

Ordinary life is passe, our curated images are glowing perfection, we all pay a cost



SHIVANI SIBAL

A FRIEND I bumped into recently at a birthday party explained to me, almost apologetically, why she hadn't gone away on a summer holiday.

It was not information that required self-admonishment. She had not committed a crime. She had merely stayed home. And yet, her tone carried a faint air of failure, as though her family's summer break had somehow not been fully lived, as it hadn't been framed by smiling family photos at airports, exotic locales, and beautiful, lazy sunset meals. One of the oddest pressures of modern life is the need to produce a persuasive and consistent visual record of living well.

It is not just that we live among endless images of people having fun all the time. It is that these images now seem to suggest an increasingly narrow script for what happiness, beauty, motherhood and success are meant to look like. The modern female face, in particular, has been undergoing a curious homogenisation: the same cheekbones, the same lips, the same skin tone, the same studied glow. The range of what is called 'beautiful' appears to be shrinking, and in inverse proportion to the available interventions. Certainly, women make such choices for all sorts of reasons: vanity, fun, insecurity, boredom, hope. Every day, we make rational decisions inside an inherently irrational system. But the system remains the system.

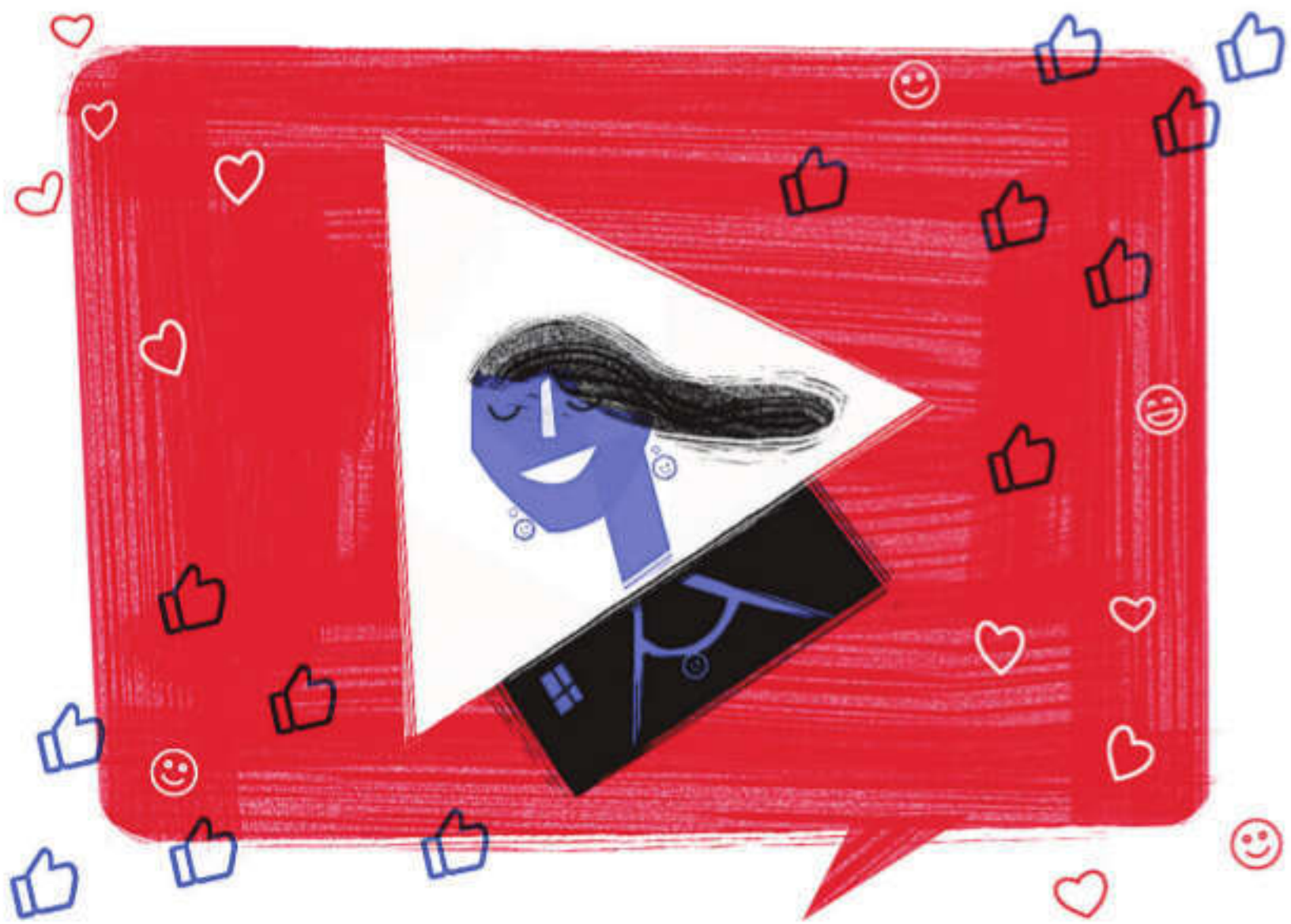


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

And if beauty has become homogenised, so too has the visual record of what it means to live a good life. We all know by now what this life is supposed to look like, because its images are delivered to us all day long. The terrifyingly wonderful summer holidays, where no one seems sick of each other, never bickering, where the children are never annoying, where the light is always perfect. The healthy lunches everyone seems to be having at, obviously, beautifully curated tables. Modern mothers, presenting as slender project managers with

glowing skin, with a Pilates-toned arm, totting a child while gazing into a laptop, then taking an older child to some genius-level chess championship, and still making it for a margarita with their girlfriends in the evening and posting an impossibly glamorous photograph — airbrushed within an inch of life — of it afterwards. Ordinary life is passe. Humblebragging is on speed.

With all of the messy bits of life wiped out, these images suggest not just glowing perfection; they suggest that it can be achieved with some kind of frictionless sor-

cery, without any apparent trade-off.

This is where modern womanhood has become particularly exhausting. We are not merely meant to cope; we are meant to make coping look easy.

What this conceals, of course, is cost.

The cost that is everywhere: In the dark circles behind the concealer, in the marriages being held together by women who have been taught from the cradle that they must "adjust", in the management of children being raised as projects, in the body forever under audit. In the constant comparisons that this curated glimpse into another's life naturally produces. In trying to keep up, in failing to keep up, in the exhaustion of checking for likes. The distance between what life looks like on the outside and what it feels like on the inside has never been greater.

There is something absurd about it, and I would have said comically so, if it were not so toxic. Modern lore sells discomfort and self-erasure as empowerment, provided it is presented stylishly enough and gathers enough approval. It reminds me of what it feels like to wear high heels: wobbling and aching while looking fabulous, insisting the whole time that it is comfortable. Women have always been asked to carry too much, but now they are denied a grimace while carrying it.

Is anyone enjoying doing this? And are they really having as much fun as they claim to? It seems unlikely to me. More likely, we have got used to keeping those high heels on all the time.

The point is not to celebrate collapse, or to sneer at beauty, effort or pleasure. It is to be more honest about the price of perfection, and more suspicious of the images that ask us to admire it.

Sibal is the author of *Equations* (2021)

The cockroach toolkit gang



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

TOMORROW IS the day that protesting cockroaches will march from Jantar Mantar to Parliament, so I have no choice but to write about the Cockroach Janata Party's protest. I have said before in this column that they should be heard because they are raising important issues. They are right when they say that the education system is defunct and failing our future generations. They are right to demand that the man most accountable for the mess should resign. And, if you spend an afternoon wandering about Jantar Mantar these days, you will meet many young people who speak of the despondency and defeat spreading through the ranks of young Indians. This is true in the cities, and it is true in the villages. But nobody in the exalted echelons of Lutyens Delhi seems to be listening.

This privileged enclave, in which only the most powerful Indians have always lived, is now occupied by a new class of people. They are not descended from the traditional ruling class. They despise us 'elitists' for having been born privileged. They pride themselves on being low of caste and humble of origin, so they should be able to better hear the voices of people who have been protesting in Jantar Mantar for more than two weeks. Judging from the silence of the Prime Minister and his ministers, it appears they have chosen to remain deaf and to allow their battle to be fought by their own cockroach warriors on social media.

This lot is linguistically challenged and bereft of ideas. So, they make their case by hurling accusations at the protesters. They are propped up by foreign agents. They are working with the same toolkit as the ladies of Shaheen Bagh. They support Khalistan. They are anti-national to the core. These charges reminded me of how little has changed in the Indian political discourse since I first started covering politics when Indira Gandhi was prime minister. She was so obsessed with the 'foreign hand' (CIA) that it became a joke among foreign correspondents. Then a KGB spy master defected to the West in the nineties and revealed in his memoir that several ministers in Mrs Gandhi's cabinet and several venerable leftist editors were in the pay of the Soviet Union.

It is ironic that Narendra Modi's supporters and social media combatants are as obsessed with the 'foreign hand'. What I find curious is why our strongman prime minister is allowing these 'foreign agents' to spread across our beloved Bharat Mata with 'toolkits' in hand to destroy the great successes he has wrought in the past twelve years. The 'foreign agent' they seem to hate most is Abhijeet Dipke, who founded the Cockroach Janata Party. Number two on the hit list is Sonam Wangchuk. I pray that by the time you read this, he is still alive. I believe that fasting to death is less effective than staying alive, so I hope he breaks his fast.

If you have been following the way in which the Modi government handles dissent and dissidence, you would have noticed that the standard operating procedure is to launch a smear campaign against those who dare to dissent. The strategy appears to be that if you damage the reputation of dissidents, then whatever they say will be treated as garbage. And it will act as a warning to future dissidents. They will think twice about challenging anything that the government does because they know that if they do not end up in jail, they will end up in disgrace.

Meanwhile, what happens next? If Sonam Wangchuk is still with us, there will be a march to Parliament tomorrow, and there is every likelihood that the government will pretend it did not happen and the opposition will do its best to exalt it. Instead, would it not be a real act of nationalism for both the opposition and the government to come together and set up a parliamentary committee with the task of suggesting reforms from the primary school level to the university level? I have said it before, and I shall repeat it over and over again, that the economic reform India needs most urgently is a total restructuring and re-imagining of our education system.

A number of studies have shown that children who can only afford government schools come out barely able to count and read. How long can we allow our politicians and bureaucrats to build third-rate schools for the people while sending their own children to private schools? How long will we tolerate the ugly truth that every political leader and bureaucrat who can afford to would rather send his children to mediocre foreign universities than to the best Indian universities? How long will we allow coaching centres to replace colleges? How long will we tolerate examinations that get cancelled at the last hour because someone or other manages to corrupt them with leaked papers?

If a bi-partisan committee is set up to examine these things and bring real reforms, then the Cockroach Janata Party would have achieved something truly significant. Until then, let us pray that Sonam Wangchuk remains alive and strong enough to join the march tomorrow. He has said that if he dies, his ghost will be on this march. We do not need any more ghosts than we already have. We need political leaders brave enough to disagree and dissent against the government when it is clearly wrong.

No, no, no, it's only football. But England-Argentina history begs to differ



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY MURARI & SAPTARSHI BASAK

THE WORLD Cup might not be ours, but the Falkland Islands definitely are," was Downing Street's response after Argentina's football team unfurled a banner proclaiming "*Las Malvinas son Argentinas*" (The Falkland Islands are Argentine) upon eliminating England to reach the final.

That the outgoing Keir Starmer government felt compelled to reaffirm British sovereignty over the archipelago off the coast of Argentina, and that the PM himself has urged FIFA to investigate the players who displayed the banner, are enough to illustrate how England versus Argentina has long been a proxy for unresolved questions of territory, nationalism, and historical memory.

It wasn't always like this. Football arrived in Argentina in the 19th century with British immigrants, and the Scottish schoolmaster Alexander Watson Hutton is widely regarded as the "Father of Argentine football".

Even when the two sides met in their 1966 World Cup quarter-final — where Argentina captain Antonio Rattín refused to leave the pitch for six minutes after being sent off, sitting in protest on a red carpet for Queen Elizabeth II, before England manager Alf Ramsey branded the Argentine players "animals" — the rivalry was a footballing one. That changed for good, 16 years later.

The Falkland Islands have been under



continuous British administration since 1833, though the roots of the enmity stretch further back to the British invasions of Buenos Aires in the early 19th century. Argentina has long claimed that it inherited the islands' sovereignty from Spain after independence.

In 1982, military dictator Leopoldo Galtieri's decision to invade the islands — to shore up domestic support amid economic turmoil — ended in a British victory under Margaret Thatcher, hastening the dictatorship's collapse and Argentina's return to democracy. But the "*Malvinas*" remained deeply embedded in Argentina's national consciousness. Every football match against England thereafter was played under the shadow of a war neither side had left behind.

If the Falklands War gave the rivalry its political charge, the next meeting gave it its mythology. In the 1986 World Cup quarter-

Argentina players celebrate their victory over England in the 2026 FIFA World Cup semifinal in Atlanta

final, Diego Maradona produced two of the most famous goals in football history within the space of four minutes. The first was the infamous "Hand of God", and the second, a solo run shredding through half the England team. Argentina won 2-1 before going on to lift the World Cup, and Maradona himself described the victory in his autobiography as a symbolic "revenge" for 1982, noting that his team knew Argentine soldiers had died in the conflict, "shot down like little birds".

And if the 1986 meeting had a hero, the next World Cup encounter in 1998 found the villain. David Beckham, sent off for kicking Diego Simeone after the Argentine provocatively touched his head while he lay on the ground, became the scapegoat for England's penalty shootout defeat. It didn't take him long to find redemption when he scored the winning penalty in England's 1-0 victory

over Argentina at the 2002 World Cup.

All that brings us to Atlanta 2026.

In London, Nigel Farage called for the Royal Navy to be readied; in Buenos Aires, Vice-President Victoria Villarruel branded the English "usurping pirates", invoking a viral anthem that binds the "*Malvinas*" to Maradona and Messi. The diplomatic temperature had already risen when Argentina formally protested the movements of British warship *HMS Medway* earlier this month.

The drama has also reached the Premier League, where many of the Argentine players holding that banner share dressing rooms with their English counterparts, such as Enzo Fernández with Reece James and Trevoh Chalobah at Chelsea. But when Chelsea celebrated Fernández's 85th-minute equaliser on social media, a fierce backlash prompted the club to delete the post.

A former foreign-policy aide to Thatcher has called for the UK work visas of every Argentine EPL player involved in the banner display to be revoked. Even during the 74-day Falklands War, Tottenham's Ossie Ardiles and Ricky Villa faced hostile chants, but no calls for exclusion from English football.

As football historian Jonathan Wilson has observed, the rivalry is a "strange, quasi-Oedipal relationship that manifests itself in football". Some have tried to cool it down. Minutes after the final whistle, Argentine President Javier Milei insisted the victory was "just a football match". Even before kick-off, Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni declared it was "a football game and that is all".

Forty years earlier, Maradona had offered almost exactly the same reassurance. Confronted by reporters seeking to link football to the Falklands, he replied: "No, no, no. It's only football." History begs to differ.

Murari is Senior Assistant Editor and Basak is Deputy Copy Editor, *The Indian Express*

What my mid-life identity shift looked like



SHE SAID
BY KARISHMA S KAUSHIK

I WOKE UP thinking of the evening that had been. A farmhouse party with friends, that is, my husband's friends and their partners. An early start to the evening. A riverside sunset with a glass of kokum sherbet. Splash time in the pool and table tennis. Delicious snacks passed around. Followed by dinner.

It had, in many ways, been familiar. I had known these friends for years. We had met on many occasions. Evenings had played out similarly. And yet, this one felt different.

I retraced the moments in my head.

Dressing up at home, I looked forward to the evening. In just a few hours, I was dangling my legs over a stream. Soon after, I jumped into the pool; getting into my swimwear needed no coaxing. When a song I liked played, I found myself doing a 'little jig', unbeknownst to how it looked or who was looking. I joined in for a game of table tennis. When my topspin was on point, my cheers were boisterous. When I missed a sitter, the jeers got me laughing.

The evening felt light. I felt content. But what exactly had been different?

For as long as I can remember, I have always been passionate about my academic and professional life. Over nearly two decades, I have built and straddled many professional identities — doctor, scientist, educator, leader — and for each role and opportunity, I have given it my all. At each stage, the circle of people I interacted with consisted almost entirely of other doctors, scientists, and educators. I did wear personal hats such as mother, wife, and daughter, but even with those, my professional identities loomed large and dominant.

Consequently, when planted in social settings, such as an evening with friends, I would find myself without my moorings. Very quickly, and no sooner after the initial pleasantries, I found myself struggling to make small talk. What do I talk about, if not medicine or science? I found it hard to go along with the flow of the evening. How could I just 'be' without my professional

identity? When a new acquaintance asked, "What do you do?" or an old friend enquired, "How is work going?", it would bring forth a mix of relief and anxiety. I could finally bring the conversation to my comfort zone, my work, yet soon after, my mind would be ablaze with conflicting thoughts: what would they be thinking about what I said? Did I speak too much about my work?

Then, a little over a year ago, I decided to quit full-time employment, write a book for girls in science, and start my own medical and scientific consultancy practice. What this meant almost immediately was that I started spending more time at home. My days involved writing my book and building my consultancy, but also planning meals with more attention and prepping breakfasts. As the days chugged on, I became a 'more present' parent and partner. Long conversations with my teenage son. Interesting coffee concoctions — with my husband. A year in, I was a renewed person. Rekindled connections with old friends (from school

and college, that is). Gym time, not merely to keep the scales in check, but also to genuinely care for myself. Instagram. Reading. And all this while my book was published, and I signed on a handful of consultancy projects. However, I noticed — both in the way I viewed and approached them — that my professional pursuits were now just another facet of my life.

So, what exactly had shifted?

As I reflected, I determined that the 'shift' was in essence a rebalancing of my identities. While my career had given me a deep sense of purpose and direction, it, over the years, had become my dominant identity. So much so that I struggled to draw out the 'person' I was in social and casual settings

While my career had given me a deep sense of purpose and direction, it, over the years, had become my dominant identity. So much so that I struggled to draw out the 'person' I was in social and casual settings

Moving on from a full-time role and not having a conventional job title had helped me undo this enmeshment. The result was that my all-dominating professional identity had shrunk back. My personal identities, and above all, the 'person' I am, had the opportunity to share space. Spending time and energy away from work meant that drawing out the 'person' in me did not need 'work'. I entered social settings as an extension of the person I was. And that is what that looked like that evening — ease, spontaneity, and that 'jig' even if the whole world was looking.

I have often introduced myself as someone who 'wears many hats ...', a tip-off to the many professional identities I have built. Yet, as I discovered at the cusp of mid-life, my biggest identity shift was a rebalancing that brought forth the 'person' within.

Kaushik is a physician and scientist
Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

NIM, A KEY PROFITABILITY METRIC, REMAINED UNDER PRESSURE

Q1: Most pvt banks post double-digit growth, HDFC lags

•Super Saturday for bank earnings

BANK	PAT (RS CRORE)	PAT GROWTH	NII GROWTH	LOAN GROWTH	DEPOSIT GROWTH
Axis Bank	7,114	23%	8%	19%	18%
HDFC Bank	19,060	5%	7%	15%	15%
ICICI Bank	14,805	16%	13%	20%	14%
IDBI Bank	2,115	5%	10%	22%	10%
Kotak Mahindra Bank	4,123	26%	9%	15%	12%
Punjab & Sind Bank	332	23%	15%	19%	12%
Punjab National Bank	5,253	214%	2%	13%	9%
YES Bank	1,071	34%	18%	18%	14%

NOTE: ALL FIGURES ARE ON STANDALONE BASIS; NII IS NET INTEREST INCOME; ALL GROWTH NUMBERS ARE YEAR-ON-YEAR. SOURCE: EXCHANGE FILINGS

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, July 18

PRIVATE SECTOR lenders ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, and Kotak Mahindra Bank — three of the top-4 private banks in the country — all reported big increases in their net profit for the April-June quarter, beating analysts' estimates as their bottomlines posted double-digit increases on the back of healthy loan growth.

YES Bank, however, was the private bank which saw the sharpest profit growth of 34% as its bottomline rose to Rs 1,071 crore, driven by 18% rise in net interest income (NII) even as provisions were 39% higher from last year.

Meanwhile, HDFC Bank's performance failed to beat the consensus view, with its net profit up 5%.

All the above five private banks — as well as IDBI Bank, whose profits were also up 5%, like HDFC Bank — reported their Q1 earnings on Saturday. Among public sector lenders, Punjab National Bank reported a three-fold increase in its profit compared to last year to Rs 5,253 crore, primarily due to the year-ago period containing a Rs 5,083-crore tax provision, which had hurt profitability. In the first quarter of the current financial year, while PNB's profits rose sharply, its NII was up only 2%.

Net interest margins (NIM), a key profitability metric, remained under pressure across

banks as they continued to weather the effects of the Reserve Bank of India's 125 basis point repo rate cuts last year.

HDFC Bank

The country's biggest private lender saw its net profit for Q1 rise by just 5% to Rs 19,060 crore, with NII — the interest income going into the bank's kitty after paying out interest to all depositors — up nearly 7% at Rs 33,534 crore.

However, the bank — which has been in the news in recent months due to the abrupt resignation of part-time chair Atanu Chakraborty in March — saw its NIM continue to decline to 3.26%.

On the asset quality front, the gross and net non-performing asset (NPA) ratios rose by 2 basis points and 3 bps, respectively, from March-end to 1.17% and 0.41% as at the end of June.

The NPA ratio measures the size of a bank's bad loans — loans that have gone unpaid — as a percentage of loans it has given out.

While HDFC Bank's provisions were slightly higher in April-June compared to the previous quarter, they were substantially lower from last year when it had used a large part of the proceeds from subsidiary HDB Financial's IPO to clean and strengthen its balance sheet.

Kotak, Axis post 20%+ PAT growth

Kotak's net profit jumped

26% to Rs 4,123 crore as it beat market expectations on the back of its provisions halving from the same period last year, although NII rose only 9% to Rs 7,928 crore.

On the margin front, Kotak's NIM declined to 4.53%, down 12 bps from last year and 14 bps sequentially. Gross and net NPA ratios were up 2 bps each from March-end at 1.18% and 0.27%, respectively.

Similarly, Axis Bank also beat Street estimates as its net profit surged 23% to Rs 7,114 crore, benefiting from a sharp decline in provisions. However, despite healthy loan growth of nearly 19%, NII rose 8% to Rs 14,646 crore.

Like the others, Axis Bank's bad loan ratios were a few basis points higher at the end of June compared to the previous quarter at 1.28% (gross) and 0.39% (net). Its NIM fell by 16 bps sequentially to 3.46%.

ICICI Bank

India's second-largest private bank posted a net profit that was up 16% from last year at Rs 14,805 crore. The better-than-expected bottomline was due to provisions being nearly a third lower than a year ago, while a robust 20% loan growth helped drive a 13% increase in NII to Rs 24,384 crore.

ICICI Bank's NIM rose 4 bps sequentially to 4.36% during the quarter. Its gross and net NPA ratio increased by 2 bps sequentially to 1.38% and 0.35%, respectively.

CORE INFLATION NUMBERS SUGGEST CONSUMPTION IS SUBDUED

India's 3 inflations: Clues from prices on consumption, profits & China dependence

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, July 18

THIS WEEK, the government released three different measures of inflation — Consumer Price Index (CPI), Wholesale Price Index (WPI), and Producer Price Index (PPI) — for the month of June.

The common theme across all three was that prices rose at a faster rate in June compared to May on the back of higher food inflation and elevated fuel prices, thanks to the weak rains and the West Asia war.

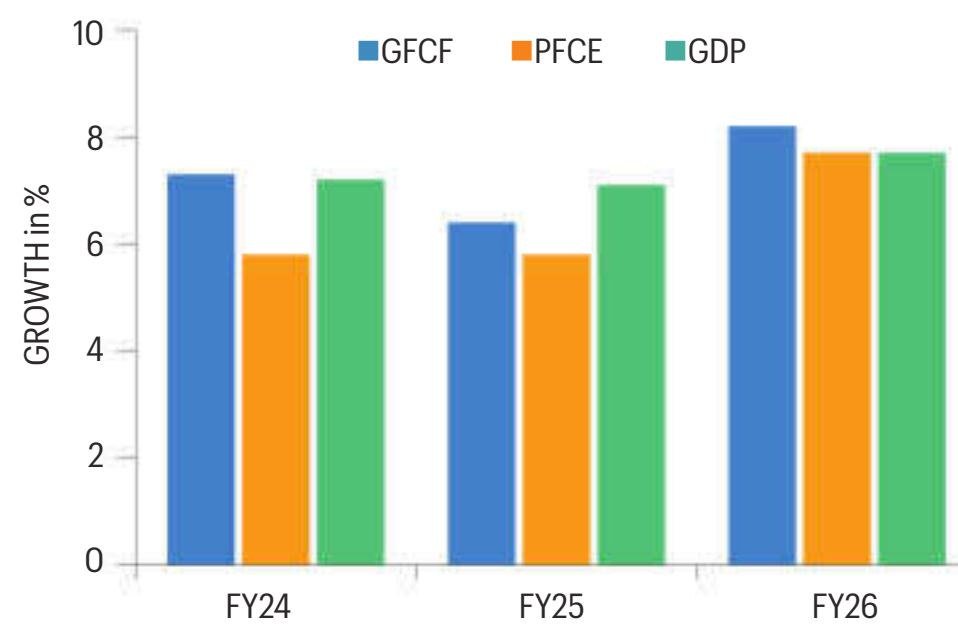
CPI inflation, which is relevant for households, rose to 4.38% from 3.93% in May; WPI inflation, which measures the year-on-year change in wholesale prices, increased to 9.87% from 9.68%; and output PPI inflation edged up to 9.57% from 9.38%. But the price situation in the country is more complex than just an increase in inflation.

Core inflation and consumption

The 4% inflation the Reserve Bank of India targets refers to headline CPI inflation. And while that crossed 4% in June for the first time in 17 months, core inflation was unchanged at 3.9%.

Core inflation measures the year-on-year change in prices for items other than food and fuel, which can be volatile. Households also

•Investment growth has outpaced consumption



NOTES: GFCF IS GROSS FIXED CAPITAL FORMATION; PFCE IS PRIVATE FINAL CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE. DATA IN CONSTANT PRICE TERMS; SOURCE: MOSPI

may not drastically change their consumption of food and fuel just because prices rose or fell — people can't give up eating and necessary travel. This is why focussing on the non-food-non-fuel portion of the CPI can provide more useful information. Economists think core inflation suggests consumption is subdued.

The most widely-used core inflation measure has risen only 20 basis points over the last six months from 3.7% in January. A narrower version of core inflation that also excludes gold and silver jewellery — precious metal prices have

rapidly risen and fallen over the last 12 months or so — has edged up to 2.5%. It was as high as 6% in early 2023.

But how did core inflation fall from 2023 to 2026 even as India recorded a world-beating 7%-plus growth? According to ANZ economists Dhiraj Nim and Sanjay Mathur, the answer may lie in what has been driving India's growth in recent years: investments.

"In the last four fiscal years, gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) growth has consistently driven GDP, outpacing private consumption growth. In other words, the productive capacity

of the economy has grown faster than consumption demand," Nim and Mathur said in a note Wednesday.

The China factor

Also pulling down India's non-food-non-fuel-non-precious metal inflation is falling prices of Chinese goods. According to ANZ, movement in Chinese producer prices is the second-most important driver of this narrow core inflation in India. With China's Producer Price Index (PPI) inflation in negative territory from October 2022 to February 2026, India has been importing 'deflation' from China.

"India's increased supply chain dependence on China means price spillovers are becoming stronger. India's goods imports from China now exceed \$130 billion annually, representing close to 3.5% of India's GDP, ranging all kinds of goods," Nim and Mathur said. The GST rate cuts and the subsequent price reductions of last year also explain why core inflation has been subdued over the better part of the last one year. However, this low base effect will vanish in a couple of months.

Dining out gets expensive

One part of core inflation which has risen sharply since the West Asia war started is prices charged by restaurants

and cafes. From 2.73% in February, restaurant and cafe inflation has risen to 6.94% in June because of higher commercial LPG prices.

With eateries passing on higher costs to diners, the second-round impact of the LPG price hikes is clearly visible, although the cut in cylinder prices earlier this month may rein it in.

Profit margin pressures

Restaurants and cafes are especially sensitive to higher costs. But the manufacturing sector has seemingly stomach the increased input prices, possibly in the face of weak consumer demand.

Consider this: the output PPI — which measures the change in prices received by producers excluding net taxes at the factory gate — for the manufacturing sector declined 0.3% in June from May. At the same time, the sector's input PPI — currently being released on an experimental basis — jumped 2.1% month-on-month in June. Is it absurd to read so much into inflation data? Perhaps not. According to DSP Mutual Fund, inflation is "by far...the cleanest indicator of the underlying strength of consumption", especially with the CPI series having been updated.

FULL REPORT ON

WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Embrace risks, seize opportunities: FM tells entrepreneurs



FM addressed entrepreneurs in Madurai. X/@NSITHARAMANOFFC

ENS Economic Bureau New Delhi, July 18

INDIA CONTINUES to be the world's fastest-growing major economy and is well placed to contribute nearly one-sixth of global growth in the coming years, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Saturday, as she urged entrepreneurs to shed their hesitation, embrace risk and seize the opportunities created by a rapidly transforming economy. Addressing entrepreneurs at an event in Madurai, FM Sitharaman said India has moved beyond the era of self-doubt and stands at a defining moment, backed by policy stability, digital infrastructure and one of the world's youngest workforces.

"India is today the fastest-growing major economy in the world. We are projected to contribute nearly 1/6th of the global

growth over the coming years," she said, adding that the country has the potential to do even better.

"It need not just be 1/6... Why can't it be 1/4? We can do it." The Union ministers said that the biggest challenge before the current generation is no longer access to information or resources but overcoming the fear of taking the first step. "I urge young entrepreneurs to overcome any hesitation in taking risks and seize the opportunities before them," she said. "India is the place to innovate and do business, backed by a stable government, policy certainty, a predictable tax regime and a responsive, approachable government." FM said India has more than 240,000 DPIIT-recognised startups that have created over 2.3 million direct jobs, making it the world's third-largest startup ecosystem. FE

Centre defers domestic solar cell sourcing mandate till December 31

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, July 18

ONE-AND-a-half month after implementing mandatory domestic cell sourcing mandates for all domestic, commercial and industrial solar projects, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) on Saturday exempted these projects from the mandatory cell sourcing requirement till December 31.

In a memorandum, the ministry said the decision has been taken after detailed deliberations with various stakeholders of the solar industry to ensure a smooth transition to mandatory

domestic cell sourcing mandate. India has a large solar module manufacturing base, nearly 200 gigawatts (GW) per annum.

But the manufacturing capacity of cells, the primary constituents of these modules, is far lower at around 30 GW. This means much of the module manufacturing capacity has been built upon imported cells.

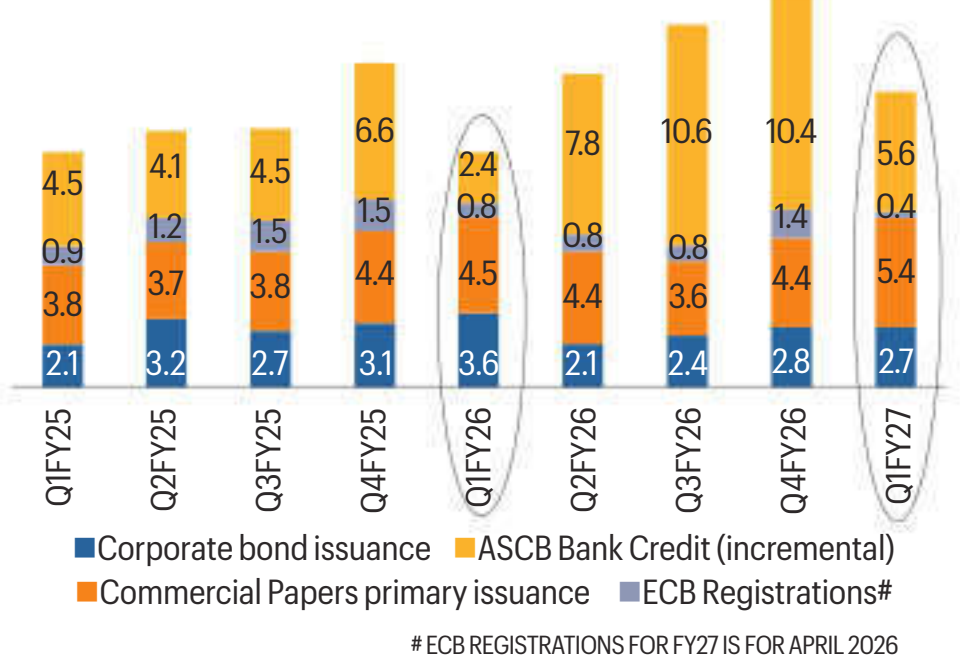
Even though the mandatory domestic cell sourcing mandate is aimed at reducing India's dependence on imports and strengthening the domestic solar manufacturing ecosystem, it could disproportion-

ately affect smaller solar module manufacturers which, unlike larger companies, may not manufacture their own cells. The exemption comes after the government had said on May 25 that there would be "no blanket" relief for domestic cell sourcing mandates despite developers seeking an extension of the deadline. The present exemption effectively extends the May 31 deadline to December 31, giving these projects an additional seven months to commission without complying with the mandatory domestic cell sourcing mandate. FULL REPORT ON

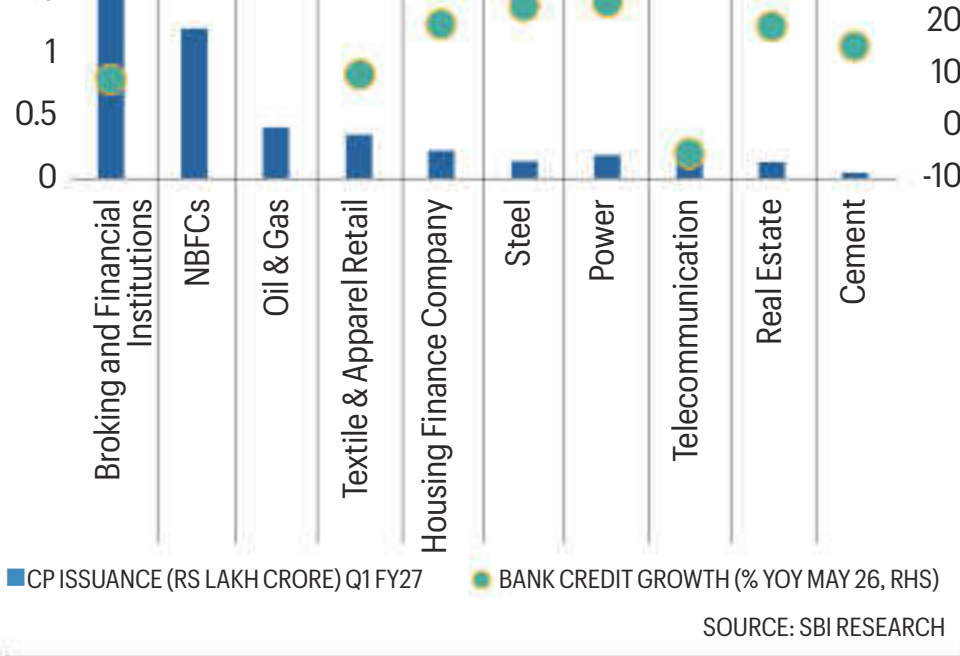
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•Meaningful growth in Q1 despite headwinds

Issuances of commercial papers (CPs) by corporates soared 19% on-year in the first quarter of financial year 2027 (Q1FY27), with June issuances at 55-month high. Incremental bank credit too rose to Rs 5.6 lakh crore in Q1FY27, against Rs 2.4 lakh crore in Q1FY26, suggesting that the Indian economy has continued to expand meaningfully in Q1FY27 despite several headwinds, SBI Research said. Top sectors with higher CP issuances in Q1 have also showed higher bank credit growth.



Top 10 industries CP issuance and bank credit growth



SOURCE: SBI RESEARCH

•MALWARE ATTRIBUTED TO A NORTH KOREAN HACKING GROUP HAD BEEN DETECTED WITHIN THE PLANT'S ADMINISTRATIVE NETWORK

Data breach revives memories of 2019 cyberattack at Kudankulam

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, July 18

A DATA breach has exposed information linked to the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNP), India's flagship nuclear project located in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district.

For nearly a month, numerous documents purportedly linked to the plant — including engineering drawings, inspection records, minutes of meetings, technical reports and official correspondence — have been circulating on the dark web after it was leaked by ransomware group World Leaks.

The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), which operates the plant, has downplayed the leak, maintaining that documents relate only to non-critical facilities outside the 'reactor island' and pose no risk to nuclear safety.

Yet, the breach has renewed cybersecurity concerns over India's critical and strategic infrastructure, particularly at a time when the government has begun opening up the tightly regulated civil nuclear sector to private participation.

The incident has also drawn particular attention because it is not the first time the Kudankulam plant has been linked to a cyber incident. In 2019, malware attributed to a North Korean hacking group was detected within the plant's administrative network, highlighting the persistent cyber risks facing India's strategic nuclear assets.

WHAT HAPPENED IN 2019?

The 2019 cyber incident was not confined to the KKNP. It also affected the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The breach became public on October 28, 2019 after some of



The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), which operates the plant, has downplayed the recent leak. REUTERS

the plant's data showed up on virustotal.com, an online malware scanning service.

Subsequent investigations by multiple cybersecurity agencies and experts attributed the intrusion to DTrack malware, which was linked to the North Korea-backed Lazarus

Group, "an umbrella name that typically describes hacking activity which advances Pyongyang's interests".

According to cybersecurity analysts, DTrack belongs to the same family of malware that was linked to the 2016 cyberattack on an Indian private

bank's ATM network. It spread across the banking system and forced the replacement of an estimated 2.9-3.2 million compromised debit and credit cards. The DTrack malware reportedly targeted the 'domain controller' of KKNP's online network, exposing credentials such as passwords.

A domain controller is a central server that acts as the 'gatekeeper' of a network and verifies the authenticity of all the other devices on the network. Following the intrusion, Seoul-based IssueMakersLab, an expert group of malware analysts, had claimed that the attack was meant to steal information on India's thorium-based nuclear power, a technology which Indian scientists have been working on for decades. According to IssueMakersLab, the primary entry point for the cyberattack was a group

of senior Indian nuclear scientists associated with the atomic energy programme, including scientists who continued to use official institutional email accounts for research work after retirement.

It claimed that the attackers sent malware-laced links to their official and personal email accounts. It claimed that once the links were opened while connected to the Kudankulam plant's network, the malware spread through the plant's IT systems. IssueMakersLab also claimed that the attackers had prior knowledge of the plant's IP network, helping them penetrate its IT infrastructure.

LITTLE INFORMATION ON OFFICIAL FINDINGS

A day after the information about the 2019 breach became public, KKNP officials issued denials saying no cyber-attack

was possible on the plant's standalone control system. A day later, however, NPCIL admitted an intrusion and said the matter was immediately investigated by specialists from the government's Department of Atomic Energy.

In a statement, the NPCIL said the matter was conveyed by Computer Emergency Response Team-India (CERT-In) when it was noticed by them on September 4, 2019.

"The investigation revealed that the infected Personal Computer (PC) belonged to a user who was connected in the internet connected network used for administrative purposes. This is isolated from the critical internal network.

The networks were being monitored continuously. Investigation also confirms that the plant systems are not affected," the statement read.

HOW HIGH-SECURITY SETUPS WORK

Most high-security setups operate on two "air-gapped", or separate, networks. The first is a standalone control system that runs the core function — reactors in case of a nuclear power plant. The other is an online network responsible for the rest of the functions. Air-gapped networks, however, are not considered foolproof. Such systems have been compromised in the past, including at the Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Station in Ohio in 2003, and in breaches involving classified US military networks in 2008.

Beyond the NPCIL's brief acknowledgment and its emphasis on the plant's air-gapped architecture, little is available in the public domain, even today, about the findings of the investigation into the 2019 malware attack.

FAQ

How does India’s newly launched train powered by hydrogen work?

How new is this technology? What is its future in India? Is hydrogen a safe fuel?

Maitri Porecha

The story so far: On July 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off India’s first train powered by hydrogen. It operates on an 89-km stretch between Jind and Sonipat in Haryana.

What is a hydrogen-powered train? India’s hydrogen fuel cell-powered train is a 10-coach train with a capacity of carrying around 2,600 passengers. Unlike conventional electric trains that draw power from overhead lines, it generates its own electricity onboard using hydrogen, known as the cleanest fuel. Unlike conventional diesel locomotives that burn fuel to generate mechanical power, a hydrogen train carries a small power plant onboard in the form of a proton exchange membrane fuel cell. Hydrogen stored in the train’s cylinders combines with oxygen from the surrounding air inside the fuel cell, producing electricity that powers the traction motors and turns the wheels. The only direct by-products of this electrochemical reaction are water vapour and heat. There is no combustion, no smoke, and no tailpipe carbon emissions. The train consists of two Hydrogen Driving Power Cars (DPCs) and eight Trailer Coaches. Each DPC houses fuel cells, lithium iron phosphate batteries, and hydrogen storage cylinders that work together to provide traction power, while ensuring reliable operation under varying operating conditions. The two power cars, one at each end, each produce 1,200 kW (1,600 hp) of power. Their combined 2,400 kW output enables the train to reach its design speed of 110 km/h.

Hydrogen is inflammable and needs to be handled with care. Since it cannot be seen or smelled, the project’s safety design focuses on detecting even the smallest leak instantly

Where does the hydrogen come from? The dedicated hydrogen storage, compression and dispensing facility established at Jind will support refuelling operations, the Indian Railways has stated. Just like a petrol pump or a CNG station, the train needs a place to refuel. First, hydrogen is produced on site through electrolysis, in which water is split into hydrogen and oxygen using electricity at the green hydrogen plant, and is then stored safely in dedicated storage tanks. In the second step, the hydrogen is compressed to 500 bar, enabling a larger quantity to be stored in a smaller volume. Finally, it is dispensed through two independent hydrogen dispensers at a regulated pressure of 350 bar, allowing both DPCs to be refuelled simultaneously and reducing turnaround time. The facility stores nearly 3,000 kg of hydrogen at a time, sufficient to support regular operations of the train set, and its storage and supply system has been approved by the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation.

Is it safe to travel on a hydrogen-powered train when hydrogen is an inflammable fuel? Hydrogen is colourless, odourless, tasteless and non-toxic. However, it is inflammable and needs to be handled with care. Since it cannot be seen or smelled, the project’s safety design focuses on detecting even the smallest leak instantly. The train and the plant are fitted with devices that continuously watch for hydrogen leaks, unusual heat, flames, or smoke. Continuous ventilation keeps air moving through the train at all times, so that even if a tiny amount of hydrogen were to leak, it is safely carried away and diluted in the open air. There is also an automatic shut-off system. If any unusual activity is detected, the system can automatically cut off the hydrogen supply on its own, without waiting for a person to react. The Jind hydrogen plant has protections, including leak detectors, flame detectors, automatic shutdown systems, water sprays to control any fire, and fire alarms. Before being commissioned, the entire system underwent an independent third-party safety assessment by TÜV SÜD, Germany, one of the world’s leading technical inspection and certification agencies, an Indian Railways spokesperson said.

What is the status of hydrogen-powered trains globally? They are still at a nascent stage. Germany was the first country to introduce commercial hydrogen passenger trains, while France, Italy, China, Japan and others are pursuing pilot projects or limited deployments. However, these trains typically have two to four coaches and serve mainly regional routes.

What is the future of such trains in India? Indian Railways is exploring the deployment of hydrogen technology on heritage railways, including the Kalka-Shimla route. They intend to transition to a structured national programme for hydrogen-powered rolling stock, which will contribute to the National Green Hydrogen Mission and the country’s long-term Net Zero goal, an Indian Railways spokesperson said.

What are the gains from the India-U.K. trade deal?

How do the two countries benefit from the deal? What changes will the deal bring for Indian workers in the U.K.? What were the intractable issues left out of the deal? Why does this deal stand out in particular?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far: The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) came into effect on July 15, a year after it was signed. At the same time, the India-U.K. Double Contribution Convention (DCC) also comes into effect. The trade deal has been hailed by both sides, with Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal even calling it the “gold standard” of India’s free trade agreements.

What trade benefits does India get? While speaking to the media a day before the deal came into force, Mr. Agrawal said the CETA stood out not just for its breadth, but also depth. That is, not only does it cover a wide range of tariff and non-tariff issues, but it also yields deep concessions within many of these issues. As per the deal, the U.K. will immediately remove tariffs on 96.8% of its tariff lines, accounting for 97.7% of trade by value. An additional 2% of tariff lines, amounting to 1.8% of trade value, will see reduced tariffs based on quotas. In total, this covers 98.8% of tariff lines and 99.5% of trade value. Apart from tariffs, the 30 chapters of the CETA also cover digital trade, government procurement, small and medium enterprises, innovation, labour, environment, and gender. They also address non-tariff barriers such as Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and Technical Barriers to Trade so that they do not become insurmountable trade restrictions in the future. The CETA also incorporates a significant section on services, which is of considerable interest to India since services exports are a vital engine of growth. The U.K. has agreed to grant commercial presence rights to Indian companies in sectors such as computer services, consultancy, and environmental services. This means Indian companies operating in these

Apart from its breadth and depth, the CETA stands out for two other reasons: automobile tariffs and government procurement

sectors can set up branches, subsidiaries, or representative offices in the U.K.

What is the DCC and how does it help Indian workers in the U.K.? One big win for India is the DCC. Under this deal, Indian workers in the U.K. and their employers will no longer need to pay social security in the U.K. if that payment is being made in India. The duration of this relief was initially three years, but was revised to five. The problem was that Indian workers in the U.K. were paying social security in both India and in the U.K. Most Indian workers in the U.K. are there for short periods of up to five years. However, under U.K. law, workers can claim social security benefits only after making contributions for 10 years. As a result, Indian workers would pay into the system but return to India before becoming eligible to receive the benefits. Now, the five-year relief under the DCC means that about 90% of Indian workers in the U.K. will no longer have to part with about 23% of their salaries towards U.K. social security, as long as they are paying social security in India. Mr. Agrawal said this will benefit over 75,000 Indian workers and more than 900 employers.

What does the U.K. gain? The U.K. stands to gain significantly in terms of market access in both goods and services, even as India has sought to protect its sensitive sectors from foreign competition. India will immediately remove tariffs on goods accounting for 30.3% of trade value, with tariffs on an additional 47% of trade value being eliminated in a phased manner. It will also offer reduced tariff rates under quota arrangements for goods accounting for 12.1% of trade value. In total, this will cover 89.5% of tariff lines and 89.4% of trade value. In terms of popular U.K. products, alcohol from the U.K., especially whiskey, is set to become cheaper in India, and so are British cars, and engineering products. India has also agreed to open up some of its key service sectors to U.K. firms, such as accounting, auditing, financial services, telecom, and environmental services. This means that U.K. companies in these sectors can offer their services to Indian customers without first having to establish a local presence here. India has also agreed to recognise U.K. professional qualifications in law and accounting.

