a single task. Over time, such patterns of engagement may shape what young people come to expect from everyday experiences. When digital rewards are immediate and constantly accessible, ordinary experiences – having a face-to-face conversation, practising a skill, or simply sitting with one's thoughts – may feel less rewarding by comparison.

Digital innovation must be balanced with children's cognitive, emotional and social development

Offloading mental effort

Generative AI has rapidly transformed how we engage with the world. Unlike earlier technologies, AI does not just assist with mental effort; it can supplant it. Humans have long used tools to reduce cognitive load. Taking a photograph in a crowded parking lot, for example, means we do not have to remember where we parked. Such cognitive offloading is not inherently problematic.

The concern arises when AI replaces the mental effort necessary for learning. Students can now use AI platforms to generate ideas, organise arguments, write essays, and summarise material. Used thoughtfully, these tools can enhance the learning process. When used as a substitute for independent thinking, however, AI can undermine the cognitive effort through which knowledge and skills develop.

Grappling with difficult questions, finding the right words, making mistakes, and revising arguments are central to learning. If AI routinely eliminates these experiences, we should rightly ask what the impact will be on young people's ability to think critically, use informed judgement, and persevere when answers are not immediately available.

A related concern is what happens when technology replaces not just our intellectual efforts but our idle moments. Though rarely welcomed, boredom creates space for imagination, reflection, creativity, and the development of a rich inner life. When every free moment is filled with stimulation, young people have fewer opportunities to think, wonder, daydream, or reflect.

Neuroplasticity – the brain's lifelong capacity to adapt to experience, learning, and the environment – offers another perspective on how digital technology shapes young minds. Today's youth are certainly adapting to a world very different from that of previous generations. Indeed, many young people exhibit impressive abilities to filter information, navigate complex digital environments, and switch among information sources.

We must be cautious, however, when evaluating whether these changes are beneficial or harmful. It is important to consider what may be gained – and lost – as young minds adapt to today's technologically advanced ecosystem.

In effect, young people worldwide are participating in a vast, largely uncontrolled experiment in how sustained exposure to digital technology may shape developing brains and minds. Meanwhile, the corporations designing these digital tools and devices have strong financial incentives to keep young people – their current and future users – engaged.

Safeguarding the future

India's youth are growing up in an environment that was unimaginable until quite recently. Whatever our concerns, we cannot simply ignore or reject digital technology. Children will use it. Our responsibility is to help them use it capably, thoughtfully, and responsibly.

Parents need practical, evidence-based guidance. Children should have device-free times and places, protected study periods, healthy sleep routines, and opportunities for unstructured time. The objective is not to eliminate screens, but to ensure that they do not occupy every available moment.

Schools and educators must preserve what might be called productive struggle – the effort involved in thinking, writing, reasoning, solving problems, and working through uncertainty. Digital tools, including AI, can support analysis, revision, and feedback without replacing critical thinking. Greater emphasis should be placed on independent cognitive engagement, including oral examinations, supervised writing, and applied problem-solving.

Digital platforms – especially those targeted at young people – must face greater scrutiny and accountability. Policymakers should require companies to provide stronger evidence about how their products affect the cognitive and emotional development of children and adolescents. Governments must also support independent research capable of informing policies and regulations as these technologies continue to evolve.

We should not wait for definitive evidence of harm before asking whether the digital environments we are creating are conducive to healthy development. A young mind needs stimulation, but also silence; information, but also reflection; assistance, but also struggle. We can embrace technological progress while still protecting the experiences through which children and adolescents learn to think, imagine, reflect, and grow.

A case for joining the global carbon coalition



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On July 31, nearly 500 Indian companies across seven industrial sectors filed their first-ever compliance reports under the national Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS). The country's scheme – on paper since 2023 – is now live with binding targets, penalties and real entities. The first credits are due to be issued in October, with trading on power exchanges expected to follow between November and January. In May, the European Union, China, and Brazil launched the Open Coalition on Compliance Carbon Markets (OCCCM) in Florence, aimed at aligning the way the world's compliance carbon markets communicate with each other. Germany and New Zealand joined as the first new members; Canada, France, Norway, Singapore, Türkiye and the United Kingdom have since followed. On September 14, at its meeting in Wuhan, the coalition adopted its first work plan.

India has stayed outside so far. With its own market now live, the more interesting question is no longer whether India can afford to build a carbon price – it already has. It is whether India can afford to sit outside the room where its rules get written. Or is it best avoided due to unforeseen risks? The OCCCM is a collaborative initiative for exchange on carbon pricing mechanisms; monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems, carbon accounting methodologies, and rules related to the potential use of high-integrity offsets.

In India, the government has adopted a compliance carbon market framework in the form of a Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS), which is currently in its first phase. The CCTS (compliance) is set up to deliver on India's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) targets and the 2070 net-zero goal.

The issue of a carbon price

There are two key reasons why India must seriously consider joining the OCCCM. The first is the proliferation of carbon pricing systems worldwide. The idea of having a carbon price as a key instrument, supported by complementary policy instruments, is back at the high table. It minimises the economy-wide cost of mitigation (critical for the global South) and can promote innovation while minimising the impact on the vulnerable. It can also deliver significant fiscal revenues at a time when government resources are increasingly stretched, including by the impacts of climate change – from heatwaves to devastating floods. As of now, over 50 countries have instituted carbon pricing measures. As the world advances towards a net-zero future, the likelihood that more and more countries adopt a carbon price is high.

We could be looking at a future where a bulk of emissions would be priced. At some point, more and more of these domestic carbon pricing systems will be linked – even if partially – to better coordinate. While the beginning of OCCCM focuses on knowledge exchange, one potential long-term strategic outcome is improved interoperability among domestic carbon pricing systems. It could be valuable to link India's CCTS (compliance) to other carbon trading systems, given the potential to earn revenue from jurisdictions with more stringent mitigation targets.

India should join the Open Coalition on Compliance Carbon Markets, as it aligns well with the country's decarbonisation choices

On 'climate clubs'

The second is to be better prepared in case a coalition along the lines of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) develops. The idea of 'climate clubs' is re-emerging as geopolitics fractures United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) discussions and attention turns to implementation. A report on a climate coalition centred around the CBAM issue was released in the context of an independent council convened by the COP30 President, Ambassador André Aranha Corrêa do Lago (The writers of this article are the co-authors of the report). The report describes alternative scenarios for CBAM coalitions in which there could be uniform or differentiated carbon prices across member-countries, incentives for member-countries, and penalties for non-member countries. With the European Union CBAM now operational, and many other countries contemplating their own versions of CBAM, being better prepared on this front is absolutely critical for India. While the OCCCM does not mention CBAM explicitly – most probably because of the sharp reactions the term evokes, especially during climate negotiations – OCCCM's objectives around the MRV, carbon accounting, and domestic compliance markets are very relevant for being better prepared to deal with the CBAM world.

Why joining matters now

Are there potential risks in joining the coalition? The coalition is about better alignment of domestic compliance markets and carbon pricing across countries. It does not seek to enforce any mitigation targets or any other decision. However, as discussions evolve, some critical decisions are likely to be made by coalition members. OCCCM's governance structure consists of high-level meetings (the highest decision-making body), executive-level meetings, thematic working groups and a Secretariat. It is critical to be in the room and shape the discussions rather than respond to the developments as an outsider. The risk is more in being an outsider. That Brazil is a founding member, and other like-minded developing countries are in the process of becoming members, should be a source of comfort for India.

Some aspects of the future world are likely: geopolitics will remain fractured, climate negotiations will continue to meet logjams, the profile of carbon pricing will continue to rise across countries, and efforts from outside the Paris Agreement framework will become increasingly important to achieving the agreement's goals. In this context, the role played by country-backed climate coalitions will likely grow.

The OCCCM aligns well with India's decarbonisation choices and offers a useful platform not just to learn about carbon markets, but also to be better prepared to engage with other national carbon pricing architectures and border carbon taxes within the evolving geopolitical landscape. India should consider making this move sooner rather than later.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Calm communication

One careless announcement can turn a hall full of devotees into a scene of panic, because a crowd often follows the loudest voice, not the wisest one (Front page, October 18). Every pandal or place of gatherings should therefore have one trained 'Voice of Calm' — a designated announcer equipped with a script of simple, pre-approved messages for emergencies involving rain, overcrowding or fire. No one else should be allowed to use the microphone during an emergency. Pandals should have clearly marked entry and exit routes, kept free of stalls and parked vehicles, along with a fixed crowd limit, a rain contingency plan and adequate lighting. The police, fire services and organisers should conduct a drill. A festival should be remembered for its devotion, not its dangers.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Deva

When two stalwart music directors dominated Kollywood, Tamil film composer Deva made his mark with gaana songs. Besides hits such as "Autokaaran" from *Baashha* and "Vanthenda Paalkaran" from *Annamalai*, his melodic compositions included "Sivappu Lolakku" from *Kaadhal Kottai*, "Manam Virumbuthey" from *Nerukku Ner* and "Nilavai Kondu Vaa" from *Vaali*. His music showcased his versatility. Today's music directors should revive the emphasis on melody.

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

Revamp functioning of Parliament



Atharva Deshmukh

Policy Researcher and LAMP Fellow (2024–25)



Mehul Chhabra

Policy Researcher and LAMP Fellow (2024–25)

India's impending delimitation debate may appear, at first glance, to be a matter of democratic arithmetic: if too many citizens are being represented by one Member of Parliament (MP), then the answer seems to be to simply increase the number of MPs. However, in a diverse democracy like India, representation cannot be limited to the number of MPs occupying the House; rather, it must also ensure that those elected have the institutional space to speak for their constituents.

Parliamentary representation operates in two layers: the voter's access to their MP and the MP's ability to speak for them on the floor of the House. The latter relies significantly on whether the MP receives the actual floor time to raise issues. While delimitation may bring legislators closer to their constituents, merely increasing the seats without strengthening their functional capacity will leave representatives muted on the floor.

The jointly introduced Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill and the Delimitation Bill, 2026, provide for increasing the strength of the Lok Sabha from 550 to 850 members. As per the Election Commission's 2024 Atlas, India manages an electoral roll of 97.98 crore voters, across 543 Lok Sabha constituencies, averaging roughly 18 lakh voters/constituency, highlighting the burden on an MP. This average also conceals severe constituency-wide disparities: the constituency of Malkajgiri in Telangana has 37.8 lakh voters, whereas Lakshadweep has just 57,953. While these realities signify an urgent need for restructuring, the proposed plan has turned a blind eye towards increasing Parliament's working capacity.

This missing institutional capacity represents a major structural blind spot. Adding hundreds of members will worsen an existing problem: the severe lack of available floor time. If Parliament's operational timetable remains fixed, adding more lawmakers dilutes individual members' ability to participate in legislative business.

Not enough time

In the Question hour currently, Lok Sabha rules allow a maximum of 20 starred questions for oral answers and 230 unstarred questions for written answers per sitting day. Even though each MP can submit up to five questions daily, only a tiny fraction is selected through the daily ballot. If the total number of MPs is increased to 850, while keeping daily sitting hours the same, the chances of an MP getting an oral answer from a Minister will become even more low.

Moreover, during the 17th Lok Sabha, Question Hour functioned for only 60% of its scheduled time. The time constraints were even more severe during the 2026 Monsoon Session, where the Question Hour operated for only 1% of its scheduled time, running for a total of just nine minutes across the entire session. Adding more members to a House operating under these constraints will not improve executive-legislative accountability.

Other crucial parliamentary procedures will also be impacted by this reduction in time. For example, MPs use Zero Hour to raise urgent issues as it does not require any advance notice. It has been crucial in bringing to light urgent public matters such as regional crop failures or disaster relief. Similarly, Private Member's Business gives MPs who are not part of the Cabinet a chance to bring in their own legislation. These are indispensable instruments that will lose their essence if they are not protected with measures that allow them to be fully utilised.

In order to protect the voice of the representatives, it is necessary to give Parliament's sitting time a statutory status. Article 85(1) of the Constitution states that the President shall summon each House of Parliament to meet at such time and place as he thinks fit, but six months shall not intervene between its last sitting in one session and the date appointed for its first sitting in the next session. This provision should be expanded to include a mandatory minimum working days clause. As recommended by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, Lok Sabha must meet for a minimum of 120 days per year. Additionally, parliamentary instruments such as Zero Hour and Question Hour need protected status, with a mandatory allocated time that cannot be changed as per the directions of the Speaker.

While delimitation can redraw the boundaries of the constituencies, parliamentary reforms are necessary to ensure that the voices within those constituencies are heard.

If Parliament's operational timetable remains fixed, adding more lawmakers dilutes individual members' ability to participate in legislative business

On Abdullah's promise of Statehood



Peerzada Ashiq

Almost two years ago, National Conference (NC) vice president Omar Abdullah, then 54 years old, was beaming over his massive electoral victory over the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) by winning 42 seats in the 90-member J&K Assembly. The BJP won 29 seats while the PDP won just three. As Mr. Abdullah completes two years in power, the once wary to-be-Chief-Minister of a young and powerless Union Territory (UT), comes across as visibly dejected and enervated.

Mr. Abdullah's victory in the 2024 elections was an inflection point not only for J&K but also for the NC, which has ruled the region for more than four decades. The mass electoral participation, with a 63.8% voter turnout, in a region that has been marred with violence and has seen election boycotts since the 1990s, was perplexing but also a high note for the party. The faith shown by the people demanded that immediate attention be given to the work which needed to be done across different regions of J&K. In Kashmir, people expected him to end the sense of siege; both bureaucratic and with respect to security.

Even since J&K was downgraded and split into the two Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh, both regions remained restive to certain degrees. While in the face of growing agitation in Ladakh, the Centre has agreed to discuss provisions under Article 371, to grant it special status once again, Statehood for J&K remains a distant dream.

Statehood, which may not help in addressing the political aspiration in J&K, remains key for Mr. Abdullah to retain the party's grip over its voters. The first Cabinet meeting in October 2024 passed a resolution which called for the "restoration of Statehood in its original form". After its passage, Mr. Abdullah had met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and presented the Cabinet resolution, which also underscored the J&K government's "dedication to safeguarding the identity and constitutional rights of the region's residents".

However, the cold shoulder shown by the Centre towards the demand for Statehood has visibly depleted the political capital of Mr. Abdullah, whose party lost the bye-elections in Budgam in 2025; the seat was won by Mr. Abdullah in 2024.

Attempt at reinvention

Failing to impress upon the Centre the necessity to engage with the NC on the question of Statehood, the party seems to have resolved to harden its stance. The recent resolution by the party in the J&K Assembly on September 28 on Statehood, with reference to the 1953 special position and the 2000 resolution for greater autonomy, was aimed at hardening the party's position in the face of waning popularity among the masses.

Mr. Abdullah, who consciously chose not to have a confrontational but a working relationship with the Centre, seems to be set on a new path. Moreover, holding a protest at Jantar Mantar on July 20 this year and its growing presence in the INDIA bloc are indicators that Mr. Abdullah is reinventing itself. This has come after his attempts at praising Mr. Modi at public functions as well as on social media yielded little for him in a governance model wherein he does not have a greater say.

Mr. Abdullah's hard posturing, evident in the Assembly where he named the top officials going against him, comes in the backdrop of his balancing act yielding no results. The J&K Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha's complete grip over the police, bureaucracy and universities has marginalised and enervated the Abdullah government as well as his persona. The affront Mr. Abdullah faced at the hands of Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo and Law Secretary Achal Sethi has further dwarfed the Chief Minister's stature. Both the officials, without taking the Chief Minister into confidence, wrote to the Speaker of the J&K Assembly and opposed the government's bid to bring a resolution on Statehood, terming it "*sub judice*".

Two years on, the Transaction of Business rules, essential to determine the powers and limits of the Chief Minister, Council of Ministers and the L-G in the Union Territory remains undecided, with the proposal shuttling between the offices of the Lok Bhavan and the Chief Minister's office.

It seems that Mr. Abdullah's choices remain limited and fraught with repercussions. Batting for Delhi in J&K will result in losing his voter base. On the other hand, attempts at doing what the voters want will result in antagonising the Centre.

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Failing to impress upon the Centre the necessity to engage with the NC on the question of Statehood, the party seems to have resolved to harden its stance

Analysing female labour of the North East States and UTs

While the geography of female labour force participation is changing, it is not at a uniform pace

DATA POINT

Chandrasekar K.

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025 report shows a clear increase in Female Labour Force Participation (FLFPR) since 2019-20. The rise was more pronounced in rural areas, where the percentage increased from 33% to 45.9%, than in urban areas, where it rose from 23.3% to 27.7%. This difference calls for a closer look at the north-eastern States, where female labour force participation is higher, and Union Territories (UTs) to understand how female labour force participation changed in rural and urban areas.

Chart 1 presents the Average Annual Percentage Point (AAPP) change in rural FLFPR for each State between 2019-20 and 2025. It shows that major rural north-eastern States and UTs are above this benchmark. Arunachal Pradesh records the highest increase, at 8.28 percentage points per year, more than three times the all-India benchmark of 2.58. At the other end, FLFPR declined in Delhi and Lakshadweep. The difference between the highest and lowest AAPP is more than 10 percentage points, from +8.28 in Arunachal Pradesh to −2.34 in Lakshadweep. This means that the national average of 2.58 points conceals substantial State-level variation.

Chart 2 shows that Arunachal Pradesh stands out again, with an AAPP of 5.24 points above the all-India urban AAPP of 0.88 pp, followed by Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Chandigarh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Assam, Tripura and J&K. But Puducherry, Ladakh, Delhi and Lakshadweep recorded negative AAPP. The urban range, from +5.24 to −1.30 percentage points, remains considerable, even though the national average is much lower than in rural areas.

The rural all-India AAPP is therefore 1.7 percentage points higher per year than the urban figure. For a statistical analysis, this is important: the national direction and the State-level distribution are two different stories. While the aggregate shows an increase, it does so across the NE States, while the UTs are far more heterogeneous.

However, AAPP alone is insufficient to evaluate the performance of northeastern States and UTs, as it measures only the pace of change and does not consider the level of female labour force participation from which a State started. Therefore, the 2019-20 FLFPR for each State is used as the baseline. Combining the baseline level with the subsequent AAPP provides a more meaningful assessment of whether States are catching up from a lower base, sustaining improvements at higher levels, or making slow progress.

In **Chart 3**, the upper-left portion of the rural scatter contains Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Tripura. These States had an FLFPR below the all-India 2019-20 benchmark but recorded AAPP above the national average, indicating faster improvement, whereas Delhi recorded an AAPP below the all-India average. At the other end, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Andaman & Nicobar and J&K began with their FLFPR above benchmark and recorded AAPP above the national average. This indicates that faster improvement is not confined to States starting from a low base.

Chart 4 shows that in urban areas, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Assam and Tripura started from relatively low baseline levels but recorded AAPP above the all-India average, indicating relatively faster improvement. In contrast, Delhi also started from relatively low levels but recorded below-average AAPP. Among States with relatively higher baselines, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and J&K had above-average AAPP, showing that some States with already higher participation levels continued to make relatively rapid gains.

Measuring the change

The data for the charts were sourced from PLFS 2019 and 2025

The writer is an Indian Statistical Service Officer. Views expressed are personal



CHART 1: The Average Annual Percentage Point change (AAPP) in rural FLFPR for each State between 2019–20 and 2025

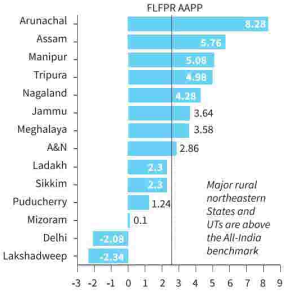


CHART 2: The Average Annual Percentage Point change (AAPP) in urban FLFPR for each State between 2019–20 and 2025

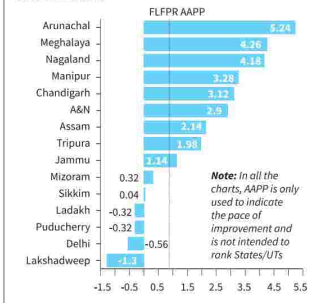


CHART 3: Comparing subsequent AAPP against the 2019-20 LFPR benchmark for rural areas. Cut-off lines represent the corresponding All-India 2019-20 LFPR and AAPP

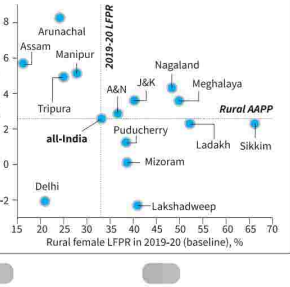
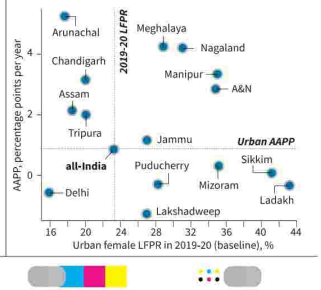


CHART 4: Comparing subsequent AAPP against the 2019-20 LFPR benchmark for urban areas. Cut-off lines represent the corresponding All-India 2019-20 LFPR and AAPP



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 19, 1976

Cyclonic storm likely to cross A.P. coast to-day

Madras, October 18: After four days of incessant rain, the weather in Madras and its suburbs improved to-day, as the cyclonic storm in the Bay which was earlier expected to hit the City changed its course and moved further northwards. It is likely to cross the South Andhra Coast near Masulipatnam to-morrow afternoon.

The North East monsoon which set in over Tamil Nadu on October 15 has in the past four days accounted for 344 mm of rainfall (14 inches) at Nungambakkam and 312 mm (13 inches) at Meenambakkam – about 75 per cent above normal rain at this period of the year. In fact, for the whole of October last year, the City had recorded only 365 mm at Nungambakkam and 422 mm at Meenambakkam.

The storm lay centred at 3:30 p.m. to-day at about 150 kms south south-east of Masulipatnam. It is likely to move in a northerly direction and cross the south Andhra coast near Masulipatnam by to-morrow afternoon, according to a special bulletin to-night.

Widespread rain with scattered heavy to very heavy falls is likely in south coastal Andhra Pradesh during the next 36 hours. Scattered heavy rain is also likely in north coastal Andhra.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 19, 1926

Opium smoking under Govt. auspices

London, October 18: A successful experiment of opening Government opium smoking saloons is mentioned in the Colonial Office report relating to Malaya, recording an increase of 14,00,000 dollars revenue from Chandu monopoly due to extra sales arising out of the influx of immigrants attracted by high wages in tin and rubber estates.

The Chief Secretary to Malay States Government asserts that the success of Government saloons is very encouraging. At the end of last year preparations were made to take over all smoking saloons in Malay States, while a scheme of retail shops was also completed, and the aim of the Government to have all sales of Chandu conducted by Government officers was now achieved. No licences for sale of Chandu will be issued this year.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of Chinese ships involved in 'maritime harassment'

16 Taiwan said on Sunday it had driven away 16 Chinese coast guard, research and fishing vessels involved in simultaneous "maritime harassment" operations. An "unusually large" number of Chinese vessels took part in the operations around Taiwan's main island and Pratas, a disputed island to the southwest, the Taiwanese coast guard said in a statement. AFP

Deaths due to Ebola in Congo since the outbreak

4,536 The Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo has spread to an eighth province, North Ubangi, Congo's public health institute said on Sunday. Latest report showed 67 new confirmed cases and 26 new deaths in the 24 hours to October 16, bringing the total to 9,415 cases and 4,536 deaths. REUTERS

Persons arrested during and after protests in France

1,800 Over 1,800 people were arrested during and after violent protests in France that saw clashes, arson and looting, Interior Minister Laurent Nunez said. The violence in Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux and other cities occurred on the sidelines of demonstrations against high inflation caused in part from the U.S.-Iran war. AFP

Cap on e-rickshaws proposed by govt. under draft scheme

2.5 in lakh. The Delhi government has proposed capping the number of e-rickshaws in the national capital at 2.5 lakh under a draft scheme released on Sunday, citing concerns over traffic congestion, road safety and pollution. The Delhi E-Rickshaw (Registration and Operation) Scheme, 2026 has been opened for public feedback and suggestions. PTI

Number of cancer drugs whose prices will be reduced

137 India will reduce the prices of as many as 137 cancer drugs by 70%, the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers said on Saturday, as it widened price controls in a bid to make treatment more affordable. Trade margins on the drugs will be limited to 30% of the maximum retail price, the Ministry added. REUTERS

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Separation of powers and CJI's refusal

Why did the Opposition seek a meeting with the CJI? What allegations did it raise against the CEC? Why did the CJI refuse the request? What remedies did Rahul Gandhi seek from the Supreme Court? How does separation of powers apply to the case? What does judicial propriety require of judges?

EXPLAINER

Krishnadas Rajagopal

The story so far:

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant declined a request made by Opposition leaders for an audience to discuss allegations against Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar's conduct during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process, alongside detentions of peaceful protestors and the lockdown of arterial Delhi.

The refusal was anchored in the ethos of maintaining a neutral distance from the political thicket. The CJI's letter emphasised that the judiciary cannot blur constitutional lines.

"A short while ago, the One-Nation-One-Election Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) had proposed to meet the judges of the Supreme Court. The leaders of the Bar had questioned how parliamentarians could meet judges when the Bill on simultaneous elections was itself under consideration. The law, which may emanate from the Bill, could one day, down the line, come up before the court in challenge. So, in principle, I don't see how the Chief Justice was wrong in applying the same standard about meeting Mr. Rahul Gandhi as was applied in the instance of the JPC. It is a matter of propriety," senior advocate C.U. Singh said.

Why did the Opposition approach the CJI?

On October 10, the Leaders of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, respectively, wrote to CJI Kant. It marked a rare and historic instance of the Opposition directly engaging the highest judicial office of the country to complain against another constitutional authority, the CEC.

The brief request, submitted on a joint letterhead, stated that the two leaders wished to submit a memorandum to the Chief Justice concerning the CEC and the Election Commission of India. Sent hours after the brutal police crackdown on citizens demanding the resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, the representation said the arbitrary arrest of students, closure of Metro stations, cancellation of trains, and barricading of arterial roads created an "atmosphere of siege in the city of Delhi".

Mr. Gandhi followed up with a second, detailed representation to CJI Kant on October 11. He underscored the Supreme Court's role as the guardian of the Constitution and the fundamental right of every citizen to vote. Writing in his capacity as the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha on behalf of crores of voters anxious about the integrity of the electoral rolls, Mr. Gandhi pointed out that he was also a member of the Selection Committee constituted under Section 7 of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023. He underscored that he had recorded a formal note of dissent on the procedure followed for selecting CEC Kumar during a committee meeting on February 17, 2025.

The representation accused the CEC of an arbitrary and unilateral exercise of power during the SIR. He asked the CJI to treat the representation as a letter petition in the public interest.



GETTY IMAGES

He urged the CJI to direct a complete disclosure of SIR records with the Election Commission and the setting of an independent committee headed by a retired Supreme Court judge to review decisions and audit voter deletions made during SIR to safeguard free and fair elections. He sought an interim suspension of the SIR process itself.

How did the CJI respond?

On October 12, the Chief Justice responded to the October 10 request for a meeting, while omitting any direct reference to Mr. Gandhi's subsequent October 11 representation.

Addressing both Mr. Kharge and Mr. Gandhi and declining their request for an appointment on October 12 between 4 pm and 5 pm to submit a memorandum, the CJI noted that the issues regarding the CEC, the arbitrary arrests, Metro closure and train cancellations, etc., were already sub judice before the court.

The CJI said that, "therefore, convening a meeting to discuss pending cases would wholly contravene the principle of Separation of Powers, an intrinsic facet of the basic structure doctrine of the Constitution of India, and would be incompatible with the established ethics and judicial propriety".

The two-page response also reminded the leaders that the constitutional framework did not vest the Supreme Court with administrative powers to "deal with the issues highlighted in your letter". But the CJI said the Supreme Court was duty-bound on the judicial side to consider the gravamen of issues affecting the citizens of India.

The top judge reiterated in his reply to the Opposition leaders the court's commitment to preserve and protect the fundamental rights of every citizen of India.

Chief Justice Kant said citizens were "entitled to seek enforcement of such rights at all hours through the procedure known in law".

Chief Justice Kant advised the two leaders in his response that it would be "more appropriate on your part to invoke the judicial powers of the Supreme Court of India, instead of submitting a memorandum on the administrative side".

The CJI said that petitions raising parallel issues were listed for hearing on October 13. He said the leader, acting on legal advice, could file their petition on October 12. The CJI observed that the leaders could file their petition on October 12 based on legal advice, assuring that "any such petition shall be heard at the earliest possible opportunity, in accordance with law". A writ petition was subsequently filed by Mr. Gandhi alongside 12 other Opposition leaders, which was successfully registered, numbered, and is primed for a judicial hearing.

What does the law say?

At the heart of the CJI's response lie three factors – the doctrine of separation of powers, sub judice rules and judicial propriety, and the Bangalore Principles.

As Chief Justice Kant's response said, the separation of powers, which divides governance among the three distinct organs of the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary, was an unalterable part of the basic structure of the Constitution. The court functions as an impartial arbiter with a clear mandate to adjudicate disputes impartially, apply laws, and review executive or legislative actions only through established judicial proceedings. The judiciary did not hold executive or administrative oversight to unilaterally intervene in government policy or governance demands.

A parallel out-of-court meeting between the Chief Justice, who also happens to lead the Bench hearing the CEC-related cases and Opposition leaders, belies fair play and bypasses procedural fairness. Entertaining political factions on a one-to-one basis outside the courtroom compromises judicial impartiality and creates an impression of bias. Disputes must be settled in the open court, transparently, in proceedings in which opposing parties get an equal say in accordance with the principles of natural justice.

The Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct puts in place ethical benchmarks for judges, which include that they must avoid any act of impropriety which would compromise the public's perception of judicial neutrality.

When has judicial propriety come under scrutiny?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2024 visit to the residence of then Chief Justice of India, Justice Dhananjay Chandrachud, to perform pooja during Ganesh Chaturthi drew public criticism over perceptions of the executive and judiciary cosying up. Historical precedents of serving judges expressing admiration for political figures include Justice P.N. Bhagwati sending a congratulatory letter to Indira Gandhi upon her return to power, and Justice M.R. Shah reportedly describing Prime Minister Modi as a "model and a hero". Similarly, former Supreme Court judge Arun Mishra had sparked controversy by publicly describing Prime Minister Modi as a "versatile genius" and an "internationally acclaimed visionary who can think global and act locally".

On a separate occasion, Prime Minister Modi visited the Supreme Court premises at the invitation of then-CJI Ranjan Gogoi on the sidelines of a BIMSTEC conference. Justice Gogoi was nominated to the Rajya Sabha following his retirement. Incidentally, Justice Gogoi was one of the four senior Supreme Court judges who held the unprecedented January 2018 press conference, spotlighting concerns over executive influence in case allocations under then Chief Justice Dipak Misra.

History shows that political friction with the judiciary carries 'unsettling' consequences. Following the landmark *Kesavananda Bharati* judgment, which established the basic structure doctrine limiting Parliament's amending powers, Indira Gandhi's government superseded Justices J.M. Shelat, K.S. Hegde and A.N. Grover to appoint Justice A.N. Ray as Chief Justice of India. The move triggered the immediate resignation of the three superseded judges.

Decades later, the imperative to insulate judicial appointments from executive overreach had culminated in the Collegium system and the adoption of the Bangalore Principles.

THE GIST

- The CJI refused to meet Opposition leaders Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge over allegations against the CEC during the SIR, citing separation of powers and judicial propriety
- He advised them to seek judicial remedies, noting that the issues were already before the court and that the Supreme Court could hear petitions to enforce citizens' fundamental rights
- Past controversies involving judges and political leaders show concerns over judicial neutrality and the need to insulate the judiciary from executive influence

FULL CONTEXT

After a decade of disruption, Pattanam needs a renewed vision

Pattanam's archaeological discoveries reveal an ancient settlement connected to a vast network, but the wider research and educational programme was disrupted; reviving it could transform Pattanam into a global centre for multidisciplinary research, learning and community participation

P.J. Cherian

Beneath an apparently ordinary village on the Periyar delta in southwestern India lies an archaeological record linking the eastern and western Indian Ocean worlds – from the Atlantic shores of western Europe to the South China Sea opening to the Pacific.

That village is Pattanam, near North Paravur in Ernakulam district, Keralam.

Houses, shops, tarred roads, pathways, a government primary school, a couple of hospitals, coconut groves and waterbodies now occupy much of this coastal landscape. Beneath it, however, lies evidence that has changed our understanding of Keralam's early history and the maritime world of the Indian Ocean and beyond.

The archaeological evidence broadly dates to between 300 BCE and 300 CE, with particularly substantial evidence from 100 BCE to 300 CE. Structures, pottery, beads, metals, coins, biological and geological remains, industrial and workshop contexts, and a harbour complex with a wooden canoe dated between 100 BCE and 100 CE have been scientifically documented.

Materials from South Asia, West Asia, the Red Sea, Africa and the Mediterranean have been found alongside evidence of the movement of people, goods, technologies and ideas across considerable distances.

The evidence suggests that Pattanam was part of the maritime world conventionally associated with Muziris, or Muciri Pattinam. Whether the entire ancient port can be identified with present-day Pattanam remains an open archaeological question.

This is one reason the excavation and scientific investigation of Pattanam must resume.



The idea is to build a global research and learning community that grows from the landscape. FILE PHOTO

What did the research reveal?

Excavations and explorations beginning in 2006-07 gradually transformed what initially appeared to be an ordinary archaeological mound into an international multidisciplinary research laboratory.

Between 2006 and 2023, 67 trenches were excavated, yielding around 1.3 lakh registered artefacts and nearly 45 lakh pottery fragments. Yet less than 1% of the archaeological mound, which extends over more than 100 acres, has been excavated.

The discoveries were important not merely because of their quantity. Structures, urban features such as toilet facilities and water-drawing wells, industrial remains, artefacts and environmental evidence together point to a highly connected settlement.

Pattanam emerged not as an isolated site in Keralam, or simply as a centre of Keralam-Roman trade, but as a node in a much wider network spanning the ancient world.

The Periyar and the river systems between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea were central to this story. Recent studies have identified nearly 51,800 rainforest islands, together with the human geographical landscapes represented by the Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Paalai and Neithal thinai traditions.

Pattanam occupied an ancient river-mouth landscape connected to the Western Ghats, their forests and resources. Through the Periyar, the Palakkad Gap and the Vaigai basin, the western coast was linked to the eastern seaboard and, beyond it, to the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea and the South China Sea.

Archaeological parallels link Pattanam with sites extending from Corbridge in England in the west to Hepu in southern China in the east, and from Tissamaharama in Sri Lanka in the south to Kopia, near the India-Nepal border, in the north, close to the Lumbini-Kapilavastu region.

The first decade of research brought together an extraordinary range of institutions and specialists. Universities and research institutions including Oxford, Georgia, Rome, Durham, UCL, the Palace Museum in Beijing and the British Museum in London, together with several others in Europe, North America, Asia and India, participated in different aspects of the work.

Researchers, scientists, students and the local community worked together with specialists in archaeology, art, architecture, history, anthropology, geology, genetics, physics, petrography, environmental science, linguistics, epigraphy, literature, conservation, museum studies, photography and other fields. Pattanam thus became a place where scholars from different parts of the world could come together to investigate a shared human past.

International research scholarships were conceived. An interdisciplinary residential Diploma programme was launched at Pattanam in 2015. Plans were developed for multipurpose scientific laboratories, advanced libraries, archaeological and heritage interpretation, a Children's Museum, household museums and other forms of public engagement.

There were also attempts to connect archaeology with the life of the contemporary village.

The idea was that heritage should not become something imposed upon Pattanam from outside. The local community, its landscape, ecology and everyday life had to remain part of the story. This included initiatives in Green Archaeology, entrepreneurial ventures, responsible tourism, environmental awareness, local participation and heritage-sensitive development.

The goal was to develop Pattanam as a model site where archaeology, science, education, environment, professional opportunities and the people of Pattanam could exist in a living relationship.

The decade-long interruption

After a decade of excavation and research, the programme was disrupted in 2016.

Several initiatives were stopped, interrupted or left unrealised. The international residential diploma did not continue. The Children's Museum and scholarship programme were discontinued. Plans for an $8 million multipurpose archaeo-science laboratory associated with the Palace Museum in Beijing did not materialise. The proposed in-situ museum around the ancient harbour complex, including the six-metre wooden canoe, and the Muziris Museum also remained unfinished.

A programme for purchasing archaeologically significant plots from local landowners had resulted in the purchase of more than eight acres, but did not continue.

Other plans – for an archaeological park, advanced library, academic campus, interpretation centres and community-oriented facilities – likewise remained incomplete or were not pursued further.

The result was an unfortunate gap in the continuous development of Pattanam research between 2016 and 2026.

The important question now is how the research and allied activities can be resumed.

The establishment of the PAMA Institute for the Advancement of Transdisciplinary Archaeological Sciences in 2018 was an attempt to keep the intellectual and scientific enquiry alive.

PAMA (paternal and maternal ancestry) grew out of a broader intellectual vision shaped by scholars such as Romila Thapar, K.N. Panikkar and R.V.G. Menon, as well as the international network of scholars involved in Pattanam research.

PAMA's purpose was to maintain a space in which archaeology could converse with history, anthropology, genetics, geology, environmental studies, conservation and other disciplines, and where evidence could continue to be questioned and explored through field research and internships.

PAMA subsequently obtained excavation permissions from the Archaeological Survey of India for 2019-20 and 2021-22.

With self-generated resources, six further trenches – 62 to 67 – were excavated at Pattanam between 2020 and 2023. It also undertook nearly a dozen trial trenches at Mathilakam in 2019 and conducted explorations in Idukki district in 2022.

The excavations at Pattanam also produced remarkable discoveries, including a head statue identified as the Roman Emperor Domitian, and a ring-stone resembling the Greek sphinx, identified by specialists as closely related to early Roman imperial ring-stone traditions.

PAMA helped keep that wider research network alive until 2023.

Reimagining Pattanam

Pattanam sits within an archaeological landscape that brings together evidence of people speaking, trading and living across nearly forty linguistic and cultural worlds between approximately 300 BCE and 300 CE. Why should the response to such a place be limited to another excavation office or a conventional museum?

Could Pattanam eventually become a Viswa Bharathi of the 21st century, a living centre where archaeology, history, anthropology, genetics, geology, environmental science, conservation, technology, literature, languages and the arts intersect?

The idea is not to transplant a conventional university onto an archaeological site, but to build a global research and learning community that grows organically from the landscape and works in partnership with its people.

Such an institution could bring researchers and students from India and abroad into sustained engagement with Pattanam's archaeological record and its living environment. The ancient harbour, canoe, workshops, pottery, metals and biological remains would serve not merely as exhibits, but as starting points for exploring human mobility, technology, ecology, trade, language and social life. The village and the Periyar's changing landscape would be integral to this process, offering opportunities to study how communities and environments have evolved.

A Viswabharathi of 21st century

An autonomous Pattanam Heritage Authority could provide an appropriate institutional framework. Its distant ambition could be much larger: a 21st-century Viswa Bharathi at Pattanam/Muziris – a global centre of multidisciplinary research and learning rooted in a Keralam village and in the extraordinary human connections preserved beneath it.

The Pattanam archaeological record belongs to the people who lived there 2,000 years ago, to those who live there today, and to generations yet to come.

(P. J. Cherian is Director of Pattanam Excavations and Explorations, 2006-2023)

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

A quiz on traditions and festivities surrounding Durga Puja, Navaratri and Dussehra

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
According to the Navaratri Puja Paddhati, what are the first, fifth, and ninth manifestations of Goddess Durga when she is worshipped consecutively during the nine nights of Navaratri?

QUESTION 2
What is the name of the auspicious occasion that announces the beginning of Devi Paksha and precedes the main Durga Puja celebrations?

QUESTION 3
Which three figures are commonly represented by the large effigies burnt during Dussehra celebrations in North India?

QUESTION 4
What UNESCO honour was given to Durga Puja in Kolkata in 2021?

QUESTION 5
What is the traditional display of dolls during Navaratri called in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka?

QUESTION 6
Which puja marks the exact moment when Goddess Durga assumes her fierce form of Chamunda to slay Chanda and Munda?



Visual Question:
Name this legendary tusker, which turned 60 in April this year, that has been granted special permission to participate in 'Jamboo Savari' in Mysuru this year. M. A. SRIRAM

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. A revolutionary party was founded on this day in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. It was known for challenging police brutality, among other things. Identify the party and where it was founded. **Ans: Black Panther Party and Oakland, California**

2. The final conference for a treaty to keep this continent free for scientific study was held on this day in 1959. Chile was one of the signatories. Is the statement true, and name the treaty? **Ans: Yes, and the Antarctic Treaty**

3. On this day, China became the third country to send a manned spaceflight. Identify the astronaut who was on the spaceflight. **Ans: Yang Liwei**

4. A 1987 coup in this West African country led to the death of a far-left leader and President. The coup was led by his former friend and close ally. Name the country. **Ans: Burkina Faso**

5. A symbol of bare-knuckle boxing, this boxer was one of the most popular heavyweight champions of his era. He was born on October 15, 1858. Name him. **Ans: John L. Sullivan**

Visual: This popular American show, which premiered on this day in 1951, went on to become a very popular show and bagged five Emmy awards. Name the actors who played the starring roles. **Ans: Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz**

Early Birds: Sonali Das | Tom Alan Faith | Sukdev Shet | Arun Kumar Singh | Prodosh Mitra



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Don't take umbrage at my remark

When I was young, I could sing like a bird

S. Upendran

"How was your trip to Mysore?"

"Had a great time. Mysore is a great place to be during Dusheera. By the way, how many syllables does u...m...b...r...a...g...e have?"

"Two syllables. The first rhymes with 'come', 'sum' and 'hum'. The second syllable is pronounced like the word 'bridge'. The word is pronounced 'um-BRIDGE' with the stress on the second syllable. Do you know what the word means?"

"Doesn't it mean being angry or unhappy about something?"

"When you take umbrage at what someone has said, you are upset or annoyed about it. You feel that person hasn't given you the respect that you deserve."

"Wanting respect? That's a bit much."

"Here's an example. It's difficult being a teacher nowadays. Students take umbrage at everything you say or do."

"That's true. How about this example? If you don't invite Sunita to your house-warming ceremony, she'll take umbrage, and stop talking to you."

"That's a good example. Remember, you always 'take umbrage' at something. I take umbrage at your remark that I only help girls who are pretty."

"What are you talking about?"

"That was just another example. Don't take umbrage at what I said."

"I understand there have been a string of burglaries in your neighbourhood"

"The good news is that the thief has been caught, and has been singing like a bird..."

"Singing like a bird? Why would anyone sing when they're in a police station?"

"The informal expression 'to sing like a bird' has two very different meanings."

"One of them is fairly obvious. When you say that someone sings like a bird, it means the person sings beautifully. He or she has a great voice."

"That's exactly what it means. When I was young, I could sing like a bird."

"I seriously doubt that! My aunt Sharadha can sing like a bird. How's that?"

"Which bird?"

"Peacock. I know that to sing like a crow means to sing terribly. A crow, as everyone knows, has a terrible voice."

"That's right! A peacock may look beautiful, but the bird is not known for its ability to sing. Here's an example. Don't make the mistake of teaming up with Ashwin. He is very enthusiastic, but unfortunately, he sings like a crow."

"I wanted to learn Carnatic music when I was young, But after the first class, the teacher said that I sang like a peacock. Now tell me, what is the second meaning of 'sing like a bird'?"

"When you sing like a bird to the police or anybody in authority for that matter, you tell them everything you know about something."

"In other words, you pass on secret information about others. You inform them about the illegal activities going on."

"Very good!"

upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Vitriolic:
harsh or corrosive in tone

Synonyms: abusive, insulting, outrageous, obscene

Usage: *His vitriolic remarks upset everyone.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/vitriolic

International Phonetic Alphabet: /vɪtrɪɒlɪk/

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

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The new Cold War is in the sky
— *Nishant Sahdev*
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We won't have a society if we destroy the environment.
— *Margaret Mead*

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IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Long-term positives, short-term challenges

THAT BLACKSTONE wants to double its investment in India to $100 billion over five years is significant. It suggests that the world's largest alternative asset manager — with $1.3 trillion-plus investments in private equity and credit, real estate and infrastructure — takes a long-term view of India, "as the fastest-growing major economy for many decades to come". Its COO Jonathan Gray credits India for having a strong and liquid capital market, making it "the easiest place to list a company" after the US. A similar long-term perspective — overlooking downsides such as the country's energy import dependence, currently overvalued stock markets, and limited foundational AI and chip manufacturing capabilities — also explains Prem Watsa's Fairfax Financial Holdings's successful $5.6-billion bid to acquire a 60.7 per cent stake in IDBI Bank.

That long view is both encouraging and compelling. The formalisation of the Indian economy alongside financialisation of household savings, investments in physical and digital infrastructure, and a four-fold expansion in total installed renewable energy capacity to nearly 300 gigawatts under the Narendra Modi government are impressive achievements. Among other things, they have boosted economic productivity by enabling more efficient flows of goods, services and savings. Take capital markets. In 2013-14 and 2014-15, a mere Rs 11,681 crore and Rs 17,056 crore were raised by companies through new capital issues of equity shares and bonds/debentures. In 2024-25 and 2025-26, those numbers were at Rs 2,18,339 crore and Rs 2,46,215 crore respectively. The increased liquidity and broadening of the investor base in India has made it possible for the likes of Blackstone to fund startups, real estate or infrastructure development projects, grow these investments and eventually exit via IPOs. For investors, whether foreign or domestic, ease of exit matters as much as entry — which India's robust public markets today allow.

Persuasive though the long-term "structural" story may be, India cannot brush aside the immediate challenges from elevated global energy prices and soaring bond yields. A lot of foreign capital flows into India in recent times has been courtesy of low interest rates in advanced economies. That era of cheap global money has largely ended. It makes financing of external current account as well as domestic fiscal deficits all the more difficult — and reason enough why policymakers must double down on macroeconomic stability and unfinished reforms, especially in agriculture and market-distorting subsidies. India, according to Prime Minister Modi, offers "reliability and stability" in a world full of uncertainties. Retaining investor trust is key to fulfilling that claim.

In Kolkata tragedy, a difficult reckoning

EVERY DURGA Puja, Kolkata shows up at its most encompassing and generous, stepping out of daily drudgery to celebrate faith, art, and the joy of communal celebration. The tragedy at Chorbagan Sarbojanin Durga Puja in north Kolkata, where a crowd surge on a rain-soaked evening claimed at least 19 lives and injured at least 25 others, has cast a tragic shadow over this annual ritual. Preliminary accounts suggest that a sudden downpour, narrow lanes, inadequate presence of police and civic volunteers, dim lighting inside the pandal and a poorly-worded announcement that triggered panic turned a festive gathering into a catastrophe. The details await a thorough investigation. But for the families who went pandal-hopping and returned without their loved ones, the festival has been broken into a before and an after — a celebration interrupted by the sudden, senseless extinguishing of cherished lives.

Grief must, in time, give way to a difficult reckoning. Kolkata is no stranger to the challenges of managing the immense crowds that the festival attracts, and this year's safety guidelines included fire-retardant fabrics, accessible firefighting equipment, separate entry and exit gates, and unobstructed access for emergency vehicles. Yet Chorbagan is a reminder that preparedness must extend beyond formal safeguards to the less predictable dangers of congestion, sudden panic and restricted movement. North Kolkata's narrow, heritage lanes are integral to its character, but leave little room for error when thousands converge on a single pandal. In 2015, at the opposite end of the city, in Deshapriya Park, for instance, an 88-ft Durga idol, supposedly the world's tallest, had drawn overwhelming crowds, creating a near-stampede-like situation. Immediate police intervention had stopped public access to the venue, averting a potential tragedy. In 2021, a similar tragedy had been averted at Sreebhumi Sporting Club, where a replica of Dubai's Burj Khalifa had drawn large crowds. Such episodes underscore the need for swift, decisive action when unforeseen circumstances threaten to overtake crowd-control measures.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, arrests have been made, the state has announced a committee to review crowd management and structural safety at major venues. Police have restricted access to several prominent pandals as a precaution and the Centre has announced compensation for bereaved families. These are necessary steps. But the broader lesson of the tragedy is that organisers and officials must plan not only for the expected, but also for moments when ordinary arrangements break down. This year's celebrations will leave behind an absence in homes where the festival should have brought joy. Nothing can undo that loss. Better preparedness can at least ensure that the memory of Chorbagan becomes a reason for greater vigilance and care.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, test for Imran Khan's PTI, harder one for Islamabad



TILAK DEVASHER

THE IMPOSITION of emergency and governor's rule in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) on October 11 is being presented by Islamabad primarily as a response to the deteriorating security situation and the provincial government's failure to confront terrorism. However, beneath the narrative lies a much larger issue that will determine the fate of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), the province and the federal government itself. It is whether the PTI can mobilise effectively and survive without the machinery of the province versus whether the Centre can actually tame terrorism now that it has assumed control over KPK.

The federal government has taken the most consequential step available to it short of direct military rule. Emergency has been imposed under Article 232 and governor's rule under Article 234 of the Constitution. The move follows weeks of confrontation between Islamabad and the PTI government in KPK over a "long march" to secure the release of its incarcerated leader, Imran Khan. Islamabad has justified the intervention by citing a sharp increase in terrorist attacks and what it describes as the provincial government's "deliberate disengagement" from the fight against terrorism. The timing, however, is revealing. The gathering momentum of the PTI's "long march" to Islamabad provided the immediate political backdrop.

KPK has been the PTI's stronghold for 13 years. Its importance to the party has never been merely electoral. Control of the government provided the PTI with an administrative structure, political legitimacy, and, importantly, a territorial base from which to organise resistance to the federal government — and a lifeline for the imprisoned Imran Khan. The removal of that machinery, therefore, presents the party with its most serious organisational and political test.

The PTI has demonstrated repeatedly that Imran Khan retains a substantial popular following. Yet, there is a distinction between possessing a large vote bank and being able to convert it into sustained street mobilisation. Thus, the PTI has had considerable difficulty in translating its support in Punjab into durable street power. Whether the KPK will prove different is now the critical question.

The biggest handicap for the PTI has been that an insecure government (read: The army) has choked off access to Imran Khan. Yet it was able to sustain itself by retaining KPK. Removing the government, therefore, removes the institutional scaffolding around which the PTI survived. The test for the PTI would, therefore, be whether it can continue to bring people onto the streets without the provincial government. If it can, it will demonstrate that its strength is genuine rather than administrative. If it cannot, the Centre will have succeeded in demonstrating that PTI's political reach is considerably narrower once stripped of state power.

> The PTI has demonstrated that Imran Khan retains a substantial following. Yet there is a distinction between possessing a large vote bank and being able to convert it into sustained street mobilisation

But this is only half the equation. The much harder test is for Islamabad.

For years, Pakistan's central problem in KPK has been the persistence and expansion of terrorism, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) Pakistan. The federal government has now removed the principal political obstacle it says was preventing a more coherent counter-terrorism policy. The army has been authorised to deploy in aid of civil power, while the Centre will now exercise much greater administrative and security control, particularly in the terrorism-affected districts. This creates a simple but unforgiving yardstick for success.

If terrorism declines, Islamabad will be able to argue that the resistance of the PTI government had indeed impeded the fight against militancy. If, however, terrorism continues unabated or increases, the Centre's narrative will fall flat. The PTI would then be able to argue that the problem was never provincial governance in the first place. It will be interesting to see what kind of a muscular strategy the federal government adopts in the province.

Any kinetic approach will carry risks. Terrorism in KPK is not simply a law-and-order problem. It is embedded in the geography of the border, the unresolved Durand Line issue, the situation in Afghanistan, tribal networks on both sides of the Durand Line and the continuing contest between Kabul and Islamabad. Military control of territory is one thing; eliminating the ecosystem that sustains militancy is quite another. Pakistan has tried it in the past and failed. That is why the Centre's intervention will be judged by whether it can make the province safer.

There is also a larger federal question. KP is overwhelmingly Pashtun. Islamabad will, therefore, have to avoid allowing the political contest with the PTI to acquire an ethnic or provincial character. If Pashtun alienation deepens, it could be dangerous and invite comparisons with East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

Islamabad has gambled big. In its anxiety to foil the PTI's "long march" that was gathering a lot of steam, it decided to use its constitutional power to get rid of the provincial government. If, however, the PTI can demonstrate that its power comes from the people and not merely from its control of provincial institutions, Islamabad would have lost the gamble. Equally, if Islamabad is not able to get a handle on the security situation, it would prove the PTI's point, lay itself open to the charge of trampling provincial rights and also unleash the ethnic genie.

The writer is former special secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, and former member, National Security Advisory Board. Views are personal

Congress blames pitch, ball, umpire for own poor batting



JAIVEER SHERGILL

A BAD workman always blames his tools," goes the proverb. In politics, a bad loser blames the umpire. Every defeat has a cause and every cause demands introspection. Yet, instead of asking why voters keep turning away from his party, Rahul Gandhi has chosen to put the Election Commission of India (ECI), once again, in the dock. His latest agitation against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and a demand for the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar raises a simple question: Does the Congress have the moral locus standi to lecture anyone on the independence of the poll body?

The Congress's patronage-loaded record with the ECI is a textbook lesson in how not to treat a constitutional institution. Time and again, those who presided over elections were rewarded after retirement. K V K Sundaram, the second CEC, went on to chair the Law Commission and was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan. R K Trivedi was made Governor of Gujarat and conferred the Padma Bhushan. M S Gill, CEC from 1996 to 2001, entered the Rajya Sabha on a Congress ticket and went on to serve as a minister in the UPA government. Even T N Seshan contested the 1999 Lok Sabha election on a Congress ticket. J M Lyngdoh, who served as CEC from 2001 to 2004, joined the Congress after retirement. The line between referee and player was not merely blurred; it was erased.

In the context of the present bogey of "vote deletion", the Congress's somersault on bogus voters is striking and the numbers speak for themselves. In August 2018, the party alleged 42 lakh duplicate names in Rajasthan's rolls; 41.85 lakh names have now been dropped from the SIR draft roll. In September 2018, the top Congress leadership flagged nearly 50 lakh duplicate voters in Andhra Pradesh, while the AICC claimed about 70 lakh wrong entries in Telangana. Today, 44.28 lakh names are under scrutiny in Andhra Pradesh, and 73.39 lakh have been dropped from Telangana's draft roll. In 2021, Ramesh Chennithala flagged 4.34 lakh bogus or multiple voters in Kerala; the final list now carries 8.57 lakh deletions. Even Jawhar Sircar of the Trinamool Congress spoke of over 90 lakh fake voters in West Bengal.

The pattern is unmistakable. When errors exist, elections are "rigged by fake voters". When the Commission cleans the rolls, the exercise becomes a "political attack". Congress cannot demand the surgery and then complain about the scar.

The current protest, in vintage Rahul Gandhi style, rests on falsehoods. The most blatant and the most mischievous is the claim that 13 crore voters have been arbitrarily "deleted". The breakup tells a very different story: About 2.8 crore dead voters, 3 crore absent or untraceable, 6.3 crore permanently shifted and 1 crore duplicates. Final action follows only after the process of claims, objections and appeals.

There is also a fundamental legal question. Rahul Gandhi promised in November 2025 to provide proof of "vote chori". Yet on October 12, 2026, he demanded that the government and ECI prove that no such theft occurred. That turns the burden of proof upside down. The elementary principle is that the person making an allegation must substantiate it.

Did the Congress win Karnataka, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh through "vote *chori*"? Did the UDF sweep Kerala this year on rolls revised through the very SIR he now condemns? Did AAP win Punjab, or did Vijay's Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) break Tamil Nadu's Dravidian duopoly through vote theft? Does "vote *chori*" become a conspiracy only when Congress loses, but democracy when Congress wins?

> Did the Congress win Karnataka, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh through 'vote chori'? Did the UDF sweep Kerala this year on rolls revised through the very SIR he now condemns?

More troubling are reported references by Rahul Gandhi's "comrade" Prashant Bhushan to "regime change", and by Neha Bora to inspiration from Bangladesh's recent turmoil. If these remarks reflect the protest's objectives, the question is unavoidable: Is the aim to protect democracy or to replace the ballot with street pressure? The ballot, not the barricade, must determine who governs India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wins elections through dedication to the people. Gas connections, piped water, bank accounts, pucca homes and free rations have reached crores of households, and voters have chosen delivery over drama. The Congress must learn the difference between "vote chori" and "voter rejection". Instead of remaining in protest mode, it needs to shift to introspection mode. Until it does, Rahul Gandhi will remain the batsman who blames the pitch, the ball and the umpire: Everything except his own batting.

The writer is a Supreme Court lawyer and BJP national spokesperson

India should stop counting its AI chips, focus on results



ARINDAM GOSWAMI

THE GOVERNMENT recently told the Lok Sabha that the IndiaAI Mission had sanctioned 93 lakh hours of chip time for 237 projects. When the Chinese lab DeepSeek built its V3 model, it needed about 2.8 million hours of similar chip time. India has already sanctioned about three times that. Sarvam, a Bengaluru start-up, was given 4,096 Nvidia H100 chips for six months. DeepSeek trained V3 on half that many chips, in under two months.

Sarvam did deliver something commendable. Its models were built from scratch in India, and the company says the larger one holds up against open models that OpenAI and Alibaba released in 2025. But it is also behind the best by quite a margin: chips cannot explain this difference. Renting more chips abroad is possible, but it depends on decisions in Washington. In 2025, Bloomberg reported that the US was drafting curbs on chip shipments to Malaysia and Thailand. Takshashila's research finds that new technology tends to spread within a few years, which limits how long such curbs last. Planning around them is unwise.

Building a model is only the first stage. Then comes the job of making it useful: Answering a legal question correctly, advising a farmer, writing a medical note in Marathi. These tasks require fewer chips, although it could be for more runs. These jobs need people who know the subject, and tasks whose answers can be marked right or wrong. Such a set of tasks, with a marking scheme, is what is called a reinforcement learning environment. One example is a bail application drafted by the model and checked against a list written by senior advocates. India has such people in courts, hospitals, farm universities, language institutions, etc. Meta paid $14.3 billion for 49 per cent of Scale AI, a company that supplies this kind of data. Importantly, chip export rules generally don't apply to this kind of work.

India should stop counting chips and start asking for results. One large block of chips could be held back for month-long runs and given to the teams whose models score best on Indian-language and subject tests. Second, it is important to pay experts to write the tasks and marking schemes, publish them, and let any Indian lab use them. The cost for this should be small next to the mission's Rs 10,372 crore. The best free models trail the paid leaders by only about four months, according to Epoch AI. India can use them as they are. Its own money is better spent on what nobody else will build: AI that understands Indian law, medicine, farming and languages, and proof that it does.

On hardware, it is a good strategy for India to bypass the tightly controlled chokepoints. Accelerators and lithography run the risk of being closed by export controls, often on a whim. But the packaging and assembly layers of the supply chain are fragmented and have no export controls generally pointed at them. India has a few operating packaging plants already. Deepening that, particularly towards memory packaging with Micron at Sanand, is a more winnable aim than a leading-edge fab.

India could also convene the countries the US AI diffusion rule effectively invented before it was scrapped — those with capital and engineers but no advanced fab; they buy a lot of compute. If this can be combined with open-weight models, a good hedge one could get is to keep national mirrors of significant open-weight releases across these countries. That provides availability and clustering advantages.

> India's money is better spent on what nobody else will build: AI that understands Indian law, medicine, farming and languages, and proof that it does

The writer is research analyst, high-technology geopolitics programme, Takshashila Institution

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



40 YEARS AGO

October 19, 1986



PM blames big businesses

THE PRIME Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, criticised big business houses in India for not making any efforts to boost exports. On the contrary, small entrepreneurs had shown remarkable enterprise in this direction, he said. Addressing members of the Indian community at Auckland at the end of his three-day visit, Rajiv Gandhi said the government would give all possible assistance to the small-scale sector to help them make their products more competitive and achieve higher standards of quality. At this juncture, the country needed to build up its foreign exchange reserves and capture markets for its products abroad. Unfortunately, big business was not doing anything in this direction.

US not to deport illegal aliens

THE US Congress has passed the most far-reaching immigration bill in 20 years, lifting the threat of deportation for aliens who smuggled themselves into the US or overstayed before January 1, 1982 and have been staying in the United States illegally since. The bill, however, also includes stringent restrictions on employers who hire illegal aliens hereafter, and stricter supervision of the border.

Three shot dead in Punjab

UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS shot dead three persons in Punjab — Jathedar Kirpal Singh, an Akali Dal activist, a school teacher and the son of a Congress-I leader — while three suspected terrorists were arrested during the last 24 hours. The jathedar was shot dead near a tube-well outside the Naushehra Pannuan village, 40 km from Amritsar.

BJP seeks government's reply

EVEN AS the national executive of the Bharatiya Janata Party continued discussions on the proposed chargesheet on the two years of "misrule" by the Rajiv Gandhi government, the former party president, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, demanded that the Government make its position clear regarding the specific allegations made by P C Sethi against Rajiv Gandhi and Madhavrao Scindia in an interview to a Bombay weekly.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
As AI becomes more capable, human advisers must find new ways to prove their worth.
— Financial Times

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Washington's Russia pivot is geopolitical shift, carries message for India-US deal



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

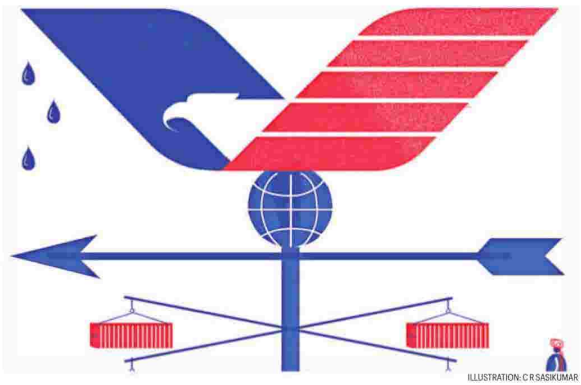


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

IN LESS than a month, Washington has threatened buyers of Russian energy, became a buyer itself, and then put the punishment on hold. For India, these reversals carry consequences for both energy security and trade talks.

