



Defection as merger

The Tenth Schedule is hollowed out by unprincipled politics

There is something deeply troubling about the wave of defections sweeping India's elected representatives, Members of Parliament chief among them. In the latest episode, six Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs are seeking to join the Eknath Shinde faction of the Sena, which emerged after an earlier split in the parent party. This group constitutes exactly two-thirds of the party's Lok Sabha strength, giving them the escape route that their crossover will constitute a merger under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, or the anti-defection law. Under the Tenth Schedule, a member can be disqualified if they voluntarily resign from their party or defy a party whip during a division of votes in the House. In 2003, the law was strengthened by an amendment that removed the earlier "split" provision — which had allowed one-third of a party's members to defect without penalty — and retained only the "merger" exception, under which disqualification does not apply if two-thirds of a party's legislators agree to merge with another party. Engineered splits are now dressed up as mergers, letting groups defect without inviting disqualification. The legal validity of such claims is itself contested, as the Supreme Court of India has, in a past judgment, made clear that a merger cannot be of the legislature party alone, and must involve the parent party as well.

With the Court holding back judgments on several constitutional questions related to this, presiding officers keep waving through such stretched claims — and the practice keeps gathering pace. The Sena splintering follows close on the heels of the TMC rebellion. A rebel group claiming the support of 20 of the TMC's 28 Lok Sabha MPs — led by four-time MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar — has aligned itself with the BJP-led NDA, seeking a merger with another party. In April, AAP MPs in the Rajya Sabha had joined the BJP, reducing AAP's Rajya Sabha strength from 10 to three. Now, three TMC members of the Rajya Sabha, Sukhendu Sekhar Ray, Sushmita Dev and Prakash Chik Baraik, have resigned. For all practical purposes, the Tenth Schedule has become redundant and irrelevant, as the Court keeps key decisions pending. The surge in these crossovers, which has the cumulative effect of increasing the strength of the ruling NDA in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, raises questions beyond technicalities. At present, the NDA does not have the two-thirds majority in Parliament needed to pass constitutional amendments. The threshold of two-thirds for constitutional amendments is kept high to ensure a wide political consensus. By-passing that intent through defections — whatever name they go by — is an affront to representative democracy and the spirit of the Constitution.

Right of way

India needs to build more footpaths to help pedestrians walk freely

As part of the Supreme Court's expansion of Article 21 since the 1970s, it has declared the right to walk on demarcated footpaths a fundamental right. The Bench of Justices P.S. Narasimha and Atul S. Chandurkar reaffirmed the right in a case seeking higher compensation for a five-year-old boy's death after being struck and killed by a tanker lorry in Karnataka. As motorised transport has become more widespread, the Bench noted with regret that walking has become an inconvenience, with motorists often treating pedestrians as a 'nuisance' to be tolerated or cleared. In the absence of a national law governing pedestrian rights, responsibility for pedestrian safety is split across municipal laws, town-planning statutes, and street design guidelines. As such, pedestrians are considered to be safe if they face no immediate physical harm. Most cities also lack continuous unobstructed footpaths; where footpaths do exist, they are often encroached on by parking, vendors, utilities, and construction debris, and competing pressures such as road widening work.

While a right to walk is desirable, the ideas that pavements belong to pedestrians and that they have right of way should be cultural in order to endure. Rights-based legislation in India that has sought to change public culture has had mixed success. The Street Vendors Act 2014 sought to protect vendors from harassment as under Article 19(1)(g). But in most cities, municipalities still conduct "eviction drives" while implementation has lagged because the Act requires surveys, town vending committees, and the demarcation of vending zones — processes that many urban local bodies have delayed or simply abandoned. Weak implementation has allowed informal rent-seeking by officials to persist in some cases. The new judgment is also likely to set up disputes with the 2014 Act. Second, the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act 2003 curtailed public smoking over 20 years, but not by "restitutionary remedies", as the Court has suggested for walking, but with consistent social messaging and small, immediate fines. Finally, despite strict laws and 'Swachh Bharat' mandates, the culture of littering remains because the law focuses on citizens' duty to segregate whereas the state has often overlooked its duty to collect segregated waste. Similarly, if the state does not build footpaths, the citizen's right will be meaningless. The Court's constitutional nudge may thus lead to no real change if it remains a legal tool for compensation after a tragedy. A state using it to 'cleanse' streets of informal commercial activity could also gentrify these public spaces and criminalise the survival of the urban poor. The nudge's principal path to success will be by moving the state's funds towards pedestrian infrastructure.