Are there any unusual aspects of the deal? Apart from its breadth and depth, the CETA stands out for two other reasons: automobile tariffs and government procurement. This deal is the first under which India has agreed to reduce tariffs on automobile imports. On July 10, the Directorate General of Foreign

Trade notified the tariff rates that will apply to auto imports from the U.K. Under the arrangement, 20,000 completely built petrol and diesel passenger vehicles will be allowed to enter India in the first year at concessional tariff rates of 30-50%, depending on engine size and vehicle type, down from the standard import duty of 66-110%. The quota will gradually increase to 37,000 such vehicles by the fifth year of the deal, before gradually falling to 15,000 by the 15th year and beyond. The tariffs on these in-quota vehicles will fall to 10% in the fifth year and remain there. There are separate quotas and tariffs for alternative fuel passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles. Regarding government procurement, U.K. firms will now be allowed to participate in Indian Central government procurement bids. However, they can participate only as Class-II local suppliers in eligible tenders. Indian suppliers, on the other hand, will continue to receive Class-I local supplier preference in the U.K. However, U.K. market access will be limited to non-sensitive Central government entities and utilities, excluding central PSUs and State/local government procurement. According to the Ministry of Commerce, this provides Indian suppliers legal access to the U.K. government procurement market worth around £90 billion (\$122 billion). India is providing reciprocal opportunities of around \$114 billion.

What has been left out of the deal? Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has repeatedly said that India and the U.K. have not let the best become the enemy of the good in negotiating this deal. That is, issues that were intractable were left out of the deal and are being worked out separately. One key element is an investment agreement. The Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) India has signed and implemented with the four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries includes a provision where the EFTA bloc has committed to facilitating investment of \$100 billion in India over 15 years. The India-New Zealand free trade agreement too includes a provision where New Zealand will facilitate investments of \$20 billion in India over 15 years. The U.K. deal does not include any such provision. Another is investor-state dispute resolution. Ever since India unilaterally cancelled all its Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) in 2017, dispute resolution has been a key sticking point for foreign investors. Under the earlier BITs, investment disputes could be referred to international arbitration in a neutral third country. With their cancellation, the disputes are being arbitrated in India. The perception is that this is not a fair process. India has also not managed to wring any concessions from the U.K. regarding the latter’s upcoming Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism tariffs. However, no country has made headway in this regard.

What goals does Semicon 2.0 aim to achieve?

What are the key focus areas of Semicon 2.0? How is it different from the first phase? Why is India focusing on semiconductor manufacturing? What incentives does the Mobile Phone Manufacturing Scheme offer?

Aroon Deep

The story so far: On July 15, the Union Cabinet cleared the second phase of the India Semiconductor Mission (ISM), and the Mobile Phone Manufacturing Scheme (MPMS), with a ₹1.27 lakh crore and ₹62,500 crore outlay, respectively. The programmes are aimed at encouraging the next cohort of semiconductor fabrication, assembly, and packaging facilities in India, as well as following through on encouraging more phone assembly and component manufacturing in the country. The government expects the scheme to draw ₹4 lakh crore in investment, ₹2 lakh crore in production, and ₹1 lakh crore in exports over its tenure of five years.

How is this different from the first phase? ISM’s first phase was approved in December 2021 with an outlay of ₹76,000 crore. Following an amendment in 2022, the programme was empowered to provide for up to 50% capital subsidy for big-ticket projects, such as Micron’s memory chip packaging facility in Sanand, Gujarat. The funds were also directed to the Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme, which was designed to incentivise additional

The government has insisted that building domestic capacities is essential even if it takes decades to reach the level of countries, such as the Netherlands and Taiwan, whose companies are critical in chipmaking

manufacturing of smaller electronics components. The Gazette notification laying out the precise details of the second phase is set to be published by next month. In the meantime, Information Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) Additional Secretary Amitesh Kumar Sinha have offered a few details of the expanded scope of the programme. The main change is that the ISM programme will now cover a larger part of the electronics manufacturing ecosystem, including areas that were partially addressed in the previous phase. These include encouraging chip design talent, capital machinery (the large equipment used in chip-making facilities), chemicals and gases that are of semiconductor-grade purity, and research and development efforts. The newer scheme will also trim capital subsidies to 30-40%, Mr. Sinha said, as the semiconductor industry is likely to get more attractive in India even with less incentives. The government is also less likely to offer land support, as State governments have shown increasing enthusiasm for hosting such projects by providing land at token prices and offering their own incentives on top of those provided by the Union government.

What have been the outcomes of phase 1? Of the 12 manufacturing and packaging units approved in phase 1, with a total committed investment of ₹1.64 lakh crore, most are semiconductor packaging units. Nine such units are spread across Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Assam, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. In addition, there is a silicon fabrication unit, and one gallium-nitride Micro LED display fabrication unit. The Tata Electronics fab is set to start commercial production in 2028. The scheme included a design-linked incentive programme, under which 24 projects have been approved. The government has also obtained licences for expensive semiconductor design software and provided them free of cost

to universities and startups. The Semiconductor Lab, Mohali, which is being revamped, is being positioned as a facility to help “tape out” chips designed by students and researchers.

Why is India focusing on semiconductor manufacturing? From the COVID-19 era supply chain disruptions to export controls initiated by the U.S. during the trade war with China, there has been a growing sense that India needs to integrate more tightly with global electronics value chains. The government has insisted that building domestic capacities is essential even if it takes decades to reach the level of countries, such as the Netherlands and Taiwan, whose companies are critical in chipmaking.

How sophisticated are the chips targeted in the current facilities? While the most powerful phones use “frontier” grade chips, with a process node of 7 nanometres or even less, the Union government has targeted 28nm chips (which are made in what are called “legacy” process nodes). There is a massive market for these chips, Mr. Vaishnaw reasoned, as everyday electronics, where size and computing power are not constraints, require such components too. As ISM 2.0 progresses, the government hopes that the ecosystem will progress to frontier nodes, especially by improving the level of domestically owned intellectual property and research for such chips. While semiconductor designers are aplenty in India, most work for either foreign firms or on their behalf, leaving royalties and expertise outside the domestic industry.

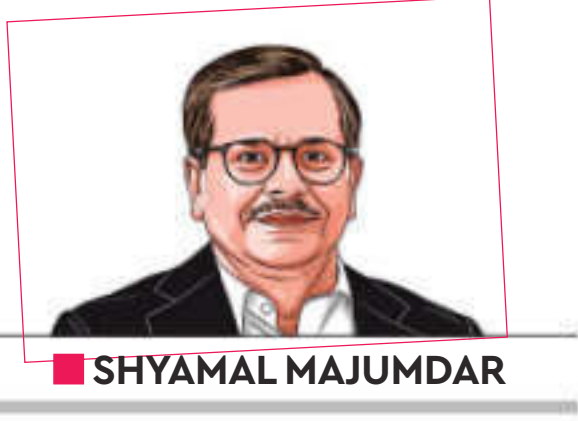
Why is MPMS being notified? While a growing share of iPhone sales around the world come from handsets assembled in India, most components remain imported, and there are barely any Indian-designed handsets in the market. The MPMS aims to incentivise both the expansion of domestic phone assembly as a way to grow the ancillary market, and to incentivise domestic design and research and development. To that end, the scheme provides for incentives ranging from 2.25% to 5%, depending on the level of local design involved in the handsets.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2026

AS ARGENTINA AND SPAIN CHASE WORLD CUP GLORY, FOOTBALL'S REAL VICTOR IS THE GLOBAL CAPITAL RESHAPING HOW THE BEAUTIFUL GAME IS OWNED, WATCHED AND MONETISED

The beautiful game, now on a balance sheet



■ SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

BY THE TIME you finish your Monday morning *chai*, you will know whether the world belongs to Argentina or Spain. Tonight's final at the MetLife Stadium—kicking off at a very India-unfriendly 12.30 am—is the first time the two countries have met in a World Cup final. Lionel Messi, at 39, is chasing a fairy-tale fourth star and the first successful title defence in nearly 70 years; Lamine Yamal, who turned 19 last week, is chasing his first. One of them will be photographed with the trophy, and half of Kerala and Kolkata will have opinions about it before sunrise. But here's the thing. Whoever lifts the cup, we already know who is winning football. It isn't a country; it's capital.

While we were watching the group stages, the game was quietly changing hands—literally. Recent research by Boston Consulting Group on the business of football points to three broad shifts: where the money comes from, how the game is governed and how much football can be squeezed into the calendar. For clubs, these changes boil down to three commercial

questions: who owns the game, where we watch it and how much each fan is worth.

Let's take them one by one, ideally before the pre-match show starts.

Force one: the new owners don't wear scarves. The romantic idea of a football club—owned by a local biscuit baron and run at a genteel loss—is rapidly disappearing. Today's owners are private equity funds, sovereign wealth funds and multi-club conglomerates that collect teams the way the rest of us collect OTT subscriptions.

Chelsea's 2022 takeover involved £2.5 billion for the club and a further £1.75-billion investment commitment. Newcastle United is controlled by a consortium led by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. And approximately 400 professional clubs now belong to multi-club groups—portfolios of teams spread across countries, sharing scouts, data and players like divisions of one company. If this sounds distant, look closer to home. Mumbai City FC is part of the City Football Group, the Abu Dhabi-backed empire built around Manchester City, with clubs on several continents. When an Island City fan cheers, she is, in a small way, cheering a line item in a global portfolio.

Indians, of course, invented nothing here—we merely perfected it early. The IPL taught the world that a sports league could be designed like a business from day one. Global football is now catching up, just with more zeroes and fewer strategic time-outs.

Force two: the screen is the stadium. Football's biggest revenue engine has long been television rights. That engine is now



The screen is the stadium as football's biggest revenue engine is changing

PTI

being rebuilt mid-flight. Cable television is shrinking, streaming platforms are bidding for matches the way they bid for film stars, and leagues are building their own apps to reach fans directly, sometimes cutting out the middleman altogether.

For Indian fans, this is old news with new packaging. We already watch the Premier League at 12.30 am on one app, the highlights on another, while a fourth sends notifications about a fifth. The battle is no longer for your television. It is for your lock screen.

But streaming presents football with a problem. It can produce enormous audiences without necessarily producing television-sized revenues. Free digital viewing

expands reach, particularly in markets such as India, but earns less per viewer than traditional broadcasting or subscription platforms. Football wants the young fan who refuses to pay for cable, but it has not yet worked out how to make that fan as valuable as the old one who did.

Which brings us to force three: you are the product; you always were.

This is the part of the business that consultants get genuinely excited about, and the numbers explain why. Analysis has found that top-quartile Premier League clubs earn roughly seven to eight times more sponsorship revenue than bottom-quartile clubs and more than six times as much from mer-

chandise. The gap is not just about talent or trophies. It is about how efficiently a club converts affection into transactions. BCG cites the example of an English club with more than 100 million social media followers, fewer than one million of whom interact with it in any way that the club can identify or monetise. That leaves roughly 99 million fans cheering into the void, commercially speaking. The clubs that thrive will be those that turn anonymous followers into known, contactable and data-rich customers—through apps, memberships, games, exclusive content and personalised offers. Once a club knows who you are, where you live, which player's shirt you bought and what time you watch highlights, fandom becomes something that can be measured, segmented and sold.

Exhibit A is Fantasy Premier League, which has grown from about 75,000 players in 2002-03 to roughly 11.5 million across 150 countries. It keeps supporters engaged throughout the week rather than merely for 90 minutes on match day.

Any Indian with a fantasy-sports account and a family WhatsApp group full of football trash talk understands this model in their bones. We are, per capita, possibly the world's most monetisable sports fans. The algorithms noticed long ago.

Should any of this bother us? A little, yes. When clubs become asset classes, the fan risks becoming a subscriber, while a century of community is reduced to "brand equity". The most successful clubs become richer because they have the largest global audi-

ences, use that money to buy the best players, win more trophies and attract still more followers. The virtuous circle for them becomes a vicious one for everyone else.

Regulators are increasingly nervous. UEFA now limits spending on player wages, transfers and agents' fees to 70% of club revenue—essentially telling billionaires that even their toys need budgets. Whether this can restrain football's financial arms race is the game's other great contest.

And yet, football keeps rescuing itself. No spreadsheet scripted Argentina's comeback against England, with Messi creating two goals in the closing minutes. No fund manager designed Spain's relentless progress to the final. The money can buy almost everything except the reason we watch.

So tonight, stay up. Somewhere between the half-time spectacle—featuring Madonna, Shakira and BTS, and curated by Coldplay's Chris Martin, because even the interval must now pay its way—and the final whistle, one set of fans will cry the good tears. The owners, funds, sponsors and platforms will get paid regardless.

That, ultimately, is football's new economic model: the result remains uncertain, but the revenue increasingly does not.

Argentina or Spain? That we will know early morning on Monday. But if the question is: Who owns football? That one, sadly, is already settled.

(Data on football economics, ownership and fan engagement drawn from Boston Consulting Group's 2026 research on the business of football)

The secret society of national open



FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

I'M CONVINCED THERE'S a secret WhatsApp group that only national open tournament directors are allowed into. Not Ryder Cup captains. Not Major champions. Not the PGA Tour. Just the people responsible for setting up national opens.

Every January, they probably exchange pleasantries before getting down to business. *"Morning, gentlemen. Last year's US Open was excellent. Players looked thoroughly miserable."*

"Thank you. We noticed your Korean Open had a lovely touch too. Particularly that par four where everyone needed a rescue helicopter after finding the rough."

"Much appreciated. What have you got planned this year?" *"We've narrowed the fairways."* *"Lovely."*

"The greens are running at about a million on the Stimpmeter." *"Outstanding."* *"Pins?"* *"Three paces from the edge. Two if we can get away with it."*

"Excellent. Same time next year?"

I'm telling you, that group exists. Because every national open, regardless of where you play, feels like it's been designed by the same slightly unhinged committee. Longer tees. Narrower fairways. Greens that bounce like airport runways. Rough so thick that if you don't find your golf ball quickly, somebody files a missing persons complaint.

I've played enough national opens around the world to know it isn't a coincidence. Whether it's India, Korea, Japan, Australia or the United States, they all seem to work from the same blueprint. The objective isn't to identify the best golfer. It's to identify the last golfer who hasn't completely lost his mind.

Take last week's Korean Open. I had an eight-foot downhill putt for par. Not a tap-in by any means, but one you'd expect a tour professional to have a reasonable chance of holing—or at the very least leaving close enough for a stress-free bogey if things went wrong. I gave it what I thought was the gentlest little nudge. The ball politely ignored my intentions. It gathered speed as though it had somewhere important to be, rolled past the hole, continued gathering momentum, disappeared off the green and left me with...a bunker shot.

Let that sink in. I went from standing over a putt for par to playing a bunker shot for bogey. Without making another full swing. At that point, you stop blaming yourself and start questioning Sir Isaac Newton. I've always believed golf is the only sport where you can execute a shot almost exactly as intended and still end up wondering whether you've accidentally offended someone upstairs.

The Korean Open merely confirmed that theory. Mind you, Korea isn't unique.

The Hero Indian Open has earned a reputation as one of the toughest weeks on the DP World Tour calendar. Players arrive fully aware that birdies will be rationed. If you miss a fairway, you're usually negotiating rough that seems to have been fertilised with steroids. Find the fairway and you're rewarded with a long iron into greens that have all the warmth and forgiveness of a marble kitchen countertop. It's almost comforting in a strange



The Hero Indian Open has earned a reputation as one of the toughest weeks on the DP World Tour calendar

way. You know exactly what you're walking into...Pain.

The funny thing is that most national opens are run by amateur governing bodies rather than professional tours. Their job, understandably, is to protect the integrity of the championship and ensure that the country's best golfer earns the title. Somewhere along the line, though, "testing the best players" seems to have become "let's see how many emotional breakdowns we can trigger before Sunday." I often wonder how pin positions are selected. I'd love to sit in on that meeting. Someone points to the middle of the green and says, "How about here?" Everyone immediately shakes their head. "Too fair." "What about over there?" "Still reasonable."

Eventually one bloke quietly walks to the very edge of the green, balances on one foot, points to a spot the size of a dinner plate and says, "Found it." The room erupts into applause. Sometimes the hole is cut so close to the edge that you're scared to remove the flagstick in case the cup falls off the green.

Of course, no discussion about impossible national opens can ignore Phil Mickelson's unforgettable moment at the 2018 US Open at Shinnecock Hills.

Watching one of his putts race away from the hole, Phil simply snapped. Instead of waiting for the ball to stop, he jogged after it and hit it while it was still moving. The rules officials called it a breach of the Rules of Golf. Most professional golfers called it Tuesday. None of us would ever recommend doing it, but every single one of us understood exactly how he felt.

We've all stood over a putt thinking, "If this finishes before tomorrow morning, it'll be a bonus."

The USGA copped plenty of criticism that week, but history shows it wasn't an isolated case.

Every national open pushes players right to the edge. The only difference is where that edge happens to be. Despite all the complaints, all the eye-rolling and all the colourful language muttered under our breath, there's a reason every professional still circles these weeks on the calendar.

Winning a national open means something. Always has. Always will.

Because these championships don't merely test your swing. They test your patience when a perfect drive catches the first cut and disappears.

They test your judgement when attacking a flag could just as easily lead to double bogey. They test your temperament when an eight-foot putt somehow becomes a bunker shot.

Most tournaments reward great golf. National opens demand something extra.

They ask whether you can laugh at yourself after a bad bounce. Whether you can keep your composure when the golf course seems personally offended by your presence. Whether you can accept that sometimes par is a masterpiece. And perhaps that's why they remain so special. Every year we complain about the rough. Every year we complain about the greens. Every year we question the ancestry of the person cutting the holes. And every year, without fail, we send in our entry forms again.

Mind you, if anyone reading this happens to be an administrator from one of those amateur associations, I have just one humble request.

The next time your secret WhatsApp group meets, maybe...just maybe...leave one pin in the middle of the green. We promise not to tell anyone.

Rahil Gangjee is a professional golfer, sharing through this column what life on a golf course is like

Most national opens are run by amateur governing bodies rather than professional tours. Their job is to protect the integrity of the championship

The cockroach toolkit gang



FIFTH

COLUMN TAVLEEN SINGH

TOMORROW IS THE day that protesting cockroaches will march from Jantar Mantar to Parliament, so I have no choice but to write about the Cockroach Janata Party's protest. I have said before in this column that they should be heard because they are raising important issues. They are right when they say that the education system is defunct and failing our future generations. They are right to demand that the man most accountable for the mess should resign. And, if you spend an afternoon wandering about Jantar Mantar these days, you will meet many young people who speak of the despondency and defeat spreading through the ranks of young Indians. This is true in the cities, and it is true in the villages. But nobody in the exalted echelons of Lutyens Delhi seems to be listening.

This privileged enclave, in which only the most powerful Indians have always lived, is now occupied by a new class of people. They are not descended from the traditional ruling class. They despise us 'elitists' for having been born privileged. They pride themselves on being low of caste and humble of origin, so they should be able to better hear the voices of people who have been protesting in Jantar Mantar for more than two weeks. Judging from the silence of the Prime Minister and his ministers, it appears they have chosen to remain deaf and to allow their battle to be fought by their own cockroach warriors on social media.

This lot is linguistically challenged and bereft of ideas. So, they make their case by hurling accusations at the protesters. They are propped up by foreign agents. They are working with the same toolkit as the ladies of Shaheen Bagh. They support Khalistan. They are antinational to the core. These charges reminded me of how little has changed in the Indian political discourse since I first started covering politics when Indira Gandhi was prime minister. She was so obsessed with the 'foreign hand' (CIA) that it became a joke among foreign correspondents. Then a KGB spy master defected to the West in the nineties and revealed in his memoir that several ministers in Mrs Gandhi's cabinet and several venerable leftist editors were in the pay of the Soviet Union.

It is ironic that Narendra Modi's supporters and social media combatants are as obsessed with the 'foreign hand'. What I find curious is why our strongman prime minister is allowing these 'foreign agents' to spread across our beloved Bharat Mata with 'toolkits' in hand to

destroy the great successes he has wrought in the past twelve years. The 'foreign agent' they seem to hate most is Abhijeet Dipke, who founded the Cockroach Janata Party. Number two on the hit list is Sonam Wangchuk. I pray that by the time you read this, he is still alive. I believe that fasting to death is less effective than staying alive, so I hope he breaks his fast.

If you have been following the way in which the Modi government handles dissent and dissidence, you would have noticed that the standard operating procedure is to launch a smear campaign against those who dare to dissent. The strategy appears to be that if you damage the reputation of dissidents, then whatever they say will be treated as garbage. And it will act as a warning to future dissidents. They will think twice about challenging anything that the government does because they know that if they do not end up in jail, they will end up in disgrace. Meanwhile, what happens next? If Sonam Wangchuk is still with us, there will be a march to Parliament tomorrow, and there is every likelihood that the government will pretend it did not happen and the opposition will do its best to exalt it. Instead, would it not be a real act of nationalism for both the opposition and the government to come together and set up a parliamentary committee with the task of suggesting reforms from the primary school level to the university level? I have said it before, and I shall repeat it over and over again, that the economic reform India needs most urgently is a total restructuring and re-imagining of our education system.

A number of studies have shown that children who can only afford government schools come out barely able to count and read. How long can we allow our politicians and bureaucrats to build third-rate schools for the people while sending their own children to private schools? How long will we tolerate the ugly truth that every political leader and bureaucrat who can afford to would rather send his children to mediocre foreign universities than to the best Indian universities? How long will we allow coaching centres to replace colleges? How long will we tolerate examinations that get cancelled at the last hour because someone or other manages to corrupt them with leaked papers?

If a bi-partisan committee is set up to examine these things and bring real reforms, then the Cockroach Janata Party would have achieved something truly significant. Until then, let us pray that Sonam Wangchuk remains alive and strong enough to join the march tomorrow. He has said that if he dies, his ghost will be on this march. We do not need any more ghosts than we already have. We need political leaders brave enough to disagree and dissent against the government when it is clearly wrong.

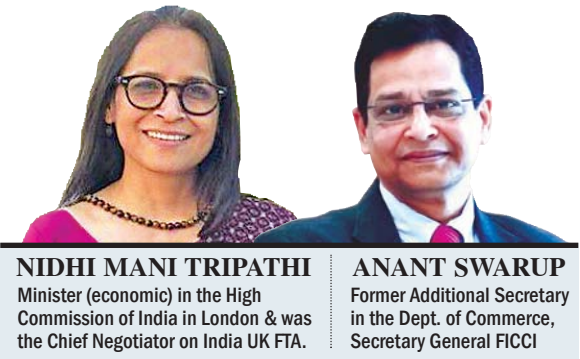
The Pioneer AGENDA

I'm not opposed to free trade if it's fair trade. But I am opposed to bad trade deals.
— Martin O'Malley

The India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) marks the beginning — not the culmination — of India's latest trade journey. While the pact promises unprecedented market access, its true success will not be measured by tariff concessions on paper but by how effectively Indian businesses use it to expand exports, create jobs and move up the global value chain

DONE DEAL HARD WORK AHEAD

CETA: How the India-UK trade deal came of age



NIDHI MANI TRIPATHI
Minister (economic) in the High Commission of India in London & was the Chief Negotiator on India UK FTA.

ANANT SWARUP
Former Additional Secretary in the Dept. of Commerce, Secretary General FICCI

At the stroke of midnight on 15 July 2026, one of the world's most closely watched trade negotiations quietly entered a new phase. The India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), together with the Double Contribution Convention (DCC) on social security, came into force, reducing tariffs on thousands of products, opening new services markets and establishing a modern framework for investment, mobility and innovation.

For a relationship once defined by history, the agreement marks a decisive shift towards a future anchored in commerce. Bilateral trade, currently valued at nearly US\$56 billion, is now expected to double to US\$100-120 billion by 2030.

A Five-Year Journey

The foundations of CETA were laid during the India-UK Virtual Summit in 2021, when Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Boris Johnson launched the Enhanced Trade Partnership and adopted the India-UK Roadmap 2030, elevating bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and committing to negotiate a comprehensive free trade agreement.

Formal negotiations began in January 2022 and unfolded over fourteen intensive rounds across New Delhi and London. Progress was often difficult. Sensitive issues-including mobility, Scotch whisky duties, automobile tariffs, carbon border measures and market access-repeatedly slowed negotiations. Elections in both countries effectively paused talks through much of 2024 before Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Keir Starmer agreed to revive them on the margins of the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro later that year.

Negotiators concluded the agreement on 6 May 2025. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and UK Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds signed the treaty in London on 24 July 2025 in the presence of both Prime Ministers. As envisaged in a side letter to the agreement, the Double Contribution Convention followed on 10 February 2026.

Even then, implementation faced one final obstacle. The UK's proposed steel safeguard quotas threatened to undermine market access for Indian exporters. A negotiated compromise-providing duty-free access for roughly 85 percent of eligible Indian steel exports alongside an enhanced country-specific quota for the remainder-cleared the final hurdle, allowing both agreements to enter into force in July 2026.

Major highlights CETA

Core Trade & Market Access

- Grants duty-free access for nearly 99% of India's exports by value, significantly boosting competitive pricing.
- Major tariff reductions apply to textiles, leather, marine products, chemicals, and engineering goods.
- India protects its strategically important and labour-intensive domestic sectors with phased tariff reductions.

PROFESSIONAL MOBILITY & SERVICES

- The UK provides access across 137 service sub-sectors, benefiting Indian IT, financial services, and healthcare.

CETA is widely regarded as India's most ambitious trade agreement to date and is increasingly described as the country's "gold standard" FTA. Spanning 30 chapters, it extends well beyond tariff reductions into areas such as services, innovation, digital trade, public procurement, intellectual property,

labour, environment and gender.

It is India's first comprehensive free trade agreement negotiated from scratch with a G7 economy under its recalibrated trade strategy of engaging with complementary economies and expanding India's share in global trade.

Firsts in India's trade policy.

For the first time in any free trade agreement, India has agreed to provide tariff concessions on fully built automobiles-an area long sought by British and European negotiators. It also marks India's first calibrated opening of its public procurement market through carefully designed asymmetric thresholds that continue to safeguard MSMEs and the Make in India programme.

The agreement also contains dedicated chapters on Intellectual Property and Innovation, aimed at strengthening India's innovation ecosystem while preserving flexibilities on public health and reaffirming commitments under the Doha Declaration. Dedicated chapters on

INDIA, IN TURN, ELIMINATES TARIFFS IMMEDIATELY ON 64.1 PERCENT OF TARIFF LINES AND PHASES OUT DUTIES ON ANOTHER 21 PERCENT OVER TIME

MSMEs and Trade and Gender Equality recognise the challenges faced by smaller businesses and women entrepreneurs and establish institutional mechanisms for continued cooperation.

Equally noteworthy is the inclusion of Labour and Environment chapters-areas long regarded as sensitive in India's trade negotiations. Importantly, these chapters are collaborative rather than punitive and remain outside the agreement's dispute settlement mechanism.

Trade Gains Across Sectors

The commercial gains are substantial. The UK eliminates tariffs immediately on 99 percent of India's tariff lines, covering almost the entire value of bilateral trade. Labour-intensive sectors stand to benefit the most. Indian exports of textiles and apparel, leather and footwear, marine products, gems and jewellery, engineering goods, auto components,

chemicals, spices, tea, coffee and processed foods will now enjoy virtually duty-free access to the British market.

India, in turn, eliminates tariffs immediately on 64.1 percent of tariff lines and phases out duties on another 21 percent over time. British exports of Scotch whisky, gin, premium automobiles, cosmetics, chocolates, medical devices and advanced machinery are among the principal beneficiaries.

Scotch whisky duties will decline from 150 percent to 40 percent over ten years, while tariffs on automobiles will reduce from 110 percent to 10 percent under an expanding tariff-rate quota. The quota begins at approximately 20,000 vehicles annually before increasing to around 37,000 by the fifth year. Electric and hybrid vehicles become eligible only from the sixth year, providing domestic manufacturers valuable adjustment time. The quota is also divided across price bands, ensuring that most imports remain concentrated in luxury segments where domestic manufacturing is limited.

Services and Mobility: India's Competitive Edge

Services-India's greatest comparative advantage-feature prominently.

The UK has committed market access across 137 of 164 GATS subsectors, while India has undertaken commitments in around 108 subsectors covering information technology, financial services, telecommunications, engineering, accounting, education and healthcare. Dedicated chapters on Financial Services and Telecommunications further deepen cooperation in these sectors.

Mobility provisions facilitate the temporary movement of business visitors, intra-corporate transferees and contractual service suppliers for periods ranging from 90 days to three years without numerical quotas. An annual quota of 1,800 visas for chefs, yoga instructors and musicians also recognises India's growing cultural and creative economy.

The accompanying Double Contribution Convention is equally significant. By exempting temporary Indian workers in the UK from double social security contributions for up to five years-the longest exemption India has secured under any bilateral arrangement-it substantially lowers costs for Indian professionals and service providers.

Together, the mobility provisions and the DCC create a favourable environment for India's globally competitive services sector and reinforce India's position as a preferred destination for Global Capability Centres.

Protecting Sensitive Interests

Despite its ambition, the agreement reflects careful calibration.

India has excluded dairy, poultry, sugar, edible oils, apples, walnuts, gold bars, selected smartphone categories and certain

BRITISH FIRMS GAIN ACCESS ONLY TO SELECTED NON-SENSITIVE PROCUREMENT OPPORTUNITIES AS CLASS-2 SUPPLIERS UNDER CLEARLY DEFINED CONDITIONS

information technology products from tariff concessions, protecting vulnerable agricultural sectors and strategic manufacturing supported under the Make in India and Production Linked Incentive (PLI) programmes.

Sensitive concessions in automobiles and whisky are similarly moderated through tariff-rate quotas, price bands and long implementation timelines rather than immediate liberalisation. Nearly one-fifth of tariff concessions offered to the UK are phased over periods extending up to ten years, allowing domestic industry adequate adjustment while improving access to cost-effective inputs that strengthen India's manufacturing competitiveness.

India has also retained important policy flexibilities in intellectual property, particularly regarding public health safeguards, while maintaining a balanced approach to government procurement. British firms gain access only to selected non-sensitive procurement opportunities as Class-2 suppliers under clearly defined conditions.

Turning Market Access into Market Share

The agreement undoubtedly creates unprecedented commercial opportunities. Exporters in textile hubs such as Tirupur, Surat and Ludhiana, leather producers in Agra, seafood exporters along India's coastline and engineering manufacturers across the country now enjoy tariff advantages over competitors from Bangladesh, Vietnam and several other exporting nations.

Yet tariff preferences alone do not guarantee market success. Indian exporters must continue meeting stringent British standards on product safety, testing, certification, labelling and technical regulations. Encouragingly, both governments have committed to pursuing Mutual Recognition Agreements covering testing, certification and professional qualifications. Their successful implementation would significantly reduce compliance costs, improve regulatory certainty and facilitate smoother movement of professionals across sectors.

Looking back, CETA is as much a story of patient diplomacy as it is of trade liberalisation. Negotiating between two economies at different stages of development, with distinct regulatory systems, political priorities and domestic sensitivities, was never going to be straightforward.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

India-UK trade: From market access to market success



GOURAV VALLABH
Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, & Prof. of Finance, XLRI

Trade agreements are usually celebrated when they are signed. Economics suggests that another date matters more: the day firms begin using them. The India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which entered into force on July 15, 2026, should therefore be viewed not as the conclusion of a negotiation, but as the beginning of an institutional test.

The agreement is substantial. Negotiations began on January 13, 2022, and the pact was signed on July 24, 2025, after more than 3 years of negotiations. Bilateral trade in goods and services reached nearly £48 billion in 2025. For perspective, £1 billion (approximately ₹13,000 crore) provides a useful conversion benchmark. The UK is eliminating tariffs on about 99 per cent of tariff lines, covering nearly the entire value of India's exports. India has opened 89.5 per cent of its tariff lines, covering 91 per cent of UK exports, while only 24.5 per cent of UK export value receives immediate duty-free access; many concessions are phased over five, seven or ten years.

For India, the immediate opportunity is concentrated in employment-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, leather and footwear, marine products, gems and jewellery, toys and food processing, alongside engineering goods, chemicals and auto components. Growth in these sectors can generate broad-based employment. India's commitments also reflect calibrated openness. Duties on Scotch whisky and gin fall from 150 per cent to 75 per cent immediately and to 40 per cent after ten years. Tariffs on British cars can fall from as much as 110 per cent to 10 per cent, but only within a quota and through phased access. Meanwhile, sensitive sectors-including dairy, cereals and millets, pulses and specified vegetables-remain protected. Competition is introduced while domestic producers in strategic sectors receive time to build scale and technology. The transition should ultimately be assessed by whether it raises productivity.

Official modelling estimates that the agreement could increase annual bilateral trade

by £25.5 billion in the long run and raise India's GDP by about £5.1 billion annually. These are estimates relative to a no-agreement baseline, not guaranteed outcomes; the official assessment itself acknowledges significant uncertainty. Realisation depends on firms claiming preferences, satisfying rules of origin, meeting product standards and responding to new price signals. That makes preference utilisation the central metric. A tariff preference has value only when an exporter can claim it and deliver competitively. International evidence shows that rules of origin and certification costs weigh disproportionately on smaller firms. An MSME may find that paperwork and testing absorb much of the apparent tariff advantage.

The government has successfully completed the demanding work of negotiation. The next phase requires an implementation partnership among the Union government, states, export promotion councils, financial institutions and industry. India should consider a CETA Utilisation Mission built on its existing digital trade infrastructure. It should provide

THE UK IS ELIMINATING TARIFFS ON ABOUT 99 PER CENT OF TARIFF LINES, COVERING NEARLY THE ENTIRE VALUE OF INDIA'S EXPORTS

sector-specific rules-of-origin guidance, standard documentation, tariff calculators, certification support and rapid grievance resolution through a single interface. The mission should publish a quarterly utilisation scorecard. Aggregate trade values alone can mislead, as exchange rates, commodity prices, and the business cycle also affect them. A more useful dashboard would track preference utilisation rates, the number and size of participating firms, rejected origin claims, first-time exporters, and product diversification. The agreement asks customs authorities to endeavour to release compliant goods within 48 hours when no physical examination is required; actual clearance times should therefore also be reported.

The second priority is standards. The UK market places a premium on quality, traceability, safety and credible certification. Tariffs may fall to zero, but regulatory requirements remain. Testing laboratories in major export clusters should be aligned with UK accreditation requirements, while negotiations on mutual recognition should continue where regulatory objectives permit. Export credit, logistics support and design assistance should help firms move from low-value supply to branded and higher-value products.

CONTINUED ON >> PII



- Creates a clearer path for temporary stays without numerical quotas or restrictive economic tests.

SOCIAL SECURITY & WORK VISAS (DCC)

Exempts eligible Indian professionals on temporary assignments in the UK from paying double social security contributions for up to five years.

INVESTMENT & NEXT-GEN CHAPTERS

Extends beyond traditional goods and services, embedding 30 chapters that cover digital trade, telecommunications, intellectual property, and government procurement.

“YOU MUST NOT FIGHT TOO OFTEN WITH ONE ENEMY,
OR YOU WILL TEACH HIM ALL YOUR ART OF WAR”
— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

Ukraine war: NATO’s proxy war against Russia hurts India’s interests



VLADIMIR LADANOV

A summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) from 7-8 July in Ankara has delivered an expected outcome: the allies reaffirmed their commitment to continuing their campaign against Russia in Ukraine. It was too much to hope that they would learn from their past mistakes of provoking that conflict in the first place by never-stopping NATO's eastward expansion contrary to earlier understandings, supporting a bloody coup d'état in Kiev in February 2014 and the toppling of Ukraine's legitimate President Viktor Yanukovich — all in an ongoing effort to turn Ukraine into a Western bulwark against Russia. NATO's ambition to dominate the security space in Europe and its blatant disregard for Russia's vital interests in its near abroad are at the heart of the current geopolitical conflagration. Described as “brain dead” by the French President Emmanuel Macron as recently as 2019, NATO has now found a new lease on life in its confrontation with Russia. But is this moment sustainable or a contrived unity of allies in Ankara is only fleeting?

After WWII, first Secretary General of NATO, an India-born British General Hastings Ismay, anecdotally formulated the alliance's purpose as “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”. While his dictum had been respected in the past, nowadays all of its three pillars are being challenged.

When the Cold War ended with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the then US Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, one of the leading neocons of his time, developed a policy which came to be known as the Wolfowitz doctrine. In no uncertain terms it advised that to preserve America's hegemony, Russia should never be allowed to rise again. Earnestly engaging with Moscow and integrating it with the West, like it was done before with the former American adversaries, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, was ruled out of the question. Yet Russia has re-emerged from the ruin of the Soviet collapse and re-joined the ranks of the great powers. It is evidenced by the fact that for over four years of the Ukraine conflict Russia has been tackling the combined might of the entire Western coalition and countering all its attempts at achieving escalation dominance. It is a fair assessment that after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe NATO had squandered an historic opportunity to re-engage with Moscow on equal terms. And since then by crossing the reddest of Russia's geopolitical red lines it has now found itself embroiled in a proxy war against it in Ukraine. Instead of ensuring security in the Euro-Atlantic area, NATO's leaders, in their folly, have provoked the bloodiest military conflict on the conti-



nent since WWII. Having become entangled in a giant mess of their own creation, NATO's leadership are now facing a real prospect of their alliance breaking up - not only because US President Donald Trump wants to take over Denmark's Greenland but also because he seeks a radical redistribution of burden sharing in NATO by ending a long-standing European habit of freeloading at American expense. It is not unreasonable to imagine that President Trump may choose to hold in abeyance America's defence commitment to those NATO countries that he considers underdelivering or politically at odds with Washington. A relevant example of the latter case is the suspension of the US's obligation to New Zealand under the ANZUS security treaty after Wellington annoyed the Reagan administration with its anti-nuclear policy. The Trump



administration is no longer convinced in continuing its sizeable European military commitment and would like to be rid of the European problems irrelevant to America's core interests. The European force posture review now conducted by US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth will likely result in the reduction of American troops stationed there. Ultimately, the Trump administration wants to geopolitically pivot to the Pacific and for that it needs to release the capabilities currently assigned to NATO and other resources wasted in the conflict in Ukraine. Worse still for the Europeans, Donald Trump favours negotiating a deal with Russia to end the bloodshed. European warmongers are aghast at this prospect because absent US support their own position vis-à-vis Russia becomes weak - America has traditionally provided a vital structural strength to NATO through its command and staff element, strategic enablers such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, precision deep strike, and extended nuclear deterrence. Deprived of these strategic assets, the Europeans will likely have to accommodate Russia.

Finally, what about keeping the Germans down? For the first time since the end of WWII Germany's massive investment in its military outpaces both Britain's and France's expenditure: in the four years since 2022 German defence budget has risen twofold and by 2030 it is projected to again double to nearly 160 billion euros, which will be almost as much as what London and Paris spend combined. Should this happen, redistribution of power in Europe will inevitably follow. There is already an emerging discussion in the West about the long-term implications of Germany's rapid rearmament. This question should be of particular interest to Germany's neighbours some of which are still harbouring grievances dating back to WWII such as Warsaw's demand (rejected

by Berlin) of paying wartime reparations. For the time being, the European elites mostly welcome Germany's military buildup in the hope of directing it against Russia. Yet they tried the same tack in the 1930s and it blew up in their face. They have to be careful what they wish for.

There are two India-relevant observations arising from the geopolitical drama drama playing out in Europe.

First, with European states heavily committed to confronting Russia they make poor security partners for India because their capabilities are tied down thousands of miles away with little to nothing to spare for upholding balance in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Their continental strategy, as the British historian Michael Howard would have put it, is likely to have implications similar to what happened to the British Empire before WWII when it chose to bolster the defence of Europe at the expense of cutting back on its deployments in the Pacific. With the Ukraine conflict raging on, unfunded and unsubstantiated European Indo-Pacific strategies bring little of real value to India's table.

Secondly, it is broadly accepted among India's foreign policy and national security community that a strong, independent and prosperous Russia is vital for maintaining a balance of power favourable to India in Eurasia. Contrary to this, the dogged pursuit of Russia's defeat by European elites pushes in the opposite direction thereby complicating New Delhi's balancing act and reducing its options.

With these down-to-earth considerations in mind it is logical to assume that an early termination of the Ukraine conflict and the rebuilding of normalcy between Russia and the West would be conducive to India's external strategy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message that “today's era is not the era of war” clearly articulated to European capitals would go a long way to achieving that objective.

Vladimir Ladanov is Chargé d'affaires of Russia in India

FROM AGENDA COVER

CETA: How the India-UK Trade...

Many of the outcomes required India to venture into areas that had never featured in its earlier trade agreements while carefully preserving policy space in sectors critical to its developmental priorities. Equally, the United Kingdom had to accommodate India's concerns as an emerging economy with priorities of inclusive growth and social justice keeping in view the substantial market access to one of the fastest growing economies of the world.

The negotiations have secured unprecedented market access for businesses of both sides. The realisation of full potential of the agreement's promise will now depend on businesses, exporters, investors and innovators who can translate these new opportunities into sustained commercial success. If the negotiations were about opening doors, the next chapter will be about walking together confidently through them.

India-UK Trade: From market...

The third priority is carbon competitiveness. The UK's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is scheduled to begin on January 1, 2027, covering specified goods in aluminium, cement, fertiliser,

hydrogen, iron and steel. This is not an argument against CETA; it is the next frontier of competitiveness. A zero tariff cannot indefinitely compensate for high embedded carbon.

Although the legal liability rests with UK importers, Indian suppliers will increasingly need verified product-level emissions data, cleaner energy and access to green finance. CETA implementation should therefore connect with India's wider decarbonisation and manufacturing strategy.

Services and professional mobility offer another strategic gain. The companion Double Contributions Convention prevents double social-security contributions for eligible detached workers sent temporarily between the two countries for up to 60 months. It does not change immigration or settlement rules.

CETA also broadens access for contractual service suppliers, intra-corporate transferees and independent professionals, and provides a collective annual quota of 1,800 places for Indian chefs, yoga teachers and classical musicians. The number is modest, but the precedent is valuable: professional mobility is being treated as part of economic integration rather than as a peripheral issue.

Execution will finally be local. The agreement is national, but its gains will be realised in manufacturing and services

clusters, district export hubs, ports, testing centres and bank branches. State governments should identify products with immediate UK potential and establish cluster-level facilitation teams. This would align trade policy with employment policy because many beneficiary sectors are both MSME-intensive and labour-intensive.

CETA also signals a broader evolution in India's trade strategy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi: from generalised defensiveness towards selective integration, backed by safeguards for sensitive sectors. This is a confident approach to globalisation-using external market access to strengthen domestic capability, not to substitute for it. As India advances towards Viksit Bharat 2047, trade agreements must become instruments for productivity, technology, formalisation and better jobs.

The text has opened the door; institutions and enterprises must now walk through it. The most meaningful measure of success will not be the number of tariff lines liberalised, but the number of Indian firms that export for the first time, move up the value chain and create durable employment.

If implementation receives the same policy attention as negotiation, the India-UK CETA can become a model of how India converts diplomatic access into broad-based economic capability.

Anger covers more ground than its title suggests and delves deep

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Anger: Why We Get Angry and How We Should Respond to Provocation isn't the kind of self-help title that promises five easy steps to a calmer you, and that turns out to be the book's real strength. Journalist Narayani Ganesh — her name is often misspelled “Ganeshan” online, worth flagging if you're hunting for the book — spent years editing The Times of India's Speaking Tree column, and it shows: she treats anger less as a problem to be fixed than a subject to be understood from every angle she can find. That range is the book's defining feature. Buddha, Krishna, and Mohammed sit alongside the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, with philosophers and psychiatrists brought in to round things out.

But Ganesh doesn't stop at scripture and sutra. She follows anger into distinctly present-day territory — incel culture and the kind of online radicalisation that shows like Adolescence dramatised, the mechanics of political trolling, and the everyday menace of road rage on Indian streets.

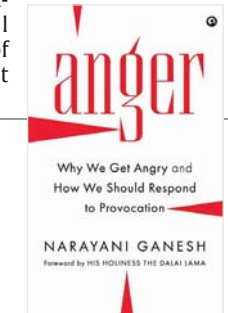
It's an unusual and effective pairing: ancient counsel on wrath sitting next to an account of how algorithms and

comment sections manufacture it fresh every day.

The most memorable stretches, though, are the quietest. A conversation with the Dalai Lama and another with Shantam Seth — whose own journey from angry young man to Dharmacharya carries more weight than any of the book's broader surveys — do more work than the wider sweep around them. Elsewhere, Ganesh gets pleasingly domestic, tracing how cooking or eating while furious can leave its residue on a meal, grounding a very old question in something as ordinary as dinner.

What the book resists is tidiness — it doesn't rank traditions or hand out a winner, just lays out a spread and lets the reader pick what fits. The trade-off is that a book trying to hold scripture, psychology, and internet culture in one hand can read more like a well-curated anthology than a single sustained argument, and readers hoping for a deeper dive into anger's constructive side — the fury that drives people to fight injustice — may come away wanting more on that front specifically.

Still, as an entry point for anyone confused about where to even start thinking about their own temper, it's a generous, well-sourced, and surprisingly current one.



Author: Narayani Ganesh
Publisher: Aleph
Price: ₹699

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 19-25 JULY

Finding Balance, Building Trust and Moving with Clarity

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

This forecast is based on your Moon Sign (Janma Rashi), which often reflects day-to-day emotional and instinctive patterns more closely than general Sun-sign readings.

Moon Watch

The Moon's quiet message for the week ahead. This week gradually shifts from practical organisation towards balanced relationships and deeper emotional understanding. Thoughtful choices, and quiet reflection help create lasting progress.

Weekly Overview

The week begins under the Virgo Moon, encouraging organisation, practical thinking and attention to detail. As the Moon moves into Libra, relationships, and balanced decisions become increasingly important. Scorpio deepens emotional awareness, encouraging stronger commitments



Aries (Mesh): Professional matters may require greater attention during the opening phase of the week. Practical planning and careful organisation will help you manage responsibilities more effectively. As the Moon enters Libra, discussions with colleagues or family members become easier and cooperation improves. Midweek encourages measured decisions rather than quick reactions.



Taurus (Vrishabh): Relationships and one-to-one interactions naturally move into focus during the beginning of the week. Listening carefully may resolve matters that recently appeared complicated. As Libra encourages balance, practical decisions involving finances or shared responsibilities become easier to manage. Midweek supports cooperation and meaningful conversations.



Gemini (Mithun): Daily routines, work responsibilities and practical organisation may shape much of the opening week. Small improvements introduced now are likely to produce lasting benefits. As communication gathers momentum, useful discussions could simplify pending matters. Midweek supports healthier routines and balanced decision-making.



Cancer (Karka): Creative interests, personal projects or family activities may provide a welcome change from routine during the opening days. Virgo encourages careful planning before beginning something new. Midweek strengthens friendships, cooperation and meaningful exchanges of ideas. You may discover that balanced discussions achieve more than emotional reactions.