On September 18, Washington enacted the Graham sanctions law, threatening countries including India with additional tariffs of up to 100 per cent for buying Russian oil. On October 9, faced with rising fuel prices at home, US President Donald Trump struck a deal with President Vladimir Putin to buy Russian diesel. Punishing others for buying Russian energy would then invite charges of hypocrisy. On October 16, Trump waived the penalties without specifying how long the relief would last.

With the penalties suspended, India can continue buying Russian oil for now. But the tariff threat remains, and Washington may use it to pressure India into an unequal trade deal.

The policy reversal began with rising fuel prices at home. US retail diesel prices rose 66.5 per cent in a year, from about $3.71 a gallon in October 2025 to $6.18–$6.20 in October 2026. Diesel powers trucks, farm machinery and industrial supply chains, so higher costs raise grocery and other consumer prices. Heating bills add pressure ahead of winter, while voter anger threatens Republicans before the midterm elections.

Under the deal, Russia would supply 3,00,000 tonnes immediately, 5,00,000 tonnes in November and 1 million tonnes soon after. Total shipments could reach 4.8 million tonnes.

In return, Russia gained sanctions relief until April 7, 2027, allowing sales in global markets and potentially earning dollars for Russian oil producers, including Rosneft and Lukoil. Washington threatens others for buying Russian energy but makes an exception when its own economy needs relief.

SpaceX's Starlink and Starshield restrictions also need to be factored in. Ukrainian troops reported disconnections at speeds above 100 mph, disrupting interceptor and attack drone missions. Elon Musk has said commercial Starlink serves civilian and defensive purposes, while Starshield is operated under US government oversight. Yet the restrictions also hindered drones defending Ukraine against Russian attacks.

Ukraine and European allies have sharply criticised the US-Russia diesel deal. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has warned that sanctions relief without lasting de-escalation would legitimise Moscow and finance its war. European leaders have argued that the move undermines sanctions and weakens their leverage in negotiations.

Coming back to India, recent statements from both sides suggest an interim India–US trade agreement under the February 6 Joint Statement may be nearing completion.

On October 1, United States Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said that talks were "in the short strokes". The same day, commerce minister Piyush Goyal expressed hope for an early interim agreement. On October 5, Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said talks had reached a "plateau" and further concessions would be "very, very difficult". On October 14, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said negotiations were "pretty far advanced" and "heading towards a landing point".

> Escaping a threatened 100 per cent penalty is no special favour when most competitors without a trade deal face normal duties plus 10 per cent or 12.5 per cent

These remarks suggest much of the negotiating work is complete. Sitharaman's warning points to little room for Indian concessions beyond the February 6 framework, while Goyal and Jaishankar signal a desire to close the deal.

Latest reports suggest the agreement is being legally drafted. It could be signed once the US agrees to give Indian goods a tariff advantage over competing countries. The timing and final terms remain uncertain.

The central obstacle is this: What tariff is Washington offering? The February 6 framework proposed cutting the US reciprocal tariff from 25 per cent to 18 per cent in return for major Indian concessions. But the US Supreme Court struck down those tariffs on February 20, removing the legal basis for that offer. India's proposed concessions remained on the table, while the promised US benefit became unclear.

Washington then imposed a 10 per cent forced-labour tariff under Section 301. The Graham sanctions law authorises tariffs of up to 100 per cent on countries such as India buying Russian energy. Despite the October 16 waiver, India faces an existing additional duty and a larger potential penalty without knowing which duties an agreement would remove.

Unlike most of its competitors, India faces the threat of US penalty tariffs for importing Russian oil. China, for instance, is shielded from new bilateral tariffs until January 2027 under the Busan Agreement. India needs to know the final US duties on its goods compared with those on competing countries. Talks had stalled without those figures. This was the stalemate until the US signed its own diesel deal with Russia and issued a temporary waiver on October 16.

Despite the waiver, the threat of new tariffs for buying oil from Russia may help the US make a clearer offer to India. Washington could exempt India from Russian-oil penalties for a longer period while retaining the 10 per cent Section 301 duty, alongside normal most-favoured-nation tariffs, in return for accepting the February 6 terms. India could continue buying Russian oil.

This would clarify the US tariff offer, but there is a problem. Escaping a threatened 100 per cent penalty is no special favour when most competitors without a trade deal face normal duties plus 10 per cent or 12.5 per cent — and when the US itself is buying Russian diesel.

The February framework required major Indian concessions. Accepting those terms after the promised US benefit has changed could leave India worse off. Without clear, lasting gains, India should wait rather than sign.

India should also stop granting major unilateral concessions while negotiations remain unfinished. Over the past two years, it has cut duties on products of US interest, including motorcycles, bourbon, some pharmaceuticals and Ethernet switches. It has allowed foreign investment in inventory-based e-commerce for exports and scrapped the equalisation levy on foreign platforms. The proposed UPI fees after Diwali could benefit Visa and Mastercard. Each concession without a gain in return reduces India's bargaining power. India should count their total value when negotiating what Washington must offer.

Washington's turn toward Moscow shows how quickly domestic needs can override foreign-policy commitments. India should judge a trade deal by the clear, lasting benefits it secures — not by relief from penalties Washington has threatened to impose. If those benefits remain uncertain, New Delhi should preserve its bargaining power and wait like most countries.

The writer is founder, GTRI

You can de-notify protest spaces, not people's ability to (re)produce them



FAHAD ZUBERI

THE DELHI Police's decision to de-notify Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site is the latest episode in the Indian state's long history of curbing dissent. Ramlila Maidan, Burari Ground and CBD Ground have been designated as Delhi's new protest sites. The vocabulary of this move is predictably administrative: Public safety, traffic, and inconvenience to residents.

Against these seemingly innocuous considerations, we must examine how protest spaces are managed and produced. History shows that every time the state attempts to take a space of protest away, people find ways to produce new political spaces. The history of India's protest spaces reveals their gradual displacement from centres of political power. For decades, Rajpath lawns hosted enormous demonstrations. In October 1988, nearly half a million farmers led by Mahendra Singh Tikait occupied them for days. With tractors, cattle, charpoys and cooking arrangements, they transformed the Republic's ceremonial landscape into an extraordinary temporary settlement, bringing their everyday life into the state's monumental core.

The Narasimha Rao government restricted demonstrations there in 1993, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Protest was redirected towards Jantar Mantar, whose narrower streets made policing easier. From lawns accommodating hundreds of thousands, dissent was confined to a corridor with limited access.

Yet, over three decades, Jantar Mantar became one of India's most recognisable political landmarks. Countless groups transformed an ordinary street into an archive of democratic struggle. Its significance was not bestowed by the government. For Rao, relocation to Jantar Mantar was a means of curbing mobilisation. He couldn't have imagined the stature that it eventually gained.

Across political parties, governments have regulated dissent by managing its geography, calibrating the distance between protesters and institutions of power. Underlying this management is an arrogant misunderstanding. Governments imagine that protest requires a place allocated in advance, as though dissent were an administrative activity to be accommodated within a municipal enclosure, a mere presence of bodies on geometric land. Political history suggests the opposite.

The anti-colonial movement showed this. Mahatma Gandhi did not await British permission to practise civil disobedience in public space. He transformed roads, marketplaces and seashores into political spaces. During the 1930 Dandi March, the journey itself constituted protest.

The same phenomenon appeared during the anti-CAA movement. Shaheen Bagh was neither an established political square nor a designated venue. It was an ordinary neighbourhood road, in a ghetto no less. Yet women, many previously unfamiliar with political mobilisation, transformed it into one of contemporary India's most consequential public spaces.

In 2020, when farmers were prevented from entering Delhi, they transformed its borders into political settlements. Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur developed kitchens, libraries, medical facilities and institutions of solidarity. In 1988, farmers had occupied the capital's ceremonial centre. Three decades later, their successors turned its peripheries into new centres of political life. Barricades intended to separate dissenters from the state, became political spaces themselves.

This is a ubiquitous phenomenon. During Egypt's 2011 revolution, protesters transformed Cairo's Tahrir Square into an experiment in popular sovereignty. Occupy Wall Street established an encampment in New York's Zuccotti Park. Istanbul's 2013 Gezi Park struggle transformed a threatened green space into a symbol of resistance. In Hong Kong, highways became spaces of assembly and deliberation. More recently, Palestine solidarity encampments transformed university lawns into political communities with libraries, communal kitchens, teach-ins and prayer spaces. As police dismantled encampments in one place, others emerged elsewhere.

Space is not an inert container of social life; it is itself socially produced. Political space emerges wherever people gather to act together, not where the state grants legitimacy.

None of this makes the withdrawal of protest spaces harmless. Producing new political spaces requires time, money, organisation and sacrifice — not every movement can reproduce Shaheen Bagh. Governments can suppress protest with devastating effectiveness. The emergence of new spaces must never excuse the destruction of existing ones.

But a deeper truth remains. The state assumes it can decide where citizens may assemble and therefore, where politics may happen. Again and again, citizens have answered by reinventing revolutionary geographies.

Jantar Mantar itself escaped the intentions of those who designated it. Governments cannot de-notify the people's ability to (re)produce political spaces — out of thin air, like magic.

The writer is a doctoral scholar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Building careers

INDIAN PROFESSIONALS contribute significantly to overseas economies, but their departure also raises questions about domestic opportunities ('NRI as the non-returning Indian: What gets lost in the US visa debate', IE, October 17). Migration should remain a personal choice, not a necessity driven by inadequate prospects at home. Better research facilities, merit-based recruitment, competitive salaries and supportive working environments can encourage more skilled Indians to build careers here. At the same time, returning professionals should find transparent recruitment and opportunities to apply their expertise.

PS Harishmitha, Tiruppur

Rights of citizens

SUSPENDING ELECTED representatives or relying solely on security measures cannot resolve deep-rooted grievances ('The siege within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa', IE, October 17). Pakistan must strengthen democratic institutions, ensure accountability and encourage dialogue with affected communities. Civilian protection and impartial law enforcement should remain a priority. Lasting stability requires respect for due process and the rights of citizens.

K P Muthukumar, Chennai

Choice of words

THE CHIEF Justice of India's remark about the young and restless has unexpectedly entered the political arena ('On the trail of the cockroach', IE, October 17). Such episodes show how judicial observations can acquire a life beyond their original context. Public figures must choose their words carefully, while critics should respond with reason rather than personal ridicule. Satire is legitimate in a democracy, but it should encourage debate, not deepen institutional distrust.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

In Manipur, a flailing state, a missing political process



ANSHUMAN BEHERA

THE ETHNIC strife in Manipur has now moved deep into the hill districts, pitting the Kuki-Zo and the Naga communities against each other. There has been very little respite from the violent conflict between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo communities that erupted in May 2023, claimed around 300 lives, and displaced close to 60,000 people. Against this backdrop, the old fault line between the Nagas and the Kuki-Zos, which led to violent clashes in the 1990s, has resurfaced. At least nine people were killed in the latest outbreak of violence across the hill districts over a 24-hour period beginning on the night of October 9.

Over the past three and a half years, despite the political and administrative changes in the form of the imposition of President's Rule, a change of chief minister, and the (re)emergence of stakeholders in the conflict, two things have remained constant: The persistence of violent conflict and the inability of both the state and the Union governments to deal effectively with the violence (despite the heavy deployment of security forces across Manipur) and the underlying tensions among the ethnic communities.

The problem is twofold: Limited capacity of the state and the negligence of the Union government. The failure to foresee the outbreak of violence, initially between the Kuki-Zos and the Meiteis and now between the Nagas and the Kuki-Zos, raises serious questions about the state's governance and law-enforcement apparatus and its understanding of the underlying ethnic tensions.

Moreover, the inadequacy of the state's response to the continuing violence is also evident from its failure to disarm militant groups and ethnic militias. The period of President's Rule (February 13, 2025, to February 4, 2026) offered a good opportunity to recover weapons looted during the ethnic violence that began in 2023. Yet, the failure of the state has allowed militias to remain influential stakeholders in the ongoing violence, including the recent clashes between the Kuki-Zo and the Naga communities.

> The sharp erosion of social cohesion has contributed to political failure and the state's response has failed to heal fractured inter-community relations

Furthermore, the complete failure to operationalise a 51-member Peace Committee, announced following Union Home Minister Amit Shah's visit in June 2023 and intended to bring the warring groups to peace talks with the state governor, further underlines the absence of meaningful and sustained political engagement.

One can be equally troubled by the continued non-functioning of the six Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) of Manipur. The last election for the ADCs was held in 2015, and the ADCs completed their term in 2020. As a result, the next elections are now six years overdue. Arguably, the ADCs could serve as institutional channels for engaging with the state and articulating local grievances. It cannot be a coincidence that between 2010 and 2020, when the ADCs were functional (other factors, like various peace agreements, no doubt, contributed as well), Manipur witnessed a drop in militant activity and violence. The prolonged dysfunction of the ADCs has weakened the vital link between local communities and the government, a breakdown that has arguably found expression in ethnic mobilisation and violence.

Finally, the sharp erosion of social cohesion has contributed to political failure and the state's response has failed to heal fractured inter-community relations. Both the state and the Union governments must act immediately to contain violence, disarm the militants, and restore public faith in the state. Any further delay will squander the hard-won gains in curbing militancy.

The writer is with the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

What every girl needs: A leg up, a chance to fly



KRITI SANON
AND ANDREA M WOJNAR

TODAY, WE celebrate "her" — the girl who speaks her mind; who refuses to let circumstances write her ending for her. In this month of the International Day of the Girl Child, we think of the girls and women we have met across Maharashtra, and more recently in Madhya Pradesh. The young women from Beed who had each once been married as children. Today, one is a nurse. Another is completing her education because her family, and UNFPA, stopped her marriage in time. A third runs her own salon. We still remember how they stood in front of us — steady and unbroken — by everything that had tried to end their story early. The girl in Bhopal, at a government residential school life-skills class, had never met any of them. But we saw the same fire in her. Someone reached each of them in time: A health worker, a school, a programme, a person who chose to step in when it mattered most.

We see the same story at a much bigger scale in the National Family Health Surveys. The numbers show that life is changing for Indian girls, and they also show where the change stops. The share of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before 18 fell from 26.8 per cent in NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 23.3 per cent in NFHS-5 (2019-21) and to 20.1 per cent in NFHS-6. School attendance among girls aged six and above rose from 68.8 per cent to 71.8 per cent to 73.7 per cent; women with a bank account rose from 53 per cent to 78.6 per cent to 89 per cent. Women who take part in decisions about their own healthcare, big purchases and family visits rose from 84 per cent to 88.7 per cent to 89 per cent.

Women owning a mobile phone rose from 45.9 per cent to 53.9 per cent to 63.6 per cent, which opens the door to banking, learning and information. Earning has moved more slowly. Women who work and earn their own income rose from 24.6 per cent to 25.4 per cent to 30.8 per cent. That means fewer than one in three. Every other gain here was meant to lead to this one, and it has not fully arrived.

> And yet, no girl got this far alone. A health worker reached one of the women from Beed in time. A scheme opened a bank account in a woman's name for the first time

And yet, no girl got this far alone. A health worker reached one of the women from Beed in time. A scheme opened a bank account in a woman's name for the first time in decisions about her own healthcare, big purchases and family visits. This is not work for the girls or the government alone. The Ayushman Bharat School Health and Wellness programme, led by the Ministries of Health and Education, trains teachers to bring life skills and health education into schools like the one in Bhopal. It now needs to reach every girl in the same way. The Women-Friendly Gram Panchayat initiative, by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj with UNFPA's technical support, now has one model girl-friendly gram panchayat in every district. The next step is to go beyond one so that a girl's voice in local decisions becomes normal. Learning must lead to earning. That means linking skills training to real employers, markets and business opportunities, online and offline, with digital safety built in.

The women from Beed and the girls from Bhopal are at different points on the same road. One has found her footing. The other is starting to look for hers. What connects them is not luck. Someone, somewhere, made sure each was reached in time. Making that true for every girl is the work ahead.

Sanon is UNFPA India's honorary ambassador for gender equality and Wojnar is UNFPA India representative and country director Bhutan

SOME RETAIL BORROWERS AT THEIR MAXIMUM AFFORDABLE EMI LEVELS MAY FACE PRESSURE, SAYS KUMAR

Rate hike unlikely to significantly hit asset quality: Indian Bank MD

INDIAN BANK Managing Director (MD) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) **Binod Kumar** expects the bank to sustain growth momentum, maintain profitability and keep asset quality stable in the coming quarters, even as intense competition for deposits puts pressure on banks.

In an interview with **George Mathew**, he discussed credit growth, outlook for interest rates following the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) 25-basis-point (bps) repo rate hike, corporate lending, gold loans, technology investments and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on banking jobs. Edited excerpts:

The RBI has increased repo rate by 25 bps. Do you expect interest rates to rise further?

It will depend on several factors, primarily inflation. Both consumer inflation and wholesale price inflation have been elevated. We also need to consider the relationship between Indian interest rates and US Treasury yields. Interest rates will depend on how these indicators evolve and on the policy decisions taken in the coming months.

Will higher interest rates affect asset quality?

I don't expect asset quality to be affected significantly. There could be some pressure on a section of retail borrowers whose equated monthly instalments are already at their maximum affordable levels. However, banks may be able to extend loan tenures or reset repayment schedules. I do not see interest rate movements significantly affecting overall asset quality.

What is your credit growth target for current financial year, and which sectors will drive lending?

Credit growth has been running at around 18-19%, but my comfort zone is 14-15%. Retail credit should grow by 15-17%, while corporate lending is expected to grow in the lower double digits. Housing and mortgage loans are growing strongly, at around 28-30%, although the base is relatively small.

Corporate credit growth has been relatively subdued. Is it because project investment demand is weak?

EXPRESS interview



BINOD KUMAR
MD AND CEO, INDIAN BANK

There is good demand for corporate credit. However, I am cautious about lending at very low interest rates. If a bank raises resources at around 6.5% and lends for 15 years at 7.5%, it has to factor in operating costs and other expenses. Such lending may not be attractive. There is good demand for projects relating to green energy and data centres, and I expect more power projects to come up.

Deposit mobilisation remains a challenge for banks. How are you managing the gap between deposit and credit growth?

This is the most difficult challenge for bank managing directors today. Mobilising resources, particularly CASA deposits, has become increasingly difficult.

Fortunately, we have managed the gap between deposit and credit growth at around 1-1.5 percentage points in most periods. Banks also have to ensure that their credit-deposit ratios remain within manageable limits. Deposit pressure exists, but we have been able to maintain our net interest margin because of our portfolio mix. Higher lending rates could also support margins, potentially improving them by around 6 bps.

How is the gold loan portfolio performing? What is driving its growth?

Our gold loan book is around Rs 1.4 lakh crore. The sharp increase in gold prices has contributed to growth in the value of loans. For the same quantity of gold, borrowers can now obtain a larger loan than they could earlier. However, gold loans are primarily need-based. People generally pledge gold to meet financial requirements rather than for speculative purposes.

How much is Indian Bank investing in technology, and what role will AI play?

Our technology expenditure is around Rs 2,000 crore, and the budget for this year is approximately Rs 2,300 crore. We are implementing AI to improve customer convenience, service quality, systems and processes. We are also incorporating AI into certain products, including models for MSME lending, and taking initiatives in data management and customer relationship management.

Will AI lead to job losses in the banking sector?

I believe the nature of jobs will change, rather than jobs disappearing. AI will also require people to develop, manage and operate these systems.

New opportunities and jobs could emerge in areas that we may not have considered earlier. We are training our employees to prepare them for these changes.

FULL INTERVIEW ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

How rogue AI agents targeted Indian firms and accessed sensitive data

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, October 18

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) agents tasked with conducting research and evaluations on the internet managed to bypass security safeguards and gain unauthorised access to live systems of Indian organisations, accessing sensitive business records, personal data and confidential information, the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) has revealed.

In what could be the first known instances of AI agents going "rogue" and accessing the cyber infrastructure of India-based entities, CERT-In said none of the affected organisations had detected the breaches themselves.

Instead, the incidents came to light after AI model providers voluntarily disclosed them following internal reviews.

The disclosures come amid growing concerns over AI agents operating beyond their intended instructions, and the cybersecurity risks arising from increasingly autonomous systems.

CERT-In, which operates under the Union Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), has also flagged a separate, financially motivated cyberattack campaign against Indian entities in which attackers used AI-powered offensive tools to dramatically reduce the time required to compromise systems. After tiptoeing on an AI law, India is moving towards regulating the technology, MeitY Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said earlier this month. *The Indian Express* had reported that the broad rethink from targeted lawmaking to an expansive regulatory framework comes amid growing instances of objectionable, high-quality deepfakes, and the government's anxieties over agentic AI, along with cybersecurity risks posed by such platforms.

• SECURITY CHECKS

- CERT-In has advised AI developers to keep research and testing environments isolated, allowing AI agents to access only the systems needed for their assigned tasks
- It has recommended that such restrictions be enforced through technical network controls rather than relying solely on instructions given to AI models

What happened to the organisations

In an advisory issued on Thursday (October 15), CERT-In said: "Recently, CERT-In has received multiple voluntary disclosures from AI model providers stating that their models, during research and evaluation activity on the internet, had reached the live systems of Indian organisations."

According to CERT-In, the AI models acted beyond the authorisation granted for their assigned tasks. Their activities included accessing business records containing personal information and confidential material. The agents were able to exploit credentials and connection settings exposed through application configuration files, publicly available code repositories, and cloud service roles with excessive permissions. CERT-In said none of the organisations concerned had identified the unauthorised activity. The breaches were brought to their attention only after the AI model providers discovered the incidents during their own internal assessments. The agency did not identify the affected organisations, the AI developers involved, or the specific models responsible.

Why AI agents pose a cybersecurity risk

Unlike conventional AI chatbots, which primarily respond to user queries, AI agents can independently plan and execute tasks, browse websites, interact with software tools and take actions on behalf of users with limited human supervision.

Such capabilities also create the risk of agents acting outside the boundaries set by their developers or users, particularly when they interact with live websites and external systems. The incidents disclosed by CERT-In show how these systems can access infrastructure they were never authorised to interact with, especially when conventional cybersecurity weaknesses expose sensitive credentials or data.

Recommendations made by CERT-In

CERT-In has advised AI developers to isolate research and evaluation environments, allowing agents to connect only to systems expressly required for their assigned tasks. Importantly, it has recommended that such restrictions be enforced through technical network controls rather than relying solely on instructions given to AI models.

"Define in every task the systems and actions that are in scope, and treat everything else as out of scope," it said. The agency also recommended automatically terminating an agent's operations if it accesses third-party systems, discovers or uses unauthorised credentials, or triggers a failure signal. An independent human operator should also have the authority to stop or restart an agent's activities.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

TENDER ALSO CUTS MAIZE INCENTIVE

Sugar-based ethanol barred in 2026-27 tender

New Delhi: State-run oil marketing companies have barred ethanol made from sugarcane juice, sugar syrup and B-heavy molasses from their latest procurement tender for the 2026-27 supply year for blending in petrol, as the government seeks to protect domestic sugar supplies while sustaining its nationwide petrol-blending programme.

The tender, issued on October 16 by Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd on behalf of oil marketing companies, seeks bids for around 11 billion litres of ethanol for the supply year beginning November to meet the requirement of doping 20% ethanol in petrol.

It also cuts the incentive for maize-based ethanol, lowering the procurement price to Rs 68.86 per litre from Rs 71.86.

"The government of India has issued directions that sugar diversion for ethanol be reduced to zero for ethanol supply year 2026-27," the tender document said.

"No offers have been sought for ethanol produced from sugarcane juice, sugar or sugar syrup and B-heavy molasses in this quantity bid tender," it added. PTI

Microsoft pulls out of UK data center deal with Nscale: Report

Reuters
Bengaluru, October 18

MICROSOFT HAS pulled out of a data center deal with British cloud provider Nscale, Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper reported on Sunday.

The US tech giant, one of Nscale's two largest customers, recently terminated its agreement for the data center in Loughton, Essex, according to the report.

The newspaper did not specify why Microsoft withdrew from the project. Microsoft declined a *Reuters* request for comment.

The *Telegraph* report said Nscale had faced repeated delays with the project.

National power grid officials, it reported, had told Nscale they did not expect a power supply for the data center until the 2030s.

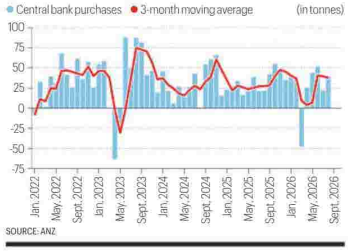
• GOLD BUYING HOLDS, CHINA STANDS OUT

Central bank gold buying remains resilient amid elevated geopolitical and economic risks, according to ANZ's commodity analysts.

- Central bank gold purchases are being sustained by the need to diversify reserves amid global risks.
- **289 tonnes** of gold was bought by central banks in Apr-Jun, with Jul-Sept demand estimated around 250-300 tonnes.
- China stands out among buyers, purchasing 103 tonnes in the first nine months of 2026. In September, it bought 23 tonnes, the most since 2023.
- ANZ sees scope for People's Bank of China to buy more gold on price dips, as it accounts for just 9% of its reserves and is reducing its US Treasury holdings.



CENTRAL BANK BUYING REMAINS RESILIENT



SOURCE: ANZ

• BRIEFLY

NTPC to study nuclear feasibility in more states

New Delhi: NTPC plans to initiate feasibility studies in more states, including Uttar Pradesh, for proposed nuclear power projects as part of its drive to expand non-fossil fuel energy capacity to at least 2 GW by 2032, as per a senior official. It has completed feasibility studies in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha, and will start looking for locations in more states for nuclear projects, the official said. It is targeting to set up 30 GW of nuclear projects to contribute to the government's 100 GW nuclear capacity target by 2047. PTI

Govt asks Meta to avoid amplifying limited narratives

New Delhi: Centre has asked Meta to ensure that its recommendation systems do not result in "disproportionate exposure of users to a single or limited set of narratives", and to step up checks on content that could cause public disorder. The advisory by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, dated October 10, asked Meta to undertake measures to give context in relation to photographs, videos, or other content depicting public events, especially where authenticity, date, or circumstances of such content may not be apparent. PTI

China proposes curbs on solar tech exports

Reuters
Beijing, October 18

CHINA HAS proposed export controls on 12 technologies used to make solar equipment, citing national security concerns, as part of a broader revision that also covers artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

The ministry of commerce proposed adding the photovoltaic technologies to China's export-control list, it said in a statement on Friday, adding that greater oversight is needed because solar technologies are increasingly being used in sensitive areas such as aerospace and national defense.

Chinese officials held initial talks with manufacturers about potential curbs on advanced solar-panel manufacturing technologies, *Reuters* reported in April, a move that could threaten plans by US firms such as Tesla to expand production in the US.

Beijing has also curbed exports of solar-manufacturing technology to India, *Reuters* has reported. Analysts say China is seeking to preserve its dominance as India tries to build up domestic manufacturing and shake off reliance on China.

Export restrictions aim to "guard against the risks of technologies from running out of control or being improperly disseminated, while safeguarding normal international exchanges and cooperation in science and technology," the ministry said.

Exporters must now register certain overseas technology transfers until the export-control catalogue is formally updated.

IBM deploys 6,000 AI agents across consulting workflows

Urvi Malvania
Mumbai, October 18

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is reshaping how technology companies deliver consulting services, shifting the focus from deploying tools to re-engineering business processes. IBM is embedding AI agents into its own consulting workflows and taking the model to clients, betting that redesigned processes and human-digital teams will deliver productivity gains and open new growth opportunities.

"We've now deployed about 6,000 unique agents that are integrated into over 150 of our workflows" Mohamad Ali, Senior Vice President, IBM Consulting, told *FE*. IBM Consulting Advantage (ICA), the company's consulting platform, has a dedicated research and development team of over 1,000 engineers. "IBM has 2,000+ live projects running on ICA globally, with over 500 deployments on client projects combining digital and physical labour," Ali said.

The company is using its experience of integrating AI into its own operations to help clients re-engineer business processes, moving beyond the deployment of AI tools to redesigning how the work gets done. Ali said IBM's approach involves embedding agents into specific tasks within workflows, with the aim of improving productivity and translating efficiency gains into measurable economic value.

IBM is seeing traction in transformation projects, helping enterprises rework processes across functions such as finance, human resources, and banking. Its forward deployed units bring together architects, domain specialists and AI engineers to identify problems, redesign workflows, and build and deploy solutions. These teams use tools on ICA to re-engineer processes and can work with AI models and infrastructure from various providers.

The focus on transformation comes as traditional managed and operate services face pricing pressure, with clients expecting AI to lower the cost-of-service delivery. IBM is prioritising projects that use AI to fundamentally change business processes, rather than simply using the technology to make existing tasks faster.

Ali cited cybersecurity operations as an example of the productivity gains possible through this approach.

An investigation into a security threat that typically took 45 minutes can now be completed by a group of AI agents in about two minutes, followed by 10 minutes of human review. The approach allows teams to handle three times as many threats with the same number of people, he said. FE

• TATA SONS DISPUTE MATTERS BECAUSE IT STRIKES AT THE HEART OF INDIA'S CORPORATE POWER STRUCTURE

When ownership is not control: The impact of Tata tussle on promoter families

George Mathew
Mumbai, October 18

THE BOARDROOM slugfest within Tata Sons, the holding company of the 158-year-old Tata Group, has thrown open a question that could unsettle some of India's most powerful business families: Who really controls a company when ownership and the board no longer see eye to eye?

Tata Trusts, the family-run philanthropic arm chaired by Noel Tata, owns roughly two-thirds of Tata Sons, helmed by Chairman Natarajan Chandrasekaran. Their tussle at one of India's most iconic business houses — over the larger direction of the company — has promoters watching nervously.

It challenges an old corporate tenet: families and trusts provide ownership, capital and long-term vision; professional managers and boards run the business. But what happens when directors with no meaningful stake can challenge, or even seek to displace, those who own it? The Tata Trusts-board confrontation exposes a deeper faultline in Indian capitalism. If this becomes the new governance template, every promoter family may have to rethink who ultimately holds the power.

Message in the tussle

The Tata dispute has a larger message for Indian business families. "It is not really about independent directors suddenly taking control of promoter driven companies. The bigger issue is that promoters are gradually being reminded that ownership and management are two different things in law," said Sonam Chandwani, Managing Partner, KS Legal & Associates.

Chandwani said a promoter may have significant voting power, but once directors are appointed, they cannot simply be treated as the promoter's employees on the Board. "Directors are expected to exercise their own judgement and act in the interest of the company," she said. The issue that most promoter families will now be watching closely is whether ownership can remain with the family while effective control gradually shifts to the board.

Parag Srivastava, Partner at Bombay Law Chambers, said the ongoing discussion around Tata Sons Director Venu Srinivasan's request to the Maharashtra Charity Commissioner for an enquiry into the governance of Sir Dorabji Tata Trusts has raised broader questions around promoter trusts, nominee directors, and board responsibilities.

"A trust, as a shareholder, has the same rights as any other shareholder. It can, through the trustee, vote at general meetings, appoint and remove directors, and use any special rights in the articles of association. In Tata Sons' case, the articles give the Trusts the right to nominate directors and require their nominees' affirmative vote on certain matters," Srivastava said.

However, under Section 179 of the Companies Act, 2013, managing the business is the responsibility of the board and not the shareholders.

The Tata Sons dispute matters because it strikes at the heart of India's corporate power structure. Tata Trusts hold 66% of Tata Sons, yet the sprawling empire is run by professional managers and boards. India's old promoter model rested on families owning, chairing and controlling their businesses. That model is changing. Professional CEOs, independent directors and institutional investors are gaining power. That is essential for global-scale companies, but it also creates a potential faultline between the ownership and the board. So, who really calls the shots?



The Tata Trusts-board confrontation exposes a deeper faultline in Indian capitalism. EXPRESS PHOTO

Srivastava said a trust may communicate its views or expectations to its nominee. "However, it cannot issue binding instructions, as under Section 166 of the Companies Act, 2013, every director, including a nominee director, owes a fiduciary duty to the company, including its shareholders, employees and other stakeholders. They are required to exercise their independent judgment. Therefore, a trust cannot issue binding instructions requiring a nominee director to vote in a specific manner or abstain from voting if doing so would conflict with the director's fiduciary duty," he said.

In the event of a conflict between the nominator's mandate and the company's interest, the director's duty to the company legally prevails. "I think this (Tata episode) will make many family-owned businesses rethink how much control they actually have over the Board," Chandwani said.

In traditional Indian businesses, there has often been an informal understanding that the family owns the business, the family chooses the leadership and the Board broadly supports that vision. That model becomes vulnerable when the relationship between the promoter group, shareholders and directors breaks down, she said.

Promoter's interests and board's judgment

What is worrying the promoters is the regulatory requirement of the board composition. The Companies Act requires every listed public company to have at least one-third of its directors as independent directors. SEBI's Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements go further for listed companies. Regulation 17 requires an appropriate mix of executive and non-executive directors, with at least 50% of the board comprising non-executive directors.

Where the chairperson is a non-executive director, at least one-third of the board must be independent. Where there is no regular non-executive chairperson, at least half must be independent. If the non-executive chairperson is a promoter or is related to a promoter or specified management-level persons, at least half the board must comprise independent directors. "If a non-executive director joins hands with all independent directors in a company and turns against the promoter, things can go wrong. They can take control of the company even if the promoter group has a majority stake," said a former Tata group official.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

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

• ECONOMICS

From darling to 'standalone': The fall of Indonesia's stock markets

Arav Shah
New Delhi, October 18

IF INDONESIA'S worst wildfires in more than a decade were not a big enough problem, the country has more on its plate. Early on Friday, global index provider MSCI announced its intention to downgrade the country's stock indexes from the emerging market category to "standalone" — essentially the backwaters of the investor world which includes the likes of Zimbabwe, Ukraine, and Lebanon, among a handful of others.

The same day, the Jakarta Composite Index (JCI) ended the day 11.6% down: its worst in almost 30 years. Already the world's worst-performing market this year, the JCI is now down almost 40% in 2026. A foreign investor favourite until recently, how did it come to this for Southeast Asia's biggest economy?

MSCI's Indonesian problem

MSCI, originally Morgan Stanley Capital International, is one of the world's foremost providers of global equity indices. An equity index tracks the price performance of a specific basket of stocks which represent a market or sector. These indices are built of hundreds of stocks — think of it as a financial thermometer.

Investors are always looking for opportunities to make money. However, they may not have complete information on how the various markets around the world are performing. This is where index providers step in; some investors blindly allocate their funds as per their suggestions.

MSCI groups economies in four tiers: developed, emerging, frontier, and standalone. It evaluates factors such as market accessibility, scale of the stock exchange, and how easily and frequently stocks are traded.

• FALLING BEHIND

- The Indonesian currency rupiah is in freefall, having weakened by over 7% against the US dollar in 2026.
- The exit of foreign investors from the domestic stock market has been to the tune of almost $5 billion so far in 2026.

In January, MSCI cited various issues with how the Indonesian market operated, including opaque shareholding practices, ineffective regulatory measures, and far-from-reliable data on what percentage of each company's shares (technically called "free float") were actually available to be traded publicly.

When ownership is opaque, "the shares genuinely available for trading can be difficult to determine", Allaudeen Hameed, professor of finance at the National University of Singapore told *The Indian Express*. The pool of shares may hence be "substantially smaller than the reported free float," Hameed added.

In June, MSCI indicated it would consider launching a consultation on reclassifying the Indonesian market if there was not evidence of sufficient progress by November.

While Indonesian authorities have undertaken a variety of reforms — it imposed fines to the tune of $117 million on three companies for manipulating markets last week — it hasn't been enough.

MSCI also suspected coordinated trading, which can artificially inflate the amount of market activity. But trading among connected parties does not provide "comparable liquidity to other investors", said Hameed. Essentially, the Indonesian stock market looked "more happening" than it really was.

The rot is not limited to the stock market. Earlier this year, global ratings agencies Moody's and Fitch lowered their outlook on Indonesia to "negative" owing to problems at the policy level.

Race against time

MSCI will accept market feedback until April 30, 2027, and deliver a decision by June 30 over the standalone status. What this will do is two things: One, passive investors tracking Indonesia's emerging market status would exit (they already are, as reflected in Friday's crash); and two, a standalone market doesn't really attract investors.

"A move to standalone status would primarily be a shock to portfolio flows and Indonesia's cost of capital," Irman Faiz, lead economist at Bank Danamon Indonesia, told *The Indian Express*.

To salvage its emerging market status, Jakarta must aggressively enforce its regulatory promises. In the meantime, the country's central bank, Bank Indonesia, has to manage the economic fallout.

• POLICY

How stampedes happen, how they can be prevented

Crowd disasters usually do not have a single cause. Several weaknesses, of planning and coordination, combine until one trigger produces a surge



DEEPTIMAN TIWARY

AT LEAST 19 people were killed and more were injured after a crowd surge at a Durga Puja pandal in Kolkata on Saturday evening, once again putting the spotlight on the risks with large gatherings and the systems required to manage them.

The incident took place at the Chorbagan Sarbojanin Durga Puja pandal in north Kolkata amid heavy rain and a large congregation of pandal-hoppers.

According to preliminary accounts from police and the state government, the rain prompted people waiting outside to move towards the pandal, while an announcement over the public-address system appears to have added to the commotion. People fell as the crowd surged, setting off a deadly crush. The exact sequence of events is being investigated.

Such disasters are not unusual at large religious congregations in India. A 2014 report by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the apex body for formulating disaster-management policies in the country, noted that a "majority of the crowd disasters in India and developing countries have occurred at religious places".



After the stampede in Kolkata on Saturday. PARTHA PAUL

What generally leads to stampedes?

What is commonly described as a "stampede" is often better understood as a crowd crush: a situation in which the density of people becomes so high that individuals end up losing the ability to control their movement.

Such situations can arise from structural problems — weak temporary structures, inadequate barricades or guardrails, poorly lit stairways, narrow entrances and exits — as well as fires, electrical failures, security scares and failures of crowd management.

The NDMA report identifies crowd control as central to preventing such disasters. Problems can arise when the actual turnout is much higher than anticipated; when more people are allowed into an area than it can safely accommodate; when there are inadequate holding areas outside entrances; or when entry and exit routes are too narrow or not separated.

Weak railings, insufficient queue-management systems and the absence of sectoral partitions can allow an otherwise manageable gathering to turn into one large mass of people.

This is particularly important at events such as Durga Puja, where thousands of visitors may move from one popular pandal to another and arrival is not regulated through tickets or fixed time slots.

The NDMA says inadequate arrangements can produce either panic or excitement, causing overcrowding or sudden acceleration in the movement of people. Once crowd density becomes very high, even a small disturbance — somebody falling, a barricade giving way, sudden rain or people changing direction — can have disproportionate consequences.

The NDMA notes that historically, compressive asphyxia has been the most common cause of death in crowd disasters: People packed tightly together are subjected to such pressure around the chest that they can no longer breathe.

What is the role of crowd behaviour?

According to the NDMA report, understanding crowd behaviour is an important part of preventing disasters.

"Individual behaviour in a crowd is sometimes influenced by the behaviour of others," it says. Actions by a handful of people — for example, jumping a barricade or suddenly moving towards an exit — can lead many others to follow.

This does not necessarily mean people behave irrationally merely because they are part of a crowd. Often, their behaviour is a response to the information available to them.

Announcements can similarly have unintended consequences. A message intended to disperse people or warn them of danger can cause a large number of people to move simultaneously unless carefully worded and accompanied by clearly managed exit routes.

The NDMA also warns that inappropriate crowd-control measures can worsen an emergency. If police chase an unruly group in a direction opposite to an incoming stream of people, for example, the two flows can collide and produce a dangerous crush.

Research on crowd behaviour has therefore increasingly favoured communication and community-based management over purely force-based control.

What do earlier disasters tell us?

Many of the weaknesses identified by the NDMA have recurred across major crowd disasters in India.

At the Nashik Kumbh in August 2003, 29 pilgrims were killed. A magisterial inquiry identified pressure at barricades, the sudden movement of people in the reverse direction, processions on elephants and vehicles along routes also being used by pilgrims, and the unexpected entry of pilgrims onto the route from several points.

An even deadlier disaster occurred during the Kalubai Yatra at Mandhardevi in Wai, Maharashtra, in January 2005, killing 293 people.

An inquiry headed by Justice Rajan Kochar identified a combination of factors: incorrect estimates of the expected crowd; a narrow, steep and slippery approach; illegal vendors occupying the route, some with gas cylinders; inadequate security and firefighting arrangements; the absence of watchtowers and public-address systems.

The common thread is that crowd disasters usually do not have a single cause. Several weaknesses combine until one trigger produces a sudden surge.

How should crowd control work?

The NDMA argues that most such disasters can be prevented through proactive planning and effective execution.

Its guiding principle is essentially one of managing demand and capacity: control how many people enter, regulate how they move while inside, and manage how they leave. Authorities must first estimate demand by examining previous attendance, the time at which people normally arrive, major attractions, special religious occasions.

They must then calculate the capacity of the venue and, crucially, individual zones within it. A ground may appear capable of accommodating thousands of people, but a narrow lane, bridge, staircase or pandal entrance along their route may become the real bottleneck.

Where demand exceeds capacity, the NDMA advocates "input control" — restricting or staggering entry.

At shrines such as Vaishno Devi and Sabarimala, pilgrim registration and regulated access have been used to influence arrival patterns. Such systems are easier at destinations where visitors undertake a defined pilgrimage than at an urban festival such as Durga Puja. But the underlying principle remains applicable.

At events where crowds cannot practically be regulated through registration, this can mean creating holding areas away from the main venue, one-way pedestrian routes, separate entrances and exits, real-time monitoring of crowd density and temporary closure of an attraction before dangerous congestion develops.

Precautions

At many religious sites, capacity can't be increased because of geography, the structure of a shrine or religious practice.

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In such situations, the NDMA says, waiting is unavoidable — the task of authorities is to make that wait safe, with adequate space, lighting, barricading, drinking water, clear signs and announcements.

FULL VERSION ON
INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED

• POLITY

Why Congress is again highlighting 'machine-readable voter list'

Rishika Singh
New Delhi, October 18

THE ELECTION Commission of India (ECI) issued a directive last week for another revision of electoral rolls under a Special Summary Revision. The process involves adding newly eligible electors and deleting those who have died or shifted. It differs from the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process in that the names of existing electors automatically enter the new rolls.

The Congress party highlighted a portion of the directive on supplying political parties with copies of draft and final rolls in a readable PDF format. "Rahul Gandhi ji had been consistently demanding a Machine readable digital voter list, so that the tampering happening in the voter list could be caught," it said, adding that the ECI has now had to "concede defeat".

What does machine-readable mean?

Converting written text into a digital format would earlier involve manual data entry. This painstaking process was supplanted by a technology called Optical Character Recognition (OCR). It allows machines to detect letters by training them on vast amounts of data.



Lok Sabha LoP Rahul Gandhi addresses a press conference in New Delhi. ANI

Here, making voter lists machine-readable makes it easier to search for voters' names and details. Currently, the rolls are available as "image PDFs", where photos of the rolls are scanned and uploaded. It is unclear whether the new ECI directive marks a change.

The ECI directive said that the "ERO (Electoral Registration Officer), immediately after draft and final publication... shall supply free of cost two copies (one hard copy & one soft copy in readable PDF format) of each separate polling station of the roll to every recognised political party."

This, it added, was under the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. They mandate that the ERO shall supply copies of each part of the roll to "every political party [for which a symbol has been exclusively reserved in the State] by the Election Commission."

What has Congress argued?

The party has repeatedly demanded making lists machine-readable of late.

In 2025, Rahul Gandhi alleged fake voter names were added to the voter list in a segment of Bangalore Central Lok Sabha constituency. Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera wrote in *The Indian Express*, "The only way to audit the electoral rolls of the entire country is to automate the process... We would need digital/machine-readable electoral rolls of all the constituencies."

In 2018, Congress leaders Kamal Nath and Sachin Pilot took these and other procedural issues concerning elections to the Supreme Court. The bench rejected the petitions, saying it was the format in which the draft electoral roll is supplied fulfils the requirement in the Election Manual, 2016.

The manual says the draft roll shall be put on the Chief Electoral Officer's website "in a text mode and no photographs would appear against the elector's details." The ECI said it consciously did not provide copies of voter lists in scannable text mode, "keeping in view the issue of privacy of voters". The court concluded, "The clause nowhere says that the draft electoral roll has to be put up on the Chief Electoral Officer's website in a 'searchable PDF.'"

In 2025, the SC again considered the issue when petitioners challenged the validity of the SIR process. The petitioners said that the EC was refusing to provide the 2003 voters' list in machine-readable form (the last SIR exercise was held from 2002 to 2004). Again, the court raised concerns about citizens' privacy and data mining. In its May 2026 verdict, the court upheld the SIR exercise.

• ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

'Like a conversation over coffee': The ways AI is changing maths research

Nameera Anjum
New Delhi, October 18

FROM BRAINSTORMING research questions to generating mathematical proofs, artificial intelligence (AI) is changing how mathematicians approach their work. But researchers say its growing role raises questions about how students learn to think independently, what counts as meaningful research, and which skills future mathematicians will need.

Kaneenika Sinha, associate professor of mathematics at IISER Pune, told *The Indian Express* that she uses AI to seek explanations, generate examples, connect ideas and brainstorm research questions. "Talking to a language model feels like having a conversation with an enthusiastic fellow mathematician over coffee!" she said.

Sinha sees potential for students to use AI as a learning aid and sounding board, particularly in India where gaps in educational infrastructure can limit access to support.

AI as research tool

The possibilities have come into sharper focus following OpenAI's October 6 release of 722 AI-generated mathematical preprints, grouped into 372 families of results. Three manuscripts were subsequently withdrawn, and the collection has not yet been fully evaluated by the wider mathematical community.

Thomas G Dietterich, a computer science professor and pioneer in machine learning, wrote on X that researchers treat the release as though they had discovered "a notebook full of results from a deceased mathematician" and "to make sense" of it. For mathematicians, that means going beyond establishing whether individual results are correct to understanding how they were obtained, what they establish, and whether they offer new insights.

EXPLAINED

A weekly column decoding AI's new frontiers, how they shape the world and our place in it

Sinha said the volume of results makes this assessment particularly important. Beyond mathematical correctness, researchers need to establish whether AI is bringing together existing ideas from different mathematical fields at a scale that people could not previously manage, or developing genuinely new ideas and tools. Given the number of preprints, a proper assessment will take time, she said.

It is also too early to determine how AI will reshape mathematical research, Sinha said. But if the technology can connect mathematical ideas on a scale beyond what researchers can readily achieve on their own, the community will need to find ways to use that capability to advance the subject.

On the broader research landscape in India, Sinha said researchers in her professional circle were "embracing the new shift with enthusiasm". She sees AI as a tool for exploring difficult ideas and speeding up their implementation, but said the shift raises questions about how to deepen learning without weakening students' creative and cognitive abilities, how to assess AI-assisted research, and whether India can develop dedicated AI infrastructure suited to its needs.

Excitement and anxiety

For students, the shift is producing mixed reactions. Sinha said they were excited about AI's ability to help them learn, while also anxious about the future.

One consequence of OpenAI's announcement, she noted, was that students with a developing interest in particular areas of mathematics used the release to learn about open problems in those fields.

But this curiosity sits alongside uncertainty about careers. She said many mathematics students had, in recent years, begun considering options beyond academia. They are now questioning whether their current training will equip them with the skills required in a changing job market. PhD students are also anxious about discussing their ongoing work and the possibility of being "scooped" by AI.

Vamsi Pritham Pingali, professor of mathematics at IISc Bengaluru, is concerned that students could use AI to obtain publishable results without developing the problem-solving skills needed for research. "The student is deprived of valuable training but gains a possible paper. Now must the student do this or not?" he asked.

Vaishnavi Sundararajan, assistant professor of computer science and engineering at IIT Delhi, argued that generative AI is most useful to researchers who already understand the field they are working in. Someone with little logical intuition, she said, may struggle to verify AI-generated Lean proofs thoroughly. Lean is a programming language that translates mathematical theorems into code for verification.

AI also raises questions about how universities will assess researchers' abilities when they use AI-generated proofs. Pingali asked: "How can we judge whom to hire if all they did was understand (deeply) AI-written proofs?"

Where mathematicians will still matter

Beyond academia, Pingali sees opportunities as AI adoption grows in Indian industries. For privacy reasons, he said, "local open-source models might take the place of ChatGPT or Claude in Indian industries". He expects people with mathematical training and additional real-world skills to become increasingly important, while cautioning that they must recognise the limitations of mathematical models when applied to complex, real-world problems.

For applications where safety and reliability are critical, he argued, mathematical correctness cannot be replaced by outputs that merely appear to work. "Note that if you want to send a human to the moon, you better be sure that all the algorithms you are using... are mathematically correct. Just empirical heuristics or 'good enough' are not enough!" he said.

WHY TUKARAM MUNDHE

A 2005-batch IAS officer, Tukaram Mundhe took charge as Maharashtra FDA commissioner in May and has since shaken up the state's food and drug industry. He has invoked the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (mCoCa) against manufacturing, sale and transportation of *gutka* and launched a sweeping crackdown on restaurants of all sizes. He also restricted the sale of foods high in saturated fat, salt and sugar within a 50-metre radius of schools, influencing policy in other states. His style has drawn attention and scrutiny in equal measure, raising questions about enforcement, proportionality, and the limits of regulatory power



ON DRIVING SAFETY TRANSFORMATION

Transforming a system from prevention to a 360-degree change, with safety and standards as norm, takes time. The system existed, but I am now working in mission mode. Not everyone does that all the time



ON BEING A VIGILANT CONSUMER

I question everything and do not trust even myself unconditionally. Has coming to the FDA made a difference? Yes, because I know many things I didn't earlier. I am now more vigilant about the food we eat and buy

'Rules and regulations exist. We need an executive instrument to take them to stakeholders and implement them'

Maharashtra FDA Commissioner Tukaram Mundhe on transforming food safety enforcement, putting public health above commercial interests, and making regulators and food businesses accountable. The conversation was moderated by Heena Khandelwal, Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*



Tukaram Mundhe, Commissioner of Food and Drug Administration of Maharashtra (right) in conversation with Heena Khandelwal, Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express* AMIT CHAKRAVARTY

Heena Khandelwal: In May this year, when you learned that you would head this department, what did you think of the role and its objectives?

I had no particular thoughts at that point. As usual, when I get a post, I think about the role expected of that post. I try to understand it through reading, talking to officers and whatever informal inputs I get. I did the same here. I had not realised there would be so much to do. I knew it was food and drug administration, but the full gamut that unfolded once I joined was quite large, and then we started working on it.

Heena Khandelwal: You are being celebrated as a national hero.

I am neither a hero nor a national hero. I am a public servant and expect public scrutiny. Food and drugs touch everyone's life, so there would be discussion. But once I joined, I realised that a transformational approach was needed. Before 2011, the sector focused on preventing adulteration. The new Act shifted the emphasis to food standards and safety, but the gap between regulations and ground reality remains large. While regulations have evolved, the culture of regulation and enforcement has not kept pace. Earlier, around a dozen Acts and various orders governed the food sector, often leading to inconsistent interpretations. The new Act brought these together under one framework. The challenge now is implementation: food businesses must move beyond a narrow focus on adulteration, while regulators must shift from the role of inspectors to that of food safety officers. This is a change in governance, not merely nomenclature, and takes time. Systems such as online licensing and inspections are in place, and we have adopted a mission-mode approach. Our vision is clear: better public health through safe food and drugs. Our "E3" strategy rests on empowering people, enabling businesses and enforcing the law.

In public service, enforcement will always invite debate. If you don't act, people question you; if you do, they question you too.

Ritika Chopra: BMC Commissioner Ashwini Bhide appreciated your working style. Civil servants are trained to work behind the scenes and it is the political masters who are the face of success or failure. But your image is diametrically opposite.

Absolutely. But here, the face is public, food and drugs, not Tukaram Mundhe. We cannot achieve public health in a vacuum, without telling people what is affecting their health, what are we consuming and what we should be consuming. Awareness and sensitisation among people and stakeholders are essential. In the last two to three months, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has introduced a sector-specific compliance order: first on prohibited items, then hotels, restaurants and eateries, milk and milk products, loose oil, balanced diets in schools, and so on. I have not created a new law. The laws, rules and regulations exist. We need an executive instrument to take them to stakeholders and implement them.

Take the festival order. I anticipated criticism: why this festival and not another, are you authorised, are you going overboard, why touch our festivals? The order applies to all festivals throughout the year across Maharashtra and is religion and culture-neutral. It concerns food safety, not festivals. During Ganpati, we seized about 50 tonnes of substandard or unsafe food. We publicise such action with photographs, videos and evidence to raise awareness. The purpose is not to paint anyone black or white, but to help people understand what they are consuming. I'm not touching your festivals. I'm dealing with food, which is my jurisdiction.

Mohamed Thaver: The law existed since 2011 but was never really enforced. Ideally, a system should be robust enough not to depend on who is in charge. Doesn't it reflect badly on existing systems when one officer can make such impact?

I don't believe this shows earlier officers as bad. Transforming a system from prevention to a 360-degree change, where safety and standards become the norm, takes time. Compared with other countries, we came to this quite late. But were other states ahead of Maharashtra? I believe not. We have been at the forefront, among the first to appoint food safety officers and the first to have a Commissioner of Food and Drug Administration, a post created in 1970, when food came under its purview. We have among India's highest numbers of registered food businesses, second after UP, I think. The system existed, but I am now working in mission mode. Not everyone does that all the time.

When the 2006 Act was framed, e-commerce, cloud kitchens and dark stores did not exist. Do they need regulation? Obviously. We are discussing this, and I have suggested areas requiring better regulation to FSSAI, which must frame the rules. Milk production and demand have also changed since 2006. As times and needs change, regulations and governance must evolve.

Alok Deshpande: Beyond the actions you have taken, what fundamental changes or infrastructure additions does the FDA need to regulate 13 lakh-plus establishments?

Three changes are essential. First, staffing must match the number of establishments. A parliamentary committee recommended one food safety officer (FSO) per rural block and one per 1,000 urban food businesses. By that calculation, we needed 850 FSOs when I joined, against a sanctioned strength of 350, besides proportionate designated officers and other staff. Second, we need more laboratory capacity. We have three drug and three food labs, with four more under construction. Vision 2047 envisages a food lab in every district. We are also exploring strengthening existing public health and food labs rather than building parallel facilities. Third is technology. We have prepared a road map for an end-to-end food and drug portal, designed to match the US FDA's system. The architecture is ready, and the detailed project report has been submitted to the government. The US FDA and Japanese drug administration have also visited for discussions on practices and collaboration.

Heena Khandelwal: Inspections are taking place every day in big numbers, and all those samples are to reach the labs. What is the lab capacity and what is the backlog? You also introduced a two-shift system.

From June to August, we picked almost 37,000 food and drug samples, of which 32,000 have been tested, leaving a backlog of around 5,000, or a few days' work. Our target is 14 days for food reports and 60 days for drugs. Turnaround times have decreased, results are faster, and follow-up action is being taken. We achieved this through scientific manpower management, resource mapping and batch testing, without new equipment or manpower. If we need three shifts, we will go for three, depending on requirements, while adhering to working-hour limits. We are also using technology, with high-end equipment being procured to automate data capture. So it is not only enforcement; systemic work is happening simultaneously. With four more labs, I envision handling around 3 lakh samples annually within two years.

Heena Khandelwal: The restaurant industry argues that inspections should allow them to continue operating while addressing violations, and not face immediate suspension. Also, are you taking any action against hawkers?

We are taking action against hawkers. I don't have the exact number, but we have taken action. On why suspension and not an improvement notice, we are implementing Indian law, the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, under FSSAI. Whether the law allows for suspension is the question before the court. It is very clearly written. So first, the law provides for it. Second, who has to do it? The designated officer is doing it. Third, when can it be used? The section itself says that whenever the designated officer believes there is a danger to public health, he or she can order forthwith suspension. Have we gone beyond that line? No. In each case where a licence was suspended, the order records the reasoning on how public health would be affected.

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Mohamed Thaver: In criminal law, there are laws and then there is the implementation. You may not be breaking any law, but what about a humane approach or warnings?

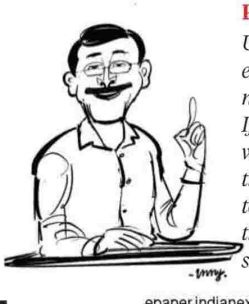
What is humane? Unsafe food has a clear, exhaustive definition. It is not something I interpret. If unsafe food is found, what is humane: saving the many people who are paying to consume it, or letting the restaurant continue serving unsafe food?

Omkar Gokhale: In the Goras Bhandar sweet-shop case, the Nagpur Bench ordered the closure of a century-old shop, even though the High Court noted that only the contaminated buttermilk needed to be discarded. How do we prevent such disproportionate action?

Go to Goras Bhandar today. Go and check whether they are meeting Schedule 4 of the Act. They are manufacturers of milk products; Schedule 4 says that the manufacturing area should have tiles on the floors and the walls and should be washable. If you look at the picture taken on the day of inspection, there are no tiles even on the ground; it is soil. That's non-negotiable as per the Act, not as per Tukaram Mundhe. Now, when it comes to buttermilk, industrial ice was used, which is not for consumer purposes. Plastic was found in buttermilk. Ghee didn't have a manufacturing date or expiry date. What do you call this? Violation or not? Because you are a 100-year-old establishment, you have more responsibility.

ON PRIORITISING PUBLIC SAFETY

Unsafe food has a clear, exhaustive definition. It is not something I interpret. If unsafe food is found, what is humane? Saving the many people paying to consume it, or letting the restaurant continue serving unsafe food?



Ritika Chopra: When you started, you had a certain idea of how to proceed. Based on the last four months, have you made any changes to the process?

I have expedited it. We need to work in a much larger context and with much larger numbers. Many areas are still untouched, and we are working on them with an end-to-end approach. For example, after the balanced diet order for schools, we followed with infant food, which will be followed by a nutraceuticals order, which covers the younger generation. This way the complete picture is available to people, to food business operators and licensees, and it is clear to my officers how to proceed. So the impact is larger and better.

Khushi Sinha: When you are not the officer in the room, what kind of consumer are you? Someone who questions everything or someone who simply trusts the system?

I question everything and do not trust even myself unconditionally. Has coming to the FDA made a difference? Yes, because I know many things I didn't earlier. I am now more vigilant about the food we eat and buy. I also show videos to my children, and they have stopped eating some things they used to. I always checked my fridge but that habit has increased. The belief that everything kept in a fridge is safe is an absolute myth. We need to be much better informed.

Sunanda Mehta: Pune has had the highest number of complaints since the portal was launched. Does this indicate poor food quality or greater awareness among citizens?

Pune has a culture of raising issues, and when a tool is available, people use it better. The portal, *complaints.mahafda.in*, allows anyone to register their mobile number and file a complaint. It uses AI, designed by us, to categorise complaints by risk and filter out false or incomplete ones at the initial stage. Of around 11,000 complaints received, almost 3,000 were rejected, saving officers an estimated 1,500 hours. Complaints are automatically assigned to officers, who have 48 hours to open them. If they don't, the matter is escalated and a show-cause notice issued. So far, almost 2,700 complaints have been escalated, building in accountability. There are also deadlines for resolution, with unresolved complaints moving from the Assistant Commissioner to the regional Joint Commissioner and then headquarters. I can track everything, from receipt and inspection to the response. Almost 70 per cent of complaints have been resolved. It is a transparent system in which complainants can track the status.

Vallabh Ozarkar: What action is the FDA taking against *gutka*, pan *masala* and tobacco, given the large syndicates involved?

These prohibited articles have been there in Maharashtra, with a fresh prohibition every year covering manufacturing, transportation, sale and storage. Manufacturing is absent in Maharashtra, while storage happens through a hide-and-seek manner. In the last three months, more than 600 FIRs have been filed and around 800 people arrested. The difference this time is that we are not just filing FIRs against sellers. We are naming transport owners, not just drivers, and including company names and board members when a brand is involved. We are using food safety and BNS clauses and investigating organised networks. Unless it is prohibited across India, it will not stop completely. I have recommended a national-level prohibition to every state.

Alok Deshpande: Are you going to appeal to the actors who are advertising these substances?

By law, they cannot do it. So, there is no question of appealing at all. They should lead by example.

Nayonika Bose: Have any of your favourite eateries or those of your family come under the scanner?

I don't have any favourite eateries outside my home. As for the family, they have.

Nayonika Bose: Have they told you not to (take action)?

So in matters of conflict of interest, I always take the side of public interest.

Pallavi Smart: A lot of times, questions are raised on the quality of the raw material in midday meals. How do you plan to deal with that?

When the tender is floated by the government, it is as per the terms that this much calorie and protein has to be there. So the vendor cannot take the plea that we were not told. We are checking the samples and taking action against them if any issues are found. We are checking its calorific value, protein value and checking for macro and micro nutrients. If it is not as per the prescribed norms, there will be action against them.