India's cheapest power is here, the grid must catch up

India is leaving tens of gigawatts (GW) of cheap solar and wind power stranded — not because the projects are not ready, but because the grid is not. Upgrading the existing grid with advanced technologies and adding storage at key nodes can unlock 1,000 GW of new clean energy, without acquiring any additional land for transmission.

India is on the verge of a major shift in its electricity system. Solar and wind are now the country's cheapest power sources, and deployment is accelerating, with over 45 GW added in 2025, roughly matching the United States. Paired with some of the world's lowest battery costs, India can now deliver firm clean power at about ₹3.5 per kWh.

Yet, just as technology and prices have aligned, transmission has become the defining constraint. More than 50 GW of clean capacity is already stranded because projects can come online in 12 to 18 months, but transmission takes three to five years to build, slowed by land acquisition, multi-agency approvals, and restrictions on new corridors. Without faster and smarter grid expansion, the benefits of low-cost clean energy will remain out of reach.

India has about 250 GW of renewables today, 100 GW under construction, and will need about 2,000 GW by 2050 to meet rising demand and electrify industry and transport. This implies one of the largest transmission build-outs anywhere in the world. The question is no longer whether India must build more lines — it must — but whether new lines alone will suffice. They will not. India needs both major new transmission and far better use of the network it already has.

Creating clean-energy superhighways

India can unlock the equivalent of nearly 1,000 GW of renewable energy far faster than building new lines by tapping the vast potential of its existing grid. Much of this potential is hidden in plain sight. Four opportunities stand out.

Storage unlocks more from the same wires. First, most renewable plants today use their transmission connections only about 25% of the time. For example, solar energy fills the transmission line during the day, but the same connection sits idle during evening peaks and at night. It is a bit like a highway used only during rush hour — busy for a few hours, empty the rest of the day. Adding batteries at the same locations allows power to be stored and delivered during evening peaks and at night, raising utilisation two to three times without new corridors or land. This directly enables the equivalent of 400 GW of additional clean energy.

Coal corridors can also carry clean power. Second, power lines connected to coal-based



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power plants offer another major opportunity. Many high-cost or old coal plants, totalling about 100 GW, operate at low output for long periods despite having valuable transmission connections. Locating solar and wind near these stations allows clean power to use this underused capacity whenever coal units are not fully loaded. In many hours it is cheaper to transmit renewable power than to run the coal plant, giving developers access to scarce grid connection and providing coal plant owners new revenue from underutilised assets. This approach can enable the equivalent of 100 GW of additional clean energy.

Using existing substations. A third opportunity sits at existing transmission substations. Many of these locations can take on new grid connections, letting more renewable projects plug straight into the system. Coupling these nodes with batteries can further support peak-demand supply and help manage power flows. Nationally, this could support around 100 GW of additional clean energy.

Modern wires can carry double the power. And fourth, much of India's grid still uses older wires or conductors that sag under heat and restrict flow. Replacing them with high-temperature, low-sag conductors — manufactured domestically — can nearly double transfer capacity on the same towers and rights-of-way. It is like upgrading the engines on a train so it can haul twice as many goods on the same track — no new land, just better technology. This added headroom allows reconductoring to double the clean energy enabled by storage and shared transmission connections — raising the total potential to over 1,000 GW within the current transmission footprint and effectively transforming today's corridors into clean-energy superhighways.

A rapid path

Crucially, these solutions can be deployed within months, not years. They require no new land for transmission, minimal permitting, and far fewer approvals than building new corridors. They can relieve bottlenecks immediately, connect stranded clean power, and let new renewable projects advance while new lines catch up. They also improve grid utilisation and lower the average cost of using the grid.

New renewable energy projects will still require significant land, but locating them near coal plants, renewable energy hubs, or substations — where some land and grid access already exist — offers a practical, lower-conflict pathway as suitable land becomes increasingly difficult to secure.

India must build new transmission, but it must

build it smart. A new line built with advanced conductors and designed to work with storage can carry four to five times more clean power for only a modest additional cost. And with India planning a 40% expansion of its grid over the next decade, costing well over \$100 billion and ranking among the world's largest buildouts, every kilometre must be future-proofed from the start.

India will need both approaches. Upgrading and optimising the existing grid offers the fastest relief to today's bottlenecks, while smarter, higher-capacity new transmission infrastructure will be essential to support the massive renewable energy expansion required in the coming decades.

The policy shifts that will determine success

India already enjoys structural advantages: a unified national grid and a track record of adding transmission capacity faster than many developed countries. In the U.S. and parts of Europe, the inability to connect low-cost renewable energy to the grid has become the most severe bottleneck in the energy transition. As India accelerates renewable deployment, it can avoid this trap through forward-looking policy.