Leo (Simha): Home, family matters or domestic responsibilities deserve thoughtful attention at the beginning of the week. Practical improvements within your surroundings may bring greater comfort later. Libra encourages understanding between different viewpoints, making this a favourable period for resolving minor misunderstandings. Midweek supports fairness in important discussions.



Virgo (Kanya): Communication, learning and careful observation become valuable themes while the Moon remains in Virgo. Conversations held during the opening phase may provide practical guidance for future decisions. As Libra energy develops, teamwork and professional discussions become more productive. Midweek encourages diplomacy where opinions differ.



Libra (Tula): Financial planning or practical responsibilities may require careful organisation during the first half of the week. A balanced approach helps prevent unnecessary complications. As the Moon enters Libra, confidence grows and relationships receive greater attention. Midweek supports cooperation, thoughtful communication and fair decision-making.



Scorpio (Vrishchik): Personal priorities and emotional well-being gradually move closer to the forefront during this week. The opening phase encourages quiet preparation rather than immediate action. Libra supports meaningful conversations that improve mutual understanding. By the weekend, the Moon enters Scorpio, increasing emotional strength, determination and clarity. This is a favourable period for focusing on personal goals.



Sagittarius (Dhanu): Future planning, learning or long-term ambitions may benefit from careful review during the beginning of the week. Practical organisation now can simplify responsibilities later. Libra encourages networking, useful meetings and cooperative efforts that support your objectives. Midweek may also bring opportunities through trusted contacts.



Capricorn (Makar): Professional responsibilities and long-term goals remain important throughout the opening days. Virgo supports disciplined work and careful planning, allowing steady progress without unnecessary pressure. Midweek encourages productive teamwork and balanced discussions. As Scorpio energy develops over the weekend, friendships, group activities or shared projects may become more rewarding. Trust built gradually is likely to produce stronger long-term results.



Aquarius (Kumbh): Professional responsibilities and long-term goals remain important throughout the opening days. Virgo supports disciplined work and careful planning, allowing steady progress without unnecessary pressure. Midweek encourages productive teamwork and balanced discussions. As Scorpio energy develops over the weekend, friendships, group activities or shared projects may become more rewarding. Trust built gradually is likely to produce stronger long-term results.



Pisces (Meen): Short journeys, learning opportunities or meaningful conversations may shape the opening phase of the week. Virgo encourages practical observation, helping you understand situations from a wider perspective. Midweek strengthens communication and mutual understanding, particularly within personal relationships. As the Moon enters Scorpio, intuition becomes stronger and emotional awareness deepens. This is a supportive period for thoughtful planning, meaningful reflection and preparing confidently for the next stage ahead.

The Poverty of Love

Why are we desperately searching for something that is already shining deep within our own hearts?

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

Today 90 per cent of the ailments we suffer are due to mental strain and tension because love is fading from the human heart. Problems diminish when there is love, but a lack of love increases and intensifies our problems. Just as food is needed for the growth of the body, love is needed for the growth of the heart. Love is as valuable and precious as breast milk for a baby.

In the name of modernity and development, humans have become more and more selfish. We have become like isolated islands, cut off from the rest of creation, cut off from life, cut off from true joy.

Look at a tree. It gives shade even to the person who cuts it down. It gives its sweet, delicious fruits to the person who harms it. But our attitude is completely different. When we plant a tree, we are only concerned about the profit we will make from it. If a tree stops yielding fruit, we will cut it down and make furniture from it.

Selfishness reigns supreme. Selfless love cannot be found anywhere. Because of this selfishness, humankind today sees Nature as being separate. Individuals think that Nature has been created solely for them to use and exploit in order to fulfil their selfish desires. This attitude creates a separation and a distance.

Scientists have found methods to produce a hundred tomatoes from a plant that could otherwise bear only ten fruits. They have also succeeded in doubling the size of fruits and vegetables. While it is true that with this increased production, poverty and starvation have been reduced to a certain extent, we remain largely unaware of the harmful effects caused by artificial fertilisers and pesticides, which become absorbed into the body.



These chemicals destroy cells and make us more vulnerable to disease. The number of hospitals has also had to increase as the push continues to artificially force plants to yield fruit and seeds in quantities which are far beyond their limits. Science has reached unimaginable heights, but owing to selfishness, humankind has lost the clarity to see the truth of things and to act with discernment.

This understanding and vision that we are a part of the totality is the path to physical and mental well-being. Seeing unity in diversity through proper understanding and spiritual practices is the only way to heal humanity and Nature.

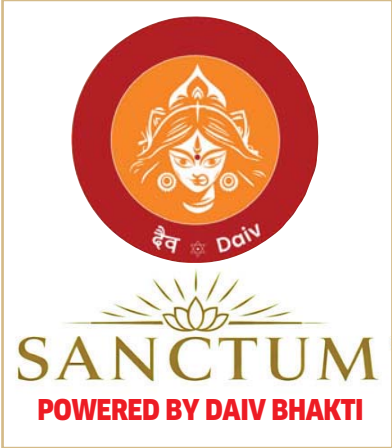
For true peace and happiness, ultimately people will have to embrace spiritual principles. Most people see life as a constant struggle just to get through the day. Such people believe in the theory of the survival of the fittest. They are satisfied with a normal way of living — for example, getting a house, a job, a car, a wife or husband, children and enough money to live.

Yes, these are important things, and we need to focus on our day-to-day lives and to take care of our responsibilities and obligations, small and big. But there is more to life, a

higher purpose, which is to know and realise who we truly are. In essence, we are love. It is through this knowledge alone that we gain everything — a feeling of complete fullness, with absolutely nothing else to wish for. That realisation makes life perfect.

Regardless of all we have accumulated or are striving to acquire, for most people life still feels incomplete — like the letter “C”. This gap will always be there. Only spiritual knowledge can fill this void and unite the two ends, which will make it like the letter “O”. The knowledge of the inner Self alone will help us feel grounded in the real centre of life.

(Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known simply as Amma, is a spiritual master and humanitarian who has given her darshan in the form of a motherly embrace to more than 4 crore people. Listening to the cries of the suffering, Amma leads an NGO that reaches across more than 50 countries, working in the areas of healthcare, disaster relief, education, gender equality, and environmental restoration)



Don't Grow Old While You're Still Young

SADHGURU

Youth is life that is still in the making. It is still in a state where it is not too conceited and lost. Youth is a life that suggests hope, seeking and the longing to know the truth about life.

The word “truth” has been used in many ways, and most people think truth is some otherworldly stuff. So what exactly is truth? Look at it this way: what truly works is truth in any sphere of life. For example, if you want to walk, is it better to walk upon your feet or upon your head? If you walk on your head, you will not walk far — you will only end up bald.

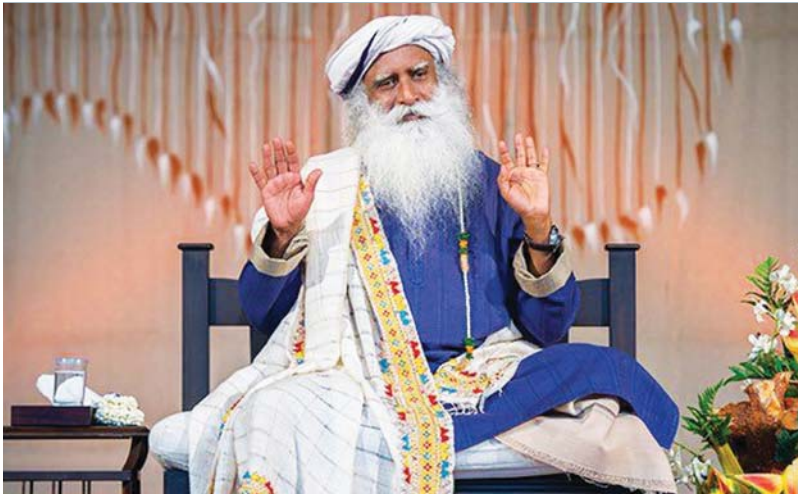
Obviously, it is better to walk on your feet. I am giving a very simplistic example, but this is the essence of what truth means. In different dimensions of life, what is it that really works? Seeking this is seeking for truth.

Bharat has been a culture that has always been a land of seekers, never a land of believers. The question is: Do

al knowledge can fill this void and unite the two ends, which will make it like the letter “O”. The knowledge of the inner Self alone will help us feel grounded in the real centre of life.

you have assumptions and concretised ideas about everything, or are you willing to seek the truth about any aspect of life because you are interested that it happens in the best possible way?

India has the fortune that 50 per cent of the nation's population is below 25 years of age. No other nation on the planet has this fortune. But to make this into a true fortune and not a disaster, youth should become seekers of truth. They should not get adhered to some ideology, belief system or philosophy. This is what being a youth means: you are not willing to settle for that which is false. You want to find out what really works on the level of your body, your mind, your emotion, your life energy, your relationship with the rest of the world — in every sphere of life.



THE WORD “TRUTH” HAS BEEN USED IN MANY WAYS, AND MOST PEOPLE THINK TRUTH IS SOME OTHERWORLDLY STUFF. SO WHAT EXACTLY IS TRUTH? LOOK AT IT THIS WAY: WHAT TRULY WORKS IS TRUTH IN ANY SPHERE OF LIFE

If this search and seeking is given up, you will no longer be youth. You become old when you are young. You settle down and prepare for the grave. Your date of birth does not decide whether you are youth or old. Have you made conclusions about life or are you still open and seeking to know the nature of life — this is what makes you either youthful or old. It is important that every life stays youthful. Especially for the youth of this nation and the world, it is very important you are seekers of truth. Only then will you remain youthful.

It is time the populations of the world, particularly the youth, move from religion to responsibility. What you make out of your life is 100 per cent your responsibility. It is not the respon-

sibility of the stars, the planets or the powers above. It is in your hands to create this life the way you want it. This is the fundamental of being youthful - you are willing to take responsibility for everything that you are. You have not become a life that looks up at the stars about, “Why am I miserable? Why am I not successful? Why is my life not beautiful?” You are not looking up. You are willing to look inward and seek answers. That means you are in pursuit of truth.

Many years ago, Swami Vivekananda said, “Give me one hundred youth who are truly committed. I will change the face of this nation.” Are we so impotent that we cannot produce one hundred youth like this? We must be able to produce millions of youth who are truly committed to know what is the truth about our existence, what is the truth about our success and failures, what is the truth about the beautiful aspects and the ugliness of our life. If you do not seek, then you are not a youth. Do not become old when you are young.

(Ranked amongst the fifty most influential people in India, Sadhguru is a Yogi, mystic, visionary and a New York Times bestselling author. Sadhguru has been conferred the Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India in 2017, the highest annual civilian award, accorded for exceptional and distinguished service. He is also the founder of the world's largest people's movement, Conscious Planet- Save Soil, which has touched over 4 billion people)

Seva Dharma: The Glory of Selfless Service

When history fades and applause falls silent, it is selfless seva that continues to live on, in healed wounds, uplifted lives, and grateful hearts. For fifty years, inspired by the timeless ideal of seva, BAPS volunteers have transformed compassion into action across the globe. From disaster relief and humanitarian aid to education, healthcare, and moral upliftment, their silent sacrifices have touched millions of lives

DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

The word ‘seva’ originates from the Sanskrit tradition and signifies service performed without expectation of reward. However, in spiritual terms, even in helping others, seva is a sacred expression of devotion, a selfless offering performed not for personal gain, but out of love for God and reverence for the guru.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan elevated seva to a spiritual discipline and an important sadhna, teaching that true greatness lies in serving devotees and humanity.

Today, that same ideal continues to shine through the life of Mahant Swami Maharaj, the living spiritual successor in the Gunatit tradition of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. His life stands as a gentle yet powerful reminder that true greatness lies in serving others.

Long before he became the spiritual leader of a global fellowship, the young Mahant Swami imbibed the spirit of seva at the feet of Guru Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

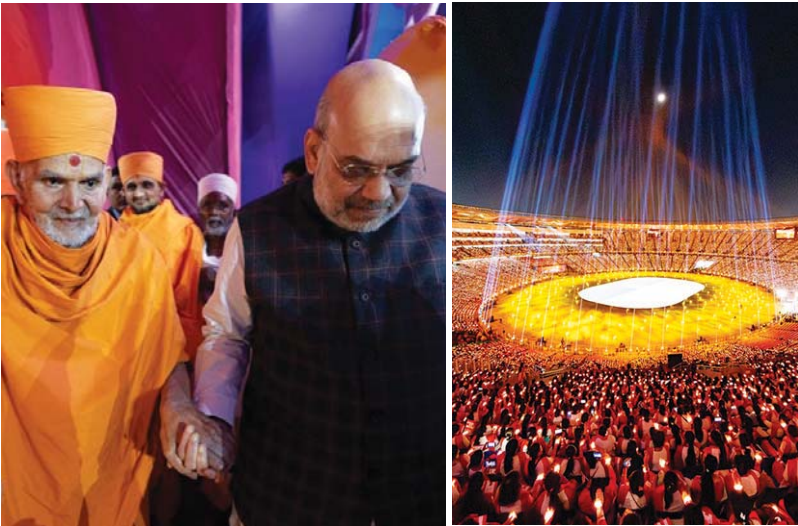
In those early years, the number of volunteers was limited, yet the demands of service were immense. During festivals and special occasions, thousands of devotees would flock to the mandirs, creating an endless stream of responsibilities that required attention.

Whether it was washing utensils late into the night, preparing facilities for arriving devotees, assisting in the kitchen, cleaning the premises, or attending to countless unseen tasks, young Mahant Swami embraced every responsibility with joy and enthusiasm. No service was too small, no duty beneath him. The greater the need, the greater was his eagerness to serve.

These seemingly simple acts of service became the foundation of a life dedicated to the service of the entire humanity. Through his own example, Mahant Swami Maharaj has inspired generations to embrace seva not as an occasional activity, but as a way of life. Under his guidance, selfless service has blossomed into a global movement, touching countless lives and demonstrating that when service is offered with humility and devotion, it becomes a pathway to both personal transformation and God-realisation.

Under his guidance, thousands have transformed their talents, time, and energy into instruments of service. Today, more than 100,000 registered BAPS volunteers form one of the world's largest voluntary service networks, united not by obligation but by a shared spirit of compassion and devotion.

For over five decades, these volunteers have worked tirelessly across the globe, serving day and night wherever humanity calls. They have rushed to the aid of victims during earthquakes,



floods, tsunamis, famines, and other natural disasters. They have provided relief and support in conflict zones, including during the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Their service extends far beyond emergency response, reaching into



healthcare, education, environmental conservation, tribal upliftment, women's empowerment, community development, and the promotion of moral and spiritual values.

Behind this vast movement of service lies a simple yet profound inspiration: the belief that serving humanity is serving God and Guru. What began as a seed of selfless service nurtured by the BAPS gurus has grown into a mighty tree whose branches touch millions of lives across the world.

That extraordinary journey of devotion, sacrifice, and selfless service reached a magnificent crescendo on the evening of December 7, 2024, when Ahmedabad's iconic Narendra Modi Stadium was transformed into a daz-

zling tribute to seva. Beneath the glow of thousands of lights and amidst an atmosphere charged with gratitude and inspiration, the grand finale of the BAPS Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav brought together more than 100,000 volunteers to celebrate fifty years of service to society and spirituality.

As inspiring presentations, vibrant performances, and heartfelt tributes unfolded across the vast stadium, the gathering became far more than a commemorative event. It was a living testament to the power of one timeless ideal, the ideal of selfless service. Every performance, every applause, and every moment echoed the silent sacrifices of countless volunteers who had dedicated themselves to serving others without seeking recognition.

To honour this remarkable legacy of selfless service and inspire the volunteers to continue their noble mission, the grand Mahotsav brought together several distinguished leaders and dignitaries. Addressing the gathering, Honourable Union Home Minister Amit Shah paid a heartfelt tribute to the spirit of BAPS volunteerism and reflected on his personal association with Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

In his video message, Honourable PM Shri Narendra Modi also praised the selfless spirit of the volunteers and offered his heartfelt wishes and respects for the occasion. He said, “It is a great achievement for any organisation to register and organise more than 100,000 volunteers to serve dedicatedly and faithfully for society. I congratulate and convey my well wishes to you all. My connection with Pramukh Swami Maharaj is an integral part of my life.”

Of course, every act of selfless seva leaves a footprint not on stone, but on human hearts.

(Dr Swami Gyanananddas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)

The Journey out of Guilt

A gang member asked me if his karma would be forgiven...

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

A young man once stood before me to ask a question that had been troubling him for years. He was a gang member and drug dealer, and had hurt many people along the way. He wanted to know if those actions would follow him for the rest of his life. Would he have to pay for his wrongdoings? Would his karmas be forgiven? Such were his questions.

I told him, Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, whatever wrong a person might have done in the past, the moment they come onto the spiritual path, they are already moving in the right direction. Then only good things will happen to them.

The young man said, “Already, better things have started happening to me.” For this shift to stay, this knowledge has to be there in the mind. You have to come back to it again and again, until it settles in completely. When this knowledge resonates more and more in your mind, there is no way anything can go wrong.

He had made a real commitment, and that commitment mattered more than the years that came before it. It does not erase what happened, but it does change what happens now and in the future.

In the Srimad Bhagwatam, there is a similar story about a king named Ajamila, a man whose life was marked by many vices. But when he was on his deathbed, he called out for his son, whose name happened to be Narayana, one of the names of God. In that instant of calling out God's name, even though his intention was entirely personal, he found liberation. This story helps to build trust in people that, however their past has been, there is no need to waste time worrying, being tense and guilty about it. Even at the last moment, chanting God's name can help you attain liberation.

This does not mean that you do whatever you want in life and at the last moment chant God's name. It doesn't give you a license to indulge in vices under the assumption that everything is forgiven regardless. It only indicates that you don't have to be guilty of your past and continue repenting it. The past is gone, and what matters now is devotion and connection to the Divine in the present.

Carrying guilt for years is like the fire that burns you from inside. Guilt does have some purpose. It stops a person from continuing a cycle of actions that harm themselves or



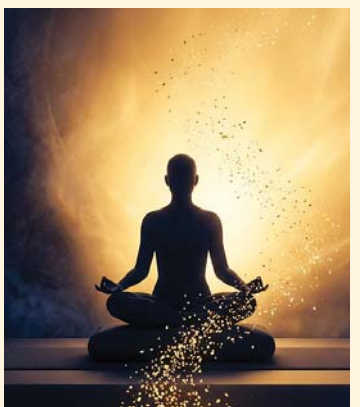
“A GURU CAN DEFINITELY RELIEVE A PERSON OF THEIR SINS, THOUGH THE PERSON MUST ALSO MAKE SOME EFFORT OF THEIR OWN” – GURUDEV

others, acting like a brake at the right moment. But once that purpose has been served, holding on to it further does nothing but weigh a person down. That person who made the mistake has packed their suitcase and left. What remains is a new person. Start believing in the innocence of the present moment.

This is where the role of a Guru becomes significant. A Guru can definitely relieve a person of their sins, though the person must also make some effort of their own. When you sin and you realise that you made a mistake, you cannot relieve yourself of sin, but the Guru can definitely do it for you. At the same time, you have to do Purusharth (self-effort). You need to do some good work. And the sense of love and devotion is equally proportionate to the amount of karma that gets released.

There is a simple way to understand how this works. If a room has been in darkness for twenty years, it does not take another twenty for a lamp to dispel the darkness in the room. In the same way, if negative karma is there, there is little darkness; there is no light there. Put the light on; darkness vanishes.

How to get rid of negative karma? With meditation, knowledge, and service. Meditation settles down the feverishness in the mind and makes you more aware. Through awareness, wisdom dawns in you and purifies you, burning all your karmas. Wisdom is the prevention, and meditation is the cure. The deeper you go in meditation, the urge to share increases. If you do some work for others, you gain merit for yourself. If someone is happy, just know that they have done some seva in the past.



HOW TO GET RID OF NEGATIVE KARMA? WITH MEDITATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND SERVICE. MEDITATION SETTLES DOWN THE FEVERISHNESS IN THE MIND AND MAKES YOU MORE AWARE. THROUGH AWARENESS, WISDOM DAWNS IN YOU AND PURIFIES YOU, BURNING ALL YOUR KARMAS

Conversely, if you are not happy now, do seva and gain more merit. It's like improving the bank balance. The more you give, the more strength will be given to you. The more we open ourselves, the more room we will have for God to fill us.

Know that the negative karma does not touch the true Self in you. The way a shadow does not touch a person standing in the sun.

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Names deleted from a list

DR. AJAY KUMMAR PANDEY

There was a time when a voter list was a dull document. It sat in the Block Development Office, it was consulted once in five years, and nobody imagined that a clerical entry in it could decide whether a man boards a flight, joins the Army, or feeds his family. In West Bengal, in the summer of 2026, the voter list has become the most consequential piece of paper in a citizen's life. It was never meant to be. Consider three residents of this state who have never met one another.

The first is a young man from Cooch Behar. He cleared every stage of the Indian Army's Agniveer recruitment: written, physical, medical. All that remained was a Police Clearance Certificate. The police would not process it. His name, they said, had been deleted from the electoral roll during the Special Intensive Revision. The Army had found him fit to defend the country; the local thana was not satisfied that he belonged to it. It took a petition before the Calcutta High Court, and the High Court's request to the appellate tribunal to hear his appeal urgently, before the deletion was set aside and his appointment saved.

The second is one of the most senior newspapermen of Kolkata, the former Editor of The Telegraph, a Ballygunge voter of long standing. His name went the same way, on the ground of a "logical discrepancy" that nobody has explained to him. He could not vote in April. Then his passport renewal stalled. The police sent an adverse verification report, citing nothing except the deletion of his name from the voters' list. He has since described his days

as an unending round of appeal trackers, verification offices and letters to institutions where his parents studied and taught more than sixty years ago, hunting for papers to prove that his family existed. He missed his daughter's wedding abroad.

The third has no byline and no writ petition. He is the daily-wage labourer of Murshidabad or Malda whose name was deleted along with lakhs of others, whose appeal lies in a queue before a tribunal, and who learnt in June that the state had linked his ration card to the voter list. By an order of the Food and Supplies Department, ration cards of persons deleted in the SIR are to be marked inactive; those with pending appeals continue to receive their entitlements only until their appeals are decided. A cash-transfer scheme for women has been linked in the same fashion. A farm labourers' union has challenged the linkage; the Supreme Court declined an urgent hearing and directed it to the Calcutta High Court, where the matter now rests. The union's estimate of ration cards at risk runs into the tens of lakhs.

Three lives, one pattern. The deletion was supposed to mean one thing only: that a name would not appear on a voters' list. The Supreme Court, even while upholding the revision exercise, said so in terms. The Election Commission's inquiry is confined to electoral consequences and is not a determination of citizenship, which only the competent authority under the Citizenship Act can make.

Yet in practice the deletion has begun to travel. It has walked out of the electoral roll and into the police verification report, the passport file, the recruitment dossier and

now the ration shop. A single administrative entry, made in lakhs of cases on grounds as vague as "logical discrepancy", is functioning as an all-purpose certificate of suspicion.

The safety valve for all this was supposed to be the appellate tribunal. Nineteen were constituted on the Supreme Court's directions, each headed by a retired High Court judge. Their record after roughly a hundred days: about thirty thousand appeals disposed of, out of nearly thirty-three lakh, which is less than one per cent. In Murshidabad, 112 appeals decided against more than six lakh filed; in Malda, 185. Judges have resigned.

There is no website on which an appellant can even see the status of his case. And here is the figure that should trouble every fair-minded reader: of the appeals actually heard in the early months, a substantial majority ended in the name being restored. Where the process worked, it found the deletions wrong more often than right. For everyone else the wait continues, and while it continues the vote is gone, the clearance is withheld, and the ration card hangs by a thread.

I write this not as a partisan of any party. The revision was conducted under one government and the welfare linkage has come under another. I write as a lawyer looking at what the sum of these measures does to the ordinary citizen of this state. The genius of our constitutional arrangement was that a man's civic existence never rested on a single document. Citizenship, the franchise, employment, movement, food: each had its own law, its own procedure, its own safeguards. What Bengal is witnessing is the quiet collapsing of all of them into one list, maintained



by an administrative process that its own tribunals are finding wrong in most of the cases they manage to hear.

The courts will, in time, answer the legal questions. The Calcutta High Court has the ration matter, the tribunals have the appeals, and election law provides its own remedies for constituencies where the margins were thinner than the deletions. But some things should not have to wait for judgments.

No police officer needs a court order to stop treating a voter-list entry as proof of nationality; the Supreme Court has already spoken.

No department needs litigation to know that a man's food should not depend on a list compiled for elections. And no citizen of this state, whether he edits a newspaper or carries head-loads at a railway site, should have to prove to a clerk's satisfaction that he exists.

A voter list ought to go back to being a dull document. The measure of the coming months is how quickly Bengal can make it one again.

The writer is an Advocate practising before the Supreme Court of India and Founder & Managing Partner, 4C Supreme Law International. He is also National Spokesperson of the Lok Janshakti Party - Ram Vilas, a member of the National Democratic Alliance.

The ABH of SDGs

ANDREW SHENG

Sitting by the Tanjung Aru beach watching one of the most stunning sunsets in the world, I reflected on what it would take to prioritize the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We had just finished an intense three days with 170 local and global organizations like WWF, mostly non-governmental civil societies, businesses, investors and policy makers on how we should accelerate action on bringing impact investing in SDG projects at scale in Sabah and beyond. The United Nations launched their 17 SDGs in 2015 and ten years later, only 18 per cent of the goals seem achievable by 2030. Bluntly speaking, lots of aspirations, but insufficient impact and almost no money, on top of a lack of political will.

If practical execution is the process, the end game is to Pick or Prioritize the Problems, Fix them and Show everyone. Complaining gets you nowhere. The people will only believe when you deliver planetary and human justice. But we must start small, think big and act at scale.

So, with limited resources, what would we pick to deliver impact on biodiversity, water, food and energy?

The Amazon Basin, Borneo Island, and the Hindu Kush Himalaya (together ABH) are not just wild and exotic, they form the planetary frontier for experimentation and action on climate stability, biodiversity, and human survival. Combined,

ABH holds nearly 40 per cent of the Earth's terrestrial carbon, sustains one-quarter of all known species, and secures water, food, and energy for nearly 3 billion people across three continents. But the threats are daunting: deforestation, peat destruction, glacial melt, and short-sighted uncoordinated development may trigger irreversible tipping points that will harm rich and poor across the world.

Each region shows unique features. According to the UN 2025 report, the Amazon basin spans nine countries and holds 120-200 billion tonnes of carbon. The mighty Amazon discharges one-fifth of global river flow from the Andes to the Atlantic. Home to 47 million people, slash and burn for industrial output has cut 18 per cent of its original forest, and if climate warming accelerates, the world's largest rainforest could shift permanently to savannah - altering global weather patterns forever.

The Hindu Kush Himalaya is the "Third Pole" holding much of high-altitude ice compared with the North and South Poles, but it is warming 2-2.5 times faster than the global average. Its glaciers feed ten major rivers that sustain 1.7-2 billion people across Asia. If these glaciers disappear, they will trigger huge floods or droughts, threatening heat and food crises for nearly one quarter of mankind in South Asia alone.

Borneo - and within it, Sabah in East Malaysia, is the smallest of the three regions by area and population, but it packs the highest

carbon density on Earth, storing nearly 40 billion tonnes including vast peatlands that hold 40 per cent of that total. Sabah's blue economy - with four of the world's top dive sites to 59 per cent of Malaysia's mangroves - contributes 18-22 per cent of state GDP and supports millions of livelihoods.

But Sabah and Borneo are also at extreme risk: 30 per cent of original forest is cleared, and peatlands exposed to industrial agriculture are releasing methane that adds to global warming. In terms of human biodiversity, Borneo has the same number of 2.2 million indigenous people who protect the forest, rivers and seas as the Amazon.

The economics are unambiguous. Adding data from all the UN reports suggests that protecting all three regions requires US\$67-91 billion annually through 2030 - less than 0.1 per cent of global GDP. These could return huge benefits in terms of avoiding climate heating, water stress for billions of people and finding solutions for sustainable, inclusive and environmental protection and productivity at scale.

Impact investing means finding the blended sources of capital from charitable foundations, friends and family, retained profits and mainstream equity markets, banking, insurance and pension and sovereign wealth funds to make change at scale. Put human capital (money) to fix and nourish natural capital. We need money, technology and markets to help communities protect nature.



We just need pilot projects and pioneer eco-warriors to show the way. Listening to the passionate native civil society movements, particularly from the indigenous tribes, Sabah can prove how to close this gap. It is uniquely positioned to combine four finance streams unavailable together anywhere else: terrestrial forest carbon, peat carbon, blue carbon from mangroves and reefs, and premium markets for sustainable palm oil, seafood and ecotourism. Sabah straddles the highlands of Mount Kinabalu like the Himalayas, the Kinabatangan river basin that is a micro-model of the Amazons, and lies at the heart or head of Borneo island.

The choice is clear: we either treat the three ABH regions as separate "environmental" crises spots, or act together to secure the systems that keep our climate stable, our food growing, and our water, energy and economies flowing. Sabah can show us the way - now the world must back her, and scale

the lessons to the Amazon, Borneo and the Himalayas.

This is thinking global, framing regionally, and be the focal for acting local. This fusion of urgency, integration, and forward-looking policy makes the small state of Sabah the ideal global pilot. Her 2025 Climate Change & Carbon Governance Enactment - the first of its kind in Southeast Asia - enshrines free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), guarantees 50 per cent+ benefit sharing for customary communities, and creates a unified registry for forest, peat and blue carbon. No other jurisdiction in these three regions has combined these elements into law.

It is time to stop preaching. The risks of not acting are higher than being the path-maker and thought leader hub of climate action.

The writer is Adjunct Professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing and University of Malaya, and former Chairman of the Securities and Futures Commission, Hong Kong. Special to ANN.

Crossword | No. 293525

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Last Sunday's Solution

S I A N D P I P T E R W E I T T H
C O A A E E N O
A R T I S A N A V E N G E R
R E S T L P R S
F O L L I E S I M I T A T E
E O S S E T P
A T T E N D I A N T S H E L L
R T V S E T S E C O N D A R Y
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R O U N D E R M A R T I N S
O N D B A V T H
P E N S I V E P L A C A T E
O E E N T A N T O
D O D O S T E E N A G E R S

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1 Perverse aversion to whisky (7,3,5)
9 French left without social skills (6)
10 Lender cried out to Rishi initially (8)
11 Protesting members entering America (2,4)
14 Theatre god (6)
17 Partisan loyalty on organised trip so typical (5,8)
20 Difficulty finding somewhere to go (13)
23 Day in Ascot rearranged for groups of eight (6)
25 Wake-up call first for Cassandra? (8)
28 Fast car reversed inside - there's the rub (8)
29 Got back trouble carrying a box to Baltic state (6)
30 Policy advisor's banker ruins core review (9,6)
3 Native American furious to lose ancestry (5)
4 Curse Cornish listener (5)
5 Loads of headless nails (5)
6 Looker seen at Suffolk town dance (7)
7 Thick-skinned heavyweight who charges money (5)
8 Anxiously fixed louvres in city (9)
12 Border protection (5)
13 Times up in West perhaps? (5)
15 One learning about wine region (5)
16 Call for attention twice, holding vote for the masses (3,6)
17 Choose detailed books on decorative embroidery (5)
18 Gold that is left for Oxford college window (5)
19 Intimate meal with no starter (5)
21 Is absorbed by medal - time to show guts (7)
22 Dream about Persia (6)
24 Say goodbye to a pass at university (5)
25 Make room at the top by trimming trellis (5)
26 Perform without notes from Brideshead librettist (2-3)
27 Saw excessive award overturned (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

NOW AND AGAIN

THE BRILLIANT SCHOLAR

DEVENDRA SAKSENA

After a long and eventful stay in Bombay (now Mumbai), on promotion, I was posted to Jamnagar in Gujarat. The change was total, but pleasant; while Bombay never slept, it was lights-out by 9 pm in Jamnagar. The entire town, including all Government offices, shut down in the afternoon, for an after-lunch siesta.

Jamnagar had little traffic, no double-decker BEST buses, no incessant honking on roads, and instead of big ugly skyscrapers, it had small graceful bungalows. Life in Jamnagar was leisurely, sometimes maddeningly so; after you gave a reel at the photo shop, it would be sent to Ahmedabad for developing, and you would receive the prints only after three-four days. Alas, those halcyon days are over; with the advent of Reliance and other big companies, the geography and character of Jamnagar have undergone a sea change.

There was also a great drawback; Gujarat had been reeling under a drought for the last three years, and water was in short supply. People had dug pits, where taps let out a weak trickle for half an hour or so, that too, once in two days. Accustomed to free-flowing water in our stamp-sized Pedder Road flat, we took a long time to adjust to water rationing.

I had a large area under my superintendence, which kept me constantly on the move. One district with me was Bhuj (Kutch), which was five hours by car, and fifteen minutes by an Air India flight. The ticket cost a princely sum of a hundred and fifty rupees. My one-year-old son, had the distinction of taking this flight on a ticket costing fifteen rupees.

Bhuj had an Income-tax Officer, Mr. X, who, intriguingly, was from the same place, and bore the same surname, as the big boys of the diamond trade I had accosted in Bombay. I could only wonder whether Mr X had any connection with those people, and if so, what prompted him to serve in the Income-tax Department and not join the highly lucrative diamond trade? After some months, with increasing familiarity, I could gather the courage to ask Mr X the reason.

I was surprised by what Mr X had to tell me. It appeared that he belonged to Palanpur, the cradle of diamond merchants. Also, Mr X came from the diamond trading community, and to top it all, the biggest names in the diamond trade had been his class fellows in childhood. Mr X had been a role model for his classmates, because he was a brilliant student, the perennial class-topper, while the future billionaires just about scraped through.

After college, Mr X's classmates joined their struggling family diamond business, which gave poor returns, and was risky, because sometimes, unknowingly, you ended up handling smuggled stones. Meanwhile, true to his acumen, Mr X, cleared the Income-tax Inspectors' Exam at the first attempt, for which he was widely feted in his hometown. Everyone labelled Mr X as a great success, because he had become a 'sahib,' at such a young age.

However, soon enough, with the diamond boom of the 1980s, the tide turned. While Mr X was promoted to Income-tax Officer, his contemporaries raked in moolah by the bucketful. This was the bitter reward for Mr X's brilliance, who vowed to discourage his children from becoming too bright in their studies.

100 Years Ago

News Items

AIRMEN RELEASED

FRENCHMEN'S MACHINE CONFISCATED

(*"Times" Special Service, London, July.*)

A Paris message states that Captain Arrachart who, with his brother, left Le Bourget on June 28 in an attempt to break the world's record for a non-stop aeroplane flight, has returned by rail from Budapest, where the authorities compelled him to quit his aeroplane, which was confiscated. The Arrachart brothers were detained on the pretext that notice of their intention to land in Hungary was not given. The French Government protested and the airmen were released.

FINANCE MEASURES

CHAMBER REJECTS FIRST CLAUSE

Paris, July.

The Chamber's Finance Committee has rejected by fourteen votes to thirteen the first clause of the Government's finance proposals, whereby financial measures are to be taken by decree. M. Caillaux's Bill consists of two clauses, the first authorizing the decrees and the second providing for the submission of these decrees to Parliament at its opening session in 1927. Meanwhile the measures prescribed are being effective. Thus the Finance Committee's rejection of the first clause knocks the bottom out of the whole Bill. The fate of the Government hangs on the general finance debate, which begins in the Chamber to-morrow, when the Government will submit the Bill.—Reuter.



Who moved the teacher's chair? When private equity goes to school

Investors promise shiny campus upgrades and a second life for struggling institutions.
But can classrooms be run like a business? Sunday Times finds out

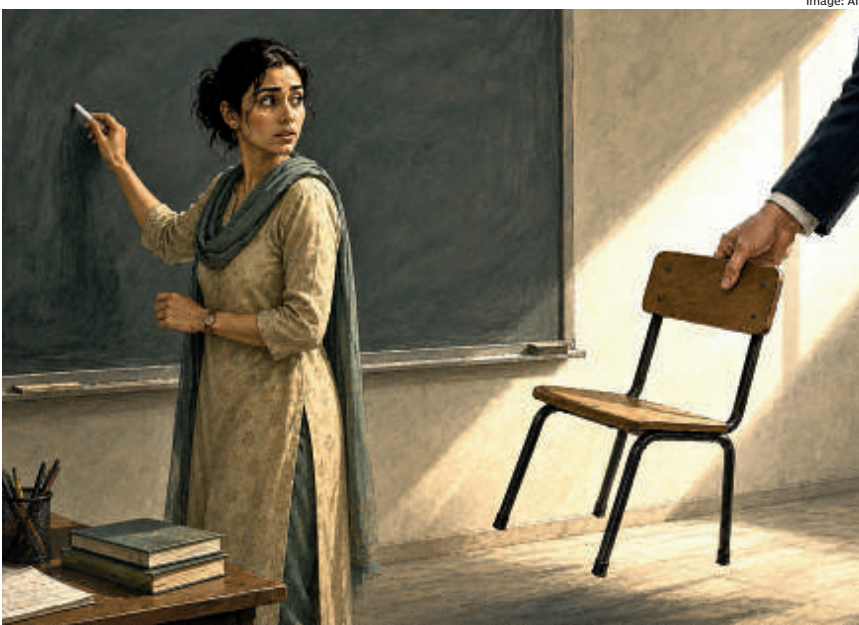
Hemali.Chhappia@timesofindia.com

PE SCHOOL PLAYBOOK FOR INDIA

In India, K-12 schools must legally operate as not-for-profit trusts or societies, so private equity rarely buys the school itself. Instead, it invests in the businesses around the school—management companies, chain platforms, franchise networks and campus real estate

SIX WAYS PE ENTERS

- Platform buyout:** Buy a school chain and add campuses
- Growth capital:** Invest in expansion without taking control
- PropCo—OpCo:** Own campus real estate, lease it to schools
- Management co:** Earn fees for branding, HR, curriculum, admin
- Franchise:** Local partner owns campus; chain supplies brand and systems
- Vertical stack:** Link pre-school, K-12 and after-school services



WHY INVESTORS LIKE SCHOOLS

- Predictable annual fee income
- Growing premium-school demand
- Fragmented market
- Scope to improve operations

KEY RISKS

Fee regulation | Teacher shortages | Regulatory scrutiny | Quality vs profitability

PE BY THE NUMBERS

85 funding rounds for education in 2025
\$580m raised by schools
\$4m avg acquisition value
20 M&A deals

Source: LoEstro Advisors report, 2026

FIRST MAJOR PE-BACKED K-12 DEAL

In 2019, UK-based Nord Anglia acquired Oakridge Schools in Hyd

as 'strategy consultants', 'integration specialists' and 'transition champions', guiding schools through changes once rare enough to be crises.

Investors and large school operators argue that professional capital can preserve institutions that might otherwise decline or close and fund better teacher training, experienced administrators, and access to technology. In such cases, transformation can be less an act of take-over than one of rescue.

But a school is not only an asset. It is a network of memory, habit and trust—the teacher who knows three generations of a family, the counsellor children seek during a crisis, the rituals that make alumni feel they still belong and the passing down of institutional culture.

Educationist Francis Joseph, associated with school-transformation programmes, which work with campuses in need of capital and operational support, insists that their stated approach is broader than refurbishment: strengthening leadership and teaching, modernising infrastructure, improving inclusion, and placing student well-being at the centre of the turnaround.

Several parents and educators who have witnessed schools change hands say these are often the first things placed at risk when operational costs are reviewed.

"Mental wellness becomes non-essential, and the training of newly recruited teachers in the school's legacy is done away with," says a former principal of a prom-

inent Gurugram school who resigned after its takeover by a private equity firm.

A former head of school is more blunt. "All private equity investment enters schools with an exit date," she says. PE firms typically seek to raise a school operator's valuation before selling their stake to another investor. "And so Excel cost sheets begin deciding what a school must continue to offer and what must be removed." Each exit can bring another shift in ownership, priorities and operations.

But at the school she led, the first such shift was unsettling enough. A month after the takeover, she recalls sitting alone in her cabin and wondering where she was. The building remained familiar; the institution did not. "I had lost my sense of purpose," she says. Many teachers followed her out. "Today, that school is not even a shade of the legacy institution we built."

Parents can be left equally disoriented. In 2023, after the admission season had ended at DPS Sonipat, the management decided to hand over operations to a private equity-backed organisation. Parents protested, and some demanded school-leaving certificates.

That is why communication cannot be treated as a ceremonial afterthought, says Joseph. "It is important to hold a town hall, allay the fears of parents and give them clarity about the road ahead."

The method matters as much as the money, argues Swati Popat Vats, director of Inspirenext Learning Foundation. "When corporate or private equity enters

education, the traditional playbook of cost optimisation often fails when it treats an ecosystem of human relationships like a standard manufacturing supply chain."

The conflict lies in the different clocks governing capital and childhood. Investors measure performance in quarters and years; schools, through the slow accumulation of trust, the maturation of teachers and the growth of children. "A laboratory can be rebuilt in months; a culture may take decades to form and only weeks to damage," adds Popat Vats.

When fresh capital arrives, growth often becomes the first imperative. Marketing budgets increase, facades are repainted, laboratories are upgraded, and campuses are redesigned to attract more students. But the effects do not stop at the gates.

"It shakes the entire neighbourhood," Joseph says. Families look towards the shinier campus while smaller schools, unable to match its spending, lose students and staff. "As nearby schools lose admissions, they too begin seeking capital, new partners or buyers. One acquisition can therefore create the conditions for the next," he adds.

Investment itself is not the problem. Some schools are poorly governed, neglect teachers, or allow standards to decline. "Capital, professionally deployed, can provide institutions with a second life," says Chhumal. But what kind of school emerges into that second life? Is it stronger because enrolment has risen, costs have fallen, and buildings look better? Or should success also be measured by teacher stability, student well-being, parental trust and the institutional character it retains?

For Chhumal, the answer lies not in resisting investment, but in recognising that a school cannot be run like any other business. "The landscape of K-12 education is changing," she says. "Only schools with passion and compassion will survive."

Cost optimisation often fails when it treats human relationships like a standard manufacturing supply chain. A laboratory can be rebuilt in months; a culture takes decades to form and only weeks to damage

Swati Popat Vats, DIRECTOR, INSPIRENEXT LEARNING FOUNDATION



From e-hundis to digital gold, temples turn to 'faith-tech' to track offerings

After the Ram Mandir scandal, shrines are making a quick move to cashless donations and electronic audits to rebuild trust. But cultural beliefs and patchy networks are slowing that transition

Shruti.Sonal@timesofindia.com

For generations, devotees have believed that once their money, accompanied by whispered prayers, disappears into a temple hundi, it will reach its intended purpose.

That understanding is now under scrutiny, with the faith of millions of devotees shaken by allegations that employees and intermediaries at Ayodhya's Ram Mandir siphoned off donation money through fake receipts and unauthorised collections, triggering a gruelling chase for the crores missing from the temple's coffers. Meanwhile, temples across India are swapping hundis for QR codes, payment apps and digital kiosks, not only to improve transparency but also reduce the scope for human error.

Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have already popularised the e-hundi system, allowing temple trusts to partner with banks and payment platforms to accept digital donations globally. At the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan, a Supreme Court-appointed management committee has intensified efforts to promote online donations, with digital contributions now accounting for nearly 20% of offerings.

Startups, too, are pushing the envelope as this new pillar of 'faith-tech' grabs the spotlight after every embezzlement controversy. Pratyush Ambuj, co-founder and head of temple acquisition at SwaDharma, says the platform, which provides temple management and payment pro-

cessing services, has onboarded over 150 mandirs and 250 mandals, including Sidhivinayak, Jagannath Puri, Kashi Vishwanath and Parmarth Niketan.

It recently installed kiosks along the Amarnath Yatra route, where pilgrims can make donations or book darshans at the click of a button. Its dashboards let temple trusts access all details of the donations—including their purpose—and reconcile their books, going beyond the simple transaction ID that UPI payment screenshots usually provide. Even the cash collections at the onboarded temples are logged on the platform, while donors automatically receive tax compliance certificates.

"In crowded temples, devotees are not even allowed to pause for a minute at the

Today, everything related to gold and silver in a temple is fragmented and unorganised. We wanted to bring an additional transparency layer where every penny could be tracked...so that we don't have to rely on a person's good intentions for the safety of the donation

Amol Bansal, FOUNDER OF MYGOLD



daan peti. Half of them are unable to drop their money offerings. Having multiple kiosks across the temple lets them scan and donate while they're standing in the queue," he adds.

Ambuj admits things often "move slowly", but says younger members joining temple trusts and management committees are making them more open to digitisation. While some temples use their services year-round, other mandals turn to them during peak seasons such as Ganapati puja, when crowds swell into lakhs. "We work very closely with Mumbai's GSB Ganapati Mandal, the richest Ganapati mandal in India. Their annual collection increased by 10x after they adopted our digital payment platform and kiosks last year," he adds.

BEYOND THE DONATION BOX

The push to digitise donations is not just limited to cash. Gold and other precious offerings are also coming under the digitisation lens. According to World Gold Council estimates, Indian temples collectively hold 2,000-4,000 tonnes of gold amassed through centuries of devotee donations, rivaling central bank reserves. Arrests in the Ram Mandir case have led to the recovery of allegedly siphoned gold jewellery, while an activist has filed a police complaint alleging that 1,250 gold, silver and diamond bricks donated during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement have gone missing. Last year, Kerala's Sabarimala temple was embroiled in controversy after the state high court said there



was evidence that some idols had been stripped of their gold covering.

Enter MyGold, a 'phy-gital' startup that lets temples move beyond storing donated gold in vaults prone to theft or inaccessible bank lockers. Instead of offering physical ornaments or bars, devotees scan a QR code and make a payment. These payments, which can be as small as Rs 10, are then recorded on the platform, and their equivalent value in gold is credited to the temple's account at an MMTC vault, from where it can later be redeemed as physical gold when required, with the weight fully insured.

"Today, everything related to gold and silver in a temple is fragmented and unorganised. The recent controversies have shown how difficult it is to store gold, track its exact weight and coating, and protect it from environmental damage," says Amol Bansal, founder of MyGold.

"We wanted to bring an additional transparency layer where every penny could be tracked in terms of how it was converted to gold, how much gold was collected, and how much is still lying in

Tapur, tupur to rimjhim, listening to the sound of rain

Sumana Roy

I teach poetry. The semesters are named after the seasons—Monsoon and Spring. We collect onomatopoeia, the sounds of water. Our first collection station is often the rains. We say the obvious—it rains differently in the English language than it does in the Indian languages. In Bangla, for instance, the sound for fat drops of rain is 'tapur tapur'. In English it's 'pitter patter'. The consonants overlap: 't', 'p', 'r', arranged differently on two continents; the open-mouthed 'a' and the pull of 'u' of the Bangla have their counterparts in the clipped vowel sounds of 'i' and 'e'. The consonants are aligned differently as well—the fat drops are held in the opening 't' sounds of the Bangla, 'tapur tapur'; the curtness of slim English rain in the polite opening 'p' sounds. That is why we can enjoy being bathed in the monsoonal rains in Bombay when Kishore Kumar sings "Rimjhim girey sawan..." The 'r' is liquid, the 'jh' adds flow and fluidity, the reason the names of water bodies often begin with the sound: 'jharna', 'jhora'. The 'jh' sound falls off the tip of our tongue, like water drops fall off our bodies, or dust off brooms, the reason they are called 'jhata' or 'jharu' in Bangla and Hindi.