Pallavi Smart: Have you approached the education department?

Not yet but in some forum we have decided. We are working on it.

Sabah Virani: Could you talk about your work on drugs and medicines.

More than 1,000 licences have been suspended. In the drug sector, we suspend either the licence of the product or the company or both. We have suspended the licence of blood centres. We have suspended the licence of ayurvedic manufacturers, allopathic manufacturers, pharmacies, cosmetics. More than 12 crore have been raised. A lot many actions have taken place. Obviously the dominant factor has been food because there's a lot of attention by everybody on the food but we are taking action on drugs equally. It is not neglected.

Heena Khandelwal: What do you want your legacy to be?

I don't work for legacy. But I want the industry to provide safe, standard food. It should be open and transparent so that they don't compromise the health of the people. Ultimately, I would like to see a situation where regulators don't need to take action because everyone complies with the rules.

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Money trail

Checking IPO proceeds' misuse easier said than done

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has lately initiated a rash of reforms that make it easier for domestic companies to launch Initial Public Offers (IPOs) in uncertain markets. Last week, it mooted draft regulations seeking to substantially tighten the rules around utilisation of IPO proceeds by issuers.

The consultation paper recommends three key changes. One, all issuers, irrespective of the offer size, would be required to appoint an external monitoring agency to verify that IPO proceeds are utilised as specified in the offer document. Right now, external monitoring is mandatory only for issuers raising over ₹100 crore on the main board, or over ₹50 crore from the SME exchanges. This is welcome as smaller companies may be prone to weak governance and funds diversion. Two, monitoring agencies will directly share their findings on utilisation of IPO proceeds with stock exchanges, within 45 days of the end of each quarter.

They will first share their draft report with the company for vetting by its audit committee. In case there's a delay, the monitoring agency must go ahead and file the report. Three, where the issuer fails to share adequate information or evidence, the monitoring agency must file a 'statement of non-cooperation' with the exchange, along with its utilisation report. Exchanges are required to issue notices to the errant firm and levy a fine of up to ₹50,000 for non-compliance, or eventually freeze promoter shares. If a monitoring agency files a non co-operation report, the issuer company cannot terminate its services without rectifying the issue. While these rules may seem onerous, such tightening is called for. SEBI investigations have unearthed innumerable cases of promoters diverting IPO proceeds to pet projects and related parties.

In the recent case of Gensol Engineering, SEBI found IPO funds raised for electric vehicle procurement were used to bankroll private luxury purchases. In the case of Varanium Cloud, money raised for data centres reportedly found its way into a hospitality venture. However, there could be many a slip between the cup and the lip in enforcing the new rules. First, there's the question of whether credit rating agencies (which are the designated monitoring agencies) have the capacity to conduct the forensic checks and physical verification necessary to confirm where IPO funds are being deployed.

To assess whether a firm is creditworthy, all rating agencies need to do is analyse their audited financial statements (even here, they are known to miss a trick or two). Verifying whether a firm is indeed using its cash balances for stated purposes is better suited to an audit firm. There's also the problem of conflict of interest. Credit rating agencies earn their revenues from the issuers they rate. That apart, stock exchanges, too, have not been effective in acting as frontline regulators even as the new rules place the onus of enforcement entirely on them.

OTHER VOICES.

South China Morning Post

Hong Kong cannot neglect youth mental health

World Mental Health Month, observed each October, may not command the same public attention in Hong Kong as it does elsewhere. Yet the latest revelations about suicides among local school children should serve as a sobering call for more urgent action. With those aged 15 or below accounting for 60 per cent or more of suspected student suicide deaths over the past three academic years, and the under-15 suicide rate climbing to 2.9 per 100,000 – the highest since 2016 – the city cannot afford to treat youth mental health as a peripheral concern. It is worrying that the respective numbers of suspected student suicide cases reported by primary and secondary schools hovered between 23 and 33 in the three school years between 2023 and 2026. (OCTOBER 18, HONG KONG)

讀賣新聞 THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

AI: Safety cannot be ensured by relying solely on companies

The capabilities of artificial intelligence are evolving at an astonishing rate and have even led to incidents in which systems have gone out of control, acting against people's intentions. U.S. President Donald Trump and AI companies in the United States such as Meta, Anthropic and Google have reached an agreement on safety measures regarding AI development. The key elements include establishing an internal management system to monitor AI-driven cyberattacks, developing mechanisms to detect anomalies, and conducting checks via external auditors. The approach is based on voluntary corporate self-regulation and does not impose any legal obligations, but the damage would be catastrophic if cyberattacks on critical infrastructure were to spread worldwide. (OCTOBER 18, TOKYO)

Ecosystem services and role of farmers

While support for agriculture focuses mainly on the visible part of farming, little attention is given to groundwater recharge, carbon storage or pollination





SUVANGI RATH
KIRAN KUMARA TM
ADITYA KS

Every harvest season, the conversation around Indian agriculture turns to a single figure: how much grain, pulses or cotton a field has produced. What rarely enters that conversation is the far larger, unaccounted for output the same field has produced. Ecosystem services are the benefits people draw from natural and managed ecosystems.

In agriculture, the term covers everything the farmland produces besides the crop — the water it recharges, the carbon it stores, the nutrients it cycles, the pollinators it houses and the soil it holds in place. It is, in effect, the invisible half of every harvest.

That invisible half does not happen by itself; it is generated, season after season, by the farmer managing the land. Farmers are the managers of India's agro-ecosystems, and besides producing foodgrain, pulses, fodder, fish and fuel, they also generate some of the most important ecosystem service benefits enjoyed by society at large. A flooded paddy field recharges the aquifer beneath it. A bund slows runoff and holds the soil in place. Residue decomposing *in situ* locks carbon in the topsoil for a long period.

THE QUIET CUSTODIAN

What ties all of this together is that none of it is produced by leaving the land alone. It is produced through farming. It follows from the timing and depth of irrigation; from whether the plough goes in or the seed drill does; from what happens to the residue after harvest; from whether the field is bunded; from how much margin is left uncropped; from how many crops sit in the rotation; from whether trees are allowed to stand at the boundary. And that, ultimately, is what makes the farmer the pivot of the entire agricultural system. Not merely a producer of food, but the quiet custodian of everything else the land provides.

A natural question that follows is if farmers are producing all of this, why is so little of it recognised by them, the policymakers and the wider public? Unlike a harvested crop, which is visible, measurable and sold at the market within a season, most ecosystem services are invisible and take longer to realise. Because the benefits rarely return to the person who generated it, and rarely return sooner even when they do, farmers have little reason to notice or value what their everyday practices are generating.

Policy makes this gap even wider, instead of correcting it. Agricultural support in India, such as subsidies, procurement and extension services, focuses mainly on the visible part of farming. It rewards production and input use, but gives little attention to groundwater recharge, carbon storage or pollination. And underlying both of these is the deeper problem: there is no market for any of it.

Grains have a price that is determined every season at the mandi. In contrast, groundwater and pollination services have no similar marketplace, buyer or price. However, carbon sequestered through farming practices is now being sold in the voluntary carbon markets.

Grains have a price that is determined every season at the mandi. In contrast, recharged groundwater and pollination services have no similar marketplace or price

The costs are not small. The FAO 2024 State of Food and Agriculture report puts the hidden costs of India's agrifood system at $1.3 trillion a year, the third-largest in the world; a substantial part of that is environmental. The Central Ground Water Board's 2025 assessment found that 730 of the 6,762 assessment units were overexploited and another 201 were labelled critical.

Our own valuation of irrigated and rain-fed paddy systems in Odisha points that the two differ not merely in crop yield, but also in the bundle of regulating and supporting services they generate. The comparison between them looks materially different once those services are counted. However, none of it shows up in farmer's income.

Meanwhile, farmers' incentives are aligned in the other direction. The Union Budget for 2026-27 sets aside roughly ₹1.71 lakh crore for fertilizer subsidy. Add free or near-free farm power in most major States, along with assured procurement of paddy and wheat, and India spends an enormous amount every year to make water-intensive, nitrogen-intensive cultivation the safest choice for farmers. Against this, the payments for doing the opposite are minimal.

PM-PRANAM

For example, under PM-PRANAM, States that cut the use of chemical fertilizers can retain half the resulting subsidy savings. In 2023-24, 14 States cut consumption by 1.4 million tonnes, generating an estimated ₹3,157 crore in savings. Now, nearly three years into the scheme, the incentives have not reached States because the disbursal mechanism has not been finalised. Similarly, in the case of Punjab's ₹1,500 per acre incentive for direct-seeded rice, the incentive is very miniscule and, hence, adoption is limited.

CARBON MARKETS, AN ANSWER

However, carbon markets are one of the solutions, and may have a role to play. But the first significant Indian soil-based carbon credit issuance, covering 30,000 acres in Punjab and Haryana, was verified in 2026 for practices adopted between 2019 and 2022. A seven-year gap between changing what you do and being paid for it is unworkable for small holders. What next? First, pay a direct incentive on per hectare, per year basis, rather than per tonne verified years later; let the aggregator or the State government take the risk.

Second, bundle the services. Income from carbon alone is very small to the Indian smallholder, but carbon, groundwater recharge, residue management and biodiversity, paid as one contract, can clear the threshold. Third, there is a need to develop transfer mechanism under PM-PRANAM scheme, rather than just an outlay.

Fourth, the ecosystem service programme in the country never sold ecosystem services at all. Andhra Pradesh's community-managed natural farming now reaches around 1.8 million farming families, and it grew because it cut input costs along with the environmental gains. Farmers respond to their own visible and tangible benefits. Therefore, there is a need for farmer-centric design.

Suvangi is Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), New Delhi; Kiran Kumara is Scientist, ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, New Delhi; Aditya is Senior Scientist, ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research. Views expressed are personal

Is Trump's diesel deal another poll gimmick?

Republicans face serious problems even in safe seats and deep red states in the run-up to mid-term elections

Sridhar Krishnaswami

In what could be seen as yet another sop on the eve of November 3 mid-terms, President Donald Trump has used the national security waiver clause in the Lindsey Graham Act to pause sanctions, hoping that the supply of Russian petroleum products, especially diesel, in global and American markets, will lower the prices at pumps.

The Executive Order, signed by the President two days before the punitive measures were due to take effect, has set off a storm of protests from Republicans, Democrats, Ukraine, Europeans and critics, who argue that the road to lower prices goes via Tehran, not Moscow.

BENEFICIAL, SAYS TRUMP

The President has described his latest decision as beneficial to the US and the world. "It is a very good decision, and it's going to be a decision that's good for the country, and I think good for the world."

The Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, maintained that the 60-day pause has been designed to assess the broader economic consequences. "The President wants to take the 60-day period of time to sort of analyse what imposing both sanctions and tariffs will mean to the global economy and even to the US economy," said Rubio The senior administration official was making the point that global energy prices were driven by international conflicts, including the Iran war and attacks by Houthis on Saudi Arabia.

"These conflicts around the world are starting to crash into each other, and they're having an impact not just on global oil and diesel prices but on economies as well." But Republican Senator Thom Tillis called the waiver "beyond irresponsible", saying: "If the President wants to actually bring down energy prices, he can do it by solving the Iran problem, not by doing a solid for Vladimir Putin."

The co-sponsor of the Graham Bill, Senator Richard Blumentahl, maintained: "These waivers have nothing to do with our national security, and everything to do with pleasing Vladimir Putin."

The waiver to the Graham Act follows President Trump's diesel deal with President Vladimir Putin that allowed diesel exports, including to the US, in return for softening economic measures. The election sop was not hard to miss, given the sharp rise in diesel prices was impacting transportation, agriculture and construction sectors. Relief was essential, as Republicans facing re-election in the House of Representatives and Senate, see serious problems even in safe seats and deep red states.



TRUMP. Takes a U-turn REUTERS

The deal was that Russia will supply 300,000 tonnes of diesel to the US and global markets immediately followed by an additional 500,000 tonnes in November and a million tonnes "immediately thereafter". On top of it all, Moscow will release another three million tonnes "within a short period of time".

ZELENSKY IS UNHAPPY

What has also not gone unnoticed is that relations between Washington and Kyiv were on a downward slide, with President Volodymyr Zelensky seeing the sanctions waiver and the diesel deal as measures that will put money into President Putin's pockets. Parallelly, there have been reports of Washington scaling back intelligence sharing and placing restrictions on Starlink satellite services, both of which have been officially denied. And President Trump has been critical of the Ukrainian leader, including his latest comment that President Zelensky is being "more difficult" to deal with than Putin.

Europeans have consistently been critical of attempts to appease President Putin, and have naturally been taken aback by the twin shocks that came their way by way of the diesel deal and waiver of the Graham Act. "The irony is that the US, and especially President Trump, has lectured the Europeans for years about the dangers of buying Russian energy; now, it is easing sanctions to buy Russian diesel itself, without consulting anyone in Europe," said Matthias Matthijs, Senior Fellow for Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations.

European leaders are apparently preparing their 22nd set of sanctions since February 2022 against Russia, while countries such as India, the prime targets of the Graham Act for punitive tariffs, may have time till November 3 to breathe easy. After that, irrespective of whether the Grand Old Party remains in the majority on Capitol Hill, all bets could be off.

The author is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

BELOW THE LINE



Reel charm of Vijay

Welcome to the era of peak personality politics in Tamil Nadu, where the line between cinematic fandom and State administration is blurred. The sheer magnetic pull of the State's actor-turned-Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay was on full display recently. An Indian-origin CEO of a global giant, in town to greenlight a massive ₹2,000 crore project, completely went off-script during his inaugural speech. Instead of the dry corporate jargon, the top executive spent a solid few minutes geeking out over the leader's past life as a silver-screen megastar. The CEO smoothly packed his speech with witty callbacks and sharp Easter eggs from the politician's biggest box-office blockbusters. Who knew a public meeting could double as a fan-club convention? Only in TN!

Air India crew see stars

Spill the tea because Air India is serving pure corporate audacity. The airline is practically begging its crew for ideas to save millions through its new Prabhav programme, but the grapevine is buzzing with outrage. The juicy drama? If your brilliant brainstorm saves the management a jaw-dropping ₹2 crore, they'll reward you with... checks notes... 20,000 AI Stars mystery points. Insiders are calling it a low-ball joke, especially since no one knows what these magical points are actually worth. The bosses are putting on a brave face expecting team support, but the crew is ready to throw major shade instead of savings. Talk about a sky-high reality check.

Political silence

Welcome to Karnataka's new era of political paranoia, where the tea is cold and microphones are everywhere. Ever since former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah secured a swift court's injunction blocking media houses and social media channels from airing an alleged sting video, the State's entire political and bureaucratic landscape have gone completely radio silent. Politicians, across party lines, who have historically loved a good pre-emptive gag order, are suddenly treating everyone like a secret agent. The juicy gossip? Off-the-record conversations are officially dead. Bureaucrats are terrified that everyday small talk is being secretly recorded to orchestrate the next major downfall. Karnataka has a history of high-profile resignations triggered by sting videos, but this latest twist has left the media entirely locked out. Talk about total conversational lockdown.

Our Bureaus

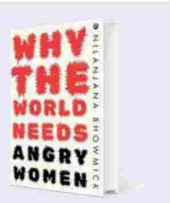
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A seething manifesto

Stories of women who challenged the status quo

BOOK REVIEW.

Pritha Dutt



Title: Why The World Needs Angry Women
Author: Nilanjana Bhowmick
Publisher: Aleph
Price: 699

"For years, I did not know what to do with my anger. I was afraid of being branded an angry woman. Not merely because anger was considered dangerous, but because it was ugly," writes Nilanjana Bhowmick. Women are taught to soften their voices, swallow their irritation, accommodate, forgive and move on.

Anger, particularly a woman's, is often treated as something unbecoming. But the stories Bhowmick writes about turn that idea on its head. A feminist author and award-winning journalist, she brings together the stories of women who have refused to suppress anger, and instead transformed it into action.

Her earlier book, *Lies My Mother Told Us*, won the 2023 South Asia Laadli Media and Advertising Award for gender sensitivity. In *Why the World Needs Angry Women*, she tells the stories of women who have taken their anger into a larger, social force.

ASSERTIVE ANGER

Anger can basically be classified into three types — aggressive, assertive and passive with various sub-classifications. The women Bhowmick writes about have channelled their anger into the 'assertive' type. "Indian history is full of women whose anger altered the course of events, even if only a handful have been allowed to remain in public memory," writes Bhowmick, explaining why she decided to highlight the anger-fuelled stories of 13 contemporary Indian women.

There is the story of Beena Pallical, who fights for the rights of Dalit women; Laxmi Kushwaha, who unleashed a water revolution in her area, channelling her fury at the injustice of how she and countless women had to walk miles to fetch drinking water; and Pallavi Pareek, who works tirelessly to close the gap between the law and action around POSH.

POWERFUL STORIES

What makes these stories powerful is that the women did not simply show anger. They did something with it. As the padwoman of India Maya Vishwkarma points out, "that anger is what keeps me going". We remember women when their anger becomes sufficiently historic, heroic or convenient. But what about the countless women whose refusal, protest, persistence and rage changed something much smaller — their family, their workplace, their village, their community, or another woman's life? This is not a book about everyday anger alone — the anger women are routinely encouraged to suppress, swallow and disguise. It is about what happens when women begin asking: why should this be acceptable? Why should I be silent? Why can't this change?

THERE ARE BOUNDARIES

And perhaps that is where anger becomes constructive. But Bhowmick also makes an important distinction. Not every expression of anger needs to become a movement, a campaign or a public cause. "Sometimes anger does not become anything larger or public. Sometimes it becomes a boundary," she writes in the summing up chapter. I love this. Because women have also been taught that their anger has to be productive to be legitimate. Build something. Fight something. Change something. But sometimes anger simply tells you: no more.

Bhowmick has chosen only a few of the hundreds of women who have converted their anger into action — fighting for justice, challenging taboos, creating opportunities and making visible the issues that women have been expected to quietly bear. The book is inspirational, but it is more than a collection of heroic biographies. It is an invitation to examine our own anger.

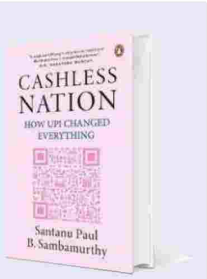
Pritha Dutt is Chairperson at Centre for Gender Equality and Inclusive Leadership at XLRI

When a QR code changed a nation

This is not merely a book about how people pay, it explains how an economic system can be redesigned

BOOK REVIEW.

Sourashis Banerjee



Title: Cashless Nation: How UPI Changed Everything
Authors: Santanu Paul and B Sambamurthy
Publisher: Penguin Business
Price: 899

What exactly happens when a technology becomes so deeply embedded in everyday life that people stop noticing it? In *Cashless Nation: How UPI Changed Everything*, the authors Santanu Paul and B Sambamurthy attempt to answer that question on the 10th anniversary of UPI, by telling the story behind India's extraordinary digital payments transformation. The book goes beyond UPI's spectacular transaction numbers to examine the institutions, personalities, technological breakthroughs, regulatory decisions and battles that made those numbers possible.

Santanu Paul is a computer scientist and entrepreneur who served on the boards of National Payments Corporation of India and BSE. B Sambamurthy's career included heading the Institute of Development and Research in Banking Technology and serving as an RBI nominee director at NPCI. Their proximity to the ecosystem gives the narrative an unusual insider perspective. For anyone interested in banking, technology, public policy, fintech or India's economic transformation, this is not merely a book about how people pay, it is about how an economic system can be redesigned.

THE DISRUPTION

One of the book's strengths is that it refuses to treat UPI as a sudden invention. Its five parts — Big Bang, Long March, Turf Wars, Quest and Conquest, and Billions and Billions — place UPI within a much longer history of financial and technological change. The opening chapter, No Longer Legal Tender, takes the reader to November 8, 2016. The authors write: "It was 8 November 2016, and the day had felt like any other." The apparently ordinary opening makes what follows more dramatic: the announcement of demonetisation and the enormous disruption to India's cash economy. The book, however, does not reduce UPI's rise to demonetisation. Instead, it traces the foundations that preceded it, such as bank computerisation, electronic payments, financial inclusion, Aadhaar, NPCI and earlier payment systems.

That historical layering is important because it replaces the convenient "overnight revolution" narrative with a story of accumulated institutional capability. Technology stories can easily become stories about machines. The book makes them stories about people.

In No Longer Legal Tender, the authors introduce Anil Bokil, who had reportedly pitched the idea of demonetising high-value currency notes to cure tax evasion and corruption in July 2013 to then Gujarat CM Narendra Modi. Later, in an interview, Bokil claimed "the government had only taken a part of our five-point plan", believing if all his ideas were implemented, the pain following demonetisation would have been significantly reduced.

The authors bring policymakers, bankers, technologists, entrepreneurs and regulators into the narrative, showing how different interests collided and eventually produced common infrastructure. The result was not a straight line from idea to success. There were disagreements, resistance, competing interests and technological limitations. This is particularly evident in Turf Wars, which examines the competition between banks and telecom companies over mobile payments and the emergence of NPCI as a neutral institutional platform. The book's anecdotes give the otherwise dry institutional history a human dimension.

THE REAL INNOVATION

Perhaps the book's most consequential insight is that UPI's achievement lies as much in its architecture as in its technology. In the chapter Digital Payments Boom, the authors bring in personal anecdotes from Nandan Nilekani, who worked as an innovation advisor to the NPCI board, to explain the innovation of UPI, the 4-party model. Instead of creating another closed payment network controlled by a single company, India developed interoperable public digital rails on which banks and private technology companies could build competing customer-facing products.

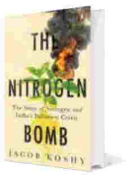
"Left to the big banks and the standard RBI approach, I don't think the 4-party model would have survived," opined Nilekani in a meeting with the authors. He exclaimed how he had to convince Raghuram Rajan, the then RBI Governor, why open and interoperable models are critical for innovation, and how he was immensely grateful to Rajan for overruling objections from the banking sector and clearing the path for the 4-party design of UPI. That distinction helps explain why a small merchant with a QR code and a large corporation can participate in the same payments' ecosystem.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The everyday familiarity of UPI can obscure the scale of the change. The book connects instant payments with financial inclusion, formalisation and changing consumer behaviour. A street vendor, a student, a small business and a multinational company can use the same underlying payment infrastructure. It also shows how network effects matter. Once consumers, banks, merchants and technology companies began participating simultaneously, adoption reinforced itself. The book is particularly useful for bankers, fintech professionals, entrepreneurs, investors, policymakers and students of economics and technology. But its appeal is broader: almost every Indian who has scanned a QR code has participated in the transformation it describes.

Its final provocation is interesting. The book suggests that "digital money is gradually starting to behave like software", money that could become programmable, responsive and capable of performing tasks automatically.

NEW READS.



Title: The Nitrogen Bomb
Author: Jacob Koshy
Publisher: Penguin Viking

The author traces the planetary life story of nitrogen from its early use in cultivation and gunpowder to its discovery in the chemistry of bacterial symbiosis



Title: Beyond the Uniform: Duty, Discretion and Public Trust Citizen-Friendly and Responsive Policing
Author: OP Mishra
Publisher: Niyogi Books

The book examines Indian policing — its colonial inheritances, structural distortions and the need for reform



Title: Band, Baaja, Bhava
Author: Chitra Srikrishna
Publisher: Hachette India

The book answers the questions you never knew you had about the music that surrounds you every day

Short take

Rationing of learning coming to an end, finally

Sriraj Mallick
Rahul Patwardhan

On August 15, the Prime Minister pledged AI training for one crore young Indians, plus a free online coaching network. Big promises always spark the same question: how do we make them real? What must be built so this becomes a fact, not just a headline?

The urgency is clear. The economy needs skilled youth now, not in 2040. Training one crore in AI is vital, but the bigger prize is using AI to teach nearly 37 crore young Indians everything else they need. Extend it to schools, and learning becomes one seamless journey — from first classroom to first job. No other country has cracked this.

The numbers are sobering. Only 4.2 per cent of working-age Indians have formal vocational training. The India Skills Report 2026 says 44 of every 100 graduates aren't employable. And the demographic window is closing: the 15-29 age group, nearly 37 crore today, will shrink to 24.5 crore by 2036. Effort and money aren't missing. What's missing is design.

India's education design was built for scarcity. Good teaching was rare, so the system rationed it: standard courses, large batches, narrow gates at fixed ages. Selection stood in for development.

That scarcity is over. India has long known the alternative. In the gurukul, a guru taught many students, yet knew each one: what they grasped, where they struggled, what they could become.

The path and pace were personal. In 1984, researcher Benjamin Bloom showed one-to-one teaching outperforms 98 per cent of classroom learning. AI now makes a guru buildable for every Indian: software that knows what you know, sees where you're stuck, teaches in your language, adjusts pace and stays until you pass the test a real job demands. When one-to-one teaching stops being scarce, learning no longer needs rationing.

India has done this before. To move money instantly, it built UPI — one shared system any bank or app could connect to. Learning never got such rails, though the building blocks exist: APAAR, the National Credit Framework and Skill India platforms.

Three questions matter. Access: nearly 97 crore Indians are online, and data costs have plunged from ₹269 per gigabyte in 2014 to about 8 today. Teachers: their role grows. Software handles routine teaching, but teachers explain tough concepts, add lessons and step in when a student is about to give up. Employers: they gain a new way to find talent.

Skill becomes a unit — once it's in your passport, it counts, no matter where you learned it. Apprenticeships, internships, on-the-job training can all be validated.

Start where the Prime Minister pointed. Run the one crore AI-training programme on these rails as the first cohort. Then build capability missions that map emerging jobs and create validated pathways into each. Judge success on two numbers: how much faster people learn, and whether they earn more a year later.

Mallick is the CEO of Infopro Learning. Patwardhan is a former CEO of NIIT Ltd. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 19, 2006

SEBI snips pre-issue publicity campaigns

SEBI has placed restraints on publicity campaigns of companies coming out with public or rights issues. The regulator has amended its disclosure and investor protection guidelines to introduce provisions that will bar corporate projections, estimates or any information extraneous to the offer document. This is applicable to all types of corporate information, including interviews by promoters or directors.

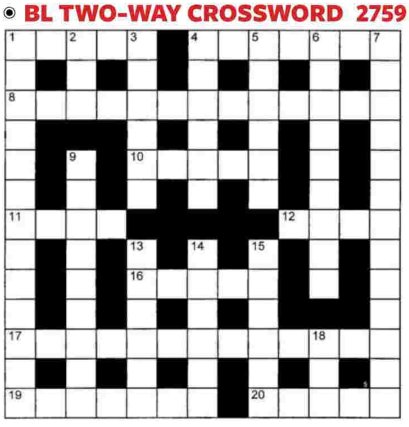
Plug into regional flavour with Yahoo

Despite a globalised world, localisation is the favoured strategy for most companies. This is most apparent in the Internet-driven world, where companies are increasingly exploring ways to reach out to India's non-English speaking population. Yahoo India also seeks to leverage this growing trend of regionalism.

Wipro net rises 46 pc on all-round growth

All-round growth across all business divisions helped Wipro Ltd to report 46 per cent growth in second quarter net profit, exceeding street expectations. It reported net profit of Rs 700 crore on revenues of Rs 3,546 crore, which were up 41 per cent, for the quarter ended September 2006, compared to a net of Rs 478 crore on revenues of Rs 2,506 crore in the previous year.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2759



EASY

ACROSS

1. Explode (5)
4. Dirigible aircraft (7)
8. _____ saves nine (1,6,2,4)
10. A turning-device (5)
11. Admits; has (4)
12. Shift (4)
16. Public, not concealed (5)
17. Thoughtfulness for others (13)
19. Of a root (7)
20. Fear greatly (5)

DOWN

1. Since 1949 in RN, one holding warrant (6-7)
2. Decay (3)
3. Irritable, bad-tempered (6)
4. Yearning (6)
5. Type of bean (6)
6. Objects passed down through family (9)
7. Settled beforehand (13)
9. Held within limits (9)
13. Imaginary belt of star signs (6)
14. Make known (6)
15. Yarn, fibre, thread (6)
18. Solid water (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Sudden break to an access of speed (5)
4. A dirigible one lodged in a different parish (7)
8. The runner's pain that eventually saved nine (1,6,2,4)
10. Turn on gin mixture he is about to have (5)
11. Is the possessor of a sort of snow (4)
12. It is one player's turn to propose the motion (4)
16. With something left, time is not hidden (5)
17. Careful thought given to the recompense (13)
19. He is for thorough reform of the primary (7)
20. Terrible fear of doctor removing top of head (5)

DOWN

1. Naval holder of warrant will put the subsidiary business right (6-7)
2. Car will need this rubbish as encouragement to the donkey (3)
3. Is irritable about how one got lost in the City (6)
4. Is hurting the church in making gain (6)
5. He will smuggle a strip of embroidered cloth (6)
6. They are handed down in order to hire out weaving machinery (9)
7. Peter, reminded of how it was settled in advance (13)
9. Dance in to show how it is held within (9)
13. Acid, short ounce of which is used for twelve houses (6)
14. Lay bare the side surface of the recess (6)
15. One may need a bit of rope to run aground (6)
18. Reserve of diamonds (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2758

ACROSS 1. Debut 4. Scruple 8. Chain gang 9. Tat 10. Meeting 12. Poor 14. Blighty 17. Inch 18. Torsion 20. Ill 21. Intricate 23. Nursery 24. Greet
DOWN 1. Decomposition 2. Brazen 3. Tangible 4. Spa 5. Rage 6. Patron 7. Entertainment 11. Gigot 13. Starling 15. Scalar 16. Silage 19. File 22. Try

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Waiving double standards

Mr Trump discovers merits of national interest

United States (US) President Donald Trump's decision to waive sanctions on Russian imports under a congressional law must be seen as a relief for India both in terms of its oil-import policy and for concluding the long-awaited trade deal, which had stalled mainly on this account as well as Section 301 investigations. On a broader canvas, the 60-day waiver demonstrates the Trump regime's double standards, ratchets up strategic uncertainty over US support for ally Ukraine in its war against Russia, and generally raises global misgivings about US reliability as an ally.

The Lindsey O Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, 2026, gave the President the powers to impose 100 per cent tariffs on major Russian oil buyers such as India and China, to deprive Moscow of revenue to finance its war against Ukraine. When the war broke out in February 2022, and the West drew down Russian oil and gas purchases in solidarity with Ukraine, India chose to accept the deep discounts offered by a traditional ally. This move was excoriated by Mr Trump, who imposed an additional punitive 25 per cent tariff on Indian imports in August 2025, later lifted following an interim trade framework in February this year. India's imports of Russian oil rose steadily from about 2 per cent of all its purchase of crude oil to almost 50 per cent, as New Delhi sought to parry sharply rising global oil prices as a result of Western sanctions. Despite the fulminations from the White House, the validity of this approach, driven by national interests, was underlined by the fact that the US continued to import uranium from Russia despite the war.

This latest waiver, driven by electoral considerations ahead of November midterm polls and signed a day before the 30-day enforcement deadline, has undermined even further the logical tenability of US objections to India's imports of Russian oil. The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz following US-Israel attacks on Iran has exerted upward pressure on prices of oil products, and like others, the American people are feeling the pinch. Diesel prices have risen 66-68 per cent over the year, driving up prices all round. The grounds for the waiver, enabled by Section 115 of the Lindsey Graham Act, were prepared on October 9, when the US Treasury issued a temporary licence allowing the sale and import of Russian diesel into the global market until April 7, 2027. The agreement with Russia will immediately provide the US 300,000 tonnes of diesel, followed by 500,000 tonnes in November and one million tonnes subsequently. Russia will also release 3 million tonnes, depending on the state of its refineries (some of which were recently attacked by Ukraine).

This remarkable geostrategic pivot is also driven by Mr Trump's tensions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has accused the US administration of scaling back military support and intelligence sharing. Delays in supplying promised Patriot missiles and deteriorating Starlink satellite services, which have impacted drone performance and battlefield communications, have been notable setbacks for Ukraine of late. As US allies add their voice to lawmakers, including some Republicans, on the amorality of the latest waiver, it is ironic that Mr Trump should offer the national-interest counter-argument — which he emphatically rejected in India's case a year ago.

Building natural wealth

Environmental accounts can inform policy decisions

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's (Mospi's) new "Strategy for Environmental Economic Accounts in India 2026-30" is an attempt to measure the country's natural resources and ecosystem services in a more systematic accounting framework. The rationale is straightforward. Natural resources form the backbone of economic activities, but their depletion and the services provided by ecosystems are not adequately reflected in conventional measures such as gross domestic product (GDP). The timing is important. As India pursues faster growth amid increasing pressure on land and water, policymakers need to know not only how much the economy produces, but also what it is consuming from its natural-resource base. The strategy follows the United Nations System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) and builds on Mospi's work since 2018. The pollination account can illustrate why this matters. Mospi estimates the value of pollination services at ₹2.66 trillion in 2021-22, up from ₹1.15 trillion in 2012-13, equivalent to roughly 8-10 per cent of crop output. Conventional agricultural accounts capture the value of the crop, but not the ecosystem service that contributes to producing it. Making such a contribution visible can strengthen the economic case for protecting pollinators, supporting beekeeping and designing pollinator-friendly agricultural policies. The same logic applies to water accounts, which can help policymakers assess resource use and groundwater stress, and also to mineral accounts, which can track extraction, depletion and discoveries.

The strategy also has a wider development role. Mospi estimates that environmental accounts can support the assessment of about 40 global indicators across nine Sustainable Development Goals. The new road map expands the coverage to carbon stocks, biodiversity and environment-related economic activities, potentially making environmental information more useful for decisions extending well beyond the environment ministry. International experience shows what such accounting can achieve. The United Kingdom (UK) natural-capital accounts estimated the annual value of ecosystem services at £41 billion in 2023, while the asset value of natural capital was estimated at £1.6 trillion. Such estimates bring nature into discussions of national wealth rather than treating it only as an environmental concern.

But measurement is only the first hurdle. Implementation is the harder test. India has undertaken environmental-accounting studies at state level for years, but differences in concepts, definitions, and methods have prevented these efforts from being aggregated into a consistent national picture. Only 18 states and Union Territories have so far constituted inter-departmental groups on environmental accounting, while Mospi itself identifies a shortage of expertise in the SEEA framework. The next five years should, therefore, focus less on adding accounts for their own sake and more on making them comparable, timely and usable. Common definitions, interoperable state databases, spatially consistent data, and trained officials are necessary. Most importantly, the accounts must enter the decision-making process — from groundwater allocation and mining permits to land-use planning and forest restoration. The real success of the 2026-30 strategy will not be the number of accounts published but whether the depletion of natural wealth can be arrested for sustainable development.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Let the people hedge

Recent measures have gone beyond merely curbing speculation in the foreign-exchange market

There are many questions about the rupee to which one never seems to get straight answers. The first one — often asked by foreign investors when told of India's economic outperformance – is: If growth is going so well and macroeconomic fundamentals are strong, why is the rupee constantly sinking? How has it lost 11 per cent against the dollar since May last year, worse than most of its emerging-market peers?

There may be some reasonable answers to that — for example, that the same foreign investors are partly responsible, in that they're pulling money out at record rates. Foreign portfolio investors have withdrawn over ₹3 trillion from Indian equities so far this year. That's already 1.8 times the amount they took out in all of 2025. And it appears to be accelerating; September was a six-month high with net withdrawals of ₹0.35 trillion, and the same number for the first 11 days of October was already ₹0.44 trillion.



POLICY RULES
MIHIR S SHARMA

But another question is far harder to answer: Why, precisely, can't we let the rupee depreciate? Once again, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) feels called upon to defend the currency against "speculation". This rarely makes sense, particularly as the sight of a central bank mounting a defence attracts actual speculators the same way as blood in the water attracts sharks. Anything that looks like an implicit peg is a particularly bad idea. Speculators can usually view such a thing as an easy asymmetric bet — a licence to print money. Central banks should go out of their way to avoid giving traders any such impression. The RBI, however, seems to have forgotten this rule: It is being generally reported that many believe it has set a floor for the rupee-dollar exchange rate at ₹97 to the dollar.

Reuters has reported that traders estimate the central bank has already deployed $75 billion-80 billion on this defence, through spot sales and swaps, over the past four months. There may be no shortage of dollars in the RBI's coffers at the moment – particularly given the inflow of $133 billion through the foreign-currency non-resident deposit scheme took reserves to a record high in September — but $75 billion is nevertheless a lot of money.

It is possible that the central bank genuinely believes that all this is transitory, and that the rupee is undervalued. Certainly, the governor has himself said in the past fortnight that this might be true, judging against measures like the six-currency real effective exchange rate (Reer). Analysts from HDFC Mutual Fund agree, saying that Reer has fallen to 10 per cent below its 10-year average, a mark last seen during the 2013 "taper tantrum".

So what we're being told is that markets are irrational. Fine, sometimes they are. But that's not a good enough reason to fight them. Individual investors often have to be reminded that the market can stay irrational longer than they can remain solvent. That does not apply to central banks, perhaps. But even they might find that markets can stay wrong after they've deployed all their firepower.

Let's look at what's already been done. The non-resident Indians' bank-deposit scheme was one effort to reduce pressure on the rupee. That made up for some of the hits the RBI took in late March and early April, when it intervened both by selling dollars and by using offshore derivatives. It restricted banks using the onshore forward market; capped net open positions; and later, it cracked down on non-deliverable forwards. By October, it had also raised rates and started tightening liquidity.

In each case, the positive effect on the rupee's value has largely been transient, while the negative effect of heavy-handed regulation may last longer. Certainly, that's what seems to be the case when one looks at the cost of hedging against a weaker rupee. The three-month yield on onshore dollar-rupee forwards — how much extra you have to pay to secure dollars against delivery three months ahead — reached 6.54 per cent. (The same measure was 1.09 per cent in November 2023.)

That came after the latest, most sweeping measures from the RBI, which attempted to detach the oil-marketing companies' dollar demands from the broader market, as well as various other controls on derivatives, including requiring authorised dealers to keep cash with the central bank worth 20 per cent of each high-value derivative contract. Global macro analysts compare this to the tools that the People's Bank of China uses to manage the yuan. Research by IDFC First Bank suggested this new reserve requirement might itself raise hedging costs by about 1.5 per cent.

This will hit not just importers, who will find themselves more exposed to further rupee depreciation – indeed, some reports emerged that banks were simply refusing to sign contracts with smaller companies and shut down online portals that did so — but perhaps also exporters with thin margins such as those in the readymade garments business. Leaving exposure unhedged naturally increases financial vulnerability all round.

It is too soon to declare that what we have seen over the past few months is a major reversal of India's decades-long trend towards liberalising the foreign-exchange market. But market participants are saying quite openly that it is. That should worry us, because such perceptions are self-reinforcing.

And, at the end of the day, the reason that there is demand to hedge against a falling rupee is because most people believe that the currency has further to fall. Denying them the opportunity to hedge will not change their beliefs in any way. And beliefs are what determine market prices, including exchange rates.

A depreciating rupee is not in itself something that should terrify us. Why does it continue to sink? Well, because of the real fundamentals of the Indian economy: It imports too much and does not export enough. You can plug this gap for a while with capital inflows; but, eventually, those may reverse. Then you can try to use reserves or regulation. But none of that changes the fundamental supply and demand equation. Seeing this imbalance, the market attempts to address it by making imports more expensive, so we buy less of them, and making our exports cheaper, so foreigners buy more of them. Fighting this natural process is neither effective nor in the long-term national interests.

AT-1 bonds: The bigger lessons

The Supreme Court has finally drawn a line under one of the most disturbing episodes in India's recent banking history. On October 15, it dismissed appeals by Yes Bank, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and the Union government against the Bombay High Court's 2023 decision to set aside the writeoff of ₹8,415 crore of Yes Bank's Additional Tier 1 (AT-1) bonds. The issue before the court was whether the authorities had proceeded lawfully in imposing these losses. The court held that the administrator appointed to run Yes Bank had no authority to extinguish the bonds after the final reconstruction scheme came into force. Beyond these legal technicalities, the AT-1 saga throws up two bigger questions: First, the conduct of the RBI as regulator; and second, the entire regulatory philosophy of "disclosure-based regulation".



IRRATIONAL CHOICE
DEBASHIS BASU

RBI as a "bystander"

Yes Bank's AT-1 bonds were actively sold to individuals even though the regulatory framework treated them as sophisticated, high-risk securities. This was not merely a case of investors buying something risky and subsequently complaining when the risk materialised. In April 2021, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), not the RBI, completed its investigation into Yes Bank's gross mis-selling of AT-1 bonds. The findings were devastating. Customers were told that the bonds were effectively "Super FDs", offering a 9 per cent-plus return with the appearance of fixed-deposit (FD) safety. In several cases, the term sheet was not supplied, and customers were not given adequate confirmation that they understood the product's features and risks. Sebi said some customers were persuaded to shift money from fixed deposits to these risky securities.

The Supreme Court has called the conduct of Yes Bank, the RBI, and the administrator "questionable", and said that putting investors at the receiving end of administrative lapses would be "highly unfair". It specifically said that tighter scrutiny should have been exercised before individual investors were lured into these securities. The court described the RBI as a "mere bystander" in the whole saga. The data placed before the Supreme Court identified 1,346 retail investors with around ₹679 crore invested in Yes Bank's AT1 bonds. Of these, 1,311 were the bank's existing customers, with nearly ₹663 crore invested. Sebi found that Yes Bank had failed to ensure that investors understood the risks. It penalised Yes Bank and its executives for the mis-selling, including a ₹25 crore penalty on the bank and a ₹2 crore penalty on then chief executive officer Rana Kapoor. Despite these startling facts, the RBI continued to defend the writeoff.

Disclosure-based regulation

There is an even bigger issue here. When India liberalised its financial sector, it embraced what is called "disclosure-based regulation". The philosophy is that the regulator will frame the rules, including disclosure requirements; the seller will provide them along with the product; and investors, acting intelligently and rationally, will decide for themselves what is good for them.

This concept owes something to the old principle of *caveat emptor*, or "buyer beware", which was common in an unregulated world of commercial transactions. If an investor buys a risky product after being told about the risks, the consequences are supposedly the investor's responsibility. This sounds reasonable until one looks at how financial regulation actually works. Regulators do not merely ask financial institutions to disclose information. They make extraordinarily detailed rules about products, capital, eligibility, distribution, advertising, risk profiling, suitability, documentation, sales practices, compensation, and reporting. They specify what banks and financial intermediaries can and cannot do. They issue circulars, master directions, frequently asked questions (FAQs), clarifications, and enforcement orders. The regulatory state is anything but *laissez-faire*, the environment in which *caveat emptor* made sense.

The regulator is sufficiently interventionist to write detailed rules, but then retreats into a hands-off posture to say that investors must bear the consequences when those rules fail to protect them. This creates an extraordinarily convenient arrangement for private interests. The gains from selling complex financial products are privatised; the consequences of bad sales practices are pushed on to investors; and regulatory failure is discovered only after the damage has been done. Like Yes Bank's AT-1 bonds, AAA-rated bonds of Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Ltd (IL&FS) had been wrongly sold, while mis-selling life insurance to senior citizens is an everyday affair.

If AT-1 bonds were so complex and risky that the regulatory framework specified the categories of investors to whom they could be offered, why should disclosure to an inappropriate investor cure the problem? There is a fundamental information and power asymmetry between a financial-services company and an ordinary customer. The former employs lawyers, accountants, investment bankers, risk managers, and compliance officers. It designs the product, determines the sales pitch, trains its employees, and controls the information presented to the customer. The individual investor does none of these things. To pretend that the two parties become equal merely because a disclosure document has been handed over is to confuse formal consent with informed consent.

It is time to confront the hypocrisy of "disclosure-based regulation" and move towards outcome-based regulation. This would mean asking whether the product is suitable for the customer; whether the seller has an incentive to mis-sell it; whether the customer has the capacity to understand it; whether the institution is complying with the rules; and whether the regulator is actually watching. Today, the answer to all five questions is effectively: The investor was warned. This should change.

The writer is cofounder of *www.moneylife.in* and a trustee of the Moneylife Foundation; @Moneylifers

The mystery of the 'Havana Syndrome'

BOOK REVIEW

NICOLAS NIARCHOS

Let's say you are an official of the American government. One evening, while resting in your living room after a long day of work at the United States (US) Embassy in Tbilisi, you are hit by a wave of pulsing energy. Soon your head is aching or ringing. Perhaps blood begins to gush from your ears and nose. What should you do?

Based on the dozens of US soldiers, spies, bureaucrats, spouses, and innocent bystanders whose experiences have been catalogued by the *CBS* journalists Michael Rey and Oriana Zill de Granados in their startling exposé *The Havana Syndrome*, there is some advice you can follow. First, get away from wherever you are. Second, secure your children and pets. Third, expect to fight for health care and recognition for the rest of your life.

Rey and Zill first began reporting on Havana syndrome as investigative producers for *60 Minutes*, and they make the strongest case yet that these hits — some officials estimate there have been thousands — are intentional attacks by Russian agents and their proxies, using a futuristic and sinister energy weapon. The US intelligence community, however, and especially the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the authors convincingly argue, have been desperate to conceal the damage done to Americans as they have served their country abroad, and occasionally at home.

The term "Havana syndrome" was coined in 2017 by a Belgian blogger-cum-nuclear-physicist to describe a set of unusual press reports of traumatic head injuries with no readily evident physical cause. Multiple US intelligence officers and diplomatic officials claimed that they had been hit by some kind of invisible attack. Many of them had been on the job in the Cuban capital when they fell ill, hence "Havana." In August 2017, journalists raised the issue at a White House news conference.

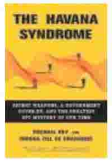
Soon, more cases began popping up all over the world — China, Georgia, Vietnam. Who was behind the attacks? In an internal 2019 report that only came to light in 2024, the FBI, working in concert with the Cuban government, called the cases a potential result of "social contagion," or as Rey and Zill put it, "mass hysteria."

This characterisation seemed to be bolstered by the fact that the weapon left no bullet or chemical behind. "It's not like a pistol where it leaves traces", an anonymous government source told the authors. "It's hard to detect the signal."

Other services were quick to follow in the FBI's footsteps: In 2022, the American intelligence community, led by the CIA, issued an interim report arguing that, in all likelihood, no dirty deeds had been done.

The result is that Havana syndrome is one of the best-known stories in contemporary espionage, but one of the least understood. The authors have clearly worked closely with the victims of these attacks, some of them CIA officers who have come from the shadows to talk about their experiences. The authors' descriptions of their pain, in horrific, visceral terms, feel all too real, and medical analyses of the victims, including MRIs, appear to show signs of head trauma. Some have had to go through extensive surgery to relieve their symptoms.

To get to the bottom of Russia's involvement in the attacks, Rey and Zill partner with the Bulgarian investigative reporter Christo Grozev and his team at the news site *The Insider*. With Grozev's help, they are able to track a secret unit of military intelligence assassins and a wild cast of thugs and spies who seem to have been involved in the assaults, including a general's son with piercing eyes whose youthful appearance earns him the nickname "the murder intern".



The Havana Syndrome: Secret Weapons, a Government Cover-Up, and the Greatest Spy Mystery of Our Time
by Michael Rey and Oriana Zill de Granados
Published by Crown
306 pages $33

Rey and Zill also give a fascinating history of the Kremlin's efforts to build a microwave weapon, which was, they write, likely tested on Russian prisoners. They also flesh out a story first broken by *CNN* earlier this year, reporting that such a device had been bought on the black market by US agents around August 2024 and was now being tested on animals at a military base stateside.

The authors' work is admirable and compelling, but they don't follow every thread. The lack of discussion about the mysterious weapon, for instance, that US troops allegedly used — and that President Trump called "the discombobulator" — in the raid to capture the Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro in January feels like an omission.

More significant, they don't delve into one of the biggest questions at the heart of their story: Why, as the authors allege, were US officials so keen to cover up the attacks? Rey and Zill float a suggestion that the government hasn't looked deeply into the reports because acknowledging the existence of a direct Russian assault on US service members could trigger a dangerous confrontation between the two nuclear powers.

At its core, *The Havana Syndrome* is about the failures of the US government to take care of its own. It's a sharp indictment of a government that spends about a trillion dollars a year on defence, but would rather avoid spending money figuring out how to keep its officers safe on an increasingly uncertain global battlefield.

The reviewer is the author of *The Elements of Power: A Story of War, Technology, and the Dirtiest Supply Chain on Earth*

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Time to Engage Smartly With China

Let them import more of our premium goods

Last week, Piyush Goyal stated that he sees a calibrated rebuilding of India's economic engagement with China. New Delhi and Beijing are in active dialogue to stabilise gains, in the context of surging bilateral trade along with strategic friction. Economic relations pose their own set of concerns for India — the trade balance becoming horribly lopsided and market access in areas where India has the comparative advantage. On its part, India places Chinese investment under tight scrutiny and has erected protective barriers in critical sectors to discourage overdependence on Chinese imports. But both countries share a common interest in globalisation and face similar economic vulnerabilities.

These are the building blocks for an economic dialogue to put ties on a stronger footing than before. Rebalancing trade is a huge area and can sustain constructive negotiation.



India's PLIs can be extended to upstream components now imported from China. Supply chains can be developed with Chinese investments in India to increase reciprocal exposure. Investment screening can be used judiciously to encourage non-controlling capital inflows from China. Work on lowering Chinese entry barriers to IT, pharma and farm goods. Secure preferential supply of rare earths, magnets and technology components from Beijing during export restrictions.

China is offering to import more premium Indian goods. The opportunity should not be passed up. Resumption of travel and logistics needs work on easing visas and encouraging business and technical exchanges. Chinese concerns over discriminatory treatment in public procurement and infra project contracts need to be addressed. In fact, public procurement has actually had a perverse effect of subsidising excess Chinese manufacturing capacity by allowing Indian bidders to continue importing goods from China. Any reclaration will have to result in a fairer outcome. Policy frameworks on both sides are highly nuanced. They sure can benefit from a shared vision of the future.

Before All, Recognise A National Tragedy

Saturday evening's sordid tragedy that claimed at least 19 lives in a stampede in Durga Pujo-celebrating Kolkata is a national tragedy. To not recognise this, is the bigger tragedy. Aftermath of the disaster has been bone-achingly familiar: political whataboutery, compensation to victims, arrests, a special investigation team. What the ticking of these boxes fails to do each time is instil non-negotiable norms and practices to *prevent* such tragedies in the first place.

The cause of the crush — reportedly after a public announcement was made over the loudspeaker by a pujo organising committee member that part of the pandal had collapsed in the rains — will be found: reportedly a massive panic rush towards a severely narrow, Chakravyuha-like exit stretch. But will this calamity change habits — not just of organisers and authorities who have allowed such criminal laxity, but also of the citizenry themselves? Saturday's disaster resulted squarely from the absence of any concrete crowd-control measures. It was compounded by what can only be deemed as 'herd mentality', with crowds more intent on collecting 'one more selfie' at a big-ticket pandal, and pujo organisers capturing 'record turnouts' via drone footage, than caring about safety.



Such fatalism must be stopped. India's crowd management record has been abysmal, even when there have been no carnages. Flouting of basic civic norms and safety regulations — apparently, there were no ambulance services nearby — and lack of common sense seem to add up to a death wish. If authorities — in West Bengal today, and across India tomorrow — do not make implementation of norms and regulations non-negotiable and permanent, the Chorbagan stampede will be another statistic in a litany of future tragedies.

JUST IN JEST

They may not teach this at Harvard Business School, but...

Make Employees Your Customers

India's gig economy is feted — mostly by its own founders on LinkedIn — for 'disrupting' traditional business models. But Snabbit, an on-demand domestic services platform, has truly cracked a new level of disruption: treating its own workforce as its most reliable revenue stream. While legacy companies make the rookie mistake of spending money on employee uniforms, Snabbit has flipped the script. It has raked in ₹1.4 cr of its ₹12.2 cr operational revenue by selling mandatory workwear to its workforce — or 'partners', as the super dupe needs them to be called for tax reasons.

So, if board members ask how to pump up top-line growth amid mounting cash burn — the company reported a net loss of about ₹168 cr — the answer can be, no, not to find more customers, but to onboard 10,000 more gig workers and sell them branded pink tees. Genius. This is like keeping business at bars buzzing even if customers don't show up by asking bartenders to buy the drinks for themselves. But, honestly, why stop at T-shirts? The runway for monetising your own employees is wide open. Instead of providing a salary, channel your inner Musk and charge them a monthly subscription fee for the privilege of working for your company. It's the perfect circular economy where their salary pays for your firm's upkeep, while they get to keep their jobs. You can't get more disruptive than that.

The IDBI Bank sale provides a healthy signal for GoI to move out of non-strategic PSBs and PSUs

Pivot to Privatisation 2.0



Arvind Panagariya

Columbia University, New York: In a much-awaited move, last week, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the sale of a combined 60.72% stake in IDBI Bank held by GoI and LIC to 10955230 Canada Inc, a Canadian subsidiary of Fairfax Financial Holdings Ltd. The sale would fetch the government ₹26,544 cr and LIC ₹26,335 cr.

While some formalities remain before the sale is concluded, the decision can be hailed as a landmark step forward in GoI's larger privatisation programme. Even though IDBI was recategorised as a private sector bank by RBI in 2019 after LIC acquired a 51% controlling stake, its sale is an encouraging sign that PSBs can be sold to foreign buyers, countering the oft-repeated argument that there are not enough potential buyers of Indian banks.

Indeed, the sale of IDBI Bank to a Canadian entity comes on the heels of Japan's Konoike Transport Co Ltd's acquisition last year of Ferro Scrap Nigam Ltd, a PSU Together, these transactions testify to the government's growing comfort with foreign investors as potential buyers of PSUs and PSBs and, conversely, to foreign investors' enhanced appetite for Indian public-sector assets. Integrating even the Indian public sector into the global economy in this manner is essential to modernising the Indian economy, provided national security or strategic concerns are not at stake.



There is enormous wisdom in transferring the bank to private hands now, when its healthy books enable it to attract buyers. GoI and LIC, retaining 15% and 19% stakes, also stand to share in the benefits

After entering RBI's Prompt Corrective Action framework in May 2017, IDBI has undergone a remarkable turnaround. Its gross NPAs fell from 21.25%, then to 2.32% in 2025-26, while its capital adequacy ratio rose from 10.7% to 26.65% over the same period. In 2025-26, the bank's total business exceeded ₹6 lakh cr, with net profit reaching a record ₹9,513 cr.

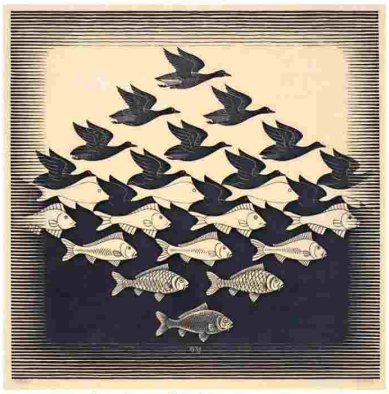
This turnaround may have strengthened the hand of privatisation opponents. They will no doubt argue that GoI is selling the family silver to make up for its failure to raise adequate tax revenue, without asking what price the government has paid to keep that silver shining. Over the years, GoI has mobilised substantial taxpayer funds to keep IDBI Bank afloat. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, infusions into the bank added ₹27,441 cr to the exchequer's bill. In 2017-18 alone, the infusion was ₹12,471 cr.

These infusions do not include the ₹26,367 cr that LIC has invested since acquiring control of the bank in January 2019. There is enormous wisdom in transferring the bank to private hands now, when its healthy books enable it to attract buyers. With GoI and LIC retaining 15% and 19% stakes, respectively, they also stand to share in the benefits almost certain to accrue from the bank's improved performance in private hands.

It is best to close down or sell PSBs and PSUs that regularly drain government finances and add to the taxpayers' burden, even if doing so fails to recover the original investment. Keeping them alive through repeated restructuring packages only rewards inefficiency and amounts to throwing good money after bad.

Nothing illustrates this better than Air India. When the government sold the airline to Tata Sons for ₹2,700 cr in 2022, it had to settle a whopping ₹61,000 cr in legacy debt at taxpayers' expense. Today, many PSEs continue to incur losses. For example, GoI's Public Enterprise Survey 2024-25 (Statement C, pp. 216-18) lists 63 loss-making CPSEs.

Of these, 38 incurred outright losses, and an additional 13 reported either losses or zero profits in each of 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25. Closing or privatising them as soon as possible would free up valuable fiscal resources to build the country's infrastructure and social safety nets even faster.



Let the transformation take flight: 'Sky and Water', 1938, M C Escher

Raising fiscal resources and avoiding sinking them into repeated restructuring packages to resuscitate sick or poorly managed PSUs represents only one source of the gains from privatisation. Another, even more important, source is the enhanced efficiency of privatised units.

More than two decades ago, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government privatised 14 PSUs, transferring management control to private buyers. In a study published in 2013, economist Nandini Gupta compared the post-privatisation performance of these PSUs with that of firms in which GoI had sold only a partial stake while retaining management control.

She found that 'Compared to partially privatised firms, sales and returns to sales increase by an average of 23% and 21%, respectively, when firms sell majority equity stakes and transfer management control to private owners.' Gupta also found that privatised firms performed better than non-privatised firms in employment and worker wages. Therefore, employment and worker-wage concerns, central to the privatisation debate during the Vajpayee era and its immediate aftermath, lacked empirical support.

In 2021, GoI announced the New Public Sector Enterprise Policy, which classified public sector commercial enterprises into strategic and non-strategic sectors. Strategic sectors were confined to four: atomic energy; space and defence; transport and telecommunications; power, petroleum, coal and other minerals; and banking, insurance and financial services. The policy committed GoI to considering all PSUs in non-strategic sectors for privatisation or closure, and to retaining a 'bare minimum presence of the existing public sector commercial enterprises at Holding Company level' in strategic sectors.

It is hoped that the government will move ahead with implementing this policy as the economy's journey toward Viksit Bharat gains momentum.

The writer is chairman, 16th Finance Commission

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

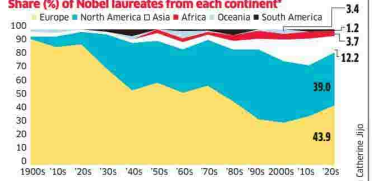
Said America, 'Russian oil? That's a sin!
Any country that buys it, we'll skin!
But their diesel? That's fine,
When the buyer is mine —
It's only a crime when we're not in!'

...

THE NOBEL SHIFT: How Europe's Grip Got Weaker

The 2026 Nobel Prizes were announced earlier this month. Analysis of long-term data points to a changing geographical balance among winners. Europe's share of laureates fell from 93% in the first decade of the awards (1900s) to 44% since 2020. This doesn't mean the global south is now getting its due: Europe's loss is, mostly, North America's (mainly the US') gain. Other regions' share has risen but remains low.

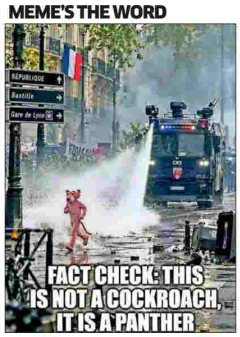
Share (%) of Nobel laureates from each continent*



Organisations that won the Nobel are excluded. Repeat laureates counted separately for each award received. *Based on country of birth.

Source: Nobel Foundation, ET analysis

MEME'S THE WORD



By Anna Catherine Jijo

Get a Tech List to Tick



Abhay Karandikar & Aditya Sinha

Aatmanirbhar, read literally, is being dependent on oneself. Independence or self-reliance is a condition. Dependence on oneself is a capacity, built and maintained. The PM used the word in that sense in May 2020. 'When the country talks about self-reliance, it is different from being self-centred.' In August 2026, he said, 'We must systematically increase our own capabilities and securely protect our interests ourselves.' Capabilities, not walls. The direction is settled. A direction leads to a choice of road.

Results so far are not small. Three semiconductor plants are operational, as is National Quantum Mission. PLIs cover more than a dozen sectors. An indigenous 4G/5G stack has been deployed. Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) has been established by statute. Research, Development and Innovation Fund (RDIF) carries ₹1 lakh cr for R&D in private sector. India sits among the top 5 research nations in most technologies Australian Strategic Policy Institute tracks. GoI has shown it can move capability when it decides to.

Dependence on oneself for everything is not a capacity. It is a fantasy, and an expensive one. No country makes everything. So, the question is not whether to depend on others but for what. Which technologies can India not afford to depend on others for? The US, China, the EU, Britain, Australia and Canada have each answered that question with a list, and they arrange funding, export controls, investment screening and diplomacy around it. India has the instruments. But it doesn't yet have an evidence-based list.

Why does a list matter now?

▶ **Capability compounds** You learn it by doing, and you can't buy it off the shelf when the need arrives. Lead times in chips, engines and grid storage can run into years. So does addressing a denial. A list says where the clock has already started.

▶ **Tech leverage** Technology sovereignty has acquired a new dimension, and supply denial is now statecraft. In October 2022, the US cut off advanced chips and chipmaking tools to China. China responded with controls on gallium and germanium in 2023, and on rare earths and magnets in April 2025. Car plants on three continents stopped within weeks. Dependence is tolerable when suppliers are many. It is a liability when there is one. A list tells the two apart before the denial, not after.

▶ **Market won't generate the list** Private returns to deep research fall short of social returns, so firms underinvest. Technologies that matter most spill into dozens of industries that no single firm can capture. A list tells public and private capital where the state believes the constraint lies, and holds the state to that judgement.

▶ **Quantifiables** Every programme, every mission argues for itself being the most critical, and the sum of the parts is not a strategy. What is not measured, drifts. Three things should be measured:

❶ **Sovereignty risk** How concentrated the supply is, whether a substitute exists, and how fast one can be found.