Three shifts matter most. First, India's national electricity regulator has already created enabling rules that require solar plants to make better use of their grid access by pairing with storage. This approach now needs to be implemented and expanded at the State level, with regulators and utilities actively incorporating it into planning and procurement decisions.

Second, regulation and procurement norms should reward the use of advanced transmission technologies that cost slightly more upfront but deliver greater system-wide benefits over their lifetime by expanding capacity without the need for new corridors.

Third, the coordinated development of large renewable energy zones and optimised transmission corridors is essential to overcome site-selection, planning, and timing challenges, and to enable the efficient movement of vast volumes of low-cost clean energy.

These measures will help India sustain its lead in low-cost clean power at a time when industries such as steel, aluminium, cement, data centres and chemicals are increasingly demanding reliable 24x7 electricity at predictable prices. The path ahead is clear: build all the transmission India can — and get far more out of every line. The grid is no longer background infrastructure. It is India's next engine of growth, and a cornerstone of a low-cost, high-productivity future.

Moving from drone purchases to drone partnerships

The Indian government's planned \$2 billion drone procurement from domestic manufacturers reinforces its commitment to indigenous manufacturing and will boost the country's growing drone industry. It also signals a shift from buying large, sophisticated platforms such as fighter aircraft to smaller, cheaper and more attritable systems. This shift also means procurement practices will have to address the challenges that come with the territory.

Long-term capital procurement that deals with systems such as tanks and fighter jets, is likely to struggle to keep pace with the rapid demand for upgrades and modifications. The willingness to spend money on these platforms is a good sign, but the question now is whether procurement systems will spend it well.

The economics of drones

Although public conversations about military drones typically focus on large uncrewed combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) such as the MQ-9B Reaper and the Bayraktar TB-2, recent conflicts have exemplified the utility of smaller, cheaper drones.

These typically fall within the 'micro' and 'nano' drone categories, and are built to be cost-effective. Both Iran's use of drones against the United States and Israel, and the use of drones in the Russia-Ukraine war, have followed this principle. Intercepting drones that are being used to strike high-priced hardware, is typically far more expensive than the drones themselves. The trend across recent wars has been to produce vast numbers of cheap drones, and deploy them in large numbers. Creative uses and modifications of drones that were originally manufactured for commercial use, have also served as an inexpensive means to achieve military objectives.

Ukraine's use of first-person-view (FPV) drones that have been retrofitted with warheads has made many headlines. Innovation in the defence



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drone sector is therefore closely linked to innovation in civilian drone technology, creating a need for more iterative and collaborative research and development (R&D) processes. The case of the Chinese drone industry demonstrates the benefits of closer collaboration among industry, academia and the military.

The challenge of drone relevance

The other unique aspect of procuring tactical drones, is that the challenge lies not in acquiring them, but in ensuring that they stay relevant. A state-of-the-art fighter jet or tank bought in 2015 is still relatively new today, and is reasonably competitive. Tactical drones bought today can be obsolete in as little as two to three years, as enemy capabilities and threat environments continue to evolve. Enemy electronic warfare (EW) units can adapt their jammers to the signal of a new drone in as little as six to eight weeks.

When Ukrainian engineers faced this issue, the solution was not to procure new systems with different communication links, but to replace radio links with fibre-optic cables. Processes need to be quick, and allow for rapid modifications and upgrades without the constraint of red tape and bureaucratic timelines.

Indian procurement frameworks have made some good provisions in this direction, but there is still scope for change. For instance, the draft Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) allows the armed forces to procure commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) systems, enabling them to purchase commercial drones wherever they can be utilised. The DAP also has provisions to streamline upgrades. The Defence Procurement Manual (DPM) allows financial buffers for unforeseen repairs and upgrade costs. These are sensible moves.

The key shortcoming of current procurement frameworks is that buyer-seller relationships

remain fundamentally transactional. The underlying assumption is that once the government identifies a requirement, it can issue a tender and procure a product that meets it.

However, in a domain where technology evolves rapidly, products require continuous iteration and improvement.

Partnerships, not transactions

A more suitable model for tactical drone procurement may resemble a managed service contract rather than like purchasing hardware.

Much like large organisations that procure computers with maintenance, software updates and replacement support, the armed forces could enter longer-term agreements with drone manufacturers. Such contracts would provide industry with demand predictability while ensuring assured supply, upgrade pathways and surge production capacity during conflicts. They would also create a framework for continuous improvements, including performance enhancements and adaptations to evolving electronic warfare threats. Most importantly, they would foster closer collaboration between the armed forces and industry in a domain where technology changes rapidly and future requirements are constantly evolving.