We notice what the vowels do to water—the difference between 'drip' and 'drop', for instance, a tiny i-like thread from a tap and the o' of a fat globe. 'Barish' in Hindi, 'brishhti' in Bangla, the words hold their rhythm and their flow, even their fall. These are drops—small, thin, long or fat; they fall separately. The words fill with them; we hear them, like we do a jug or bucket, differently. There's a sense of abundance in the words themselves: it's not one drop or two, but a few more, a continuous more. What happens when the abundance changes to excess? 'Bonnaya', 'badhi', 'badhi', the Bangla, Hindi and Nepali words for flood, begin with 'b' as well, the same sound as 'brishhti' and 'barish', but there must be something different in the code of these sounds that gives us a sense of accumulation, even an intimation of fear.

Notice how our tongue gets stuck and almost anaesthetised when we say 'badhi'. It's almost like 'bandhi', where the tongue gets paralysed temporarily, turned into a statue by the sound, by its architecture. But in the Hindi word for flood, the 'n' sound is missing. It's not the nasal 'n' but a liquid 'r'—that's the water; the waterlogging to be more specific. The 'n' appears in the Bangla, in 'bannaya' but also in the more colloquial 'baan'. I, like many, learnt the word from a child rhyme—"Brishti pawrey tapur tapur/Nadey elo baan/Shib thakur biye holo/Teen kanya daan" (It's raining tapur tapur, the river's in flood, Shiv's got married, given three brides). Even at that young age, entering a language unconsciously, I could not have failed to register that 'bannaya' rhymes with 'kanya', 'flood' with 'daughter'. I was one—"kanya". There was also the other rhyme: 'baan' and 'daan', 'flood' with 'donation', giving away. The relation between women and water; set up so early in a girl's life, haunts and directs her



self-instructionally. Not just the women should-be-like-water adage about adapting to the shape of the vessel but more violent ones, of the kind people like my mother had to hear, when they married against their parents' wishes—being thrown into a well, like a clay jug.

In a poem where Rabindranath quotes this child rhyme, reminding the reader that he too, like us, had been inducted into the language through the same folk idiom, he uses other onomatopoeic sounds for water. At first the 'tapur tapur', then 'jhoop jhoop jhoop', which Tagore, very cleverly, rhymes with the little boy's 'choop', listening in silence. In 'jhoop jhoop

jhoop', the water isn't slim and small any more; it's not 'tapur tapur'; it has been collecting and growing girth, sitting on bushes and roofs and eaves and falling from there. The rain is not an infant anymore; it has grown into an adolescent. There's something in that sound which gives us an intimation of excess—that the centre cannot hold anymore, that the water must fall. Gravity makes its presence felt in that sound, as it does in, say, 'thud'. Water is being pulled towards the earth, and it is collecting there. Drops of water can make an ocean, and many tapur



We can enjoy being bathed in the monsoonal rains in Bombay when Kishore Kumar sings "Rimjhim girey sawan..." The 'r' is liquid, the 'jh' adds flow and fluidity. The 'jh' sound falls off the tip of our tongue, like water drops fall off our bodies, or dust off brooms

tupur can make jhoop jhoop jhoop. What happens after that? Or when there is no ocean for the water to flow into?

Another 'j' word. 'Pani jam gaya'. 'Jam'—after the 'jhoop jhoop jhoop'—means to collect; it also means to solidify. Water is collecting, solidifying. Not inside a refrigerator, not on mountain peaks, but on land. 'Jal', water; 'jam', waterlogging. Land is turning into water. We are not water animals. 'Machhli jal ki rani hai, jeevan uska pani hai' (Fish is the queen of water, its life is of water). Notice where the rhyme falls—"pani" and "rani", water and queen. But we have no fins, no scales, no tail. How will we be our own boats? Our languages shout out for oars. Poems about flood end abruptly. 'Flood', Miyazawa Kenji, the Japanese agronomist-poet's poem ends with 'I went in the water a few minutes ago, up to my waist... leaving us worried for him. A Birendra Chattopadhyay poem ends with 'Tyaro nodir jawley/Buk du-biye khudar michhil chawley' (Drowning its chest in the water of 13 rivers, hunger marches on). We are left to imagine the sound of hunger's march past.

Roy is a poet and author

TRUST GAP

Ambuj estimates that of all the temple donations being made in the country, only 10% are taking the digital route at present. In a country that accounts for 50% of the world's digital transactions, this seems to be a paradox.

Gireesh Kulkarni, founder of global digital repository Temple Connect, says the matter is not about temple trusts being reluctant to go the digital route. "We deal with nearly 17,000 temples in about 59 countries. Most of them are more than proactive about incorporating technologies into their systems. But it's also on the devotee to use them religiously," he says.

E-donations face multiple roadblocks, Kulkarni points out. Mobile phones are barred inside some temples. Many devotees also believe in placing offerings before the idol rather than scanning a QR code at the entrance. "In terms of gold or other physical offerings, there's a belief in giving away something close to their heart. It is a huge liability for temples to maintain, but because it has come to them in that format, they have to safeguard it."

Despite these, efforts are being ramped up, Kulkarni says. At the International Temples Convention and Expo conducted by Temple Connect in Tirupati last year, ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce) presented a case study on how cashless transactions can be done around temples and the temple economy. MyGold's Bansal also presented ideas of how physical gold can be replaced by digital gold in a larger way.

However, the way forward is mandated by state endowment boards to make cashless offerings compulsory, Kulkarni says, along with initiatives by the National Payments Corporation of India and ONDC that improve connectivity and iron out network issues.

Meanwhile, temple trusts and management committees have no choice but to strengthen CCTV surveillance, audits, and IT oversight. After all, even in the abode of gods, faith alone is no longer enough.



DIGI DAAN: Inauguration of a SwaDharma payment kiosk at Kundal Dham, Gujarat

the temple coffers so that we don't have to rely on a person's good intentions for the safety of the donation," he adds.

In the past few months, they've set up their systems at three temples, including the Khatu Shyam mandir, which saw annual donations worth Rs 250 crores in 2023. "We are in talks with all the major temples right now, but there's a lot of red tape as most of them are run by bigger trusts which meet once every three months. But I'm sure that post-Ram Mandir fiasco, they will understand better why it is needed," Bansal says.

Model is Out of Date

Indian IT companies have survived many technological upheavals. But AI is threatening their pyramid model resting on an army of workforce performing repetitive tasks. Can the industry reinvent itself?

Jochelle Mendonca

For decades it seemed Indian IT could only grow. The Y2K bug turbocharged their initial expansion in the late 1990s, and though later waves of changing technologies brought down other companies (remember Nokia), the Indian IT sector surged to success.

With every new technology, they pivoted. From SMAC (social, mobile, analytics and cloud) to SaaS (software as a service), they trained and retrained hundreds of thousands of employees to deliver what clients wanted. When the risk of commoditisation grew, threatening their margins, they doubled down on engineering freshers and even moved science graduates to some roles such as basic testing.

The last round of automation, which threatened to take a chunk out of their business, failed because the licences for robotic process automation were more expensive than freshers' annual salary. And the industry fought off claims that they were on their deathbed.

So when Sam Altman unveiled ChatGPT to the world in November 2022, it was initially just another new technology they thought they would need to adopt. But this time things were different. Enterprise technology typically moves slowly but companies wanted GenAI and the benefits (read cost savings) it could bring about as soon as possible and IT companies have rushed to comply.

Every single IT company has the same AI strategy—cut jobs, partner with OpenAI, Anthropic, or Palantir; change how they bid for projects, run and charge for them.

But three years on, a deeper problem remains. Indian IT's structure and culture was built around throwing people at a problem and managing the challenges that came with it. The rise of AI is making that irrelevant.

"Most IT services firms understand the strategy. They know AI will change delivery, pricing, talent models and client expectations. The harder part is changing the culture that made them successful in the first place," says Phil Fersht, CEO of the consultancy HFS Research.

PYRAMID MODEL

When the Indian IT industry was just an upstart in the 1980s and '90s, its founders and early employees came out of some of the best engineering colleges—NR Narayana Murthy had an M Tech from IIT-Kanpur, Nandan Nilekani went to IIT-Bombay. FC Kohli, who cofounded Tata Consultancy Services, earned his degree in electrical engineering from Queen's University in Canada.

Their success came not just from starting the sector, but scaling it. Just as Henry Ford revolutionised the automobile industry with his moving assembly line, Indian IT's breakthrough was in industrialising the IT business. Growth and scale meant putting in place structures and processes to deliver a high level of technology services but, this time, with freshers from tier-2 colleges from small towns—no fancy skills or degrees were required.

This was the birth of the pyramid model. Thousands of freshers at the base and then older, more experienced employees at the top. When they needed the skills that degrees from the best colleges could

bring, they hired them as a separate group. Infosys, for example, has power programmers; Tata Consultancy Services hires Prime fresher talent that gets paid about three times a regular fresher does. This talent is not fed into the general pyramid but is brought in when a project needs it.

This model has worked for decades. Even when technologies changed, IT companies simply tweaked what they offered. Their underlying model still worked.

"We are the children of prosperity. We have only seen growth and innovation that help us and create opportunities. The culture we have has been created in good times and has not been tested in bad times," says Abidali Neemuchwala, who was earlier CEO of Wipro and senior executive at TCS.

He adds that the best talent was isolated in chief technology officers or innovation labs and now it has to become part of the overall operating model. This will be a problem.

"We have these employees in separate units because they do not want to work in the traditional services model. In five years, we will need more employees like them throughout the business and making that change is something everyone is trying to figure out," says an HR head at a top Indian IT company.

To hire this talent and apply them throughout a company, IT companies will

We are the children of prosperity. We have only seen growth and innovation that help us and create opportunities. The culture we have has been created in good times and has not been tested in bad times"

ABIDALI NEEMUCHWALA, Former CEO, Wipro

need to make significant changes.

"The cultural challenge is that top-tier AI talent does not want to be managed like traditional services talent. They do not want layers of approval, utilisation policing and pyramid-style career structures. Firms will need to create more product-style teams, give these people greater autonomy and reward them for building reusable IP and outcomes rather than billable hours," says Fersht.

Neemuchwala calls this the industrial-vs-artisan model. "The model will have to be re-architected to the artisan mode... all the non-artisan work is going to disappear in 5-10 years and if you can't hire artisans, you are not going to have a company," he says.

SCALE VS AGENTS

Indian IT's biggest success was scale. When you are among the largest companies in the world, you get a shot at the biggest IT deals; being larger means you win larger deals and get even bigger.

As a result, IT companies doubled down on the pyramid and the kind of projects that would help them deploy this talent. They focused on large enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms, managing their clients' infrastructure, running their customer service operations—all the things that AI is threatening to take over.

"In the last four-five decades, industrialised IT/tech services firms like Accenture or TCS sold custom development, maintenance and testing services on top (of ERP platforms) for customers. However, AI and Gen AI allow enterprise clients to re-think technology across processes with an agentic layer either on top of ERPs or to create custom solutions that are faster to build and easier to maintain," says Gaurav Vasu, CEO of the consultancy Uneartinsight.

"This now challenges the business model of IT/tech services driven by application delivery services, testing and partnerships," he adds. According to him, the next winners will be those who can build horizontal and vertical agentic AI solutions that solve business problems without requiring "the large army".

That large army is also increasingly facing pressure from far smaller, more nimble competitors, some of whom know Indian IT business inside out. ET has reported how a slew of senior executives have left Indian IT firms to set up their own AI services start-ups backed by venture capital firms.

A few weeks ago, former Infosys CEO Vishal Sikka—who was one of the first to talk about how Indian IT's culture had kept it from being innovative—raised \$32 million

to launch an AI services company, HangTen Systems, that directly competes with Indian IT. About 10 years ago, at Infosys, Sikka talked about bringing in a product culture, which analysts pointed out would be crucial if a company had to successfully transition into AI services.

"Cultural transformation remains significantly harder than technology adoption. Product-oriented organisations require greater experimentation, tolerance for failure, investment ahead of revenue realisation and a stronger focus on outcomes rather than effort," says Gaurav Parab, principal IT analyst at the consultancy NelsonHall.

"The true test will be whether leadership teams are willing to adapt management systems, career structures and incentive models to support fundamentally different ways of working," he adds.

SINK, FLOAT, OR SURF?

One of the favourite phrases of an Indian IT leader is that a rising tide lifts all boats. Technology waves, which have boosted growth, have boosted it for everyone. And though IT companies love to talk about the large amount of work that AI will bring their way, this time it is going to be different.

"This is a massive rising tide opportunity, but it will not lift all boats. Companies that do well will be the ones that help their clients accelerate business value. AI for business is a significantly larger opportunity than AI for IT. As an industry we need to start thinking of [our] identity as less about IT and more about business impact and outcomes," says Jimit Arora, CEO, Everest Group.

But making this change will come at a cost. Indian IT companies will have to take risks—from clients they target to the companies they buy. That would require them to put more capital into investments even when the returns

Indian IT was built on breaking work into repeatable tasks and training large teams to execute those tasks at scale. That worked brilliantly when the constraint was access to affordable skilled labour. AI changes that equation"

PHIL FERSHT, CEO, HFS Research

aren't immediately apparent.

For listed Indian IT players, this is hard. A couple of weeks ago, mid-tier player Persistent System's shares dropped by 11% after it acquired German digital engineering firm Nagarro in a deal valued at 1.4 billion euros. Though analysts agreed with the deal's rationale—boosting its European business and giving it scale in key verticals—they found it too expensive.

Persistent's experience highlights how complicated is a transformation for a listed player. Shareholders are used to large margins that fund dividends and buybacks; investing for growth cuts into those returns.

"Making this change as a public company will be like trying to change the wheels of a car when you are speeding down the highway. At least, when you are a private company, you have the option of pulling over and doing this in a garage," says Neemuchwala. He points out that companies which have significant promoter ownership—like Wipro and TCS—could weather the turmoil, if the promoters bite the bullet. "(They) might be able to do this, if the promoters are willing to make the investments and say they will not look at the share price for three years. If the promoters are still looking for dividends and returns, then there won't be any benefit."

IT companies have started making the changes they need. But essentially discarding your strengths and having to rebuild a culture is hard. But if a company wants to survive the next decade, they don't really have another option.

As Ray Wang, CEO of Constellation Research, underlines, "Burning platforms change culture very quickly"

jochelle.mendonca1@timesofindia.com

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

The Pyramid Problem

AI is upending Indian IT's cheap labour-scaling model, forcing a shift to product-driven, artisan-talent teams.

Tune in to ETPlay.com. Available on EconomicTimes.com/podcast, Amazon Prime Music, Apple Podcasts, JioSaavn and Spotify.

Pankaj Rohatgi, vice president, engineering, product security, at Google, was in Bengaluru recently for the tech giant's flagship developer conference in the country. He spoke to **Nirmal John** on some of the burning issues in cybersecurity. Edited excerpts.

You have a background in cryptography. Is the pace of adopting post-quantum cryptography [which secures systems against attacks by quantum computers] satisfactory around the world, considering quantum computing appears closer than ever to threatening today's encryption standards?

We at Google regularly track the state of progress [in quantum]. It's a field that's not linear, so sometimes there are major breakthroughs. We have some brilliant mathematicians who are on top of this space. What we did just recently was to actually pull the deadline for adoption [of post-quantum cryptography] to 2029. We are trying to set an example for everybody and we are warning them that the time has come for you to migrate your systems. The other application, something Google is not directly involved in, but is going to be problematic [in a world where quantum computers can crack the maths underpinning today's encryption standards], is the Bitcoin protocol [which is underpinned by cryptographic math]. So that might be another incentive for people to build things faster and prepare for a post-quantum world. Looking at all of those factors, the world needs to move faster on post-quantum cryptography.

The 2029 date—what were the signals that led Google to suggest that?

It's all the research that is happening.

But countries like China which have invested heavily in quantum wouldn't want to disclose the state of their progress, right?

'Security is No Longer a Human-Scale Thing, It is Machine-Scale'

Yeah, it could be, and you've seen it in maybe the AI space as well. But when you look at the frontiers of research in any topic, especially when you have brilliant minds everywhere working on something, the gaps are a matter of one year or six months. I mean, it has been rare that someone has like a two- or three-year advantage, and the rest of the world is completely unaware.

Humans were supposed to be the weakest link in cybersecurity. Has that changed now that AI is being used actively by criminals to find vulnerabilities?

What we see coming more from our threat intelligence team is that humans used to be the vector through spear phishing [highly targeted attack]. That is now maybe slightly less than 50%. What has come up are the number of zero-day vulnerabilities—attacks

that are exploiting a vulnerability [enabled by AI deployment by bad actors].

In an agentic era, how much will user education on its vulnerabilities matter?

Just like in other areas, the user should be aware of the limitations of the agents.

In India, tech has created a new set of vulnerabilities like digital arrest scams. When so

much agency is given to algorithms, how much thought goes into designing guardrails, especially for vulnerable communities like the senior population?

This is definitely something that's top of mind for us. We have to think about the populations at risk. Children, too, right? We can put guardrails and controls on what an agent can do. So we put those controls and build them in. It's again more of a partnership between Google and other companies in not just building controls but also in educating the population. It's like, you know, my mother used to say, don't keep your jewellery at home, keep it in the locker. It is the equivalent of that. So if someone comes to my house and steals my locker key, they still have to go to that bank and prove their identity.

Google has a limit of ₹10,000 or \$100 for agentic AI transactions. How did you arrive at that number?

As of today's technology and where we are today, you still have threats against agents.

Everybody knows about prompt injection [which targets LLMs] and so on. The other piece that people don't talk about as much is that some-

Sometimes you don't need to even have an attack. The agents, in their effort to please you, will do things that you may or may not agree with"

PANKAJ ROHATGI Vice President, engineering, product security, Google

What are some of the biggest generative AI security risks that enterprises are missing?

Security is no longer a human-scale thing, it is machine-scale—the speed at which attacks are happening, the fact that vulnerabilities will be found quickly [by bad actors].

Have you looked at your enterprise from a perspective of what happens when AI attackers are that much more powerful? Sometimes it's just having the capability to react fast, the bandwidth to quickly contain it if there is an incident. That is a test for everybody.

CEOs often wonder what is the right mix of tools to have in cybersecurity. In the AI era, do you see more consolidation of tools to make the lives of executives easier?

I think you're right. There was a time when you had to assemble a whole bunch of tools. Now we are seeing customers asking for more integrated defences. I think this may also be driven by the agentic era. You need to have automation, and automation means you have to have a bigger picture.

nirmal.john1@timesofindia.com

Toy Story 2.0

Move over, kids. Grown-ups have discovered the joy of spending adult money on toys, collecting everything from Funko Pop figurines and superhero statues to model cars and Lego sets

Pratishtha Bagai

"To infinity... and beyond!"

It was in 1995 that animated cinema's favourite space ranger, Buzz Lightyear, first uttered these words in *Toy Story*, introducing audiences to him and his loyal friend Woody. More than three decades later, when *Toy Story 5* released last month, it was not just kids who were waiting to reunite with the gang. *The Washington Post* recently noted that the franchise belongs as much to the adults who grew up with it. For adults, the movies are a story of memory, change and the people they once were.

Toys, it turns out, stir these sentiments in grown-ups—on screen and off.

In the real-life toy story, adults, across the world, are building Hot Wheels heavens, Lego lands, superhero sanctuaries and Funko Pop fantasies. For some, it's about fulfilling a childhood dream that money once put out of reach. For others, it's fandom, community or simply the thrill of the hunt.

CHILDHOOD... AND BEYOND

For Paresh Dhillia, it's about reliving the joy he felt the first time he held a miniature car. The 61-year-old Bengaluru-based businessperson grew up in Mumbai dreaming of owning a collection of toy cars, but there wasn't enough money for it. Years later, while buying miniature cars for a young relative, he rediscovered that fascination. Today, his toy garage houses around 300 die-cast cars, including nearly 200 Matchbox models. On a trip to US two years ago, he returned with 100 Matchbox cars, many of which are difficult to find in India.

Unlike many collectors, Dhillia isn't possessive. "I enjoy sharing this hobby. I often give the cars away to younger relatives and acquaintances," he says. For him, collecting isn't about ownership—it's about passing on the sheer delight.

Dhillia is not an exception. Working Gen Zs, millennials and boomers are using adult money to buy the toys they could once only admire through shop windows, fuelling a booming global kidult economy. According to American market research firm Circana, adults aged 18 and above are among the fastest-growing consumer groups in the global toy industry.

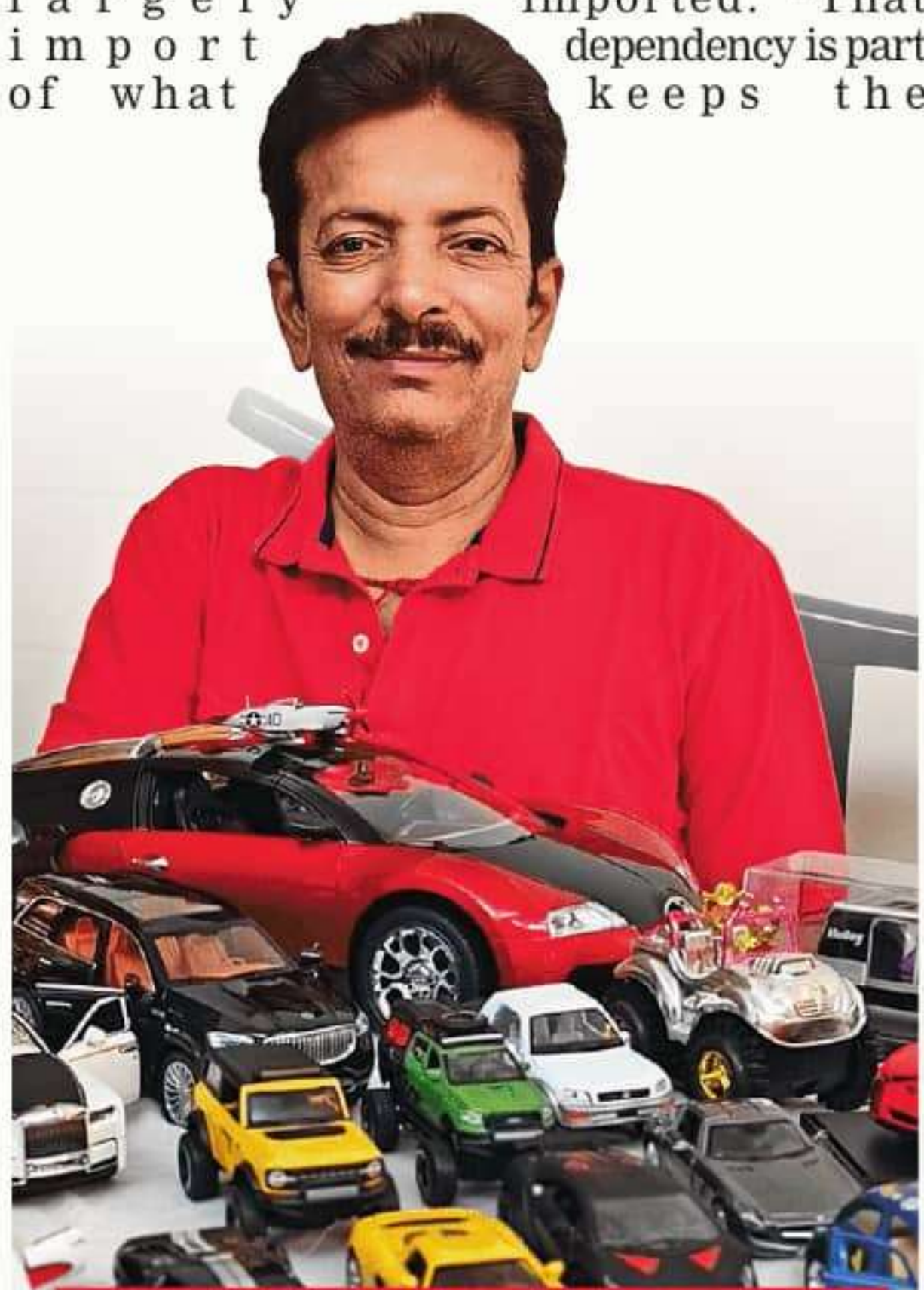
From premium Lego sets and die-cast cars to Funko Pops, designer art toys and collectible statues, these purchases are destined not for playrooms but for office desks, display cabinets and carefully curated shelves, where they serve as markers of identity, fandom and nostalgia as much as objects of play.

Jatin Varma, founder of Comic Con India, who is also a collector, says people collect out of passion, not as an investment—even though he knows of collections worth crores. "Millennials are driving much of the market because they now have disposable income and their own space," he says. "As people get into their 30s, collecting really picks up."

Sunil Kumar, founder of Chennai-based toy manufacturing company Kid In U, says the kidult segment has become a major growth driver in India. Globally, in 2025, consumers aged 15 and

above accounted for around 20% of global toy sales, according to the Circana report. "In India, the trend is being powered by nostalgia for Marvel, DC and Japanese anime, along with rising incomes and a growing acceptance of licensed collectibles," he says.

Even as domestic manufacturing gathers pace, premium figurines and collectibles are still largely imported. "That import dependency is part of what keeps the



PARESH DHILLIA, 61 | BENGALURU
Businessperson

COLLECTS: Matchbox cars

"These cars cost ₹250-2,500. As a kid, I never had money, but now I buy to fulfil my childhood dream"

category aspirational," says Kumar. Collectors often wait longer, pay more and hunt harder for the pieces they want.

NOT KIDDING

For Rahul Dhiman, 49, a Gurgaon-based consultant who designs casino games for international markets, the wait has been worth it. Over the past five years, he has built a collection of around 150 high-end figurines, most of them superheroes. While unopened boxes command a premium in the market, he has unboxed them all. These are proudly displayed in custom-made shelves in his man cave. "After all, they are meant to be enjoyed, not locked away in boxes. On difficult days, I take out a figurine or photograph it. For a while, it takes me back to my childhood."

In Navi Mumbai, IT consultant Sayali Sameer Sen, 38, has started building a collection of plushies. She owns six and plans to add to it every few months. "I have always loved them. I couldn't have a lot of them when I was a kid, so I'm spending adult money to have small joys."

Mental health experts say the reasons adults buy toys are emotional first and financial later. Delhi-based psychologist and behaviour consultant Nandini Sehgal says a hobby can be a healthy outlet. "Collecting childhood toys, miniature cars, anime and superhero figurines can be a



RAHUL DHIMAN, 49 | GURGAON
Consultant

COLLECTS: Hot Toys

"On difficult days, I sit in my man cave, unbox a figure and for a while it takes me back to my childhood"

healthy way of coping with modern-day pressures. These toys act like emotional anchors, tapping into a sense of comfort and nostalgia," she says. "Collecting also helps adults find a community of people who share the same fandom or interest."

COLLECTORS & COMMUNITY

Community, in fact, is changing the way adults engage with toys. Social media, WhatsApp groups and Facebook communities have made collecting more public, more convenient and far more competitive. Amit Sundra, fifth-generation owner of Ram Chander & Sons, India's oldest toy store in Connaught Place, Delhi, has seen demand for collectibles more than double since the pandemic, with much of the growth coming from working professionals in their early 20s. "For them, toys have become an extension of personality and fandom. Categories such as action figures and die-cast cars are now markers of identity," he says. "Social media intensifies the trend, with Instagram, YouTube and creators fuelling awareness, hype and FOMO (fear of missing out)."

Brijraj Rathore, a 20-something psychology graduate in Ahmedabad, built his collection largely thanks to WhatsApp groups from where he sourced it. In 2020, he bought 650 Funko Pops, eventually growing the collection to over 1,220 figures. At its peak, he says, his collection was worth nearly \$38,000. "Certain distributors and sellers, who import in bulk, have been running these groups post-Covid. They have also built communities that help the hobby surge in India," he says. Much of Rathore's collection came from Australia, UK and US. Vaulted or discontinued pieces are often found through Facebook groups or on eBay.

Just as collections are built over years, so are the communities around them. Vineet Singh Bakshi, 57, a Gurgaon-based creative professional and automotive



RACHIT SHARMA, 47 | NEW DELHI
Senior leader in banking

COLLECTS: Superhero figurines

"I have no intention of ever selling these prized pieces. That's why I dispose of the boxes, which reduces its reselling value"

OBJECTS OF THEIR AFFECTION

While brands broaden their offerings, collectors are becoming more discerning about what they buy. For the new generation of grown-up toy buyers, the object itself matters as much as the nostalgia attached to it. Hot Toys, for instance, is a premium category of highly detailed collectible figures based on pop-culture characters and designed primarily for display. The point is no longer to simply own a toy but to curate a collection that reflects one's identity. Custom-built display cabinets, mood lighting and dedicated collector rooms have become part of that experience.

For Rachit Sharma, 47, a Delhi-based banking professional who is a fan of DC Comics and Batman, unboxing is as enjoyable as owning a collectible. Collecting Hot Toys for over a decade, he owns more than 300 collectibles, including about 50 one-fourth-scale statues and around 200 smaller resin statues. He has also completed the entire 100-piece DC Collectibles Batman Black & White line—a project that took him 10 years, with some statues already 15-20 years old and sourced from the resale market.

"The hobby has become significantly more expensive," he says. Figurines that retailed for \$200-250 a decade ago now cost around \$850. But that hasn't deterred him. For Sharma, it's more than a collection—it's his happy place. Moral of the toy story: childhood may not last forever, but for a growing tribe of collectors, toys certainly do.

pratishtha.bagai@timesofindia.com

WHY ADULTS COLLECT TOYS

- Nostalgia is self-care
- Toys have become identity markers
- Social media has turned collecting into a community
- Toys are now designed for adults
- Offer a sense of achievement



VINEET SINGH BAKSHI, 57 | GURGAON
Creative professional and automotive journalist

COLLECTS: Hot Toys

"Earlier you had to hunt for these models in stores. Today you can order online from home"

Warner Bros Discovery's young adult portfolio accounts for about 65% of overall business. Unlike a few years ago, when wearing or displaying fandom-related merchandise was often perceived as childish, fans today are far more open to celebrating their interests publicly

ANAND SINGH, senior director, Warner Bros Discovery Global Consumer Products, South Asia

BRIJRAJ RATHORE | AHMEDABAD
Psychology graduate

COLLECTS: Funko Pop toys

"Buying toys became more meaningful during the pandemic. Collecting them gave people something to derive happiness from"



Nupur Amarnath

In the ever-expanding multiverse of viral wellness trends, a reel by home hacks influencer @carolina.mccaulley perfectly captures the zeitgeist, bringing together almost every fitness fad of the moment. In the video, viewed over a million times, she's sporting a red-light mask, hydrating from a Stanley cup and lifting a dumbbell—all the while standing on a vibration plate. The caption reads: "Trying my best to be that wellness girl in 2026."

In many ways, it's the holy grail of internet wellness: every buzzy trend rolled into one aesthetically pleasing clip. And it rests on the latest fitness gadget having a social media moment—the vibration plate.

SHAKE IT OFF

Vibration plates or whole-body vibration (WBV) platforms are motorised devices that rapidly vibrate while you stand or exercise on them, triggering involuntary muscle contractions as your body works to maintain balance. Originally developed for rehabilitation and sports medicine, they are now being marketed as home fitness devices, promising everything from body sculpting and fat loss to improved circulation, stronger bones and even as a replacement for the gym. Celebrity endorsements, influencer videos and promises of easy gains have only fuelled the trend.

It's an enticing proposition, says Mumbai-based fitness trainer Yasmin Karachiwala. After all, who can resist the lure of a low-effort, high-gains workout? "We all have busy lives, so I understand why people are drawn to anything that promises faster results. But the reality is there are very few shortcuts when it comes to health and fitness," she says.

Before vibrating plates were found by social media, there was a vibrating "workout" that had briefly caught on—the vibrating belts

Vibe Check

Vibration plate workouts are buzzing across social media, with claims ranging from body sculpting and fat loss to improved circulation. Does this trend have a leg to stand on?

that people put on to melt belly fat. Dr Vineesh Mathur, director, orthopaedics, Medanta, Gurgaon, says the modern devices are very different. "Those belts mainly produced passive movement of soft tissues without meaningful muscle activation, whereas vibration plates are designed to stimulate the neuromuscular system through controlled frequencies," he says.

Nelke van Aspert, MD, Power Plate, Gulf & India, says the US-headquartered company, which has a registered WBV platform, re-entered India after Covid and now caters to hospitals, clinics, sports centres, gyms, hotels, wellness centres and home users. Their products start at around ₹200,000. But there are budget alternatives online costing ₹5,000-6,000.

Aspert says that because of the popularity of their vibrating Power Plate, many copied its appearance. "Much like people use 'Tupperware' to describe plastic food storage containers, many now call every vibrating plate a Power Plate," she says, adding that they use a patented technology. "The muscles respond involuntarily by contracting and relaxing to maintain stability. Similar to the automatic reflex when a doctor taps below your knee." She also claims that the technology can activate more muscle fibres than conventional exercise without heavy external loads.

That sounds impressive. But medical experts urge caution.



DOES THE WORKOUT WORK?

Mathur says research does suggest modest improvements in muscle strength, balance, flexibility and functional mobility, particularly among older adults or people with reduced physical capacity. "However, the evidence does not support replacing

conventional strength training or aerobic exercise," he says. Dr Kshitij B Mody, an orthopaedic surgeon specialising in arthroscopy and sports medicine at Welcare Hospital, Vadodara, perhaps sums it up best: "If you believe a 10-minute stand on a vibration plate can replace your squats, lunges and brisk walks, the only thing that will lighten is your wallet."

The strongest evidence, in fact, centres on rehabilitation. Dr Ashish Yadav, attending consultant, physical medicine and rehabilitation, Medanta, Noida, says WBV has long been recognised as a rehabilitation tool. "The advantages of this method are often exaggerated on social media. Its primary benefits lie in muscle activation and improving balance, coordination and neuromuscular control," he says. Experts say the people most likely to benefit are older adults with declining muscle strength or balance, patients recovering from musculoskeletal injuries and individuals who are initially unable to tolerate conventional exercise.

Yadav adds that there is no evidence to prove vibration plates improve athletic performance or recovery better than established methods such as strength training, adequate recovery, proper nutrition and sleep. They should be viewed as a complement to an existing fitness programme—not

If you believe a 10-minute stand on a vibration plate can replace squats, lunges and brisk walks, the only thing that will lighten is your wallet"

Dr KSHITIJ B MODY, orthopaedic surgeon (arthroscopy & sports medicine), Welcare Hospital, Vadodara

Buyers should look beyond the hype. Cheap copycats produce uncontrolled shaking, aggravate existing conditions and create medical risks for users"

NELKE VAN ASPERT, MD, Power Plate, Gulf & India

a replacement, he says.

The biggest disconnect between science and social media, however, lies in the weight-loss claims. On Instagram, vibration plates are frequently marketed as tools for body sculpting, lymphatic drainage and fat burning. The evidence tells a different story. Yadav says, "While they may temporarily improve blood circulation, they should not be viewed as a fat-burning or detoxification tool." Bariatric surgeon Dr Shashank Shah, Apollo Spectra Hospital, Pune, says, "Vibration plates should not be considered as the potential solution for weight loss. It doesn't guarantee weight loss."

So should you invest in one? Karachiwala believes there is a place for vibration plates—but only after the fundamentals are in place. "If someone has the budget and enjoys using the plate as an extra tool, there's no harm. But I certainly wouldn't tell you to invest in one before you've invested in strength or resistance training, quality nutrition and consistency." Mathur also urges for realistic expectations. "According to the latest research, there is no basis for the belief that vibration plates can replace resistance exercise or cardiovascular exercise."

If you do decide to buy one, knowing how to use it is just as important as buying the right model. "One of the most frequent errors people make is the belief that increased intensity or duration equals better outcomes. The best outcomes can be achieved when using vibra-

tion in combination with activities such as squats, jumps or balancing," says Yadav.

ADD-ON, NOT A SUBSTITUTE

Despite Instagram's preference for first-things-in-the-morning wellness routines, experts say there is no medically recommended time of day to use a vibration plate. Sessions are typically short—around 10 to 15 minutes—and work best when paired with movement rather than simply standing still. People with recent fractures, advanced osteoporosis, serious spinal conditions, recent joint surgeries, active soft tissue injuries and those who are pregnant should consult a physician before stepping on a vibration plate.

Aspert recommends starting with just a couple of minutes and choosing the frequency and intensity according to one's health, mobility and goals. But her biggest advice is to choose well. "Check controlled frequency and amplitude, platform stability, performance under different body weights, safety standards, warranty, training support and after-sales service," she says. "Cheap copycats produce uncontrolled shaking, aggravate existing conditions and create high medical risks for users."

Experts agree that the technology isn't pseudoscience. But somewhere between the clinic and the content creator, the messaging has become more ambitious. Karachiwala stresses that vibration plates can be a useful add-on or even a motivational tool for beginners, particularly those who don't like long workouts. She adds, "The biggest transformations I've seen in my practice haven't come from gadgets. They've come from people who showed up consistently, moved well, ate sensibly, hydrated well, slept enough and stayed patient." The fundamentals of good health, it seems, aren't resting on shaky ground.

nupur.amarnath@timesofindia.com

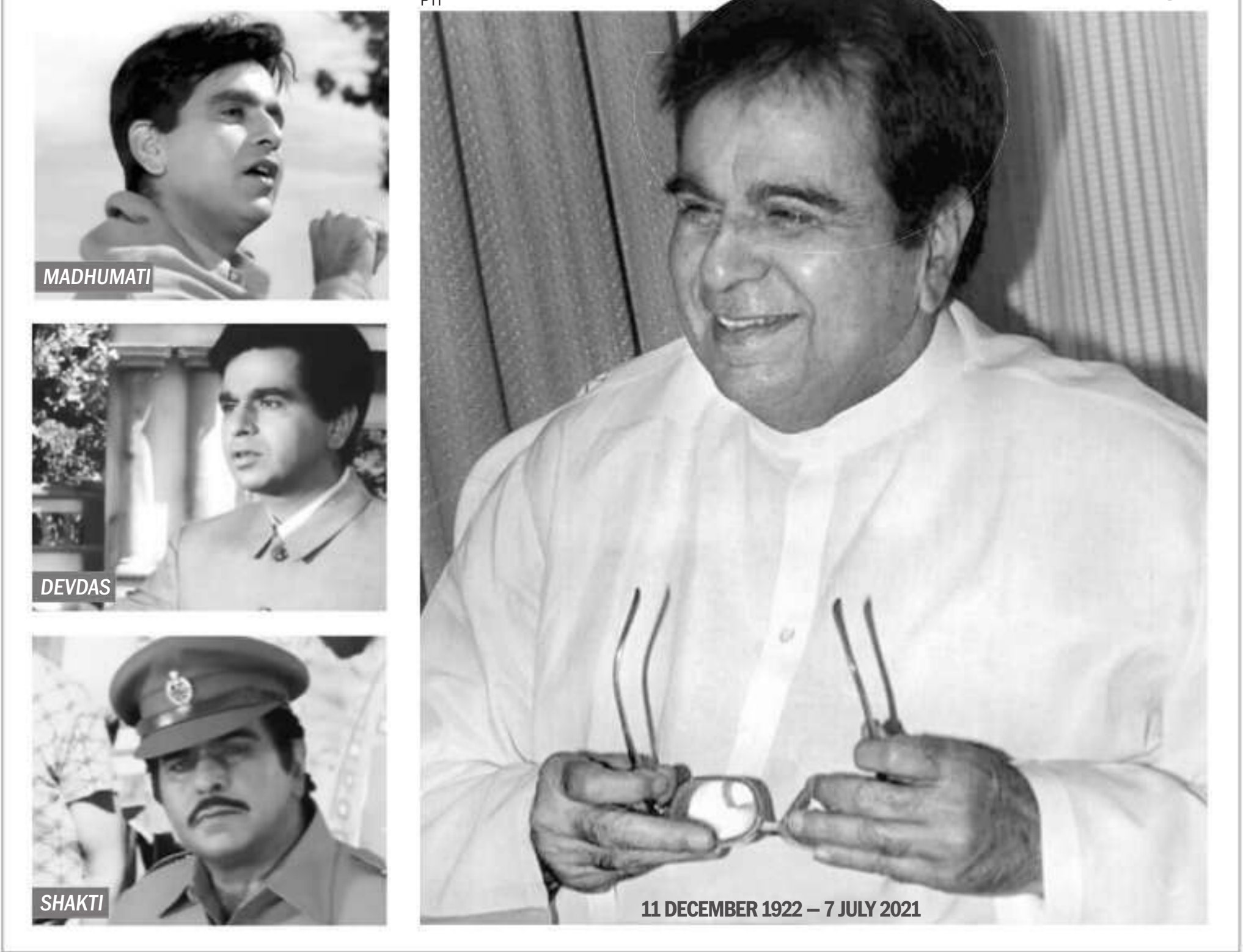
To mark the legendary actor's death anniversary, filmmaker and author **Anup Singh** reflects on what makes Dilip Kumar so special — we value his performances because he surcharges a story, and in the process surcharges us

HE speaks a medley. That's how I hear him when I think about him speaking. No other actor speaks the many-voiced medley that is India, its pell-mell pitches and rhythms, its grumbles, grunts, whining, its rhapsodies and enthrallment, and no one has given the male call, the cry, that soul-searing anguish or that ecstatic glee and jocularity the canniness, wit and genius that Dilip Kumar sings.

He can give us the voice that comes from under a turban, a fez, a fedora, a Nehru cap, the voice carrying a haze of *biryani*, the glutinous smack of *bun-maska* and tea, the slurp of Sindhi curry, but can also, with the same veracity, bring us the raw pungency of a hand-crushed onion with a dry *roti*.

His mimicry, however, always remains playful, pro-social and transformative, attempting to jumble up the space between the self and other. It's the kind of caricaturing that we also see in the work of the great Goan cartoonist Mario Miranda, who never allows his insightful amplification of certain features of various political identities to hold any malice or promote prejudice.

He speaks a medley



Dilip Kumar could fill the words with euphoria, rising suspense, and an unexpected release of great storytelling

To me, Dilip Kumar's voice, like the music of both Salil Chowdhury and SD Burman, has the magical prowess to invoke the sounds of the soil — the heated wind beating through wheat, the cackle of poultry, the long bawl of a cow, the *ghada-ghada-daga-daga-ghada-ghada* of a tractor.

He can bring forth a river with a sibilant hush of breath, a city's fervency, enticement, hidden dreams or desperation with percussive gabbling. And like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, his voice could form before us the unseen, the nameless, the eerie as well as the wondrous.

But what makes Dilip Kumar one of the finest actors we have seen is something more. Let's keep a film like '*Gunga Jumna*' in mind as his voice of a beloved travels the vast landscape of the desert like a bird. At moments we hear the rhythms of a child's nursery rhyme, and at another the baffled, exhausted, angry voice of a community and history pillaged, ruined and still incessantly preyed upon. There is a deeply moving quality created here — an anguished melancholy that evokes not only, let's say, Karna, but also Nachiketa. Where else do we hear such contrapuntal energies coming together in an actor's voice?

We expect everything in a film, including the dialogue, to lead towards telling the story. Dilip Kumar, however, slows down that zeal to keep moving by filling moments with

micro-plots of their own, opening the story to other possibilities, contradictions and unexpected correspondences among the larger themes, and thus saturating the story with an emotional fullness it might never otherwise have achieved. Often, just when we presume we understand a narrative moment, a rhythm, a sigh disorients that understanding, pushing us off balance, reminding us yet again that there is more to life and human beings than we know.

Watch his films again and it is obvious that words to him are like a *mantra*, a chant, a hymn — the belief that not just the word but its hidden music can touch off an effect in us that is transformative.

A *mantra* — often obscure of meaning — makes us consider what we do not know of ourselves, our world. Like a *mantra*, Dilip Kumar's rhythms and cadences place us in a trance, compelling us to wonder: Here, we enter a realm where no moment, person, situation can be understood by a single explanation. Instead, we face innumerable explanations and none of them complete, obvious.

He asks us to not simply accept an emotion, but notice how it comes into being: how much of a hurry it is in to tell its story, how much does it disregard, ignore, edit out those aspects of itself that might contradict it, lead it elsewhere. What we get from him instead is an emotion that challenges our sense of familiarity, or that generalises. With him, we get a voice that is textured with a resistance, the possibility of its opposite, perhaps even unsure of what it says because the very next moment's response is unknown.

That is one of our great pleasures about listening to Dilip Kumar: he could fill the words with euphoria, rising suspense, and an unexpected release of great storytelling. But then, he takes us completely by surprise, twisting a phrase towards a sense of loss, unease, disorienting the emotion we expected to flow, unsettling our historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of tastes, values, memories, to bring us to reconsider all that we had believed our world or relationships to be. With him, we are in that radiant, unknown realm between feeling, sound and

the immensity of desire.

Anything else does not measure up to the delicacy, rigour and play of perversity and seductiveness.

It is such detailing in his performance that helps it escape again and again from creating a caricature or a stereotype. We value his performances not only because he surcharges a story, but because he surcharges us, releases within us the emotional nuance that leads us to relate differently to the story, ourselves, our surroundings and other people.

A performance without such disjunctions offers nothing more than the satisfaction of fast-food, fulfilment that chokes the heart's flow.

What Dilip Kumar seeks is to apprehend each element around him, and the constantly alive interrelationship with everything. It is as if he were filling his breath with the multiplicity within the landscape, his co-actor, and moving our attention from one object to another. For example, in the song "*Suhana safar aur yeh mausam haseen*" from '*Madhumati*', he keeps us grounded in the very

materiality he finds around him, makes it real as well as evocative.

It is this approach that leads to his constant re-organisation of his performance on the level of rhythm. Listen, for example, to the 'voice' of any of the garments he wears, even if the sound recordists of most of his films hardly ever recorded it. So not there on the sound-track, but he knows we will hear the flap of the *kurta* as he holds himself momentarily in a breeze. The crumple as he deliberately pulls off and squeezes a hat in his hands. He knows we will hear when he folds the sleeves of a shirt, which he does thoughtfully, not hurrying.

He seems aware that everything in movement is sound, that our opening ourselves to all sound opens us to our environment. Voices with their own history. Desire, individuality and meaning in the post-Partition country.

These voices of refugees, minorities, the homeless, as well as those welcoming, suspicious, the bitter and the celebrative. Voices seeking to belong, to root out a new meaning for themselves, to rummage through contrary convictions to ascertain their own value in their new home.

There is excitement, a hubbub, discussions, rhapsodies about integration. For Dilip Kumar, this is a moment of improvisation — an opening of beliefs and a questioning of yearning, flexible, fluid responses, a generosity in all give-and-take moments. In Dilip Kumar's voice, a new citizen, society and nation emerges and imagines itself in a state of perpetual becoming.