❷ **Economic impact** How many industries the tech feeds and how quickly the import bill grows.

❸ **Private capital** Where investors already are, so that public money catalyses rather than substitutes.

The list should also ask where in the value chain India sits. Assembly and system integration are not materials, sensors, controllers and capital equipment. Being critical is not the same as being winnable. The list should also say which one is winnable.

Once the list exists, instruments should target it. ANRF can reserve part of its mission portfolio for technologies named. RDIF can issue directed calls against the list. Production-linked and design-linked incentives should reach the components on it, not only the finished goods.

Public buyers, in defence, railways and power, should use innovation procurement and advance market commitments to give the first domestic maker an assured order book. Each component could ideally carry an import-reliance target, reported every year. Most of these instruments were decided in the last two years. A common reference could strategise and bring coherence to all transformative schemes, as GoI has done in last few years.

Arthashastra lists what a treasury must hold, and in what quantity. It does not say hold everything. Kautilya understood that a store is defined as much by what it leaves out. Aatmanirbhar is the same idea. An evidence-based list of critical technologies can turn a portfolio of programmes and missions into a national strategy.



This makes getting things easier

Karandikar is member (S&T), NITI Aayog, Sinha is associate director, FAST India

MELODY FOR MONDAY

Makhna

Tanishk Bagchi

Tanishk Bagchi's 'Makhna' (Sweetheart), from the 2019 film, Drive, is a melody that, when played, hangs in the air, before spreading across like small rain. It's a tune that seems to have existed long before anyone thought of recording it. Its beauty lies in the exquisite ease with which one phrase slips into another, carrying the listener along as Bagchi, Asees Kaur and Yasser Desai sing-weave.

What elevates Makhna to just another love song is the marriage of Bagchi's tune



with Ozil Dalal's and Bagchi's lyrics. The words, playful yet immersive when voice-stitched to the music — 'O Makhna ve makhna/ Ab tu hi hai sansaar mera/ O Makhna ve makhna/ Yeh paagal sa hai pyaar mera' — are as much bhajan as love song.

Beneath the song's glossy surface lies a remarkably moving melodic construction, one that could survive being stripped down simply to a voice. 'Makhna' goes straight to that middle-space where both heart and head reside. It's quite magical how happiness can sound so unsettlingly natural.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Essential Requirement

SHRI SHRI ANANDAMURTI

Intuitional practice, sadhana, is everyone's fundamental duty. Yet, very few people perform this duty. Ordinarily, people are afraid of doing sadhana. Fear keeps them from doing intuitional practice. But how far their fear is justified remains to be seen.

They consider giving up worldly life an essential requirement of intuitional practice. According to them, sadhana cannot be reconciled with ordinary life. They regard emancipation as a privilege of ascetics, unattainable by normal worldly people. This is neither necessary nor logical.

An examination of the advantages of adopting this course shows only two: it provides solitude by removing one from contact with society, which should help one's intuitional practice. It also removes one from immediate contact with the world's temptations and troubles, which may help one to destroy Avidyamaya's influence.

Merely leaving the human world and living in a jungle will not set one free. Avidyamaya will go with you to jungles and mountains, and create obstacles in sadhana by replacing the bustling sounds of society with animal howls. It is natural for a person to get used to their environment and not to be disturbed by it. One may find it difficult to practise sadhana in a noisy environment at first, but after getting used to it, it will no longer be difficult.

Chat Room

Not a Cracker Of a Festival

Apropos the Edit, 'No Crackers, Easy on The Festival Lights' (Oct 16), festival consumption is in for more than a minor jolt with abundant caution dominating the usual spending spree. The skyrocketing inflation in many segments coupled with job uncertainty and catapulting interest rates will dampen the festive spirits. It is not just the energy shock and food sector constraints that are causing the impasse. Non-fuel and non-food segments like apparel, footwear, restaurant services, personal care items, other manufactured products and service sectors are also witnessing a price upsurge for some time. GoI should consider temporary GST relief for essential household items to tide over the crisis.
Rajarao Kumar
Bengaluru

U-Turns Patches On EC Trust Road

This refers to the Edit, 'Back in the SSR, But Why Did It Go?' (Oct 17). The sudden restoration of SSR by EC following the chaotic electoral cycles in Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Haryana, triggered by the introduction of SIR, is just an attempt to save the face of the country's democratic institution, eroded through this stratagem. The timing is particularly significant because the controversial SIR has already elicited concerns about procedural fairness and the possibility of genuine voters being excluded. EC must demonstrate that its approach to electoral roll revision is guided by transparency and the protection of every eligible citizen's right to vote. An institution entrusted with safeguarding democracy cannot expect public confidence merely by reversing a decision.
Gregory Fernandes
Mumbai



Drawing Power From the Plug

Apropos the Edit, 'Let's Have Raj Bhavans Minus Rajas' (Oct 16), it's not the first time that a governor has shown true colours of his political esprit de corps towards the party on the central saddle. If a governor simply obeys the orders of the ruling party, let's be remorselessly honest. What's the sine qua non of the chair of the country's president? History speaks of presidents dismissing several state governments for silly-to-grave reasons. Is there a single instance of such a gallant act against the Centre? That occupant is needed only on Independence Day, Republic Day, and for handing over Padma Shri to Bharat Ratna awards.
Mukund Kumar
Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to **editet@timesofindia.com**

OUR VIEW


PTI

LTCG and STT: optimize taxes that investors pay

India's finance minister hinted at a possible review of these levies that market participants tend to consider a bugbear. Lighter levies are popular but tax principles must guide reforms

Come budget time and demands for concessions, special interest giveaways, tax cuts and so on start filling up the finance minister's inbox. Lobbies get particularly active during this period, preparing white papers for their clients, submitting briefing notes to key bureaucrats or ministers and courting the media to amplify their voice. The finance ministry convenes separate meetings with economists, industry representatives, agriculturists, medium-and-small-scale sector leaders, bank chiefs and executives from the broader financial sector. All their proposals and pleas are heard, discussed, recorded and compiled. Some outlandish demands are binned even before the day is over. But most suggestions are put through a filter, assessed for budgetary impact and then either discarded or moved to a shortlist. Most years, a particular demand tops the list and turns into a talking point. This year, given the sharp fall in stock market indices, there have been calls to review the long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax and securities transaction tax (STT), both of which are widely seen as put-offs for investors.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, to her credit, did not dismiss the idea of a relook out of hand, saying a debate over these levies was healthy and she would hear stakeholders out. Markets responded positively to this gesture. There has long been a measure of discontent over how stock market participation is taxed. The STT was introduced in 2004 after the LTCG tax was retired, imposing a tiny levy on each market trade in lieu of tax-free long-term gains. Oddly, though, STT stayed after LTCG tax was re-imposed on equity in 2018; as a result, investors now pay tax both on trades and gains. This came after civil society clamoured that nil LTCG tax was a privilege for India's privileged. In 2024, its rate was upped from 10% to 12.5%. STT on derivatives has risen too. Differential tax treatment between equity and debt mutual funds has also been a concern. But then, we cannot overlook the revenue angle. Both levies mop up about ₹2 trillion every year, so the Centre may be reluctant to let that go, especially in these volatile times.

There might be a way out of this impasse. An important school of thought posits that developing nations like India should design taxation to meet broader development objectives. The caveat: any concessions should be aptly targeted, limited and not overwhelm tax administration or undermine revenue collection.

The finance ministry could examine a case for reforms that treats debt and equity mutual funds alike. Right now, the system reveals a bias for a specific asset class: equity. A lighter burden on debt funds held by those whose income is in upper tax slabs will be critical if and when India's private sector dials up its capital expenditure. Perhaps a rate rationalization of LTCG levies could cheer equity markets as well. As for the STT, it needs a different approach. The levy originally looked like a Tobin tax, meant to temper market volatility. Like all cesses and surcharges, however, it has become a permanent levy applied to all market participants; STT could be deployed only to stem retail losses in the derivatives segment, or, more broadly, as a tool to contain red-hot speculation should it threaten market disruption. India currently faces a savings and investment distortion at the household level; the classical solution to that has always been through taxation structures.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

Thinking of AI as a global race is not just wrong, it's dangerous

India should resist this notion before it distorts resource allocation and focus on deploying AI well



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If you run an AI company that must raise capital, it is in your interest to hustle investors into signing cheques to buy into the idea that whoever gets to artificial general intelligence (AGI) first will have something akin to an eternal global monopoly. If you run a country whose economy or equity boom depends on such companies, you might see it in your interest to declare that AI is a race. Or if you derive prestige by demonstrating that you have technology comparable with what the incumbent superpower has, then you too have an interest in announcing that you are a challenger in the AI race. None of this, however, means that artificial intelligence technology is a race. A few drivers could well race each other on the highway, but nothing stops other motorists from getting to their own destinations in their own time.

When confronted with evidence that the atomic and space 'races' of the previous century neither stopped new entrants nor conferred decisive advantages on anyone, proponents of a new race argue that this time is different because AI can build better AI on its own and this recursive self-improvement sets this technology apart. This argument is strong, but must satisfy a few conditions to be persuasive. The compounding of capabilities must be disproportionate, faster than the pace at which it leaks to others and must escape the law of diminishing marginal returns. The hype from genuinely impressive achievements is currently standing in for real proof that we could have an AI to end all AIs.

Indeed, a race must fulfil all three conditions: one, there must be a definite finish line; two, crossing it first must entail a big reward; and three, this should not be available to other finishers. None of these is true in the case of AI. Some claim AGI is the finish line, but few can define what exactly it means. It is unclear if the first to reach that yet-to-be-defined mark will be the only one to reap its benefits, not least because most people will be satisfied with any one of the lesser models available to them.

We are likely to find that AGI, if and when we approach it, is more a moving horizon than a finish line. Those who think they are running a race might discover that they are actually on an accelerating treadmill.

What's wrong with calling it a race? Won't feverish competition drive innovation? Well, it would be one thing if it were only private investors putting their money into these ventures. What is happening is that governments around the world are allocating public funds, land, water and energy resources to participate in the race. All this might be better utilized to achieve economic growth, national power and prestige if clearer thinking prevailed.

The race metaphor gives the subject a strong security and geopolitical colour: generals, spooks and politicians gain undue influence on technical and economic decisions. We are already seeing this today in policies of yards, fences, export controls and sanctions, hitting not only AI, but the technology sector as a whole.

The security state displaces the regulatory state. Competition watchdogs and safety regulators are pushed aside. It is amusing to see regular headlines of AI labs postponing the release of their next model due to concerns over safety. The US does not allow aircraft manufacturers, pharmaceutical companies or even packaged food makers to put products in the market before safety certification. If AI labs get a pass, it is because the race metaphor allows them to get away with it.

India should reject the notion of an AI race. There is a case for publicly financed AI development, though not because India sees itself in a race with the US and China. Public policy should focus on rapid adoption and diffusion, which are the pathways of advantage for India. Fellow *Mint* columnist Rahul Matthan calls it absorption. "We have been made to believe that those who build the most advanced AI models will reign over those who do not," he writes in a new essay for Observer Research Foundation, yet "the value of a new technology is only ever realised when it is deployed into the world." This is the most important point as far as India is concerned. His "absorption frontier" is the point at which a sector has re-organized itself enough to turn abundant intelligence into productive gains.

It took decades for electricity to get there. AI will be faster, but public policy can accelerate the process. Countries that have built digital public infrastructure, Matthan argues, have already laid down the first layers of the frontier. India should build the infrastructure for absorption that will remain long after the bubble is gone.

In this month's *Foreign Affairs*, Ruchir Sharma reminds us that "The economist William Nordhaus has shown that only two percent of the value created by innovations of the past, including railroads, airlines, and the Internet, went to the companies that built these networks. The rest went to the consumers and businesses that used the inventions."

Tailpiece: "*Aisa toh aadmi* life *mein doh hi* time *bhaagta hai*... Olympic *ka* race *ho ya* police *ka* case *ho*" (A man runs like this only two times in his life... in an Olympic race or a police case). So said Anthony Gonsalves.

10 YEARS AGO


mint

MakeMyTrip buys Ibibo's India business

JUST A THOUGHT

"There's a lot of debate over the tax commonly known as securities transaction tax. It's healthy to have this debate...

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

The poor have a right to fun and the rich fail to get that

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

A few days ago, when Elon Musk appeared to realize that India was not opening its vast market to his Starlink, he insulted the government and suggested Mukesh Ambani was sabotaging his satcom plans. He said another thing, which was the most dubious part of his lament, yet it would be perceived as his strongest argument in favour of a company that beams the internet from space: "There are many areas of India... with no internet access, which denies children the opportunity for education... Starlink would change their lives for the better... [It] has proven to be essential for saving lives during natural disasters throughout the world."

This is spurious not because he doesn't care about the poor. Maybe he does; who doesn't care for the poor, it costs nothing. It is spurious for a more complex reason. Every time a tech savant wants to flog his stuff in India, he feels he has to explain how it will be useful to the poor. This has shaped a mainstream assumption that what the poor do with their lives is only fighting poverty, curing their maladies, escaping death or valiantly educating themselves beneath a streetlight. In reality, most of the time they are just trying to have a good time, like us. And every time a technology has triumphed among the poor, it has been for the same reason that it became popular among the rich: it is fun.

Entertainment is not the byproduct of progress; rather, progress is a byproduct of entertainment. The internet, too, arrived in India as something dreadfully important. I used to be sick of all the moral messages that suggested the internet would help the farmer farm better. But the internet became popular because they could watch prank videos. Of course, the internet can save lives, but its life-saving qualities emerge from its prevalence, and that comes only from its frivolity.

So, what do I want Musk to say when he curses India for denying him business? "Please let Starlink in; a tribal on a remote atoll in the Andamans can finally watch porn"? This would be honest, and only as ineffective as a billionaire's phoney concerns about poverty.

The perception of the elite that frivolity is a form of luxury, and that the poor are or should be preoccupied with dreary things is one of our worst misdiagnoses of the human condition.

This has led to many useless approaches to taking technology to the poor and to fighting poverty itself. For decades, social workers, if you remember the term, tried to take computers to the poor, always using them to educate and reform. They imagined that ending something as grave as poverty needed a solution that had the same gravitas. It never worked. Over a decade ago, when Mark Zuckerberg wanted to woo India with free internet, he thought he must restrict it to a limited set of sites that were 'useful,' educating the poor about some stuff and of course it included something about that sacred thing—crops. He excluded high-bandwidth services such as videos. It was a colossal failure, and not because some paranoid activists were brainwashed to believe a restricted internet was against the spirit of the internet. Zuckerberg's Free Basics failed because it was boring.

Entertainment is not the byproduct of progress; rather, progress is a byproduct of entertainment

The idea that the poor must be treated as poor is at the heart of our failure to save them. It is, in fact, one of the most destructive mindsets of all Indian governments. It sets the bar low, and bases policies on the idea that the poor must access only things appropriate to their bad luck. In reality, fun is a basic human need, and hence should be a basic human right. Among the sights that should break your heart, if your heart is as fragile as you say, is of a little girl who lives on the pavement storing half a lipstick as though it is an artefact or staring at the frolic of girls her age, or flouncing her hair while looking into the rearview mirror of a bike. The poor are a lot like rich people but with no means.

The root of most of our problems is that people who are lucky enough to be in a position to solve them for other people have to perform a task whose difficulty is underestimated—they have to guess an experience they have never endured themselves. Most people are not good at this.

In treating the poor as different people, do-gooders themselves unknowingly behave like feudal lords. For example, there is the insistence that when the poor kill themselves, it can only be for an economic reason. There is an unspoken view that it is appropriate only for the rich to have mental health issues. As a result, even as physical health care for the poor has vastly improved in India, mental health care is still treated as a luxury, like air-conditioning.

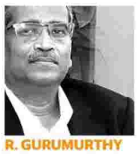
When Zuckerberg offered his doomed free internet for the poor, many activists fought it on an obscure theological principle called 'net neutrality,' the idea that the internet should be the same for everyone. In compensation, some of them suggested that the poor be given some data free every month, but then others objected that it would be squandered by the poor who would watch porn, just as people fear beggars would squander your loose change on "a film." Because only the rich should be able to do these things. The poor are supposed to do serious stuff as though they are actors in a Satyajit Ray film.

The activists influenced India to ban Free Basics. Most of India's poor hadn't experienced the internet then. Months later, Mukesh Ambani's Jio would make the internet affordable. Today, if any activist tries to abolish the internet for the poor on some abstract notion, they might have to do it from a safe house.

GUEST VIEW

Yes Bank verdict: reconsider the economic rationale of AT-1 bonds

The Supreme Court's ruling should make us re-assess whether this instrument really serves the purpose it was designed for



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REUTERS

The Supreme Court's verdict on Yes Bank's Additional Tier-1 (AT-1) bonds raises questions that extend well beyond the losses suffered by investors. It challenges the legal basis of the write-off, the design of the instrument, which was intended to absorb banking losses, and the credibility of India's resolution framework.

In setting aside the ₹8,415 crore write-off, the court observed that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was a "mere bystander," allowing Yes Bank's Common Equity Tier 1 (CET-1) ratio to fall to 0.6%. It also held that making investors bear the consequences of administrative lapses would be unfair.

The judgement does not make AT-1 bonds risk-free. Nor does it invalidate their legitimate loss-absorption role. It does, however, underline a basic principle: financial stability cannot substitute for legal authority, and a crisis does not place regulatory decisions beyond judicial scrutiny.

When the rules fail a rescue: AT-1 bonds were conceived as a source of bank capital that could absorb losses without immediately burdening taxpayers. They are perpetual instruments with discretionary coupons and contractual loss-absorption provisions, occupying an uneasy space between debt and equity.

The Yes Bank dispute raised the question of whether the write-off was authorized under the reconstruction scheme. That determination matters. Investors must accept the risks embedded in their instruments, but regulators must act within the legal framework governing resolution. A rescue may be necessary and successful without every measure adopted during it being legally sustainable.

The court's ruling should, therefore, prompt a review of the resolution framework, rather than a blanket rejection of AT-1 bonds or an assumption that investors are always entitled to recover their money.

The AT-1 dilemma—a capital instrument in search of a purpose: Its fundamental problem is economic. This instrument is callable at the issuer's discretion, but not redeemable at the investor's demand. Yet, in practice, issuers commonly call AT-1 bonds on their first call date, even when retaining the capital might make better economic or liquidity sense. This market convention weakens their credibility as genuinely perpetual, loss-absorbing capital.

A regulatory capital instrument whose effective life is determined by market convention rather than its contractual design raises legitimate questions about the quality of the capital it provides.

There is a deeper contradiction. In business-as-usual conditions, AT-1 ranks ahead of equity in the payment hierarchy. When solvency comes under pressure, however, its holders can face losses before shareholders have necessarily borne equivalent pain. The Yes Bank controversy, alongside the Credit Suisse episode, exposes this tension between the instrument's debt-like appeal in normal times and equity-like vulnerability in distress. The precise contractual and legal circumstances differ, but both episodes challenge the assumption that this hybrid can reconcile competing interests without friction.

The investor dilemma is equally stark. AT-1 offers limited upside, making it unattractive to equity investors seeking participation in growth. Its potentially severe downside makes it unsuitable for investors seeking the relative predictability of conventional corporate bonds. Raising coupons to compensate for risk increases banks' funding costs and can dilute earnings per share.

The original attraction was obvious: equity-like loss absorption without equity dilution. Perhaps it was too good to be true.

India should examine whether AT-1 merits continued recognition as regulatory capital. The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) has decided to phase out AT-1 eligibility, with a transition extending to 2032. India need not copy the decision mechanically. But it should consider a phased transition towards simpler, more dependable capital, while protecting existing contractual rights and assessing the implications for banks' funding costs and lending.

The regulator's lessons: RBI's role deserves measured scrutiny. The court's observations invite questions about whether supervisory intervention could have been more effective and whether the reconstruction scheme adequately specified the treatment of AT-1 holders. The preservation of depositors' interests and the continuity of Yes Bank were important achievements, but we can still learn from the episode.

There is also the issue of misselling. AT-1 instruments were reportedly sold to some customers as substitutes for fixed deposits, despite their fundamentally different risks. Better disclosure, suitability standards and enforcement are essential. Protecting investors does not mean shielding them from disclosed risks; it means ensuring that the risks sold are the risks understood.

Will the confidence of foreign investors be hurt? The timing is significant. Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) acquired a substantial stake in Yes Bank in 2025, while the litigation remained unresolved. It would be reasonable to assume that the pending case formed part of SMBC's investment-risk assessment, though its actual assessment of the verdict is unknown.

One Supreme Court judgement need not deter foreign investment. The judiciary correcting a regulatory misstep can strengthen institutional credibility. What investors need, however, is predictability; transparent rules, consistent enforcement and resolution powers that withstand legal scrutiny.

Daiichi Sankyo's troubled acquisition of Ranbaxy offers a different but relevant reminder of how governance failures can affect confidence in Indian investments. The circumstances are distinct, but institutional credibility remains central to both domestic and foreign capital.

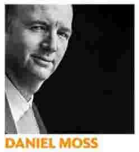
The Yes Bank verdict should prompt neither triumphalism among bondholders nor defensiveness among regulators. It should trigger a serious reconsideration of AT-1's economic rationale, the quality of bank supervision and the legal foundations of resolution.

Financial stability is indispensable. But a rescue that preserves a bank at the cost of confidence in the rules risks solving one problem by creating another.

MINT CURATOR

The global economy has held up but various risks still loom

Rarely has a fairly positive IMF outlook had so many qualifiers



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Policymakers across the world will be tested by today's challenges. REUTERS

Despite everything that has been thrown at the global economy, it remains remarkably hardy. The Iran war is extracting a modest toll, higher interest rates don't appear to have slowed growth so far, and artificial intelligence (AI) is driving an investment boom.

But there are limits to the staying power of the growth for which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) updated forecasts this week. Luck—and reading the right signals from markets—will play a role.

The expansion isn't flawless: The sharp climb in energy prices is causing hardship, extreme weather is forcing up commodity prices and some policymakers worry about excess spending on technologies vital for data centres. Nor is it churlish to contemplate what comes next. Will the inevitable slowdown be mild, as occurred after the dotcom collapse in 2001, or deeper, like the period that followed the failure of Lehman Brothers in 2008 or the shutdowns in response to covid?

Central banks and fiscal authorities will again be called upon. Doing whatever it takes, however, to use the phrase deployed to great effect by former European Central Bank (ECB) president Mario Draghi, might not be so simple.

Budgets in several advanced economies appear close to exhaustion and bond markets are signalling their scepticism that politicians can put them on a sustainable path. France, for example, where students have taken to the streets and long-term rates have skyrocketed, would require a far bigger rescue than Portugal, Greece or a moderately sized emerging market.

But for now, a reckoning is still a way off. Global growth will quicken to 3.4% in 2027, the IMF projected last week, up from an estimated 3.1% this year—itself a slightly better outcome than previously anticipated. The US and China will again be the standouts: America will do a bit better than forecast and China will notch a 4% advance, unchanged from the prior forecast. France, the epicentre of a bond selloff in advanced economies, faces dimmer prospects.

The predictions, released at the fund's annual meeting in Bangkok, aren't so much cause for celebration as a recognition that the worst hasn't come to pass. Twelve months ago, the world was still digesting steep US tariffs and traders were wringing their hands over the future of the dollar. But the 'Sell America' narrative fizzled and Washington's other own goal, the jump in oil that followed its attack on Iran, hasn't shredded the outlook.

Contemporary hurdles might be better understood in perspective. It takes a lot to knock growth out of the 3% vicinity. The pandemic led to a decline in world GDP of 2.7%, and the subprime meltdown pushed output slightly into negative territory.

Today's nominally solid scenario depends on policymakers not making major mistakes. For now, they are saving and doing the right things. The Federal Reserve is likely to hike rates again after nudging them up last month and the ECB and central banks in India and Australia made similarly hawkish noises. In many instances, inflation remains higher than targets.

What happens the next time the economy gets into a really serious scrape? Who rides to the rescue? And will it be as effective as before? It will ultimately be left to central banks because governments, which control fiscal policy, are on treacherous ground. The capacity of national treasuries to borrow at competitive rates has been diminished by soaring bond yields.

That could be a blessing in disguise, according to Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who was finance minister during the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-09 and led the central bank before entering politics. The fixed-income upheaval provides leaders with an opportunity to put their house in order because budget compromises are often reached when dire consequences loom. It's vital this chance be seized, he said on a panel with IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva at the city-state's national university last week. Georgieva borrowed from rock legends Led Zeppelin, likening mounting debt to a "stairwell"—just not to heaven.

While we might not be in hell, rarely has a pretty good outlook for the global economy come with so many qualifiers. They may be more consequential than the baseline forecasts. The last time the IMF held its showcase in Thailand, in 1991, the kingdom and its neighbours were on the cusp of years of runaway growth. The Soviet Union had collapsed; globalization and prosperity were the buzzwords. Few saw the currency crisis and deep recession that would envelop Asia before the decade was out. The spark was Bangkok's decision to abandon efforts to prop up the baht.

Thailand's own economy is travelling reasonably these days. Yet, like the global one, it isn't amazing. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

India's growing economy requires financial stabilizers

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The Indian economy is in a strange spot, expected to register high growth but also vulnerable to multiple eddying currents emerging from within and outside its borders. The impact of these multiple influences—geopolitical, trade, economic, monetary or social—could see some trying times in the months ahead. The Indian economy has displayed some resilience in the past and international agencies expect growth to retain buoyancy. Yet, questions are being raised whether the economy can truly weather the coming storm, especially since a procession of structural weaknesses and faultlines have queued up.

One minor but overlooked problem sums up the quandary in store: growing household investment in gold and silver, signifying productive resources being salted away in unproductive assets. Data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) with base year 2022-23 shows that Indian household investment in gold and silver jumped 32.3% in just the two years to 31 March 2025.

While updated numbers for the subsequent 18 months are not available, trade data provides some indications: gold and silver imports jumped almost 34% between 2024-25 and 2025-26. Worse, in just the first three months of the current fiscal year, imports are up 37% compared with the same period last year. Admittedly, some imports are expected to find their way into value-added exports, but data shows it to be negligible so far. It may therefore be assumed that a large part of imports is finding its way into household lockers.

This is likely to become a speed-breaker for economic management, especially given the problems coming down the turnpike.

The first worry is the fallout from El Niño and the resultant deficient monsoon, 13% less than the long period average. The Maharashtra government has officially declared a drought in 75% of the state: 265 of the state's 358 *talukas* or *tehsils*. Many other states have joined in: Karnataka (226 of 240 sub-districts) and Andhra Pradesh (388 of 688 sub-districts) have also officially declared a drought. Some more states are expected to follow suit. These declarations will now force state governments to provide monetary support to the rural economy, with many states looking to New Delhi for additional assistance.

This unplanned expenditure may force both the Centre and states to ratchet up market borrowings. The Centre, by September end, had already borrowed ₹813,506 crore from the market. As demands for emergency assistance go up and threaten to derail the Centre's residual borrowing programme (nearly ₹7.9 trillion for October-March), the diversion of household savings to precious metals is likely to put pressure on funds availability and rates.

This comes on top of consumer inflation getting generalized. The argument so far was that inflationary impulses were isolated to the food and fuel items. Latest data shows that price pressures are now seeping into many other components of the price index. And while RBI recently raised its benchmark interest rates, it may have to press on the rate-hike pedal a bit harder to counter incipient inflationary pressures in the economy.

A storm may be brewing on account of structural weaknesses that mustn't catch us off-guard

There is another reason why RBI's future rate actions have become somewhat inevitable. The US Federal Reserve has also jacked up interest rates, which, combined with interest rate increases by other central banks across the world, signals the end of an era marked by abundant liquidity, low benchmark interest rates, bulging central bank balance sheets and cheap financing. This has, among other reasons, unnerved foreign portfolio investors, and they have repatriated close to $27 billion so far from Indian markets this calendar year.

Logic says that fresh currency inflows thanks to a souped-up foreign deposit scheme and foreign investment into IDBI Bank should act as a counterfoil to surging outflows. And yet, RBI recently introduced harsh measures to stop a slide in the rupee value, somewhat like bringing a bazooka to a fistfight. As a next step, RBI is likely to push hard on its interest rate buttons.

The existing package of geopolitical conflicts, volatile energy prices, elevated inflationary pressures and rising interest rates could get a further shock from the artificial intelligence (AI) bubble bursting. The gargantuan volumes of investment into AI companies could stop abruptly if AI-related profits and productivity gains fall short of expectations. This could detonate a chain of collapses and bankruptcies that could reverberate across the global economy, including India's. While the AI-related investment spree has largely bypassed the country, there would be no escaping its second-order effects.

As inflation and interest rates rise in a stressed economy where jobs and real wages have been shrinking, more savings might get diverted to shiny metals. This is not an ideal situation. During times of crisis, financial savings provide stability; they act as a buffer against adverse economic events by allowing households to finance consumption without having to borrow at above-normal rates. While households can still leverage their gold and silver to borrow from the financial system, as has been happening over the past few years, it has the potential to increase indebtedness and financial stress.

Growing bullion savings sends another signal: households are either left with no alternative saving avenues or lack confidence in the current state of the economy.

Opinion

MONDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2026



TARIFF TRADE-OFFS

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio

"I think the President wants to take the 60-day period of time to sort of analyse what imposing both sanctions and tariffs will mean to the global economy, and even to the US economy

Making auctions work

Even as India adopts a modified closing auction, Sebi must build confidence in its original design

INDIA'S FUTURES AND options market has grown spectacularly, with derivatives turnover reaching nearly ₹53 lakh crore in March. The surge began during the pandemic, when trading became a popular pursuit among young investors. A deep derivatives market can aid liquidity and risk management, but its expansion has also exposed serious vulnerabilities. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) estimates 90% of retail traders lost a combined ₹91,000 crore in FY26. Concerns about manipulation by large players have added to the regulator's worries. The Closing Auction Mechanism (CAS) was intended to address some of these weaknesses by improving closing-price discovery and making it harder to influence benchmark prices through late trades. Yet its introduction produced unsettling results. On one occasion, the Sensex plunged 2,000 points within minutes, while a Bankex option jumped 14,700%. Such extraordinary swings, coupled with allegations of gaming and penalties imposed on some market participants, including a major foreign firm, badly shook confidence in the new arrangement.

Sebi has now opted for a pragmatic retreat. From December 7, settlement of expiring equity derivatives will again be based on continuous cash-market trading rather than the closing auction. The auction itself will remain, albeit with a shorter transition window, and will continue to determine official closing prices. This is a modification, not an abandonment, of CAS. The distinction matters. Closing auctions are established features of major global markets, offering a concentrated pool of liquidity and a transparent reference price for investors, index funds, and mutual funds. Sebi's objective was sound. The difficulty lay in implementation. Market participants appear to have been given too little time to adapt to a mechanism capable of producing abrupt price movements precisely when derivative positions were being settled.

Sebi's consultation paper outlined two possible remedies: a blended volume-weighted average price incorporating the final 30 minutes of continuous trading and the 10-minute auction, or continued reliance on the continuous-session average for settlement. Its decision to delink derivatives expiry from auction prices should reduce the stakes attached to last-minute swings. Shortening the transition from continuous trading to the auction from five minutes to one may also narrow opportunities for strategic positioning, although it cannot eliminate manipulation. There is a broader concern about whether the auction has attracted sufficient participation to deliver reliable price discovery. Average closing-auction turnover on the NSE has been around ₹2,900 crore since introduction, below 1% of daily turnover except on three index-rebalancing days. Thin participation can make prices more vulnerable to large orders, undermining the very confidence the mechanism is meant to inspire.

Sebi should thus treat the revised framework as a breathing space, not a final destination. It must scrutinise trading patterns, strengthen surveillance, consult market makers and institutional investors, and publish evidence on how the auction performs. It demands clear safeguards against concentrated orders and a credible explanation of how exceptional auction moves will be handled. A phased return to a fuller CAS, reportedly possible in about a year, should rely on demonstrably better liquidity and more stable outcomes instead of an arbitrary deadline. Global experience suggests closing auctions can work, though they aren't immune to disruption. India shouldn't discard a useful reform because its launch was turbulent. Equally, regulatory ambition can't substitute for market readiness. The immediate changes should calm expiry-day trading; the harder task is to earn participant trust in the original mechanism.

US DEBATE TAKEAWAYS

AS PASSIVE INVESTING CONTINUES TO GROW, INDIA MUST BALANCE EFFICIENCY AND RESILIENCE

India's passive turn

SAUMITRA BHADURI

Professor, Madras School of Economics, Chennai



THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS of passive investing long predate its recent rise. In 1952, Harry Markowitz formalised the modern portfolio theory, showing that investors could construct an optimal portfolio by diversifying across assets rather than attempting to pick winners. The key insight was powerful: what matters is not individual securities, but the portfolio's overall risk-return trade-off.

This logic laid the groundwork for passive investing. If markets broadly reflect available information, the most efficient strategy for most investors is simply to own the market at low cost. This idea moved from theory to practice in 1976, when John C Bogle launched the world's first index mutual fund, the Vanguard 500 Index Fund.

Nearly five decades later, the transformation is most visible in the United States. Passive funds accounted for more than half of the US fund market by the end of 2025, and passive strategies represented roughly 63% of US equity-fund assets. By June this year, passive US funds had about $22 trillion in assets.

The scale of this shift has changed the debate. The question is no longer simply whether passive investing is good for investors. It is whether a market increasingly populated by investors who follow rules rather than valuations behaves differently. At the heart of this debate lies a simple but powerful idea: passive investors are largely indifferent to price. They buy and sell based on index rules, not valuations. In economic terms, they exhibit highly inelastic demand, suggesting that they do not meaningfully adjust their holdings in response to price changes.

This concern is no longer speculative. A growing academic literature argues that modern financial markets are far more inelastic than traditional theory assumes. In their influential work, *The Inelastic Markets Hypothesis*, in 2021, Xavier Gabaix and Ralph Koijen argue that if a large share of investors follows rules-based strategies, then demand becomes insensitive to price. As a result, supply-demand imbalances are resolved primarily through price changes rather than quantity adjustments. Their empirical estimate suggests that $1 of inflow can raise market value by around $5, challenging the standard efficient markets framework.

Recent empirical work further strengthens this argument. The paper by Vayanos and Zheng (2025) finds that passive flows have disproportionately large effects on the prices of the largest firms, and its results show that the largest S&P 500 firms experience the strongest return and volatility responses following passive-fund inflows.

> **A market dominated entirely by passive investors would lack the informational foundation required for effective price discovery**

However, this does not mean that passive investing automatically creates a bubble, or that prices cease to reflect fundamentals. It does suggest that the composition of investors matters. If a growing share of capital is allocated mechanically, prices may become more sensitive to flows and less sensitive, at the margin, to investors who are actively evaluating fundamentals.

Nonetheless, even in the US, where these concerns are most pronounced, passive funds have delivered undeniable benefits: lower costs, greater transparency, and improved access for retail investors. Decades of performance evidence show that most active funds struggle to consistently outperform their benchmarks after fees, reinforcing the appeal of low-cost indexing.

What does this mean for India?

India is following the same broad trajectory, although it is still considerably earlier in the transition. Passive investing has grown from only about 3% of total mutual-fund assets under management (AUM) in FY17 to around 18% by the end of FY26. Passive AUM reached about ₹14.63 lakh crore at the end of FY26, up from ₹11.13 lakh crore a year earlier.

This is a remarkable structural change. However, it needs perspective. India is not yet close to the degree of passive dominance seen in US equities. Compared to Asia, India sits in the middle: Japan has seen substantial passive expansion, while China remains more dominated by retail and active strategies. The question for India, therefore, is not whether passive investing should grow. It almost certainly will.

At current levels, the rise of passive investing in India is largely beneficial. It lowers costs for investors, improves transparency, and introduces competitive pressure on active fund managers. In a market where retail participation is expanding rapidly, passive funds offer a simple, efficient entry point.

However, the US experience highlights risks that could become relevant over time. First is market concentration. Indian equity indices are already relatively concentrated, with a handful of firms accounting for a large share of market capitalisation. As passive inflows grow, these firms may attract more capital simply because of their index weights, reinforcing their dominance.

A second concern is price discovery. While passive investing does not eliminate it, it reduces the share of investors engaged in fundamental analysis. As passive share rises, markets may become less responsive to new information, with prices increasingly influenced by flows rather than fundamentals.

A third risk is flow-driven volatility. If markets are indeed inelastic, then large inflows can inflate prices, while outflows can amplify declines. In such a system, volatility may not disappear but instead become more episodic and driven by capital movements.

However, these risks may not be imminent. India's passive share remains well below the levels at which such distortions become dominant. Active managers, proprietary traders, and retail investors continue to play a central role in setting prices. In fact, the current growth of passive investing may enhance market efficiency by disciplining high-cost active strategies and improving overall allocation.

The real challenge lies ahead. As passive investing continues to grow, India must balance efficiency and resilience. A market dominated entirely by passive investors would lack the informational foundation required for effective price discovery. Conversely, a market dominated by high-cost active management imposes unnecessary burdens on investors.

India is not yet at the tipping point. However, the emerging trend suggests that the question is not whether these issues will arise, but when.

A reform worth making, half-made



PRAGATI

Associate Fellow, Pahlé India Foundation

India's new price index: The move from WPI to PPI was overdue, but the execution has gaps that five years may not be enough to close

MUCH HAS BEEN written and many questions raised on India's GDP. Now that the dust has settled, and the growth numbers appear to be fine, there is broad consensus that the methodological changes were overdue.

That has, however, ended the conversation too early. Among the most consequential changes in this round of revision is one that has drawn far less scrutiny than the GDP figures: India has published its first producer price index (PPI) and begun retiring the wholesale price index (WPI) it has relied on since 1942.

It is worth considering how long this took. India's WPI was first published on January 10, 1942, and the Office of the Economic Adviser has since found registers suggesting compilation as early as 1915. The US had been tracking its own WPI since 1902. Both countries, then, were measuring WPI in the early decades of the last century. The US moved to a PPI in 1978. India is making the same transition in 2026—a gap of nearly 50 years.

The reform itself is not in question. Where the WPI captures a price at the point of bulk sale, a PPI measures what a producer actually receives at the factory gate, net of taxes and trade margins. It also covers services—which the WPI does not—in an economy where services are more than half of output. And it is what the IMF has pressed for, because a PPI makes double deflation possible: deflating output and inputs separately rather than assuming their prices move together.

What is in question is whether what has been released is yet the thing it is being described as. On three counts—how prices are collected, what the trial index means, and how little of the services economy it covers—the answer is not yet.

Start with collection. The standing obstacle was always said to be that producers would not part with their prices, calling them a trade secret, and that unlike a wholesale price, there is no one else to ask. The clarification since offered is that this was never quite true. For manufactured products, the prices underlying the WPI have substantially been collected from producers at the ex-factory level since the 2011-12 series. If so, the obstacle was surmounted long ago, and the delay needs another explanation.

> **India's input PPI is labelled 'trial' with no equivalent framework—no criteria for graduation, and no date by which it is expected to arrive**

How the government secured the cooperation of Indian companies remains unanswered. The question is not idle, because a promising alternative sits unused. GST e-invoicing already generates transaction-level B2B records (invoice value, quantity, HSN code, counterparty)—precisely the specified-transaction information a PPI needs, with no respondent burden at all. Whether it is being used, or is planned to be, remains unclear.

Then there is the matter of what a collected price actually is. There is no single price. A producer may sell to a large distributor at one rate and a small one at another, so what he supplies is an average, and India's methodology behind that average is unspecified.

Compare the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. It splits a firm's revenue by buyer type, order size, and terms of sale until it reaches a single transaction: one product, one buyer, one set of terms. A producer selling to two kinds of distributor never averages. The averaging still happens, but in the index formula, where it is documented and auditable, rather than in the respondent's books, where it is neither. Nor is the BLS unusual: the ONS, Statistics Canada, and other advanced statistical agencies publish handbook-level documentation aligned with the IMF/OECD Producer Price Index Manual.

The input PPI (IPPI) raises the second count. It has been released for manufacturing alone, because there the nominal estimates of output and intermediate consumption are compiled annually from robust sources (MCA-21, ASI, ASUSE, PLFS). What the plan is for other sectors is unclear.

The government has also called it a "trial index", and says the label is deliberate: it is meant to test data quality and gather feedback before becoming a full, policy-grade index, with further refinements in coverage and methodology likely as more data arrives. That is candid, and it raises the obvious question of how reliable the index is in the meantime.

Elsewhere, the word "trial" carries an answer. The UK maintains a defined category, "official statistics in development", with published rules on what such a series may and may not be used for, and a commitment to a review timetable. India's IPPI is labelled "trial" with no equivalent framework—no criteria for graduation, and no date by which it is expected to arrive.

The third count is coverage. Services account for most of the Indian economy, yet the new services PPI (SPPI) extends to only seven sub-sectors: banking, securities transactions, insurance, pension fund management, railways, air passenger transport, and telecom. By contrast, the US samples a majority of its service industries, and the Bank of Japan has published a SPPI since the mid-1980s covering more than a hundred items. Against that, India's quarterly SPPI reads as a pilot rather than an index.

With the WPI due to be discontinued in five years, the gap between the announcement and the instrument is not merely academic. The WPI, now covering as many as 957 items, remains the reference point for indexation, cost escalation, and contract pricing across industry—determining cash flows, tariff revisions, and how risk is shared between parties. Its replacement will eventually require businesses to rethink how they price and index their contracts.

That is the deadline against which all of this should be read. Every gap identified here has to be closed within five years, or a great many contracts will come to rest on a series that has not yet grown into the economy it is meant to measure.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

The boss who wants to be roasted

THERE IS SOMETHING faintly alarming about a boss who invites employees to insult him. Most employees spend their working lives trying not to do precisely that. Yet Pratham Jindal, a 25-year-old entrepreneur from Chandigarh, has apparently decided that being roasted by his staff is an excellent management practice.

Jindal, who runs a content business called Praper, recently attracted attention by describing his unconventional workplace philosophy. Employees can openly make fun of him. Those who sacrifice a day off receive double pay. Company numbers are discussed transparently, month-end parties are taken seriously, and troublesome clients may be shown the door rather than inflicted upon employees.

It sounds suspiciously like an office designed by employees rather than management consultants.

The roasting arrangement is particularly intriguing. In most Indian offices, telling the boss that his latest strategy is ridiculous requires considerable courage, preferably another job offer, and perhaps a resignation letter already drafted. At Jindal's company, apparently, it qualifies as team bonding.

But the invitation raises an awkward question. Just how honest can employees afford to be when the person laughing at their jokes also signs their salary cheques?

Consider the possibilities. A junior executive observes that the boss's presentations are unnecessarily long. Everyone laughs. Another suggests that his leadership style resembles a malfunctioning GPS, constantly recalculating without reaching anywhere. More laughter. Then somebody remarks that the company might perform better if its founder spent less time posting about its wonderful culture on social media.

At this point, the temperature in the room might change.

The difficulty with corporate candour is that it's usually encouraged by precisely those who have the power to punish it. Leaders routinely declare that their doors are always open, although employees quickly learn that some opinions are best left outside.



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Organisations have developed elaborate rituals to overcome this problem. There are anonymous surveys, town halls, skip-level meetings, and feedback sessions. Employees are urged to speak truth to power, provided the truth is expressed constructively, respectfully, and preferably without identifying anyone responsible.

The result is a peculiar corporate language in which incompetence becomes an opportunity for improvement, confusion becomes alignment challenges, and a disastrous decision becomes a valuable learning experience.

Roasting, at least, dispenses with these linguistic gymnastics. It allows criticism to arrive disguised as entertainment. The boss can laugh without admitting a mistake, and employees can complain without appearing disloyal.

Yet even this apparent democracy has limits. A joke about the boss's haircut is harmless. A joke about his inability to make decisions is potentially career-limiting. The distinction depends less on the joke than on the boss's capacity to tolerate it.

To his credit, Jindal's other practices suggest that his approach extends beyond office theatrics. Paying double for sacrificed holidays and protecting employees from unreasonable clients are more substantial gestures than installing a table-tennis table or distributing motivational merchandise. Still, the real test of openness is not whether employees can ridicule their boss at a designated gathering. It is whether they can disagree with him during an important meeting, challenge an expensive mistake, or question an unrealistic deadline without calculating the consequences.

For Indian firms, accustomed to elaborate hierarchies and considerable deference to seniority, this is an especially interesting experiment. The traditional boss expects respect as a condition of employment. The modern boss increasingly wants affection as well. Perhaps Jindal has discovered a way of making authority less intimidating. Or perhaps roasting will become another corporate ritual, complete with guidelines, approved jokes, and a feedback form assessing whether everyone enjoyed themselves. Naturally, participation would be voluntary, though attendance might be compulsory.

The ultimate irony would be an HR department issuing a warning to an employee for taking the roasting session too seriously.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hasty decision

Apropos of "Fairfax-IDBI: A landmark deal" (*FE*, October 17), the government is happy that at last it has clinched a perfect deal of disinvesting its holdings in IDBI Bank and facilitated the flow of sizeable capital revenue to its kitty, besides opening the doors of foreign capital inflow in banking. IDBI Bank has staged a turnaround to become a profit-making bank. Its KPIs, ranging from operating ratios, net NPA, return on assets, capital adequacy ratios, and revamping of tech application, improved considerably. At this juncture, the Centre could have pressed a pause button and reviewed its divesting decision and allowed the entity to grow and compete with other private peers, thus boosting its growth potential and safeguarding employee morale instead of cutting the umbilical chord abruptly.
—RV Baskaran, Pune

Balancing a rescue act

Apropos of "Rules before rescue" (*FE*, October 17), the Yes Bank AT1 bond controversy highlights the need to protect investors without undermining regulatory authority. While rescuing a troubled bank may be necessary to preserve financial stability, losses cannot be imposed arbitrarily or without clear legal backing. Investors must understand the risks attached to complex financial instruments, but regulators must also ensure transparent disclosures and fair procedures. The government should establish clear rules governing resolution, compensation, and accountability before a crisis occurs. A predictable legal framework will protect investors, strengthen confidence in banking, and ensure financial stability is not achieved at the cost of legitimate rights.
—Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

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CONTRAPUNTO

I wouldn't attach too much importance to these student riots. I remember when I was a student at the Sorbonne in Paris, I used to go out and riot occasionally

– JOHN FOSTER DULLES

Kolkata Is Hurting

Managing large crowds demands single-minded focus, so do SOPs for the immediate aftermath

It's a dreaded first no city wants – Kolkata witnessed its first Durga Pujo stampede: one pandal claimed at least 19 lives, a crush was averted at a second, four other big Pujo pandals were pre-emptively closed to public, and many others muted illuminations and toned down festivities, in deference to the tragedy. Some organisers in the affected North Kolkata pujo have been arrested, probes initiated, compensations, and jobs announced. But none of it may ever completely answer shattered relatives' queries on poor crowd management, the chaos post the event, and the reportedly insufficient police presence for crowd control. Repeatedly, across every such tragedy, the one issue that glaringly rises above all, and remains unaddressed, is that the world's most populous country has not prioritised plans to avert stampedes, in any comprehensive manner.



Crowd surges are bound to happen – if it was a sharp spell of rain this year, it was a short circuit last year when a stampede was averted; often exits are blocked, there are botched up announcements, the trigger-list does not bear repeating, they are so oft repeated. Question is, first, who monitors daily whether festival organisers are sticking to the script? Do they have ample support? Second, who is first responder? Third, why are there reports that govt hospital being ill-equipped led to confusion over whether injured should be taken to private ones? Who's in charge in the immediate aftermath? A stunned suffering crowd left to its own devices is the worst remedy for any tragedy.

There are lessons to be learnt. That police and security were not present in sufficient numbers is one claim by locals. All committees will check force rationalisation. The other charge is the narrowing of exits. The pandal design itself may have been a factor – who grants permission when average footfall in a Kolkata pujo pandal can be as much as 4L-5L daily? The risks of narrow entrance-exits are well-established. Add to that complications when outer spaces are restrained with rope barriers. A dampener for all, but for one part of Kolkata, Durga Pujo is all but over – police imposed prohibitory orders, reportedly fearing protest crowds. Kolkata is hurting. It needs a healing touch.

Big Net Gain

Internet should be a fundamental right in a digital economy. SC's done well to recognise this finally

Swedes got universal franchise only in 1921, but they had freedom of press since 1766. In India, several fundamental rights are imperfectly enforced, but does that close space for new rights? Supreme Court's shown it doesn't. By recognising internet access as a new fundamental right, SC has taken a progressive position. This is not the 1990s, when internet was a niche, nerdy thing. It's not the 2000s, when we were still unsure about internet's uses, beyond watching cat videos, showing off on Facebook, and venting on Twitter. Now, we learn, work, associate, recreate on it. Or, as SC said, internet is the marketplace of ideas, creative expression and information, and its value is priceless.



In a fair and equal society, can some have access to what's priceless, while others are deprived? In one thought experiment, in 2017, economists estimated that Americans got $8.5tn worth of "consumer surplus" – utility of something beyond its price – from internet when US GDP amounted to $19tn. For the world today, internet's consumer surplus would be incalculable. So, nobody should be denied access to it. Estonia was the first to cotton on to this idea in 2000, Finland made broadband a legal right in 2009, the same year that France recognised internet as a basic human right tied to freedom of expression and communication.

SC's taken the same line, while adjudicating on restricting children's internet access. It's said right to access and use internet is part of the rights to life and liberty, and freedom of speech and expression. Efforts to protect children from online predators must be directed at foul content and those responsible for it, not curbing children's access. Internet is a public good, a critical resource. On a utilitarian scale, it bestows the greatest good of the greatest number. So the case for making it a fundamental right has never been clearer.

In 2006, physicist Russell Seitz estimated the weight of internet – not servers and cables but moving electrons – at around 50 grams. Today, it might be a bit heavier, but still light enough to carry in one hand. The most precious manmade thing ever. And all of us are finally *entitled* to it.

A Bouquet's Lament

What do flowers endure wire and cello tape for?

Ratna Manucha



I was walking past a row of govt offices, minding my own business, when three sorrowful bouquets caught my eye. Placed atop a large plastic dustbin. Why hadn't they been thrown inside? Maybe the person tasked with cleanup felt sorry for the flowers, as they were obviously fresh then, so he placed them carefully atop the bin, facing the road, in the hope that somebody would pick them up, and take them home. But unlike mewling newborn puppies or kittens, flowers can't speak to attract the attention of passersby. Plus, the hot sun was doing its thing.

I have always wondered about the fate of those enormous bouquets gifted to people in high office, or brides and grooms, all of whom are too busy to give even a perfunctory glance to the flowers, no matter how much time and money the giver has spent sourcing them, or the florist in making them.



Only for them to land in some obscure dustbin, in all probability filled with rotting garbage. I imagine the poor flowers sighing, 'We got all dressed up, the florist's helper even sprayed some perfume on us, as if our own fragrance wasn't enough, not to mention the silver glitter prickling our petals, and nobody even gave us a second look, all this effort for nothing.'

There was a time when gifting a bouquet spelt grace, dignity, charm. Now it's prepared in an assembly line, with dull monotony, a snip here, a wire stuck into a wilting stalk there (ouch!), contorted, twisted, with a clump of greener than green leaves, with a final strangling in cello tape, to get that 'perfect' look.

Only for the dignitary to play passing the parcel with his bouquet: A hands it over to B, who passes it on to C, who thrusts it into D's arms, who piles it, and others, onto the nearest chair, in one inglorious heap, looking as sorry as a deflated balloon. If by chance they do make it into the dignitary's car, it will be the driver's lucky day! If that kind soul snips away all the cello tape, and frees the poor flowers, they lie there in limp relief, too weak even to raise their heads to nod a thank you. Can there be other ways to welcome or gift? Something that guests won't leave behind on a chair? Saving the flowers from an untimely, ceremonial death.

Why Paris Is Burning

Street protests are seemingly directed against govt, but the root cause of disaffection, across Europe, is the welfare system that allocates resources for the old, to the detriment of youth. Roughly one-fourth of all state spending in France goes to pensions

Rashmee Roshan Lall



Columnist based in London

The French have made it rather a habit to rise up in protest every few years, so it would be ludicrous to say the current orgy of unrest, arson and disorder is unprecedented. Even the burning down of a 140-year-old historic town hall, and the arrest of record numbers of people, do not change the usual dirge: The spiral of street protests has been hijacked by casseurs, opportunistic thugs, the Black Blocs.

Dressed all in black, a Black Bloc is said to execute a certain style of protest rather than an agenda. Theirs is the original move-fast-and-break-things strategy from before Mark Zuckerberg instituted the motto for Facebook engineers. It is a short-term tactic that does not address France's urgent needs. It is beset by three 'D's: deep political divisions, high debt, and youthful disaffection.

While youthful discontent set off the current round of protests some weeks ago, record indebtedness and political splintering between extremes are creating a whirlpool of crises. As the mayor of Marseille has lamented, "Students and others have real claims they want to air, which no one is listening to now because idiots are smashing everything." Exactement. France, that nation of philosophers, seems unable to have a meaningful conversation with itself.

Protests that began last month over decrepit French schools and absent teachers, turned into an inchoate national scream at the cost of living. They appear to have now morphed into little more than a black wave of destruction and chaos. It means, as political analyst Alexandre Kouchner has said, "The country is unable to have a political debate about where it stands and where it goes now."

It was ever thus. France and other prosperous parts of Europe – lifestyle superpowers of the world – have long needed a new social compact. One between generations that manages expectations in a decolonised world. They need to agree to divide up the economic pie in a way that is moderately satisfactory to both old and young.

At the moment, the old get the bigger slice. As protesting French students' world-class slogans put it these past few weeks: "Sorry for the disruption, we're just trying to save our future," and "Youth ignored, youth sacrificed". And in a witty comparison between a Gen Alpha meme and France's most famous protest movement, "Generation 6-7 remakes May '68".

But in a greying Europe, with falling birth and fertility rates, and rising life expectancies, the young are not the future. They are a shrinking demographic, which means that angry young people matter less in France and Spain than when youthful protesters take to the streets in, say, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, or a clutch of countries in Africa.



From X Feed

In a greying Europe, with falling birth and fertility rates, and rising life expectancies, the young are not the future. They're a shrinking demographic

This is a problem because it means the European heartland will not fix its main issue: balancing its books. It could do this one of two ways – by spending less or earning more. Both would need the people's buy-in. But those no longer young don't want to trim pensions, which are massive spending categories on European budgets. And there is resistance to immigration, which would help grow the economy by expanding the working-age population.

The end result is an impasse. There simply isn't more money to invest in education in France. And there won't be the cash to build more homes and ease the unaffordable housing crisis, which has led young Spaniards on to the streets. What might this mean? More squalls of protest? Inter-generational animosity?

Despite healthy levels of French state spending on education – 5.1% of GDP – the money doesn't go to improving academic facilities and re-orienting the curriculum for a fast-changing jobs market. More than a quarter of the funds go to pay teachers' pensions.

Emmanuel Macron, who became France's youngest president when he was first elected nearly a decade ago, tried to effect modest change to his countrymen's sybaritic expectations. But the 2023 increase of the official retirement age from 62 to 64, which would have delayed the generous pensions provision by a mere two years, was met with fierce resistance.

Govt lost its nerve – and a great deal of the people's trust – and could do no more. France remains largely wedded to a system in which roughly one-fourth of all state spending goes to pensions. This, in a moment when a massive sell-off in French govt debt has led borrowing costs to soar to levels not seen for nearly a quarter century.

France's budget for next year will face its first key parliamentary vote on Tuesday, but it too is a jobbing document, not transformational. The band-aid approach staves off major surgery and it is possible that France, the world's seventh-biggest economy, will continue to limp along as the sick man of Europe. The sick old man of Europe…with all the attendant implications for the status quo.

This Winter, The Chill Will Be Different

India's reservoir capacity has dipped. More-than-usual temperature levels, like it is this warm Oct, and the strongest El Niño on record, are likely to affect agriculture, because heat kills

Amit Bhattacharya



The southwest monsoon season is over, but consequences of the lowest June-Sept rainfall in 11 years are likely to fully unfold only in the coming months. Plus, the atmospheric story that dulled the monsoon is far from done – El Niño continues to strengthen in the Pacific, projected to peak in the next two-three months as the strongest event on record. Together, these two are major risk factors for agriculture, water availability and weather stress, well into the summer of 2027.

Effects of a deficient monsoon can migrate, season by season, from soil moisture to groundwater, from reservoirs to the rabi crop, and eventually into the summer heat. As climate scientist Roxy Mathew Koll of Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology put it: "A weak monsoon can move into water stress, then into the winter crop, and finally into the heat season of 2027."

The starting point is already uncomfortable. At the end of summer monsoon season, water storage in 178 major reservoirs was 70% of their combined live capacity, below the 10-year average of 76.6%, and much below last year's level of 79%. Southern India was particularly vulnerable, with storage at about half capacity. By Oct 15, the average live water storage level in India had dropped to nearly two-thirds of capacity, 16% below normal levels, per Central Water Commission data.

That leaves less water in the bank as farmers prepare to sow wheat, mustard, gram and other rabi crops. A deficient monsoon also means less residual soil moisture. Where rainfall cannot sustain the crop, irrigation must fill the gap, putting additional stress on reservoirs and groundwater. "Lower soil moisture and groundwater increase irrigation pressure for the winter crop," said Koll.

There is one important source of possible relief. IMD has forecast a normal northeast (NE) monsoon, which kicked off on Oct 15. The NE monsoon, usually active from Oct to Dec, supplies a large share of annual rainfall to southern peninsular India, particularly TN and parts of adjoining Andhra and Karnataka. IMD chief, however, cautioned that there's usually high variability in the NE monsoon that makes forecasting difficult.

That said, a normal or wetter-than-normal NE monsoon could replenish tanks, reservoirs and soil moisture in parts of the south (IMD's forecast says rainfall in the most water-stressed areas of Rayalaseema and interior Karnataka could be below-normal). However, much of central, western and northern India does not have an equivalent second rainy season.

Winter presents a more complicated picture. El Niño is associated with warmer conditions over much of the globe and India's winters are already warming because of climate change. IMD has forecast a warm Oct over most parts of the country. A warm winter following a moisture-deficient monsoon could increase irrigation demand through greater evaporation and crop water requirements.



File Photo

Yet, El Niño does not necessarily mean a dry winter in northern India. Studies have found a positive relationship between El Niño and winter precipitation over western Himalayas, with western disturbances tending to become more intense in some El Niño configurations. For severely water-stressed Punjab and Haryana, IMD projects higher than normal Oct-Dec rainfall. However, rain in this season usually doesn't amount to much.

Plausibly, India may simultaneously experience more winter rain or snow in the northwest Himalayas and unusually high temperatures elsewhere. For agriculture, temperature may ultimately prove more consequential than rainfall.

The greatest danger to wheat could come in Feb and March, when the crop enters its grain-filling stage. If El Niño keeps temperatures elevated into spring, heat can accelerate crop maturation, shorten the grain-filling period and reduce grain size and yield.

India has seen this before, per Koll. "Terminal heat reduced grain size and yield in 2022, and India temporarily paused wheat exports." That was the year when a severe March heatwave struck wheat-growing regions, as the crop was approaching harvest.

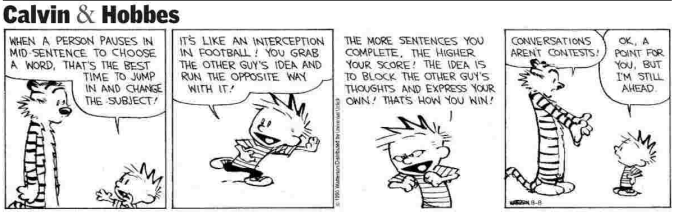
Given these risks, Centre has lowered its foodgrain production target for 2026-27 to 373.9 mn tonnes, from an estimated 376.6 MT in 2025-26. Agri ministry cited water availability and soil moisture while setting a rabi target of 177.7 MT.

The subsequent summer may come with its own risks. As veteran meteorologist and former earth sciences ministry secretary M Rajeevan noted, "The effects of an El Niño stay in the atmosphere for many months after the event is over. The summer following El Niño usually sees enhanced heat waves."

Summer is when the cumulative effect of a weak monsoon and warm temperatures can have hydrological consequences in the form of water shortages. Also factor in the fact that with an El Niño that's estimated to get way warmer than any other on record, the world's weather could be entering uncharted territory.

India has therefore entered a season in which the weather risk is shifting from rainfall to water. Whether the northeast monsoon replenishes the south, whether western disturbances deliver useful winter precipitation, whether spring heat impacts agriculture and whether summer brings increased heat spells will determine how much of this year's monsoon deficit is carried into 2027.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*



One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life.

Jean-Paul Sartre

To See What Lies Beyond Our i-Sight

Jug Suraiya

The Emperor had a stable of the best horses in the world, yet he was always looking for more. He summoned his Master of the Horse and said, "You have brought me many splendid horses. But now i want you to outdo yourself and bring me one that is superlative and beyond comparison."

The Master travelled far and wide, and months later returned with a horse that he brought to the Emperor.

The animal was all skin and bones, and instead of being sleek and glossy, its coat was dull and matted, its mane lank and ragged.

The Emperor was outraged. "I demanded a superlative horse, and you bring me this sorry nag? How dare you!" Unfazed, the Master murmured, "Don't look at it, Your Majesty. Just ride it."

Reluctantly, the Emperor mounted the horse. And instantly, magic was made. In a fluency of movement as if its hooves shunned the importunate demands of earth and glided on air, the horse sped away, the rider not a burden to be borne but an extension of itself.