While Indian policy frameworks continue to take steps in the right direction, perhaps structural changes within these frameworks could create an environment better suited to keeping pace with the evolution of tactical drones. India's domestic drone industry has the technical foundation to support a more sophisticated procurement relationship. The \$2 billion commitment is the clearest signal yet that the political will exists. Translating that into the right contractual architecture, one that prioritises sustained capability over one-off delivery, is the logical next step.

India's drone ambitions require smarter contracts and continuous innovation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Access to messaging app

Banning or blocking applications is not the way forward. Strengthening cybersecurity, plugging loopholes and improving preparedness should be the priority. Is the government's fear that Telegram has evolved into a "new dark web" based on reality or on far-fetched assumptions? Telegram has existed for more than a decade and has not faced similar action in most other countries. Putting the platform itself on trial cannot be a

sufficient justification for a ban. Would the government halt all financial transactions simply because they can be misused by criminals?

Balasubramanian Pavani,
Secunderabad

A truce with Iran

U.S. President Donald Trump's words — that he would "go back to shooting and dropping bombs" if he dislikes how things unfold — reveal how personal the agreement with Iran really is. Quiet, sustained

diplomacy, not theatrical signings, will determine whether this truce outlasts the season.

A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore

New Chairman

My association with *The Hindu* dates back to 1960. The newspaper helped shape my career in the Railways and strengthened my competitiveness in public life. I have maintained an unbroken bond with this illustrious publication throughout my

life, which has now entered its eighth decade. I have followed the developments that have contributed to its growth. The unanimous appointment of Mr. N. Murali, a veteran with vast experience and deep expertise in the publishing industry, as the new Chairman of the Board of Directors of The Hindu Group Publishing Private Limited, is in keeping with *The Hindu's* rich tradition and legacy.

N. Sadasivan Pillai,
Kollam, Kerala

As a reader for the past six decades, I plead for improving the quality of news reporting, and to monitor accuracy, fairness and have balance without any political support. I am sure that the 'ABCD' of newspapers — Accuracy, Balance, Credibility, Democracy — in its presentation will be continued under the new Chairman's guidance.

A.J. Rangarajan,
Chennai

Art and culture are

inseparable aspects of human life. Since its inception more than a century ago, *The Hindu* has, in keeping with its founding principles, served as a custodian of India's art and culture. Readers look forward to positive changes in its policies and a renewed focus on art and cultural issues.

V.P. Dhananjayan,
Chennai

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GROUND ZERO



Census enumerators at Shashi Garden in the Mayur Vihar area in New Delhi. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

The pressures of counting India

Enumerators working on the Census are facing several challenges in the field, including heat, connectivity issues, and safety concerns. Though the exercise is being conducted through a digital system designed for real-time monitoring, field workers say conditions on the ground and supervisory instructions are affecting data collection. **Vijaita Singh** reports on the challenges

Every day for about a month, M. Soumina, a government-school teacher, began her mornings by knocking on the doors of apartments in a multi-storey residential complex in East Delhi's Mayur Vihar. Although the school where she taught was closed for the summer break, Soumina had her task cut out for her after being appointed an enumerator for the ongoing Census. The exercise relies on about 33 lakh government teachers and other enumerators, who will spend nearly a year surveying an estimated 1.4 billion Indians on housing, amenities, and demographics.

For Soumina, the work meant spending hours going door to door in a brutal Delhi summer, with temperatures consistently hovering between 40°C and 42°C. She surveyed 150 flats spread across 17 apartment blocks and administered a 33-question survey to each household within 26 days.

"I was making those visits daily from May 19," said Soumina. "I had an app on my phone to record the data. Before asking the questions, the households also have to be mapped and geo-tagged on the app."

Other than her smartphone, a black bag, a QR-enabled identity card, and a white cap with the Census logo to protect her from the heat, Soumina's companion during these visits was her husband, who works in the production unit of a newspaper. She said she felt safer with him around.

Like Soumina, enumerators working on the Census report facing several challenges in the field, including heat, connectivity issues, and safety concerns. Though the exercise is being conducted through a digital system designed for real-time monitoring, field workers said conditions on the ground and supervisory instructions are affecting data collection. Many of them have also flagged these issues on social media.

A massive exercise

The questions that enumerators asked are part of the Houselisting and Housing Operations (HLO), the first phase of the Population Census 2027. The questionnaire was notified by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India on January 22.