A quick glance at his body of work shows a stunning range of characters. He seems to want to play everyone, and with a gusto and sense of homage that lifts us out of ourselves. The unanticipated regard and affection for the character that he builds within us, disarranges our philosophical, political positions and suddenly our biases reveal themselves.

Listen again, and we immediately hear each of the characters thrumming with their own unique voice. Every voice emerges from a knowledge of itself in the world. It is a weight, a positioning, and it has some sense of its effect.

And, yet, when it takes a word, it finds itself scouring for its sound at that moment. We believe we know how every word sounds, but say the same word before a sea or a distant mountain and it escapes our authority. It mutates away from its meaning and wanders into the world in multiplying intimations. It whirls in pain, yearning, mirth, animating all that resides in its environs — be it a scarf, a gesture, a streetlight, a cloud.

We might lose the word completely, but the sound animates our world. It is only then that we can touch what is beyond us.

Dilip Kumar sings his words, his voice is always reaching out, whirling out into the world, mutating into what cannot be foreseen, touching and animating the world around us. It is a voice neither his nor ours, though we understand it. We are finally listening to our world.

CAPTION CONTEST 1571



Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number in your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1570



SPECTRUM JULY 12 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

The twilight odyssey — Khushpreet Singh via epaper, Ferozepur city

Night watchman — Charandeep Shergill, Mohali

Waiting for offshore clearance — Sanju Panicker, Panchkula

On the edge — Surinder Miglani, Kaithal

Night in shining harbour — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Chicken *tikka*, the Chettinad style



SURPRISES never cease. Organic, we thought, was a fad, like vegan, that translated as predictably insipid food. Healthy, maybe, but jaggery coating the bitter pill didn't help much. We were, much to our unalloyed delight, proved wrong at a recent lunch we had at Khan Market's Organic Bistro, the brainchild of Deepak Gupta, sometime engineer and now a full-time organic food evangelist from Chandigarh. A dish that stole our heart was Chettinad chicken *tikka masala*. It's been given this name with good reason.

Nothing can match the allure of the Chettinad chicken *thondai* in a *tikka* garb

Everyone loves *tikka*, a tasty bite fashioned from chicken, mutton, fish or *paneer*. The prefix lends it an exotic touch. The Chettinad style from Tamil Nadu is renowned for its aromatic, subtly-spiced recipes, not overpoweringly chilli hot. But let's not digress. This mouth-watering dish isn't called *tikka* in the land of its birth. It is known as *kozhi thondai*. *Thondai*, like a *varuval*, is a dry, pan-grilled or stir-fried dish that multiplies the joys of monsoon munching.

Don't let the word 'fry' deter you. This '*tikka*', like the one coming out of the *tandoor*, can be enjoyed with just a few drops of oil cooked in an air-fryer,

CHETTINAD KOZHI THONDAI

INGREDIENTS

Chicken (boneless)	500 gm
Coriander seeds	2 tsp
Cumin seeds	1 tsp
Red chilli powder (Kashmiri)	1 tsp
Turmeric powder	1/2 tsp
Black peppercorns	1 tsp
Star anise flower	1
Ginger-garlic paste	1 tbsps
Coconut (freshly grated/desiccated)	1/4 cup
Curry leaves	1 large sprig
Mustard seeds	1/2 tsp
Green chillies	3-4
Lemon	1/2
Salt	To taste
Oil (sesame or peanut)	4 tbsps



METHOD

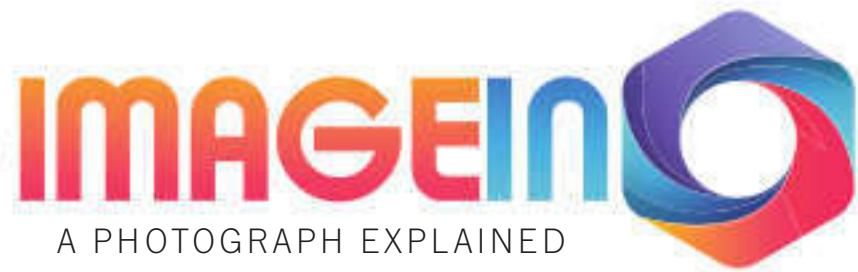
- Trim, wash and pat dry the chicken. Cut into small chunks.
- Dry roast the spice seeds on a griddle on low heat till these exude aroma. Add coconut, star anise, peppercorns and continue roasting for another 30 seconds. Remove and place in a grinder to powder.
- Take a thick-bottomed pan and heat half the oil in it. Add the spice powder, along with ginger-garlic paste, turmeric and red chilli powders.
- Sprinkle a tsp of water to avoid burning the spices. Stir-fry for 30 seconds on low medium heat and then remove from the flame.
- Take a large bowl and place the chicken in it. Next, pour the spice paste over it and mix well to ensure that the chicken is well-coated all over with this marinade.
- Squeeze in the lemon and sprinkle salt. Keep in a fridge or a cool place for about four hours.
- Take a thick-bottomed pan and heat the remaining oil, covering the surface with a thin film. Put in the chicken, along with the marinade.
- Cook on low-medium heat for about 12 minutes, turning regularly to ensure that the *tikka* is well done. Brush with a little oil if the *tikka* is getting dry.
- Prepare the tempering by heating a little oil to smoking point and adding mustard seeds, curry leaves and slit green chillies to it. When the seeds splutter and the chillies change colour, pour over the *tikka*.
- Garnish with onion rings. Serve hot.

oven, or even a thick-bottomed pan lined with a thin film of oil.

Don't confuse the *kozhi thondai* with the, by now, ubiquitous *Chicken 65*. The latter has a pronounced Andhra-Telan-

gana profile with a charm of its own but for us, nothing can match the allure of the organically raised Chettinad chicken *thondai* in a *tikka* garb.

— *The writer is a food historian*



Monsoon hues & blues

MONSOONS evoke mixed emotions in Mumbai. There is the obvious good that they bring — feeding the lakes and reservoirs that supply water to the city, providing respite from scorching summers, enriching the earth beneath our feet, and enabling us to absorb the pleasure of a heavenly shower. Then there is the dark side. Every year, and inevitably it seems, rains disrupt and destroy the lives of so many Mumbaikars, especially those already teetering on the edge. They lead to ailments and diseases and they leave in their wake pot-holes and landslides, collapsed buildings and flooded streets. Each of these is cause for calamity because, at its worst, the Mumbai monsoon maims and kills. The toll extracted is grim and the victims, be they from a slum or a well-appointed apartment, have little recourse from a governance system whose apathy borders on criminality.



Sudharak Olwe

This collection of images by award-winning photo-journalist Sudharak Olwe frames the struggles of citizens trying to cope with Mumbai's excessive, or merely errant, monsoons. Shot over a timespan of more than three decades, these are portraits of resilience, even desperation. They reflect a reality that is at odds with the city's much-exalted spirit, a phantom quality made credible through constant parroting.

Text by Philip Chacko, writer and editor
(Mumbai-based Sudharak Olwe is a Padma Shri awardee)



A dying language and a half-remembered song

SARIKA SHARMA

THE threat to indigenous languages is not distant any longer. It is here, and it is real. Words are being forgotten, native speakers are moving out, and with them are vanishing traditional knowledge systems and unique ways of seeing the world. Nihaarika Negi's Kinnauri film 'Tenfa' is a gentle reminder of this loss.

The short (30 minutes), which had its world premiere at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA) in April, follows three generations of Kinnauri women — a midwife, a grandmother, and a teenage girl — on a trek through tribal Kinnaur to look for a herb that can save a new mother's life, guided only by the fragments of a folk song.

Artist-filmmaker Nihaarika Negi's Kinnauri film 'Tenfa', which premiered at IFFLA, is a reminder of all that we have lost in the name of progress, including ourselves

Half-Kinnauri, half-Punjabi, Negi had never been to her paternal home in Himachal until a project on climate change came along in 2022. Once there, the Los Angeles-based multidisciplinary artist-filmmaker engaged with the locals and travelled to remote villages, rendered unlivable due to recurring landslides in areas where hydroelectric projects had come up. She listened to stories of her paternal aunt's treks to these villages as a certified midwife.

A Berlinale Talents alumnus, Negi says it was in that moment that 'Tenfa' emerged. "Visiting Kandari, which is an



The film follows three Kinnauri women on a trek to look for a herb that can save a new mother's life; (R) director Nihaarika Negi.

hour-and-a-half trek on an extremely narrow path, I wondered, if a woman is pregnant in that village and there is a complication with the birth, how do you get access to medical care?"

The film came to life from conversations like these. Through the lens of a character based on the life of her *bua* (played by Negi's *chachi* in the film), who is on a mission to save a haemorrhaging mother, the film explores how one begins to experience the loss the land has faced.

The midwife teams up with an 85-year-old grandmother and her teenage granddaughter to find the medicinal herb. But how do they find it? The clues lie in a folk song — its meaning half-remembered, half-forgotten. The young girl turns to

social media, sharing the song and crowdsourcing its meaning from the wider Kinnauri community. In finding the herb, they not only save a life, but forge an unexpected bond — reconnecting with a shared inheritance of land, language, and care.

The film traverses treacherous mountain paths, rivers turned into streams, dam sites that look like apparitions, deforested stretches, and hundreds of wooden logs neatly stacked up as a shocking cost of development in the fragile Himalayas.

Interestingly, the film's name itself is a stark reminder of what is at stake. To modern-day Kinnauris, 'tenfa' means a gift, but the real meaning is so deep that it is surprising the word even exists. 'Tenfa' stands for a gift given or received in the



form of a medicinal plant. A symbol of gratitude, love, and care for the community and the environment.

Negi says that like the finding of the herb, the film was a participatory effort. From the actors to the crew, all were locals. "Right from the beginning, we were showing them the script and getting feedback, checking if we had misunderstood anything about the space or the culture."

Her co-producers, Asawari Jagushte and Varsha Panikar from Star Hopper Studio, say entire villages came together to make this film — mothers, daughters, grandmothers, local artisans, musicians, poets, young people, and climate workers, all working in concert with a small film team. "They reminded us, again and again, that

you cannot tell the stories of a tribe without them as partners, both in front of and behind the camera."

The film was shot in Negi's hometown of Sungra, nearby Nichar, and a dam site, Rarang. Since its premiere in April, the film has had several screenings in Kinnaur, Indian cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Chandigarh, and at a micro cinema in L.A.

As a child, Negi was always moving around the country with her government-employed father. "We were raised with the mindset that progress is moving forward. And forward usually means away from your town or village to a bigger town, to a bigger country, to learn English, to go to a better school, have a job outside." And that's what she was doing for most of her 20s and early 30s. "But in the process, I also realised that beyond a point, if you are not connected to your own heritage, and there is a void there, there is only so much you can offer to the world."

This approach has seeped into her practice as a multidisciplinary artist, where she tries to see if there is "a community or a space with a story that can be developed in collaboration with people or artists from different disciplines". Like her project 'Dance Like a Mother', which was showcased at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa in 2017. Involving various sets of parents, including her own, it is a piece about the ways in which people end up becoming their parents or versions of them.

Up next from her oeuvre is 'Birds of a Feather', her first feature film, a satire about three siblings who return to the ancestral home to their dying father. An experimental theatre director, he has given instructions to perform his life's regrets as a play in order to determine who gets his estate.

For now, however, Nihaarika Negi is keenly listening to the conversations 'Tenfa' is engendering and exploring the paths leading home.

BOOKS

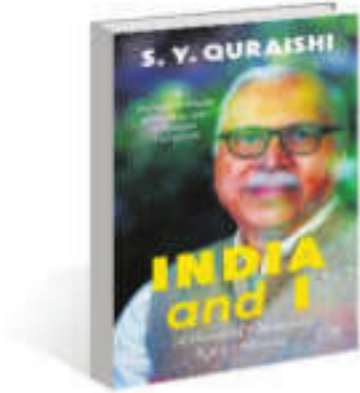
How Devi Lal settled it: ‘Changa’

SY QURAISHI

M R SK MISRA was not just an IAS officer; he was an institution. In Haryana, his name carried the kind of weight usually reserved for chief ministers. Some even said he was the most powerful bureaucrat in the country, and it didn’t sound like an exaggeration.

The reason was simple: he worked with Chaudhary Bansi Lal, arguably the most formidable Chief Minister of his time. Between them existed a rare, almost dangerous level of trust. Bansi Lal had blind faith in Mr Misra, who enjoyed full delegated authority to take decisions in the Chief Minister’s name. We all knew he would sign files with three magic words, ‘CM has seen’, even when the Chief Minister may never have laid eyes on the matter. In those days, one didn’t ask questions; one simply watched how power worked.

The partnership delivered results. Haryana was pushed onto the development map with a speed and ambition that became its signature. Electricity reached every village, an achievement that sounds routine now but was revolutionary then. Tourist



INDIA AND I
by SY Quraishi.
Hachette.
Pages 308.
₹699

A hundred memories, not a memoir – that’s how SY Quraishi, the former CEC, describes his latest book

complexes were created out of barren land, roads improved, and the state acquired an administrative swagger. Methods could be debated, but the results were visible, and for a young officer, it was hard not to feel that the state was being run with purpose.

Then came 1977. The Emergency ended, Indira Gandhi’s government fell, and Bansi Lal, by then Defence Minister, lost his footing. In Haryana, the Janata Party under Chaudhary Devi Lal swept to power. Across India, the mood turned sharply against everything that smacked of Emergency-era high-handedness. In Haryana, Devi Lal had no doubt who symbolised that era’s administrative muscle: SK Misra.

The backlash was merciless. Raids followed him like a shadow. The man once treated as invincible suddenly became untouchable. He stayed with his batchmate and friend, PH Vaishnav. I still remember when Mr Misra’s house was raided for three days.

At the time, I was Additional Director of Public Relations, Haryana, a title grander than its reality. In truth, I was little more than a *shahi dhandorchi*, a royal drummer, paid to sing the government’s praises. During Mr

Misra’s powerful days, I had met him often and enjoyed his affection. Now that he was in the doghouse, most officers who had basked in his authority vanished overnight. Bureaucratic loyalty is most visible when it disappears. I would try to visit him whenever I came to Delhi, conscious of how lonely he had become.

But even harmless loyalty was suspect then. One day I was summoned by Chaudhary Devi Lal. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) had reported that I was meeting Mr Misra. His tone was sharp, his look probing. I told him the truth: I knew Misraji, met him occasionally, and discussed only generalities. I had neither access to confidential files, nor reason to misuse them.

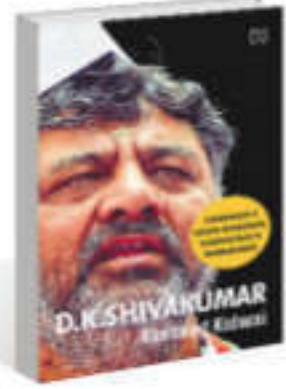
Devi Lal listened silently. Despite his rough image, there was a vein of humanity beneath the bluster. When I finished, he paused and uttered a single word: ‘Changa’.

All clear. I walked out relieved, not because I’d been cleared, but because that one word summed up the whole process: suspicion, scrutiny, authority — and then simple fairness.

— Excerpted from ‘India and I’, with permission from Hachette India

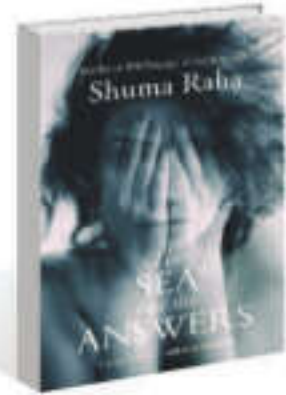


BACKFLAP



DK SHIVAKUMAR
by Rasheed Kidwai.
Hachette.
Pages 245. ₹699

In the high-stakes political theatre of Karnataka, few figures loom as large as DK Shivakumar, widely known as ‘Kanakapura Bande’ (Rock of Kanakapura). From a grassroots organiser in rural Karnataka to one of the most powerful figures in state and national politics, Shivakumar’s journey is a story of ambition, resilience and relentless political instinct. The biography takes you inside the strategy rooms, the rural rallies and the private moments of a man who refuses to be shaken.



THE SEA HAS THE ANSWERS
by Shuma Raha.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 379. ₹595

The book is a story of a woman’s search for self-realisation and the rekindling of her sexuality after her husband has been outed as a #MeToo perpetrator. It also delves into the psyche of a powerful man who stands exposed as a sex offender, and throws light on some of the grey areas around ‘consent’. The novel explores power and its abuse, misogyny and sexual violence, faith and betrayal, self-deception and the many shades of truth.



HEARTLAND RISING
by Javed Goya.
Westland.
Pages 408. ₹699

The book is a searing examination of the forces driving India’s contemporary majoritarian turn. The author maps how the partition of the subcontinent and the subsequent elevation of the Hindi heartland reshaped India’s social and economic trajectory, amplifying caste and communal divisions while narrowing the space for pluralism. The book raises an existential question: how do we alter the dire course that India is on?

The truth behind ‘love jihad’

KAVITHA IYER

T HERE are books to read and put away, and then there are books to read with a stack of sticky notes, knowing you will return to them repeatedly. Sameena Dalwai’s ‘Love Jihad: A Feminist Retelling’ belongs firmly in the latter category.

The Hindu woman. The Muslim man. The Dalit-Bahujan. These are the three figures around which Dalwai structures her book, and together they offer a striking lens through which to understand one of contemporary India’s most potent political narratives.

The claim that Muslim men systematically target Hindu women for conversion has generated legislation, state action, and court cases in the remarkably short period of about a decade. Yet much of the discussion around ‘love jihad’ has remained trapped within the language of religion and electoral politics.

Dalwai’s most persuasive contribution is to shift the discussion elsewhere. Her argument is that the phenomenon cannot be understood without examining the intertwined workings of patriarchy, caste and social control.

The three figures at the centre of the book represent an unequal social order whose hierarchies have endured despite decades of constitutional guarantees and legislative reform. Together, they reveal how power operates through surveillance, exclusion and the regulation of personal choice.

Interrogating the central fiction on which the ‘love jihad’ discourse rests, that Hindu women are being protected, Dalwai assembles evidence of how families, communities and even courts have demonstrated tolerance for violence against women, and suspicion and outrage toward women who exercise agency. In India, Dalwai writes, “being a woman, by itself, is provocation enough”.

In this feminist retelling, the ‘love jihad’ discourse cannot be understood in isolation from caste and patriarchy, themselves

deeply intertwined. In a society marked by hierarchies, the fear of the religious outsider serves another function: it denies internal fractures, obscures the persistence of caste structures and caste-based violence, and presents a paradigm where all Hindus unite in their anger towards Muslims.

Such insights allow Dalwai to connect contemporary anxieties around interfaith relationships with older forms of social control. The discourse around ‘love jihad’ is, in many ways, an extension of the impulses that have fuelled opposition to inter-caste marriage and, in its most violent forms, honour killings. The fear is not merely about religion. It is about maintaining power. What is being defended is not simply religion, but an entire social order that allows vigilantes into households to question adult women’s personal choices.

At a moment when questions regarding religious identity increasingly shape both public discourse and private life, Dalwai offers a framework for understanding how these anxieties are produced and sustained. To her credit, the book never feels like an academic exercise. Her method is distinctive: she moves effortlessly between courtroom records, political theory, popular culture and personal observation.

Dalwai discusses a bizarre legal case on the cohabitation of Akbar the lion and Sita the lioness in a Tripura zoo and barely a few pages later invokes Antonio Gramsci. Her references range from Bollywood lyrics to the prison writings of GN Saibaba. Dark humour sits comfortably alongside rigorous scholarship.

A feminist thinker and teacher of law, Dalwai herself has a mixed-religion family — the one she was born into as well as the one she chose as a spouse. The book shows her intellectual range and moral clarity, but also her proximity to the subject and the anger that animates it.

Sharp and original, ‘Love Jihad: A Feminist Retelling’ asks readers to look beyond a familiar slogan. What it reveals is that the debate was never only about religion. It was also about who gets to choose, who gets to belong and who gets to be free.

— The reviewer is a freelancer

ADITYA VIKRAM

T HE writer is not a historian, says the spy who narrates ‘August 17’, the story of a fictional country. A mere paragraph before this muddy declaration, the novel opens like a history lesson. Time is marked by a certain year in the Malayalam calendar. The event at hand is the independence of the great nation of Thiruvithamkoor, which has refused to be a part of India after the British rulers’ departure. The Maharaja hoists his holy flag in the sweet breeze of Onam, showering soft petals over freshly minted citizens. A new country is born, and soon enough finds itself caught in the bloody strife that often belongs to nations.

If this is not history and is yet teeming with the same riddles — rebellion, propaganda, nation, and prison — how is the book to be read? Is it historical fiction, speculative fiction, or simply an allegory? The narrator answers many times over: “consider this the history of our country as witnessed by me alone”, or “an autobiography”, or “the biographies of several people I have met”, and finally, “a story”.

In this gentle progression lies a world of divergence, erasure, and imagination that flutters at the heart of all histories we write and believe. Inventing a past parallel to the one we know, ‘August 17’ attempts to remind us that history is a story the powerful like to tell about the world.

As the monarchs, nationalists, communists, and the military fight for power, many people we know dearly from our own histories come to the novel in different forms. Real-life historical events unfold in this fictional setting, where the fight for power ravages the nation’s people, rendering the autonomy of Thiruvithamkoor irrelevant.

Hareesh is strongest in his autopsy of movements and understanding of power, but dwindles at times when he experiments with form. The list of dates, events, people fails to work, contrary to the autobiographical narratives of the spy, which are full of flavour. Given how specific the novel is in terms of context, it is carried bril-



AUGUST 17
by S Hareesh. Translated by Jayasree Kalathil.
HarperCollins.
Pages 432. ₹699

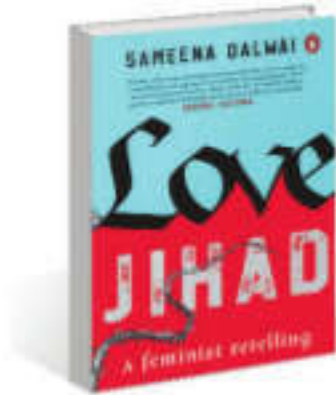
liantly in translation. It displays a deep understanding of the characters and events being referenced, but more than the historical details, Kalathil reads the pulse, recreating its urgency.

One of the most potent reinventions here is the haunting presence of writer and freedom fighter Basheer. While Basheer is the most widely read Malayalam writer, he acquires epic proportions in the imagination of Avacharan, the novel’s narrator. Here, Basheer does everything a revolutionary trapped in a totalitarian state might do, even things the real Basheer stayed away from. He eventually disappears without a trace, leaving Avacharan deeply troubled.

In the final lines of the novel, as armoured military vehicles of the neighbouring nation rush towards Avacharan, he realises his own nothingness. He was a spy without a shadow, trained to distrust, and eventually left unremembered. He has lost touch with the world, so much so that he could not narrate his own life to himself. We finally know what this mythical Basheer did all along: “Oh Basheer, you trapped me inside a story. Listening to the stories you did not write, imagining the stories you might have created, I pursued you. All I am is a shadowless man who followed you like a shadow. What is my real name? What is my country?”

In the end, all that is left is a line drawn in blood.

— The reviewer is a poet and translator



LOVE JIHAD: A FEMINIST RETELLING
by Sameena Dalwai.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 248.
₹599

A book bazaar as community, tehzeeb and a place for dreams

MANDIRA NAVAR

I S Delhi love-worthy? Ghalib and Zauq have left the streets, taking with them their love for the city in poetry. Even the ‘Modern Love’ series does not turn to it for romance. A city of power, refugees, and corruption, Delhi is defined by cut-throat ambition, aggression, and arrogance.

Kanupriya Dhingra’s ‘The Sunday Book Bazaar — Daryaganj and the Making of a Reading Public in Delhi’ is then the closest declaration of love for Delhi, her “sheher”. Charming and delightful, this book is difficult to resist as it filters the city through the prism of the original pop-up bazaar that guarantees the afterlife of books.

This deeply felt book brings alive the book-sellers, the *shaukeen* buyers and the relationship of the Daryaganj Patri Book Bazaar with Delhi and Delhiwallahs. This is the gentle, genteel and gentleman’s Delhi. And this book bazaar is not only testimony that literature needs no walls, but also represents what the streets of Delhi could be.

The books sold here are not bright or new, but are well-thumbed. These may be unreturned library books, or collections from the

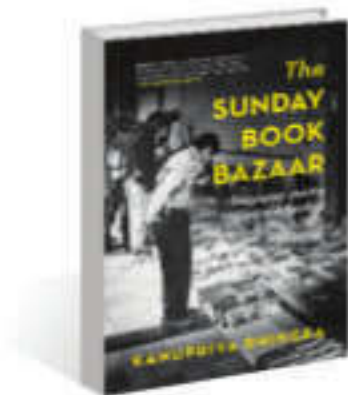
libraries of those who will never read them again. There are also textbooks, comics, pirated books and guides for college students. Used, rejected, sometimes smuggled, sometimes lovingly preserved... Kanupriya says these books are bought to be loved, or sometimes just because they are affordable.

Each Daryaganj book for her — her first being how to learn the piano when she was a child, a dream she gave up — is a fragment of the past, an object carrying memory.

“Each torn spine, each yellowed page feels intimate,” she writes. What started off as a personal journey became an intellectual one — to probe deeper into the meaning of books, buying them and reading them in the Capital. It is equally a book of reclaiming the pavement as a space for business and readers once a week.

The bazaar is not a “marginal leftover of the city’s literary life”, she writes. “It is one of the places where the city’s full complexity — social, economic, historical — becomes visible on a Sunday morning, laid out on a sheet on the footpath.” This was until it was recently moved to Mahila Haat — a shift to an idea of ‘sanitised’ modernity.

Kanupriya documents the old, carefully



THE SUNDAY BOOK BAZAAR — DARYAGANJ AND THE MAKING OF A READING PUBLIC IN DELHI
by Kanupriya Dhingra.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 311. ₹599

building it with her words to prevent its erasure from memory or history. She also chronicles the building of the new.

The book conjures up the bazaar staples: readers and sellers. The readers carry with them not only the books they buy, but stories of the market. Like the legend of Abdul Sat-tar, an Old Delhi institution, who loved books and shared them with people; or BN Uniyal, who would never lend his books, but can tell you the history of how he acquired each book

on his shelf. A journalist, Uniyal has amassed a library from the *patri*. In his library is a collection he bought for ₹8, a princely sum that he could not afford then. He bought it in instalments of ₹2!

In *qissas*, Kanupriya brings the vendors to life. Qamar Saeed, the oldest bookseller in the bazaar, came into the trade because a vegetable seller wrapped his *subzi* in a page from a magazine. This incident changed his life and Qamar promised himself that he would sell magazines. There is AR Khan, an Urdu teacher, who came here to sell the books that his father-in-law had spent his life collecting. After he died, the scrap dealer offered ₹10 for the lot. Khan instead chose to sell it — a moment of grief bringing him into the trade. Or Mahesh, a vendor who can identify books in six languages, but can’t read them. Kanupriya weaves this *dastaan* of the sellers, offering them, for the first time, a space in the books they sell.

Her book forces readers to encounter a city that still exists. The one beyond Khan Market, which has, in many ways, come to define the city. It is a place where there is community and *tehzeeb*; a place for dreams. By way

of how it is assembled each week as a repetitive act, the bazaar itself is resilience. It is a habit, writes Kanupriya.

The book forces readers to contemplate what this ephemeral market represents in the urban fabric of Delhi, as well as what shifting it to a neater space means for the city’s history and its future.

In mapping the book bazaar, she has also drawn within it the contours of hope in the city. It exists in the unspoken friendships that thrive here. Every Sunday, as some vendors go off to pray, their neighbours keep an eye on the stalls, while regular customers wait. This happens without ceremony, turn-out comment, just as a box of *mithai* turns up to mark a special occasion. “The sociologist might call it social cohesion,” writes Kanupriya. “The vendors would not call it anything. It is simply what they do.”

More than a memoir of a book market that thrives in the afterlife of books, it is also a reminder of how many cities Delhi holds within. Its seven cities are immortalised in history, but the Sunday Book Market represents a different one — of the *aam aadmi*, etched in Dilli’s *dil*.

— The reviewer is a literary critic

A proud Indian, and not so



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

THESE are times when I am proud to be an Indian but there are many more times when I'm ashamed to be one. These occasions arise when I encounter (or read about) my fellow countrymen and women behaving like uncouth, loud *junglis*, particularly when they travel.

Whether this is in India when they drive on the wrong side or bully other people on the road to give them way and hurl abuses when not allowed, or when they come across pedestrians. Then there are those who spit and blow their noses without a care for anyone who may be blessed with their offensive 'gifts'. What about those who toss out empty chips or *gutka* packets or those who relieve themselves in full public view? I could go on and remember those who leap up in a plane as soon as they land and open the overhead storage before it is safe to stand, or those who leave public toilets littered with paper and water. Or those who speak loudly on their mobile phones and watch something on their laptops without earphones.

The list is endless and I am sure you have encountered such people when you step out even to a shop or wait to board a train or bus. It's fine to blame the government for many of the ills that beset our country, but have you ever seen any person standing patiently in a queue or giving up his seat to a senior citizen or a woman? For many of us, freedom from foreign rule granted us the right to shrug off all the rules the colonial government had imposed, which includes behaving as if public property belongs to us. The recent revelation

about crores worth of linen the Railways lose to passengers who take home bedsheets, blankets, pillows and even face towels provided in air-conditioned coaches was an eye-opener. And who was made to reimburse the loss? The poor attendant of the coach.

Similarly, an Indian family on a foreign holiday was publicly shamed when their luggage was searched and the hotel recovered stuff they had slyly purloined. As for the loud singing and dancing when travelling on a plane, especially by a wedding party, the less said the better. Who does one blame then? The government, parents, the school or certain Indians of a geographical area north of the Vindhya? Look within yourself and let me know.

Moving on, I recently attended a lecture by a very eminent academic, who now teaches in a prestigious US university, on the history and politics of Indian democracy. The room

Who does one blame? The government, parents? Look within

was full to overflowing and some of our most well-known scholars, public intellectuals and social scientists stood throughout the presentation as the room had run out of seats. The lecture was excellent as expected and covered the earliest manifestations of democratic impulses to make the point that we evolved into a democracy not because we learnt it from the West, but because we have a long and proud history of living harmoniously together. This point is often made by others as well, but what I was amused to see was that the scholar (who comes from UP and speaks impeccable Hindi) chose to deliver this lecture in English. Naturally, Ambedkar and Gandhi were invoked with the respect they deserve, and Nehru valorised

for setting up all those institutions that have strengthened our democracy and made it into an article of faith.

He regretted that Gandhi's infusion of Hindu gods into his version of democracy has now been totally betrayed by the present government's aggressive promotion of Hindutva. He forgot to mention that Gandhi wrote and spoke in simple Hindi so that even the unlettered villagers absorbed his thoughts.

There is no denying that English is now regarded as the language of serious intellectual communication. Rare is the public intellectual who cares to write in Hindi (or any language other than English) and it follows that such wisdom is shared only amongst like-minded people. There is now a determined effort to widen the outreach of TV news by inviting guests and appointing anchors who can speak in other languages, but go to any public lecture by a known scholar and you will find the room full of like-minded people like us. Sitting in libraries and in think tanks, their faith in data collected by their assistants is of more value than visiting the hinterland of India to see the truth for themselves.

We value Gandhi and Nehru for many remarkable changes that helped deepen the roots of our democratic system, but increasingly we have forgotten that they were such compelling speakers because they effortlessly spoke in the *lingua franca* that always comes from the heart. As Peggy Mohan has put it, mother tongue and fatherland are related in ways that we are slowly forgetting. Caste was bad enough as a social segregator, but is class any better? Why does even the most disadvantaged Indian want his children to speak English and not the language he speaks with his parents?

There is no point in preaching to the converted. If we are to strengthen the roots of our democracy and widen its appeal, we must learn to respect the wisdom of the common Indian. In election after election, it is this wisdom that has saved our democracy.

— **The writer is a social commentator**

Bumpy swadeshi model of justice



AVAY SHUKLA

IT was indeed a wise man who said that judges should shun the spotlight and let their judgments do the talking. But that was before the era of YouTube and 24x7 breaking news. In India's legal firmament today, judgments do not make news, mainly (I suspect) because these have become one-sided and therefore predictable. The *obiter dictum* makes news, delivered from the lofty perch of finality, if not infallibility.

The Honourable CJI, Surya Kant, is currently not only the master of the rooster, but also of the *obiter dicta*. How can we forget, if not treasure, his denunciation of the three academicians who wrote that chapter on the judiciary for NCERT, banning them from any government engagement? The later cockroach comment is now part of legal folklore. And just recently, in an address at Oxford University, he remarked that India should develop its own "*swadeshi* jurisprudence", something even our freedom fighters had not thought of.

I am not sure what he meant by this call to a legal *atmanirbharta*, or whether it is the right course to follow. For, in civilised democracies at least, jurisprudence and laws are aligned with global principles, concepts, conventions, declarations, rights and charters, and till recently we more or less conformed to these universal principles.

Swadeshi jurisprudence, it must be lamented, has already arrived in India, which is why, according to the WJP (World Justice Project) Rule of Law ranking for 2025, we are placed at 86 out of 143 countries. We have been consistently slipping down — in 2014, we were at 66. Frankly, I am not surprised, because the evidence is strewn all over the road to *swadeshi* jurisprudence. It is the price we have paid for the gradual loss of independence, integrity and quality of the judiciary.

Jurisprudence in India today appears to be governed by four made-in-India *swadeshi* doctrines which should be a blot on any justice system: *fait accompli*, sealed cover; ignore the science, and reward the criminal. Importantly, even constitutional challenges to the executive's actions are kept on the backburner for so long (Article 370, CAA, SIR, Shiv Sena split) that by the time they are decided, it is impossible to turn back the clock and undo what the government of the day has already implemented on the ground.

The sealed cover has become the standard fallback option for denying full disclosure to civil society petitioners, or for not giving rebuttable reasons for a particular judgment (Rafale, Pegasus, Vantara, Hindenburg). Increasingly, this spectre of our *swadeshi* jurisprudence, like the executive, shows disdain and contempt for science, as in the case of stray dogs, Aravalli mountains, the Char Dham highway, and the Great Nicobar project. More trust is reposed on government-appointed committees and patently partisan ministries than on scientists, domain experts and spe-

cialised organisations working in the relevant field. Finally, this mutant form of justice also ensures that the criminal will be duly allowed to keep the proceeds of his crime (Ram Mandir theft, electoral bonds) even as his actions are declared irregular! A judicial paraprofessionarian if ever there was one.

Perhaps the biggest stain on our *swadeshi* system of justice is the default denial of bail to every three out of four accused who are otherwise entitled to it: 74 per cent of the prison population comprises undertrials, and the position keeps getting worse. Eminent scholars, students, social activists are denied bail for as long as five years, even though they are not convicted, and in many cases their trials have not even commenced. A university professor with 90 per cent disability is deemed to be a national security threat, and kept in jail for years without a trial. He finally gets acquitted and released by a High Court, but is pushed back in within 24 hours at an urgent hearing by the apex court! And here is the supreme irony — those who are not convicted are kept in jail, while the convicted elite are out on parole whenever they want a breath of fresh air!

Millions of voters are denied their voting rights by a capricious CEC and his untested algorithms, their appeals are kept pending, but the *swadeshi* response to their entreaties is a callous: Never mind, you can vote in the next elections! An exercise based on mysterious algorithms, which has disenfranchised millions of citizens, has been given the highest court's imprimatur of approval.

Judicial orders are flouted by the executive on a routine and continuing basis — on Aadhaar, demolitions, bulldozers, hate speech, voter rolls, citizenship, to mention just a few areas, but there is no pushback or punitive action by the courts. The *swadeshi* jurisprudence model has ensured that our judicial system is broken and on the point of total collapse. There is a backlog of 5.4 crore cases which will take 323 years to clear; of these, 1.8 lakh cases are pending for more than 30 years. India has only 15 judges per 10 lakh population against a developed country average of 150-200 (China's figure is 300).

It gets worse — the judiciary has carved out so many privileges for itself, it is accountable to no one. A Collegium system ensures that only judges can appoint judges, and that too in the most opaque of manners; judicial corruption cannot be investigated unless the judiciary itself permits it; even though all government appointees are required to declare their assets, only 12 per cent of judges have done so; it has been reported that, historically, appointments to the Supreme Court are limited to just 250 families in the entire country. This is a *swadeshi* blueprint for judicial anarchy and ochlocracy, not jurisprudence.

No, sir, the last thing we need is a *swadeshi* version of what a justice system should be. This model ensures that democracy (and justice) has become a privilege available only to those with influence. *Swadeshi* slogans should be left to the politicians; the jurisprudence of rights, justice and equality needs a more solid and time-tested foundation. We need to adopt best global practices and principles and dig ourselves out of this *swadeshi* hole. And yes, let judgments, not *obiter dicta*, do the talking.

— **The writer is a retired IAS officer**

The Shambhala prophecy



UNIVERSE

DEVDUPT PATTANAİK

But the meaning of the prophecy did not stay the same. Over time, later interpreters softened its militant tone. What had once been a literal war against outside enemies was reimagined as an inner struggle. The battlefield moved from geography to the mind. The 'barbarian' was no longer only a foreign invader but also the ignorance, desire, and anger inside each person. In this reading, Kalkin became a symbol of awakened con-

It turned fear into narrative, conflict into cosmology, and survival into destiny

IN a world that seems to be hurtling from one crisis to another, many people are talking about the Shambhala prophecy. This appeared in the early 11th century in a Buddhist Tantric text called the *Kalachakra Tantra*. At that time, Northwest India was under heavy military pressure from expanding Islamic powers. The prophecy was not really a religious vision. It was a political response, but written in the language of myth and cosmic prediction.

At its heart, it carried an apocalyptic imagination. The text spoke of a future age of decline, when the world would fall under the rule of the *mleccha*, a word used for outsiders, here linked specifically with Islam. This was not described as a passing problem but a complete change in the world order. Existing religions, including Buddhism, would seem to fade as a powerful and disciplined rival faith took over.

Into this collapsing world came a saviour, Kalkin Raudra Cakrin, the future king of the hidden land of Shambhala. Unlike earlier Buddhist ideals that praised withdrawal from the world, this figure was a warrior-king. He did not retreat. He stepped forward, leading an army into a final, massive battle. The prophecy described this as a holy war, in which the forces of Shambhala would crush the 'demonic *dharma*' of the invaders and restore balance to the cosmos. After this victory, a new golden age of pure Buddhism would begin, echoing older Indian ideas of cycles of decline and renewal.

Pantry car of a pluralist nation and a carnivore's lament

SUKIRAT

COME from a household of accommodating compromises. My father was the sort of man who believed that a meal without meat was essentially an apology for a meal, while my mother — a committed eggetarian — never quite crossed the Rubicon into flesh but learned, with admirable pragmatism, to cook it for the rest of us. She would cook the mutton with the confidence of a woman who had no intention of tasting it. This, I have always thought, is a form of culinary sainthood.

So I grew up neither tormented by guilt, nor overwhelmed by righteousness. Meat was simply food. It arrived on the table, it was eaten, the plates were cleared.

Then I went to study in the USSR, and discovered that meat was at once everywhere and nowhere. In theory, the Soviet Union was a land of hearty, meat-eating proletarians. In practice, you could never be entirely sure when a cut of beef might next present itself at the state shop, so when it did, you bought all of it. My freezer became a kind of insurance policy against

a future of nothing but cabbage and potatoes — which, in Moscow's endless winter, was less a metaphor than a certainty. I filled it with beef without a moment's theological discomfort. Sikhism, my religion of birth, carries no injunction against eating meat, which struck me then, as it does now, as one of its more sensible positions.

My Hindu classmates were not so doctrinally unencumbered, but they adapted with a speed that would have impressed even a Darwin. Mutton, the acceptable alternative, was an even greater rarity. Vegetables arrived in waves, and then disappeared. Even the most committed vegetarians among us eventually surveyed the culinary landscape and made their peace with necessity — or more interestingly, discovered that the forbidden had a flavour they had never previously suspected. Nothing quite radicalises a vegetarian like a Moscow winter.

I observed a similar pragmatism later, in my travels through Europe and North America. Non-vegetarian Hindu families, people who in India would debate the ethics of eggs at a dinner table, were cheerfully biting into beef burgers without a flicker of unease. Per-

haps, I concluded, Jersey cows and their Indian counterparts are not felt to be related in any meaningful spiritual sense.

All of which is to say: I am not a complicated man in my appetite. I eat eggs in the morning. This has been the stable centre of my dietary life for almost seven decades. Two boiled eggs, perhaps an omelette if the occasion demands, and the world is in reasonable order.

Enter the Vande Bharat. On my first journey up to Pathankot on the Vande Bharat to Katra, I settled into my seat with the quiet anticipation of a man who expects his morning eggs. What arrived instead was *poori chole*. I want to be reasonable here: *poori chole* is a perfectly honourable dish. There are times and places for it. Seven in the morning on a moving train is not among them. There was also the option of a potato outlet, which I examined with the polite incomprehension of someone who could not fathom this cross between an *aloo-tikki* and a breaded mess.

The train, it turned out, served only vegetarian food. I accepted this with the grace of a man who has eaten cabbage soup for months on end and survived. But then the

same vegetarian mandate was extended to the newly launched Jammu-Srinagar Vande Bharat, presumably because its route passes through Katra, the holy city.

I understand the logic, up to a point. One understands the symbolic weight of certain places. What one does not quite understand is why my egg — that modest, inoffensive oval — must be sacrificed on the altar of someone else's religious geography. I am not asking for mutton *biryani* outside a temple. I am asking for breakfast on a train.

Now I find myself doing what anxious people do, which is to extrapolate. The Amritsar-Delhi Shatabdi passes through Kurukshetra, where the Mahabharata was fought and where, one presumes, the cosmic stakes of vegetarianism are even higher. Will a future crusader of dietary purity notice this?

I could, technically, opt out of the catering on these trains and carry my own eggs. This is allowed. But here I enter murkier terrain. Two boiled eggs peeled somewhere between Ludhiana and Ambala — this is, I am aware, a provocative act in the current climate. My fellow passenger may be a man of the world, unbothered by the proximity of an egg. Or he

may be a gentleman with strong views on the *sattvikta* of his morning, that he feels entitled to press upon the person sitting next to him. I would rather not find out.

There is, I think, a reasonable principle buried somewhere in this absurdity: that a secular democracy on a long railway network ought to be able to accommodate both the devout vegetarian and the man who simply wants an egg. These are not incompatible requirements. They have coexisted on Indian trains for decades. The pantry car of a pluralist nation should, one might argue, reflect the actual plurality of its passengers rather than the preferences of its most vocal constituency. But perhaps I am being naive. Perhaps the egg, like so many other things in contemporary India, has become political.

In which case, I shall boil mine at home, wrap them carefully, and eat them in whatever silence seems safest. My mother, who cooked meat she never ate and raised a son who merely wants his breakfast, would have found the whole business very funny. I find it slightly less so. But I'm working on it.

— **Sukirat Singh Anand publishes under the name Sukirat**

Will Argentina retain the crown, or will Spain’s record-breaking run culminate in global glory?



Most of the Spanish players idolised Lionel Messi when growing up, and now they are up against him. REUTERS

Final showdown

DEEPANKAR SHARDA

IT was during the 1966 World Cup — an era long before modern sensations like Lionel Messi, Enzo Fernandez, Rodri, or Mikel Oyarzabal were even born — that the two 2026 FIFA World Cup finalists first crossed paths on the global stage. Until now, that group-stage clash was the first and only time *La Roja* (the red) and *La Albiceleste* (the white and sky blue) had ever met in World Cup history.

In that historic encounter, Argentina emerged victorious with a 2-1 win, courtesy of a brace from Luis Artime, while Pirri netted Spain’s solitary goal. While the Spanish side suffered an early group-stage exit, Argentina advanced to the quarterfinals, only to be eliminated by England. That fiery match, decided by a lone Geoff Hurst goal, went down in football folklore as the infamous ‘Battle of Wembley’.

Exactly 60 years later, these two titans of modern football are set to face off in a World Cup tournament for only the second time. This time, however, the stakes couldn’t be higher.

Argentina’s journey to the final has been a masterclass in resilience. Peaking at the perfect moment, the defending champions secured their last three victories with dramatic, late-game heroics to book their ticket to the New York New Jersey Stadium on July 19 (12.30 am IST, July 20).

While a World Cup rematch has been 60 years in the making, these two nations are intimately familiar with one another, largely due to the deep club-football ties shared by their players.

Their overall head-to-head record reflects a fierce, deadlocked rivalry. Across 14 meetings in all com-



Beyond wearing the captain’s armband, Rodri Hernandez represents the balance and identity of the Spanish team. REUTERS

petitions and international friendlies, the stats are perfectly split: six wins apiece and two draws.

Their last memorable encounter took place in 2018, when Spain thrashed Argentina 6-1 in a Madrid friendly. The landscape has shifted dramatically since then. Current Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni was merely an assistant under Jorge Sampaoli during that defeat, while Spain was led by Julen Lopetegui, who parted ways with the team just before the 2018 World Cup.

CLASH OF THE ‘UNBEATENS’

Spain’s 2-0 semifinal triumph over France did more than just book their place in the final — it etched their name into the history books. *La Roja* extended their remarkable unbeaten run

to 37 matches (28 wins, 9 draws) across all competitions, equalling Italy’s all-time European international record.

Spain is also the first European nation to win eight consecutive knockout matches across the FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship. This extraordinary streak began after a 1-0 friendly loss to Colombia at London’s Olympic Stadium on March 22, 2024. Since then, they have been unstoppable across international friendlies, the UEFA Nations League, UEFA Euro 2024, and the 2026 World Cup.

Argentina enters the final riding a spectacular 13-match unbeaten streak in World Cup play. While their famous 36-match unbeaten run between 2019 and 2022 was recently eclipsed by Spain’s current streak, *La Albiceleste* remains an incredibly dangerous and unpredictable opponent.

What makes Scaloni’s men so lethal is their ability to fight until the final whistle, deploying the same core group of players with entirely different tactical blueprints in each match.

Against England in the semifinals, they relied on physical dominance, aggressively targeting defenders and pushing a relentless, high-octane pace. Against Switzerland and Egypt, they pivoted to a technical, possession-heavy style driven by precise footwork.

In every instance, Argentina’s second-half substitutions have proven to be the game-changers. The final promises an iconic clash of philosophies. Spain will look to impose their signature brand of football — keeping the game beautifully simple with quick *tiki-taka* passing sequences.

Whatever tactical curveball Argentina throws at them, Spain’s response will need to be flawless if they hope to dethrone the reigning world champions.

STANDOUT PLAYERS

RODRI (SPAIN, MIDFIELDER/SKIPPER): The tactical anchor of *tiki-taka* style, the 30-year-old is known for the 2-to-4 touch passing and controlling possession. The skipper was 14 when Spain last won the World Cup.