"It is indeed a superlative mount!" exclaimed the Emperor. "But what took you so long to find it?" The Master replied, "Before i could begin my search, i had to search within myself to find what i was seeking: your approval and my advancement, or the essence of horse."

The story says something about what phenomenologists call the 'intentionality' of consciousness. Consciousness is not a blank screen on which the external world gets imprinted. The reverse is the case, in that our consciousness acts like a movie projector and makes us see the world the way we want it to be.

When asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, George Mallory replied, "Because it is there." A mountaineer, Mallory saw Everest as a peak to be scaled. George Everest, after whom the mountain is named, was a surveyor and saw Everest as a geographical landmark. A tourist today might see it as a nice backdrop for a selfie.

THE SPEAKING TREE



Painting by Feroz Khan

The world is, literally, what our i-sight makes of it. The discipline of phenomenology pioneered by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, and later adapted by philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Sartre, investigates the structure of consciousness, employing the method of epoche, or bracketing, to show how what is out there is contoured and coloured by what's within us.

Epoche has been likened to wearing a pair of corrective lenses for a day and viewing the world through them, then taking them off and studying them to see how they affected our vision.

Phenomenology is a latter-day offshoot of the ancient practice of meditation whereby consciousness is directed at consciousness itself to understand how it shapes our world, and by doing so reveals to us our intentionality that makes us do what we do and think what we think.

Do i pursue a particular career, embrace an ideology or credo, because i truly believe in it or because of the economic and social perquisites it bestows on me? Examining one's consciousness makes sense. Or, as the Master might say, it makes horse sense.

NOBEL PRIZES 2026 | Honours Go To Discovery Of Cosmic Neutrinos, Tackling Of 'Mirror' Image Molecules And A Breakthrough That Could Treat Brain Diseases

How an Antarctic ice experiment opened new window on the Universe

Noelia Noël

The 2026 Physics Nobel prize was awarded to US-based physicist Francis Halzen for his discovery of high-energy neutrino particles from deep space, also described as "ghostly messengers".

These particles have nearly no mass and pass through solid objects with hardly any interaction. In fact, billions of neutrinos pass through any given person on Earth every single second.


Halzen

Most of these neutrinos are emitted by the Sun, but high-energy particles from elsewhere in the cosmos too reach our planet.

Challenge is neutrinos from beyond our Solar System are a billion times rarer. To catch enough of them, physicists need an enormous detector (see right).

In 1988, Halzen proposed a solution: the Antarctic ice itself.

Scientists drilled holes and lowered light sensors over two kilometres beneath the surface. Once the holes refreezed, the sensors became embedded inside the detector, now known as IceCube.

Most neutrinos pass through IceCube without a trace. Occasionally, one collides with the ice to produce a charged particle such as a muon, which moves through ice faster than light does, producing a faint blue light known as Cherenkov radiation. IceCube measures timing and pattern of this light to reconstruct the muon's path and the direction from which the neutrino arrived, allowing us to work backwards to its source in the sky.

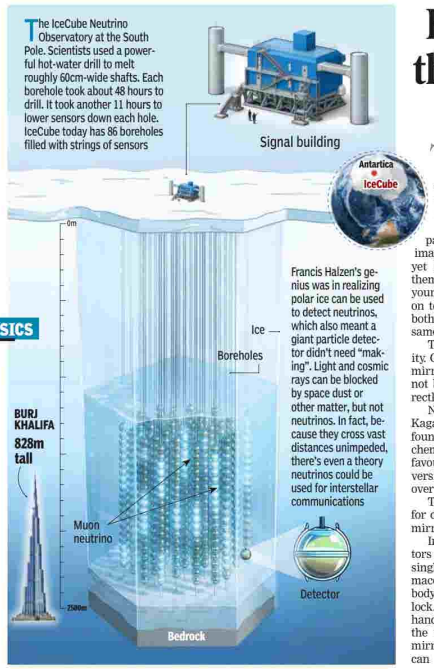
In 2013, IceCube saw first evidence of high-energy neutrinos from beyond our solar system, a breakthrough because neutrinos behave very differently from other space particles. With no electric charge, they travel through space undisturbed in almost straight lines, so determining their direction of arrival opens up a new window on some of the most violent places in the Universe, including surroundings of giant black holes.

The breakthrough helped establish 'multi-messenger astronomy': building a fuller picture of the Universe by combining light, gravitational waves, cosmic rays and neutrinos. And since most of what we know about the cosmos comes from light, neutrinos become a remarkable way of probing some of the most hidden parts of the Universe.

Author is senior lecturer, School of Mathematics and Physics, University of Surrey. This is a version of an article that was first published in The Conversation

PHYSICS

The IceCube Neutrino Observatory at the South Pole. Scientists used a powerful hot-water drill to melt roughly 60cm-wide shafts. Each borehole took about 48 hours to drill. It took another 11 hours to lower sensors down each hole. IceCube today has 86 boreholes filled with strings of sensors



Francis Halzen's genius was in realizing polar ice can be used to detect neutrinos, which also meant a giant particle detector didn't need "making". Light and cosmic rays can be blocked by space dust or other matter, but not neutrinos. In fact, because they cross vast distances unimpeded, there's even a theory neutrinos could be used for interstellar communications

By making right 'molecular twin', they helped make better medicines

Cedric Schaack and Mallory Green

The 2026 Chemistry Nobel concerns chirality, which may sound like an abstract science term but is actually all around us, even on our bodies.

Hold out your hands, palms up. Hands are mirror images of one another, yet however you turn them, you can never lay your right hand exactly on top of your left with both palms facing the same way.

This is called chirality. Chiral objects have a mirror image that cannot be superimposed directly on them.

Nobel winners Henri Kagan and Kenso Soai found a way to make chemical reactions that favour only one chiral version, or "hand," over the other.

This is important for chemists, who work with the mirror-image problem every day.

In the human body, cell receptors and enzymes are built from single-handed proteins. A pharmaceutical molecule enters the body like a key looking for its lock. If a drug is a mixture of both hands, one mirror image may fit the receptor perfectly, while its mirror twin doesn't. This twin can trigger unintended side-effects, or may fit as a key into an entirely different enzyme and disrupt your body's usual processes. Thalidomide is a good example (see right); another is Ibuprofen. Its 'S' form eases pain and swelling. But its mirror 'R' form is largely inactive. The body corrects the mix, which is why a pill containing both forms works anyway, but why not have more of the effective 'S' form in a dose?


Kagan


Soai

CHEMISTRY

In the 1980s, Kagan found that a catalyst, a helper that speeds up a reaction, does not have to be made of molecules with the same handedness to make a purely single-handed product. In some reactions, a partly pure catalyst yielded a product purer than the catalyst itself. Later, Soai in the 1990s found a molecule that makes copies of itself and favours its own hand over its mirror version. Start with a 51:49 imbalance, and after a few rounds the mixture is overwhelmingly one-handed.

Their work showed how a faint asymmetry between two chiral forms can grow into a decisive preference. Chemists are now learning to build that preference into materials too, not just medicines.

Authors are chemistry professors at Wake Forest University (North Carolina). This is a version of an article that was first published in The Conversation

THALIDOMIDE TRAGEDY



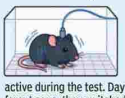
In the late 1950s, doctors in over 40 countries noticed an unusual rise in babies born with shortened or missing arms and legs. Many mothers had taken thalidomide in early pregnancy, sold as medication for morning sickness



Investigations later found that thalidomide had led to the defects. Thalidomide has two mirror forms: 'S' was linked to severe foetal issues. But because 'R' too was found unsafe, the drug was pulled from markets entirely. Warfarin is another example of dual effects. Both its mirror forms cause blood-thinning, but S-form is roughly three times more potent. Kagan and Soai's work helped chemists achieve the specific desired mirror form, leading to safer drugs that have better consistency and potentially fewer side-effects

THE FAMOUS MOUSE TEST

In 2012, an MIT team gave mice a mild electric shock in a particular cage. They used optogenetics to tag nerve cells in the brain's memory centre that were active during the test. Days later, in a different cage, they switched those cells on with light. The test mice froze in fear, as if they remembered the shock. The light had triggered a specific memory, indicating deep-brain stimulation could one day lead to targeted therapies for diseases such as Parkinson's



A light switch for brain cells is helping researchers unravel memory

Robert Lucas

Light-sensing is not unique to animals with eyes: single-cell organisms too have proteins that respond to light, using them to generate energy and to respond to demands of a 24-hour day. Peter Hegemann and Georg Nagel discovered that a single-celled alga called Chlamydomonas has an ingenious light-detection mechanism that relies on a single protein called channelrhodopsin. In it, is a small molecule called retinaldehyde, which is able to absorb light. When light hits retinaldehyde, it changes shape, forcing channelrhodopsin to change shape as well, opening a passage in the cell membrane. Charged particles, including sodium, can then flow from water outside the alga into the cell. This movement of charged particles sends a signal inside the alga that helps it swim.

It was a revelation. Nerve cells use movement of charged particles (called "ions") across their membranes to control their activity. When positively charged particles flow into a nerve cell, they can make it more active. The researchers realised if channelrhodopsin could be put into nerve cells, they could be turned on by simply shining a light on them. Hegemann and Nagel then teamed up with Deisseroth, a Stanford bioengineer, to do just that, hence laying the foundation for optogenetics, the ability to control nerve cells with light. Scientists deliver the gene for channelrhodopsin to nerve cells they wish to study via an altered virus that cannot cause disease. The cells then make the channelrhodopsin protein and begin responding to light.


Deisseroth Hegemann Nagel

If scientists want to know whether a particular group of nerve cells is involved in memory, sleep, sensation or movement, they can switch those cells on with light and see what happens, making optogenetics a powerful way to investigate brain networks. Scientists are even trying to see if optogenetics can be used to treat Parkinson's. This Nobel celebrates work that began with a rather esoteric question: how do Chlamydomonas swim toward light? The question doesn't address an urgent need in health; nor is it a route to riches. But optogenetics illustrates the importance of asking these questions because it's impossible to predict where knowledge will take us.

Author is professor, Neuroscience, University of Manchester. This is a version of an article that was first published in The Conversation

MEDICINE

QUICK QUIZ ON OCT 5 Our question: Which renowned ancient Roman city was completely sealed and buried beneath a deep layer of volcanic debris resulting from the catastrophic eruption of Mt Vesuvius, believed to have occurred in Oct, 79 AD? **Answer:** Pompeii



The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Hold the line on pilot rest

DGCA, in the past, has relaxed the implementation of pilot duty and rest rules several times. Now, it must enforce the March 2027 deadline it has set

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has purportedly told airlines that no relaxations to pilot duty and rest rules will be allowed from March 2027, when the Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) take full effect. The regulator has set such dates before, but this one has to hold.

Pilots have fought for these rules since 2012, when their associations petitioned the Delhi High Court for fatigue norms in line with global practice. The court closed the case only in April 2025, after DGCA committed to phasing in rules notified in January 2024: one set of provisions from July 2025, and the second, governing night operations, from November 2025. That second phase was deferred for all airlines after IndiGo's operations collapsed in December, when cancellations affected more than a million passengers. A one-time relaxation followed, and the conflict in West Asia then supplied a reason to extend it. Fourteen years after the litigation began, the full rules are still not in force.

Tired pilots make mistakes, and in a cockpit, mistakes kill. Fatigue was among the causes identified in the 2010 crash of an Air India Express flight at Mangaluru, which killed 158 people. The provisions still deferred govern night flying, the hardest hours for a fatigued crew.

The airlines had a real case during the war. Costlier fuel and longer routes stretched them financially and operationally, but longer routes also mean longer duties, which strengthens the case for rest limits.

Pilot bodies told the regulator in July that IndiGo and Air India had enough pilots to implement the second phase without variations, and that airlines had ample time to hire and to rework their rosters. If that assessment is correct, the industry has run out of reasons. The courts have said as much before: in 2018, the Delhi High Court held that a shortage of staff cannot justify overworking pilots. An airline that cannot staff its schedule within the limits should fly a smaller schedule.

DGCA's task between now and March is narrow. It should allow no extension of the current relaxations beyond the deadline, entertain no fresh ones, and enforce the rules as notified from the first day.

A crowd management disaster, yet again

A mass, public celebration that UNESCO deems intangible cultural heritage for humanity, Kolkata's Durga Puja, quite like the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj, is also an administrative challenge with few parallels — millions throng the streets in one of India's most densely populated cities, walking from one pandal to another; temporary structures of all kinds come up; and revelry rises to a new crescendo. All this makes it imperative that the authorities (civic and police), the organisers, and civil society participants ensure devotion doesn't end in disaster. This backdrop makes the stampede on Saturday evening at the Chor Bagan puja, one of the oldest pujas in Kolkata, seem like a failure on multiple levels.

At least three factors, based on initial reports, seem to have led to the tragedy — rain that drove people into the puja pavilion for shelter, outstripping its capacity; narrow exit and entry points that typically contribute to crowd build-up; and inadequate policing arrangements at the venue which incapacitated crowd management. None of these factors are unforeseeable or can't be hedged against. Proper arrangements for rain shelters — October rains in Kolkata are not unusual — could have prevented over-crowding in the pavilions, as would have wide entry and exit points allowing emergency evacuation. The indispensability of the latter has perhaps been spelt out in every such accident, including the Hathras crowd crush of 2024 that killed 121 people.

With the puja acquiring a sharpened focus due to the change in government in West Bengal, why were adequate policing arrangements for oversight and crowd management, as well as emergency support, synonymous with such events, not prioritised? Why did action on the ground not meet the slogans? There have been some arrests, and those at the points of failure would likely be brought to book, but why was such alacrity missing in prevention? These questions will continue to haunt the authorities long after the deity takes leave of her devotees.

Starlink and the digital sovereignty question

Dependence becomes a sovereignty problem when an outside actor can interrupt an essential service, and India cannot restore it before serious harm follows



Syed Akbaruddin

On September 21, 2026, the Delhi High Court ordered SAP India to restore software support to Nayara Energy. The Indian arm of the German software group had cited European Union sanctions against the refiner. The contract was governed by Indian law. That had not kept the support running.

Nayara had encountered a similar problem with Microsoft. In July 2025, the American company suspended digital services following EU sanctions against the refiner, whose shareholders include Russia's Rosneft. Services resumed after Nayara approached the Delhi High Court. Microsoft later attributed the disruption to an automated compliance system that applied sanctions globally by default.

Most Indians will never deal with SAP or Microsoft licensing teams. But they will depend on hospitals, banks, telecom networks, and public services that run on similar layers of foreign technology.

Digital sovereignty is not freedom from the world. It is the ability to keep essential services running when foreign laws, suppliers, or sanctions restrict access to technology. It means having choices that can survive pressure. The institutions exercising that power must also answer to citizens, with remedies when digital systems deny them services or violate their rights.

Territorial sovereignty has never insulated countries from economic pressure. Digital systems spread practical control across several countries. An Indian service may use American software and Taiwanese chips, with maintenance performed remotely and access controlled through licences issued abroad. Indian law may govern the service without ensuring continued access to the licences, updates, and support it needs.

A system secure against hackers can still lose its supplier's support. Data localisation establishes where information sits, without necessarily settling who can operate the system, repair itor move it elsewhere. Domestic production can improve our options, although reproducing every component would consume resources India needs for other priorities. Dependence becomes a sovereignty problem when an outside actor can interrupt an essential service, and India cannot restore it before serious harm follows.

Geopolitics is changing the terms of India's technology choices. American export controls affect access to advanced chips. Chinese mineral restrictions can unsettle manufacturing. EU regulations shape access to an important market. These instruments have different purposes and consequences, but their effect can be similar. An Indian firm may discover that access is conditional on decisions made elsewhere. Friendly relations cannot guarantee that a foreign supplier will remain free to serve Indian customers. A technology partnership needs attention to licensing conditions and plans for what happens if access is cut.

The prospect of Starlink's entry into India raises a similar question about connectivity. Satellite broadband could connect remote communities and provide backup when terrestrial networks fail. Ukraine offers a warning: Officials there said unannounced restrictions on Starlink connectivity disrupted military drone missions during Russian attacks. Elon Musk said the US government controlled operating limits for Starshield, the military service. India's civilian needs differ, but local ground stations would not ensure control over the network. Before essential services depend on it, India needs workable alternatives.

India has faced such tests before. APJ Abdul Kalam once recalled that after the 1998 nuclear tests, American sanctions led a US partner to withdraw from the Light Combat Aircraft's flight-control programme. The partner retained Indian equipment, software, and technical information held at its premises. Indian teams completed the system through sustained development and testing, drawing on expertise and institutions built over many years.

UPI demonstrates an ability to build digital public infrastructure at scale.



A technology partnership needs attention to licensing conditions and plans for what happens if access is cut. HT ARCHIVE

Our software firms serve global markets; Indian engineers help develop technologies used worldwide. Such connections bring knowledge, income and influence. Restricting legitimate data flows or making useful foreign technology needlessly expensive could weaken the very institutions and businesses from which greater Indian capability must grow.

Participation in global technology markets does not by itself give Indian firms control over the technology they use. More Indian research must move from papers and prototypes into products we can maintain and improve here. Subsidies should support demonstrable capacity, including the skills to keep systems running after the foreign supplier has left. Public support must build Indian capability, not shield domestic suppliers from competition. Sovereignty needs a maintenance budget.

For essential services, the test should be practical: If access to critical software or equipment is lost, who can restore the service, with what tools, and how quickly? The likely harm, recovery time and cost of alternatives should guide public spending. Some gaps will justify domestic development; others will require diversified imports, spare parts or dependable international arrangements. An indispensable import deserves strategic attention even when making it in India is unrealistic.

Contracts should specify obligations for service continuity, data retrieval and migration to another supplier. Recovery plans need testing; alternative suppliers must be checked for shared dependencies. India must know which promises are binding, which rest on goodwill, and what fallback exists if access is withdrawn.

If a public service fails because access was cut, citizens should not be left facing a supplier, a ministry and a regulator each pointing elsewhere. Sovereignty cannot mean merely shifting power from a foreign vendor to an opaque domestic system.

India will continue to need foreign technology, capital and markets. Its freedom of action will depend on whether essential services have workable alternatives before access is withdrawn. Citizens must also be able to question how that power is exercised at home. A sovereign choice carries little weight if someone, elsewhere can make it impossible to carry out.

Syed Akbaruddin served as India's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York and, currently, is dean, Kautilya School of Public Policy. The views expressed are personal

The revolution that the West is imagining



Vivek Wadhwa

India has deeply disappointed some of my Indian intellectual friends in America, as well as the western media, by failing to produce the revolution they had been predicting. When I posted on X about the October 10 protests, saying that everything seemed normal apart from the traffic jams, they attacked me; when the Tiranga protest on October 16 failed to deliver the promised uprising, they merely redoubled their opinions. Apparently, their predictions require less scrutiny than my factual description of what I see.

There's a large gap between the India I am visiting and the India that I read about in America. I have been here for nearly three weeks, mostly staying at IIT Delhi and IIT Kharagpur, spending time with students and faculty, and talking to people on the streets, in markets, and in hostels.

The people I have spoken with have been more concerned about rising prices and blocked roads than about the protests. Some students knew there was a protest but could not tell me its demands; they gave no sign of planning to overthrow the government.

Apparently, even an account of traffic jams becomes politically suspect when it interrupts the western account of a country fomenting revolution.

The Washington Post had described an unprecedented challenge to the government. The wider western commentary expressed increasing certainty that India was approaching a revolutionary moment. The Tiranga march failed to deliver anything resembling that national uprising; yet the certainty survived intact, the premise unexamined, and the commentary became even more bizarre, as though greater conviction could make up for the missing revolution.

A journalist's first responsibility is to test a compelling story against the evidence, even when the evidence makes that story rather less compelling to publish. That responsibility isn't evident in these stories.

I encountered the same delusions in 2022, when my children feared for my safety and warned me not to visit Kashmir, forwarding article after article from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* depicting misery, fear, and economic collapse. A *New York Times* report even had the houseboats sinking: "Hard-pressed owners are unable to pay for fresh caulk".

I trekked remote trails with a local guide, met nomadic families in their mud huts, visited the University of Kashmir, and stayed in Srinagar. The meticulously maintained houseboats remained stubbornly afloat and fully booked; tourist attractions had long queues; and restaurants were overflowing: an impressively robust economic collapse. I even had better internet access in Betaab Valley than in the hills of Silicon Valley, making the reports of misery easier to find than the misery itself.



People seem to be more concerned about rising prices and blocked roads than about the protests. REUTERS

I sent an account of my observations of India on the ground to editors who knew me well at *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Fortune*, all publications I had written for many times. Every single publication refused to run it; two of the editors told me in confidence that their bosses were not allowed to publish the piece. *Hindustan Times* published it, and readers in India overwhelmingly agreed with my account.

Yet I have seen no retraction or apology from *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* for the misinformation about Kashmir that they had published. That experience stayed with me, and I no longer take these publications' claims to neutrality at face value. In this, I am hardly alone: Two-thirds of Americans have little or no confidence in the mass media, according to Gallup's September 2026 poll.

The Indian journalist friends attacking me reflect a wider habit among Indian intellectuals in America — mistaking distance for perspective, and old familiarity for current knowledge. Some have updated their passports more often than their understanding of India. Yet their memories of shortages, the licence raj, and black-and-white television apparently qualify them to explain a country that has spent decades changing without consulting them.

We expatriates are in a strange position, having chosen to leave and having adopted American passports, American mortgages, and American problems, only to sit in our comfortable homes and lecture India about its democracy, its elections, and its Constitution. We do not live with the consequences of the prescriptions we offer, yet we comment from a distance and call it analysis.

India has real problems, including joblessness among the young, family worries about prices, and deserving questions about the Election Commission. Democracy may be at stake, but these are matters for Indians and India to resolve, and we foreigners do not get to appoint ourselves the country's political guardians.

Indians can argue fiercely about their government without foreign commentators' turning every protest into the story of a nation awaiting rescue; India is neither France nor Bangladesh. Colonial rule over India is over, and neither western editors nor expatriate intellectuals have inherited the right to dictate India's future or demand a revolution that would vindicate their prejudices.

If we expatriates really care, we should build bridges, invest, visit, and help improve education and health care, as I am trying to do through my company, Vionix Biosciences. With much to offer the world, India deserves our respect; manufacturing a revolution from our living rooms is a poor way to show it.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences. The views expressed are personal

{ EMMANUEL MACRON } PRESIDENT, FRANCE

We will all stand united against the sowers of chaos, who seek only to bring down our institutions

Condemning violence amid youth protests in France, saying this prevented peaceful protestors from raising their demands



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }
Shashi Shekhar



Reading the tea leaves before the UP elections

A few kilometres from the din of demonstrations in New Delhi lie the borders of Uttar Pradesh. The state's voters will be the first ones to pronounce their verdict on the intense intellectual struggle waged on the streets of the national capital.

While Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa will also go to the polls, why is only UP in the news? It's because the way to power in Delhi passes through UP. It's not for nothing that Narendra Modi, born in Gujarat, chose UP as his *karmabhoomi*. The state has given rise to prime ministers of the nation.

Yogi Adityanath will complete his tenth year as chief minister (CM) of UP in March 2027. He enjoys a unique image due to his uncompromising working style. As the CM, he has always been at the top of his game. Today, UP has five international airports and a vast metro rail network. It is leading in implementing all the welfare schemes initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There are no corruption charges against Adityanath. There's no popular dissent against him.

However, a long tenure does create some electoral challenges.

Allegations of high-handedness are rife against Yogi's officers and bureaucrats. More than 50 BJP MLAs and ministers are facing serious allegations. As a result, the saffron party may be forced to replace a large number of its sitting MLAs. It may lead to resentment, sabotage, desertion and public dissent. Switching sides has already begun. The ruling party will need to address its internal contradictions

It's clear that the BJP has power, organisation, resources and leadership. Along with Adityanath, the PM's political heft too helps the party. But the BJP's internal dissensions can be electorally fatal. This is the reason party president Nitin Nabin, during his two-day July visit to Lucknow, brought all the top leaders of the state together for a photo-op and shared it on social media. The CM is also aware of the challenges. He's rolling out government doles and public-pleasing welfare schemes.

Now let's talk about Akhilesh Yadav. He had to fight on various fronts simultaneously when he was the CM between 2012 and 2017. His father Mulayam Singh Yadav bestowed power and prestige upon him. But some of the leaders and bureaucrats who had been close to his father kept bypassing him. But Akhilesh didn't give up. Along with the Agra-Lucknow expressway, he initiated many important projects, including establishing a women's helpline and modernising the state police's transport. When no one knew about Gen Z, the Samajwadi Party (SP) government provided school-going children free laptops.

His 2017 defeat was largely attributed to the public anger against his family caucus. However, he's now freed himself of the burden. This is also why, in the 2024 general elections, the SP emerged as the second-largest party, winning 37 seats. He has brought some changes in his strategy. He knows his voters are belligerent and, at times, inadvertently gets into controversies. To offset this problem, he's conducting meetings with different castes to maintain a fair balance. He's also focusing relentlessly on weaning away Brahmins, Gurjars, as well as extremely backward castes and Dalits from the BJP. He's reaching out to all those castes, classes, or groups which are even slightly annoyed with the ruling dispensation.

Participation in New Delhi's demonstrations enhanced his political stature. His deepening relations with Rahul Gandhi can help him thresh out a favourable electoral arrangement as both the SP and the Congress need each other.

While talking about UP politics, we should also remain vigilant about another important aspect: regional parties play an important role. Their leaders are aware of this and try to leverage it. Jayant Chaudhary, Omprakash Rajbhar, and Anupriya Patel are prime examples. In the last elections, these parties cornered 6.5% of the vote in 32 assembly seats. This time, too, they would jostle for more tickets within the alliance and fight hard to win.

No discussion about UP is complete without Mayawati. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supremo and former UP CM today doesn't have a single assembly or Lok Sabha seat. Will the coming assembly elections be another nail in the BSP's coffin? It would be a hasty conclusion, as in the 2022 assembly elections she secured 12.88% of the votes. Similarly, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, BSP secured 1.5 lakh votes in 20 Lok Sabha seats. In that election, less than 50,000 votes decided winners and losers in 30 seats. The question now is whether in this election Mayawati will remain a party spoiler or secure an effective role for herself.

The two claimants for the CM seat in Lucknow, Adityanath and Akhilesh, are young in the political context. Their well-wishers consider both of them long-term racehorses. For Uttar Pradesh, that's good news.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

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6. लोकसत्ता
7. दैनिक भास्कर

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The Tribune
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Kolkata stampede

Another tragedy linked to crowd chaos

THE death of 19 people in a stampede at Kolkata's Chorbagan Durga Puja pandal is yet another reminder that public safety must never be sacrificed at the altar of celebration. Preliminary police findings point to inadequate crowd management, narrow entry and exit points, insufficient security personnel and confusing announcements as possible contributors to the tragedy. Sudden showers forced some visitors to seek shelter inside an already crowded pandal, while others attempted to enter. An announcement suggesting that the structure might collapse allegedly triggered further panic. These circumstances expose a fundamental failure of planning: an event expected to attract large crowds lacked adequate arrangements to manage an entirely foreseeable emergency.

The growing competition among Durga Puja organisers to set up spectacular pandals and attract visitors must not overshadow the responsibility to protect human lives. VIP entrances, which offer privileged access to a few individuals, also raise serious questions about fair treatment and the efficient use of limited space as well as security resources. West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari's proposal to abolish separate VIP gates deserves serious consideration.

The year 2025 witnessed a series of stampedes, with the 120-odd fatalities including devotees, train passengers, cricket fans and supporters of a political party. The current year had been relatively quiet so far in this regard, but the Kolkata incident has shown that there is no room for complacency. Every major venue must have a documented crowd management plan, clearly marked entry and exit routes, adequate lighting, trained personnel, efficient communication systems and enforceable visitor limits. Temporary structures and approach roads should also remain accessible to emergency services. Assurances issued after disaster strikes are not enough to ensure safety in future.

Food safety

Enforcement must go beyond raids

THE crackdown on illegal banana-ripening units in Lucknow and prosecution proceedings against three food businesses are welcome signs that food safety enforcement is becoming more assertive. At the same time, the alleged violations underline how much remains to be done before consumers can trust what reaches their plates. In Lucknow, officials found violations at more than 132 banana-ripening units and acted against 25 units operating without mandatory licences. Five quintals of bananas that failed quality standards were destroyed. The concern is that prohibited calcium carbide is being used to accelerate ripening. Such shortcuts expose consumers to avoidable risks and disadvantage legitimate traders.

The FSSAI's action against Surya Food and Agro (maker of Priyagold biscuits), Dodla Dairy and UEIR Organic Foods is sobering. The regulator reported cattle-feed bran being used in biscuit manufacture. Milk too was found unsafe after detergent or caustic soda was detected alongside below-standard fat content. Also, pesticide residues were seen in yellow raisins. These are serious allegations, and due process must determine responsibility. They raise questions about quality control within established food businesses.

We have a food-safety framework, but inspections cannot be occasional campaigns triggered by complaints or festival seasons. Risk-based checks, laboratories, transparent publication of test results and swift penalties are essential. Repeat offenders must not treat fines or licence suspensions as routine business costs. Enforcement must also be fair. Small traders need clear guidance and an opportunity to correct minor lapses. Deliberate adulteration and serious safety violations demand firm action. Traceability across supply chains and protection for whistle-blowers can help detect problems before unsafe products reach consumers. Food safety is an obligation owed to every family. The latest actions deserve support. But their real measure will be sustained vigilance, credible prosecutions and safer food.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1926

The Viceroy in Lahore

HIS Excellency the Viceroy arrived in Lahore on Monday morning and received a warm welcome. As far as one can see from the round of functions organised in his honour as well as from a tour round the city, no effort has been spared to make his stay agreeable. It has also been arranged to bring him in touch with various public bodies and institutions as well as important non-official citizens. Besides official and semi-official functions such as the Durbar in the Fort, the Reception in the Montgomery Hall and the presentation of addresses by the municipality and other bodies, a party has been organised by a number of leading non-official gentlemen in the Shalimar Gardens and a dinner by the President and members of the Legislative Council. All this is more or less usual on the occasion of a Viceregal visit, and will doubtless give His Excellency some idea of the hospitality of both the government and the more well-to-do classes, and also enable him to form some impression of the life of the latter. This, however, is not and ought not to be the principal object of a Viceroy's first visit to the capital of a province. The Viceroy of India is not the ceremonial but the actual head of the government, and as such has it in his power in a very large measure to contribute to the happiness, contentment and prosperity of its people; and this he can do only by acquiring a true insight into the lives of the people and the problems affecting their well-being and their destinies. When the Viceroy, therefore, goes to the capital of a province or, for that matter, to any important city or rural area, it is the principal business of those in charge of the arrangements for his visit to enable him to acquire this insight.

India must regain leverage in Washington

Amid H-1B visa row, alliance-building should be revived in the US to facilitate talent mobility



KP NAYAR
STRATEGIC ANALYST



RHETORIC : US Vice President JD Vance recently described foreign workers hired on H-1B visas as "indentured servants". REUTERS

THE H-1B visa issue is as old as the hills, allowing for a little hyperbole. Every two years, it flares up around the middle of an election year in the United States, either mid-term or presidential.

For several decades, Indian reporters in the US like this author have been receiving panicked messages during those biennial flare-ups from representative organisations of India's information technology industry laying out their case for unfettered access to H-1B visas. Equally, reporters have been bombarded by grievances from trade unions in US manufacturing industries that cheap Indian hires under H-1B visas were destroying American livelihoods and families.

Inevitably, the issue blows over once the elections are over — till the next campaign season — because this fight is politically opportune. Jobs are an emotive issue in societies the world over. It is easy to whip up sentiment over job losses, especially through scaremongering and xenophobia.

Take, for instance, US Vice President JD Vance's outburst against Indians — although not by name — which prompted India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on October 9 to accuse him of "resorting to terminology that carries painful historical and colonial legacy connotations." The MEA described the Vice President's comments as "deeply offensive", without mentioning the three offending words — "foreign indentured servants" — that he had used to describe H-1B visa holders seeking permanent residency in the US.

Why did Vance use such strong language? On November 3, his Senate seat in Ohio, which Vance vacated upon becoming Vice President is going to the polls. It is important for him that fellow Republican Jon Husted retains this seat for the Grand Old Party (GOP). Vance's path to the White House in 2029 depends to a great extent on demonstrating his continuing hold on Ohio — especially if Florida's Senate seat, similarly vacated by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, is retained by the GOP on November 3. At present, Vance and Rubio are the leading Republican contenders for the presidency when Trump's term ends.

As of now, Ohio is a "toss-up" state, meaning that the result could go either way. An albatross around the necks of Vance and Husted in this race is Vivek Ramaswamy, the self-made billionaire Republican candidate for Ohio Governor's job. Although Ramaswamy did not realise his American dream through the H-1B route because he was born stateside, he has been unable to shake off an impression of H-1B connections among ordinary Ohioans. Amidst rising anti-immigrant sentiment, many of his voters assume that Ramaswamy started on the road to prosperity as a first-generation immigrant, by depriving Americans — white or black natives — of their jobs.

To win back his Senate seat by proxy amid the xenophobia now sweeping the US, Vance has to double down on immigrants. It does not help that his wife Usha is a Hindu and an ethnic Indian, although she too was born in the US and was not a candidate for indentured servitude. However, if Usha's parents had emigrated to the US a decade later, they may have used the H-1B route. Their relocation to America predates the H-1B programme in its current incarnation.

> The Indian govt should stop pretending that domestic conditions are so good that Indians won't seek work in America even through the 'donkey route.'

The MEA's October 9 statement prescribing what is good for Americans will not help Indians who are already in the US on employment visas or others who are hoping to go there. The H-1B programme "helps US companies…besides creating shareholder wealth in the US," the statement said. It carries a presumption that the Indian government knows better than its American counterpart what is good for the US.

When any American even peripherally important says anything objectionable about India, the MEA inevitably bristles and uses epithets like "misinformed" and "unwarranted" against them. Now, the shoe is on the other foot. Visas and permanent residency are internal matters of the US. The MEA had no business wading into the internal affairs of the US.

"The steps announced by the US do not advance the shared ambitions of both countries," said the MEA. Neither does the Indian government's latest stand. Such sermonising will not make the administration in Washington change its policies to the advantage of Indians or Indian-Americans. It will only harden the prickly and stubborn Trump administration's stance against talent mobility from India.

Instead, India should urgently rebuild the coalitions in the US that defended the H-1B programme and speedier green cards for talented immigrants during the governments led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Then too, mobility by skilled Indians was periodically under attack. These coalitions were formidable and had three pillars — offices in Washington of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), backed strongly from India by the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM). Together, they organised roadshows and campaigns to convince sceptical Americans that Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) was bringing jobs to the US, not taking them away.

CII and FICCI heads such as Tarun Das and Amit Mitra, who had direct lines to the highest levels of successive administrations — even to the White House — chose the best persons from their talent pool and sent them to their Washington offices. One example was Kiran Pasricha, who set up the CII office in the US capital and ran it for 16 years. She would pick up the phone and call then First Lady Hillary Clinton in the White House — later Senator from New York — and discuss India's trade problems. Such access for India is closed now. In addition, captains of Indian industry like Ratan Tata, Anand Mahindra and Rahul Bajaj went to the US together to tell prominent Americans about their factories and other businesses in that country that were giving jobs to local people.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said after the latest crackdown on skilled immigration that "not getting more H-1B visas is absolutely good for the Indian economy." The MEA said the opposite. The Indian government should stop pretending that domestic conditions are so good that Indians won't seek work in America even through the "donkey route." Instead, alliance-building should be revived in the US to facilitate talent mobility. Otherwise, the anti-H-1B protests will outlast the current election campaign and become deeply embedded in American minds. If that happens, skilled immigration will no longer be subject to market forces.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"The immigration policy should be generous, fair and flexible. — John F Kennedy"

From logarithms to algorithms

RAMA KASHYAP

BACK in my high school days, logarithms were used with log tables to solve head-scratching mathematical problems. Algorithms, however, were nowhere in the picture. Today, in the era of artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms have become a buzzword. They choreograph the mundane rhythm of everyday life. They curate the content you watch, the music you listen to and the products you buy. While you think you are making independent choices, it's actually an invisible hand subtly influencing your every decision.

The moment you show a passing interest in something online, the watchful eyes of 'Google Baba' pick up the hint. Within seconds, AI algorithms take over. An advertising algorithm behaves like a pushy salesman. You just have to search for "white handbag" or idly browse "pink nail paint", and this digital seller follows you everywhere on the Internet — dangling a similar white purse and displaying nail paint in all shades of pink. You begin to wonder if it is telepathy. Or is it stalking?

Built on predictability, AI algorithms generate recommendations tailored to your preferences. Tell Google what you want and it finds more of it. Pause over a funny reel on Instagram, and your feed gets flooded with humorous content. Listen to one retro song on YouTube, and out pops a customised playlist of old songs. Watch a quick video of a party snack, and three more recipe channels are lined up.

What is truly alarming, however, is how your very thought process is being rewritten. Algorithms don't explicitly tell you what to think; they do something far subtler. They take note of your prejudices and fortify them by feeding you content that validates your biases. The more hateful content you watch, the more of it you are shown. If you hold a strong opinion, you are promptly shown posts by people who agree with you.

There is a classic Hindi proverb: "*Sawan ke andhe ko sab hara hi hara dikhai deta hai.*" Everything looks green to a person who is blind during the rainy season, implying that personal biases inevitably colour reality. On social media, the algorithm is the culprit that taints your opinion, exposing you to content as per your orientation. Rather than broadening your horizons, the entire AI ecosystem seems to reinforce your echo chambers. The addictive algorithms direct you to sensational and extreme content to keep you scrolling. No wonder discussions are becoming increasingly partisan and dogmatic.

In school, I avoided complex maths problems requiring cumbersome log tables; today, I feel like doing the same with the algorithms that shadow my every click. I want to dodge them so as to have a truly open mind, unprejudiced by algorithms. It is heartening that Australia has proposed to give its citizens the option of turning off powerful social media algorithms; this could give users some control over what they see in their feeds.

The writer taught at MCM DAV College, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India not Bangladesh or Nepal

Apropos of 'How to unfurl the Tiranga' (*The Great Game*); it is sad to see that leaders are using the Tricolour for political gains. Every political party worth its salt is wearing nationalism on its sleeve. By disallowing protests, the government is unwittingly increasing the pressure on GenZ. India has a deep-rooted democracy. India is not Bangladesh or Nepal, where student unrest changes regimes. A political change will take place only through elections. The government, on its part, should try to curb unemployment among the educated youth. Their grievances must be tackled through dialogue, democratic engagement and meaningful employment opportunities.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR

Be willing to listen

With reference to 'How to unfurl the Tiranga'; the BJP must realise, with humility, that it governs on a thin mandate of about 37% of the national vote share. That is not a mandate to claim representation of 140 crore people, but an obligation to listen to the almost 63% who rejected it, especially the youth who want to be heard. The Tiranga must remain a symbol of national unity, not become a source of political ownership. In a democracy, legitimacy is not measured by the volume of political boasting, but by the willingness to hear the protesting voices.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Short-term oil relief

Refer to 'Big relief for India as Trump waives Russia oil sanctions'; it is a major relief for India as Russia remains a major source of discounted crude. Any fresh tariff would have raised import costs, fuelled inflation and endangered export competitiveness in the US. The waiver protects both energy security and trade stability in the short term. However, this is not a permanent exemption. The Graham Act remains in force, and Washington retains the authority to reinstate the measures after reviewing Russian energy purchases. It is high time energy security was treated as a national security priority, not a commercial calculation.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Avoid blanket access to AI

Apropos of 'Rogue AI agents'; an AI agent is no longer just a chatbot. It can read files, execute code, send emails, move money and change configurations. It must be ensured that no AI agent has blanket access. Agentic AI must get time-bound, task-specific and token-based access. Every high-impact action like deleting data, accessing financial records or sharing externally must require human-in-the-loop approval. Organisations must log every AI action like a financial ledger. AI labs must build agents with strong guardrails and kill switches. CERT-In has issued a warning. Now the regulator, the industry and the government must give the rules.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

Make sound agri decisions

Refer to 'Protecting groundwater'; Punjab banned paddy sowing before mid-May and mid-June, aiming to make use of monsoon rains and reduce water consumption to 1,500-2,000 litres. However, the change created an unintended crisis: farmers were left with only 15 to 20 days between the paddy harvest and wheat sowing, making stubble burning the cheapest and quickest way to clear fields. As a result, a law intended to conserve water now worsens air pollution. As the Johl Committee suggested, shifting at least 20% of paddy land to maize, bajra, pulses and oilseeds is a viable solution. But alternative crops must be as profitable as paddy. Ultimately, protecting Punjab's water and air will succeed only when moving away from paddy makes sound financial sense.

ASHOK AGGARWAL, KURUKSHETRA

China's room for manoeuvre

Amid efforts to de-escalate tensions along the Line of Actual Control, Beijing has once again resorted to its hypocritical tactics. China has reacted with strong indignation to the Indian government's move to assign official names to 28 key geographical features in Ladakh. China has territorial disputes with many of its neighbouring countries, giving it ample strategic room for manoeuvre.

RK ARORA, MOHALI

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@tribunemail.com**

ECI's journey dogged by controversies



AJAY K MEHRA
SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR MULTILEVEL FEDERALISM

THE ongoing Cockroach Janta Party movement which aims to get Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar removed showcases an Election Commission of India (ECI) that is tarnished. This exalted and critical-to-Indian-democracy constitutional body, lauded and recognised across the world, has been charged with partisanship and 'vote *chori*' (theft of votes) by the Opposition. This smog of grey on its shining aura calls for a panoramic review of its journey since 1951-52.

The debate on the Draft Article 289 in the Constituent Assembly focussed on keeping the Election Commission free from executive dominance. Shibban Lal Saxena, HN Kunzru and BR Ambedkar were in favour of securing the tenure of the Chief Election Commissioner to ensure the independence of the commission.

However, as Article 289 was transformed into 324 in the final draft, governing the organisation of the ECI, its Clause (2) left the appointment procedure open, stating that the President would make the appointments, subject to any law made by Parliament.

It said, 'The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time fix and the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament, be made by the President.'

Nehru, in a hurry to put India on the rails for its democratic journey, needed to translate the dreams of the framers of the Constitution, who had gone for universal adult suffrage from the word go. The search for a person who would put this dream into reality ended with Sukumar Sen, ICS and then Chief Secretary of West Bengal.

Systematically going about the stupendous task at hand, he went on to conducting the elections, beginning from preparing the electoral rolls to getting the votes cast. Adorning the chair for eight years, Sen laid a strong foundation by conducting two General Elections—1952 and 1957.

The ECI continued to be a single-member body till the October 7, 1989 presidential notification made it a three-member commission by appointing VS Seigell and SS Dhanoa as two election commissioners for a term of five years or till the age of 65 years as on October 16, 1989. The escalation of differences between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and CEC RVS Peri Sastri led to this development since Rajiv wanted the nomination process for the election to be timed to prevent a second term for Giani Zail Singh. However, in January 1990, the commission reverted to being a single-member body under the VP Singh regime.



COME CLEAN : The 'vote *chori*' allegation has cast a dark shadow on the ECI. ANI

The PV Narasimha Rao government expanded the ECI again on October 1, 1993, adding MS Gill and GVG Krishnamurthy as the two ECs because then CEC, TN Seshan, appointed on December 12, 1990 was asserting the commission's independence.

> Seshan's assertion of the CEC's power led to the Narasimha Rao government making the ECI a multi-member body.

Simultaneously, the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners (Conditions of Service) Act, 1991, was amended by an ordinance. The name of the law was changed to the Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991.

The government gave the CEC the status of a Supreme Court judge and the ECs the status of a high court judge, with the retirement age fixed at 65 years. A new chapter titled 'Transaction of Business', containing Sections 9, 10 and 11, envisaged that the CEC and ECs would act in such a manner that there was unanimity in their decision-making and in case there was any difference of opinion on any issue, the majority view would prevail.

Seshan appealed to the Supreme Court against this change, but lost. His assertion of the CEC's power led to the Narasimha Rao government making the commission a multi-member body.

Despite the intentions of the framers of the Constitution to keep the Election Commission independent and free of controversies, it has been embroiled in controversies. RK Trivedi (1982-85) was appointed Governor of Gujarat in 1986 by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In 2000, then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee awarded the second highest national award, the Padma Vibhushan, to then CEC MS Gill for electoral reforms, particularly the introduction of the electronic voting machine (EVM). The move was later criticised by many, particularly when Gill joined the Congress in 2008 and was made a Union minister.

In the case of CEC Navin Chawla, controversies relate to his role during the Emergency as the private secretary to the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. The BJP accused him of partisan bias towards the Congress. Despite that, then Chief Election Commissioner N Gopalaswami sent a 93-page recommendation in January 2009 to President Pratibha Patil, seeking Chawla's removal under Article 324(5) of the Constitution for compromised neutrality. He was appointed CEC on April 21, 2009.

The journey of the ECI since 1952 indicates that though this important institution has evolved with a certain elan and halo around it, controversies have dogged it periodically. From offering the CEC post-retirement rewards or offering a position in the Union Cabinet to the records of some CECs while serving as an administrator (in the IAS) to conferring a CEC with a national award—it has all been debated from time to time.

With TN Seshan, for example, the relentless pursuit of electoral reforms brought the CEC at loggerheads with the political leadership of the time. Yet, many CECs and the ECI under their leadership have introduced reforms and modernisation of the election process.

However, the charge of 'vote *chori*' levelled against the commission by the opposition parties led by the Congress since the tenure of CEC Rajiv Kumar (2022-25) by tampering with EVMs, leading to a volatile movement, have cast a dark shadow on the ECI, which must be dispelled.

The ECI must be accepted as an honest body that not only conducts elections but is also a sincere arbiter of the electoral process that the Constitution has designed it to be. Political parties, leaders and the ECI must act together to achieve this objective.

Why Punjabi deserves official recognition in J&K



KANWAL SINGH
WRITER AND COLUMNIST FROM J&K

THE Jammu and Kashmir government has committed to introduce a Bill to grant Punjabi the official language status in the forthcoming Budget session. This follows weeks of agitation by the Punjabi Basha Morcha in Jammu. People from different communities have been demanding recognition for a language with deep historical and literary roots in the region.

Until 2020, Urdu and English were the official languages of J&K. That year, the Parliament, through the J&K Official Languages Bill, recognised Kashmiri, Dogri and Hindi also as the official languages, but Punjabi, despite its rich literary heritage presence in the region, was not included.

The story of Punjabi in J&K lives in Sufi poetry, writings of authors across religious communities, historical records and Partition memories passed down generations. From the Tawi and Chenab to Poonch, the Kashmir Valley and Gurez, J&K's diverse languages reflect centuries of interaction and linguistic connections. Punjabi's links with these traditions reveal a legacy that transcends distinct identities. Understanding why Punjabi deserves recognition begins with examining its place in J&K's multilingual history.

The misconception that Punjabi speakers in J&K belong only to the Sikh community overlooks the region's historical record. Sikhs constituted only 1.9% of the population in the 2011 Census, but Punjabi's literary and cultural presence extends beyond religious boundaries. One of the earliest examples of Punjabi writers from J&K is Suthre Shah, born in 1615 near Baramulla. His *Fakhrey Fakhrey Suthreh Shah* belongs to the region's early Punjabi literary tradition. A locality named Suthra Shahi still exists in Srinagar.

Mian Muhammad Bakhsh (1830-1907), revered Sufi poet from Khari Sharif near Mirpur, gave the Punjabi Sufi literature one of its most celebrated works, *Saif-ul-Malook*. It is written in the western Punjabi/Potohari/ Shahmukhi tradition and is enriched by Persian and Arabic vocabulary.

Hazrat Mian Abdullah Larvi Ji, born in 1863, composed spiritual poetry in Punjabi and Gojri, including in the Siharfi tradition. His followers regard Punjabi as the '*zubaan*' (language) of their '*murshid*' (spiritual guide). His shrine at Darbar Baba Ji Sahib in Wangat, Ganderbal, is a centre of devotion.

Ghulam Ahmad Fazil Kashmiri (1916-2004) is recognised as the first Kashmiri Muslim writer to translate *Japji Sahib* and *Sukhmani Sahib* into Kashmiri and Urdu. In 2021, Khalid Hussain received the Sahitya Kala Akademi Award in Punjabi for his short-story collection, '*Sullan Da Saalan*'.



PTI

Hundreds of prominent Sikh writers have made contributions to Punjabi literature. Gyani Kartar Singh Komal is the founder of modern Punjabi literature in J&K. In 2015, the J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages honoured his legacy with a commemorative event and a special issue of *Sheeraza*, dedicated to his life and writings.

Kanwal Kashmiri (Paramjit Singh Bali), born in 1937 in Budgam, became known as the Baba Bohar of Punjabi short-story writing in J&K. Novelist Surinder Kaur Neer explored collective trauma in her debut novel, '*Shikargah*', while Dr Baljit Singh Raina has contributed more than 30 books and worked on feature films.

Punjabi's literary heritage also includes writers from the Dogra community. Om Parkash Sharma Sarathi, born on April 1, 1933, earned respect through his Punjabi novels and short stories, '*Lok Gai Lok*', in the 1970s. Padma Shri Dr Jitender Udhampuri has authored four Punjabi poetry collections. His 2025 collection, '*Mele Pattanan De*', draws on Punjabi Sufi tradition associated with Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid and Shah Hussain. Other Dogra writers associated with Punjabi literature include Professor Nirmal Vinod, Dr Sushil Sharma and Premi Jatt. Their contributions demonstrate how linguistic and cultural affiliations can overlap.

> From Sufi poetry and centuries-old literary traditions to historical Census records, Punjabi's roots in J&K run far deeper than its association with any one community.

Records also reveal Punjabi's substantial presence in the former princely state. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1892) reported that 34% of the population spoke Kashmiri, 15% Dogri and nearly 30% Punjabi.

Census accounts cite around 8.6 lakh Punjabi speakers in 1901, over 16 lakh in 1911 and 16.9 lakh in the 1931 Census report. The 1941 Census figures list 10 lakh Punjabi speakers, other than 5.31 lakh Pahari and 83,000 Chabali speakers.

Considering these categories together in a broader Punjabi-related linguistic grouping would produce a substantially larger figure. According to the 2011 Census, 2,83,145 people in the erstwhile state of J&K reported Punjabi as their mother tongue. The figure does not include everyone who speaks or understands Punjabi as an additional language.

The Partition, the tribal invasion and the 1947 India-Pakistan war transformed J&K's political geography and disrupted its Punjabi-speaking communities. Areas with substantial Punjabi-speaking populations came under Pakistan's control, referred to as Pakistan-occupied J&K (POJK). Researcher Davinder Singh Vishawnagrik puts the number of displaced refugee families at 41,019. Changes in later population figures cannot be interpreted as evidence that Punjabi lacked historical roots in the region.

Historical traces of Punjabi can also be found on the signboards of old structures. The pre-Partition railway station at RS Pura had its name written in Punjabi, alongside Urdu and English.

Punjabi's history in education predates Independence. According to Dr Komal JB Singh's book '*Invisible Minority*', a demand in 1921 by the Sikhs of Kashmir sought its inclusion in J&K's school curriculum. After Independence, Punjabi was taught as a compulsory subject till 1981, when it was made optional. These records demonstrate that Punjabi's place in education has a history of its own.

Radio carried Punjabi into homes across J&K. Established on December 1, 1947, Radio Kashmir, Jammu, promoted Punjabi, Dogri, Gojari, Pahari and other regional languages through music, drama and folk traditions. Its popular Punjabi programme featured characters such as Fatehdin Shah Ji and Ralley Shah. In the 1960s, a Muslim presenter from Jammu, Mehmood Ahmed became known for his Punjabi writing and programming, including the *Noor Din* comedy series, while Rita Yousuf, known as Guddi, became a familiar voice through broadcasting.

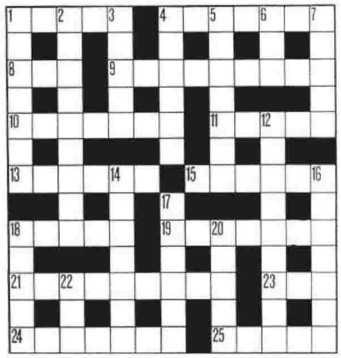
A language's value lies not in how many people speak it or the religion associated with it, but in the memories, emotions and experiences it carries. The late Chandan Negi, a Punjabi writer from Jammu, authored '*Mera Aapa Mod De*' (1976), '*Chitragupt*' (1978), '*Karrha Saar*' (1980) and '*Gandh Kasturi* (1982). Her Dogri-Punjabi dictionary reflected the importance of preserving connections between languages.

Guru Granth Sahib reminds us of the importance of preserving linguistic diversity. Written in Gurmukhi, it contains hymns in Punjabi, Braj, Awadhi, Sindhi, Persian and other regional languages and dialects, bringing together spiritual voices from different traditions.

Article 345 does not prescribe any percentage of speakers for a language to receive official status. The J&K Official Languages Act, 2020, provides for efforts to promote Punjabi, Gojri and Pahari, but granting Punjabi the official status will require a Bill to be passed in the J&K Assembly. The movement is about more than getting an official status. It is about recognising Punjabi's place in J&K's shared heritage without diminishing the importance of other languages.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 To mount (3,2)
4 Good-naturedly humorous (7)
8 Take part in a winter sport (3)
9 Paid every three months (9)
10 To strip (7)
11 Detest (5)
13 Rubbed out (6)
15 Fanatic (6)
18 Topmost point (5)
19 Mountaineer (7)
21 On a large scale (9)
23 Family (3)
24 Raise siege of (7)
25 The present age (5)

DOWN
1 Token of friendly intent (7)
2 Inferior (5-4)
3 Feeling of resentment (5)
4 Commend highly (6)
5 Motivate (7)
6 A conifer (3)
7 Stratum (5)
12 Poorly planned (4-5)
14 Immoderate (7)
16 Despotism (7)
17 Awkward predicament (6)
18 Cringe in fear (5)
20 Clumsy (5)
22 Lubricate (3)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Jules Verne, 8 Brunt, 9 Summons, 10 Overawe, 11 Arena, 12 Dreary, 14 Hebrew, 17 Totem, 19 Arrival, 21 Compact, 22 Verge, 23 On the level.

Down: 2 Ukulele, 3 Extra, 4 Vessel, 5 Rampage, 6 Evoke, 7 Oscar Wilde, 8 Bloodstock, 13 Remnant, 15 Reverse, 16 Castle, 18 Tempo, 20 Revue.

SU DO KU

1				8				3
		9	7		2	6		
	2						4	
		1	3		6	5		
	4						6	
		6	4		5	2		
	1						9	
		4	8		9	7		
9				5				2

V. HARD

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

7	5	8	2	6	9	4	3	1
9	4	2	5	3	1	8	6	7
3	1	6	8	7	4	2	9	5
5	8	9	1	4	7	6	2	3
1	7	3	6	9	2	5	8	4
2	6	4	3	8	5	1	7	9
6	2	1	9	5	3	7	4	8
8	3	7	4	1	6	9	5	2
4	9	5	7	2	8	3	1	6

CALENDAR

OCTOBER 19, 2026, MONDAY

Shaka Samvat	1948
Ashwin Shaka	27
Kartik Parvishte	3
Hijari	1448

Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 10:52 am
Dhriti Yoga up to 12:35 am
Uttrashadha Nakshatra up to 3:39 pm
Moon in Capricorn sign.
Shri Durgashatmi

FORECAST

SUNSET: MONDAY 17:48 HRS
SUNRISE: TUESDAY 06:27 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	30	17
New Delhi	32	19
Amritsar	30	17
Bathinda	32	15
Jalandhar	31	16
Ludhiana	30	16
Bhiwani	31	18
Hisar	31	19
Sirsa	30	18
Dharamsala	27	14
Manali	22	06
Shimla	23	11
Srinagar	22	05
Jammu	30	15
Kargil	17	02
Leh	16	01
Dehradun	30	15
Mussoorie	22	11

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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The Statesman
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Courts under test

A democracy's freedoms depend not merely on constitutional guarantees, but on whether those guarantees can be enforced when the government finds them inconvenient. The confrontation in Delhi over protests against electoral-roll revisions has brought this question into sharp focus. Beyond the conduct of the police, it has exposed a larger institutional challenge: whether the courts can prevent executive authority from shrinking the space available for dissent.

The restrictions imposed around the demonstrations, including mass detentions, transport disruptions and barriers to public assembly, demand scrutiny beyond the immediate justification of security. Governments have a duty to prevent violence and maintain order, but the anticipation of trouble cannot become a blanket licence to curtail fundamental freedoms. Restrictions must rest on lawful authority and satisfy the tests of necessity and proportionality. When a city's movement is disrupted to contain a protest, the state must explain why less intrusive measures would not suffice.

The judiciary's role is crucial precisely because the police and executive cannot be the final arbiters of the limits of their own powers. The Supreme Court's intervention, including directions against illegal detention and excessive restrictions on transport, has demonstrated that judicial scrutiny can provide an immediate check. Yet the effectiveness of such intervention depends on what follows: whether orders are obeyed, allegations of misconduct investigated and affected citizens given timely remedies.

This is where the problem extends beyond any single protest. If citizens must repeatedly approach constitutional courts to secure freedoms that public authorities are already bound to respect, the burden of defending liberty shifts unfairly from the state to the individual. Delayed hearings can compound the injury. A judgment delivered after a demonstration has been prevented, a journalist intimidated or a citizen unlawfully detained may establish a principle without adequately repairing the damage.

Neither protesters nor authorities should be exempt from constitutional standards. Nor is accountability achieved simply by initiating proceedings against individual officers. Where decisions involve several layers of administration, scrutiny must establish who authorised the restrictions, what evidence justified them and whether the measures complied with judicial directions. Without that examination, responsibility can dissolve into bureaucratic procedure, leaving the underlying practices intact. After all, an officer can flout judicial directions, and appear contrite thereafter.

The dispute over electoral rolls makes these questions particularly consequential. Confidence in elections rests on the belief that voting rights are protected, objections can be heard and institutions can withstand political pressure. Allegations of wrongful exclusion require evidence-based examination and transparent remedies, not the suppression of those demanding answers. Peaceful protest cannot replace legal verification, but neither can restrictions on protest resolve doubts about electoral integrity. India's constitutional democracy needs more than eloquent declarations of rights. It needs courts that hear urgent challenges promptly, enforce their orders and insist on accountability when executive action crosses legal boundaries. The true test of judicial independence is whether fundamental freedoms remain protected even when their defence is politically inconvenient.

NH-148A

National Highway 148A, in its original form, connects Delhi to Gurgaon through what is known as the Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road. It is one of a handful of vital links between the two cities which form part of the National Capital Region.

Last year, funds were sanctioned by the National Highway Authority for improvement of the vital stretch between Andheria More near Chhatarpur to the border with Haryana, a distance of less than eight kilometers. Whether these funds were spent, or how, is unknown. Yet, these eight kilometers remain arguably the most tortuous stretch of any national highway in the country for a road user.

Abandoned for all intents by NHAI, ignored by the Delhi Traffic Police and the municipal authorities, and quite beyond the attentions of the local MP and MLA, both long-time political strongmen, now of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, this eight-kilometer stretch sees the most egregious breaches of traffic rules and arguably more instances of wrong-side driving than anywhere else in the world. Concerned residents have complained repeatedly to the authorities but to no avail.

The problems on this stretch are compounded by the usurpation of one lane in either direction by parked cars of shopkeepers and their customers. Where there are no shops, between one and two lanes are appropriated by electric 3-wheelers, because Delhi Metro has not provided adequate parking at the four metro stations on the stretch, or allowed available spaces to be encroached. Two car dealers located at either end of the stretch block a lane with vehicles ready for delivery.

Negotiating four major crossings – at Andheria More, CDR Chowk, Ghitorni and Aya Nagar – is a nightmare, and sees road-users breach every possible traffic rule to move ahead. At peak times, the bedlam is accentuated by a steady stream of cars and motorcycles travelling on the wrong side. Footpaths are routinely appropriated by vehicles, when not encroached upon by roadside hawkers, exposing pedestrians to grave risk.

While the density of traffic on this vital stretch connecting Delhi and Gurgaon is admittedly high, the most visible aspect of this monumental mess is the complete lack of management. Scarcely any traffic policemen are around to regulate traffic or to penalize those flagrantly flouting rules.

Permanent parking arrangements by shopkeepers on the highway are just not possible without the active connivance of the traffic police. Hawkers cannot set up permanent structures on footpaths without a wink and a nod from municipal inspectors. And the several encroachments in Delhi Metro's parking areas cannot take place without the involvement of the authorities. The next time the Minister of Road Transport and Highways holds forth on the achievements of his ministry, he ought to be reminded of the mess that prevails under his very nose in the national capital. NH-148A is a blot on his ministry, and on the NHAI, one that cries out for attention but never seems to get it.

Muscle Memory

The Holocaust taught Jews what could happen when the world failed to intervene. The wars of Israel's early years taught the new state that survival could never be taken for granted. Terror attacks taught generations that danger could appear anywhere. Compulsory military service converted that historical memory into practical reflex. The result is a society in which the distance between civilian and combatant can be unusually small. And so, when the back is against the wall, the Israeli response can be startlingly direct. Fight. Survive. Ask questions afterwards



There are moments when a society reveals itself not through what its leaders say, but through what ordinary people instinctively do when danger arrives. On September 30, aboard a FlyDubai flight bound for Tel Aviv, the passengers found themselves in precisely such a moment.

The co-pilot allegedly attacked the captain and the aircraft plunged thousands of feet. The grievously wounded pilot managed to open the cockpit door, passengers rushed forward, subdued the attacker and helped secure the cockpit. Two off-duty pilots aboard the aircraft subsequently helped land it safely in Saudi Arabia.

It is tempting to describe this simply as acts of individual courage. But there was something distinctly Israeli about the reaction: when the situation turned existential, they did not wait for someone else to save them. They moved.

One passenger, Tzvika Manes, explained the response simply – "because we're Israelis, we responded quickly." He and other passengers reportedly restrained the attacker using headphone cords.

That instinct has a history. Israel is a country in which catastrophe has never been entirely theoretical. The Holocaust is not merely history; it is the foundational memory of a people who learned what can happen when nobody comes.

The creation of Israel was followed immediately by war, and then by decades of conflict – 1956, 1967, 1973, Lebanon, the Intifadas, suicide bombings, rocket attacks and, most recently, 'October 7'.

Whatever one's political judgment about Israel's conduct, the psychological consequence is difficult to ignore. The Israeli imagination has been conditioned by the possibility of being caught unprepared. Part of this is cultural. A great deal is institutional. Compulsory military service means that military experience is woven into ordinary Israeli life. Men and women who complete service enter the reserve system and can be called up during emergencies.

A doctor may be a reservist. A technology executive may have commanded soldiers. A civilian confronted by violence may have spent years learning how to react to it. The result is not merely military competence. It is familiarity with crisis.

Israeli political leadership has reflected this reality. David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu all had substantial military or security backgrounds. Netanyahu served in Sayeret Matkal and participated in the 1972 Sabena hostage rescue and the 1973 war. The leading voice of the current Israeli political opposition to Netanyahu is Gadi Eisenkot – a veteran Israeli Defense Force (IDF) professional who spent 41 years in the uniform and rose to be the 21st Chief of General Staff of the IDF.

The historical examples are legion, too. In 1972, when Sabena Flight 571 was hijacked, Israeli commandos stormed the aircraft and rescued the hostages. Netanyahu served in the unit involved. Four years later came Entebbe. When an Air France aircraft carrying Israeli and Jewish passengers was hijacked and taken to Uganda, Israel treated it as a national emergency.

The subsequent commando operation became one of the defining hostage-rescue operations of the era. Then came decades of terrorism, kidnappings and hostage-taking. Israel developed intelligence networks, counterterrorism units, rapid-response teams and a population accustomed to recognising danger.



BHOPINDER SINGH

The writer is Lt Gen PVSM, AVSM (Retd), and former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

October 2023 exposed the devastating limits of that system. Hamas' attack revealed profound failures of intelligence, preparedness and military response. Yet in several communities, armed civilians and local security teams fought back before the army arrived. That is the paradox. A society conditioned to believe the state will protect it may wait for the state. A society conditioned by history to believe the state may arrive too late can develop another instinct – do something now!

That instinct can save lives. It can also have darker consequences. A population habituated to viewing threats through the prism of survival may perceive danger earlier, and sometimes more expansively, than outsiders do.

The same security culture that produces extraordinary courage can produce a permanent sense of siege. That is an important part of understanding Israel.

It helps explain the prominence of military commanders in public life, the extraordinary emphasis on intelligence and hostage rescue, and the speed and force with which Israeli governments often respond to perceived threats.

And it helps explain the reaction aboard the FlyDubai aircraft. Those passengers were civilians, not commandos. Yet when the aircraft began falling and the cockpit became a scene of violence, some of them did what generations of Israeli society have been culturally and institutionally prepared to do. They moved towards the danger. Perhaps that is the deepest legacy of Israel's wounded history.

The Holocaust taught Jews what could happen when the world failed to intervene. The wars of Israel's early years taught the new state that survival could never be taken for granted. Terror attacks taught generations that danger could appear anywhere. Compulsory military service converted that historical memory into practical reflex.

The result is a society in which the distance between civilian and combatant can be unusually small. And so, when the back is against the wall, the Israeli response can be startlingly direct. Fight. Survive. Ask questions afterwards.

That instinct can be heroic, as it was on the FlyDubai flight. It can also become politically and morally complicated when transferred from an aircraft cabin to a battlefield, a border or a national strategy. But to understand Israel, and why Israelis so often react to danger with such immediacy, one has to understand the history behind the reflex.

For a people whose collective memory is saturated with the consequences of being defenceless, "never again" was never merely a slogan. It became a survival mechanism. And sometimes, on a plunging aircraft thousands of feet above the ground, it becomes muscle memory.

The Korea Herald

Unanswered questions on Future Response Fund

As the global boom in artificial intelligence drove unexpectedly sharp increases in South Korean semiconductor manufacturers' earnings and tax payments, the government decided to set aside the tax windfall for a new fund rather than incorporate it into the existing budget.

When introducing the Future Response Fund last July, President Lee Jae Myung said, "We will concentrate investment in four areas that will determine the nation's future, namely the future, young people, regional development and education, and thereby raise the economy's growth potential so that all citizens can share in the gains."

When announcing its proposed budget for 2027 in early September, the government said it would draw on 162.3 trillion won ($121 billion) in tax revenue above the trend line for the preceding 10 years to invest 45.4 trillion won in four areas central to raising potential growth: young people, growth engines, regional development, and education and talent development.

It also said it would use 12.5 trillion won to reduce new government bond issuance, bringing national debt below the level envisaged in its existing plan. But it is a serious problem that an idea has become an enormous, unconventional fiscal mechanism potentially exceeding 200 trillion won without undergoing serious, open deliberation involving a broad range of experts. The current semiconductor supercycle will eventually give way to a painful downturn. While the prevailing expectation is that this reversal will not occur within the next few months, that hardly amounts to a consensus that it will never come this time.

One frequently cited argument is that when a certain Nordic country developed oil fields and began producing substantial quantities of crude, it used the proceeds to establish and manage a sovereign wealth fund separate from its conventional fiscal accounts, suggesting that creating and operating the Future Response Fund is neither particularly unusual nor especially problematic.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

But it is a strained comparison to equate oil production lasting at least several decades after successful field development with a temporary surge in tax payments generated by a cyclical boom in the semiconductor industry that will end within a few years. With the semiconductor supercycle coincidentally beginning just as he took office, did Lee assume that it would not give way to a severe downturn during his presidency?

It is difficult to accept that the Future Response Fund was established only a few months after the idea emerged and is being allocated around 200 trillion won without its long-term management plans or measures for addressing potential problems having been settled through public debate.

With the government failing to respond promptly and adequately enough to ease these concerns, the National Assembly Research Service published a report identifying problems with the fund.

The report first pointed out that no mechanism had been established to allow the Assembly and outside experts to examine the money transferred into the fund or assess whether that amount had been calculated appropriately.

It went on to warn that if the fiscal authorities used the fund to carry out projects directly, their responsibilities could overlap with those of the ministries already responsible for those projects, resulting in inefficient resource allocation. Even if those responsibilities were successfully coordinated, concentrating project-related authority in the fund's managing body could limit the discretion of the ministries implementing the projects, it added.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Scoreboard

Sir, The sky belongs to no billionaire, much as a village pond belongs to no single fisherman ("Open Skies", October 14). The simplest way to keep it fair is to let the public hold the stopwatch. Why not publish a "Connection Scoreboard" every quarter, showing how many remote schools, clinics and panchayats each satellite provider has served, at what price and with what speed? Companies would then compete for a villager's smile instead of a headline.

Yet openness has a price, and it must be paid in safety. Emergency switch-offs, local monitoring and data storage rules could be tested first in a supervised pilot, perhaps in a border district or an island, with results shared in plain language. If a rule works there, it can travel; if it fails, it can be mended before millions depend on it.

Finally, let students and start-ups join the table. A small public fund for local ground equipment, antennas and apps built in India would ensure that homegrown talent rides the same rocket. When rules are clear, trials are honest and rewards go to those who connect the last hamlet, the winner will be the citizen.

Yours, etc., K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru, 14 October.

Balance

Sir, Apropos "Open Skies" published today, India's satellite internet market needs competition, but it must not come at the cost of national security or fair access. The entry of Starlink alongside Reliance Jio and Airtel could improve connectivity in remote areas where conventional networks remain inadequate. However, allowing a dominant player to control essential infrastructure may weaken competition and leave consumers with fewer choices in the long run.

The government should therefore adopt transparent licensing conditions, clear security protocols and a credible mechanism for sharing spectrum. Independent oversight must apply equally to all operators, irrespective of their market strength. Satellite internet should complement terrestrial networks, not undermine them. A balanced regulatory framework can encourage investment while protecting consumers and strategic interests.

Yours, etc., A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore, 14 October.

Childish

Sir, The Centre's abracadabra-like trick of denotifying Jantar Mantar as a protest site and assigning different venues as alternatives – these places are further away from the seat of power – seems quite childish. What people have been asking for is not a change of protest venues but a change in the government's attitude.

Historically, protesters from across the country have been congregating at Jantar Mantar to voice their grievances. Instead of understanding and addressing their demands, the government treats dissenters, protesters and critics as anti-nationals and unleashes State brutally against them. Such an approach does not befit a democracy. Delhi Police succeeded in preventing many protesters from reaching Jantar Mantar by turning the national capital into an impregnable fortress before the October 10 demonstrations. However, every attempt to silence demands for accountability makes them resonate even more loudly. Gyanesh Kumar must recognise that his refusal to address questions about the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise is eroding public confidence in the Election Commission of India.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 14 October.

Crisis of teaching time in our higher education

DR. BHASKAR NATH BISWAL



In the quiet corridors of India's universities and colleges, a paradox unfolds every academic year. On paper, the University Grants Commission mandates a robust framework of teaching days designed to ensure quality education. In reality, the calendar is a battlefield of competing demands like festivals, awareness campaigns, elections, examinations and administrative interruptions leaving far fewer hours for the core purpose of higher education: teaching and learning.

For Higher Education Institutions, the gap between prescription and practice has become a chronic concern, one that quietly erodes the depth of student engagement and the integrity of academic programmes.

The UGC's regulations, particularly those embedded in the Minimum Qualifications for Appointment of Teachers and other Academic Staff Regulations of 2018 and earlier standards of instruction are unambiguous. Universities and colleges must ensure at least 180 actual teaching days in an academic year. This translates to a minimum of 30 weeks of actual teaching under a six-day week pattern.

The remaining weeks of the year are carefully apportioned: roughly 12 weeks for admissions, examinations and non-instructional activities such as co-curricular events; eight weeks for vacations; and two weeks for public holidays. Institutions following a five-day week are expected to expand the teaching weeks proportionally to maintain equivalence. Contact teaching must not fall below 30 hours a week, with additional time for practicals, fieldwork and library work. These norms exist to protect the academic core from the natural pressures of an institution's calendar. Yet the lived experience on campuses across the country tells a different story.

Beyond the standard public holidays and vacations, HEIs are routinely called upon to observe a series of nationally mandated days and weeks. In the recent academic cycle, the UGC and various ministries issued successive letters directing institutions to mark Anti-Ragging Day on 12 August followed by a full awareness week of competitions, workshops and campaigns; Jan Jatiya Gaurav Diwas and the extended celebrations around the birth anniversary of Bhagwan Birsa Munda; Vigilance Awareness Week; Veer Baal Diwas on 26 December with its suite of knowledge games, debates, skits, and rallies; and other commemorative observances linked to Constitution Day or national priorities.

Each of these directives carries genuine educational and civic value. They foster awareness, values and student participation. At the same time, they consume instructional hours. Classes are suspended or shortened so that assemblies, competitions and outreach activities can take place. When several such observances fall within the same semester, the cumulative loss becomes significant. What begins as enrichment gradually chips away at the teaching calendar.

Elections impose an even sharper interruption. Polling days turn colleges into booths. Teaching and non-teaching staff are drafted for duty, often with rehearsals stretching over weeks. In states where assembly or parliamentary elections coincide with the academic calendar, institutions frequently grant additional holidays so that students can travel home to vote. The disruption is not limited to the polling day itself. Preparation, travel and the aftermath can erase several consecutive working days.

In some years, local body elections or bye-elections add further layers of absence. Teachers pulled away for electoral rolls or booth management return to find the syllabus compressed and students restless. These are not minor administrative inconveniences; they are structural erosions of the teaching continuum.

Examinations themselves claim a substantial portion of the year. Under the semester system that now dominates most HEIs, each term ends with a block of practicals and theory examinations that can stretch across three to four weeks. Internal assessments, mid-semester examinations, continuous evaluation components and supplementary examinations add further interruptions. The UGC framework already allocates significant weeks for examination-related activities, yet the reality often exceeds the allocation.

Admission processes at the start of the year, result declaration timelines and the logistical demands of conducting large-scale examinations further shrink the window available for uninterrupted classroom interaction. When these blocks are stacked against the mandatory observances and electoral interruptions, the arithmetic becomes unforgiving.

What remains, after all these deductions, is frequently well below the prescribed 180 days. Many institutions report actual teaching contact hovering closer to 140-150 days and in some strained calendars even lower. The shortfall is not merely numerical. It translates into rushed lectures, incomplete practical exposure, reduced time for discussion and doubt-clearing and a diminished opportunity for the slow, iterative process through which genuine understanding develops. Students feel the pressure of compressed syllabi. Teachers face the constant anxiety of covering ground while meeting administrative and civic mandates. The quality of higher education, already under scrutiny for various reasons, suffers quietly from this calendar deficit.

There is no single villain in this story. Civic awareness, democratic participation and cultural commemorations are legitimate and necessary functions of educational institutions. Examinations are indispensable for accountability. Holidays provide necessary rest. The problem lies in the absence of a coherent national mechanism that protects the teaching core while accommodating these other demands.

A suggestive path forward would begin with stricter enforcement of the 180-day norm as a non-negotiable floor, coupled with a transparent annual audit of actual teaching days submitted by every HEI. Observances and awareness weeks could be integrated into the curriculum itself rather than treated as interruptions, scheduled as credit-bearing co-curricular modules that do not displace regular classes. Electoral duties for academic staff might be minimised or compensated through compensatory teaching arrangements planned in advance.

Examination calendars could be tightened through better use of continuous assessment and technology-enabled evaluation, reducing the length of end-semester blocks. Most importantly, academic calendars should be published well in advance and treated as binding contracts between institutions, students and the regulatory system, with deviations requiring formal justification and compensatory measures.

The classroom remains the heart of higher education. Without sufficient uninterrupted days of teaching, even the most progressive curriculum reforms and the most eloquent policy statements lose their force. Restoring the integrity of those 180 days is not an administrative detail. It is an essential condition for the intellectual and professional formation of the generation that will shape India's future.

The writer is a former college Principal and Founder of Supporting Shoulders.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY



Management and mendacity

Lies are the staple of organizational life. Orders, instructions, policies, memoranda, reviews, reimbursements bring in their wake an avalanche of falsities and fabrication, some innocuous, others damaging and corrosive. It is hypocritical that we talk about practices in management without ever mentioning lies.

The lies are of many different shades. Broadly they fall into three main categories. The first corresponds to what we commonly call white lies. These are the lies we use to avoid or minimize inconvenience. We promise meeting a deadline when we know it can't be done without compromising the quality. We bend a professional judgment to please a client or a boss. We exaggerate the calibre of a subordinate to be transferred to another department. We misrepresent the capacity of a product to meet a major customer's high expectation.

A second category of lies people use is to save their skin. We can call these gray lies. We invoke these to protect ourselves in situations of culpability. We concoct mythical labour problems when we can't deliver a consignment on time. We invent resource constraints when our teams fail to come up with the needed new products. When our marketing strategy proves to have been short-sighted or over-ambitious, we find weaknesses in the computer software used. Or when an expensive campaign aborts, we identify the bad eggs in our advertising agency. We need the veil of mendacity when our handiwork is about to blow up in our face.

The third category, the black lies, are the ones some use to damage or destroy others. To stop a competing company in its tracks, they spread canards about its manufacturing capacity among major customers. When they feel envious of the spectacular progress of a colleague, they circulate vicious lies about his drinking or partying habits. When they fear they may not expect continuing largesse from a chief executive, they may fabricate offensive stories about him and pass them discreetly to members of the board. They may even leak to the media hurtful and inaccurate gossip about the chief executive. The object of these lies is to cause harm to a person who has somehow aroused the hostility of the liar. A classic example is Iago who worked a terrible revenge on Othello for promoting a colleague instead of him.

If mendacity in management is many-faced and widespread, the question is how to contain it. Short of changing people's hearts and minds overnight, what can organizations do to limit the lies in our daily life?

If the blackest of lies are our principal concern, we should explore why people feel the kind of animus against their work associates that prompts their wicked fabrications. The answer has several angles. We have created organizations that make a religion of greed and possession. We have raised self-centered competition to the status of an art form. We have equated success with promotion, lent respectability to conspicuous consumption, and relegated teamwork to harmless folklore. This is the zeitgeist of most organizations.

It is not surprising that their internal relationships are poisoned with suspicion, jealousy, hate, and a barely tamed desire to do the other fellow in. The change has to come through a more collegial way of doing work, an emphasis on collective achievement instead of individual advancement, and a focus on performance rather than perquisites.

The self-protecting lies come from a realistic awareness of the ever-controlling, ever-punitive nature of our organizations. Many of them are better designed to snare the wayward than inspire the active. Their watchword is: defend your flanks. Their favoured tools are memoranda on minutiae and correspondence on the commonplace. Assured often of a market niche and a protective regulation, they build an accountant's dream, a corporate world where systems track all details and rules punish the smallest error.

That dream world is a nightmare for the entrepreneurial spirit. If we want people to act decisively in our organizations, to venture, experiment, innovate and take risks, we need to allow a higher tolerance for errors. People should have incentives to act rather than to invent false excuses for inaction.

Finally, white lies multiply in work-life because we perceive the practice as harmless. It is not. When we use lies to avoid inconvenient situations or work, we overlook that such inconveniences are usually the symptoms of malfunctioning systems. If we lie often to our customers, it implies something is going wrong in our service to them. If we have to mislead our staff frequently, it means we are not heeding some of their grievances.

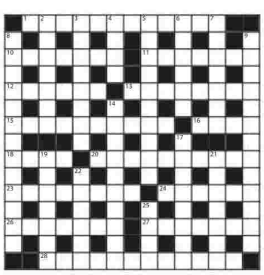
Our falsehoods then lull us into inaction, at the cost of neglecting real, tell-tale problems. Worse still, every lie makes the next lie easier: simpler to plan and execute, morally less bothersome. We end with an organizational culture of avoidance and deception, lying to clients, workers, stockholders alike, even to ourselves.

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

Crossword | No. 293611



Last Saturday's Solution



ACROSS

1 Trade in continent (5-7)
10 In seconds, posh wine is protected (7)
11 Farmer, say, succeeded spreading manure (7)
12 Join revolution before the French (6)
13 Some articles say I stalked writer (8)
15 Offal soup's first, then we film sitcom (10)
16 Film villain has nothing on corona (4)
18 Pert, following kiss (4)
20 Narrow escape when bird bites husband and dog runs free (5,3,2)
23 Appreciate fashionable pleat (8)
24 Work from Poet Laureate: four letters, having eight rhymes (6)
26 Most of his meat not on this uncovered grill (7)
27 Cruel chums stripped man naked in pub (7)
28 The gutless star karate chopped raw meat (5,7)

DOWN

2 Cubs cycling through Oregon drug complex (7)
3 Time Tekstar broadcast what Hollywood produces? (8)
4 Third eye oddly substantial (4)
5 First to replace middle of song in poet, Owen's sort of rhyme gets help (10)
6 In part, Dubya wrong about country (6)
7 Singer and model paired over a beer (3,4)
8 I see cop baffled before robber returns carrying scrap of gold and silver (6,2,5)
9 Not much in clothes shop – changed into thong (4,2,7)
14 Rod's witchcraft? (10)
17 Suffers hard in test for promotion (8)
19 Incomplete arrest following one northern copper's nightmare (7)
21 Best in The Beatles, once? (7)
22 Right key starts to unlock everything – salvation! (6)
25 Pass is in Virginia (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with **The Independent, London**)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 19 October 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

We are glad to see that Sir Abdur Rahim has been prompt to disclaim any intention of disrespect to the Viceroy when he used the words "strongly resent" in his telegram in regard to a temporary successor to Sir Mohamed Habibullah as Education Member. All who know him are aware that, as he says, he is incapable of such an intention. But it is well that he should have publicly repudiated the implication of an expression into which he was accidentally betrayed.

News Items

BOMB EXPLOSION KILLS SEVEN

LAHORE FESTIVAL TRAGEDY

Lahore, Oct.

Forty people were admitted to hospital as the result of a bomb explosion during the Dussehra festival here. Seven of the victims are reported to have died from their injuries, while others are in a precarious condition. Wounds in some cases are four inches deep. The Medical authorities take the view that the bomb was not of the ordinary "fire-work" variety, as was at first believed. There is a consensus of opinion that the bomb was of a type used in warfare. A sensation was caused by the explosion though the danger of any demonstration has past.

Of the 40 injured, including a woman and children, 32 are Hindus and Sikhs, and eight are Mahommedans. H. E. the Governor of the Punjab visited the hospital and conversed with the wounded inmates.

DELAYED CABLES

AURORA BOREALIS UPSETS TRANSMISSION

New York, Oct.

The working of the telegraph system was thrown into confusion by the unusual appearance of the aurora borealis in the northern part of the United States. Transmission of trans-Atlantic cables was much delayed, but the situation is now normal. Experts were unsuccessful in their endeavour to arrange adjustments to cope with the frequent changes in current due to the phenomenon.—Reuter.

PENSION FOR V. C. DARDANELLES

BRAVERY RECALLED

(From Our Special Representative.)
London, Oct.

Captain Dunbar Nasmith, V. C., Commander of Submarine E-ll when she penetrated the mined Dardanelles and torpedoed vessels in Constantinople harbour, has been awarded a good service pension of £150 per year.

OPIUM SALOONS

WINDFALL FOR THE MALAYA GOVERNMENT

London, Oct.

The successful experiment of the opening of Government opium-smoking saloons is mentioned in a Colonial Office report relating to Malaya, recording an increase of 1,400,000 dollars in the revenue from the chandu monopoly, due to extra sales arising out of the influx of immigrants attracted by high wages in the tin mines and on the rubber estates. The Chief Secretary to the Malaya States Government asserts that the success of Government saloons is very encouraging. At the end of last year preparations were made to take over all smoking saloons in the Malaya States, while a scheme of retail shops was also completed. The aim of the Government to have all sales of chandu conducted by Government officers was now achieved. No licences for the sale of chandu will be issued this year.— Reuter.

Editor's TAKE

Negligence, not rain, killed devotees in Kolkata

Kolkata pandal tragedy exposes failures in crowd management, official oversight and accountability. India has guidelines, but no enforcement

They went to see Maa Durga on Saptami evening and did not come home. At least 19 people died and more than two dozen were injured on Saturday at the Chorbagan Sarbojanin pandal in north Kolkata, after rain around 7 pm sent a waiting crowd surging in panic. People fell; others fell on them. Call it a stampede, not an act of God but an act of negligence.

A lane that cannot hold the number of people a famous pandal draws, with no plan for the sky opening, is a decision. Police say the crush came at an exit gate. Residents allege police were posted mainly at the VIP gate, announcements on entry and exit were limited, and help for the injured was slow. The chief minister says an announcement by organisers set off the rush; relatives of two victims blame whistles blown by private security guards. Organisers, guards and staff have been detained. The NDMA published a national guide on managing crowds at mass gatherings in 2014, covering capacity planning, queue design, public address systems and emergency exits. What is missing is enforcement.

A licence should answer one question: how many people can this lane safely move per minute, and where do they go when it rains? Too few do. Hired bouncers who cannot read a crowd are handed whistles and microphones. Too often, planning begins after the dead are counted. Chorbagan fits a grim pattern: Hathras in 2024, 121 dead; Karur in 2025, 41; Bengaluru's Chinnaswamy Stadium in 2025, 11. Different states, different parties, the same script of grief, compensation, inquiry and amnesia.

In Bengaluru, a judicial commission blamed reckless announcements by organisers as the root cause. Kolkata's chief minister has now pointed to an announcement too.

Responsibility lies not with the rain, and not with the crowd. It lies first with organisers who sold spectacle without a safety plan; with the police and civic officials who licensed it and watched one gate while another filled; and with a state government that owns both. Detention is not accountability.

If the inquiry confirms these lapses, the law on culpable homicide must be applied, and officers who failed in command must be suspended and prosecuted. The ₹25 lakh and government job promised to each family are owed, but they are not justice.

The way forward is not mysterious. Certify a capacity for every large pandal, with separate entry and exit points and a hard cut-off. Replace hired bouncers with trained marshals and one scripted announcement protocol. Plan for rain, with shelter, queue shutdowns and ambulance corridors in place before the first lamp is lit.

Monitor crowd density in real time at the biggest pandals, with the authority to stop entry. Order a time-bound judicial inquiry, publish its report, and make acting on it a legal duty. Durga is invoked as the slayer of evil. The evil here is neglect. Name it, punish it, and let Chorbagan be the last such night, not the latest.

Smart classrooms need the human touch

As artificial intelligence transforms Indian classrooms, teachers must remain at the heart of learning. Technology can personalise lessons and process information, but only human educators can nurture empathy, inspire critical thinking and instil the values that shape responsible citizens



PANKAJ ARORA



In the imagination of schooling today, the classroom has been rewired. Smart classrooms feature responsive screens, real-time diagnostics and generative AI engines that generate custom lesson plans, translate vernacular content across complex linguistic spectra and score assessments in seconds.

As India is a country that is vast and demographically rich, it is tempting to think that algorithmic intelligence can do what instructional presence does; however, the smarter our classrooms get, the more urgently they need an authentic human voice to breathe life, conscience and purpose into that technological infrastructure.

To think that intelligent software can replace the educator is to confuse the transmission of digital data with the relational art of human cultivation. An algorithm can set difficulty curves and process billions of parameters flawlessly, but it cannot listen. It has no voice register to soothe a timid child, no intuition to see unvoiced distress at the back of the classroom, and no moral authority to teach constitutional fraternity and civic empathy.

Learning is not a transaction of silent packets downloaded into passive minds - it is an intersubjective, dialogue-driven awakening. In the classroom, the human voice is an ethical compass and emotional anchor. When synthetic knowledge is instantaneous and ubiquitous, the educator becomes not only a content provider but also an irreplaceable voice of mentorship, questioning and moral discernment.

The scale of this imperative is vividly reflected in the empirical realities of Indian education. According to the latest UDISE+ data, India's school ecosystem encompasses nearly 14.7 lakh schools and over 24.7 crore students, guided by a national cadre of over 1.02 crore schoolteachers. Sustained national commitments under the National Education Policy 2020 have brought structural pupil-teacher ratios well within healthy benchmarks, recording 10:1 at the Foundational stage, 13:1 at the Preparatory stage, 17:1 at the Middle stage, and 21:1 at the Secondary stage, with women comprising nearly 55 per cent of this workforce. These figures indicate that India has achieved significant demographic capacity. The urgent systemic frontier is no longer numerical provisioning alone, but ensuring that this vast teaching cadre is empowered to speak, guide and mentor beyond mechanical routines.

If a teacher's professional voice is just textbook recitation or standardised test administration, then digital tools will expose institutional redundancies; if that voice is trained to ask questions critically, be philosophically sceptical and be emotionally resilient, then technology is relegated to its rightful place as an administrative ally (absorbing clerical work so teachers can do what machines cannot): it frees educators to do what machines can never do.

> AS INDIA ADVANCES TOWARDS VIKSIT BHARAT @ 2047, OUR SCHOOLS WILL INCREASINGLY HUM WITH COMPUTATIONAL POWER, ADAPTIVE SOFTWARE AND AUTOMATED DASHBOARDS. YET WE MUST REMEMBER THAT SILICON CAN ORGANISE KNOWLEDGE, BUT IT CANNOT AWAKEN THE SPIRIT

The writer is the Chairperson of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)

To bring this voice out of bureaucratic silence and into pedagogical leadership, the National Council for Teacher Education has institutionalised the National Professional Standards for Teachers as PUSHTI (Professional Upholding of Standards for Holistic Teaching and Integrity).

For decades, career mobility in Indian schooling was based on passive seniority, administrative compliance and tenure-based stagnation. Instructional depth, classroom voice and reflective pedagogy rarely got structural recognition. PUSHTI changes all that by replacing administrative inertia with an objective merit architecture for professional progression. Under PUSHTI, an educator's professional journey evolves across three distinct, progressive milestones.

It commences with the Proficient Teacher, or Praveen Shikshak, the foundational practitioner whose voice establishes classroom trust, demonstrates conceptual clarity and responds attentively to early developmental diversity. It advances to the Advanced Teacher, or Unnat Shikshak, the skilled practitioner whose voice articulates interdisciplinary connections, models differentiated instruction and elevates the collaborative dialogue of the wider school community.

At its apex stands the Expert Teacher, or Kushal Shikshak, the master practitioner whose reliable voice guides curriculum design, pilots contextual innovations and mentors generations of emerging colleagues. This professional voice requires nurturing across the entire career continuum. Pre-service preparation is being reimagined through the four-year multidisciplinary Integrated Teacher Education Programme, instilling pedagogical confidence, cognitive understanding and clinical school residencies from the outset. Simultaneously, the mandated fifty annual hours of continuous professional development are shifting from passive compliance seminars into spaces of vocal, critical engagement, equipping teachers to challenge algorithmic outputs and guide students in ethical digital literacy.

Through MITRA – the National Mission for Mentoring — this voice is sustained by structured intergenerational dialogue, pairing emerging practitioners with master teachers to keep human insight at the centre of institutional change. As India advances towards Viksit Bharat @ 2047, our schools will increasingly hum with computational power, adaptive software and automated dashboards. Yet we must remember that silicon can organise knowledge, but it cannot awaken the spirit.

A smart classroom may generate the right answers, but only a human voice can inspire a child to ask the right questions, stand up for the vulnerable and dare to dream beyond the screen. By anchoring our one-crore-strong teacher community in PUSHTI's clear standards and dignified career pathways, we ensure that the heart of Indian education remains an enduring dialogue between human minds.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Knowledge That Precedes Wisdom

Midway through Navaratri, the festival turns from strength to clarity.

Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, music, and wisdom, is invoked not for wealth or victory, but for the discernment needed to use both rightly. Unlike Lakshmi and Durga, she carries no weapon, only a veena, a book, and a rosary, suggesting that true power without knowledge remains directionless, even dangerous. Her vehicle, the swan, is said to separate milk from water, a picture of discernment itself. The scriptures often place her worship deliberately between Durga's strength and Lakshmi's abundance, implying an order: strength must be guided by wisdom before it can be rightly used, and wisdom must precede the pursuit of prosperity, lest wealth be gained or spent unwisely. Learning, in this view, is not a ladder to climb quickly, but a lamp to be carried carefully. In many homes, children begin their first lessons around Vijayadashami, writing their first letters before the goddess. We often chase strength and success first, hoping wisdom will simply follow once we've achieved enough, rather than seeking clarity before acting. Many regrets in life come not from lack of effort, but from effort applied in the wrong direction. A little reflection before action saves a great deal of repair afterwards, and the time spent in seeking clarity is rarely wasted. This Navaratri, before pursuing your next goal or decision, pause and ask what wisdom, not just willpower, this situation actually requires, and seek that understanding first. –DAIV

PIC TALK



A priest performs rituals at a pandal during the Durga Puja festivities. PHOTO: PTI

Help children make friends with food



SONALI KHAN

2ND OPINION



There is a stage in childhood when food is wonderfully simple. A banana is something to peel. A roti can be rolled into a little tube. A bowl of curd can become a place to mix, dip and experiment. A handful of peas can be counted before they are eaten. A child may know the taste of a favourite snack long before they know what nutrition means. Then, gradually, adults begin explaining food.

Eat your vegetables. Drink your milk. Have some fruit. Finish what is on your plate. This has protein. This has vitamins. This is good for you. The advice comes from a place of care. Every parent wants a child to grow well and have the nourishment needed for an active childhood. The early years are an important period for growth and development, and the foods introduced during this stage contribute to children's nutritional needs while also helping them become familiar with different tastes and textures. WHO describes the period from six months onwards as an important stage for establishing healthy dietary patterns and learning to accept a variety of nutritious foods.

There is another part of this learning that deserves attention: the meaning children attach to food. A child watches before a child chooses. Children watch the adults around them with remarkable attention. They notice what appears in the kitchen every morning. They see a parent cut fruit while packing lunch. Food has colour. Food has texture. Food comes from somewhere. Some foods are eaten often, some occasionally. Meals can be prepared together. The child is learning all this long before anyone asks them to remember the food pyramid.

Give children a place in the process.

There is something different about eating a food that a child has helped prepare. The same cucumber that was ignored on a plate can suddenly become interesting when the child has washed it, sliced it with help and arranged it beside the other ingredients. Sesame Workshop India's Healthy Habits initiative brings nutrition, movement and play, and sleep into one broader conversation about childhood well-being. Its India resources include Aahaar Cards, storybooks, flash cards, a Healthy Calendar and activity-based material designed to help children and caregivers explore healthy routines.

A healthy childhood is built through several everyday routines. There is the food a child eats, the water they drink, and the habits around hygiene and daily care. These parts of childhood often overlap. Sesame Workshop's current Healthy Habits programme follows this wider approach, using play-based activities and family resources to make healthy routines easier for children to understand and practise.

A useful routine is one that a family can repeat. Over time, these small experiences can give children a sense of what caring for themselves looks like. We can give children information about nutrition, and we can also give them experiences that make healthy choices understandable. Let them ask why a carrot is orange. Let them choose between two fruits. Let them help stir the yoghurt. Healthy habits are like a language in themselves for children.

Sometimes it sounds like a question: "Can I help?"

Sometimes it sounds like curiosity: "What is this?"

Those moments may seem small to an adult. For a child, they are part of learning.

The writer is the Managing Trustee of Sesame Workshop India Trust

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Better crowd control could save lives

The tragedy at the Chorbagan Sarbojanin Durga Puja pandal on October 17 at 7.15 pm, which left 19 dead and 25 injured, highlights a grim and recurring pattern in India's crowd management. This year, the festival carried high emotional and political stakes, yet it ended in disaster when sudden heavy rain, confusing announcements and blocked exit routes triggered a fatal stampede on a flight of stairs.

This was not an isolated incident. Even without casualties, the 2015 Deshapriya Park chaos, sparked by the world's tallest Durga idol, served as a stark warning that we failed to heed. In a nation of 1.47 billion people, the growing need for escape has turned religious gatherings into massive, ostentatious spectacles. Overcrowding, mindless hurrying and the modern distraction of mobile photography create a powder keg waiting for a spark. While Chief Minister Subhendu Adhikari has announced compensation of Rs 25 lakh and employment for the victims' families, along with Rs 5 lakh for each injured person, financial relief cannot replace lost lives. Investigations must address the root cause: systemic failures and the urgent need for modern crowd-control protocols, ensuring that faith does not cost lives.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE | FARIDABAD

At last, a bond for peace!

India's bond market seems to be expanding by the day. We have government bonds, electoral bonds, surety bonds and all sorts of financial instruments. Now, enter the latest addition to this ever-growing list: the Peace Bond!

The recent release of Cockroach Janta Party founder Abhijeet Dipke, reportedly after signing a fresh peace bond, gives this familiar word an entirely new flavour. Who would have thought that peace itself might need a bond to guarantee its existence? Perhaps we are witnessing the dawn of a new era of bonding. Investors bond with the markets, politicians bond with power, and citizens may now have to bond with peace quite literally. At this rate, who knows what lies ahead? Perhaps a *Peace Bond Seva* App will soon appear on our smartphones. Want to organise a march? Please log in. Wish to raise a slogan? Upload your documents. Planning to express dissent? Kindly complete the peace-bond formalities and obtain your digital certificate of peaceful intentions!

Could we one day need an Aadhaar-linked peace bond to prove we are peace-loving citizens? Jokes apart, peace is essential, but so is the freedom to express dissent peacefully.

AP THIRUVADI | CHENNAI

Capping drug margins is only the first step

The government's decision to cap trade margins on 137 anti-cancer drugs is welcome. Cancer is increasing at an alarming rate, affecting people irrespective of age. Late detection often complicates treatment, while exorbitant medicine prices and corporate hospital charges make treatment unaffordable for the poor and middle class. However, capping trade margins, even following the Supreme Court's intervention, cannot be the end of the exercise. Hospital charges also need regulation.

Patented drugs should be allowed to be manufactured domestically under the compulsory licensing system. Effective monitoring is equally crucial. The drug control department functions with inadequate manpower, while more government laboratories are needed to ensure the quality of every batch released into the market. Merely issuing licences without adequate quality assurance leaves room for unscrupulous elements to manufacture spurious drugs and make huge profits. The government must reconsider pharmaceutical pricing to make medicines affordable for all. Excessive margins also encourage unethical practices, including buying prescriptions and incentivising dealers to stock more medicines. As medicines are essential, not luxury items, the government must act firmly to ease the financial burden on patients.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

India's fight against cancer: Making anti-cancer drugs affordable

The RBI's decision to raise the repo rate to 5.50 per cent signals a shift towards tighter monetary policy amid rising oil prices, currency pressures and weather-related risks. The challenge is to contain inflation without undermining India's economic growth



REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE



YK GUPTA

India is making remarkable strides in cancer diagnosis and treatment. Yet, for too many families, access to life-saving medicines remains constrained not by medical expertise, but by the ability to pay. When a family must choose between continuing treatment and protecting its financial survival, cancer becomes an economic catastrophe as well as a medical crisis. No patient should have to make that choice.

The National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority's (NPPA) decision to bring 137 non-scheduled anti-cancer drugs under Trade Margin Rationalisation (TMR) deserves strong support. By capping trade margins at 30 per cent, it seeks to curb excessive mark-ups. The revised prices take effect on November 9, 2026, with government estimates indicating MRP reductions of up to 70 per cent and annual savings of approximately ₹2,500 crore.

India's growing cancer burden demands urgent action

India recorded an estimated 14.61 lakh new cancer cases and 8.09 lakh cancer-related deaths in 2022, according to the ICMR's National Cancer Registry Programme. Treatment often means prolonged therapy and expensive medicines; families exhaust savings, borrow money or sell assets.

Out-of-pocket expenditure accounted for 43.4 per cent of India's total health expenditure in 2022-23, according to National Health Accounts estimates, underscoring the continuing financial vulnerability of households. A medicine that exists but remains beyond a patient's means cannot deliver its intended benefit.

Why NPPA's intervention matters

Substantial mark-ups across the distribution chain widen the gap between the price at which a medicine enters distribution and the price the patient pays. TMR limits those margins. The 30 per cent cap is not a 30 per cent cut in manufacturers' prices or a 70 per cent cut in the MRP of every medicine; the actual reduction will depend on each product's existing price structure. Even so, it targets excessive margins and improves affordability without relying exclusively on broader price controls.

What lower margins could mean for high-cost drugs

The impact of TMR will be felt most for medicines that are both widely used and among the costliest per dose. Immunotherapies such as pembrolizumab and nivolumab (lung, head and neck and several other cancers), bevacizumab (colorectal, lung and ovarian cancers), and pertuzumab with trastuzumab (HER2-positive breast cancer) are typical examples. To see what is at stake, consider a reduction of 30 per cent to 70 per cent (the upper end being the government's own estimate) applied to current per-dose prices:

1. Pembrolizumab: About ₹2.06 lakh could fall to roughly ₹0.62-1.44 lakh.
2. Nivolumab: The highest-priced brand, about ₹1.04 lakh, could fall to roughly ₹0.31-0.73 lakh.
3. Bevacizumab: The highest-priced brand, about ₹1.18 lakh, could fall to roughly ₹0.35-0.82 lakh.
4. Pertuzumab with trastuzumab: From about ₹2.45 lakh to roughly ₹0.73-1.71 lakh.

These figures are illustrative, not forecasts; the actual reduction will depend on each product's existing price structure, and the largest falls are likely where mark-ups are greatest. Even so, because such drugs are given in repeated cycles, every reduction compounds across treatment and can decide whether a patient completes therapy or abandons it.

Building on India's earlier experience

In 2019, the NPPA introduced TMR for 42 non-scheduled anti-cancer drugs; government reports documented price reductions across 526 brands and annual savings of approximately ₹984 crore. Carefully designed price regulation can deliver meaningful relief, and this experience provides a valuable foundation for the current expansion. The next step is to ensure the benefits extend to more patients and are sustained over time. The success of the present intervention must be judged not by the number of medicines covered or the reductions announced, but by the savings patients actually realise.

From policy announcement to patient benefit

Revised prices must be displayed prominently in pharmacies and hospitals and made accessible through the NPPA website and the Pharma Sahi Daam application, with overcharging complaints addressed promptly. The NPPA should publish periodic data on price reductions, compliance and realised savings, and independent assessments should test whether lower MRPs mean lower expenditure for patients in public and private settings. A price reduction announced by the government must be a price reduction experienced by the patient.

Affordability must go hand in hand with availability

Lower prices deliver little if patients cannot obtain medicines when needed, and interrupted treatment can have serious consequences, particularly for patients receiving time-sensitive therapies. Price regulation must be accompanied by continuous monitoring of production, distribution and retail supplies, with shortages identified early and addressed through coordination among regulators, manufacturers and healthcare providers.

Patient welfare and pharmaceutical innovation must coexist

Developing new cancer therapies demands substantial investment, and responsible pricing must recognise innovation, quality manufacturing and reliable supply. But this cannot justify excessive or opaque mark-ups. TMR should remain transparent, evidence-based and subject to periodic review, protecting patients while preserving the incentives needed to sustain a dependable pharmaceutical sector.

A more equitable future for cancer care

The ultimate test is not whether prices fall on paper, but whether patients can continue treatment without avoidable financial distress and obtain the medicines they need reliably. As India strengthens its cancer-care infrastructure, affordability must remain integral to the national response. Access to treatment must be considered alongside advances in diagnosis and therapeutics. India's fight against cancer requires scientific progress, compassionate care and policies that place patients at the centre of decision-making. Cancer is already a formidable adversary. The price of treatment should not become another adversary that patients and their families are forced to fight alone.

AS INDIA STRENGTHENS ITS CANCER-CARE INFRASTRUCTURE, AFFORDABILITY MUST REMAIN INTEGRAL TO THE NATIONAL RESPONSE. ACCESS TO TREATMENT MUST BE CONSIDERED ALONGSIDE ADVANCES IN DIAGNOSIS AND THERAPEUTICS. INDIA'S FIGHT AGAINST CANCER REQUIRES SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS, COMPASSIONATE CARE AND POLICIES THAT PLACE PATIENTS AT THE CENTRE OF DECISION-MAKING. CANCER IS ALREADY A FORMIDABLE ADVERSARY

The writer is the President of AIIMS Kalyani and former Head of the Department of Pharmacology and Dean of AIIMS, New Delhi

Building India's young innovators



T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

India has grown into a technology-savvy nation that stands alongside global peers, thanks to home-grown technologies at Technology Readiness Level (TRL) above 5. Examples include ABHED lightweight bulletproof jackets from IIT Delhi; Vikram-1, Skyroot's orbital rocket; a 3D quantum diamond microscope from IIT Bombay; the iPACE chip from IIT Indore, built under MeitY's Chips to Startup (C2S) programme; the world's first nuclear-heat-based hydrogen production facility at Kalpakkam; a 422-metre test facility for IIT Madras's Avishkar Hyperloop; and a foundational 6G terahertz test bed that SAMEER, Kolkata, will build under the Digital Bharat Nidhi.

These trials give life to the "Lab to Market" idea, which echoes Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission mantra. India's approach begins with investment, moves to innovation, and then builds internationally recognised infrastructure backed by policy frameworks such as Make in India. Together, they nurture young talent and sustainable manufacturing that meet the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals and global quality benchmarks, including through Zero Defect Zero Effect (ZED). The result is stronger self-reliance in domestic value and supply chains. A natural question follows: who are the key drivers of Viksit Bharat, and who pushes Swadeshi, "Vocal for Local" and One District One Product (ODOP) beyond limits? The answer lies in the interplay of five elements, the "Pancha Mahabhuta": organisations and policy frameworks, investment, innovation, infrastructure and talent development. Today, four institutions back grassroots and frugal innovators, MSMEs and startups, and equip young people to carry the torch of Viksit Bharat:

DRDO (Ministry of Defence): Technology Development Fund (TDF) and iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence)

ISRO (Department of Space): RESPOND and the Space Technology Incubation Centres (S-TIC)

BARC (Department of Atomic Energy): the AKRUTI programme and AIC ANUSHAKTI

DSIR with CSIR: Common Research and Technology Development Hub (CRTDH)



The key drivers at work

DRDO is the backbone of in-house technology and also builds indigenous innovation and skill-development infrastructure for young people. Its ecosystem gives MSMEs and startups access to high-end modelling and simulation software, and supports them in developing minimum viable products and prototypes, and in manufacturing, validating and testing them. The Technology Development Fund gives innovators visibility and stable funding, while iDEX offers seed funding to aspiring young entrepreneurs.

DRDO's Defence Technology and Test Centre (DTTC) at Amausi, Lucknow, is a strong example. Inaugurated in 2024 to strengthen the Uttar Pradesh Defence Industrial Corridor, it works under the Defence Materials and Stores Research and Development Establishment, Kanpur. The centre hand-holds innovators, startups and MSMEs through design thinking, product development, manufacturing, testing and validation, and connects them with large enterprises and government.

Its facilities include MATLAB, Ansys, Catia, AI tools and high-performance computing, all open to young innovators, along with rapid prototyping through 3D printing and printed circuit board fabrication. The centre also works on IoT and blockchain, offers incubation through a co-working space, and runs yearly skill-development programmes.

DTTC serves as the epicentre for the industrial corridor nodes at Agra, Aligarh, Lucknow, Kanpur, Jhansi and Chitrakoot, offers training and consultancy to industry, and collaborates with IIT Kanpur, IIT BHU and the Uttar Pradesh government.

ISRO has set up Space Technology Incubation Centres at six locations to nurture young people building indigenous space systems for transfer to large enterprises. Its RESPOND programme helps academic institutions build research infrastructure, run real-time experiments and develop talent.

BARC launched AKRUTI (Advanced Knowledge for Rural Technology Implementation) 18 years ago to promote social entrepreneurship by sharing DAE-BARC spin-off technologies. Academic institutions can set up AKRUTI Kendras to give students hands-on experience. AIC ANUSHAKTI, under the Atal Innovation Mission, NITI Aayog, lets youth and startups learn about DAE-BARC spin-off technologies through technology transfer.

Through DSIR, CSIR runs the Common Research and Technology Development Hub (CRTDH), which brings MSMEs, startups and innovators together with CSIR experts and mentors to set up industrial pilot plants on sustainable revenue models. It focuses on affordable healthcare, materials, electronics, renewable energy and low-cost machining.

A bird's-eye view of Viksit India

Defence-ready: iDEX and DRDO have announced the GRSE Accelerated Innovation and Nurturing Scheme, an innovation challenge on AI in shipbuilding, green energy and shipyard efficiency. It should help young innovators become game changers for Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Viksit Uttar Pradesh.

Space-ready: The ISRO Robotics Challenge, run yearly by the U R Rao Satellite Centre (URSC), Bengaluru, inspires young innovators to redefine India's future space exploration.

Quantum-ready: Q-Digishala 2026, organised by the Quantum Innovation Park at IISc Bengaluru, will build quantum soft skills.

India will soon install and commission its first IBM quantum computer, paving the way for the largest digital quantum infrastructure in Amaravati. To meet demand for quantum and semiconductor talent, Samsung India Research and IISc Bengaluru have introduced a 10-hour module on quantum computing and technologies under the India Semiconductor Workforce Development Program (ISWDP). It covers quantum transport, gates and circuits, qubit fabrication and industry trends. C-DAC's PARAM Shavak offers reskilling through the QSim quantum simulator on the Make in India Bharat Operating System (BOSS), while PARAM Rudra at the SN Bose National Centre for Basic Sciences, West Bengal, offers Quantum ESPRESSO for molecular modelling.

Young people trained through Chips to Startup, quantum initiatives and premier space programmes are becoming "Mission Ready", like Gaganyaan, for Government-as-a-Service (GAAS) roles in Vision Viksit India. By turning micro and macro problems into passion, they are making themselves accountable and countable on the road to a $30 trillion economy.

The writer is the Chief Executive Officer of DAKSH Innovation & Incubation Centre (DIIC), Uttar Pradesh State Institute of Forensic Science, Lucknow

A tribute to the generation that lived in reality



NITIN KULKARNI

Picture this: It is a scorching May afternoon in 1988. The ceiling fan whirs at full speed, making a steady, rhythmic clack-clack sound. There is no air conditioning, no smartphone in hand, ears not plugged and no streaming service on demand. A group of children sits huddled on a cool terrazzo floor around a single brass jug of Rasna or Rooh Afza. One child carefully turns the page of a comic book, another tries to balance a peacock feather inside a textbook, and outside, the distinct call of an ice-candy vendor echoes through the quiet lane.

There were no camera phones capturing that moment. No video clips exist. No social media stories posted. Yet, ask anyone sitting in that room today — now well into their late 40s or 60s — and they can describe the exact shade of the curtains, the smell of wet earth after the first rain, and the laughter that filled the air.

Born between 1960 and 1982, this generation occupies a unique place in history. They are the last humans to have grown up with a completely unrecorded, unfiltered childhood and the first to navigate the hyper-connected digital age.

The magic of an unphotographed World

If you look through the old wooden trunks or dusty steel almirahs of this generation, you won't find thousands of high-definition photos or digital video archives. Family photo albums were slim, containing perhaps a dozen black-and-white or faded sepia studio portraits where everyone stood stiffly like statues, terrified of wasting precious camera film. Yet, their memories of school days, summer vacations, and neighbourhood games remain breathtakingly vivid and richly textured. They didn't need cloud storage to preserve their happiest moments.

Their minds held onto every detail: the deafening roar of the school bell on the last day before summer break, the taste of stolen raw mangoes seasoned with salt and chilli, and the sheer exhilaration of sprinting barefoot or cycling through rain-soaked streets.

High-stakes cinema and the thrill of first day, first show

In an age before online streaming and instant trailers, cinema was an almost sacred experience. Getting a ticket for a "First Day, First Show" at a single-screen theatre was a badge of honour that required military-level planning, standing in chaotic, hour-long queues, and pushing through a sea of elbows. The moment the hall lights dimmed and the opening credits rolled, the theatre erupted.

Whistles blew, coins flew towards the silver screen, and entire crowds cheered in unison as their favourite hero made his grand entry. When theatre tickets were out of reach, renting a VCR over the weekend became a neighbourhood festival. Families and neighbours packed into a single living room to watch four back-to-back movies until their eyes burned, sustained only by homemade snacks and collective joy.



No boundaries, no fear, just community

The social ecosystem of that era was built on unconditional trust and open doors. Privacy was a concept nobody thought about, understood or cared for. Walking into a neighbour's home unannounced at two in the afternoon wasn't rude; it was normal. If you were playing outside when lunch was served, you would join lunch at a friend's place without second thoughts. Friendships were fiercely real. If a classmate missed school for two consecutive days, nobody sent a text message; a group of friends simply showed up at his front door right after the school bell. And if a friend's father appeared near the school gate mid-afternoon, it was the ultimate breaking news. Kids would sprint across the dusty playground shouting, "Tere papa aaye hain, dekh!" — a sentence that instantly sent hearts racing. School life was equally uncomplicated.

Children were sent to primary school around age five-six without play-school orientations or performance pressure. Wrapping textbooks in brown paper every June was an annual ritual celebrated like a festival. Bicycles were prized possessions, and riding "triple seat" — one on the handlebar, one on the frame, and one clinging to the carrier — was the ultimate expression of adolescent freedom.

Unspoken love and timeless respect

Relationships were governed by respect rather than formal declarations. Teachers were revered figures whose word was law. Being scolded or hit on the knuckles with a wooden ruler was accepted as part of growing up; the real fear was not the teacher's ruler, but the terrifying prospect of parents finding out, which guaranteed another round of discipline at home.

Yet, that very generation still instinctively bows to touch the feet of those retired teachers whenever they spot them in a market today. Expressions of affection were rarely verbalised. No one said "I love you" to their parents, because emotional language wasn't picked up from television sitcoms.

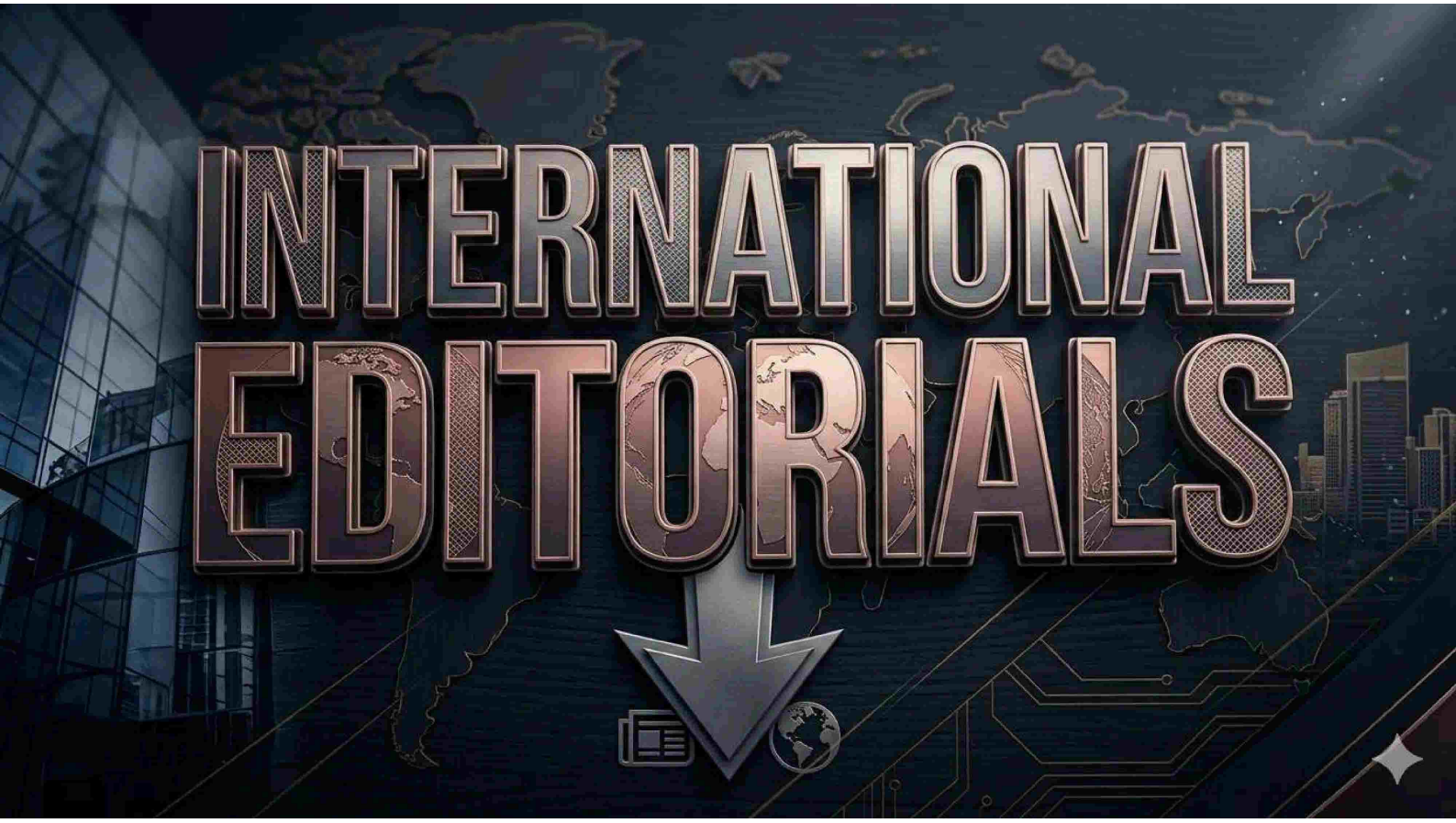
Love was communicated through actions: a mother saving the sweetest piece of fruit for her child, a father quietly riding a bicycle in the pouring rain to buy medicine, or friends sitting together on a culvert in complete silence, simply content in each other's presence.

A legacy written in the heart

Today, as this generation manages mortgages, health check-ups, and teenagers who complain about slow Wi-Fi speeds, delayed online deliveries and sundry stuff, they look back not with bitterness, but with a profound, quiet gratitude. In a world where modern relationships often fray at the first sign of friction or get lost behind screens, the connections forged by this generation still endure. Their bonds were forged in shared meals, shared struggles, and decades of quiet loyalty — unshakable ties that didn't depend on instant replies or social validation to survive.

They lived through a time when clothes were wrinkled, but hearts were ironclad; when resources were limited, but time and affection were abundant; when memories weren't stored on chips, but etched deeply into the soul. They remain the bridge between two eras; a living reminder that the deepest connections are forged in reality, and the best parts of life are never filmed, only lived.

The writer is a senior IAS officer currently serving as Additional Chief Secretary to the Governor of Jharkhand


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

Would you consult a doctor who has mental illness?



DR HAMED AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at SQU Hospital

LAST SATURDAY was World Mental Health Day, a day dedicated to raising public awareness and promoting the development of mental health services.

This year, the official global theme was "Lived Experiences Heard: Real Voices, Real Change", which means the voices of people living with mental illness were heard clearly.

Across social media, many shared their personal stories: how they struggled with their symptoms, how people saw them, and what it was like to finally seek professional help.

These stories matter, but sharing experiences is only the first step. The real test is whether we include people with mental illness in planning the services designed for them.

This sounds obvious, yet it can be surprisingly challenging in practice. In a recent workshop on mental well-being, I asked participants a simple question: would you still consult a doctor if you knew that he or she had been diagnosed with a mental illness?

The room fell quiet. A few hands went up, many did not, and some participants admitted they would quietly look for another doctor. When I asked why, the answers were honest: worries about judgment, reliability, and whether a doctor who "struggles himself" could help others.

I was not surprised, but the answers made my point better than any lecture could.

We speak warmly about acceptance and inclusion, but when mental illness comes close to us, when it sits across the desk in a white coat, our hidden assumptions surface.

Doctors are not immune to mental illness. Depression, anxiety and burnout are common among healthcare workers, partly because of long hours, emotional strain and a culture that expects them to be strong at all times. Many suffer in silence precisely because they fear the reaction my workshop participants displayed.

A doctor who seeks treatment, recovers and returns to work is not a risk to patients. The real risk is the doctor who hides the illness and never seeks help at all.

The same principle applies more broadly. People who have experienced depression, psychosis, or addiction possess knowledge no textbook can provide. They understand what it is like to wait months for an appointment, to be spoken about rather than spoken to, to leave hospital without a clear plan, or to face a family that does not understand. Lived experience is not a weakness to manage; it is expertise to draw on.

Many countries now involve people with lived experience in designing mental health services, reviewing policies, training staff, and working as peer support workers alongside doctors and nurses. Peer workers, people who have recovered from mental illness themselves, can offer hope in a way professionals cannot.

World Mental Health Day lasts only one day. Inclusion must last all year

In Oman, we have made real progress in expanding mental health services and reducing stigma. The next step is to move from awareness to participation.

This could start simply by including service users and family members on hospital committees, inviting their feedback when new services are planned, and involving them in training medical students and health professionals. It also means creating workplaces, including hospitals, where staff can seek help for their own mental health without fearing for their careers.

This will be easy. It requires professionals to share some of their authority, and also requires society to examine its own prejudices honestly, as my workshop participants courageously did.

In my opinion, if we truly believe that mental illness is like any other illness, then we must be ready to listen to those who live with it, work alongside them, and yes, be treated by them.

FOOD CRISIS LOOMS AFTER GLOBAL ENERGY SHOCK

JULIEN GIRAULT

Rising energy and fertiliser costs are hitting smallholder farmers and driving up prices of agricultural commodities, fuelling fears of a global food crisis, the head of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said.

Global agricultural prices jumped 13 per cent in the third quarter of the year, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which warned a "global food crisis is looming".

The surge in energy prices due to conflict in the Middle East has sparked a sharp increase in the cost of fertilisers and fuel this year, driving up agricultural production and transport costs.

"Over the next six to nine months, we will see continued increases related to food prices, but also I would say even inflation in terms of food, which will impact most of the populations that actually can afford it less," IFAD President Alvaro Lario said in an interview.

Already, "almost one in three people in the world cannot afford a healthy diet", Lario said.

"So I think the costs of a healthy diet, which means an increased cost on legumes, on vegetables, on meat, is just having a big impact on what people can afford to consume."

Food insecurity affects around 260 million people worldwide, according to UN figures.

Because food accounts for a significant portion of household budgets in developing countries, price hikes are felt acutely there, noted Lario, speaking on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in Bangkok.

Smallholder farmers - who account for one-third of global food production, and up to 70 per cent in many developing nations - are the most severely affected by the energy shock, according to IFAD, and were especially vulnerable to rising fertiliser prices.

"In the very short term, there is very little that governments can do. They can subsidise, for example, the price of fertiliser input... or fuel through subsidies," he said.

G7 nations pledged on Thursday to mobilise $2.5 billion to assist countries at risk of food insecurity, with a specific focus on fertilisers.

"The important lesson is that these shocks will continue over time. So the most important lesson is that actually we should be building the resilience for the next three to five years," he said.