PAU CUBARSI (SPAIN, DEFENDER): A Xavi protege, the 19-year-old is a contender for the Young Player Award. Cubarsi earned massive plaudits for his composure under pressure.

PEDRO PORRO (SPAIN, DEFENDER): Dominated the right flank against France, neutralising Mbappe and scoring Spain’s second goal in the semis.



KYLIAN MBAPPE (FRANCE, STRIKER & SKIPPER): Has scored 20 goals in 21 World Cup games (till the 2026 World Cup semis). The French skipper is a frontrunner for the Golden Boot.

OUSMANE DEMBELE (FRANCE, STRIKER): Netted 5 goals in 6 US-based World Cup appearances till the semis. Dembele, though, was unable to break the “reigning Ballon d’Or winner” World Cup curse.

LIONEL MESSI (ARGENTINA, FORWARD & SKIPPER): Has recorded 8 goals in 6 matches. Is the first player since 1966 to log 20+ pass-to-shot creations in three different World Cups (2014, 2022, 2026).

LEANDRO PAREDES (ARGENTINA, MIDFIELDER): Defensive anchor who logged 131 touches and a 94% passing accuracy against Switzerland, he is key to Argentina’s transition play.



HARRY KANE (ENGLAND, STRIKER & SKIPPER): Logged 6 goals till the semifinal in the 2026 edition, becoming England’s all-time top World Cup goalscorer.

JUDE BELLINGHAM (ENGLAND, MIDFIELDER): 6 goals in 6 games till the semis. The 23-year-old has a lethal major-tournament average of a goal or assist every 138 minutes.



ERLING HAALAND (NORWAY, STRIKER): Scored 7 goals in 5 matches during Norway’s first World Cup appearance in 28 years. Haaland has seen his global fame reach new heights.

VINIcius JUNIOR (BRAZIL, FORWARD): Carried the attack amid Neymar’s partial availability, scoring 4 goals and 1 assist before Brazil’s shock Round of 16 exit to Norway.

JOHN STONES (ENGLAND, DEFENDER): Partnered with Marc Guehi to lock down elite strikers like Haaland, recording 6 headed clearances.

GOALKEEPERS



VOZINHA (CAPE VERDE): The 40-year-old star of the World Cup, he held Spain to a goalless draw and shut down Messi, seeing his Instagram following explode.

ORLANDO GILL (PARAGUAY): The 26-year-old made 4 saves, 15 goal pre-ventions in upset against Germany.

ORJAN NYLAND (NORWAY): Stopped a Bruno Guimaraes penalty to secure a historic 2-1 victory over Brazil.

UNAI SIMON (SPAIN): Maintained a 650-minute shutout streak until the quarterfinals.

RISING STARS

NICOLAS PAZ (ARGENTINA, 21): The creative attacking midfielder is being seen as Messi’s heir apparent.

IBRAHIM MBAYE (SENEGAL, 18): Explosive young striker who added immense dynamic pace.

NESTORY IRANKUNDA (AUSTRALIA): Watford attacker who stretched defences with blistering speed.

DESIRE DOUE (FRANCE): Left winger who scored against Norway.

NICO O'REILLY (ENGLAND): Left-back with a 93% passing accuracy.

LAMINE YAMAL (SPAIN, 19): Left-footed right winger, twice Player of the Match.

The EV cybersecurity wake-up call

The e-rickshaw hacking scare has exposed cybersecurity flaws that could threaten increasingly connected electric vehicles



YOUR electric vehicle has plenty of battery left, the dashboard looks perfectly normal, and yet the EV simply refuses to move. No flat tyre. No breakdown. No drained battery. Just an invisible digital switch that seems to have been flipped. It may sound unbelievable, but the recent controversy over e-rickshaws allegedly being stalled using battery-management apps has exposed a worrying reality: weak cybersecurity can leave some EVs vulnerable to remote tampering.

While the government has banned the apps in question, the bigger challenge lies in fixing the security loopholes that made such attacks possible in the first place.

WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED?

The issue exploded after videos circulating on social media allegedly showed electric autorickshaws suddenly coming to a standstill in the middle of roads. Those clips soon drew attention to battery-monitoring apps such as BAT-BMS, Lossigy and Epoch-i-ion, which were allegedly being misused to remotely interfere with some EVs.

Originally designed to display battery health, charge levels, temperature and other technical details, the apps themselves weren’t necessarily the problem. In



After the hack, automakers and component makers have been asked to run a full security audit.

some cases, they were allegedly used to access the vulnerable battery management system (BMS) and switch off the battery’s discharge function. The battery would still have charge, but it would stop supplying power to the motor, bringing the autorickshaw to an abrupt halt.

THE REAL LOOPHOLE

It’s tempting to blame the apps, but that’s only half the story. Many affordable EV battery packs are sourced from third-party suppliers. In some cases, manufacturers reportedly shipped them with default bluetooth names, predictable passwords or almost no authentication. Some even lacked encrypted communication. This meant the BMS trusted almost anyone trying to connect.

It’s like you have basically left the front door unlocked with a neon sign saying “come on in”. Removing BAT-BMS from app stores closes one route. But if another developer creates a similar app tomorrow, the same weakness could be exploited again unless the battery itself is secured.

BMS: BRAIN BEHIND BATTERIES

The BMS is the brain of an EV’s battery. It constantly checks battery temperature, charging speed, voltage balance and overall health. It also decides when charging should stop or whether the battery should shut down to prevent overheating. Giving unrestricted access to that system is like handing strangers the admin password to your laptop. They may not physically touch your device, but they can still change critical settings.

YOUR EV AT RISK?

The short answer is yes, but don’t panic just yet. A lot depends on how “connected” your car is. Data shows remote features in Indian vehicles are shooting up. Remote battery management alone jumped from under 2 per cent to over 5 per cent of vehicles in just a few years.

Platforms like Tata iRA, Hyundai Blueink, MG i-SMART and others are increasingly wired up with Internet-enabled, remote-access features. Many let you lock or unlock doors, check battery status, locate your vehicle or even cool the cabin before you get in. Super convenient? Absolutely. But every connected feature is also another digital doorway that needs protection.

Fortunately, mainstream carmakers usually employ stronger safeguards such as encrypted communication, multi-layer authentication, secure over-the-air (OTA) software updates and continuous security testing. Still, no connected vehicle gets a lifetime immunity certificate since software is constantly evolving.

WHY THE ALARM BELLS

After the videos of rickshaws freezing mid-ride went viral, the government moved fast. Apple and Google were told to remove the three apps from their stores. A small sigh of relief. But banning the apps doesn’t fix the actual vulnerability. The underlying weak authentication and default settings in battery systems are still very much out there, waiting for the next app (or hacker) to exploit them. That is why the Centre has now asked automakers and component

makers to run a full cybersecurity audit — checking battery communication interfaces, killing off weak authentication, removing unsecured defaults and locking down OTA update pathways.

There is also a bigger framework in the works, rolling out from October this year, pushing manufacturers to build proper cybersecurity management systems from the ground up, not as an afterthought.

FIXING THE FLAWS

The biggest lesson from this episode is simple. Cybersecurity cannot be treated as optional. Manufacturers need to stop shipping battery systems with default passwords or unsecured bluetooth access.

Every battery should require strong authentication before allowing anyone to change settings. Software updates must be digitally verified so fake updates cannot be installed. Communication between mobile apps and the battery should always be encrypted. Vehicle owners should install only official apps and update firmware whenever available.

SMARTER, SAFER EVs

EVs are the future no doubt, but “smart” only works if it’s also “secure”. The recent battery hack wasn’t simply about three apps disappearing from app stores. It exposed a larger truth: the weakest part of any connected system isn’t always the software people see, it is often the hidden code quietly running in the background.

As EVs become more connected, cybersecurity will be as essential as brakes, seatbelts and headlights. After all, nobody wants their ride to buffer in real life.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Inflation and price rise in Oman



MOHJA
AL MASKARI

The author is a student at
Modern College of Science
and Business

INFLATION AND rising prices are economic issues that affect the lives of all members of society, because they increase the cost of living and make purchasing goods and services more expensive. Inflation means a continuous rise in the prices of goods and services over a certain period of time, which leads to a decrease in the purchasing power of money. This means that the amount that was sufficient to purchase certain needs in the past may not be sufficient to purchase the same amount at the present time.

The Sultanate of Oman, like other countries in the world, has been affected by rising prices in recent years due to several factors, including rising global oil prices, increasing shipping and transportation costs; and rising prices of raw materials. The Sultanate of Oman's dependence on importing part of its needs from foreign markets makes local prices affected by any change that occurs in global markets.

The rise in prices included many goods and services, such as food, building materials and some basic services. This has increased the financial burden on many families, especially families with limited income, as they need to spend larger amounts to meet their daily needs. Therefore, it

has become necessary for many people to be careful to organise their expenses and stay away from unnecessary spending.

The impact of inflation is not limited to individuals only, but also extends to companies and institutions. When prices of raw materials or transportation costs rise, the cost of production rises, which prompts some companies to raise the prices of their products so that they can cover their expenses. Some small projects may also face difficulty in continuing if costs continue to rise, which may affect business growth and job creation.

In order to reduce the effects of inflation, the Omani government is working to implement a number of economic policies aimed at maintaining economic stability and supporting development.

These efforts include encouraging investment, increasing local production and supporting economic sectors such as agriculture, industry and fisheries, in order to reduce dependence on imports. The competent authorities also constantly monitor the markets to ensure the availability of basic commodities and prevent any unjustified rise in prices.

On the other hand, individuals can contribute to mitigating the effects of

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rising prices by planning expenses well, setting a monthly budget, purchasing basic needs only, comparing prices before purchasing and taking advantage of offers when needed. Supporting national products also helps stimulate the local economy and encourages increased production within the Sultanate of Oman.

Through Oman Vision 2040, the Sultanate of Oman seeks to diversify sources of income and strengthen the national economy, so that it becomes less affected by global economic fluctuations. Supporting investment, encouraging innovation and developing non-oil sectors are among the most important means that help achieve this goal and enhance the economy's ability to face future challenges.

In conclusion, inflation and rising prices are economic challenges that affect individuals, companies and the economy in general. However, cooperation between the government and society, along with sound financial planning and increasing local production, can mitigate the effects of this phenomenon. As economic efforts continue in the Sultanate of Oman, economic stability can be achieved and the standard of living improved, which contributes to building a more prosperous and sustainable future.

TALKS START ON A UN TREATY TO PROTECT OLDER PEOPLE

EMMA FARGE

A United Nations meeting this week heard calls for an end to ageism and better protection against what campaigners say are hidden abuses as negotiations began on a treaty to strengthen the rights of older people. The week of talks in Geneva was initiated and chaired by Argentina in efforts to combat exclusion, discrimination and neglect as life expectancy rises. The UN projects that the number of people over 65 will double in the next 50 years to become a fifth of the world's population.

"Our objective is not just to address the needs of the present, but also to prepare a system that can meet the needs of the future", said Carlos Mario Foradori, Argentina's ambassador to the UN in Geneva. "This goal is to build an instrument that strengthens the dignity, protection and the rights of millions of older persons globally".

Brazil, Slovenia, the Philippines and Gambia are the proposed treaty's other main backers; and Chile and South Africa were among countries that voiced support in the week-long talks.

Negotiators are set to meet again in Geneva in October and it is not clear how long negotiations might last. It can take years for such treaties to be agreed on. Although there are already human rights treaties that have non-discrimination clauses based on race and gender, none exist for age.

"There are many situations where people are not fully protected by existing law", said Heidrun Mollenkopf, President of AGE Platform Europe, a network of older people.

"It's completely hidden what's going on", she said, referring to what she said were abuses in nursing homes by carers that have included chemical restraints to control the behaviour of people with dementia. There had even been cases of homicide, she said, without identifying such incidents. A UN-appointed independent expert on the human rights of older people recommended reforms in a 2021 report, saying ageism was pervasive globally and that deeply embedded stereotypes about age were informing laws and policies. — Reuters

Justice for Haaland — and a lesson from Argentina

ENGLAND'S

QUARTERFINAL win at the 2026 World Cup did not feel like sporting justice. It felt like a talent tax on a team carrying a singular bright light. Norway should have advanced. That is what you see when the match is studied: Sequences where Erling Haaland stood open, perfectly placed to finish and did not receive the ball. A team can miss a moment; it should not miss a pattern. Norway missed a pattern.

Jealousy and envy are unfashionable in modern tactics, but they are real in human systems. Haaland's brilliance — statistical output, physical dominance and visible kindness with fans — can expose teammates. Some rise; others resist. When a forward refuses a simple pass to an open striker to chase personal glory, the team pays. The coach should have managed this. With a rising star, you plan for the human side: set clear rules for the final pass and act when selfish choices repeat.

That did not happen here. At least twice, the ball should have gone to Haaland; instead, teammates shot or dribbled into traffic. "There is no I in team" points to a truth: impulse needs consequences. The first time a player refuses the obvious pass, you talk. The second time, you take him off. The coach did



DR NAJMA
AL ZIDJALY

The writer is Associate
Professor, Sultan
Qaboos University

*He won
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neither, and the game slipped — costing Norway its edge and the tournament its marquee finisher.

Officiating also mattered. An early goal was ruled out without a clear, real-time explanation. That kind of call breaks trust; players feel it. I still do not see what Haaland did to justify disallowing Norway's second goal. In knockout matches decided on margins, unclear decisions tilt outcomes.

Haaland's response remained steady though. When blame could have been easily assigned, he declined to humiliate his teammates. He called football a game of decisions — some right, some wrong — and kept his focus. Greatness is not only being the solution; it is refusing to become the problem when others falter.

Now add the semi-finals proof from Argentina. Despite suspicions that Fifa favours them and familiar hostility towards Lionel Messi, one thing was clear: Argentina played as a team. No one hunted personal headlines. When behind against England, they gathered, recalibrated and chose the best option over the biggest name.

They passed to whoever occupied the right position — even Messi. It was not "I have to score"; it was "we have to win". Argentina focused on advancing to the final; too many in Norway seemed to play for a personal moment, resentful of Haaland's

attention.

This contrast strips away excuses. External pressure did not produce ego; it tightened Argentina, clarified roles and made the final pass a shared ethic. When ego risked disrupting flow, Argentina's collective corrected it in real time — by pass selection, reinforcement and the star himself choosing service over spotlight.

Lessons follow: For rising talents: your light will trigger shadows. Expect it. Protect your craft. Align with coaches and teammates who prize the best decision over the loudest celebration. Under stress, make the selfless choice until it becomes the team's reflex.

For coaches: Star management is the job. Anticipate envy, name it and design incentives that make the right pass the obvious pass. Set non negotiables and rotate early when ego disrupts flow. Build the culture Argentina displayed.

Norway's loss does not dim Haaland's light. He did not win that quarterfinal. He won something else: the discipline to keep choosing team over self, even when others failed to choose him. Argentina, in parallel, showed what happens when the team is at risk of losing: Choose the game, not the ego. That is the standard for the next match, the right pass and a finish that counts.

OPINION

Drive export growth in quality and volume

IT IS essential to take measures to increase domestic production. Only when production of goods is expanded and increased can export products be generated, and consequently, the earned foreign currency can be spent to prioritize the import of essential goods urgently needed for the country.

Ministries and regional and state governments need to make dedicated efforts to increase production. In order to produce a greater quantity and wider range of export products that meet prescribed quality standards, relevant ministries must encourage and support business owners and provide the necessary assistance. The State Government has been implementing the National Export Strategy

Only by sustainably and consistently increasing the production and export of goods can the country's economy achieve steady growth. To further expand exports, depending on market conditions, benefits can also be generated for the country by integrating measures such as importing raw materials or semi-finished goods from abroad, manufacturing finished products domestically, and re-exporting them to overseas markets, as well as conducting re-export activities within the export sector.

The main priority sectors include the rice and agricultural products sector (rice, various types of beans and pulses, and oilseed crops), the rubber industry sector, the fisheries sector, the textile and garment sector (CMP garment industries), the forestry products sector, and the handicrafts sector. The services and technology sectors include the digital economy and digital products sector, the tourism sector, and logistics services. Supporting sectors include quality management, trade information services, and innovation and entrepreneurship development.

In line with the key priority sectors of the National Export Strategy, it is necessary to increase production volumes in the agriculture, livestock, and manufacturing sectors in order to expand exports. At the same time, authorities and business leaders must stress the innovation and technological progress needed to raise product quality and strengthen market competitiveness. Efforts must also be made to produce and export value-added finished products instead of exporting raw materials such as agricultural products, livestock products, forest products, and industrial raw material crops.

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In order to overcome the challenges currently facing the country domestically, it is essential to increase domestic production. Therefore, concerted efforts must be made to place greater emphasis on enhancing production across all sectors.

The Myth of the Perfect Accent

For many Myanmar learners, speaking English is often judged by one visible feature: pronunciation. A strong Burmese accent is sometimes mistaken for poor English, while a near-native accent is admired as the hallmark of fluency. Yet this perception overlooks an important truth. In the real world, effective communication depends far less on accent than on vocabulary, fluency, and the ability to express ideas clearly.

Language is like building a bridge. Vocabulary provides the bricks, grammar the supporting pillars, fluency the roadway, and intonation the guide rails that carry meaning and emotion. Pronunciation gives the bridge its appearance. A beautiful bridge is of little value if it does not carry people safely across. Likewise, the purpose of English is not to sound impressive but to connect minds.

What Neuroscience Tells Us

Neuroscience explains why pronunciation becomes more difficult with age. Young children

Beyond Accent: The Real Measure of English Proficiency

By U Khin Maung Myint

Vocabulary Is the Currency of Communication

Words are the currency of every language. Without vocabulary, grammar has little to organize and pronunciation has little to express. A rich vocabulary enables speakers to explain, persuade, negotiate, comfort, and inspire.

Fluency is equally important. Conversation is like a flowing river; when words come naturally, communication becomes effortless. Constant hesitation interrupts that flow, no matter how accurate the pronunciation may be.

Importantly, adults do not lose the ability to learn a language. Rather, they rely more on reasoning, memory, and deliberate practice than on the effortless imitation seen in childhood. Although acquiring a native accent becomes less likely with age, adults often excel in understanding ideas, expanding vocabulary, and communicating with confidence.

The Music of English

English is not merely spoken; it is performed. Stress, rhythm, and intonation give life to words. They signal questions, emphasis, humour, emotion, and sincerity.

Even perfectly pronounced words can sound unnatural if delivered without appropriate rhythm.

A good teacher, therefore, offers more than vocabulary and grammar. Learners imitate the speech they hear. Clear pronunciation, natural intonation, and expressive delivery provide a model that the brain gradually adopts. As the proverb reminds us, "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree".

Accent Is Not Ability

International communication proves this point every day. Doctors, engineers, scientists, academics, airline pilots, and business leaders across the world speak English with recognizable national accents. Yet they collaborate successfully because their speech is intelligible and their ideas are clear.

An accent tells listeners where we have come from – not

how intelligent we are. It reflects identity, not competence.

One Important Exception: Proper Names

There is, however, one important exception. The pronunciation of people's names, towns, cities, and countries deserves particular care. A proper name is more than a collection of sounds; it represents identity, history, and culture.

Mispronouncing an ordinary word may cause temporary confusion. Mispronouncing a person's name, however, can unintentionally diminish dignity or convey a lack of respect. Healthcare professionals, teachers, diplomats, broadcasters, and business people therefore make a conscious effort to learn unfamiliar names correctly.

This is not about acquiring a perfect accent. It is about showing courtesy. Respect often begins by

calling people by the names they recognize as their own.

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A Practical Goal for Myanmar Learners

For Myanmar adults learning English, the objective should not be to sound British or American. That pursuit can become a mirage — always visible yet never fully attainable.

A more realistic and rewarding goal is to build a broad vocabulary, develop fluent speech, master English rhythm and intonation, and speak with confidence. Clear communication will always carry greater value than flawless imitation.

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Conclusion: Build Bridges, Not Mirrors

There is an old proverb: "Empty vessels make the most noise." In language learning, the opposite is often true. Those who communicate most effectively are

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A Land of Traditions and Heartfelt Kindness

By Kyaw Ye Aung

THE country I live in today is my absolute dreamland. It is a place where you can truly experience a meaningful and beautiful family life. The traditional culture here is incredibly rich and unlike anywhere else in the world. People here are content with what they have. Most of them are honest, polite, and genuinely warm-hearted. They love to help others, and they will gladly lend a hand to a stranger without expecting anything in return. To them, the simple act of giving is what matters most.

While family love is important all over the world, the bond in our society is uniquely deep. Parents

selflessly raise and guide their children, no matter how old they get. In return, children take care of their parents when they grow old, looking after them until their very last days. This is the purest form of love between parents and children. It is a beautiful connection that words cannot easily describe, and you really have to see it for yourself.

This is a land where everyone should experience living, mostly because of our strong and lasting cultural traditions. In our society, every single person is valued — whether they are young or old, rich or poor, healthy or sick. This comes from a long history of mutual respect. To be honest, we live by the teachings of Lord Buddha. This helps us understand that nothing in life lasts forever. By accepting this, we believe that being happy with what we have is the real key to a peaceful life.

There is a famous saying,

"Honesty is the best policy," and this is very true for our country. We might not be as modern or industrially developed as some other countries, but we are incredibly rich in honesty, kindness, and goodwill. Because of this, we can live our daily lives with a peaceful mind. On top of that, our land is blessed with beautiful nature and breathtaking views. It is no surprise that so many tourists visit us and leave with unforgettable, warm memories.

In conclusion, we must love our country and help build a modern, disciplined nation through the strength of our youth. By doing this, we can proudly stand as Myanmar citizens in the global community. We should protect and cherish our special values — our hard work, our generosity, and the deep respect we show to our elders. At the end of the day, I am incredibly proud to be Burmese.

Destination

By Thihathayna

With all our might,
We've rowed the boat,
Using all the sails and oars

Reached there,
Yet still rowing

Was it lost?
Or has it shifted over and over?

One certain thing
Is
Never-ending.



Today and Tomorrow

By Min Min Zan

I live my life from day to day,
And try to walk the proper way.
Tomorrow may be bright and gay,
Or take my happiness away.

The future comes with mystery,
No one can read its history.
It may bring joy for all to see,
Or write a sad new story for me.

So I will cherish every hour,
And use my time with all my power.
Today may bloom like a lovely flower,
For tomorrow may change its colour and power.



GLOBAL VIEWPOINTS:
WEEKLY HIGHLIGHTS



PM Modi flags off India’s first Hydrogen train

PRIME Minister Naren-
dra Modi today flagged
off India’s first hydro-
gen-powered train be-
tween Jind and Sonipat
at Jind railway station in
Haryana.

The launch of the
first Hydrogen- powered
train marks an important
step towards the adop-
tion of clean and sus-
tainable mobility in the
railway sector.

On the occasion,
Prime Minister also
dedicated to the nation
as well as lay the foun-
dation stone of National
Highway projects worth
over 124.7 billion rupees
in Haryana. Mr Modi ded-
icated the 157-kilometre
long Delhi-Amritsar-Ka-
tra Expressway.

The Greenfield cor-
ridor forms part of the
667-kilometre Delhi-Am-

ritsar-Katra Expressway.
The expressway will re-
duce travel time between
Delhi and Katra from
about 14 hours to near-
ly six hours, while cut-

The launch of the first Hydrogen-powered train marks an
important step towards the adoption of clean and sustainable
mobility in the railway sector.



A decorated hydrogen-powered train is seen in Jind, Haryana. PHOTO: X/@RAILMININDIA

ting the Delhi-Amritsar
journey from about eight
hours to four hours.

Addressing the
gathering, Prime Minis-
ter Modi said that over
the past twelve years
Indian Railway has wit-
nessed major transfor-
mation. He noted that
Haryana has witnessed
a new phase of devel-
opment in recent years
and has moved forward
on the path of progress.
Mr Modi added that the
launch of the country’s
first hydrogen train has
given Jind a special
place in India’s history.
— ANI

Israel dissolves
parliament,
set Oct
elections

ISRAEL’S Knesset, the
country’s parliament, on
Friday voted unanimously
to dissolve itself, paving
the way for general elec-
tions scheduled for 27
October.

From then until the
elections, the government
will operate as a caretaker
government, with limited
authority to advance ma-
jor policy initiatives except
for broadly supported leg-
islation, routine regulatory
matters and measures re-
quired for security needs.

Under Israeli law,
general elections for par-
liament are held every
four years. This will mark
the first time since 1988
that elections have been
held after a full four-year
term. — Xinhua

US, Iran trade attacks in return to
full-blown war

THE United States and
Iran traded attacks on
Friday, with Tehran tar-
geting American assets
across the Middle East
in the biggest escalation
since the two foes re-
turned to outright war.

A month after the two
sides agreed a memo-
randum of understand-
ing aimed at ending the
conflict that began in Feb-
ruary, Iran accused US
forces of hitting civilian
and energy infrastruc-

ture on Friday including
an airport, a railway sta-
tion and two bridges, with
state media reporting at
least eight dead and 20
wounded in overnight at-
tacks. — AFP

Iranian strike damages Kuwaiti
power and desalination plant

KUWAIT said Friday that
an Iranian attack struck
a power generation and
water desalination plant,
causing extensive dam-
age to the facility.

In a statement post-
ed on social media plat-
form X, the Ministry of
Electricity, Water and
Renewable Energy said
the attack also triggered
a fire at the plant.

Firefighting teams
had brought the blaze un-
der control, while techni-
cal crews were working
to repair the damaged
units and restore them to
service, said the ministry.

It added that author-
ities were continuously
monitoring the stability
of the national electricity
grid as restoration work
progressed.

The ministry urged
residents to conserve
electricity during what
it described as an “ex-
ceptional period”.



An Iranian attack struck a power generation and water desalination plant, causing extensive damage to the facility. PHOTO: NEWS OF BAHRAIN/FACEBOOK

The latest escalation
came after the United
States carried out fresh
strikes on Iranian mili-
tary and infrastructure
targets.

In response, the
Iranian armed forces
said Friday they had
launched retaliatory
strikes against US bases
and facilities in Syria, Ku-

wait, Bahrain and Oman.

The renewed hos-
tilities unfolded despite
a peace memorandum
of understanding signed
on 18 June under which
Washington and Tehran
were expected to hold
negotiations within 60
days aimed at reaching
a final agreement. —
Xinhua

China protects its wild Asian elephants

CHINA has expanded
its conservation efforts
for wild Asian elephants

through habitat protec-
tion, ecological restoration,
early-warning systems

and rescue programmes,
according to a report re-
leased Thursday by the
Xinhua Institute, a think
tank affiliated with Xinhua
News Agency.

The report, titled “Liv-
ing in Harmony with Na-
ture: The Ecological Civil-
ization Behind China’s Wild
Elephant Sanctuary,” said
sustained conservation
efforts and science-based
management have con-
tributed to the steady
growth of China’s wild
Asian elephant population.
— Xinhua



Elephants appear in thermal imaging captured by a ranger’s
drone in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province. PHOTO: CHINA
DAILY

OPINION

A simultaneous publication from
ISLAMABAD, LAHORE, KARACHI, GWADAR & QUETTA

Chairperson/Publishing Editor
RAMEEZA MAJID NIZAMI

Legacy of our Founding Chairman
MAJID NIZAMI

Editor
SALMAN MASOOD

Children's Rights

The ongoing discourse surrounding the legal and social protections of minors is a critical admission that the current framework for safeguarding children is fundamentally insufficient. By advocating for a more robust enforcement of children's rights, the state is finally acknowledging that a child's welfare should not be a matter of familial discretion, but a guaranteed legal entitlement.

The current situation demands a systematic effort to support the rights of minors, moving beyond the performative nature of occasional policy announcements. The failure to protect children from exploitation, neglect, or abuse is not merely a social tragedy, but a systemic failure of governance. When the state fails to provide a protective environment, it effectively sanctions the marginalisation of its future citizens. The lack of a structured support system ensures that the cycle of vulnerability is perpetuated, leaving children to navigate a world that offers them little more than the bare minimum of care.

A childhood stripped of basic rights and security leads to lifelong psychological and physical scars, which in turn snowball into a generational trap of poverty. When a child is denied education, health, and security, they are effectively locked into a socioeconomic bracket that is nearly impossible to escape. This creates a cycle where the poverty of the parents is inherited by the children, not as a matter of fate, but as a result of systemic failure.

A sustainable solution requires a transition from reactive interventions to a proactive, rights-based approach. The goal must be the establishment of an independent oversight mechanism that ensures children's rights are upheld regardless of their social standing.

Institutionalised Cruelty

The movement of Jewish families into new West Bank settlements, coupled with the absurd proposal to surround Palestinian prisoners with crocodile-filled moats, reveals a regime that views human suffering as a design choice. By combining land theft with the dehumanisation of prisoners, the Zionist state is not merely managing a conflict, it is refining a system of total domination. This reflects a staggering level of impunity, as the state is allowed to continue its genocide and extend its reach across the region without facing a single meaningful consequence from the global community.

The current state of affairs is a result of a transparent strategy where government representatives, public figures, and settlers openly admit to a project of ethnic cleansing. The arrogance is further compounded by the development of laws that criminalise protests against these atrocities, effectively treating the demand for human rights as a legal offence. This is a calculated move to silence dissent and ensure that the machinery of displacement can operate without the inconvenience of public accountability. The Western supporters of this regime, by providing the financial and diplomatic cover, are not just allies, they are active architects of this erasure.

Palestine has become the practice ground for powers to test their ammunition and their most brutal tactics of control. The world is witnessing a laboratory of oppression where the rules of international law are treated as optional.

Those supporting this regime, or remaining silent in the face of such brutality, will eventually face a rude shock when these same tactics are replicated on them. Whether through the surveillance of the populace or the militarisation of civil space, the tools used to oppress Palestinians are the same tools that will eventually be turned on the citizens of the world.

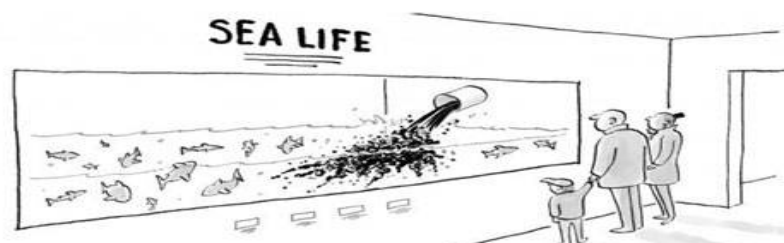
The Riparian Gamble

Recent developments regarding India's unilateral approach to water sharing and its disregard for the Indus Waters Treaty reveal a strategic shift toward hydrological coercion. By manipulating the flow of shared rivers, New Delhi is not merely managing a resource, it is weaponising a basic necessity. This move creates a cascade of critical issues, ranging from the threat of artificial droughts to the destabilisation of agricultural economies that millions of people depend upon for survival.

When a riparian power decides that treaties are optional, the risk of miscalculation increases exponentially. The lack of transparency in India's water management strategies suggests that the water is being used as a tool for political leverage, transforming a technical arrangement into a source of perpetual tension. Such a strategy ensures that the region remains in a state of anxiety, where the security of the food chain is subject to the whims of a neighbouring power.

The irony is that India has further exposed itself as following in the footsteps of the Zionist genocidal state. By discarding international treaties and treating human survival as a strategic variable, New Delhi is adopting a blueprint of aggression that prioritises dominance over diplomacy. This mirroring places not only the local population at risk but threatens the entire region with the spectre of war.

A sustainable future requires a return to the sanctity of international law. Until India recognises that the Indus Waters Treaty is a binding obligation rather than a suggestion, the region will remain a powder keg. The goal must be a transition from a culture of water-bullying to one of genuine cooperation, ensuring that the rivers continue to be a source of life rather than a catalyst for conflict.



Pakistan's Pharma Growth

Pakistan's pharmaceutical industry, with more than 700 registered pharmaceutical companies, has quietly reached a landmark that deserves far greater public attention.

For the first time in its history, the sector has crossed PKR 1 trillion in annual revenues, reflecting not only its growing economic significance but also its strategic importance for national healthcare, industrial development, and exports. This milestone is more than a financial achievement. It signals a structural transformation in an industry that has long struggled with inflation, currency depreciation, supply chain disruptions, and pricing constraints. The recent deregulation of prices for non-essential medicines has reshaped the financial landscape, allowing pharmaceutical manufacturers to absorb rising production costs while strengthening their ability to invest in research, technology, and expansion.

From a medical professional's perspective, the industry's evolution is both encouraging and instructive. A review of trailing twelve-month financial data, fiscal performance, and reports from the Pakistan Credit Rating Agency, Topline Securities, Pakistan Stock Exchange, and IQVIA retail market audits reveals that Pakistan's pharmaceutical market continues to operate as an oligopoly. Although more than 650 pharmaceutical manufacturers are registered in the country, the top ten companies continue to command an overwhelming share of the market through their established brands, extensive distribution networks, and manufacturing capabilities. One of the most significant catalysts behind the sector's improved performance has been the government's decision to deregulate prices for non-essential medicines. For years, pharmaceutical manufacturers struggled to cope with soaring costs of imported raw materials, energy, packaging, and logistics while operating under strict price controls. As inflation accelerated and the Pakistani rupee depreciated, profit margins came under severe pressure.

The deregulation policy has provided much-needed breathing space. Companies can now adjust prices in response to market conditions, allowing them to recover increased production costs. Consequently, gross profit margins among leading listed pharmaceutical companies have expanded from nearly 35 per cent to an

average of 41-44 per cent. Stronger profitability has improved cash flows, encouraged investment in manufacturing facilities, enhanced regulatory compliance, and strengthened overall financial stability. Another defining trend is the changing competitive landscape resulting from multinational corporations restructuring or reducing their footprint in Pakistan. Several global pharmaceutical companies have shifted priorities towards asset-light business models and regional restructuring. Rather than weakening the domestic market, this transition has opened new opportunities for well-established local companies.

Pakistani pharmaceutical groups such as AGP Limited, OBS Pakistan, and Lucky Core Industries have actively acquired mature international brands and product portfolios. These acquisitions have enabled local firms to expand their therapeutic offerings, strengthen market share, and reduce dependence on foreign ownership. This gradual consolidation reflects increasing confidence in the capabilities of Pakistan's pharmaceutical sector. Exports have emerged as another powerful growth engine. Pakistan's pharmaceutical exports have reached a record level, growing by more than 34 per cent to exceed US\$450 million annually. Although exports remain relatively small compared with regional competitors, the growth trajectory is highly encouraging.

Leading companies, including Getz Pharma, Ferozsons Laboratories, and BF Biosciences, are increasingly investing in export-oriented production and international regulatory compliance. Expanding into overseas markets not only generates valuable foreign exchange but also provides protection against domestic economic volatility and currency depreciation. Export diversification is becoming essential for sustaining long-term industry growth. Despite these encouraging developments, important challenges remain. Pakistan still imports a substantial proportion of its Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs), making manufacturers vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations and global supply chain disruptions. Energy costs, taxation, regulatory delays, and limited investment in pharmaceutical research continue to affect competitiveness.

Moreover, industry growth must never come at the expense of medicine affordability. Policymakers face the delicate responsibility of balancing financial sustainability for manufacturers with equitable access to medicines for patients.

Effective regulation, transparent pricing mechanisms, and targeted subsidies for essential medicines will remain critical to achieving this balance. The sector's long-term success will also depend on greater investment in innovation, biotechnology, local API manufacturing, digital health technologies, and workforce development. Compliance is a major pillar of this transformation. Strengthening quality assurance systems, encouraging research collaborations between academia and industry, and promoting internationally recognised manufacturing standards will position Pakistan as a more competitive pharmaceutical producer globally.

In contrast, India has developed into one of the world's largest pharmaceutical producers, with an industry worth around US\$65-70 billion and pharmaceutical exports exceeding US\$27 billion annually. India supplies nearly 20 per cent of the world's generic medicines by volume and has thousands of manufacturing facilities that meet international regulatory standards. While Pakistan's market is dominated by a handful of leading companies, India has more than 3,000 pharmaceutical companies and 10,000+ manufacturing units, supported by substantial investment in research, biotechnology, vaccines, and export-oriented manufacturing.

Pakistan's pharmaceutical industry stands at a defining moment. Crossing the PKR 1 trillion revenue mark represents far more than commercial success—it reflects resilience, adaptation, and growing industrial maturity. If policymakers continue to pursue supportive reforms while ensuring patient protection, and if industry leaders prioritise innovation alongside profitability, Pakistan can transform its pharmaceutical sector into a regional manufacturing and export powerhouse. Nevertheless, the industry still faces significant challenges, including dependence on imported APIs, exchange rate volatility, regulatory requirements, rising energy costs, lower spending on pharmaceutical research and development, and affordability concerns for patients.

In a nutshell, the coming decade offers an opportunity to build a globally competitive pharmaceutical ecosystem that delivers high-quality medicines, generates employment, strengthens exports, and contributes meaningfully to national economic development. The foundations have been laid; the challenge now is to sustain this momentum responsibly.

Motherhood

Motherhood—what does this word bring to your mind? I can probably guess what first appears in most of our minds: the ideal image of a woman taking care of her children, cleaning, teaching, raising them, and noticing every little detail of their lives. When the children go to school, she makes sure they complete their homework, keeps track of their classes, attends their functions, knows all their teachers, ensures they have good friends, and lets them grow while also worrying that they do not grow up too fast. With modern Gen Alpha children come new challenges: monitoring what they watch in their free time, limiting screen time, and constantly adapting to concerns that previous generations of parents never had to face. As these children become teenagers, mothers ride an emotional rollercoaster alongside them. They answer difficult questions, navigate hormonal changes, and provide the patience, reassurance, and support that adolescence demands.

Yet, when we talk about motherhood, if you have not noticed already, we only talk about women in relation to their children. We rarely talk about them as individuals, as women, or simply as human beings.

These are idealised notions of motherhood that women are expected to live up to in order to be considered the "perfect" mother.

The question is: why are women no longer seen as fully human once they adopt the title of mother?

Many studies have shown that motherhood is a complex identity that can evoke feelings of anxiety, pressure, loss, stress, and fear. I do not think women, or the people around them, fully understand the enormity of the commitment that motherhood demands. It is not simply a role that occupies a few years of life; it is a responsibility that shapes every single day, stretches from year to year, and eventually becomes a lifelong commitment.

I often think that if people truly understood the weight of this commitment, we would not have witnessed such rapid population growth in recent years, a trend that continues even today.

When we continue to reinforce traditional gender roles in parenting, they become so deeply normalised that even children fail to recognise the immense time, effort, and emotional labour invested by their mothers in comparison with their fathers. They do not necessarily appreciate it because they have been taught to see it as normal. Women leave their careers when they have children, while men rarely have to, even when the wife is more qualified than her husband. Even educated families often default to traditional gender roles instead of questioning and unlearning these rigid gender scripts.

This affects children in subtle ways, quietly, almost invisibly, but in ways that become deeply ingrained. From a very young age, children begin absorbing these gender roles. They see mothers as caregivers and fathers as providers. They rarely grow up believing that care is not a gendered responsibility but a fundamental part of family life that should be shared by everyone. Gradually, this diverts them from the natural course of simply becoming themselves. These expectations begin to shape their play, the toys they choose, the emotions they allow themselves to express, and even the ambitions they dare to have, without realising that these assumptions may stay with them for the rest of their lives.

For a society like Pakistan, it is essential to understand that the more a woman is able to enjoy her motherhood, the more a child is able to enjoy their childhood.

A study showed that nearly 80% of autoimmune diseases, conditions in which the immune system attacks the very body it is meant to protect, occur in women. Beyond the scientific explanations, it has also been argued that cultural expectations surrounding womanhood and motherhood contribute to this reality. To be clear, this is a cultural problem, not a biological inevitability or a gendered flaw.

Certain characteristics have been observed among many of these women, particularly by those who know them closely within their families. First, they place the emotional needs of others above their own. Second, they identify themselves through duty and responsibility rather than through their own needs and identities. Third, they prioritise being agreeable, keeping the peace, and maintaining harmony, often suppressing even healthy expressions of anger. Fourth, they are conditioned to believe that they are responsible for how everyone else feels.

Why is this so? Because we live in a culture that teaches women to constantly care for everyone else's emotional needs, carry everyone else's burdens, define themselves through their responsibilities, and suppress their own emotions. They are expected to endure quietly, and even healthy anger is often seen as something they are not permitted to express.

We must understand that mothers are human beings before they are mothers. They have emotional needs, ambitions, dreams, disappointments, and identities that exist beyond the people they nurture. Yet these parts of them are so often taken for granted, overlooked, or quietly sacrificed, even by the partners with whom they are meant to spend their lives.

We should thank mothers even more for everything that goes unnoticed. Thank them for the invisible labour, the quiet sacrifices, the emotional strength, and the countless moments that never receive recognition because they have been mistaken for obligation. They deserve appreciation not because they fulfil a role, but because they are human.

Perhaps the first step towards creating healthier families and healthier societies is not asking mothers to become more perfect but allowing them to be more human. And maybe, when we finally begin to see mothers as complete individuals rather than only through the lens of motherhood, we will also begin to raise children who understand that care, love, and responsibility belong to all of us, not just to women.

To my mother and to every mother reading this: you are, before anything else, a human being. You matter, you are valued, and you are deeply appreciated.



Iman Shahbaz Cheema

The writer is a law student at LUMS with research interests in gender, law, governance, and public policy.

Dr Zeeshan Khan

The writer is a personal finance and financial literacy enthusiast with an investing experience in financial markets. He tweets @DrZeeshanKhanAI

Pakistan's pharmaceutical industry enters a new era of growth.

OPINION

The Missing Classrooms



Attiya Munawer

The writer is an activist and environmentalist. She covers human rights and politico-environmental issues. She tweets @AttiyaMunawer and can be reached at attibutt121@gmail.com

Education in Pakistan is always considered the foundation of national development, economic stability, and social prosperity, but the ground realities seem to negate such a claim. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) 2026 Report, if more than 25 million children between the ages of 5 and 16 are out of school (OOSC) in Pakistan, it is not just a problem for the education sector but also a matter of national security, economic future, and social stability. The Civil Services Academy Comprehensive Policy Review Report has once again highlighted the bitter reality that, despite the passage of more than two years since the declaration of a National Education Emergency, Pakistan has not been able to overcome its biggest education crisis. This report has made it clear that the problem is not about making new policies but about the effective, transparent, and continuous implementation of existing policies.

Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan grants every child the right to free and compulsory education, but there is a large gap between the constitutional guarantee and the practical situation, which is why Pakistan is among those countries in the world where the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) is alarmingly high. This is not just a numerical problem, but a crisis related to the dreams of millions of families, the future of children, and the human development prospects of the country. The out-of-school children crisis is becoming increasingly urgent to address through the National Education Action Plan (NEAP) 2026.

The Civil Services Academy comparative policy review, UNICEF assessments, and Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) data collectively indicate that, over the past several decades, inadequate public financing, a disjointed education system, weak governance structures, poor accountability, and a growing population have combined to transform this crisis into a complex challenge. Governments change, policies are enacted, committees are formed, and plans are drafted, yet the results have not been what the nation hoped for. This proves that Pakistan's true crisis lies not in policy-making, but in implementation, accountability, and institutional capacity. Expecting positive change without addressing fundamental flaws would be tantamount to self-deception.

Addressing these fundamental flaws would be tantamount to self-deception.

Although all provinces have prepared their educational roadmaps under the National Education Action Plan (NEAP) 2026, the obstacles contributing to educational disparity vary across provinces. The biggest problem in Punjab is the huge number of out-of-school children (OOSC). With approximately 10.4 million out-of-school children (OOSC), a campaign for new enrolments will not be enough. Effective measures will also be required to prevent children from dropping out prematurely. This is why 6.4 million children in Punjab have never gone to school, and 3.16 million children have dropped out after enrolment. The situation in each province of the country is completely different from the others. The educational disparity in Sindh province reflects a different kind of structural crisis. Here, the dropout of children after primary education, weak infrastructure, and the effects of climate change or disasters such as the floods of 2022-2025 have caused severe damage to the education sector, wiping out nearly half of the public schools in Sindh province. On the other hand, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the law and order situation, harsh geography, and lack of female teachers have become major obstacles to promoting education, while Balochistan's vast geographical area, weak administrative structure, dysfunctional schools, and lack of basic facilities further complicate the crisis. The above facts make it obvious that adopting a single educational strategy for the entire country cannot prove effective; rather, policy-making tailored to the conditions and needs of each province is inevitable, which is currently not being done.

Apparently, a major reason for the education crisis has been the lack of financial resources. In Pakistan, government spending on education as a proportion of the gross national product is lower than in many neighbouring countries. Most of the provincial education budgets are spent on salaries and administrative expenses. Unless education is given equal importance in the country's national priorities alongside defence, infrastructure, and other development sectors, it will not be possible to achieve the desired progress. It is not enough to construct school buildings in some suburban areas while neglecting their continuous educational frameworks. The

recruitment of quality teachers, a modern curriculum, digital facilities, a safe environment for children, and an effective monitoring system are equally important; therefore, adequate attention should also be devoted to these aspects.

The root causes of illiteracy and out-of-school children include rising poverty. There are millions of families in the country for whom sending children to work instead of school has become a compulsion. If the government more effectively implements scholarships, free books, transport, food programmes, and social security schemes for school-aged children, many parents will be able to bring their children back to school. Numerous countries around the world have achieved significant success through conditional cash transfers and welfare programmes linked to school attendance. Pakistan can also benefit from such experiences, but poverty and the lack of educational financial assistance schemes compel us to follow the beaten path.

It is also impossible to deny the fact that the education crisis is not only the responsibility of the government; parents, teachers, the private sector, social organisations, religious and community leaders, and the media also have to fulfil their responsibilities. Having over 25 million children out of school in Pakistan is not the failure of any one government or institution, but the outcome of decades of collective negligence. However, this crisis is not insurmountable. If the government allocates sufficient resources for education, formulates policies according to the needs of the provinces, ensures transparent accountability, invests in teacher training and modern technology, and makes the provision of education to every child a national goal, the dire situation can change for the better within a few years. The real development of this country is not merely related to high-rise infrastructure, motorways, unsustainable buildings, or mega projects; rather, it is associated with providing education to deprived children. If we do not equip these children with books, pens, and classrooms, this deprivation will become the biggest obstacle to our national development tomorrow. However, if they are provided with quality education, these children will prove to be Pakistan's greatest economic, scientific, and social force.

#Whatstrending

The top opinions on Twitter



Tweets are reproduced verbatim and are unedited to retain the author's views and mannerisms.



Zarrar Khuhro @ZarrarKhuhro

Interesting and sudden influx of people with bios like 'geopolitics enthusiast/ human rights activist/ coffee lover etc' made tagging while saying the same exact thing. Weak cover IDs guys. Try harder.



omar r quraishi @omar_qurai...

Punjab CM Maryam Nawaz and her team remained unhurt after a helicopter transporting them triggered the collapse of a wall while landing in Arifwala.

The incident occurred as CM Maryam arrived in Pakpattan district to attend the inauguration ceremony of Nawaz Sharif School of Eminence

Good that she is safe

However question does arise as to the quality of construction of the wall which collapsed and whether this wall was part of the school that was to be inaugurated



Dr Andreas Krieg @andreas...