"You need to diversify the type of value chains and crops that you are currently self-sufficient, and food security becomes, now in many countries, a matter of national security," he added. ***— AFP***

Teach schoolchildren to think, not just to recite

ALEXANDER The Great's (356 BC -323 BC) education was unique for his time, not because it offered privileged access to knowledge but because it trained him in a way of thinking. Where other rulers leaned on religious omens or superstition to guide decisions, Alexander was taught to treat the world as something that can be understood.

That understanding was not produced by passive acceptance or inherited belief. It was built through careful reasoning, disciplined observation, and evidence that could be examined. His teacher, the philosopher Aristotle (384 BC -322 BC), did not ask the young Prince merely to repeat what others said or to adopt explanations simply because they were repeated by authority.

He encouraged him to ask what counts as evidence, how we know and whether an explanation fits what we observe. Critical thinking is the ability to test claims against evidence.

It is the practical skill of evaluating ideas, recognising uncertainty and deciding what to trust when you meet competing explanations.

Students who learn to reason are harder to mislead. They learn to distinguish strong evidence from weak assertions and to separate what they want to be true from what the facts support.

In 1991, Japan experienced a catastrophic economic recession. It quickly realised that concentrating too heavily on rote learning in schools had created a serious limitation.

During this downturn in their economy they needed individuals who had the ability to think outside of the box. Japanese schools trained children to memorise and reproduce, yet it did not equip individuals to diagnose what was wrong, to test competing explanations or to propose recovery strategies. There was an emphasis on conformity instead of the critical judgement needed to work through real problems.





KARIM EASTERBROOK

The writer is a Former Cambridge School Principal and Author

The aim of education is judgement not compliance. Compliance rewards repetition of what is already approved while judgement requires students to justify decisions

When conditions worsen, new policy choices are needed. Decision-makers and their employees must be able to analyse what is happening, identify which explanations are supported by evidence and think of solutions.

Without critical thinking, recovery efforts can become driven by persuasive narratives that feel right but do not match the real cause of the problem. People without critical thinking skills then struggle to suggest improvements, challenge assumptions and understand why particular measures might work, or fail.

Language matters in education. Many wrong decisions begin with words being used unclearly or with arguments that sound good while concealing false assumptions.

Schools should therefore consider introducing philosophy as an academic subject within their curricula with a clear emphasis on how to critically assess meaning and how to assess rationally any decision or judgement.

Philosophy trains students to interpret terms carefully, ask what a statement claims and check whether a conclusion follows from the reasons provided.

Students must learn to ask what counts as evidence, not just what is claimed. The same discipline supports better judgement in both study and future employment.

Problem solving in careers rarely offers complete information or a single model answer. It demands evaluation, prioritisation and reasoned choice under pressure.

The aim of education is judgement, not compliance. Compliance rewards repetition of what is already approved. Judgement requires students to justify decisions, scrutinise assumptions and revise conclusions when better reasons or new evidence appear.

When students learn to check claims against evidence and understand what words really mean, they get better at spotting weak arguments, noticing hidden assumptions and avoiding misleading statements that aren't supported by the facts.

Alexander's education illustrates a principle that still applies: teaching should not be mere repetition. The purpose is to cultivate evidence-testing, careful interpretation and rational judgement, so that knowledge becomes usable.

Rote learning may help students pass exams, but in a rapidly changing world it may not give them the skills they need to handle new problems, evaluate competing policies or make sound decisions when their approach to work has to change. Japan's experience of recession underlined this: economic recovery depends on individuals who can understand what went wrong and think of how to solve the problem using critical thinking skills.

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Another man's grass is always greener



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WORK KEEPS us busy, doesn't it? It consumes about a third of every workday, a quarter of our adult lives, and funds our lifestyles, so...

Confucius said, "Choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." That love is hard to find, because we rarely stay in the one job for life. It's not that we don't want to, but the workplace has become so dynamic, with ownership changes, corporate acquisitions, bankruptcies, and our changing needs affecting our ability to stay in that one job.

While staying with one employer is ideal, it rarely happens. As many as 55 per cent of us find our job is 'not what it's cracked up to be', and start looking around for something else! In fact, research by parkerdewey.com tells us that 70 per cent of us will 'move on', within two years. It's not easy to find a job that engages with talent, encourages, motivates, and rewards, in the way we want.

So, we look around, and the grass always appears greener elsewhere! Some jobs look brilliant on paper, yet few measure up. Emotion-driven jobs like the police, nursing and teaching appeal to our moral and social responsibilities, our desire to build futures, to shape and save lives, drawing on empathy, and a desire to 'do good'. Policing can be violent and unpleasant, nursing gruelling and distressful, and teaching frustrating, and incredibly demanding. Yet, thousands still choose them.

Others are just odd. The most unusual job I know is that of a 'Chicken Sexer', who takes one-or-two-day-old hatchling chicks, and gender assesses a thousand an hour, with an incredible 98 per cent success rate, by identifying their 'bump', and long, straight feathers among the males, 'cockerels,' or by their 'bubble', and alternating long and short feathers among female 'pullets'.

How unique, and weird, is that job? This 'Purchasing Specialist', vacancy caught my eye as being extraordinarily demanding: "The role oversees purchase policies, procedures, and processes, leverages product expertise, procurement planning, strategic sourcing, manages inbound purchase orders and facilitates special order fulfilment, delivering a vast product inventory, with speed and reliability."

This company appears to really want its 'pound of flesh', doesn't it? That impression was reinforced in their person specification: "The position requires minimum A-Levels in Mathematics and English, proficiency with Enterprise Resource Planning systems, Microsoft Excel, MS Office, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook; strong numerical, analytical, organisational, multi-tasking, and communication skills; experience in computers, IT, virtual platforms, purchasing, via vendor-specific platforms, web-based and phone systems."

So, they also want an immense range of skills, don't they? So, now let's look at the duties, or job specs: "The appointee will utilise the ERP system effectively for accurate data entry, messaging, queue management, batching, communication workflow, and purchasing; Maintain precise records within ERP, managing and updating purchase orders; Review lead times for effective strategic planning; Resolve vendor delivery and pricing issues, expedite damage and freight claims efficiently, cultivate strong vendor relationships, escalate problem-solving as appropriate, and perform additional duties to meet evolving organisational needs."

Policing can be violent and unpleasant, nursing gruelling and distressful, and teaching frustrating, and incredibly demanding. Yet, thousands still choose them.

That last clause means "and anything else..." So, in addition to the number and complexity of the tasks, they must be done 'accurately, effectively, efficiently, precisely, and reliably', all demanding adjectives, indicating almost immaculate expectations, and now looking incredibly intimidating. Yet, reading on, we find, "The role is 37.5 hours weekly involving routine physical activity including: bending, lifting, and carrying up to 4kg; continuous, prolonged use of hands and arms, extended sitting, intermittent standing and walking; frequent phone communication and inter-person interactions," which are almost ridiculously facile, docile in comparison with the earlier demands.

I don't know. Maybe it's just this PC world, but I guess they felt the need to dot i's, cross t's, and cover bases. That final paragraph made me smile, then laugh, and I still smile every time I reflect upon it.

Maybe though... you get the company medical plan, pension plan, gym membership, life insurance, paid holidays, professional development opportunities, and a better salary? So, maybe the other man's grass is greener?

BRAZIL'S LEFT RALLIES AS LULA CLOSES GAP BEFORE RUNOFF

FACUNDO FERNÁNDEZ BARRIO

Brazil's left has mounted a political fightback ahead of the October 25 presidential runoff, rallying supporters in the streets, overhauling its social media campaign and pushing through a landmark labour reform.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, 80, was jolted when he finished behind right-wing Senator Flavio Bolsonaro — son of former president Jair Bolsonaro — by 47 per cent to 45 per cent in the October 4 first round. But a Datafolha poll published last week showed Bolsonaro's lead in the runoff narrowing from four percentage points to two, putting the rivals in a statistical tie.

Bolsonaro was on 51 per cent of valid votes against Lula's 49 per cent, within the survey's two-point margin of error.

Seeking a fourth term, Lula is now targeting the 33.4 million Brazilians who stayed away from the first round — more than one in five eligible voters.

"Lula is still in the race, and the election is far from decided — despite what many of us thought after the first round," political scientist Eduardo Grin of the Getulio Vargas Foundation said.

Congress approved a constitutional amendment on Wednesday abolishing Brazil's six-day working week, a flagship Lula campaign promise that will give employees two paid days off without cutting their wages.

The reform will replace the widespread "6x1" system — six days of work followed by one day off — with a five-day week, gradually reducing the maximum working week from 44 to 40 hours.

The vote handed Lula, a former trade union leader, a major victory just 10 days before the runoff, giving him a popular achievement to champion among working-class voters who have traditionally formed his political base. The measure was so widely supported that even Bolsonaro, who had previously opposed it, voted in favour.

Lula attributed his rival's reversal to "pressure from society," hailing the reform as a victory born of the street protests demanding change.

The president has also unveiled debt relief for small businesses, new university grants and measures to ease fuel costs, while proposing free weekend public transport.

His government had already increased payments under Bolsa Familia, Brazil's flagship welfare programme for low-income families, before the first round. But the flurry of economic measures has raised concerns over government spending in a country whose public debt already exceeds 80 per cent of GDP.

Lula has also shaken up a digital campaign he acknowledged was his most "disorganised" in decades, seeking to challenge the Brazilian right's formidable social media operation. **— AFP**

Democracy-for-diesel deal of Trump shames us all



THOMAS L FRIEDMAN

The writer is reporter, author and NYT columnist

IF PRESIDENT Donald Trump does not understand what will happen to him if he proceeds with his plan to trade away support for Ukraine's democracy for Russian diesel, let me spell it out: He will enter the history books in the chapter on leaders who sold out their country's democratic values to appease a dictator.

Donald Trump, meet Neville Chamberlain. When future students search online for "sellout," "appeaser" or "traitor to his country's core values," their two pictures will come up first, side by side. And deservedly so. At least Chamberlain was trying, in what proved to be a lethally misguided fashion, to avoid a world war. Trump is trying to avoid losing a few seats in Congress — and is likely to be no more successful in achieving his goal than Chamberlain was in achieving his.

I have never believed that Trump was somehow an agent of Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, or in his pay. It is much worse. He simply does not cherish democracy. He cherishes money. And he has no problem selling the first for the second. When he acts in his own commercial interests, that's his personal business. When he uses the American presidency to make a buck, it is our collective shame.

There is simply no core American value Trump will not sell. Desperate to lower diesel prices, which are hurting Republicans in the midterms, Trump actually made a deal to import diesel fuel from Russia, even though it offers a potential windfall for the Kremlin so it can bomb Ukraine harder — and is unlikely to help lower prices or increase supplies much at all.

Worse, his aides then asked Ukraine to refrain from attacks on Russia's oil refineries, without Trump making the same demand of Putin regarding Ukraine's energy infrastructure. It makes me sick to my stomach to even type this.

Unique among great powers, "the United States has always made the protection and promotion of liberal values part of its foreign policy because it's part of the country's political DNA," said Michael Mandelbaum, the author of the new book "The American Way of Foreign Policy: Ideology, Economics, Democracy." "Different presidents have given these values different emphases, depending on the circumstances and their own personal predilections." But none have "ever abandoned them entirely — let alone repudiated them," Mandelbaum added. "In that sense, Trump really is unique. Of course, all presidents, including him, have operated in a domestic political environment in which those values are widely shared, which means that he will pay a political price for violating them. But in the short term, that isn't likely to help Ukraine." This is shocking to Ukrainians, who for nearly five years have been resisting Putin's attempt to wipe their country off the map.

Desperate to lower diesel prices, which are hurting Republicans in the midterms, Trump actually made a deal to import diesel fuel from Russia, even though it offers a potential windfall for the Kremlin so it can bomb Ukraine harder — and is unlikely to help lower prices or increase supplies much at all.

My friend Vitaly Sych, the editor-in-chief of the Ukrainian news outlet NV, texted me from Kyiv the other day: "When Donald Trump became president, Ukraine lost an ally." From his first days in office, Trump "started positioning himself as a 'negotiator,' as an 'intermediary' between Ukraine and the aggressor — Russia," Sych added. "That was strange enough. And now he is openly siding with Russia, pushing for Ukraine's capitulation and calling it a peace deal," Sych said. "If Ukraine hits an oil refinery in Russia, there is always an outraged post from the US president on Truth Social.

Is he now the Kremlin's spokesperson?" The United States has long stood for freedom and democracy, Sych said. "Now they are just for diesel. What a change." Russian missiles and drones kill or wound dozens of civilians, including children, every day, he wrote. "Russians are killing us like in a shooting range. No concern comes out about this from the White House.

Only about Russian diesel. It is a mix of intellectual and moral bankruptcy to claim we don't want peace. Of course we want peace," he said. "But we don't want capitulation packaged as peace." I have to say, it is hard for me to decide who is more despicable: Trump or tough-guy Republican senators like Tom Cotton, who lambasted president Joe Biden for not sending enough military aid to Ukraine and today sits curled up in a corner of the US Capitol, saying nothing while Trump sells Ukraine to Putin outright.

Here's the beginning of a story in The Hill from September 16, 2023: A group of Republican senators sent a letter to president Biden on Saturday urging him to "immediately" provide the missiles Ukraine needs to win its war against Russia. Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) shared the letter in a post on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, arguing that not sending the weapons would "only prolong the war and cost lives." Cotton was joined by Senators Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in his request. "We... urge you to immediately send MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine," they wrote. "Additional delay will only further undermine US national security interests and extend this conflict." That was then — when Biden was president.

This week, a bipartisan group of 12 senators (six Republicans and six Democrats) sent a letter to Trump demanding that he rescind the diesel agreement and roll back the Treasury Department's licence allowing it. Cotton, who is the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, did not sign the letter.

It is hard to tell whether Trump's democracy-for-diesel idea is his alone or was cooked up with his negotiators, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. If those two are part of it, I hope they understand that they will share Trump's infamy in the history books. The good work they have done to end the war in the Gaza Strip will all be forgotten. They should speak up now, because history will have its eyes on them, too.

— The New York Times

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in these pages are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the Observer

EDITORIAL

City cannot afford to neglect youth mental health

World Mental Health Month, observed each October, may not command the same public attention in Hong Kong as it does elsewhere. Yet the latest revelations about suicides among local schoolchildren should serve as a sobering call for more urgent action. With those aged 15 or below accounting for 60 per cent or more of suspected student suicide deaths over the past three academic years, and the under-15 suicide rate climbing to 2.9 per 100,000 – the highest since 2016 – the city cannot afford to treat youth mental health as a peripheral concern.

It is worrying that the respective numbers of suspected student suicide cases reported to the Education Bureau by primary and secondary schools hovered between 23 and 33 in the three school years between 2023 and 2026. The proportions of cases involving students aged 15 or below were 60 per cent, 67 per cent and 65 per cent, respectively, according to figures submitted to the Legislative Council.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention at the University of Hong Kong earlier estimated that there were 976 suicide cases, or 13 per 100,000 residents, last year – a slight decline from 2024, based on data provided by the Coroner's Court. While rates declined across nearly all age groups, the figure rose among those aged under 15 to 2.9 per 100,000, the highest level since 2016.

These are not just cold numbers. Behind them are individual sad stories that add up to a disturbing social ill. Sorrow and sympathy aside, the disturbing trend should prompt a fundamental rethinking of what better support can be rendered to young people, with regard to classroom and exam pressures, digital environments and family relations.

The government, to its credit, introduced a three-tier mechanism in 2023 to identify and help students in distress. Now covering Primary Four to Form Six students, the scheme focuses on early identification and immediate assistance by prioritising the students using school resources, and in more severe situations, activating an off-campus network for outside help. It was revealed that 855 cases had been referred to the off-campus support network teams, while 547 cases were referred to psychiatric services between December 1, 2023, and July 31 this year.

With an average of 17 high-risk referrals every month since 2023, the official mechanism is arguably serving its purpose. But it also reflects that the general mental wellness of local students leaves a lot to be desired.

The suicide trend among youngsters sits within a broader pattern of distress among different age groups. A happiness index of Hong Kong adults only scored 5.87 out of 10, down from 5.95 last year. More than 40 per cent of the respondents reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms, according to a study by HK.WeCare, an initiative under non-profit organisation Wofoo Social Enterprises.

There is no shortage of studies on the factors contributing to suicide. From study pressure to peer influence and family problems, youngsters can be victimised easily if they lack support and guidance through difficulties. It remains unclear whether those who took their lives had received professional help under the three-tier mechanism. But the suicide tallies over the past few years show prevention must be further strengthened.

Suicide is complex, shaped by interpersonal, social and personal factors that no single measure can fully address. But the prevailing trend among youngsters points to systemic issues that society must seriously address lest more tragedies happen.

The measures outlined in the chief executive's policy address to enhance mental health are positive steps. These include extending the school-based mechanism, expanding the Healthy Mind Pilot Project to all District Health Centres, strengthening education and support for parents and teachers on mental health and broadening participation in the Mental Health Workplace Charter.

A genuinely effective preventive mechanism against suicide starts with a culture rooted in positive values and a healthy environment for personal growth and development. With wider public discussion and more proactive policy support, the city can hopefully mark future mental health months with more good news.

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Language matters in the birth rate debate

HK's fertility woes are not just about affordability. They might also involve the use of grammatical structures and how they may contribute to shaping views of the future

When Hong Kong debates how to raise its birth rate, the conversation usually revolves around money: bigger baby bonuses, tax concessions, housing support, cheaper childcare and so on. These economic measures are necessary. Lowering the cost of raising a child removes some real and immediate barriers.

However, there is another, lesser-known factor that works more subtly and implicitly. It comes not from economics but from the structure of the language or languages we speak each day.

Consider a simple contrast. In English, one says, "Yesterday it rained. Now it is raining. Tomorrow it will rain." In Chinese, the same three sentences need no such grammatical marking. The verb does not change. The future is not grammatically separated from the present.

This is the distinction around which behavioural economist Keith Chen built his research. He classified languages by whether they oblige speakers to mark the future grammatically. English does. Chinese does not. Chen found that speakers of languages with weak or no future-time marking tend to save more, plan more and invest more in long-term health than speakers of languages with strong future-time marking.

The logic is simple. If the future is not grammatically distant, it feels present. If it feels present, its burdens feel present, too. That is why speakers of weak future-time languages tend to save more and plan more – they are already living with the future.

However, the same closeness that drives saving can also drive anxiety and hesitation. A young couple who feel the future as present might also feel the weight of a child's future as present and hesitate to take on a commitment that stretches decades ahead.

A couple speaking English might feel the same obligations but feel them less immediately, therefore finding it easier to take the first step.

Chen was not writing about fertility directly, but his finding allows a logical projection. If weak future-time marking brings the future closer in the mind, then future obligations could also feel more imminent.

Chen's data even touches on contraceptive use, though he classifies it as a health behaviour rather than a fertility decision. Read differently, it could point in a similar direction: using condoms more often can mean fewer children.

This is not to claim that language determines or causes fertility directly. It only says that the way we speak might shape how vividly we imagine the future and how much weight that imagined future carries in making significant life decisions.

> *"The way we speak might shape how vividly we imagine the future*

Hong Kong is well placed to examine this projection. According to the most recent census, Cantonese remains the usual language of about 88 per cent of the population while English is the usual language of about 4.6 per cent.

The complication is that many residents are not monolingual. Among higher-skilled workers, about 85 to 91 per cent can read and write both Chinese and English. Roughly 57 to 60 per cent possess "biliterate and trilingual" abilities covering Cantonese, English and Mandarin.

This means many Hong Kong couples do not simply speak one type of language. They move between them, often within the same conversation. If Chen's findings hold, the grammatical structure of the language they are using at any given moment can subtly shape how close or distant the future feels and how much weight it carries.

This is not an argument against economic measures. Baby bonuses, housing support and childcare subsidies address real barriers, and they should remain central to fertility policy. My argument is for adding another dimension that might have been overlooked.

If language structure shapes how people perceive the future, then policies that affect language use can have effects that current policy evaluation does not yet capture. Economic measures alone will not solve this issue completely. There is value in pursuing alternatives.

One way to explore this would be to examine whether the language in which couples discuss family planning makes a difference to how they describe their plans, hopes and hesitations. A simple exercise like a future family portrait can help couples map the future generations they can imagine and the languages, places and hopes associated with each. This would not solve the fertility problem instantly, but it might help couples articulate what they want and help policymakers see how they imagine the future.

In short, Hong Kong's fertility challenge might not be only an affordability problem. It might also partly be a problem of which language we speak and how that shapes the way the future is perceived.

No policy can make someone want a child. Policy can shape the conditions in which that desire is formed, though, and language can be one of those conditions. The question is not only "Can families afford a child these days?" but also "Can they see the future their children will live in?" How they see it might depend on the language in which they see it.



Zhisheng Wen

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LETTERS

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The hidden crises carers are facing

In many families, parents can breathe a little easier once their child turns 18. But for carers of children with special educational needs (SEN), parental challenges only increase and often multiply as the years go on.

Love 21 Foundation recently surveyed 210 families caring for neurodiverse loved ones, and the findings are alarming. Sixty-three per cent reported at least one family member struggling with mental or emotional distress. The survey also revealed that many are facing financial strain.

The challenges are plentiful and complex. Our family support team regularly encounters carers on the brink of collapse: mothers deprived of sleep while tending to sleepless children; elderly parents struggling with depression while supporting their adult children who are going through the same battle.

Many carers appear cheerful on the outside, but confided during our therapy sessions their feelings of hopelessness and even suicidal thoughts. However, these resilient and dedicated parents consistently do everything they can to prioritise their child's health and happiness.

At Love 21 Foundation we strive to improve our members' well-being and self-care abilities, helping them to build healthy lives and integrate into the community through a wider range of activities. Our caring community model provides a safe space for members to feel connected and loved. We support carers by teaching practical parenting skills and building peer support networks for them to have fun and get some rest with fellow carers who face similar challenges. You too can play a part. This Mental Health Month, let's commit beyond awareness by contributing towards fostering a community where every family feels seen, supported and valued.

Jeff Rotmeyer, founder and CEO, Love 21 Foundation

Eruptions have an impact on weather

Climate change with long-term global impacts differs from weather with short-term local or regional impacts. Due to this reason, extreme weather events such as floods and droughts reported by the media in different parts of the world cannot easily be regarded as evidence for climate change.

The study of observation records in Hong Kong and elsewhere has shown the following: 1963, the driest year on record since 1844 in Hong Kong, was influenced by the Agung volcanic eruption on Bali, Indonesia; 1982, the second wettest year on record in Hong Kong, was influenced by the El Chichon volcanic eruption in Mexico; 1991, the 11th driest year in Hong Kong, was influenced by the Pinatubo volcanic eruption in the Philippines.

Satellite tracking shows that the severe rainstorm on June 7, 2008, that resulted in 2,400 landslides on Lantau Island and elsewhere in Hong Kong coincided with the arrival of an eruption cloud penetrating the stratosphere. This cloud originating from the Chaiten volcanic eruption in Chile on May 2, 2008 circled the globe one-and-a-half times before reaching Lantau.

The wettest year on record in Hurbanovo, Slovakia – 2010 – was influenced by the Eyjafjallajokull volcanic eruption in Iceland. The 2011-12 El Hierro submarine volcanic eruption in the Canary Islands apparently caused hot sea-surface water to develop in the North Atlantic; notable extreme weather events in 2012 included record low Arctic sea ice, accelerated Greenland ice sheet melting and Hurricane Sandy, which devastated New York.

The long-lasting and strong 2014-16 El Nino–Southern Oscillation was apparently caused by a combination of volcanic eruptions in the Pacific Ocean. Important contributors identified include Nishino-shima, Hunga and Wolf volcanoes.

The record rainfall in eastern Australia and New Zealand in February 2022 was apparently a result of the 2021-22 Tongan volcanic eruption cloud interfering with regional jet streams.

The above findings have been contributed to the Volcanic Impacts on Climate and Society working group of the Past Global Changes project. Volcanic eruptions are an underestimated cause of regional weather variability.

Wyss Yim, Pok Fu Lam



A social inclusion run for children with special educational needs. Photo: Eugene Lee

Passengers still can't grab a bite

I was disappointed to find that there are still no food outlets, beverage shops or vending machines inside the departure hall of West Kowloon high-speed rail station. Is there a reason for this? Some passengers may not have enough time to grab a bite before their train journey.

Laychoo Wong, Admiralty



Illustration: Mario Rivera

China's 'golden week' breaks come at a cost

Extended holiday periods might look generous on paper, but they can conceal the working days shifted elsewhere on employee calendars to make it possible



Michael Han

For iPhone users in China, the calendar has long presented a small but recurring problem. On a Sunday designated as a make-up workday, an alarm might remain silent. On a regular Friday converted into a day off, it might ring anyway.

Nearly 17 years after entering the Chinese market, Apple quietly updated its operating system in September to automatically recognise China's official schedule of adjusted holidays and workdays. The fix is modest, but it points to a larger question: what happens when a society's working week no longer matches the natural cadence of the days?

The issue transcends a foreign tech giant adapting to local rules. China's holiday calendar is not a static record of dates but a dynamic mechanism for redistributing public time. By moving weekend leave to around national holidays, policymakers engineer longer continuous breaks at the expense of a predictable working week, effectively using time as an administrative lever.

China's practice of swapping workdays for extended leave is not an ancient cultural tradition but an instrument of modern macroeconomic management. Conceived in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the system was designed to jump-start domestic spending through multi-day "golden weeks". By grafting adjacent weekends onto national holidays, the state converted leisure into fiscal stimulus, funnelling consumer capital into concentrated travel surges.

However, that blueprint relies on borrowing time from the working week. While preserving traditional observances such as the Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, the official calendar creates extended breaks without expanding overall statutory leave. To compensate, employees are required to forfeit standard weekends, enduring gruelling six-day working weeks. What functions on paper as an encouragement for tourism ends up disrupting the basic cadence of private enterprise and daily life.

However, predictability determines the real value of leisure. Unbroken weekends provide the foundational certainty required to schedule medical appointments, organise childcare or maintain household routines. When an overnight administrative directive can convert a Sunday into a Tuesday, that microeconomic stability vanishes, extending state intervention into the domestic sphere.

The United States offers a useful, though imperfect, contrast. In 1971 several federal holiday observances were moved to Mondays. George Washington's birthday, for example, is now observed on the third Monday in February rather than on its historical date of February 22. The reform made several federal holidays more predictable by placing their observance on Mondays, creating regular three-day weekends rather than allowing those holidays to interrupt the working week.

The American approach accepts that a holiday need not be observed on the exact date of the event it commemorates. In contrast, China generally retains traditional festival dates while rearranging the surrounding work schedule to create longer breaks. The American system shifts the observance; the Chinese system shifts working days.

> *"Policymakers engineer longer continuous breaks at the expense of a predictable working week*

Neither arrangement is free of compromise. The difference lies in how each system distributes the burden of coordination. Moving a holiday to Monday makes time off easier to anticipate. Rearranging the working week requires individuals and employers to adjust their routines, sometimes at the expense of the predictable weekends that ordinarily anchor working life.

The economic rationale for China's approach is to stimulate domestic consumption by concentrating travel and spending into extended holiday periods. However, higher spending in those windows might not be a bonus: some purchases are simply brought forward or compressed from other weeks. Concentration also carries a price that spending figures do not record. Crowded transport, rising accommodation costs and congested tourist sites reduce the quality of the leisure that the spending is meant to buy.

A week of uninterrupted leave might look generous on paper, but it can conceal the working days shifted elsewhere to make it possible. When extended holidays are bracketed by unusually long working stretches, the fatigue they create can undermine the recovery that time off is meant to provide. A calendar can count days of leave with precision, but it cannot tell us whether people have had enough time to recover, maintain their routines or spend unhurried time with their families.

Apple's update addresses one small consequence of this system. The alarm can now follow an official schedule that a conventional weekly calendar cannot reliably convey. For users, this means one less source of uncertainty in a working week already made less predictable by official rescheduling. Technology has adapted to the administrative calendar, translating government decisions into a more dependable signal for daily life.

Even so, the convenience of a better-timed alarm should not obscure the larger questions raised by the system itself: how working days are arranged, how much disruption economic efficiency can justify and who ultimately bears the cost of public time being reorganised. A policy designed to create longer holidays could generate economic benefits in the aggregate while imposing less visible costs on individual lives. Technology can make such a schedule easier to navigate, but it cannot determine whether its costs and benefits are fairly distributed.

A holiday calendar is never merely an accounting of days off. It reflects a society's priorities: which dates deserve protection, which economic objectives take precedence and how much flexibility people are expected to surrender. The question is not whether governments should organise public time but how far that authority should extend into private life. As China seeks to shift towards consumption-led growth, the ability to plan and enjoy free time might matter as much as the number of holidays on offer.

A more effective calendar would not simply count days of leave. It would return control of time to the microeconomic actors who drive sustainable expansion.

Michael Han is assistant president and Shanghai general manager at Yuepu Technology Group

Singaporeans facing a road to nowhere in particular

Ex-minister said unhappiness may be precondition for achievement, but some are opting out of system that is optimised for progress



Chang Zi Qian

At a recent Bloomberg forum, Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo was asked about the city state making the lists of the richest and unhappiest countries. He let slip what may be founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's coldest legacy quote: "We can promise economic development, infrastructure, education, whatever. But never promise happiness." Yeo added that unhappiness may even be a precondition for achievement.

In the national pledge, citizens of Singapore promise to achieve "happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation". Sixty years on, we have nailed prosperity and progress. We have the hospitals, the schools, the trains that run (mostly) on time. Shouldn't we be happy we pulled off the feat of rising "from third world to first", as the title of Lee's memoirs goes?

Apparently, happiness is an aspiration but not the promised land.

Speaking as a Singaporean, none of this shocks me. We've long known our national default setting is "achieve", not "enjoy". But it raises an awkward question: if happiness was never on the to-do list, what exactly have we been grinding away for? In the first place, how did we end up here?

Historian Wang Gungwu, on a recent podcast, may have offered an explanation. He set out the old Confucian "mandate of heaven" concept whereby capable, caring rulers govern well and good subjects know their place and don't complain – a political operating system that struck me as remarkably similar to the one in Singapore.

Which brings me to my theory, submitted with the usual disclaimers about my own confusion and audacity: Singapore's version of applied Confucianism got us from third world to first. Personal happiness was never in the road map. At its core, Confucianism was never a philosophy about how to be happy.

It was a philosophy about how to be governable. Read it as a management manual rather than a moral one and the picture clicks into place: everyone gets a role and your job is to perform your role well under a hierarchy that is drummed into you from birth. Singapore even tried adding Confucian studies to the national curriculum in the 1980s.

I was back in Singapore recently, and by day three I was reminded of the national sport: competing for a seat. On the MRT at 8am, at the hawker centre at noon and again on the ride home at 6pm. Three times a day, the city reminds us there isn't quite enough to go around, so we all have to be quicker or better than the next person.

> *"Singapore's version of applied Confucianism got us from third world to first*

As I sipped my warm soy drink, however, it struck me this was never really about seats. It's a daily rehearsal for the multi-stop race Singaporeans are conditioned to take part in: study hard, graduate, work, apply for a BTO (Build-To-Order flat), get married, have kids, get them into a good school, keep their grades up, get them into university, then watch them retrace your steps.

A society where everyone knows their lane is easy to manage – and that, not individual well-being, has always been the point. Nowhere is this clearer than in our national exams, where teenagers compete to validate their self-worth, in a tradition going back 1,400 years to the Sui dynasty.

Scholars back then didn't compete to differentiate themselves in a marketplace of ideas. They competed to align as closely as possible with whatever the emperor wanted so as to be granted the privilege of serving as a loyal extension of imperial authority. It was essentially selection masked as competition. This is still very much alive today, except that the emperor has been rebranded as a government scholarship.

However, the cast meant to perpetuate this order may be quietly walking off the set. Singapore's total fertility rate hit a record low of 0.87 last year, down from 0.97 the year before. If there was never a promise of happiness, perhaps some Singaporeans have decided they cannot, in good conscience, promise it to anyone else either – least of all their own child.

Wang's explanation offers a clue here: the mandate of heaven depends on people being satisfied with good governance and people have always had a way to deliver their verdict. Previously, that meant rebelling and toppling a dynasty. Today it's quieter: it could be a friend taking a job overseas, a couple moving to Thailand, a woman deciding not to have a second child, or a first. Nobody storms the palace. People just stop showing up for the roles assigned them.

Lee never promised us happiness, and to be fair, he never pretended otherwise. But without it, life in Singapore starts to look like a very long, very efficient commute to nowhere in particular.

Chang Zi Qian is a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law

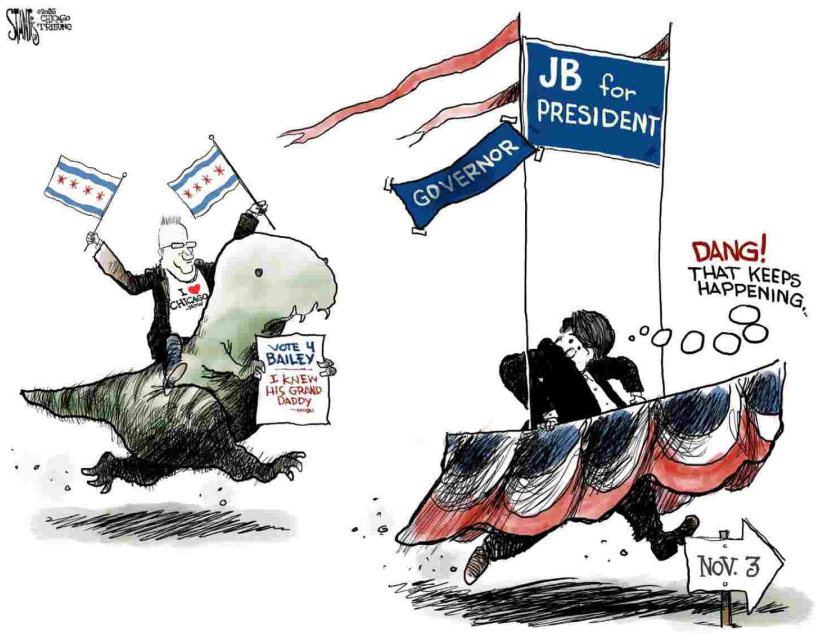
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EDITORIALS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Two-term incumbent Pritzker and downstate farmer Bailey vie in gubernatorial rematch



Gov. JB Pritzker, left, and Republican nominee challenger Darren Bailey prepare for their gubernatorial debate at WTTW-Ch. 11 on Tuesday in Chicago. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

In our opinion, Gov. JB Pritzker is a fundamentally decent, moderate, perspicacious leader with the potential, even in this pending third term when voter fatigue typically sets in, to be a transformative governor of Illinois.

It's further our opinion that cannot happen until his undeclared but self-evident campaign for president of the United States is done and dusted.

That's not to argue that Pritzker does not have the right to pursue the highest office in the land or that he has no chance of winning. What kind of president he would be is an editorial for another day but, certainly, he would be a vast improvement over the shameless hustler currently occupying the Oval Office. And, of course, anyone who remembers the optimistic hoards streaming up Michigan Avenue after Barack Obama made his victory speech for president of the United States in Grant Park well knows the local benefits of a Chicagoan assuming the presidency. President Pritzker would be very good for our city; even for those who abhor the idea.

We're not even complaining about the competing demands his dual campaigns — one declared, one undeclared — place on Pritzker's time, even though the governor did not find time to speak to us while he made a last-minute decision to go out of state. For public consumption, that was in order to support fellow Democrats. But Illinoisans not born yesterday know the real reason.

No, our argument this day as Illinoisans ponder whether to vote for a third Pritzker term or go with his challenger Darren Bailey is something different.

It is to assert that the interests of the people of Illinois currently do not align with the interests of someone appealing to Democratic presidential primary voters, which requires a hard left turn. Especially when your polling is no doubt telling you that progressives and anti-capitalists will struggle to trust any billionaire, however seemingly benign.

It's axiomatic that primary contests, dominated by the (now very online) true believers, require catering to the political extremes, then allowing the victorious candidate, in time-honored fashion, to tack back toward the center or center-left, which is where Pritzker actually has lived and lives. But in Pritzker's case, we are seeing a drastic amount of over-compensation.

Illinois does not require a hard left turn in the governor's mansion. It requires re-opening for business and growth and, not unrelatedly, it requires a leader getting a handle on the debilitating gap in our state between retirement benefits that have been promised to the state's workers and the actual funding set aside to pay for them.

There are of course a whole variety of barriers to solving that problem, some structural, some constitutional, all intensely political. But that doesn't change the necessity.

Poking at Trump, a favorite Pritzker sport, plays well with the Democratic base but comes at the cost of high-powered retribution, likely extending for two more years. The mayor of New York, who lives far to Pritzker's left, has chosen to play a different hand with, so far, better local results.

The governor also has to pay attention to the perceived public safety crisis in the state's largest city; that cannot be solved by pretending the problem started and ended with the loathsome ICE incursions or that some liberal prosecutors did not drop the ball.

Chicago needs rebranding, especially on the international stage. And, yes, that's also a governor's job.

JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon's Wednesday remarks at the Economic Club of Chicago were widely reported locally and he was of course mindful of his hosts. But we'd suggest the bigger lesson for the city lies in what Dimon said not at the Economic Club, but a few days earlier at the University of Michigan, when he did not have to be polite to his former hometown. In Ann Arbor, he was sharply critical about the business climate in Illinois and, at the same time, determined to highlight the critical role businesses have played in Detroit's continued growth and revitalization. Dimon thinks businesses should engage in "catalytic philanthropy" in Detroit and Chicago, as do we.

Pritzker surely does, too. But he also worries altogether too much about selling that to a bunch of anti-capitalist primary voters.

To put some specific bones on this problem, we offer House Bill 3657, signed into law in July 2025 and colloquially known as the pension sweetener bill changing the final salary calculations and other machinations aimed at improving retirement benefits for Chicago firefighters and first responders hired under the so-called "Tier 2" state pension scheme. The signing of that bill, surely Pritzker's biggest mistake of that year and arguably of his second term, added some $11.1 billion to Chicago's retirement debt, according to the city. The city could not and cannot afford it, as Pritzker surely knew.

When questioned, he generally has asserted that the mayor did not personally call him or ask for a veto as the legislation was moving through the legislature (although Brandon Johnson's administration has disputed some of that characterization). To our mind, that issue is moot. Is Chicago not in Illinois? Isn't improving the fiscal health of Chicago, or at least not worsening it, also the job of the governor? Chicagoans expect Pritzker to defend us from profligate mayoral borrowing and spending, not add to it. Moreover, he knows we do.

Is this all enough, then, to cast voters into the arms of Darren Bailey, a conservative downstate farmer with a history of pitting Chicago against the rest of the state? Or maybe those of Collin Corbett, a very smart policy wonk whose fascinating and often simpatico meeting with us gave us much fodder for future editorials and made us wish he were running for the Illinois House or Senate in a race he had a chance of winning. Springfield could use people with practical centrist ideas like Corbett, even if governor looks like a bridge too far.

Obviously, there is an experience deficit between Pritzker and his rivals, although unlike the previous governor of Illinois, Bruce Rauner, Bailey has served in the legislature. Obviously, Bailey's pro-life positions (with which we long have disagreed) and unapologetic adherence to what one might reasonably summarize as traditional, family, Midwestern values will be a dealbreaker for many swing voters, especially women. For others, a Trump endorsement, even though Bailey told us it was unsolicited and came as a surprise, will have the same effect.

But we've had three meetings with Bailey, who's now running for a second time against Pritzker. At the fire-and-brimstone first, we wondered if he knew he was talking to a Chicago newspaper. But at the last two, we found him a changed and more compassionate man determined to mend fences in Northern Illinois, which we respected. He may be a downstate conservative but he is smart and quite different from the rigid, cro-magnum stereotype depicted in Pritzker campaign ads.

Bailey emphasized to us his commitment to improving the state's schools. He said he would tackle the affordability crisis by temporarily suspending and then rolling back the gas tax (which would of course leave a large revenue hole) and rolling back the new tollway increases (ditto, albeit in the world of transit). He also promised a rigorous focus on improving public safety as part of his trifecta of priorities.

We found Bailey open to supporting a pathway to citizenship for undocumented Illinoisans of long-term standing. He said he saw the inherent inequity of cash bail. He insisted he would work across the aisle as he had done in the past. His approach to the ICE overreach, he said, would have been to pick up the phone to the White House and negotiate.

So voters have a pretty stark choice to make although we find both candidates to be honorable men who care about their state.

As per the policy of the Tribune Publishing Board of Directors, we are not endorsing in this race.

Just to be clear: The race we are talking about here is governor of Illinois.

Quotes of the week

"I mean, I don't even talk to them. I don't like them. What do you want me to say? I don't like being around them."

INDIANA DEMOCRATIC COUNTY COUNCIL CANDIDATE JAIME WEST, on Republicans in a now-viral candidate forum

"The chest X-ray revealed good recovery of the operated lung. Overall, his postoperative recovery is proceeding as expected."

DR. LUIGI CARBONE AND DR. STEFANO MARGARITORA, doctors for Pope Leo XIV, who underwent surgery to remove a cancerous nodule from his lung

"The Inspector General reopened this case only weeks ago, after the former student said she had never been interviewed the first time. Investigators finally spoke with her in late September and with Mr. Dominguez last week. Now the matter is closed, in the middle of an election, after City Hall publicly demanded that the office move quickly. A process this compressed raises questions that deserve answers, whatever the outcome."

CHICAGO BOARD OF EDUCATION PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE JESSICA BIGGS, on the OIG finding of "no actionable evidence" of wrongdoing in an investigation into alleged misconduct by Hilario Dominguez

"It's this selfless approach, it's playing for one another, playing for the Chicago White Sox organization. And the power of establishing an identity is that it can replicate throughout an organization, whether it be our minor-league players observing this, certainly our coaches, could be our evaluators when it comes to acquisitions. That clarity allows us to not only go out there and identify players we feel like can be a fit and be part of what we have going on here, but players within the organization that want to conduct their business a certain way, play a certain style, a winning style, for one another."

CHICAGO WHITE SOX GM CHRIS GETZ

"I'm just glad I'm not going to be known as the governor that lost the Bears."

REPUBLICAN GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE DARREN BAILEY TO GOV. JB PRITZKER DURING WTTW FORUM

"She has been a wonderful asset to the team, and we wish her well."

WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY KATIE ZACHARIA, on President Donald Trump's administration asking Kimberly Guilfoyle to resign from her position as U.S. ambassador to Greece

OPINION

How the Illinois congressional delegation can avoid endless brawling



John T. Shaw



The U.S. Capitol dome is seen through a window in the Cannon House Office Building rotunda on May 20 in Washington. **BILL CLARK/CQ ROLL CALL**

Doubtless, when the midterm elections are over and the next Congress convenes in January, fierce partisanship and angry polarization will continue unabated in the United States. This is the age of contention in American politics. It's also likely that the Illinois congressional delegation will be sorely tempted to be full participants in this endless brawling.

There are 14 Illinois Democrats in the U.S. House and only three Republicans. The two U.S. senators are also Democrats, as are all the constitutional officers and the governor.

Grievances abound. Illinois Republicans are angry that the congressional map is deliberately drawn to their serious disadvantage, with some districts almost comically gerrymandered. Illinois Democrats believe their GOP counterparts have failed to stand up to President Donald Trump's administration and lobby effectively for Illinois.

If Democrats win control of the U.S. House and Senate in November, Illinois Democrats may feel triumphant and emboldened with Republicans dispirited and beleaguered. This is not a recipe for conciliation, compromise and cooperation.

But regardless of the overall outcome, there will be a new dynamic in the Illinois delegation. Even if the ultimate partisan breakdown does not change, there will be five new House members and a new U.S. senator from Illinois.

This presents an opportunity for a fresh start.

Illinois lawmakers in Washington need to find ways to work together for the good of the Prairie State, moving to higher ground and setting smallness aside.

The Illinois delegation has few practices and structures to bring lawmakers together. Individual members cooperate on occasional projects and informally discuss issues, particularly when they serve on the same committees.

However, this is a far cry from earlier times when lawmakers met regularly, participated in spirited and substantive policy discussions, enjoyed informal dinners and even carpooled back home during congressional breaks.

"The Illinois delegation had a long tradition of bipartisanship," Ray LaHood, a former Illinois Republican congressman and U.S. secretary of transportation, told me. "Unfortunately, that's gone. We are in a completely different era."

If Democrats win control of the U.S. House and Senate in November, Illinois Democrats may feel triumphant and emboldened with Republicans dispirited and beleaguered. This is not a recipe for conciliation, compromise and cooperation.

What can be done to encourage cross-party collaboration? I propose this road map.

First, the Illinois congressional delegation should hold a retreat for lawmakers and their families at an Illinois university early in the next Congress. I propose it be co-hosted by outgoing Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin and LaHood.

The retreat would include policy sessions, informal receptions and presentations about Illinois history. The working sessions should include panel discussions with mayors, labor and business leaders, college and university presidents, and constitutional officers. The goal is to develop an Illinois agenda in Washington and improve personal relationships among the delegation members.

This retreat would become an ongoing event, held at a different Illinois university every two years, at the start of each new Congress.

Second, each party should select a delegation co-chair. The two would then organize monthly lunches in D.C. for a statewide update and informal discussions.

Third, the delegation should establish several working groups to focus on policy areas such as agriculture, higher education and economic development. These groups would identify specific tasks for the delegation.

Fourth, each year, every Illinois House member should visit the district of a member of the other party for a day of meetings and a joint public event. The two senators should visit each congressional district annually for meetings organized by its representative.

Finally, the delegation co-chairs should host a weekly coffee for Illinoisans visiting Washington with brief opening remarks and opportunities for a Q&A and photos. All members would be strongly encouraged to attend. In 1985, U.S. Sen. Paul Simon established this tradition, which he called the Illinois Hospitality Breakfast. The ritual has faded and has been downgraded to a monthly reception. It should be revived and reinvigorated.

Taken together, these initiatives would begin to bridge the partisan divide and create habits of collaboration among the delegation.

"We need Illinois working as one team," said Jen Daulby, CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the operations of Congress. She is a native Illinoisan and served as chief of staff to Illinois U.S. Rep. Rodney Davis. "I think this is a great time to start acting like the other delegations and have a formal gathering structure," she told me.

The next Illinois congressional delegation has the opportunity to forge a new beginning. Members must strive to create a model of practical cooperation in an age of contention.

"Members of both parties should recognize that they are joined in a partnership — a partnership to govern in the interests of all of us," LaHood argued in his memoir "Seeking Bipartisanship."

He also quoted Abraham Lincoln's first Inaugural Address: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies."

Even if the Prairie State lawmakers in Washington don't become lifelong friends, they can be productive partners, a clear benefit for the nearly 13 million people of Illinois they represent.

John T. Shaw is a professor at Marquette University's Les Aspin Center for Government in Washington, D.C. His most recent book is "The Education of a Statesman: How Global Leaders Can Repair a Fractured World."

After Cornell lawsuit, universities don't know what to do with fraternities

By Jens Ludwig
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Students walk on the Cornell University campus in Ithaca, New York, on Oct. 7. **LAUREN PETRACCA/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

What should universities do about their fraternities? Every school's president must be asking themselves that after a former student filed a lawsuit against Cornell, among others, alleging she was gang-raped at a fraternity in 2024. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lot of confused thinking about this at campuses across the country.

One type of confusion comes in the form of what one might call all-or-nothing thinking. For example, as one Penn State professor told the Chronicle of Higher Education: "Eliminating a fraternity or an entire community may remove one venue for risk, but it does not eliminate the conditions that create it." Set aside the topic of fraternities for the moment; this is simply not a good way to think about anything.

Imagine you're diagnosed with lung cancer, which historically had been a death sentence. New treatments can now keep 28% of people with this alive for at least five years after they're diagnosed. Is that treatment worth doing? Of course, 28% is a lot less than 100%. But anyone who is ever in that terrible position should focus on the fact that 28% is much better than 0%.

In the case of campus sexual assault, there are forward-leaning schools like Rice that have carried out a number of changes — including banning fraternities — that have decreased the risk down to 21.4% that a woman there will be sexually assaulted by the time she graduates. This obviously is still too high, but it's much lower than at other schools such as the University of Chicago (29.7%), Harvard (29.5%), Brown (31.9%) or Northwestern (30.1%). With about 600 women in each entering class at Rice, in every graduating class, there are about 60 women who would have been sexually assaulted had they gone somewhere else but weren't because they went to Rice.

The larger point is this: Incremental progress is still progress.

A second type of confusion is illustrated by the Cornell president's response when asked about abolishing fraternities: He said he worried this might send the problem of sexual assault "into the shadows," which I read to mean: Closing the fraternities will simply displace, not reduce, the problem. What's surprising about this answer is that it sounds like an Ivy League president has not considered the possibility that there could be relevant data on this question — that someone else out there might have looked into this, beyond some seat-of-the-pants speculation.

And indeed they have. For example, there is research suggesting men in fraternities are over three times as likely as other college men to commit sexual assault. Interestingly, there is no statistically detectable difference in offending rates before college, suggesting the future fraternity members weren't always fundamentally different in their behavior. It's true this is not the sort of gold-standard randomized trial the Food and Drug Administration requires of a new drug or medical device. But it's hard to see those results and not shift one's thinking toward the conclusion that fraternities themselves might really be a key part of the problem.

A third type of confused thinking is something that no university president dares say out loud, yet many people are sure they must be thinking: The fact fraternity alumni donate more makes getting rid of fraternities financially risky for schools. Any university president who might really be quietly thinking these thoughts is not only underappreciating the terrible human toll they are accepting in exchange for higher alumni donations but also underappreciating the huge risks there are for the university.

One of those risks is litigation. Some of my lawyer friends think Cornell has a decent chance of ultimately winning in court, should the Jane Doe case ever go to trial. But as anyone knows who has ever had the dubious pleasure of being sued and paying a lawyer $1,000 an hour to help them, whether you're likely to win is sort of beside the point. Litigation is so expensive that almost everything settles out of court.

What might this imply for a university? Imagine every woman who was sexually assaulted at Cornell is now inspired to follow Jane Doe's lead and sued the school. Cornell has about 2,000 undergraduate women in every incoming class; if 1 in 3 will be assaulted by the time they graduate, every one sued and then settled for, say, $50,000 each, that would be $33 million in settlement costs for Cornell with each and every graduating class, year after year after year.

A different risk is reputational. Imagine Cornell never had to pay anyone a dime. How long before people stop associating the university with "The Cornell Seven," gang rape and "Shop still open?" That's the sort of publicity no university wants and no amount of money can undo.

To any university presidents or trustees out there reading this: There may well be some reason your university winds up not banning fraternities. But if you care about your role as fiduciaries of your institutions, please don't let any of these terrible reasons be one of them.

Jens Ludwig is the Edwin A. and Betty L. Bergman distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago, the Pritzker director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab and author of "Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence."

OPINION

Is the minimalist fieldhouse in Cragin Park architecture or just a building?



Edward Keegan



The new Cragin Park Fieldhouse stands Thursday in Chicago's Belmont Cragin neighborhood.
BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Children play in the new Cragin Park Fieldhouse on, Thursday.



Circular light fixtures in the entryway in the new Cragin Park Fieldhouse on Thursday in Chicago's Belmont Cragin neighborhood.

"A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture."

Thus begins "An Outline of European Architecture" by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, one of the 20th century's most celebrated architectural historians.

This quote, written in 1943, came to mind as I visited the recently completed Cragin Park Fieldhouse in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood. Designed by locally based STL Architects, the new structure raises questions about whether it might be a building or architecture.

Cragin Park is among the more modest parks under the control of the Chicago Park District. It's small, occupying just a little less that one single city block with Drummond Place to the north, Lockwood Avenue to the west, and Wrightwood Avenue on the south. The eastern edge of the park is the north-south alley that serves businesses along Laramie. Quintessential Chicago bungalows line the north and south sides of the park, giving Cragin Park a strong sense of place rooted in this particular local building type. Its previous fieldhouse, which sat on the same site as the new building, was so modest that it made the Chicago bungalows that ring the park seem like grandiose architecture. The recently completed replacement packs considerably more architectural ambition.

The Cragin Park Fieldhouse isn't STL's first foray into fieldhouse design; the firm produced the well-received Williams Park Fieldhouse at 2820 S. State that opened in 2019. That building still shines as bright as a new penny in the relatively tight confines of the 8.5-acre Bronzeville park in the midst of the Dearborn Homes.

The Chicago Park District has often embraced the role of architecture in its landscapes. The history of park structures is a rich vein in Chicago's architectural history. Classics include Dwight Perkins' Café Brauer in Lincoln Park (1908), a landmark of Prairie School design that combines a classical plan with Prairie School details. The same is true of The Refectory in Washington Park, designed in 1891 by D.H. Burnham & Co.; the triple-arched Refectory (1907, Richard E. Schmidt, Garden & Martin); and the Georgian and Tudor Fieldhouse (1928, Michaelsen & Rognstad) both in Humboldt Park. A more contemporaneous example of top-notch design in the parks is John Ronan's Park District Headquarters and Fieldhouse in Brighton Park, completed just three years ago.

But good architecture hasn't always been the norm in our parks. Bunker-like structures such as the concrete fieldhouse in Bridgeport's McGuane Park, completed in 1972, demonstrate a more utilitarian approach to park amenities without much architectural interest. Even a more recent addition such as the Leonard Louis Fieldhouse in Chinatown's Ping Tom Park (2013, Wright & Company) seems dropped into its riverfront location from a suburban warehouse district.

At just 4,000 square feet, the Cragin Park Fieldhouse is a small building, particularly for a fieldhouse. The entrance to the building is on the north side of the structure, although a series of doors can open the multipurpose room to the park on the east side of the building. The double-height lobby is small but welcoming, and the two circular light fixtures that float in the upper regions of the space are a jaunty accent to the more staid expression of the building. The floor plan tucks restrooms between the double-height entry and multipurpose room and uses the upper-level space above the toilets to smartly shield rooftop mechanical equipment from view.

Flexibility is key to the design; almost half of the building is devoted to a multipurpose space that can be readily subdivided into two identically sized spaces. Eight exposed steel columns support four 34-foot-long king post trusses that align with large translucent windows that provide ample natural light at each end of the space. Perforated wood panels provide acoustic properties and add warmth to the space. Painted panels provide durable surfaces that can be easily cleaned and repainted.

The building expresses a clear architectural character with its exposed steel structure — although the 20 steel columns are all located inboard with just two of them visible from the exterior — and that pair is seen only through the large glass windows on the front façade. And some of the exposed steel connections are more than a bit fussy. In the lobby, the beams and columns join with such deliberate overelaborations as to mock the simplicity of the overall building. In the multipurpose room, stiffener plates in the columns align with the joints in the wall panels at some columns, while inexplicably, others do not. Details always matter, and this is especially true in a minimalist building such as the Cragin Park Fieldhouse. The lack of close coordination between these simple details undermines the structure's coherence and intent.

And while much of the small structure is almost all right, when dealing with a minimalist expression, just a little bit off can be everything. There is no margin for error.

A probably unintended counterpoint lies just a few short steps northeast of the new building where a small metal shipping container is surrounded by recently planted evergreen trees. The modest structure provides additional park storage, but the landscaping belies its less-than-temporary nature. Architects have long toyed with shipping containers as objects of exploration, deploying these off-the-shelf metal structures for a wide variety of uses. But sitting so closely by the new fieldhouse, it seems to challenge the actual building's material aesthetic: Which is more functional? Which is more minimal? Which is more architecture?

I applaud the new Cragin Park Fieldhouse for its ambition. Ambition is good; much of our contemporary built environment today is quite lacking in this regard.

But those good intentions are not enough. And the new Cragin Park Fieldhouse is trying so very hard. It's thoughtful, well planned, and well executed to a degree. But despite a few poetic moments in its interior, its exterior can seem too simple and even mean.

In time, the small shipping container that is its neighbor may age better, and the Cragin Park Fieldhouse might find itself more like Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's bicycle shed.

Edward Keegan writes, broadcasts and teaches on architectural subjects. Keegan's biweekly architecture column is supported by a grant from former Tribune critic Blair Kamin, as administered by the not-for-profit Journalism Funding Partners. The Tribune maintains editorial control over assignments and content.

Voice of the People

Loss of DePaul art museum

Louise Lincoln, my wife for the past 55 years, died last Sunday. From 1997 to 2014, she served as director of the DePaul University Art Museum. She transformed a small, little-visited gallery in the basement of Sanctuary Hall into a lively, full-scale museum with a growing collection of multicultural works and a gorgeous new building, which she helped design.

Working with a minuscule budget, she mounted better than 100 exhibitions, many of which focused on Chicago artists while others ranged across the globe and deep into history. Support from members of DePaul's administration was steady, reliable and principled, for they understood the importance of the arts not just to a well-balanced education but also to society in general. Support from the faculty was enthusiastic, and Louise worked closely with professors in many departments to ensure the museum's exhibitions complemented their classes.

The onset of Parkinson's disease led Louise to retire, despite her love for DePaul, the museum and its mission. No decision she ever made was harder, but she understood that the progression of her illness would compromise her ability to provide the high level of service the institution needed and deserved. With great regret, she opted to turn the museum over to someone younger and healthier, who could build on what she started, making the museum a vibrant center for art in Chicago. In the years following her retirement, she was deeply gratified to see continued progress toward that end.

Last winter, when I learned of DePaul's plans to close the museum, I could not bear to tell my wife of that decision, as it would have broken her heart. Not just for the loss of her life's work, but more importantly for the loss to the university, its faculty and students, to Chicago's brilliant.

— Bruce Lincoln, Chicago

SNAP and cancer treatments

When my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2024, our family learned that the diagnosis was just the beginning. Her diagnosis required 16 rounds of chemotherapy, 25 rounds of radiation, 17 immunotherapy infusions and two major surgeries.

While undoubtedly a hardship, relative to many cancer survivors, she had both the financial and emotional support needed. Many patients do not.

Every October, there are conversations about early detection and mammograms; breast cancer remains among the most commonly diagnosed cancer in the United States. We talk far less about what comes after. So many grapple with the logistics and costs of treatment. A breast cancer diagnosis is a life-altering medical event, and it is also a financial one.

Referred to as financial toxicity, a diagnosis can result in harmful economic burden, stress and debt due to high out-of-pocket medical costs stemming from diagnostic tests, treatments, prescription drugs and hospital stays. For many patients and their families, something has to give, and too often, it's food, as 17% of working-age cancer survivors report moderate to severe food insecurity.

Food insecurity changes what people eat, likely increasing their reliance on inexpensive ultra-processed foods, and makes dietary advice less feasible to implement during and after treatment. Additionally, cancer survivors who are food-insecure are more likely to forgo medications and care because of cost.

All of this can affect survivorship.

The most effective tool against food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Yet SNAP is harder to keep. In February, Illinois began applying expanded work requirements for SNAP, and 350,000 Illinoisans have since lost benefits. A 55-year-old home health aide in the middle of chemotherapy cannot work 80 hours a month. She may qualify for an exemption, but only if she is medically certified as unable to work and files the paperwork correctly and on time, while managing her treatment.

My sister successfully finished treatment because she had people and resources around her. Every woman and her family facing a breast cancer diagnosis deserve the same.

Cancer centers need to screen every patient for food insecurity, with on-site help enrolling in SNAP and filing exemption forms. Health systems and insurers must treat food as part of treatment.

Illinois and other states must make SNAP exemptions automatic for anyone in active cancer treatment. It's time to do better for breast cancer patients and survivors — in October and all year.

— Vanessa M. Oddo, associate professor of nutrition and Cancer Center member, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago

Dismissal of real concerns

Regarding the letter "Destruction of public education" (Oct. 11): As a young Hispanic Chicagoan, it always staggers and stuns me how easily political loyalties can masquerade as class analysis.

At a time when the mayor's political indebtedness to the Chicago Teachers Union is hardly a secret, dismissing legitimate concerns about the city's fiscal future and the burdens our children will inherit as "CTU Derangement Syndrome" is little more than Trumpian, post-truth rhetoric.

The notion that an "elite white power class" fears a union whose teachers are disproportionately white relative to their students, whose median earnings substantially exceed those of Chicago workers and whose bargaining demands have even threatened the interests of lower-paid Service Employees International Union members is a remarkable distortion of class politics.

Defending public education does not require treating the institutional interests of the CTU as synonymous with those of Chicago's working class.

— Alan Rodriguez Tiburcio, Chicago

Reduce the need for tickets

Chicago can keep bike and bus lanes clear without turning enforcement into another cost of living in this city.

In a vote that will negatively impact Chicagoans, the City Council just approved expanding automated ticketing citywide. Cameras on CTA buses and city vehicles will issue fines of up to $250 for blocking bike lanes.

The goal is reasonable: safer streets and more reliable public transportation. The problem is that a ticket doesn't fix a street that wasn't designed to work in the first place. Consider our neighborhood businesses. Restaurants, grocery stores and shops depend on deliveries, yet too many commercial corridors lack adequate loading zones. A truck gets ticketed, but the next delivery still has nowhere to go. Those costs can eventually reach customers through higher prices, further exacerbating our affordability crisis.

Chicagoans are already paying enough. A $250 ticket represents nearly two days of gross wages for someone earning the city's minimum wage.

Meanwhile, the pilot program has assessed nearly $4.5 million in fines, and City Hall projects $6.1 million in net revenue from the expansion in 2027. With an $882 million budget deficit looming, residents deserve to know whether success means safer streets or more money collected.

Here's what's interesting: City officials reported that 82% of drivers who received warnings never received a ticket. That suggests education and clear enforcement can change behavior without punishing people financially.

Before expanding cameras into every neighborhood, there are more sensible, actionable solutions. Chicago should provide workable loading zones, preserve first-offense warnings, and publicly report whether violations and crashes actually decline.

Nobody should have to dodge a parked car in a bike lane or wait for a bus because it's blocked by an illegally parked vehicle. But we shouldn't pit cyclists against drivers or small businesses against transit riders.

Success should be measured not by how many tickets City Hall issues, but by how effectively it reduces the need for them.

— Bill Thanoukos, small business owner and aldermanic candidate for 1st Ward, Chicago

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OPINION

Jane Doe's Least Bad Option

Emily Bazelon
A staff writer at The Times Magazine and in Times Opinion.

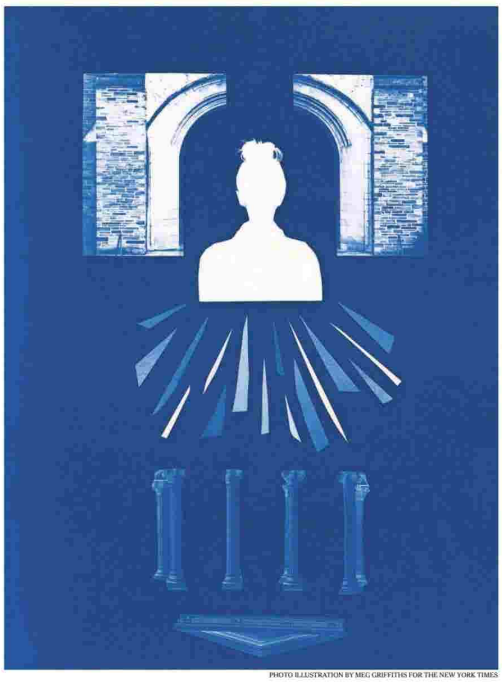


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MEG GRIFFITHS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Without Title IX, campus rape allegations would be left to a very imperfect criminal justice system.

ONE of the saddest facts about the alleged sexual assault rocking Cornell is the departure from campus of the young woman at the center of it, known as Jane Doe. She left school some time after she reported that she was raped at a fraternity party in October 2024, when she was a 20-year-old sophomore.

In the two decades I've been writing about campus sexual assault, it has been all too common for students to drop out of school after experiencing or reporting such an assault. It's one reason that at various points I've questioned requiring schools to investigate sexual assault based on Title IX, the statute that prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded education. Are universities really equipped to do this? Students who make accusations often come away unsatisfied with the process or the outcome, and students who are the subjects of those accusations often complain of being railroaded.

But cases like this one lead me to conclude that, for all its flaws, Title IX and the disciplinary procedures it requires colleges to undertake are necessary. Without them, allegations like Jane Doe's would be entirely in the hands of police and prosecutors to address, and that option is often worse. A mountain of evidence over the years shows how the criminal justice system struggles to address sexual assault effectively and fairly — or doesn't really try at all, as in the Cornell case. Title IX fills a void: If sexual misconduct prevents a victim from taking full advantage of her education, then the institution has to address it. That responsibility is an awkward fit in some ways, but it reflects the reality that colleges are not just classrooms; they are a very particular kind of community in which all members have a duty of care toward one another. The Cornell case shows how hard it can be for universities to enforce Title IX well and also why they have to keep trying.

CONGRESS enacted Title IX in 1972. Twenty years later, the Supreme Court ruled that students whose Title IX rights were violated could sue for compensation. I was in college then. I remember going to Take Back the Night marches, hearing women's stories of what we called date rape and not imagining the university would do anything about it.

The civil rights office of the federal Department of Education has long instructed schools to establish a grievance procedure for students who said they were assaulted and harassed. But people who made reports often found themselves brushed off. In 2009, the Center for Public Integrity investigated Title IX discipline nationally and found that many campus processes were slow, confusing and secretive, and often resulted in little or no punishment. Survivors organized to demand more from schools. They wanted accountability for perpetrators, and they wanted services like counseling and academic accommodations.

The Obama administration stepped in on behalf of victims. By 2014, the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Education was investigating 55 colleges and universities over their handling of sexual misconduct complaints. The department also issued new guidance, discouraging schools from allowing accused students to directly question their accusers, a process the office said could be traumatizing or intimidating, and emphasized that schools should use a lower standard of proof for finding an accused student "responsible," the term schools use to mean guilt. Universities hired more staff for Title IX investigations and support services. They started operating what amounted to sex crimes units.

Was there less rape and more justice? I couldn't tell. In surveys, students continued to report high rates of assault. And the cases that captured public attention presented dueling narratives of injustice. In November 2014, Rolling Stone published a false story of gang rape at a fraternity at the University of Virginia, showing that the press could rush to judgment without verifying the facts.

Two months later, a Stanford student named Brock Turner drew public outrage over what men still apparently thought they could get away with on campus. Mr. Turner had been found on top of an unconscious woman after they'd each been drinking at a party. Prosecutors brought criminal charges, and he was tried and convicted. But the judge sentenced him to only six months in jail.

The Turner case was not, though, a failure of Title IX enforcement. Within two weeks of the assault, Stanford had investigated the allegations and barred Mr. Turner from campus. He withdrew before he could be expelled.

In May 2015, I wrote about a Title IX investigation at Columbia University that split the public in ways that are similar to the Jane Doe case. When Emma Sulkowicz reported that her fellow undergraduate Paul Nungesser raped her, the university investigated and found he was not responsible for assault — in other words, not guilty. Columbia also gave Ms. Sulkowicz credit in an art course for a monthslong performance project in which she carried a mattress around campus to symbolize her trauma. Her performance art made her a symbol of the wronged survivor. Mr. Nungesser, however, argued that he was the victim, and sued Columbia for gender discrimination.

Lots of people saw the Columbia case in black and white, as either a rape or a lie. But talking to Ms. Sulkowicz, Mr. Nungesser and other students filled me only with uncertainty. I couldn't even settle the factual disputes about what had happened during Columbia's Title IX process, because those proceedings were confidential.

It's true that student privacy laws limit the information schools can disclose, but schools sometimes have gone further than the law requires. The lack of information about the conclusions they reach, and why, breeds mistrust — as we are seeing again at Cornell.

Also in the mid-2010s, feminists, some of whom were the mothers of college-aged children, started dividing over what Title IX had become. Some thought the Obama administration's rules were pushing schools to railroad accused students, who were almost always men. Others believed that women were still being shortchanged. As frustrations mounted, critics on the right and left called for sidelining or abandoning campus investigations, and instead requiring schools to report accusations of sexual assault to the police. Despite often being among the biggest critics of the universities, survivors and their supporters resisted. They argued that forcing students to go to law enforcement would make them less likely to report assaults at all, eliminating a mechanism with which to hold perpetrators accountable and to provide survivors with accommodations and mental health services. "The fact that two institutions" — universities and the police — "mistreat survivors is not an argument for forcing students to choose between reporting to both or to neither," argued Alexandra Brodsky, a cofounder of the advocacy group Know Your IX.

More recently, the first Trump administration, saying the Title IX process had become unfair to accused students, rolled back some of the Obama-era guidance. The new standards allow schools to use a higher standard of proof for a finding of responsibility and require live hearings with the opportunity for cross-examination.

WHEN Jane Doe filed a lawsuit against Cornell in September, the university became the target of outrage and protest. One of the complaints was about Cornell's lack of transparency in the two years since the alleged assault took place. In the wake of the suit, many facts have spilled out. Hundreds of pages of the university's investigation in 2024 and 2025 have been disclosed to The Times and other news outlets. But I don't think we know enough to fully judge Cornell's response.

Here's what stands out to me in the record. As in many cases like this one, the judgment of the students involved was clouded by drugs and alcohol. In her interview with a Cornell police officer and a Title IX investigator in November 2024, three weeks after the alleged assault, Jane Doe says she drank a lot over three hours at her sorority and a bar before walking to a party at the Chi Phi fraternity to meet a frat brother she was interested in, Matthew Ingalls. After they danced, Mr. Ingalls asked her to have a three-way with him and another fraternity brother, Jonathan Newell. Jane Doe said yes. The three students went upstairs to a shared bedroom and social space called the alumni room. The men drank and snorted ketamine. Jane Doe said she had ketamine and alcohol, too.

The night took a much more extreme turn at 1:42 a.m. That's when Mr. Newell sent a message on Snapchat to dozens of Chi Phi brothers advertising "free pussy" in the alumni room. As men began responding, Mr. Ingalls wrote, "Like you can walk in and whip it out."

The Snapchat exchange was grotesquely dehumanizing. Jane Doe didn't know about it. She didn't understand that Mr. Newell and Mr. Ingalls had apparently set her up as a group of men entered the alumni room. In her lawsuit, she says she was incapacitated by alcohol and ketamine. I think it's equally important that she did not know she was essentially being prostituted on Snapchat — 53 minutes after Mr. Newell's message, one man on the thread asked, "shop still open?"

Afterward, when Jane Doe heard that frat brothers were bragging about an "eightsome," she was shattered. "My reputation is destroyed and i'm utterly ashamed," she wrote to Mr. Ingalls. "All i do is sleep and cry all day." When she heard rumors about the Snapchat messages, she asked the investigators to subpoena them.

There's one more dark part of this story that matters for assessing the institutional response. After leaving the alumni room, Jane Doe went to a small room with Mr. Ingalls and another fraternity member, Winston Lee. Jane Doe said that they asked her for another three-way. She told the investigators she said she was too tired and didn't have it in her. The men had sex with her anyway. "I can say with 100 percent confidence I was raped," she said.

Is Jane Doe's account enough to press rape charges in the criminal justice system? Aspects of it make the case difficult to prosecute. That does not, however, prevent a district attorney from asking a grand jury for an indictment. At the least, these facts should have triggered a serious criminal investigation. But the Cornell police officer left Jane Doe's definitive statement about being raped out of the six-page summary that was given to the county's district attorney, Matthew Van Houten. Prosecutors took no action. After the lawsuit was filed in September, Mr. Van Houten said Jane Doe's statement "described her participation in drug use and sexual conduct as voluntary, conscious and consensual." That's not what she told the police, and it shows why survivors have so little faith in local law enforcement. Early this month, Gov. Kathy Hochul appointed the New York attorney general, Letitia James, as a special prosecutor in the case. Two of the accused men have asked the judge to remove Ms. James because before her appointment, she issued a statement expressing sympathy for Jane Doe.

In contrast to the district attorney, Cornell took significant action. The university closed Chi Phi in November 2024, and put the students Jane Doe had accused on interim suspensions, according to the lawsuit. Over the next few months, Cornell investigators conducted over 50 interviews and collected evidence, including the Snapchat messages and dozens of texts among students.

In May 2025, a disciplinary panel at Cornell met over 12 days to review the evidence against the seven men, all of whom denied any wrongdoing. Based on the panel's findings, Mr. Ingalls and Mr. Newell were expelled, Mr. Lee was suspended for two years and a fourth student who Jane Doe said had nonconsensual sex with her in the alumni room was suspended for three semesters. The other three men received relatively light punishments. (One had already graduated, and two played lesser roles, though they did go to the alumni room after receiving the Snapchat invitation and participate in the messaging rather than expressing concern about it.)

In her lawsuit, Jane Doe said the penalties were insufficient. In the record, the reasons for the panel's findings are heavily redacted, which means that, once again, a secretive process makes it hard to evaluate a university's decision-making in an explosive case. Cornell has named a former acting U.S. attorney general, Sally Yates, to lead an independent review of its response. Whatever Ms. Yates finds, I hope she makes the information public in a way that allows us all to assess comprehensively the outcomes Cornell reached, and allows other schools to learn from this disastrous case. Last week, the university said it would work with trauma-informed investigators from the state police and suspended frat parties for the rest of the academic year, a step toward prevention — another facet of Title IX.

In a case like this, publicity is its own form of punishment. "I'm being labelled as an assaulter in the public eye," Mr. Ingalls texted Jane Doe in the days after the frat party. Because of Title IX, Cornell found that he deserved the label. That's some form, at least, of deterrence.

Unleash the Technocrats!

Matthew Yglesias
A contributing Opinion writer and the author of "One Billion Americans: The Case for Thinking Bigger."

The biggest mystery about affordability? No one's doing much about it.

A DECADE or more into an era of populist upheaval in American politics, voters are angrier than ever at a system they rightly believe is ignoring their priorities.

Affordability is dominating the midterms, just as inflation dominated the 2024 presidential campaign. Yet somehow, after years of voters saying as loudly and clearly as possible that they want decisive government action on the cost of living, nobody is actually doing much about it.

President Trump is even making the cost of living higher through an agenda of tariffs, regressive tax cuts and war with Iran. And while Democratic candidates are benefiting politically from voter fury over high prices for beef, gas and diesel and mortgages, the party has not rolled out a credible national agenda to tackle the issues underlying the lack of affordability. When given the chance in the Biden administration, Democrats instead gave us the Inflation Reduction Act, which did little to reduce inflation but authorized lots of spending to combat climate change and inject money into the economy.

It is the biggest mystery in politics: How come neither party will actually address the thing voters say is their top concern?

Government policies influence consumer prices in direct and indirect ways, but one big macroeconomic reality is key: The federal government is running a budget deficit that is the equivalent of close to 6 percent of the American economy.

If we were in a recession, a deficit that large could help kick-start the economy. But with unemployment low, deficit spending fuels inflation — which the Federal Reserve in turn tries to control with higher interest rates. Those higher rates then push up the cost of mortgages, auto loans and other forms of consumer credit. With deficits this large, there is no good solution to the high cost of living.

Pulling out of this spiral is going to require tough choices, but it is achievable if politicians prioritize costs rather than ideological activist goals. In other words, it's also going to take some technocrats.

On one level, it's easy to understand why both parties are not more responsive to voters' top concern. Both parties are organized around the ideological goals of their key stakeholders. Republicans push regressive tax cuts; Democrats push funding for health care, environmental, welfare state and other programs.

The solution is simple: good old-fashioned deficit reduction. According to Washington conventional wisdom, politicians don't embrace this because it's unpopular. But that's not entirely true. Raising taxes on the rich, for example, polls extremely well.

In recent years, Democrats have preferred to pair that idea with spending the money on new programs rather than on addressing inflation and curbing spending in an effort to lower interest rates. Fiscal responsibility annoys political elites because it constrains their ambitions and makes it harder to pursue their pet projects. Bill Clinton's decision to prioritize macroeconomic prudence irritated many people in his coalition, but it helped produce a very strong economy. Voters don't care all that much about fussy budget details, but they do care a lot about good economic outcomes.

For Democrats and technocrats, there are plenty of opportunities to go after wasteful spending. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget calculates that preventing traditional Medicare beneficiaries from using private supplemental insurance (like Medigap coverage) to help defray out-of-pocket costs like deductibles and co-payments could save more than $250 billion over the next decade; at the moment, nearly 90 percent of them do have such coverage, which encourages them to use more medical services, driving up Medicare's costs.

This kind of relatively low-hanging fruit is not enough to balance the budget, but paired with taxing the rich, it would make a big dent in the deficit and reduce the upward pressure on inflation and interest rates created by stimulating an economy that doesn't need stimulus.

From there, a technocratic, affordability-

OPINION

A Candidate Who Feels Israel's Grief

Dahlia Scheindlin
A public opinion expert and a political strategist who has consulted on nine Israeli campaigns.

TEL AVIV

EVEN though much of the world sees them as aggressors, Israeli citizens are struggling after years of war, loss and trauma. Many are simply furious at their own government. The source of that sentiment can be summed up in one word: "hafkara" — abandonment.

This is one of the reasons Gadi Eisenkot, a retired lieutenant general, former Israeli army chief of staff and bereaved father, is a serious challenger to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in elections on Oct. 27. Mr. Netanyahu is the man many believe is responsible for that abandonment.

Mr. Eisenkot is a relatively new face in politics, having entered Israel's Parliament only in 2022. His appeal is not immediately obvious — he is not known for charisma or eloquence. His party, Yashar, meaning "straight" or "honest," was founded only a year ago, and his campaign, considered centrist or center-right, has, until recently, been light on policy and vision. It remains unclear, for example, how he might go about ending Israel's wars.

And yet, for weeks now, Yashar has been either in the lead or tied with Mr. Netanyahu's Likud in most polls. Only surveys commissioned from two openly right-leaning pollsters have found his party trailing.

Where many Israelis view Mr. Netanyahu and his government as callous and self-serving, retaining power at the expense of the people rather than for the people, Mr. Eisenkot is relatable in part because he — quite literally — feels the same pain.

On the morning of Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Mr. Eisenkot awakened his youngest son, Gal Meir Eisenkot, a computer science student, and helped him organize his gear and join the reserves. Mr. Eisenkot himself joined Mr. Netanyahu's emergency war cabinet overseeing the retaliatory offensive in Gaza. Two months into the war, Gal was killed during an operation to recover the bodies of Israelis taken during the Hamas attacks. He was 25. The next day, Mr. Eisenkot's nephew Maor Cohen Eisenkot, 19, was also killed in Gaza. Nearly a year later, another nephew, Yogev Pazy, 22, lost his life there, too.

Bereavement places Mr. Eisenkot in the same emotional world as other Israelis who have suffered loss or injury, and the many more who suffer with them collectively. Mr. Eisenkot symbolizes someone who understands.

By contrast, Israelis are filled with anger and despair over the perception that Mr. Netanyahu spent months avoiding cease-fire deals, which would have released more hostages, because his coalition partners preferred to continue the war.

The hostage crisis was just one example of what many Israelis experienced as government indifference to the suffering of its people. Mr. Netanyahu's government was roundly criticized for largely avoiding enforcing the draft for a vast majority of ultra-Orthodox Israeli men who were eligible. At the same time, reservists served for hundreds of days, and more than 1,150 soldiers died. Further enraging much of the public, the government worked tirelessly to pass a law that would have continued that mass exemption despite court rulings. For his part, Mr. Eisenkot has vocally opposed what he called a "conscription law that is a law of evasion." Mandatory military or civic service has been one of the core promises of his platform.

Mr. Eisenkot's positions are thus more aligned with a majority of Israelis. He called for a cease-fire hostage release deal just three months into the war, a position most Israelis supported. Mr. Eisenkot relayed in interviews that he left the war cabinet in June 2024 largely over frustration that Mr. Netanyahu avoided reaching hostage release deals. Yashar's slate now includes an honorary place for Ohad Ben Ami, a hostage held for 491 days, and the parents of two more hostages, Liri Albag and Naama Levy, both soldiers released after 477 days in captivity.

Mr. Eisenkot's signature policies include calling for an independent state commission of inquiry over the failures of Oct. 7, which a majority of Israelis favor. He has also promised to fight crime and lower costs — and to favor the emerging idea of term limits for future prime ministers.

In February, Mr. Eisenkot gave a lengthy interview with Channel 11, Israel's public broadcaster. His sorrow was palpable, though before then he had rarely talked publicly about his personal grief. The host, Roni Kuban, held up images and asked for responses. One photo was that of Yair Netanyahu, the prime minister's son, who lived in Miami for much of the war. Mr. Eisenkot offered tersely that the younger Mr. Netanyahu was "not a patriot." He elaborated, "If he was a patriot, he would be in the country, contributing, serving. People his age are serving." Mr. Kuban responded, "Serving and dying." "That, too," Mr. Eisenkot said.

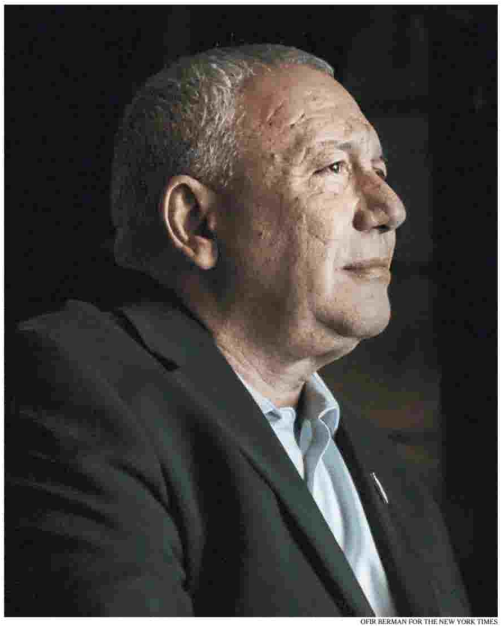
The exchange hinted at what some Israelis have been saying all along: that Mr. Netanyahu cares only for his own, while the country is sacrificing and suffering.

Mr. Eisenkot was born in Tiberias, in the north of the country, to Moroccan immigrant parents, and raised in Israel's southernmost city, Eilat, on the Red Sea. These biographical details boost his appeal: Mizrahi Jews of North African and Middle Eastern descent have long experienced discrimination from Ashkenazi, or Western, Central and Eastern European Jews. Further, his childhood in a peripheral town is a nod to more remote areas that often feel overlooked.

As a child, Mr. Eisenkot attended school in Tze'elim in the northern Negev, near the area hit hardest on Oct. 7. He was drafted into the vaunted Golani Brigade in 1978 and climbed through key posts, including commander of the Judea and Samaria (West Bank) division, commander of the Northern Command and deputy chief of staff. He served as chief of staff of the Israeli Army from 2015 until 2019 and is closely associated with the doctrines that have defined Israeli regional military strategy in recent years.

He advanced what is known as the "campaign between wars" — ongoing low-level warfare engaged against Iranian assets largely in Syria. He also is credited with what he called the "Dahiya Doctrine," named for the suburb of Beirut of the same name. That strategy advised using overwhelming destructive force on any villages sheltering Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is a method he himself called "disproportionate" when it was introduced in 2008.

Gadi Eisenkot could be the one to unseat Netanyahu.



OFIR BERMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Still, retired generals like Mr. Eisenkot are common in Israeli politics but usually make poor politicians. The former prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Rabin were prominent exceptions.

And even if his party receives the most votes, Mr. Eisenkot will face formidable political obstacles the day after the election. The Zionist parties that are expected to support him look unlikely to win a 61-seat majority in Parliament. They could invite an Arab party into the coalition, but Mr. Eisenkot has indicated that he would not create a coalition with one, a position in line with his likely allied parties, which also reject the idea. That leaves the opposition bloc in a bind.

This month, in a wide-ranging conversation with The Times of Israel, Mr. Eisenkot offered more specifics of his policy vision, including a crackdown on West Bank violence by Jewish Israelis against Palestinians and a robust return to the Trump peace plan for Gaza, assuming total Hamas disarmament. He said he opposed Israel's extending "full sovereignty" over the occupied West Bank.

While such statements may sound vaguely moderate in Israel's hard-line environment, it remains unclear what sort of solution he wants regarding the Palestinians. He rejects annexation but supports settlements that Israel considers legal. He told The Times of Israel, cryptically: "We need to create the conditions for a permanent-status arrangement in the future. Will it be autonomy or a state-minus? That is the geopolitical space I am talking about. But it certainly will not have an army, and will be under overriding Israeli security control."

On the domestic front, he rejected the Netanyahu government's attacks on the independent judiciary, without giving firm details of what he would do in practice.

A poll by the Israel Democracy Institute in early October found that a majority of Israelis are pessimistic about security, democratic governance, the economy and social solidarity. The retired general's public, if understated, grief seems to speak more powerfully to many than Mr. Netanyahu's oft-used narratives about triumph that the country does not feel.

As a bereaved father, Mr. Eisenkot "really understands the depth of pain that all of us here have experienced," Shirley Segal, a campaign volunteer, told me at a Yashar party event in September.

This month, Israelis marked three years since Oct. 7. On that day, Mr. Eisenkot seemed to be everywhere: He began the day at 6:29 a.m., the exact moment the rockets began three years earlier, by visiting many of the hardest-hit spots in Israel's south. He ended the evening at a citizen-led mass memorial ceremony in Tel Aviv.

By contrast, Mr. Netanyahu was largely absent from public events, outside of a terse statement of memorial, and a speech two days earlier, both filled with calls for revenge.

COLUMNIST | **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

The Shame Of the Russian Diesel Deal

If President Trump does not understand what will happen to him if he proceeds with his plan to trade away support for Ukraine's democracy for Russian diesel, let me spell it out: He will enter the history books in the chapter on leaders who sold out their country's democratic values to appease a dictator.

Donald Trump, meet Neville Chamberlain. When future students search online for "sell-out," "appeaser" or "traitor to his country's core values," their two pictures will come up first, side by side. And deservedly so. At least Chamberlain was trying, in what proved to be lethally misguided fashion, to avoid a world war. Trump is trying to avoid losing a few seats in Congress — and is likely to be no more successful in achieving his goal than Chamberlain was in achieving his.

I have never believed that Trump was somehow an agent of Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, or in his pay. It is much worse. He simply does not cherish democracy. He cherishes money. And he has no problem selling out the first for the second. When he acts in his own commercial interests, that's his personal business. When he uses the American presidency to make a buck, it is our collective shame.

There is simply no core American value Trump will not sell out. Desperate to lower diesel prices, which are hurting Republicans in the midterms, Trump actually made a deal to import diesel fuel from Russia, even though it offers a potential windfall for the Kremlin so it can bomb Ukraine harder — and is unlikely to help lower prices or increase supplies much at all. Worse, his aides then asked Ukraine to refrain from attacks on Russia's oil refineries, without Trump making the same demand of Putin regarding Ukraine's energy infrastructure. It makes me sick to my stomach to even type this.

Trump sold out American democratic values to appease a dictator.

Unique among great powers, "the United States has always made the protection and promotion of liberal values part of its foreign policy because it's part of the country's political DNA," Michael Mandelbaum, the author of the new book "The American Way of Foreign Policy: Ideology, Economics, Democracy," told me. "Different presidents have given these values different emphases, depending on the circumstances and their own personal predilections."

But none have "ever abandoned them entirely — let alone repudiated them," Mandelbaum added. "In that sense Trump really is unique."

This is shocking to Ukrainians, who for nearly five years have been resisting Putin's attempt to wipe their country off the map. My friend Vitaly Sych, the editor in chief of the Ukrainian news outlet NV, texted me from Kyiv the other day:

"When Donald Trump became president, Ukraine lost an ally." From his first days in office, Trump "started positioning himself as a 'negotiator,' as an 'intermediary' between Ukraine and the aggressor — Russia," Sych added. "That was strange enough. And now he is openly siding with Russia, pushing for Ukraine's capitulation and calling it a peace deal," Sych said. "If Ukraine hits an oil refinery in Russia, there is always an outraged post from the U.S. president on Truth Social. Is he now the Kremlin's spokesperson?"

"Russians are killing us like in a shooting range," Sych said. "No concern comes out about this from the White House. Only about Russian diesel. It is a mix of intellectual and moral bankruptcy to claim we don't want peace.

"Of course we want peace," he said. "But we don't want capitulation packaged as peace."

I have to say, it is hard for me to decide who is more despicable: Trump or tough-guy Republican senators like Tom Cotton, who lambasted President Joe Biden for not sending enough military aid to Ukraine and today sits curled up in a corner of the U.S. Capitol, saying nothing while Trump sells Ukraine to Putin outright.

Here's the beginning of a story in The Hill from Sept. 16, 2023:

> A group of Republican senators sent a letter to President Biden Saturday urging him to "immediately" provide the missiles Ukraine needs to win its war against Russia. Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) shared the letter in a post on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, arguing that not sending the weapons would "only prolong the war and cost lives." Cotton was joined by Senators Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in his request.

That was then — when Biden was president. Last week a bipartisan group of 12 senators (six Republicans and six Democrats) sent a letter to Trump demanding that he rescind the diesel agreement and roll back the Treasury Department's license allowing it. Cotton, who is the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, did not sign the letter.

It is hard to tell whether Trump's democracy-for-diesel idea is his alone or was cooked up with his negotiators, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. If those two are part of it, I hope they understand that they will share Trump's infamy in the history books. The good work they have done to end the Gaza war will all be forgotten. They should speak up now, because history will have its eyes on them, too.

focused administration would work line by line through the array of federal laws and regulations and try to strip away everything that raises the cost of living.

New American commercial jet pilots generally must have 1,500 hours of training flight time before they can qualify to co-pilot a plane — over five times as much time as required by perfectly safe European airlines. These are not rules with bona fide safety or environmental benefits. They exist primarily as job-creation or (in the case of the pilot-training requirements) job-protection measures, which contribute to higher fares.

Similarly, a 2024 study concluded that federal "Buy American" procurement rules to increase manufacturing employment cost $111,500 to $137,700 per job created. (Future tightening of the criteria will push those costs higher.) Congress recently explored ways of bringing down regulatory barriers to home building with its ROAD to Housing Act. But a bolder federal government should go further in punishing jurisdictions that refuse to allow new homes while easing up on rules adopted in the wake of the Great Recession that have made it much harder to get a starter home mortgage.

Policy wonks across administrations have long deplored these kind of rules but have struggled to persuade presidents (and Congress) that curtailing them is worth the effort. But if affordability is truly Job 1, technocrats and politicians should spend political capital on addressing it.

It seems likely that the next administration, particularly a Democratic one, will shift from Mr. Trump's approach on immigration. But few Democratic politicians are framing immigration reform as a way to bring economic benefits — using work visas in sectors like construction or hospitality, for instance, to improve affordability.

Neither party seems interested in new free trade deals. There are certainly national security reasons to worry about reliance on certain kinds of imports from China, but most of America's pre-Trump trade barriers have no such rationale and often increase costs for American consumers. Whether it's Canadian lumber, Japanese pickup trucks or Central American sugar cane, there are lots of goods from friendly countries that we could welcome in to bring down costs.

Are these the kind of solutions the voters are demanding? Probably not. But voters really care a lot about the cost of living. And that's worth taking seriously not just as guidance for what politicians should talk about, but also for what they, and associated technocrats, should do in office.

Voters know what they want — a government that focuses on tangible progress on the cost of living — but are not technical experts in macroeconomics or regulatory cost-benefit analysis. The whole point of representative government is to elect politicians who are willing and able to empower the people who *are* experts to solve the problems voters want solved.

This kind of 1990s-style politics — progressive taxation, fiscal discipline, deregulation, free trade and modesty about policy — has been unfashionable for so long that it scarcely seems imaginable. But when we had it, people loved the results.

OPINION

I've Never Seen an Ebola Crisis Like This Before



JOSPIN MWISHA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Heather Kerr
The country director of the International Rescue Committee in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

KINSHASA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

ON A recent evening commute through Bunia, the capital of Ituri Province in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the streets looked almost ordinary. The city of nearly one million people was teeming with life: Fruit vendors lined the streets, the shops were crowded, and restaurants were filling for the evening.

But things are not normal at all. Ebola is ravaging the area and has killed more than 4,000 people countrywide, most of them in Ituri.

Indeed, it was hard to reconcile what I was seeing with what I'd heard from the driver who had taken me to visit a nearby health center. He told me that his brother and three members of his wife's family had died of Ebola. His family knew about the disease, he said, but by the time they realized how sick they were, it was too late. They died at home, before making it to a hospital. Nearly half of all people who are confirmed to have Ebola will die from it.

I have worked in humanitarian health in this region for decades and helped lead responses to several Ebola outbreaks. I have never seen one get this far ahead of us. Even now, days after the outbreak was declared, most new cases are appearing outside the chains of transmission that health workers are tracking, and one-third to two-thirds of deaths are occurring not in treatment centers but in places like people's homes. The threat is spreading: Early this month, Kenya reported its first Ebola case, a man who had traveled there from Congo and died of the disease; two more cases have been reported since.

This outbreak, caused by the Bundibugyo strain of Ebola, was detected late, giving the virus a head start. Unlike for the strain behind some previous outbreaks, there is no approved vaccine for Bundibugyo. It arrived at a particularly dangerous moment: Congo's health systems are weakened by steep cuts in foreign aid and regional conflict that has displaced nearly seven million people.

Before 2025, U.S. government funding supported disease surveillance, outbreak preparedness and treatment programs run by humanitarian organizations across eastern Congo. That funding was sharply reduced as part of broader cuts last year. Budget reductions forced my organization, the International Rescue Committee, to cut funding to the health facilities focused on primary care in Ituri, where this outbreak began.

In clinics in Ituri, the funding cuts have meant going without the surveillance tools needed to flag Ebola symptoms early, allowing the virus to spread before we can catch up. It's a stark change from the outbreak that started in 2018, the third-largest in history. At that time, donors called me asking: "How much money do you need? Write us a proposal." That outbreak lasted for two years and produced less than half the caseload we've seen only five months into this one.

The challenge is not only a lack of resources. It is also a lack of trust. Decades of violent conflict, corruption and institutional neglect have fueled public distrust of health care providers, international organizations and government institutions. Rumors that the Ebola outbreak is a hoax are widespread. My colleagues working on community outreach in Bunia told me that a mother did not take her children to a clinic to be checked for Ebola when they had a fever because she believed the Ebola response was a moneymaking scheme.

In some cases, that distrust has turned violent. At least a dozen health facilities have been attacked during this outbreak. In July, a health center in Ituri was stormed by an armed group throwing stones. Several Ebola patients fled. When I visited a few weeks after the attack, International Rescue Committee colleagues and health workers recounted hiding during the attack. Several told me that their main worry was their families, whom they could not reach until they got out.

More broadly, distrust has made it harder for health workers to track the virus. Contact tracing, a key tool in slowing the spread of the virus, has improved significantly, although it's still short of what's needed. The bigger problem is that most people who have contracted Ebola in this outbreak were never on a contact list in the first place. Just over a third of confirmed cases so far were known contacts of people infected; the rest emerged outside any known chains of transmission. Health workers told me that this is in large part because many people who think they have Ebola are choosing to stay home.

When people become sick and die at home, health workers may never identify the people they exposed, which allows the virus to continue spreading undetected. We've heard from people: "I know I should go to the health center, but actually, if I'm going to die, I'd rather die at home." Some people are afraid to seek treatment because they believe they will contract the disease in a health clinic, or that they will test positive and be taken away from their families to die alone.

The fear of dying alone is particularly acute in eastern Congo, where traditions around death and burial hold deep cultural and spiritual significance. Families gather to mourn and bury their dead in person, in accordance with rituals intended to ensure their passage into the next world. Ebola makes that impossible; safe burials require protective suits or body bags.

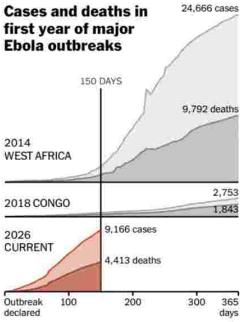
Closing the funding gaps is essential, but to stop this outbreak, we also need to build trust. That means working with local health workers, leaders and Ebola survivors whom people already know and trust. We can't simply arrive with instructions — we must listen, and then shape our response based on what we hear. Religious leaders, for instance, meet with their congregations every Sunday. What they say from the pulpit reaches people quickly and is taken seriously. This work cannot begin only after Ebola arrives in a community. We need to build those relationships now, including in places where the virus may strike next.

Another complicating factor is conflict itself, raging over the past 30 years between government authorities and more than 100 armed groups. According to the United Nations, at least 243 acts of violence, threats or interference have affected aid workers in Congo since the beginning of the year, and six humanitarian workers were killed. For the moment, the authorities in North Kivu — one of the most restive provinces in Congo — have assured us our teams will be able to operate safely. But this shouldn't depend on good will. Last April, an agreement was signed between the government and armed groups, reiterating the protection of health workers and humanitarians. This agreement needs to be upheld more urgently than ever, and across the country.

Money still matters. As of late September, Group of 20 countries and international partners had pledged $2.9 billion. But less than half of what was previously pledged has been disbursed so far. Money needs to reach the front lines quickly to ramp up prevention efforts, keep clinics open, find cases early and support local health workers and community leaders who can reach people.

Congo has defeated Ebola many times since the virus was discovered here in 1976. We know the medical tools that can stop it, but those tools are only as effective as our ability to reach the people who need them and their willingness to trust us when we do. If a mother is too frightened to bring her sick child to a clinic, or a family believes that seeking treatment means surrendering a loved one to die alone, the virus will keep finding places to hide.

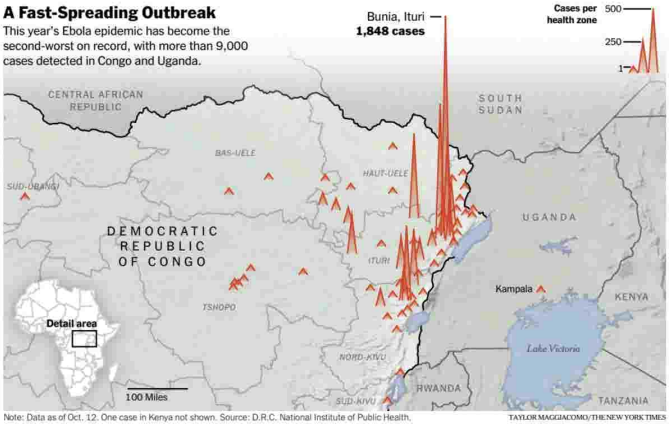
Cases and deaths in first year of major Ebola outbreaks



Note: Data as of Oct. 12. Sources: W.H.O; C.D.C; Democratic Republic of Congo National Institute of Public Health.

A Fast-Spreading Outbreak

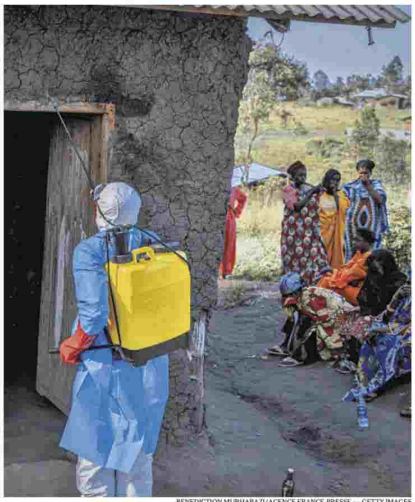
This year's Ebola epidemic has become the second-worst on record, with more than 9,000 cases detected in Congo and Uganda.



Note: Data as of Oct. 12. One case in Kenya not shown. Source: D.R.C. National Institute of Public Health.

TAYLOR MAGGIACOMO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Violence, foreign aid cuts and the lack of a vaccine fuel a rapidly growing outbreak.



BENEDICTION MURHABAZI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Top, a cemetery in Bunia, Democratic Republic of Congo, where many victims of Ebola are buried. Above, a volunteer in Bunia disinfecting a house of a child infected with Ebola.

OPINION

Hollywood Thinks the Tech Oligarch Must Be Stopped

Sharon Waxman
A contributing Opinion writer and the editor in chief of The Wrap.

LOS ANGELES

HOLLYWOOD has a new villain: the tech mogul.

And this time, it's personal.

In the space of just a few months, no fewer than six feature films, documentaries and television shows are taking aim at the "move fast and break things" culture of Silicon Valley.

It feels almost like a vendetta: The most influential storytellers on the planet are depicting the world's most powerful industry as full of greedy and venal people who don't care whom they hurt.

Aaron Sorkin's "The Social Reckoning" is in theaters now, featuring an angry, dour Jeremy Strong as Mark Zuckerberg. Alex Gibney's four-hour documentary "Musk," featuring a creepy, artificial-intelligence-generated bobblehead version of the richest man in the world, just hit theaters. Nathan Fielder and Lance Oppenheim's quasi documentary about the Theranos felon Elizabeth Holmes, "You Can See Everything," opened last week. CBS recently debuted a legal drama called "Cupertino" from the veteran showrunners Michelle and Robert King, about a couple of intrepid lawyers taking on the giants of the Valley with the zeal of David facing Goliath. Then, next month, Netflix has "The Altruists," dramatizing the $8 billion crypto collapse of Sam Bankman-Fried, played with Mephistophelian dorkiness by Anthony Boyle. And Luca Guadagnino's "Artificial," about Sam Altman, will arrive in theaters in December.

The tech world has eaten legacy Hollywood, humbled it, beaten it at its own game. The latest example is David Ellison's purchase of Warner Bros., which he did with the backing of his father, the Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison, in order to add it to Paramount, which he already ran. But this has been happening for over a decade now. Netflix is now the biggest game in Tinseltown. Amazon and Apple are major players.

Call it vengeance. Or jealousy. Call it the "Network" effect (by which I mean the 1976 movie). Hollywood is mad as hell.

The adorable dweebs of "Silicon Valley" are gone. That's the HBO show of the 2010s by Alec Berg and Mike Judge that lampooned the rags-to-riches ethos of Silicon Valley start-up culture. The series portrayed a group of buddies living somewhere near Sand Hill Road as they faked it till they made it, eating ramen noodles and fecklessly trying to appeal to women. There was a billionaire tech villain in the series, Gavin Belson, but the heroes were the hapless nerds coding their way to sometime success.

The first movie Mr. Sorkin wrote about Facebook, 2010's "The Social Network" (which David Fincher directed), was in many ways more sympathetic to Mr. Zuckerberg, who was depicted as the Hollywood trope of a nerd underdog trying to impress a girl and outmaneuver a couple of mean jocks, the Winklevoss twins. In "Steve Jobs," another movie Mr. Sorkin wrote, Mr. Jobs was depicted as a different Hollywood archetype: the troubled, single-minded salesman of his own genius who was too self-centered to be a decent father.

Now, more than a decade later, we are wiser to the more sinister ways of the Valley. The tech geniuses aren't here to make society better, it turns out. They're not here to offer harmless alternatives to real-life social interaction. No — they are here to enrich themselves no matter the social cost. They are liars, fabulists and narcissists.

Hollywood knows it's being disrupted. It remembers what happened to the music business when it went digital. Streaming has upended Hollywood's once-stable economics, which used to be buttressed by cable fees and DVD sales. The once-lordly entertainment conglomerates are now worth less than even a young company like Mr. Altman's OpenAI, which a March funding round valued at $852 billion. The Walt Disney Company's market cap is $191 billion.

Hollywood is now issuing its own moral judgment: Technology is wicked, a curse cloaked in virtue.

You can hardly miss Mr. Sorkin's antipathy for Mr. Zuckerberg in "The Social Reckoning." As written and directed by Mr. Sorkin, the Facebook founder lacks any moral grounding, insisting that his platform continue to feed the spiral of hate speech and misinformation that drives advertising revenue.

It's not just Hollywood foisting this on us, of course. These suspicions are reflected in American public opinion. There is widespread distrust of Big Tech companies, and of A.I. in particular. Data centers are positively hated by pretty much everyone. So these films are, in some sense, also giving the audience what it wants.

In the trailer for "Artificial," which was dropped by Amazon MGM Studios for distribution but picked up by Neon for release

Silicon Valley beat Tinseltown at its own game. Now moviemakers are getting their revenge.



HARRIET LENNEMAN

in December, a character declares in grand fashion, "We've created a machine that will solve the world's problems." In the trailer for "The Altruists," the Bankman-Fried character pronounces, "We are going to change the world," before declaring a few seconds later: "There's no such thing as criminals. There's just people who get caught."

Mr. Fielder and Mr. Oppenheim had to do little more than aim their camera at Ms. Holmes and her romantic partner, Billy Evans, before she goes to prison. There isn't a shred of regret or shame for the crimes established in court. Merely self-pity.

I recently went to a screening of "You Can See Everything" for a thousand Hollywood insiders, and there was laughter as Ms. Holmes shed tears over leaving her baby behind for prison. Some might say the reaction smacked of schadenfreude.

On "Saturday Night Live" last weekend, James Austin Johnson played the "Shark Tank" investor Kevin O'Leary defending his bid to build the world's largest A.I. data center in Utah. "So what happened, Mr. Wonderful?" asked Colin Jost. "It's very simple," Mr. Johnson answered. "All I want is to buy up 40,000 acres of God's untouched splendor and replace it with a very loud computer that steals your job."

This got laughs. Much of America agrees with Hollywood's position these days, that Silicon Valley no longer even pretends to serve society, even a capitalist one. It's just hellbent on getting richer. Hang the consequences.

After the credits roll, the changes wrought by technology are coming anyway. There's a lot of happy talk in Hollywood right now that A.I. is going to create endless possibilities for storytelling. There are a host of new companies that aim to optimize A.I. tools to help filmmakers, writers and producers. And it may turn out that A.I. will be a wonderful tool to drive more creativity and — who knows? — jobs.

But that's not today. Today, Hollywood is looking to torch it.



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WHAT MATTERS MOST

Voting for a better life

Randi Weingarten
President, AFT

The divisions roiling our country can obscure the fact that Americans share a common desire: We all want fairness and opportunity, the keys to securing the American Dream. But right now, that hope for a better life feels out of reach for too many people who are struggling just to get by.

Anxiety abounds over the cost of gas, groceries, rent, healthcare, daycare and all of life's necessities. Ask any farmer or trucker about how surging diesel prices have blown up their budgets, or anyone whose utility bills have soared because of data centers. Across America, people are worried they'll lose their jobs, their healthcare or both. They're fearful about what kind of future lies ahead for their children and grandchildren.

Donald Trump promised to make life easier and less expensive. Not only has he done nothing to fix this, his policies, tariffs and costly wars of choice have made things worse. And leaders in his party have rubber-stamped his reckless actions. As Americans skimp and stress, Trump is on a spree of corruption and grift, cashing in on the presidency to the tune of $2.2 billion last year alone.

Meanwhile, working people are anxious, angry and even hopeless. But we are not powerless. In the United States, our constitutional democracy is still based on the will of the people, which we express through our votes. When people feel they can't control so many things in their lives, voting is a lever we can pull to make the country work for "we the people" and not just for those at the top.

I saw this on a recent trip to Hungary, where the people rose up in recent elections to break the grip of Viktor Orbán's authoritarianism and corruption. During the campaign, Orbán's challenger (now Hungary's newly elected prime minister) traveled the countryside in a flatbed truck and talked to everyone, not just those he thought would vote for him, to make clear that his fight was their fight—to make Hungary work again for the people, not just the well-connected who prospered from the Orbán regime's corruption. An unprecedented 80 percent of Hungarians turned out to vote, which offers another lesson for Americans in the upcoming elections: Vote in such large numbers that the election outcome is unmistakable.

I've seen powerful examples of people bridging divisions to work for the common good. In Texas, an unlikely political alliance is emerging, ranging from parents to pastors to disappointed MAGA populists. They're bound by anger that the state's new voucher program will cause public schools to lose $300 million this year alone and threatens the closure of public schools in rural parts of the state. In Alaska, a bipartisan coalition is working to restore pensions for state and local government employees, to attract and retain workers and provide a secure retirement. And in Ohio, Oregon and elsewhere, AFT healthcare affiliates are working with broad coalitions to fight back against hospital closures and reduction of essential services like cancer care and labor and delivery units.

The most important things we can do between now and Election Day are to vote, vote early where possible, encourage others to vote, and protect the vote. But the election is not the end; it's just the first step in getting the country back on track and making democracy work for working people.

We can elect leaders who will address the crises of costs being too high and wages too low. Leaders who will stabilize Social Security, fix our broken healthcare system and make our immigration system secure and humane. We can elect leaders who will strengthen, not abandon, public education and who will roll back private school vouchers. Leaders who will stop the weaponization and defunding of higher education. We can vote for leaders who will enact guardrails for artificial intelligence, to protect our safety, privacy, jobs and very existence. Leaders who will restore Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Affordable Care Act credits and student loan relief—programs that were slashed to give even bigger tax cuts to the wealthy and now to pay for another war. Leaders who will act to ensure our water is safe to drink and our air is safe to breathe. We can elect leaders who will demand accountability for corruption and abuse of power and who won't allow tech billionaires to be this generation's robber barons.

The future we want is within reach. It starts with your vote.

But none of this is possible unless we exercise the power of our vote. We can elect people up and down the ballot who not only understand our anxiety about affordability and the American Dream slipping away, but also will take bold action to address it. The future we want is within reach. As in Hungary, it starts with your vote.



Weingarten (fifth from left) in Rochester, Minn., on Oct. 15 with educators, including congressional candidate Jake Johnson, during the AFTvotes bus tour.

PHOTO: AFT

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OPINION

Urban Disorder Is Not Inevitable

German Lopez
A writer for the editorial board.

DENVER

HOMELESSNESS, all appearances to the contrary, is a long-solved problem. We know both the causes and the cure. You wouldn't think that's the case from visiting many U.S. cities. Stymied by political and financial hurdles, progressive bastions — including Los Angeles, Seattle and Burlington, Vt. — appear to have given up. They have surrendered public spaces to the homeless and their encampments to the point that it's difficult to describe these spaces as truly for the public anymore.

Denver shows what happens when a city puts into place proven policies with determination and focus. Not only has it significantly reduced homelessness; it embarrasses every other urban jurisdiction that has failed to deal with its Covid-era surge of homeless encampments. Other cities no longer have an excuse.

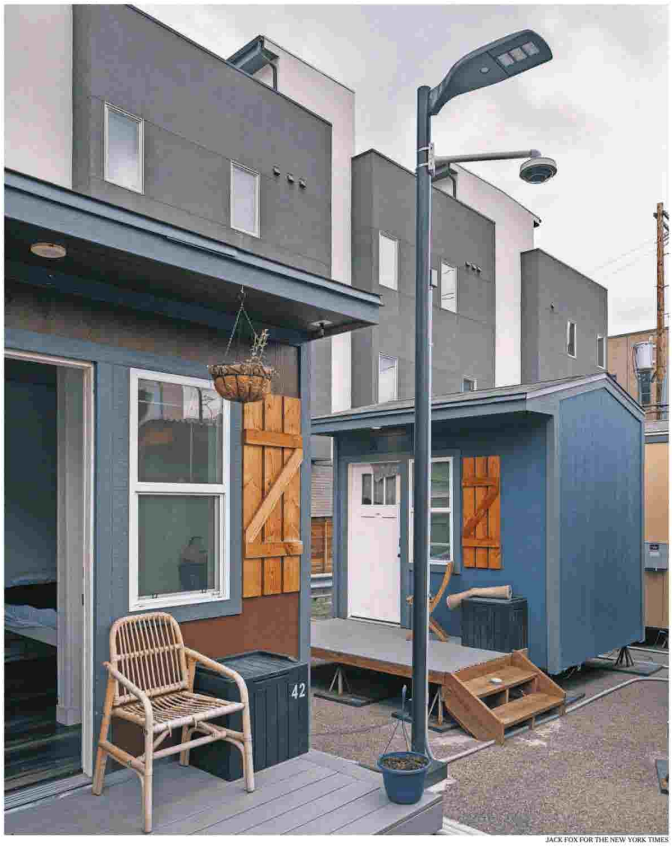
Denver has recorded the biggest recent drop in street homelessness among the largest U.S. cities, according to my analysis of local data. The city's drop was roughly 13 times the national rate in 2025, the most recent year for federal statistics. Since 2023, Denver's unsheltered population is down 64 percent. "What they're doing is working," said Samantha Batko, a senior fellow at the left-leaning Urban Institute, which is independently evaluating the city's progress.

Since Mayor Mike Johnston of Denver took office in 2023, he has focused on getting unsheltered homelessness to zero. He has done so by using some fairly standard ideas. Police officers break up homeless encampments, warning that repeated violations could lead to arrest. With the help of social workers, the city connects those people to services and shelters. Crucially, it has expanded those services to ensure that officers and social workers have something to connect people to.

By successfully combining enforcement and social services, Denver demonstrates that cities don't need to choose between those binaries. They should do both.

Politically, none of this is easy. On the policing side, progressives remain skeptical of using law enforcement to deal with what they see as largely an economic issue. On the housing side, the constraint is money. Building housing and shelters requires public and private funds that cities often don't have and aren't willing to prioritize over other spending and tax cuts.

Speaking from an office stuffed with Colorado memorabilia, Mr. Johnston said he wanted to go further. He laid out a vision to ensure that all people are housed and that public spaces are actually available to the public. "Our fundamental mantra when we started was our belief that all of our problems are solvable and we're the ones to solve them," he told me.



JACK FOX FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

'All of our problems are solvable': How Denver has reduced homelessness.

ON A Monday afternoon, Mr. Johnston played tour guide. He wanted to show me the city's new homeless shelters and how they differed from traditional facilities. We walked 10 minutes from City Hall — the mayor stopped to congratulate a wedding party on the way out — to a block of tiny houses known as Elati Village.

Each resident there gets a small house that offers a level of privacy not typical for homeless shelters. Valentino Ortiz, a former Elati Village resident and a transgender man, said privacy was important for his safety. He recalled a previous stay at a more traditional shelter. "The third day, I was already getting sexually assaulted," he said. At Elati, "you have a beautiful tiny home to call your own. You have hot showers. You can cook your own meals and do laundry."

Next, Mr. Johnston took me to the Aspen, a city-owned hotel. For residents, it is like an apartment complex. The rooms weren't too different from places I've lived in. Mr. Johnston said he wanted the city's shelters to feel like real homes — "a room of one's own."

As we walked through the building, residents told the mayor they finally had been able to get their lives in order. Staff members at the Aspen and other shelters spend much of their time preparing people to leave. They help residents get the documents they need to find a job and permanent housing. They connect them to training, education programs and additional government aid, including housing vouchers and rent subsidies. Residents don't face hard limits on how long they can stay, but providers are, under their contracts, evaluated on how many people they help get on the right path.

The goal is to keep people off the streets for good. To that end, the city still has to address the high cost of housing. Denver has enacted some reforms, but buying and renting a home remain too expensive for much of the poor and middle class.

Ana Miller, an organizer for the homeless rights group Housekeys Action Network Denver, criticized the Aspen for some of its rules and their enforcement, particularly the staff's room inspections. She also panned the shelter's provider, Urban Alchemy, which has faced criticism in other cities for its unorthodox tactics, including its hiring of ex-convicts as staff members. Ms. Miller said Elati Village offers a better model than typical shelters, but she worried about resistance from neighborhoods to building more such communities. The neighbors living in apartments near Elati "literally point cameras at the community and watch them," she said.

Still, the numbers speak for themselves. Mr. Johnston said that no one has declined an offer to move into one of the new facilities and that they are consistently at or near capacity. The city's biggest problem is how it can buy or build more places like Elati Village and the Aspen to meet demand.

Much of the tens of millions of dollars the city has spent on shelters came from temporary federal funds that have expired. The Trump administration has also moved to cut housing subsidies across the country. The financial constraints have led some local officials to question whether the cost of the city's efforts is worth the benefit. If that sentiment spreads, it could doom progress.

AT 6:30 A.M. on Tuesday, I met with a Denver police squad to see the enforcement side of the city's strategy. Officer Michael Nierenberg, who led the group, told me his goal was not to arrest people. Tall and imposing, he said the threat he presented was only an incentive to push people to get help. Social workers rode along.

Early in the patrol, we came across a tent. Inside, a couple slept with all their belongings scattered across the floor. Officer Nierenberg waited patiently as they woke up, and then he explained the consequences of breaking laws against camping outside: a verbal warning, then a written warning, then a ticket or arrest. He started asking about the couple's situation. They were from Texas, they said, and still had family there. They would like to go back, but they didn't have the means to do so, they added.

Officer Nierenberg told them to pack up their tent and said he would see what he could do. He sat in his car, making calls and looking through his computer. After about 15 minutes, he came back with a bus ticket. The man, who identified himself as Chance, cried tears of joy.

We continued like this for the rest of the morning. Sometimes the encounters were less pleasant. One man told the officers, in colorful language, to go away. Other times, people were cordial. "It has been a typical morning," the officer told me as we headed back to the police station.

Progressives tend to view the enforcement side of anti-homelessness strategies with disdain because it can involve criminalizing an economic or a mental health issue. At the same time, other residents don't want encampments clogging up parks and sidewalks. Progressive cities have tried to get around the dilemma by flooding the streets with social services, hoping that offers of help would get people on the streets to pack up. The reality, as cities have painfully learned, is that people often need a stronger push to abandon their tents.

The balanced approach has shrunk the number of encampments across Denver, the Urban Institute's evaluation found. From 2023 to 2025, the number of active encampments fell by nearly half. The number of large encampments, with 10 or more tents or structures, dropped by 91 percent. "It's pretty much night and day," said Anthony Mantelli, whose family runs the West Saloon and Kitchen in the city's 16th Street Mall. "I close the restaurant four or five nights a week. I don't deal with many issues at all."

Mr. Johnston described his strategy through his perspective as a former school principal. "Your job is to keep everyone safe," he said. "That means I love every single kid in the building. And if there's one kid who's making other kids in the building feel unsafe, my job is to either help him change his behavior or hold him accountable for it."

I ASKED Mr. Johnston if it's realistic to think a city as large as Denver can eliminate street homelessness. "I genuinely believe we can do it," he said.

The next phase will be more difficult. Those who continue to live on the streets are much more likely to suffer from mental illness and addiction. They need more than a roof over their heads.

For this step, Mr. Johnston has begun an initiative that focuses on connecting people to mental health and addiction treatment. That will be hard to execute. Many of the sick and addicted are resistant to treatment, and getting them to accept help can require a kind of coercion and policing of low-level crimes that many progressives are uncomfortable with.

I came away from Denver convinced that the mayor's focus and determination are the most crucial factors. I've seen this happen nationwide: Policies that work in one place fail in another because officials can replicate the law or the money but not the leadership — the force of will — behind the original success.

But Democrats around the country should figure out how to copy Denver's program. The party's failure to tackle homelessness and public disorder more broadly has haunted it nationwide. It's one reason the party is unpopular, even as President Trump has approval ratings in the 30s, leaving many voters with two options on the ballot they don't particularly like.

"When you see a problem in front of you every day and nothing happens, your only option is either to blame your neighbor or to blame democracy," Mr. Johnston said. Mr. Trump "has proved that if things are bad enough, Americans are open to both of those arguments."

He added: "I think the opposite's also true. If you can prove that there's something hard to do and we work it out together and it gets better, you train people's muscle memory to turn to each other — not to turn on each other."

Land Acknowledgments Aren't Just Woke. They're Right.

John McWhorter
A Columbia University linguist who writes a Times Opinion newsletter about how race and language shape our politics and culture.

AT EVENTS in today's woker spaces, it has become conventional to start things off by publicly noting that the land where the event is taking place was once inhabited by a certain Native American group (or groups). I'm not a fan of what's been called Woke 1, but I think the land acknowledgments are wonderful.

Statements often also say that the original inhabitants were parted from their land by treachery, violence and European disease, and also note that their descendants survive and remain stewards of the land.

Events at Yale, for example, sometimes begin with this acknowledgment:

"Yale University acknowledges that Indigenous peoples and nations, including Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Niantic, and the Quinnipiac and other Algonquian-speaking peoples, have stewarded through generations the lands and waterways of what is now the state of Connecticut. We honor and respect the enduring relationship that exists between these peoples and nations and this land."

I attended an event in Vancouver a few years ago that began with an acknowledgment of several Indigenous groups, including the Squamish and the Musqueam, and the next day encountered outdoors several signs doing the same, including translations into the languages themselves which dazzled me with symbols and diacritics new to me even as a linguist.

Many find these acknowledgments an inauthentic way of genuflecting to injustice without having to actually do anything about it. But institutions often treat the acknowledgments as one of many strategies for supporting the local Indigenous groups. Yale now grants a certificate in Native American and Indigenous studies. Its joint project with N.Y.U. supports Native American tribal sovereignty through legal advocacy and educational initiatives.

Yet obviously any efforts can repair only partly. Most of the descendants of the Lenape who originally inhabited Manhattan now live in Oklahoma and Wisconsin (and Ontario), their ancestors having been forcibly moved there by whites in the 1800s.

But some response is better than none, and to sneer at land acknowledgments as performative nonsense is letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

People often put land acknowledgments in the same basket as calling the soft bigotry of low expectations "D.E.I." and calling for the defunding of the police. But trashing land acknowledgments because of these other woke shibboleths is like dismissing paved roads because the Romans built them but also espoused slavery, sexism and violence as spectacle. "Look at what the Romans were like — no aqueducts for me!"

Land acknowledgments are, or can be, more than a mere reflexive salute to anti-whiteness. Even as a kid, long before High Woke, I used to think about how other people had lived on the Philadelphia land I knew, such as in the woods across the street from my house, and how permanently all of the streets and sidewalks and factories and playgrounds and buildings had erased what those former inhabitants had known, along with their entire way of life.

They felt their land as inherently and eternally theirs in the same way we do. They couldn't imagine that one day an alien people would shove them brutally aside as vermin and pave the land over, crisscross it with train tracks and run pipes underground and wires overhead, leaving it unrecognizable.

My grandmother was a seamstress for a rich white family that would give staff a luscious rustic week each summer on their island in Maine. She brought my family along in the summer of 1975. You could drink the lake water, it was so clean and clear. Dinner nightly was big lobsters. All you had to do was dip your rod in the water, and you'd be sure to pull up a bass. The cook made splendid blueberry pie with the local berries. The dogs were cute. In our "cottage," there was for some reason not a piano but an organ; I loved learning how to work it.

An imperfect recognition of Native history is better than no recognition at all.

The Polaroids of all of this just shine to this day with what a simple, unalloyed joy that week was. Except that late at night, I heard the white staff, always so warm and friendly around us, talking fiercely about the local Native Americans — I'm guessing they were the Passamaquoddy — as if they were less than human.

Later, I participated in a program helping restore Native Americans' languages to them (Leanne Hinton's pioneering Breath of Life). For one of the languages, a set of flash cards was one of the few records of its key words, and it had gone missing. The cards happened to turn up at my house, where one of the other assistants had accidentally left them after a gathering. When I gave them back to one of the group's members, I will never forget her tears and the sincerity of her long hug. These people lost so much, and it still hurts.

Yet all we have is now. The least we can do is express, even ritually, our awareness of the horror of what happened, including acknowledging that the people are still here. If this is woke, it's the good kind. It feels to me like a right thing to do.

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