"Israel is a highly traumatized country. It exists in a sociopsychological bubble built around victimhood relying on a government system dominated by the military. In such a militarized society, there is no room for political strategy. It is a system built for perpetual war...Military leaders are terrible rulers and terrible at strategic decision making outside the battlefield. This is why Israel has never strategically won a war because it is still fighting 80 years on"



Abdul Mussawer Safi @Mus...

Before increasing a petrol price, first address purchasing power parity. #FuelPrices



Bilal Farooqi @bilalfqi

The petroleum minister said the government was moving towards the #deregulation of #petroleum products. The gist of the presser is that the govt is absolving itself of the responsibility for fixing #fuelprices



Zubair Ahmed Khan @Zub...

Karachi to Install Smart No-Parking Cameras to automatically detect illegally parked vehicles and enable the issuance of electronic traffic challans.

Before doing this they should first ensure adequate parking space and arrangements else its just another EXTORTION scheme!



Waleed Shahid @walee...

"Eventually, almost everyone claims they opposed apartheid...But justice is not measured by where we stand after history has issued its verdict. It is measured by where we stand when the verdict is still being rendered." -@NYCMayor on Nelson Mandela and Palestinian human rights



Former Congresswoman Mar...

BREAKING: American commentator Candace Owens to Trump:

"You will inevitably die as slaves to Israel. You are chained now, and the entire world sees it."

Letters to the Editor

Views expressed in articles and letters on these pages are not necessarily shared by the newspaper. E-mail alert! Writers for Opinion and Analysis pages are requested to send their contribution to: editorial@nation.com.pk E-mails for notes to the editor should be addressed to: readerscolumn@nation.com.pk — Editor

Changing Climate

During a recent family trip to Kalam, Swat, we were surprised to find temperatures exceeding 35°C. Known for its cool climate, Kalam has long been one of Pakistan's most popular summer destinations, making the intense heat both unexpected and alarming.

This experience highlights the reality of climate change. Rising greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and global warming are driving increasingly extreme weather, not only in Pakistan but around the world. Europe's recent heatwave is another reminder that climate change is no longer a distant threat but a present-day crisis.

Governments, industries, and individuals must work together to reduce carbon emissions, protect forests, promote renewable energy, and conserve water resources. Strong environmental policies and their effective implementation are essential to safeguard future generations. **NASIR SOOMRO,** Karachi.

Emerging Technology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming one of the most influential technologies in the modern world. From education and healthcare to business and software development, AI is transforming the way people work and learn. However, despite its growing importance, many universities in Pakistan still hesitate to properly integrate AI into their educational systems and often view it negatively rather than as an opportunity.

Historically, many emerging technologies faced resistance before be-

coming essential parts of daily life. The same is now true for AI. Instead of discouraging students from using AI tools, universities should guide them on how to use these technologies responsibly and effectively for learning and research.

AI can help students improve productivity, understand complex concepts, conduct research more effectively, and develop modern technical skills. The aim should not be to avoid AI, but to use it intelligently.

Universities should organise workshops, awareness sessions, and training programmes on AI tools and applications. Integrating AI into education will prepare students for future careers and help Pakistan keep pace with global technological advancement. **MUHAMMAD REHAAN,** Lahore.

Rising Petrol Prices

I am writing to express concern over the continuous rise in petrol prices and its impact on the daily lives of ordinary citizens. Recently, petrol prices in Pakistan have surged to around Rs450 per litre, making fuel increasingly unaffordable for many people. The rising cost of fuel has made it difficult for people to manage their everyday expenses.

One of the most noticeable effects is on daily commuting. Whether people use private vehicles or rely on public transport, the cost of travel has increased significantly. Public transport fares have gone up, making it harder for students and working individuals to afford their daily commute.

Moreover, the rise in petrol prices has also affected the prices of essential goods. Transportation costs

have increased, leading to higher prices for food and other necessities. This has placed additional financial pressure on households that are already struggling to meet their basic needs.

The situation is becoming increasingly difficult for middle- and lower-income groups, who are the most affected by these price hikes. It is important for the concerned authorities to take measures to control fuel prices or provide relief to the public. I request you to highlight this issue in your newspaper so that it may gain the attention of the relevant authorities and prompt necessary action. **FAIQA KHAN,** Karachi.

Chase Evaders, Not Taxpayers

The country's budget season has long followed a familiar pattern. Industries and salaried workers brace for fresh levies, while billions of rupees lost to illicit trade remain largely unaddressed. This year, however, there are signs that the approach may be changing.

The government is intensifying enforcement measures against illicit trade, viewing them as a means of revenue recovery. The Prime Minister has directed the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) to double enforcement-based collections from Rs389 billion to Rs778 billion during the 2026-27 fiscal year.

The scale of the problem is significant. Across the tobacco, petroleum, pharmaceutical, and auto parts sectors, illicit trade is estimated to inflict annual losses of around Rs1 trillion. In the tobacco sector alone, an estimated 45 to 47 billion non-duty-paid cigarettes are sold each year,

costing the national exchequer approximately Rs350 billion annually.

Enforcement operations during the current fiscal year have resulted in the confiscation of substantial quantities of illicit products. Whether this momentum can be sustained beyond the budget season remains the critical question. **USAMA GHULAM RASOOL,** Karachi.

Access to Higher Education

At a time when access to quality higher education remains a challenge for many talented young Pakistanis, it is encouraging to see institutions making merit the primary criterion for opportunity. Habib University's Convocation 2026 highlighted that 85 per cent of its graduating class completed their education through scholarships or financial aid.

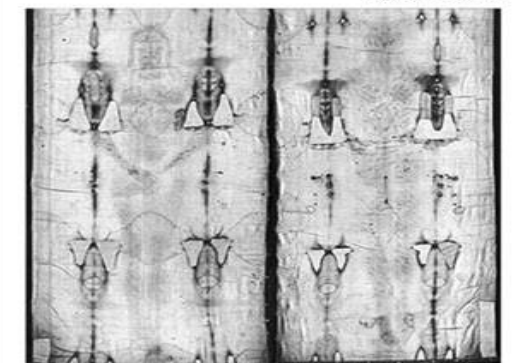
This statistic deserves attention because it demonstrates that academic excellence can be made accessible when financial barriers are removed. The graduating class represented students from multiple cities and diverse backgrounds, showing that higher education can become more inclusive when support systems are intentionally designed.

Educational institutions are often evaluated on the basis of rankings and infrastructure, but their broader contribution lies in creating pathways for capable students who might otherwise be excluded. By enabling access through scholarships and financial assistance, universities can help ensure that talent is not constrained by economic circumstances. **TOOBA JAFRI,** Karachi.

Past in Perspective

"The relic doesn't seem like something from the past. It's the vestige of the future."

—David Mitchell



The Shroud of Turin, a centuries-old linen cloth, is perhaps one of the most enigmatic and debated relics in the world. Believed by some to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, it bears the faint, ghostly image of a man who appears to have suffered crucifixion. The shroud has fascinated scientists, theologians, and historians alike, with numerous studies and examinations conducted to unravel its mysteries. While some regard it as a genuine relic, others maintain skepticism, citing carbon dating results that suggest it hails from medieval times. The Shroud of Turin remains a profound religious and scientific enigma, captivating the imagination of many.

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Kevin Sabet | By Allysia Finley

Has Legal Marijuana Passed Its High Point?

Has America hit a marijuana high-water mark? About one-third of Americans in their 20s admitted in 2024 to having used marijuana in the previous month. As did 1 in 5 of those 35 to 50. More Americans now report using marijuana nearly every day than drinking alcohol.

Justice Neil Gorsuch's majority opinion in *U.S. v. Hemani* last month cited that last figure. The court held unanimously that Americans can't be forbidden from possessing firearms for using marijuana a few times a week. Justice Samuel Alito, concurring in the judgment, compared cannabis use today to alcohol at the founding: "It is widespread and increasingly considered socially acceptable in many quarters. And from a practical standpoint, law enforcement widely tolerates the use of marijuana."

The latter statement is mostly true. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for recreational consumption, and every state except Idaho and Kansas permits its use for putative medical purposes. But the cultural tide on marijuana may be ebbing. So says Kevin Sabet, who has led a countercultural movement against pot.

A longstanding skeptic observes with satisfaction that the drug's costs and hazards are beginning to catch up with the politics.

"People are seeing with their own eyes, and I think frankly smelling with their own nose," Mr. Sabet, 47, says in a phone interview. "They see that there are more people with a marijuana addiction. There are more people with marijuana psychosis. There are more people whose kids are struggling."

He notes that in 2024 Elton John called marijuana legalization in the U.S. and Canada "one of the greatest mistakes of all time.": "It's addictive, it leads to other drugs, and when you're stoned—and I've been stoned—you don't think normally."

It's a message Mr. Sabet wishes more Americans would hear. This spring he released a film, "THC Inc.," which premiered April 20 on the Documentary+ streaming platform. It chronicles the negative social and public-health effects of legalization. The documentary exposes the marijuana industry's foul underbelly, what Mr. Sabet calls "addiction for profit."

While working on the film, Mr. Sabet encountered many rich and famous people who struggled with marijuana addiction: "I was at an Oscar party and met all kinds of celebrities who were quietly taking me aside and thanking me for what I'm doing." He met many parents whose kids got hooked on the drug, leading in some cases to psychosis and suicide.

If you live in Oregon and your child is confused about her sex, the state is ready to medicate her and perhaps even put her under the knife. The Beaver State has become a national leader in providing life-altering hormones to minors.

According to a new study published in Research Connections, at age 17, roughly 1 in every 240 girls and 1 in every 630 boys in Oregon received cross-sex hormones for "gender dysphoria" between 2016 and 2023. These figures are triple and double the national average for girls and boys, respectively. For younger children the disparity is even greater: Cross-sex hormone use in the study was four to five times the national rate among 14- and 15-year-olds, and puberty-blocker use was more than five times the national rate at age 14.

Oregon classifies hormones and surgery as "medically necessary" treatments for gender dysphoria, which the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines as a mismatch between one's sex and one's subjective perception of "gender," accompanied by distress or difficulty functioning.

According to the study, teens in Oregon are being diagnosed with gender dysphoria at alarming rates: 1.51% of girls and 0.46% of boys received a "transgender-related diagnosis," almost always gender dysphoria, between 2016 and 2023. The figure for both sexes is 0.98%—10

"If you're a privileged dude with a lot of money and you smoke a lot of weed, you can do that because you can take the risk," he says. "You'll send yourself to \$100,000-a-month treatment in Malibu, and you'll end up being fine." But many young people who use pot heavily develop mental illnesses from which they never recover.

In many ways, he says, "marijuana addiction is the toughest addiction to treat." There aren't medications to aid recovery, as there are for opioids and methamphetamines. It's also hard to get addicts to overcome their denial that they have a problem when political leaders and society at large insist the drug is harmless.

Never mind that it isn't. There is a broad medical consensus that marijuana, especially the high-potency varieties that prevail today, damages developing brains. A study in February that tracked 463,396 adolescents from 2016 to 2023 found that those who reported using cannabis were twice as likely to develop a psychotic disorder after accounting for other mental-health conditions. Copious research also shows that the drug increases the risk of cardiac problems, strokes and mental illness among adults and impairs driving and motivation.

Mr. Sabet traces his antimarijuana activism to junior high school, when he served as a peer counselor to students who struggled in school because of their pot use: "I saw how my friends were very negatively affected." In 1996, while in high school, he campaigned against a ballot initiative to legalize marijuana for medical purposes.

At first he was sympathetic to the idea: "I thought, 'Well, if it helps people and it's medical, then who can argue with that?' And then I started to dig deep into who's behind this and what's this about. And I found that it was basically three billionaires funding this." Voters approved the initiative, 56% to 44%, making California the first state to permit pot.

Other states followed, and thus began America's experiment with marijuana legalization. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, Mr. Sabet founded Citizens for a Drug-Free Berkeley, which he says "was about as popular as a coalition for a wine-free France would be in Paris."

"I had friends who had almost died from ecstasy use at raves," he recalls. "I saw people pushing safe ways to use MDMA"—the chemical abbreviation for ecstasy: " 'Just drink a lot of water, you'll be fine, or just test it and you'll be fine.' And so I was introduced to this idea of harm reduction, which was this very extreme idea that you could use drugs safely."

Mr. Sabet's antidrug activism drew the attention of some in the Clinton White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, who recruited him to serve as a researcher. He later served as an

adviser on drug policy for the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, leaving the latter after 2½ years as more Democrats embraced legalization.

"I could see the writing on the wall where the Democratic Party was going, where the marijuana industry was going," he says. In 2013, he founded a nonprofit, Smart Approaches to Marijuana, along with former Rep. Patrick Kennedy and commentator David Frum, to oppose legalization.

A year earlier, Washington and Colorado became the first states to legalize marijuana for recreational use. Initially Mr. Sabet led a lonely fight. But he has gained allies and donors as marijuana and its ills have spread. "I feel very fortunate our donors are almost exclusively families that have been affected by marijuana," he says. He stresses his group doesn't take money from the pharmaceutical or alcohol industry.

While losing most battles in the past decade, legalization opponents have recently been scoring victories. In the past two general elections, voters rejected measures to legalize marijuana for recreational use in four states (Arkansas, Florida, North Dakota and South Dakota). In May Virginia's Gov. Abigail Spanberger vetoed a bill that would have permitted recreational marijuana sales.

Views among liberal elites are also shifting. He points to a February editorial in the New York Times, "It's Time for America to Admit That It Has a Marijuana Problem," which details how legalization has led to a rise in addiction and other social problems. In 2014 the Times's editors launched an editorial crusade for full legalization. A dozen years later, they were at least somewhat chastened.

"Much of what we wrote then holds up—but not all of it does," they wrote. "The unfortunate truth is that the loosening of marijuana policies—especially the decision to legalize pot without adequately regulating it—has led to worse out-



KEN FALLIN

comes than many Americans expected. It is time to acknowledge reality and change course." Changing course, however, turns out to mean federal taxes and regulation, not repeal of state legalization measures.

Yet repeal is a possibility in some states. In November, Massachusetts voters will vote on a ballot initiative to reverse the state's legalization of recreational sales, though it would still permit personal possession of small amounts. Marijuana businesses sued unsuccessfully to block the measure from the ballot, which suggests the industry fears it could pass.

Mr. Sabet says pot advocates have sold legalization with false promises. They claimed legalization would result in stricter regulation of a drug that was already available. But the black market continues to thrive and state regulation has proved toothless. "No state in this country has the capacity to control the underground market, has the capacity to tax it in a way that will pay for the costs, has the capacity and the will and the legal constitutional precedent to greatly restrict advertising," he says. "No state has implemented proper warning labels in a way that's actually meaningful, and no state has implemented proper THC limits in a way that's at all meaningful." (THC is marijuana's psychoactive ingredient.)

The first of the Times's 2014 editorial series was titled "Repeal Prohibition Again." Mr. Sabet thinks the analogy is inapposite: "Alcohol has been a central part of Western civilization since before the Old Testament. It's been used by the vast majority of those in the West." Marijuana hasn't.

Further, "you can't really isolate the dangerous marijuana user the way you can with somebody who's completely drunk. And frankly, the only reason to use marijuana is to get high. The only reason to drink is not to get drunk. Alcohol is in and out of your system within 24 hours. Marijuana can stay in your system for weeks and still have lingering effects for weeks."

lawsuit "baseless," disputed the FTC's jurisdiction, and said its activities are protected under the First Amendment.)

In Oregon, where WPATH's influence has been institutionalized, thousands of teens have already been exposed to life-altering drugs and surgery. Authorities likely believed they were responding to demand, but the numbers suggest they were creating it. Some objecting parents faced child-welfare investigations.

When the state first approved Medicaid coverage for "gender transition" procedures in 2015, officials projected that only about 175 people—adults and minors combined—would use the services each year, with costs not exceeding \$200,000. In the first year alone, costs exceeded \$720,000. By 2024, the figure had risen to more than \$12.3 million—over 60 times the original projection. The number of Oregonians receiving covered procedures was roughly 10 times the anticipated number in 2015 and 80 times by 2023.

Among minors, transgender-related diagnoses in Oregon rose threefold between 2017 and 2023, according to a Manhattan Institute insurance database analysis. Hormone prescriptions soared, and surgery became more common. In 2019 alone, 33 minors had double mastectomies and two had hysterectomies, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority's All Payer All Claims Reporting Program.

Oregon has slightly more than 1% of America's teens, but between 2019 and 2023 its clinics accounted for at least 7% of all "gender" mastectomies on teen girls. During those years 26

Medicaid policies to incorporate WPATH's eighth and latest Standards of Care, known as SOC-8.

WPATH has been in critics' cross hairs for years, but in 2024 controversy reached a crescendo as internal WPATH communications obtained by the Alabama attorney general while defending a lawsuit against the state's limits on so-called gender-affirming care for minors revealed evidence of medical scandal.

The state pushes teens toward 'transgender-related diagnoses' and dangerous treatments.

These documents showed that when developing SOC-8, WPATH commissioned evidence reviews, but it suppressed them after finding "little or no evidence about children and adolescents." It then claimed that a systematic review of evidence was "not possible." WPATH also initially recommended age minimums for nearly all "gender transition" procedures, enlisted almost exclusively authors with financial or other conflicts of interest, and sprinkled "medical necessity" statements to guarantee insurance coverage for procedures despite acknowledging privately in an email that "all of us are painfully aware that there are many gaps in research to back up our recommendations." Last month the Federal Trade Commission sued WPATH, alleging consumer fraud via unfair or deceptive practices. (WPATH called the

That's one reason Mr. Sabet takes issue with *Hemani*, which he says "assumes that the danger from pot only shows up like the habitually incapacitated drinker that you can identify and disarm. And that doesn't really map with marijuana because the research shows that even occasional use can lead to paranoia, psychosis and violence."

Mr. Sabet's outfit made these arguments during two weeks of hearings before the Drug Enforcement Administration, which is considering whether to move cannabis to Schedule III from Schedule I under the Controlled Substances Act. Schedule I drugs have "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse." Those on the third rung—including hormones and Tylenol with codeine—have legitimate medical uses and "a moderate to low potential for physical and psychological dependence."

Medical marijuana is a misnomer, he says. He cites a review published in the Journal of the American Medical Association last November that found the "evidence from randomized clinical trials does not support the use of cannabis or cannabinoids for most conditions for which it is promoted, such as acute pain and insomnia." A Cochrane systemic review of the evidence in January similarly found "no clear evidence" that "cannabis-based medicines work for chronic neuropathic pain." That includes CBD products, which are derived from marijuana's non-psychoactive compounds.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration this spring announced that it would allow Medicare to cover CBD products. "The president is listening to some of his biggest donors," Mr. Sabet says. That includes the cannabis conglomerate Trulieve. Mr. Sabet also notes that Howard Kessler, a Palm Beach billionaire and longtime friend of Mr. Trump, lobbied for the Schedule III reclassification and CBD Medicare coverage. "He's not listening to the majority of his advisers, who I know are against relaxing marijuana laws."

The president also issued an executive order this spring directing the Food and Drug Administration to expand patient access to experimental psychedelics under the Right to Try Act of 2018. Mr. Sabet argues that this runs counter to the purpose of the law, which was to help patients with life-threatening diseases, and could result in negative consequences and stop people from using proven therapies.

He says supporters of legalizing psychedelics are following the same playbook as marijuana: "Call it medicine before you have the science. Put it to a popular vote and get into politicians' heads on it. Get a few spokespersons that no one can argue with. Who can argue with a veteran with PTSD who says that psychedelics saved their life?"

Ms. Finley is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

minors had "bottom surgery"—23 hysterectomies and three castrations.

Videos from WPATH conferences, also obtained through the Alabama lawsuit, revealed that clinicians at the Oregon Health and Science University's Transgender Health Program were pushing the field to extremes, denouncing medical gatekeeping, offering young patients "nonbinary" body configurations with no parallel in nature, and basing medical decisions on "embodiment goals," regardless of medical history or mental health. (WPATH, which wasn't a party to the Alabama suit, issued a statement defending the quality of SOC-8 "and the process through which it was developed.")

Public-record requests, meantime, revealed that Oregon health authorities have known for years about the lack of evidence for these interventions. In 2012, a state-commissioned evidence review found "very poor evidence of the benefit" from puberty blockers. After regulators added "transition" procedures with no age minimums to state Medicaid benefits, a follow-up report co-authored by unnamed gender clinicians at OHSU affirmed the policy despite acknowledging the "paucity of data."

Oregon's extreme liberal culture, one-party politics and activist-captured medical and child-welfare systems illustrate the "gender affirmation" model taken toward its logical conclusion.

Mr. Sabet is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Mr. Terdal is Portland-based management consultant and a visiting fellow with Do No Harm.



CROSS COUNTRY
By Leor Sapir and Paul Terdal

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The SAVE America Act Backfire

President Trump broke into prime-time TV on Thursday night to talk to the nation about election security, but it must have been a letdown for anybody expecting a thrilling plot twist in Mr. Trump’s long yarn about his 2020 defeat. Instead he made a sales pitch for a bill that can’t pass, using doubts it wouldn’t address.

Mr. Trump released documents that he said show vulnerabilities in U.S. election systems, and some of them are real, though they run the gamut. He said voter files on millions of people, including names, addressees and party affiliations, “have been bought, stolen or hacked by China.” A 2020 intelligence memo advised that adversaries “have the capability to compromise” election infrastructure, especially “registration databases, pollbooks, and official election websites.”

But since Mr. Trump declassified the memo, we can quote the part he didn’t. “Vote tabulation systems would be difficult to manipulate on a wide enough scale to compromise election results,” it says. “The systems in each voting location are not connected to the Internet or to each other, and many methods for exploiting them rely on physical proximity.” Achieving it across many jurisdictions “would be difficult” and “audits and paper trails very likely would uncover such an effort.”

Mr. Trump went on to say that CIA reporting indicates Venezuela’s dictatorship conspired to rig its own election and “digitally alter vote totals.” He presented this as proof of concept that such a thing is possible. Sorry, the state of Georgia, which Mr. Trump lost in 2020 and then won in 2024, isn’t Venezuela, and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger isn’t Nicolás Maduro.

Other files involve a drive for voter registration in Michigan. Mr. Trump alleged that some canvassers in 2020, who received gift cards based on productivity, “submitted fraudulent registration for people who did not exist.” If that’s true, law enforcement ought to pursue it. Yet how many registration forms? Were they accepted? Did any phantom people actually get a ballot? Mr. Trump didn’t say.

Then he urged passage of the SAVE America Act. “The only reason you wouldn’t do it is you want to cheat,” he said. “This landmark bill requires that all voters must show photo voter ID. How simple is that?” He also called to ban mail

ballots, “except for illness, disability, military deployment or travel.”

The public likes voter ID, with a poll last year finding 83% of adults, and 71% of Democrats, favor it. Yet the SAVE America Act goes further, rendering most driver’s licenses insufficient to register to vote, and that’s to say nothing of Mr. Trump’s push to override laws in many GOP states—Florida, Georgia, most of the Midwest—that offer mail ballots for convenience.

In a floor speech Thursday, North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis argued that even if Congress whooped through the bill, there isn’t time to implement it before November. By his reckoning, the U.S. has about 10,000 county clerks or municipal entities that carry out America’s decentralized elections. The midterms are barely 100 days away, early voting sooner. “The math doesn’t work,” he said. “It can’t be done.”

Mr. Tillis isn’t against ID rules, and he helped pass North Carolina’s. “We *should* figure out a way to get every state to get to voter ID,” he said. Yet he was unsparing toward Congress’s proponents of the SAVE America Act. “Mr. President, these people are misleading you if they’re telling you that this can be implemented by November,” he said. “This seems like a legit proposal, but it isn’t.”

Unfortunately, the message from Mr. Trump and others has been that America’s elections can’t be trusted, and the only hope is the SAVE America Act. Aside from being untrue, this is a political backfire for the GOP. If Republican voters believe it, and the bill falls short, then why waste time going to the polls in November? Has the GOP already forgotten how Mr. Trump’s fraud outbursts cost them two Senate seats in the 2021 Georgia runoffs?

Republicans should be campaigning on what they want to do with two more years in power. There are ways to improve voting integrity, but Mr. Tillis is right that it’s reckless to sow generalized suspicion that American elections aren’t honest. In fact, the intel memo Mr. Trump declassified warned this is what a U.S. adversary might do. “Much of the voting public probably knows little about the process of administering US elections,” it says, “which could allow false narratives to gain traction.”

That’s dated Jan. 15, 2020. Now there’s some pressint intelligence.

Trump and Bernie, Political Smokejumpers

Smoke from wildfires in Ontario, Canada, has blanketed much of the Midwest and Northeast. Alas, politicians in both parties have responded by blowing their own smoke that adds to the intellectual haze.

Some 180 wildfires blazed across Ontario this week amid a heat wave and lightning storms. Strong winds swept plumes of smoke across the Great Lakes and into the Northeast. High temperatures exacerbated poor air quality, with pollution in some cities hitting records. Cue the politicians trying to make a point, any point.

President Trump claimed the U.S. was “being unnecessarily invaded by filthy, polluted, and unhealthy air” from Canada, threatening tariffs as retribution. Ohio Republican Sen. Bernie Moreno pledged to introduce a bill next week to “sanction Canada and the responsible Canadian government officials for this atrocity.”

Progressives, on the other hand, claimed the fires and smoke are collective punishment for burning fossil fuels. Bernie Sanders assailed the “greed of the fossil fuel industry.” The solution, he wrote, is “transitioning our energy system to energy efficiency and sustainable forms of

power,” by which he mean solar and wind, neither of which produce reliable electricity.

Allow us to clear the air: Canada has reported about 3,500 wildfires so far this year, which is in line with recent historical averages. It’s true that many decades of poor land management have resulted in overgrown forests in Canada, but the same goes for the U.S. The Trump Administration might tend to the federal government’s ill-managed forests before throwing stones at Canada.

As for the effects of climate change, a paper in the journal Nature Communications last year reported that fires in recent decades in North America are running far below historical levels (between 1600 and 1880). Even years “with particularly widespread fire during the 1984–2022 period,” the study said, “were not unprecedented in comparison with the active fire regimes of the historical period across most of the study region.”

All of this is too nuanced to fit into social media sound-bites. But maybe America’s political leaders could try to lower the temperature for a change rather than feed public furies.

Britain’s Newest New Prime Minister

The United Kingdom will welcome a new Prime Minister on Monday when Andy Burnham takes over the top job from

Keir Starmer. Such changes are always moments of hope for voters, and boy will British voters be hoping this is the one that finally works.

Mr. Burnham becomes the country’s seventh leader in roughly a decade (following David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak and Mr. Starmer). That already points at a big challenge ahead.

The first five of those were Conservatives, and by the 2024 election voters were tired of a Tory party prone to chaotic infighting. Mr. Starmer’s pitch two years ago was that his Labour Party would be more stable, yet now he’s been defenestrated. The pressure is on Mr. Burnham to keep serial leadership changes from becoming a Labour pastime, too.

His best hope would be to rev the economy. GDP growth is stuck in neutral, as are inflation-adjusted wages. Business investment is unimpressive despite occasional positive signs. This represents a bipartisan failure, as the Tories put taxes on course for the highest level relative to GDP since World War II, and Mr. Starmer’s Labour raised taxes further and keeps proposing burdensome new regulations.

Alas, here Mr. Burnham appears to have the wrong instincts. He supports greater state control over utilities, wants the government to take the lead on housing construction, and is on the prowl for other taxes to raise. It’s hard to tell where he stands on the economy-suffocating net-zero climate policies Labour has championed. He emphatically rebuffed a plea by former

Prime Minister Tony Blair to revisit the more market-friendly version of Labour that worked in the late 1990s.

All that plays well with Labour’s noisy progressive flank and assuages members who are nervous about growing support for the Green Party to Labour’s left. But it won’t deliver the economic results voters demand. Mr. Burnham has a limited chance after he takes office to pivot, especially on matters such as welfare reform. It’s a good sign that he seems not to want to appoint Ed Miliband, a popular left-winger and net-zero true believer, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, in charge of economic policy.

Mr. Burnham also needs to rebuild Labour credibility on immigration and culture issues, especially around race and sex. On these matters, Labour is losing support to Nigel Farage’s Reform UK party on the right. Mr. Burnham remains a cipher on them, which probably helps his popularity now but won’t be sustainable once he’s in charge.

His biggest challenge, however, concerns the manner of his selection. The only people to have voted for him for the top job are about 25,000 residents of Makerfield in England, where a recent by-election allowed Mr. Burnham to enter parliament so he could oust Mr. Starmer. He was then selected as Labour leader by acclamation without a competitive process to force him to articulate or defend his views.

This means he lacks a mandate other than a general relief that Mr. Starmer is gone and the good vibes that accompany any new administration. He’ll have to earn a mandate by delivering results. Wish him well.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Why Doctors Don’t Like Medicare Advantage

John C. Goodman’s July 10 op-ed gets a lot right (“Why Do Democrats Hate Medicare Advantage?”). Medicare Advantage rewards plans for identifying patients’ true health needs; doctors get paid according to a higher level of care being provided; and, most important, plans make money by keeping people healthy.

Unfortunately, Medicare Advantage plans also benefit by holding doctors’ and hospitals’ money hostage for months, sometimes not paying at all, for care already provided. They do this by employing the tried-and-true tactics of the insurance industry of unjustifiable bureaucratic decisions, superpowered by artificial intelligence: prior authorizations, unnecessary delays, claim denials, unreasonable reimbursements. These plans are currently holding many millions of dollars in payments owed for care already delivered to patients at the public-health system that I run—services that patients deserve, and that we will always keep on pro-

viding because patients need care when they need it, not when insurance gets around to authorizing it.

Our Medicare Advantage denials have grown 132% over the past year, despite promises from insurers to do better. Prior-authorization delays don’t only strain our balance sheet; they delay or deny necessary care. Patients are caught in the middle when they should only be worrying about getting better. These tactics prevent health systems from investing in patient care improvements, such as a new cancer center, facility repairs and more modern equipment.

Medicare Advantage holds great promise, but until plans are held to Prompt Pay standards like Medicare, and pre-authorizations have time limits, hospitals, doctors and patients will never love it.

DAVID LUBARSKY, M.D., MBA, FASA
President and CEO
Westchester Medical Center Health Network
Valhalla, N.Y.

The Democratic Party’s Cognitive Dissonance

William McGurn asks why Chuck Schumer hasn’t called the Democratic Party back to its pro-Israel and Jewish roots (“Schumer’s Tragedy—and Ours,” Main Street, July 14). The harder question may be why so many Jewish Democrats still refuse to recognize what is happening inside their own political home.

What troubles me isn’t that American Jews are unable to identify antisemitism. Evidence is everywhere. The problem is cognitive dissonance. Many Jews were raised to believe that serious antisemitism comes from the right, while the left represents tolerance, minority rights and moral progress. When hostility toward Jews or Israel emerges from that side, it is therefore renamed: anti-Zionism, social justice, solidarity, accountability.

That is how denial defeats evi-

dence. Jewish liberalism is often rooted in admirable commitments—to civil rights, women’s autonomy, equality and the protection of minorities. But for some Jews, those universal commitments now appear to outrank specifically Jewish concerns and even Jewish self-preservation. They will defend every vulnerable group except their own, lest doing so disrupt a political identity formed over generations.

Sen. Schumer’s silence is tragic. But so is the willingness of many Jewish voters to keep explaining away a party that increasingly treats attachment to Israel as a moral defect. The danger isn’t that Jews fail to see the calls coming from inside the house. It is that they hear them and insist they must be coming from somewhere else.

ARIE BLITZ
Weslaco, Texas

Accountable Governance Through Litigation

If Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Mehmet Oz want to discuss the role of litigation in government accountability (“We’re Defending ObamaCare From Lawfare,” op-ed, July 14), we are happy to do so.

The fact is that the Trump administration is doing everything in its power to dismantle the Affordable Care Act. By increasing premiums and destabilizing the risk pool, the regulation the authors defend will force millions of Americans to lose their health coverage.

Let the Kids Play the Field

“How Norway Created a World Cup Monster” (Page One, July 11) about Norway’s youth sports model and its success in producing stars like Erling Haaland struck a nerve. I’m the president of a Little League baseball and softball program in Fort Worth.

Norway’s focus on fun has its merits, but the problem I see today in American youth sports isn’t the score-keeping. It’s the exorbitant costs of select and travel teams and the early push toward single-sport specialization. These trends have replaced seasonal play with year-round commitments that are turning childhood fitness and recreation into a financial burden that is undermining the joy of sports.

Gone are the days when kids played multiple sports for their school or neighborhood. Instead, a 10-year-old today, facing their sixth straight week-end of tournaments with a team of strangers may well ask: Where’s the fun?

Youth sports should be an arena for developing resilient, well-rounded people. We’re risking raising generations of young athletes who get burned out on sports and, in doing so, rob them of what it means to play.

JOEY BRYCE
Fort Worth, Texas

We are a nonpartisan organization with legal and professional staff who worked in both Republican and Democratic administrations, in leading corporate law firms and in cherished civic institutions. We are proud of our record of defending individual rights in court, from protecting the privacy of the American people’s data, to opposing tariffs, protecting free speech and protecting citizens’ right to vote. We have successfully blocked the Trump administration’s effort to siphon \$1.776 billion from American taxpayers for its fund to fill the pockets of their political favorites—a fund that people from across the political spectrum oppose.

We will not apologize for our work to defend the rights of the American people, and we invite Messrs. Kennedy and Oz to join us in meaningful dialogue around these issues.

SKYE PERRYMAN
President and CEO
Democracy Forward Foundation
Washington

The ‘Influencer’ Generation

Regarding Scott Atlas’s op-ed “The Selfie Generation Is the Baby Boomers’ Mistake” (July 10): An even more disturbing barometer of the pulse of the selfie generation is the evolution of the “influencer.”

These people have positioned themselves as trendsetters and their followers are infatuated with them as role models. The messaging that emanates from these figures steers people away from the traditional work ethic. Influencers breed narcissistic and egotistical tendencies. The hard work and sweat-on-the-brow mentality has gone by the wayside. Sacrifice and altruism are lost and it becomes all about immediate self-gratification.

RONALD G. FRANK
West Orange, N.J.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“Don’t think of it as being fired. Think of it as someone else being paid less than you are to do your job.”

Free Expression

From WSJ OPINION

A daily newsletter on

life, politics and culture

Edited by Matthew Hennessey

Featuring columnists:

Matthew Continetti / Kyle Smith

Louise Perry / Ben Sasse/

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OPINION

How Did We Come to Bash the Dead?

By Louise Perry

All societies take a view on how one ought to speak of the dead. Along with conventions around funeral rites and the proper preparation of the body, we are also obliged to observe speech conventions best summarized by the Latin phrase *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*—say nothing of the dead unless it is good.

In the hadiths, reports of Muhammad’s sayings and actions, Muslims are instructed to refrain from mentioning the departed’s bad qualities. Jewish law warns against *lashon hara*, or harmful speech, directed against those who can no longer answer for themselves. Anthropologists consider a taboo on speaking ill of the dead to be a human universal, or close to it. Historians are of course permitted to make an honest assessment of the long-dead, but there is a mourning window that should be observed. To do otherwise is vulgar, insensitive, cruel—even, in some circumstances, belligerent.

In a polarized society, speaking ill is an act of symbolic banishment, casting the decedent out.

This taboo is dissolving. When Sen. Lindsey Graham died on July 11, progressives took to social media eager not only to criticize his political record, but to celebrate his passing. “Good riddance,” wrote podcaster Ana Kasparian. Comedian Margaret Cho joked that another conservative politician—Donald Trump, perhaps?—might imminently die. Anonymous posters went further, openly fantasizing about acts of political violence.

President Trump himself has little respect for the conventions of mourning. “Good, I’m glad he’s

dead,” the president wrote on social media when former special counsel Robert Mueller died in March. Less than a year after the death of Rep. John Dingell, Mr. Trump joked at a rally that he might be “looking up” from hell. Such outbursts have been met with outrage, and rightly so.

Meanwhile, attempts on Mr. Trump’s life are reliably met with expressions of regret that the bullet missed him yet again. When Charlie Kirk was assassinated last year, celebratory comments on Bluesky, the left-wing Twitter alternative, were accompanied by a hit list of other potential targets. J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk were popular options. Bluesky scrambled to remove such posts from its platform while the Trump administration promised retribution against those inciting further violence.

The latest political figure to die in violent circumstances is an icon of the British right. Ann Widdecombe, the official immigration and justice spokesperson for Reform U.K., was found dead at her rural home on July 9. At the time of writing, a 28-year-old man has been arrested on suspicion of her murder. Counterterrorism police are leading the investigation and have said that the suspect was in possession of communist literature that could suggest a political motive.

Widdecombe was both a faithful Catholic and a steadfast social conservative. News of her death was greeted with pleasure by various figures on the left. Although there were some truly grotesque comments posted online, it was the calm and considered remarks of one guest on the BBC that I found most unsettling. Acknowledging that being murdered in her own home was “quite a sad way” for the 78-year-old to “go out,” Daze Aghaji, an environmental activist in her early 20s, nonetheless took the opportunity to list every one of her objections to Widdecombe’s politics live on TV. “There are a lot of people who won’t be grieving,” she concluded. It was a euphemistic way



Sen. Lindsey Graham (1955-2026)

of saying “good riddance.”

This taboo violation made me deeply uncomfortable, as it did the other guests sitting next to Ms. Aghaji on the BBC sofa. It’s one thing when such comments are made under cover of online anonymity. That has a disinhibitory effect, encouraging impulsive expressions of emotion, including nastiness.

This became evident during the earliest days of the internet, when websites hosting obituaries found themselves overwhelmed with malicious comments from people who would never have uttered such words in front of other people. Dedicated memorial platforms emerged partly to solve this problem, employing moderators to remove the worst of the spite.

But many of the people breaking the taboo on mourning rituals are doing so quite openly and without shame. They don’t even pretend that the recently departed deserve a special social status. As the progressive commentator Jenna Price wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald after Charlie Kirk’s murder: “The idea that we shouldn’t speak ill of the dead is baffling. It comes from a time when

we were far more committed to the woo-woo than we are now. As in, spooky woo-woo, some weird leftover from more spiritual times.”

Ms. Price frames the change as a positive one, a rejection of antiquated custom. I see it differently.

Periods of political conflict have often witnessed a collapse of ordinary conventions surrounding the dead. Although ancient Romans generally maintained a taboo on speaking ill of the recently deceased, exceptions were made during periods of instability, when a disgraced public figure might see his name removed from public monuments and his images destroyed.

Some political regimes go further. In times of revolution, the bodies of deposed leaders might be hidden or destroyed so that their graves don’t become shrines or sites of political protest. Desecration of the dead is also commonly used as a political tool, as during the French Revolution, when the bodies of royals buried at Saint-Denis were exhumed and defiled.

When revolutionaries do such things, it isn’t because they’ve forgotten the taboo on treatment of the dead. It’s because they are aware of

the taboo that they violate it with such zeal.

While all societies recognize mourning practices of one kind or another, they apply them only to people seen as within the community. Those outside it aren’t subject to the usual taboos and can be insulted without restraint. The mourning window exists not only to protect the feelings of the living, but also to demarcate the boundaries of a social group. We honor *our* dead alone.

In stable societies, these boundaries are generous and expansive. Confident and happy groups of people can show respect to their political opponents, including by honoring mourning rituals. This isn’t just “spooky woo-woo” as Ms. Price insists. It is a kind of social glue. A politeness that both reveals and reinforces a state of civility. It isn’t prissy to care about such things.

But during periods of intense polarization, consensus over who is and isn’t a member of the political community breaks down. We are living through such a period. This is why so many of us find the collapse of the mourning taboo disturbing in a visceral way. It isn’t only a show of rudeness, although it is rude. Speaking ill of the dead is also an act of symbolic banishment, assigning the dead person the status of an outcast.

Note that violators of the taboo are rarely consistent in their disregard for convention. They speak ill only of their political enemies, while taking great offense if their allies suffer the same insult in return. Don’t mistake this for a general rejection of stuffy convention. Something much more aggressive is at play. Something that reflects poorly on us and on our times.

Ms. Perry is a columnist for WSJ Opinion’s Free Expression.

Peggy Noonan is away.

Trump and His Critics Whistle Past the Truth of 2020



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

A fact isn’t true or false because Donald Trump utters it. That said, have no expectation that the press will disinterestedly examine the documents Mr. Trump released after his speech Thursday pointing to alleged Chinese interference in the 2020 election. Mr. Trump missed an opportunity himself by not mentioning the one complaint in which he stands on unimpeachable ground: the Hunter Biden laptop hoax.

Whether it changed the outcome isn’t knowable, but there’s a reason the press never examines the subject. There’s also a reason you’ve never read, in six years, a New York Times “news analysis,” op-ed or editorial denying the basic truth known by every American who looks at the episode. Joe Biden’s own Justice Department would later say in court that the claim by 51 former intelligence officials that Russia was behind the laptop was a “conspiracy theory with no supporting evidence.”

There’s a part that’s even more unmentionable. The scheme required the implicit participation of Vladimir Putin. The five former CIA directors or acting directors who signed the statement would have understood this instinctively. The New York Post had established a chain of custody for the laptop data. The FBI was shown to have possessed the same data for 10 months. For the Russians to have fabricated thousands of photos, messages and other files wasn’t superficially plausible. Nor had the Bidens challenged any of the documents’ authenticity.

The naked-eye truth was the opposite of what the 51 claimed. The laptop had *none* of the “classic earmarks” of a Russian intelligence operation. It would have been embarrassing for them even to be confronted for saying so if anyone bothered to confront them. But their

bet proved good. Not only didn’t Mr. Putin stridently (and accurately) accuse U.S. officials of doing what they accuse Russia of doing—fabricating disinformation to influence an election. His sole statement, delivered on Russian state TV, was a non sequitur in relation to the accusation of Russian involvement: He repeated the Biden campaign line that Hunter had done nothing wrong.

The truth here can’t be waved away in a cloud of obfuscation and prevarication, unlike the CIA’s and FBI’s dabbling knowingly in false evidence of Trump collusion. That’s why silence must prevail. I often wonder particularly about Leon Panetta, a routine performer as House Budget Committee chairman, Pentagon chief and CIA head. He likely never felt himself at the hinge of history until he participated in an effort to affect the 2020 election that was at once

unprecedented and came with serious foreign-policy risks for the U.S.

It’s not even a case of inferring reality from a dog that didn’t bark. The dog barked. Mr. Putin, nine days before the election, volunteered exactly

Our elections are messy, there’s foreign influence—but the 51 laptop liars were unique in U.S. history.

the required signal to show he wouldn’t upset the Biden stratagem.

I will assume on behalf of the 51 that they considered a Trump presidency such a risk to the country—and the laptop such a risk to Mr. Biden—that extraordinary actions were justified.

Why I’m Voting Against the SAVE America Act

By Lisa Murkowski

President Trump made his case for the SAVE America Act on Thursday, claiming the security of our elections is at stake.

While I support the bill’s core tenets—ensuring that only American citizens vote and requiring identification when voting—I remain opposed to it. Why? Because it would have serious negative effects in Alaska, and the current text doesn’t allow for the time and resources needed for proper implementation.

As written, the SAVE America Act isn’t a simple fix to safeguard elections, as proponents claim. It would impose costly new barriers and prevent some, perhaps many, from voting, while also creating chaos before the November elections.

Part of the problem lies in the bill’s mechanics. Right now, Alaskans can register to vote online. There is no evidence of significant fraud anywhere in that system. Yet the bill would effectively end online voter

registration by requiring voters to present documentary proof of U.S. citizenship in person to an election official.

That wouldn’t be a major obstacle in most places in the Lower 48, but Alaska has only six election offices where that requirement could clearly be met. Six places in a state more than twice the size of Texas, where roughly 80% of our communities, and about 20% of our population, aren’t connected by road.

Even in cities such as Ketchikan and Kodiak, which have Department of Motor Vehicle offices where Alaskans can register to vote under current law, the logistics would be daunting. Under the bill, they would become completely unworkable in more remote communities.

Say you are an 18-year-old living in Savoonga, on a remote island in the Bering Sea, who wants to register to vote for the first time. If the SAVE America Act passed, your only option would be to buy a ticket on Bering Air to Nome, which runs about \$780 round-trip. A night at the Aurora Inn would be more than \$300. So, not counting food and local transportation, it would cost more than \$1,000 just to register to vote.

Or maybe you’re a fisherman in Unalaska, out on the Aleutian Islands. The flight to Anchorage—the closest election office, some 800 miles away—would cost about \$1,500 round-trip. You would also need a hotel, cabs and food while in Anchorage because it would be impossible to fly in, register and return home the same day.

These examples assume you have on hand the documents necessary to prove your citizenship. But take one more: You are an 85-year-old Native elder born in your parents’ house, 18 years before statehood. Getting a certified copy of your birth certificate,

especially if you have never had one before, would be incredibly difficult.

Many Native people rely on tribal identification to register to vote, but the SAVE America Act would require the card to show that the applicant’s place of birth was in the U.S., along with a photo and expiration date. While many tribes’ identification cards have a photo, not all have expiration dates and few include a place of birth.

Only about half of Alaskans have passports. And many Alaskans—including women who have changed their names after marrying or divorcing—wait one to two months to receive certified copies of their vital records.

I believe in its objectives, but it’s too draconian, especially for voters in remote parts of Alaska.

Beyond registration is voting itself. Alaska is a “no excuse” state, meaning you can vote by mail without providing a reason. More than 50,000 Alaskans did in the 2024 general election. Voting by mail is an important alternative in Alaska, particularly in small communities that don’t have places or poll workers for in-person voting. Given the unpredictability of weather in November, many Alaskans prefer the ease and reliability of voting by mail.

The SAVE America Act as the text currently stands would add strict ID mandates to mail-in voting. President Trump is pushing for the final version to go even further—essentially canceling mail-in voting unless a voter falls into one of four specific exceptions, such as military service.

This despite the absence of any significant abuses of these systems in Alaska or across the nation.

I have expressed my concerns with the SAVE America Act for months. I filed several amendments when it came to the Senate floor. No effort has been made to correct its flaws.

I’ve also asked for the effective date of the legislation to be pushed back to give all states enough time for implementation. As written, the bill would take effect immediately—but it is unreasonable to expect immediate compliance.

This bill would force many states to modify their election laws. Some legislatures might need special sessions to do that. Thousands of local jurisdictions would have to implement new processes and find workers willing to risk being personally sued. Under the bill’s private right of action, individuals or groups could sue election officials if they believe verification requirements aren’t being strictly enforced.

Even if federal resources are provided through the budget reconciliation process to help facilitate these changes, it will take weeks or months for those dollars to arrive and much longer to overhaul state voting processes.

When allowed to speak candidly, state election officials from both parties have been clear: Provisions of the SAVE America Act won’t work, especially in the time frame envisioned by advocates.

The president is right that we should protect the security of our elections. But we can’t make it harder for American citizens to cast their ballots, because free and fair elections are the cornerstone of our republic.

Ms. Murkowski, a Republican, is a U.S. senator from Alaska.

Opinion

The lo-fi way I broke my addiction to the algorithm

I tried many remedies to break my social media habit. A homemade hack worked best.

Meher Ahmad

For how much hate it gets these days, I like the algorithm sometimes. I've trained my TikTok like an obedient dog, only instead of laying wilford at my feet, it brings me videos of Egyptian wedding performers, cooking influencers from rural Vietnam and slide shows of something called "Balkan core aesthetic." I like when my Instagram ads present me with some inane kitchen gadget shaped like a cute tomato.

But these treats come along with the many dead squirrels my algorithm also brings to me: the hollowness that follows witnessing the mundane details of so many people's lives, the nagging sensation that everyone is somewhere else having fun without me, the flattening of my tastes and sensibilities. Do I actually like ballet sneakers, or have Meta and three paid

I've been trying to live a Summer of Ludd.

style influencers I follow in Europe conspired to get me to buy them? It's why I've been trying to live a Summer of Ludd, a term I'm cribbing from a group that has been papering fliers all over New York City the past few weeks in an effort to get people off their phones. "NOT EVERYTHING IS ONLINE," read one poster I saw flaking off a wall in the East Village. For me, less and less has been. I've been staging an experiment for the past few months: I've removed all my social media apps — Instagram, Twitter, TikTok — and moved them onto an old iPhone I had lying around my house. I dubbed this phone my Scroll Phone. I designated a single spot in my home where I could use it: a stripy armchair in my living room, which I have now anointed the Scrollly Chair.

The Scroll Phone has no SIM card, only Wi-Fi, and I'm allowed to use it as much as I want, so long as I'm sitting in the Scrollly Chair. The Scrollly Chair exists so that I don't end up doing exactly what I did when my Actual Phone was also my Scroll Phone: eating dinner with my Scroll Phone, watching TV with my Scroll Phone, sitting on the toilet with my Scroll Phone. (You do it, don't pretend like you don't.) The Scrollly Chair allows me to tether my social media use to a single place. If I'm on the Scroll Phone, I must be on the Scrollly Chair. I even bought a phone stand shaped like a little piggy for the Scroll Phone to keep it on my shelf, a way to remind myself of what I'm doing when I pick it up: gobbling up social media like a pig at the trough.

Friends are sometimes incredulous when they have learned of the Scroll AHMAD, PAGE 10



Lionel Messi is walking into history

Argentina's star player doesn't walk because he's left the game. He walks in order to enter it.

Rowan Ricardo Phillips

By late Wednesday afternoon, the roads in Barcelona had begun to empty. It was still an early morning place where I planned to watch the Argentina-England semifinal, checking the dashboard clock, afraid I would miss the beginning. Messi walked. That this beginning might be Lionel Messi's last.

On the indoor, air-conditioned field in Atlanta, under a roof closed against the Georgia heat, Messi wasn't hurrying. The semifinal began as a rock fight: churning legs, desperate tugs, lunging tackles, the ball repeatedly disappearing beneath the urgency of reaching it. England's younger players pressed and collided and chased.

Inside all that motion, Messi walked. At 39, Messi, one of the oldest players in the tournament, sprints less often than he once did and covers less ground. On Sunday, he will play what is almost certainly his final World Cup match. In past tournaments, Argentina has doubted his genius, blamed him for every failure. But he has, without doubt, transformed soccer: he changed not only what a player could do with the ball but what a player could see before the ball arrived. He made patience an attacking act.

A match contains more than one clock. There's the official one, bright and remorseless, and there's the quieter time in which a defender tires, a midfielder loses half a yard, a passing lane remains open one second longer than it should. Messi moves slowly enough to watch that second clock: who follows him, who stops following, where the next space will be. The running belongs to the match everyone can see. Messi waits for the one

concealed inside it. Messi doesn't walk because he's left the game.

He walks in order to enter it. He walked like that at 29. He walked like that at 19, too.

The mythology of young Messi was his speed: his low center of gravity, the ball so close to his feet it appeared less controlled than persuaded, the sudden passage through spaces that didn't seem to exist until he entered them. But even then his deeper skill wasn't simply that he moved faster than the game. It was that he saw the game sooner than anyone else.

At Barcelona, the club where he became famous, his vision lived inside a structure. Teammates won the ball, offered passing angles, ran beyond him and pulled defenders away. When Messi received a pass, several possible futures were already attached to it. He seemed capable of seeing them all.

That structure often disappeared behind Messi's brilliance. Give him the ball, people concluded, and organization became secondary. Barcelona

treated Messi's genius as part of a system. Argentina treated it as a substitute for one.

For years, Argentina made two related mistakes about him. It mistook his genius for a complete plan, and his reserve for indifference.

Messi, of course, wears the number 10. No Argentine who wears that number enters alone. Diego Maradona, small and left-footed, had worn the shirt as a public storm. His speech, rebellion, joy and pain were impossible to miss. By the time Messi inherited the number, Maradona had established a national language of greatness that Messi was expected to speak.

Messi left Argentina for Spain at 13. Years later, when Argentina truly met him, much of his becoming had already happened on Barcelona's team. Argentines recognized the familiar gift — the small, left-footed genius — but not the unfamiliar figure carrying it.

In South American soccer, "pecho frío" — literally "cold chest" — is the old verdict against a player thought lacking in temperament when the

moment demands it. At Barcelona, Messi's stillness could be understood as concentration. With Argentina, it was entered as evidence in the case against him.

Argentina asked him not only to play like Messi but to suffer like Maradona: to demonstrate, in voice and face and gesture, that defeat wounded him.

Between 2014 and 2016, Argentina lost three finals in three summers. Germany scored late in the World Cup final. Chile defeated Argentina on penalties in each of the next two Copa América finals. Messi converted his kick in the first shootout and missed in the second; teammates missed, too. But the cameras kept returning to him.

By that third defeat, Messi was no longer merely the greatest player on the losing side. He had become the explanation for why Argentina lost. His genius had become Argentina's emergency service: Whatever the team failed to solve, he was expected to solve alone. Afterward, he said he

was finished with the national team. But he returned.

In 2018, Lionel Scaloni took over as coach and stopped asking Messi to be the beginning, middle and end of every attack. He assembled midfielders who could win the ball and carry it forward, forwards who could run beyond Messi and pull defenders away, defenders willing to step toward danger rather than retreat from it. Their work created choices. Messi's genius remained exceptional; it was no longer the entire plan.

Scaloni also surrounded him with younger players who had grown up watching him. They ran for him, argued for him, sang with him. They didn't ask him to prove his love of Argentina. They played for him, and for each other, as if it were already known.

The transformation became visible in the 2021 Copa América final against Brazil. That victory gave Argentina its first major trophy in 28 years and Messi his first with the senior national team. At the final whistle, he disappeared beneath his teammates' bodies. He had carried Argentina through the tournament. Now they carried him.

The 2022 World Cup made Messi and Argentina's new relationship a global affair. Against Mexico, with elimination suddenly possible, Messi scored the goal that seemed to steady Argentina's tournament. Against the Netherlands, the quiet captain's fury moved outward: He argued, shouted and celebrated with defiance. His teammates joined him.

He had not become Maradona. He had become himself.



JORJI SAMAO/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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#MeToo isn't dead. It's been written into law.

Gretchen Carlson

Ten years ago I made the terrifying decision to sue Roger Ailes, who was then the Fox News chief executive and chairman, for sexual harassment. In the weeks that followed, more than 20 other women spoke up about his abuse. Just months before, Bill Cosby had been charged with sexual assault. Later, new sexual harassment claims against Bill O'Reilly became public, and women began speaking out against Harvey Weinstein, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer and so many more.

The #MeToo hashtag and movement, started by Tarana Burke a decade earlier, reignited globally. Prominent men accused of horrific behavior were finally held to account. The momentum felt unstoppable.

But then Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court despite his furious reaction to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's allegations of sexual assault. President Trump won re-election despite having been found liable for sexual abuse. Pete Hegseth was confirmed as secretary of defense despite having settled sexual assault claims. (Mr. Hegseth denies the accusations.) Once again, the momentum felt unstoppable.

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For Britain, a lot more of the same

HAZELDINE. FROM PAGE 1

The 1997 landslide that brought New Labour to power, Mr. Burnham worked as a special adviser for a cabinet minister; Tony Blair then fast-tracked him to a safe seat in Greater Manchester. At 31, his political career was up and running.

In Parliament, Mr. Burnham's record was strikingly loyalist. He voted for the Iraq war and, as a junior Home Office minister, took a tough approach to law and order. At the time, he was known in Westminster as 'Flog' and Burnham. Promoted to the cabinet under Gordon Brown, he pushed along New Labour's ruinously expensive program to rebuild hospitals with private financing.

His ambitions, however, were bigger. When Labour was ejected from office in 2010, Mr. Burnham stood for party leader on a word salad of "aspirational socialism" and finished fourth. He ran again in 2015 as the bookmakers' favorite, only to lose after the surprise surge of support for Jeremy Corbyn. Two years later, he found an election he could win closer to home, becoming the inaugural mayor of Greater Manchester.

The majority comes with few powers. His chief functions, according to the Oxford Economics consultancy, are "to argue for the region" and "provide" a "point of contact for private investors." Mr. Burnham had found his level. The wider city-region, which has a population of 2.8 million, has recorded stronger growth than Britain's other conurbations. Disposable incomes haven't grown by much, though, and house-price inflation has left many residents behind. Still, there's enough construction activity and service-sector buzz to call it a success story.

Mr. Burnham's cabinet have found a secret economic sauce, "business-friendly socialism," or just plain "Manchesterism." Yet his majority will be chiefly remembered for public criticism: taking buses back under public control, though he had to be talked into, and his furious off-the-cuff reaction in 2020 to tougher lockdown restrictions imposed by the Boris Johnson government. Mr. Burnham thundered at how Westminster was "grinding people down." For his impromptu defiance, the media gave him



Andy Burnham's rushed preparations for government have pointed to a broad continuity with the world of the former prime minister, Keir Starmer — and even that of Tony Blair. Burnham is now tasked with reviving the Labour Party's popularity.

that "King of the North" epithet.

Yet the appellation wasn't so much plucked from the ether as lab-grown by the man himself. Speaking at an event earlier that year, Mr. Burnham had daydreamed about "sitting in my 'Game of Thrones' type castle at the heart of the dominant Northern Powerhouse, opening my birthday telegram from the monarch of the south of England." A Labour ally took his cue, joking that "Andy's going to be on the Iron Throne and King of the North." The Manchester Evening

News duly ran the headline. Mr. Burnham's fiery talk helped him to get comfortably re-elected as mayor, or twice. But his eyes were increasingly trained elsewhere. As Mr. Starmer landed in Downing Street, the Manchester man inserted himself into the conversation about who might replace him. Importantly, he was the only recognizable party figure whose popularity ratings weren't sub-zero. But for a third tilt at the leadership, Mr. Burnham needed to be in Parliament. Eventually, a route back to

Westminster — in the form of a special election for the Makerfield constituency, 20 miles west of Manchester — appeared.

Mr. Burnham's campaign culminated in a leadership pitch that this was the "last chance" to "lay out a new path for Britain." His victory offered proof of concept that — for now at least — his personal political brand can shore up Labour's regional heartland, menaced by Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform U.K. Seeing the writing on the wall, Mr. Starmer announced his resignation. Mr. Burnham's first move was to announce a branch office of 10 Downing Street in Manchester, as part of a broader suite of devolution.

Otherwise, Mr. Burnham's rushed preparations for government have pointed to a broad continuity with the world of Mr. Starmer — and indeed that of Mr. Blair. He has recruited his New Labour contemporary James Purnell as chief of staff and retained Jonathan Powell, once a key plank of Mr. Blair's Downing Street operation, as national security adviser. In policy terms, he's committed to the previous administration's stifling fiscal rules and has signalled a general change designed to make it harder for refugees to settle in the country, along with vague promises of economic growth.

Mr. Burnham's stick is decidedly provincial. But when pressed on former affairs during his previous run for the Labour leadership, he said he'd resign from frontbench politics if Mr. Corbyn withdrew Britain from NATO. In an article intended to coincide with the NATO summit in Turkey this month, he reaffirmed his attachment to Atlanticism, Britain's nuclear deterrent, ramping up defense spending and underwriting Ukraine's long-term security. While he has reiterated that Mr. Starmer had been "too slow" to call for a cease-fire in Gaza, his policy on Israel is impeccably centrist.

Labour wanted a bounce after Mr. Starmer. They've opted, in the absence of anything better, for a career Blairite with an urban soul and a Whigish brain. For the country, it looks a lot more of the same.

TOM HAZELDINE is the author of "The Northern Question: A History of a Divided Country."

I broke my addiction to the algorithm

AHMAD. FROM PAGE 9

Phone's existence. It makes it sound as if I was in the grips of a serious social media addiction. In fact, I was already tapering, posting on Instagram every few weeks at most. But I had gone through difficult changes in the past few years, and social media wasn't helping. I noticed that at my most vulnerable, I'd sometimes retreat myself, and would only plunge deeper into anxiety and insecurity. I would delete or disable my accounts for months, stretches of time when I'd stop and binge, reaching the same depressing emotional dead end once more.

The delete-and-repeat cycle was only one strategy. I tried keeping my phone on grayscale for several months, a hack meant to make us less distracted by the addictive devices we all keep in our pockets. I took Instagram off my phone and looked at it only on desktop. I had the daily Times app open on my apps. (I almost always ignored them, as I'm sure you do too.) Even if I managed to spend less time on the apps, none of it really stopped the nagging feeling of when I first started check, and check again, like a nervous tick, the way it felt when I smoked cigarettes. I remember a friend saying "Why can't you be chill about it?"

When I complained about wanting to be online but feeling terrible whenever I was. But I couldn't be that; regardless of what I did I felt pulled back into the algorithm's grip.

There are things I don't like: Brick, a device that blocks apps from your phone until you tap it against a small magnetic square; plug-ins that make your phone screen boring; an app literally called Brainrot that gamifies reducing your scroll time. Then there are so-called dumb phones, phones that are purposely made without access to these apps that have seemed to become trendy among the neo-Luddites.

But often their usage seemed perfunctory, less like a solution I could actually apply to my life. When I first set it up, I assumed the Scroll Phone would be another in a long line of those sort of solutions. But somehow my Scroll Phone has completely changed how I use social media — I think, in part, because I managed to recreate how I felt when I first started interacting with the algorithm. I was in high school when Facebook started, and in college when Instagram did, so I'm of the generation that rushed to our college computer libraries to see who posted a Facebook album with last night's party photos. The first time someone tweeted some-

thing negative about me, I didn't get an instant ping alerting me of their 140-character snipe. A boy told me before a biology lecture; by the time I had logged on, it had been days since the person had tweeted. Looking at social media required stepping into a specific place; it was tethered to computers, which were tethered to Ethernet cables, which you basically had to be sitting down and indoors to have access to.

For us millennials, the nostalgia for the early internet is easily commodified by brands and "remember when" montages, but there's a reason we can look back fondly on an era when internet use was limited to a place and time. You could treat it like any other hobby, not the strange extension of your psyche that comes with having constant access to information, both important and insane, about everyone you ever met in the past 10 years.

My Summer of Love has returned me to the habits of those years, but better: I now experience an almost complete lack of FOMO. It's hard to be jealous of what my former roommate friend is doing in Berlin on any given day, because I don't see it. I rarely have the urge to lift my phone up and capture a moment, because I don't have longer creating content about my life, that reflex these apps have ingrained in all of us. It makes me cringe a bit when I see people filming

or photographing a thing they should just be experiencing. When I do take photos, they're taken on a boomer quality I've come to enjoy: They're often horizontal, not vertical, less composed, no dead space for texts and captions.

And this observation is so plain it borders on trite: When I'm living my life, I don't think about my phone. You limit your audience to the people who are physically in your company, it's easier to let go of concerns about how you are perceived. Fewer people are perceiving me!

When I do settle into the Scroll Chair, I do what we all do: enjoy the wealth of the algorithm coming over me. I'll catch up on DMs; sometimes friends send me stories that have long since expired that I'm unable to see. Oh well! If it were important, they'd screenshot it and text it to me. (It never is.) I have effectively created off hours of chat with people on the app; when I'm home, on nights and weekend mornings. Sometimes, when I interact with people on social media who know about the Scroll Phone, they'll say "going on or off the scroll phone?" If I'm responding to you on Instagram, you can be sure I'm writing to you from one very specific location in my apartment.

I occasionally post to Instagram, but the process is so cumbersome (I air-drop images from my main phone to the Scroll Phone before uploading them to Instagram) that midway through doing it I realize how dumb the photo is to begin with. When you don't post about several momentous life events, the allure of doing it for future ones fades too, and soon it's just about having a good time every now and then.

I won't pretend I'm some holier-than-thou Luddite, though. I read a lot of news and blogs and Reddit posts on my real phone. I gossip. I text, my screen time is still over two hours a day (down from six, I'll have you know). I'll occasionally ask to see a friend's phone when I'm out; it's like getting a bit off someone's vape at a party. I just do most of it where the algorithm can't find me. Unlike the neo-Luddites, I still find joy in social media, a glimmer of fondness for what it could be when microdosed instead of overdosed. It doesn't need to be destroyed; it just needs to be kept in a corner, on a pin, on a pig-shaped stand that reminds me that social media, that always meant to be a little unserious.

MEHER AHMAD is an editor in the Opinion section.

Lionel Messi is walking into history

PHILLIPS. FROM PAGE 9

By the time Messi lifted the 2022 World Cup trophy, Argentina had learned to read both his silence and his fury as his own ways of bearing his collective burden.

On Wednesday in Buenos Aires, 10 minutes into the second half, Antonio Gironi slipped behind Argentina's defense to score. England led, 1-0. Thirty-five minutes remained. If the score didn't change, Messi's final World Cup would end there.

The Argentine crowd was singing an old stadium song: "por esta camiseta, ganar o morir" — for this shirt, win or die. Argentina was playing to win or go home. Argentina was the more final deadline.

Scaloni began trading caution for attackers. England made the opposite bargain, adding defenders. Argentina exchanged safety for possibility. England traded possibility for time.

Messi walked between possibility and time. He has always walked. What changed was everyone around him. Argentina finally made the runs his vision required. Other players carried the match toward the moments only he could see.

In 15th minute, Messi received the ball near the right edge of the penalty area. His teammate Enzo Fernández appeared in a strip of grass behind the Argentine defense. Messi passed. Fernández scored. England and Argentina drew even.

Seven minutes later, Messi crossed with his right foot — the one usually employed to return the ball to his left — to pass the ball to Lautaro Martínez at the far post. With a second goal, Argentina headed into another World Cup final.

Messi hadn't organized England. Argentina hadn't organized the goal, so he could outlast it — the one usually employed to return the ball to his left — to pass the ball to Lautaro Martínez at the far post. With a second goal, Argentina headed into another World Cup final.

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The FT View



ft.com/opinion

Britain’s Burnham and nostalgia for a semi-imaginary past

The new prime minister has to set out a coherent and business-friendly platform

Andy Burnham shimmied off the stage after being confirmed as Labour’s new leader to New Order’s 1987 anthem “True Faith”. “I can’t tell you where we’re going/ I guess there’s just no way of knowing,” runs one verse. As Burnham prepares on Monday to become Britain’s seventh prime minister in just over 10 years, many voters share that sentiment. His vertiginous ascent from Greater Manchester mayor to Downing Street via only a by-election has little precedent. Few UK leaders have come to office so untested on their intentions. Drafting in a popular regional leader as prime minister, albeit one with government experience, could be a last roll of the dice for Britain’s mainstream parties amid rising voter dissatisfaction and political populism. Burnham brings

qualities: a likeable charisma, an ease with the public and a facility with words. After Sir Keir Starmer’s joyless leadership Labour needs to wrap itself in some feelgood vibes. Yet the country is looking for a lot more: a leader with a credible plan to reignite the growth needed to raise living standards and fund public services and defence. For all his insistence yesterday that “I know what I want to do . . . I have a plan”, the outlines of Burnham’s vision are vague and sometimes contradictory. They unsettle the business community whose backing is critical to the success of his project. Burnham defines his strategy in part as applying nationally his successful approach in Greater Manchester: devolving powers to cities and regions to revive local economies by forging partnerships between the public and private sectors. Yet even “Manchesterism” has worked much better for the thriving city centre than for surrounding areas. While the UK is certainly over-

centralised, devolution is no cure-all. The former mayor has also extended Manchesterism into a repudiation of “40 years of neoliberalism” ushered in by Margaret Thatcher. Based on his success in bringing regional buses under public control, he aspires to do the same nationally with housing, energy, water and rail. Privatised utilities have had a mixed record. But his insistence that restoring them to public control will help drive a broader “re-industrialisation” has echoes of Trumpian populism. Burnham’s pledge overlooks the reasons Thatcherism was needed in the first place, and the very different shape of today’s economic challenges. Nostalgia for a semi-imaginary past is not a basis for sound policymaking. The vehicle for “the most significant change moment” in 40 years, he told the party faithful, is a “return of the Labour they once knew”. This is not the Labour of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, or one known for unleashing animal spirits. The new prime minister will face two

This could be a last roll of the dice for the country’s mainstream parties amid rising voter dissatisfaction and political populism

balancing acts above all. One is creating a sufficient sense of momentum among voters to secure re-election and hence time to push through a longer-term programme of renewal – and to move forward on both fronts in tandem. The other will be to find enough money in the straitened public finances to fund priorities without upsetting the bond markets, which view Burnham warily. His premiership will be defined by how he handles major trade-offs. Decisions on welfare reform will have big implications for whether he can adequately fund defence or overhaul social care. Once Burnham is addressing the country rather than party loyalists, the corporate world will hope to hear from him, and his likely chancellor Shabana Mahmood, much more of a commitment to business and markets, and to a dynamic, open economy as the driver of prosperity. For the sake of the country, the FT hopes for his success. Even more than most incoming prime ministers, Burnham will have an awful lot to prove.

Opinion Society

The ‘go big or stay home’ economy for live music

FT montage/Getty Images



Will Page

To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, the global stadium concert industry has a known unknown problem. We know it’s big and booming but not quite how big, or exactly what’s behind the boom. But thanks to new data, we can begin to answer both questions. Call it the “go big or stay home” economy. This summer, Wembley Stadium will host a record 3mn concertgoers, around 1mn more than last year. This reflects a wider trend: according to industry specialist Pollstar, 2025 saw double-digit annual percentage growth in the number of artists and shows in stadiums worldwide. Why are consumers willing to spend three times the cost of an annual Spotify subscription for three hours of musical entertainment at a sports stadium? The streaming comparison

Consumers will spend three times the cost of a Spotify subscription for three hours at a stadium

provides useful context. At the start of this century, we might have spent £80 on a festival ticket and that again on CDs for the year. Now, a couple going to a stadium concert can easily spend £500 (tickets, food, drinks and transport) rather than £130-£150 on a music subscription. Once you do that economist trick of stripping out inflation, live music is taking up the consumer spending left on the table by recorded music. One casualty from the expansion of the stadium market may be the more than 170 festivals that have been cancelled in the UK since 2023. Both are competing for a fixed pot of summer disposable income. And with huge screens that give everyone a front-row seat and top-end audio systems, stadiums have the edge in some ways. Consumers increasingly want to de-risk their lives and, compared with the risks of festivals (weather, unknown acts, outdoor facilities), stadiums are a safe bet. This feeds into a broader pattern of “go big or stay home” across society. As we invest more in at-home entertainment with streaming subscriptions and smartphones that function as huge content libraries, the opportunity cost of leaving the sofa rises.

This dovetails with why smaller venues may also be suffering. In the past we’d pay a fraction of a tanner to go to dingy venues to support an unsigned band. The seller offered a trusted combo of music and beer, the buyer was getting the chance to preview the next big thing. Now, we can preview simply by swiping a screen. If grassroots venues and festivals were about taking risks, those same consumers armed with smartphones and subscription services would now rather err on the side of caution. So, where does the boom in stadium concerts go next? In short: it only grows. American stars will continue to dominate. Of the 2,390 stadium shows last year, of which 192 were in the UK, about half were by North American artists. In the past, artists like country singer Zach Bryan would play US stadiums before downsizing to European arenas. Now, he’s just completed eight sold-out stadium shows across the UK and Ireland.

The venues will get bigger, too, with promoters like Live Nation and AEG all seeking global growth via builds and partnerships in the Gulf States, Pacific Rim, LatAm and west Africa. The stars of these shows are smart economists, aware of how to balance the sunk cost of venue hire with the declining marginal costs of repeat dates. Harry Styles did 12 nights at Wembley; Bruno Mars six. Perhaps most remarkable is the artist who will close Wembley’s summer of music with a sellout show on September 12 – Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh, a name unknown to many mainstream UK music fans. His success shows how technology has created a “sea of niches”, enabling local artists to build global fanbases. Comparing the nationality of last year’s headliners with the location of their shows also reveals different tactics on exporting cultural influence. At one extreme is South Korea. Only 10 headliners there, 8 per cent of the total, were from that country while Japan had 30 South Korean headliners. This showcases the former’s export-or-bust approach. At the other end, 93 per cent of Italy’s headliners were local. Britain was in the middle. Of the 366 stadium shows performed last year, 36 per cent were local artists.

But whether it is K-pop in Japan or a local artist in Rome, the underlying trend is the same: consumers are saving time and money for experiences they feel are worth leaving home for. If you’re planning to get off the sofa and venture to one of the 34 concerts at Wembley this summer, you’ll be joining over 10mn others across the UK who have made the same choice. To go big.

The writer is author of ‘Pivot’ and former chief economist of Spotify

Letters

What the 1960s can teach us about tax and economic growth

I enjoyed reading Tim Stumpff’s letter about patriotic millionaires (“Golden visas would send the wrong message about Britain”, Letters, FT Weekend, July 11) and could I add my thoughts as to whether the so-called high-net-worth individuals with their tax avoidance actually add anything worthwhile? I left school in 1960 and worked for a while in an advertising agency, where I had a good view of capitalism in action. Later on it occurred to me that while back then

the top band of income tax was commonly 80 per cent or 90 per cent in the pound, it was also the period that kick-started what is now known as the golden age of capitalism. Today’s economists are obsessed with supply-side economics (along with monetary policy) but the 1960s and 1970s seem to be a lesson in the need for the much more important demand side. We had jobs and affordable housing. Television advertising was just getting under way

and we sang the jingles and bought the products with our spare cash. The Beatles may have complained about the taxman, but he didn’t stop them becoming the Beatles nor of them buying nice houses in Weybridge. The high-net-worth individuals have simply raised the cost of assets, particularly housing, while causing a return to an “upstairs, downstairs economy”, which my parents thought had disappeared after the first world war and which was the subject of a

popular 1970s TV series. A word about your readers. Last week the shops around me ran out of the weekend FT around lunchtime while the weekday editions were still in good supply well into the day. Do you overestimate the number of investment bankers living around here while underestimating the number of people like Tim Stumpff and me who are perhaps more widely interested, macro economists? **David Redshaw** *Saltden, East Sussex, UK*

AI will not save us from bureaucracy

Gillian Tett is right that AI could scythe through regulatory sludge, but the relief will be temporary (Opinion, July 11). Joseph Tainter argued that complex societies answered problems by adding complexity: another rule, another check, another layer of administration. There are benefits, but the constraint is cost. Eventually a society cannot afford the complexity it has accumulated, and collapse is the involuntary shedding of it. What Tainter could not foresee was that we would automate our way around the constraint. Information technology did not simplify bureaucracy; it made bureaucracy affordable. Britain’s tax code more than doubled in precisely the decades we computerised its administration. Selling a house now takes nearly twice as long as in 2007, while conveyancing fees have fallen in real terms. Technology arrived; the process expanded. AI continues the trend, and here is the Jevons paradox: cut the cost of a resource and consumption rises. AI will reduce the cost not only of pruning rules but of writing, interpreting and complying with them. Tett counts the first effect. The second will swamp it. We will cut a third of the rules, then grow straight past where we began. Sludge-busting is not a cure. It is an interlude. **David Cleevely** *Cambridge, UK*

Trust is the ultimate wealth management tool

Laith Al-Khalaf and Emma Dunkley’s report on how some private banks are using alpine circuses and aviation upgrades to attract high-net-worth clients (“Banks jostle to woo the wealthy with snow polo, honeypots and private jets”, Report, June 25) seems to capture the current private banking marketing theatre perfectly. In my experience, the window dressing rarely matches what actually keeps a client on the books. While a private jet ride might be attractive to some, loyalty in private wealth is built on a much more pragmatic foundation, which includes excellent consistent advice and deeply rooted relationships with someone you actually like and who, hopefully, shares a sense of humour. If a private bank fails on the fundamentals of capital growth and trust, no amount of champagne on the runway will save them. Coutts may indeed be coy about its perks, but perhaps it is right: no money, no honey. **Ronald Graham** *Managing Partner (Dubai), Winston Taylor Lawyers, Dubai, UAE*



Phaethon recklessly drove his father’s sun chariot across the sky

A timely reminder that money is also for living

Like Stuart Kirk (Opinion, June 27), I too give money to every beggar and homeless person I see. Unlike him, I haven’t been a director of a global bank. Alas, I am (if you’ll forgive the tautology) a low-paid writer. I do not “spend like mad”. Thanks to Walthamstow market, Lidl and Aldi, I eat cheaply. I go on holiday once a year – inside the UK. Unlike Kirk, I have a good habit of living within my means: I’m 58 and, with my partner, two years ago paid off our mortgage six months shy of its 25-year term. However, I have an extravagant habit: the print edition of the FT Weekend. Sadly, I can’t afford to buy it every week: I probably buy it once, sometimes twice, a month. Currently, it costs £5.40, which means I am spending between £64.80 and £129.60 on it every year. Kirk urges his readers to use the following calculation next time we’re “pondering a subscription”: “Just take the annual cost and multiply it by the inverse of whatever investment return you’re used to and again by one minus your personal tax rate.” I would love a subscription to the FT Weekend. Could he simply advise me: should I be investing this instead? **Lara Pawson** *London E4, UK*

Reader’s digest

George Parker met Morgan McSweeney in a pub. We know it was a pub because it’s mentioned four times. Working in pubs is a major theme of the interview (Lunch with the FT, July 4). And yet the lunch order was for fizzy water, juice and takeaway pizza from a delivery app. And this on expenses! No wonder the hospitality industry is on its knees. **Paddy Fletcher** *Co-founder, Port of Leith Distillery, Edinburgh, UK*

Don’t conflate two visions of American nationalism

Francis Fukuyama is surely right (“The problem of American equality”, FT Magazine, July 4) to detect in vice-president JD Vance a turn away from a purely creedal understanding of American identity towards an emphasis on ancestry and rootedness. But his decision to place Marco Rubio in the same category seems far less defensible. Rubio’s entire political persona has been built around the story of a first-generation American, the son of Cuban immigrants whose life trajectory is offered as proof that recent arrivals and their children are fully American. Whatever one makes of his broader politics, he has not – unlike some on the right – framed “American-ness” as a hierarchy in which longer-established lineages are inherently “more American” than newer ones. To ascribe to Rubio the view that “the more generations back you can trace your ancestry . . . the more American you are” is therefore not an exposition of his stated position but an extrapolation from a wider critique of the Trump administration’s ideological drift. It risks blurring an important distinction between an explicitly blood-and-heritage nationalism, on the one hand, and a more conventional conservative nationalism that still understands the children of recent immigrants as paradigmatic Americans, on the other. **Richard Bolchover** *London N3, UK*

Parallels between Trump and the myth of Phaethon

In her fascinating interview, Emily Wilson compares Donald Trump to the Greek King Agamemnon on account of their joint obsession with amassing wealth and reluctance to accept responsibility (Lunch with the FT, July 11). Given the uncontrolled consequences of his actions, another befitting similarity could be with the mythological character Phaethon. Consumed with ambition, and anxious to prove that he really was the son of the sun god, he pressurised Helios to grant him permission to drive his golden chariot for one day. He however found himself unable to control its fiery horses, who soon realised that an inexperienced hand was at the rein and took the chariot away from the planned route. Many constellations burned. At one stage the Sun got so close to the Earth that forests caught fire, and seas and rivers emptied of water. In the end, Zeus himself had to intervene and stop the hapless Phaethon. We may have sadly forgotten the consequences of human hubris, which were so clear to the wise Greeks. **Pasquale Scaramozzino** *Professor of Political Economy, University of Rome Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy*

Regional powers are key to apprenticeships

If we want to see a future where apprenticeships are a standard route into employment and small, local businesses are thriving, central government needs to think regionally. Young people are gravitating towards cities such as London in search of opportunities, leaving many local employers short of skills. Retaining talent within communities is essential for lasting regional growth. (The Weekend Essay, July 4). One sector that has long been reliant on apprenticeships is construction, but the industry’s skills shortage still remains. The Construction Industry Training Board estimates the sector will need another 206,000 workers by 2030. Meanwhile, 40 per cent of senior local authority officers surveyed by SCAPE and LGIU identified skills shortages as the biggest constraint on delivering infrastructure projects. As Alison Wolf’s article illustrates, simply creating more training opportunities isn’t enough. The autumn Budget committed £725mn to skills and fully funded SME apprenticeships for under-25s, but funding alone will not connect unemployed young people with local employers. Andy Burnham’s call for devolved powers could be a catalyst for regional growth. While local authorities often understand the workforce challenges holding back their local delivery, they lack sufficient control over skills funding and training priorities to address them. Burnham’s call for the “biggest council housebuilding programme since the postwar period” will only be realised if local skills development is considered from the outset. Procurement frameworks can embed apprenticeships, training and workforce development into project delivery, creating local jobs, strengthening supply chains and providing lasting opportunities for young people. To directly fund young people’s development, support smaller businesses and boost economic growth across the country, central government must give councils greater powers, greater flexibility and the delivery mechanisms needed to connect apprenticeships directly with local employers. **Mark Robinson** *Group Chief Executive, SCAPE, Nottingham, UK*

Correction

● The market capitalisation of SpaceX hit \$2.97tn after its initial public offering last month, not \$2.97bn as wrongly stated in an article on July 17.

Opinion

How long can oil markets absorb the Hormuz shock?

Christof Rühl

Geopolitical volatility is on the rise and economic warfare is rising with it. Traditionally, the oil weapon has been a favourite way to harm an adversary's economy. Recently, however, it seems to have lost some of its shine.

The on-again, off-again closures of the Strait of Hormuz are ever harder to follow but the prospect of less oil and higher prices has had only a muted impact on the global economy. Reported inflation rates have not escalated, growth forecasts have remained relatively benign and volatility in financial markets appears to have originated elsewhere. Stagnation may be on the cards, but it is no longer commonly framed as an oil price-led phenomenon.

Why the subdued reaction? In a nutshell, because the integrated modern oil market is much better at absorbing shocks than commonly appreciated; and because oil has become a much lighter burden on the global economy than it used to be.

The latest crisis hit at an opportune moment. Global oil production exceeded consumption. Inventories, including China's strategic reserve and unregistered oil stored on tankers, were massive. A rapid shift in global trade flows, including the use of pipelines bypassing Hormuz, helped mitigate the price impact of the initial shock.

These workarounds continue. And other supply responses are being added in the form of incremental production increases elsewhere, new pipeline capacity and a reconfiguration of refining and processing capacity globally.

Still, a disruption on such a massive scale calls for a demand reaction. According to the International Energy Agency, demand fell by almost 5mn barrels per day in the second quarter of

this year, about 5 per cent of total global oil consumption. This has not been triggered by stalling economic activity. For the time being, the decline therefore represents an improvement in the efficiency with which oil is used to produce goods and services, as opposed to a recession dragging oil demand down.

Oil intensity – which measures the relationship between oil consumption and GDP in barrels per dollar – is the broadest measure of the productivity or efficiency of oil use we have. Historically, it has improved immensely and on a steady path since the oil market turmoil of the 1970s. This ongoing improvement matters because it implies that price increases need to be much higher to have the same detrimental economic impact they would have without that improvement.

So, for example, today's oil prices, adjusted for inflation and efficiency gains, would need to be about four times higher to mirror the shock after the Iranian revolution in 1979. That is a very long runway indeed and a key part of

why the economy has not reacted more to the price changes we have actually seen in the wake of the Ukraine and Iran wars. In the current price range, lower oil intensity levels mean lower risk of a recession or an inflationary impetus – reducing the need for central banks to act in response to price increases.

A look at the improvements in oil

The latest crisis hit at an opportune moment when global production exceeded consumption

intensity that have already happened shows how plausible this balancing act actually is. Combining actual data for the first half of 2026 with GDP and oil demand forecasts for the second half (from the World Bank and IEA) indicates the possible efficiency savings: expected GDP this year will need 3.6mn b/d less oil than if oil intensity had

remained unchanged from 2025.

It's not all roses, though. Reduced oil intensity is also due to the removal of easy barrels from the system (oil used wastefully or that was easily substitutable). The remaining barrels are more likely to carry economic load. If prices were to escalate into the required range, the damage could be devastating – no longer measured as a loss of purchasing power but by the costs of impaired economic activities.

Taking the leakage that still existed during the height of the military action in the Strait as a given – and allowing for reconfigured pipeline routes, supply increases outside the Gulf, sustainable inventory withdrawals and other adjustments – yields a gap of between 5-7mn b/d for the rest of this year. The efficiency savings that have already materialised shrink this gap to somewhere between 1.5 and 3.5mn b/d.

This is the rough volume that will have to be covered either by lower demand or by higher exports through the Strait (or both) to offset the current

shortfall. This increase over the minimal existing shipments is by no means a high bar for daily traffic through the Strait going forward. It also allows plenty of scope for volatility, including the current on/off games of war and negotiations. Indeed, both parties have a lot more leeway before things backfire and repercussions for the global economy become serious.

Unfortunately, this is not a reason to rejoice. The muted consequences to date could be a recipe for more disruption if they encourage greater risk-taking in the future. The danger is that an economy less vulnerable to oil price risk induces politics to become more reckless. Markets may celebrate the resilience of today's economy. But this does not mean politicians will have the wisdom to avoid pushing the system to its new limits.

The writer, an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy, is on the advisory board of Crystal Energy

As he plays his third World Cup final, the 39-year-old has created an alternative global hierarchy. By Simon Kuper

When Lionel Messi was 13, his father signed a contract with FC Barcelona on a napkin. It covered the family's move from Rosario in Argentina to Spain. The club also funded hormone treatment so that the prodigy, 1.4 metres tall, could reach a normal height. The Messis wept in the taxi to the airport. They were joining the diaspora fleeing Argentina's long economic decline.

Messi, now 39, has never lived in his country since. He plays for Inter Miami after 20 years in Barcelona. Yet this émigré has become the face of Argentina even beyond the football field. At an age when almost all his contemporaries have retired, he has scored eight goals at this World Cup so far, and leads Argentina's campaign to retain its title. Tomorrow in New Jersey, he will play his third World Cup final, this time against the country where he spent half his life, Spain.

Like many émigrés, Messi identifies with the place he left. Spain wooed him to play for their youth teams – which would have changed the complexion of tomorrow's final – but he only wanted to play for Argentina. He always retained its accent.

The kid with the flowerpot haircut was sent off within 45 seconds on his national debut in 2005, and started at the bottom of the hierarchy. After a friendly against Croatia in Basel, Argentina's federation returned him to Barcelona on EasyJet. But his brilliance was unmissable. He was what Argentines call a *"pibe"*, a boy, a natural dribbler, whose preternatural anticipation and short steps allowed him to change direction faster than opponents.

The obvious comparison was with Diego Maradona, a *pibe* who won Argentina the 1986 World Cup almost single-handed. But Maradona had a wild poetry off the field. He sang tangos and channelled the nation's emotions. After beating England with a handled goal and a brilliant solo, he said it was revenge for the Falklands war, where the British had killed Argentine conscripts "like little birds".

Messi, by contrast, is a taciturn introvert. Whereas Maradona grew up in a slum outside Buenos Aires, Messi was raised almost outside society, the product of a family clan and Barcelona's football academy. But it was an Argentine clan, consisting of his parents, siblings and his wife Antonela, whom he knew from childhood in Rosario.

He and Antonela raised their three sons in quiet Castelldefels outside Barcelona. Messi would shine in the Camp Nou stadium, then commute home along the empty midnight highway. Three days later, he'd do it again.

But for years, he couldn't do it for Argentina, partly because Barcelona socialised him into fast collective Spanish passing football. The great *pibe* became a great collective footballer, too. By contrast, Argentina's game was chaotic. Their former manager César Luis Menotti observed: "At Barcelona he plays; with the national team he runs."

It frustrated Argentines that Messi



Person in the News | Lionel Messi

Argentine legend with nothing left to prove

only excelled for Barça. Some called him a *"pechofrío"* – a "cold chest" who didn't feel the warmth of the blue-and-white shirt. The charge enraged him: "Nothing gets me more upset than you telling me I'm not Argentine."

Yet Maradona's legacy seemed to weigh on him. Messi carried a mediocre Argentina to the 2014 World Cup final, but they lost 1-0 to Germany after he blasted a last-chance free kick into the stands. After losing the final of the Copa América to Chile in 2016, he retired from the national team, before almost instantly retiring.

In 2018, his former teammate Lionel Scaloni became Argentina's manager. Scaloni understood how Messi wanted Argentina to play: slower than Europeans, with short passing, an intricate game that Argentines call *"la nuestra"* or "ours". Aged 34, Messi finally won a trophy with Argentina, the Copa América of 2021. A year later, he lifted the World Cup. At 35, his career seemed complete.

But here he is again, playing without pressure, having already delivered. His

gift, probably to his own surprise, hasn't expired. His nutritionist Ismael Galancho notes that his highest sprinting speed, a very respectable 30.9km an hour, is faster than in 2022. Galancho said: "What exactly have we done to reverse his biology? I can't say, but I'm super-contented with the result."

When he breaks into a run, his teammates know he has seen an opening. They play to serve him

On the field, Messi sees everything. All his career, he ignored the ball for the first five minutes and instead walked around, memorising the position of each opponent and the spaces between them. But now he spends almost the entire game walking and scanning. When he breaks into a run, his teammates know he has seen an opening. They play to serve him. When he moved

to the right wing against Egypt, seeing space there, the team remade itself around him. Argentina, two goals down after 78 minutes, won 3-2. Scaloni said afterwards: "We were not the ones who told him to go out to the right." Messi moved right again against England and again Argentina came back to win.

Referees protect him more than other players but that's probably because they are awed by his stardom not because (as a widespread theory goes) there's a FIFA conspiracy to win him the World Cup.

Every stadium at Argentina's games here is full of Argentines, many fellow émigrés. Most wear shirts with his name on the back. They come from the country of Messi. Crucially for his legend, he has learnt to express emotion, crying on the field, perhaps because his father is ill. In football he has created an alternative global hierarchy in which the US is an also-ran, China is absent, European powers are humiliated, and Argentina is top of the world.

simon.kuper@ft.com

The dangers of investor fatalism

FINANCE
Gillian Tett

Last week, news tumbled out that tech investors should note: a year-long investigation by Der Spiegel, Insider and Le Monde reported there had been five recent meetings of a "secret" Russo-Chinese group to come up with tools to disable American satellites such as the Starlink system developed by SpaceX.

Yes, you read that right. Even as US banks issue bullish recommendations for SpaceX stock, Russia and China have a three-stage strategy to undermine its tech, according to these reports, allegedly to counter US aggression. And while this has not been verified by Moscow, Beijing or Washington, it echoes earlier analysis by the UK and US and has startling potential implications.

Starlink, after all, is crucial for the Ukraine war. "[It] is indeed the blood of our entire communication infrastructure now," said Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's former defence minister (who has just been ousted, in a stunningly ill-judged move). Indeed, since satellites underpin much of our modern civilian life, we would all be badly hit by any loss, as we saw, to a tiny degree, when a US nuclear test damaged satellites in 1962.

So these reports should not be ignored. For one thing, they show why investors need to be aware of the emerging collaboration between Russia and China, with the former now essentially swapping its battlefield experience and raw materials for Chinese tech. "This is real, it's serious and it's ongoing," Christo Grozev, one author of the investigation, tells me.

It should also remind us that even as we watch the conflicts in muddy Ukrainian fields or the Strait of Hormuz, the next war might actually occur in space. "Orbits are now battlefields," read a recent note from the venture firm Andreessen Horowitz, which is investing in military tech. "We can . . . naively hope that China and Russia will abide by treaties for the peaceful use of outer space [or] treat space as the warfighting domain that it is."

The tale highlights a third point: current tech exuberance often seems to ignore geopolitical risks. Yes, the share prices of SpaceX and hyperscalers have recently fallen, and fewer investors are buying their bonds. But skittish investors mostly seem to worry that today's gargantuan capital spending will not be matched by future revenues; I rarely hear much discussion of military threats.

Why? "Fomo", or fear of missing out, is one factor: institutional investors keep gobbling up tech, since those that shunned US tech stocks in the past suffered a "bug zapper" of underper-

formance, said Michael Cembalest of JPMorgan.

And insofar as investors know about Russian-Chinese threats, many probably hope they will be neutered by the deterrent of mutually assured destruction. One scary idea floating around, which apparently surfaced in the secret Russo-Chinese forum, is that of putting pellets into orbit to damage SpaceX satellites; but since that move would also endanger Russian and Chinese satellites it seems unlikely to happen.

There is another factor affecting investor psychology as well: the sheer multitude of current tail risks, including the danger that China will invade Taiwan, that Russia will resort to nuclear strikes, that AI will wipe out jobs (or humanity) and so on.

This multiplicity is apt to encourage a fatalistic shrug; doubly so given survivor psychology. Previously, investors used to fret about such tail risks or panic when actual shocks hit hard. But in recent years we have had multiple shocks: the 2008 financial crisis; the 2020 pandemic; 2022's full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia; ongoing US tariffs; and now the US attack on Iran.

The sheer number has made investors more hardened; even more so since our economic and financial systems seem to have greater resilience than previously thought. "Oil shocks are no longer so shocking," noted Nouriel Roubini, who pointed out that a range of factors, such as demand destruction, fuel stockpiling, energy diversification and

Markets used to fret about tail risks, but the sheer number of recent shocks has made them hardened

the creation of new pipelines, mean that oil prices have not risen as much as some expected amid the Iran war.

The key point, then, is that using Newtonian physics to predict markets with straight-line extrapolations from the past is unwise. Better to read a potent recent speech by Ravi Menon, a former top Singaporean regulator, which uses relativity and quantum physics to frame geoeconomics. "Apparently contradictory states can coexist," he said. "Distant things can be deeply connected [and] uncertainty is an irreducible feature of our system." Amen.

In some senses, this shifting investor mindset represents progress: adaptation and resilience in the face of tail risks is good. But it can also foster dangerous complacency as deviance is normalised. The satellites news is a case in point.

Today that not-so-secret Russia-China forum might not seem a threat; but eventually it might. So tech investors should watch its next meeting, which is reportedly due to happen later this year in St Petersburg. And then let's all pray for peace – on earth and in space.

gillian.tett@ft.com

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