The 2027 Census marks several firsts: it is India's first fully digital Census, the first to collect caste data, and the first to allow residents to self-enumerate. The exercise was originally scheduled for 2021, but was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, India is conducting its population count six years later than the decennial schedule, with governments continuing to rely on 2011 Census data for policy planning and welfare programmes.

The HLO phase involves the collection of data on housing conditions, household composition, basic amenities, and assets to assess living standards. It captures information on the structure of dwellings; access to water, sanitation, and energy; ownership of consumer goods, and the number of people living in a household. It also collects residents' mobile numbers for official communication.

The HLO phase will lay the foundation for the second phase of the Census - Population Enumeration - scheduled for February 2027. In La-

When I filled untreated tap water as an option, the supervisor and the charge officers asked me to change the entry to tap water from treated source.

Census enumerator

dakh and the snow-bound regions of Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, both phases have been set a deadline of September 30, 2026, due to weather constraints.

The second phase will enumerate caste and collect other detailed individual-level data, including religion. Each enumerator gets an honorarium of ₹25,000 for completing the task. So far, 23 States and Union Territories have completed the first phase.

Meeting strangers

With several occupants being working professionals, Soumina said it was difficult to get them to answer questions during the day.

"Most residents leave for work around 8.30 in the morning. So I visited homes between 7 and 7.30 with my husband. While some were accommodative, others asked us to come again later or skip the exercise altogether," she said.

If a house was locked, she would go back again and again until she got the data, Soumina added. "Sometimes the visit extended into the evening, so I would again go with my husband."

Like her, many female enumerators, mostly government school teachers, said they asked their husbands or other male members in their families to accompany them during field visits.

Meenu Verma, a primary school teacher from Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, said that her husband and brother-in-law helped her during the exercise. "I was assigned 172 houses," she said. "My husband and I used to wake up at 4 in the morning and reach the assigned village by 7. From 7 to about 11, we would find people in their homes, but after noon, due to the heat, the entire village would be deserted."

She said they would then hesitate to knock on doors. "Many of them had no awareness about the Census, so we had to first explain it them. I want to request the government to appoint enumerators in pairs. Or a male colleague should accompany a female enumerator. Not everyone is polite. And in villages, houses are spread afar," Verma said.

On May 21, a First Information Report (FIR) was registered against a Delhi resident for allegedly harassing a female Census enumerator while she was on duty. On June 13, a Delhi court convicted the accused, Sandeep Panwar, 43, for the crime. Earlier, on April 25, a female Census

enumerator was allegedly denied entry into an apartment building in Bengaluru where an unidentified individual allegedly used abusive language against her, following which an FIR was registered against him.

Dinesh Kumar Dwivedi, a Hindi lecturer at a government school, who was Soumina's supervisor, said six enumerators were reporting to him. "Fetching data from slum clusters was easier than seeking information from multi-storey apartments," he said.

In Haryana and Delhi, Census enumerators, mostly government school teachers, complained that they faced hostility and were denied entry by residents of high-rise buildings and residents' welfare associations (RWAs). The district administration of Gurugram wrote letters to RWAs saying that according to Section 8(2) of the Census Act, 1948, every resident is "legally bound" to answer Census-related questions to the best of their knowledge or belief.

"The slum residents were hesitant initially," said Dwivedi, who collected data as an enumerator during the 2011 Census. "They thought this was an exercise to demolish the slums. When they understood its purpose, they were more than forthcoming. Some thought that participating in it would make them eligible for government schemes. Many others came to us with documents, asking for help in applying for welfare schemes."

Dwivedi recalled that in 2011, the process was tedious: all the data had to be noted down on paper, which could get lost or damaged. He said residents were reluctant to share information on assets as they feared tax raids.

The digital divide

Beyond personal safety, the digital divide in India has also affected fieldwork. In metros and towns with better mobile connectivity, enumerators entered data directly on their phones. Elsewhere, they said they recorded details on paper or in notebooks and uploaded them on the app after going back home.

According to the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, conducted from January to March 2025 as a part of the 80th round of the National Sample Survey, 83.3% of rural households and 91.6% of urban households had access to Internet. The total number of households surveyed was 34,950 (19,071 in rural areas and 15,879 in urban areas) and the total number of people was 1.42 lakh (82,573 in rural areas and 59,492 in urban areas). In the survey, a person was considered to have "used the internet" if they had accessed it at least once in the past three months.

"Connectivity is a huge issue, especially in rural areas. Once an enumerator has logged in, it is difficult to make changes, and if the network is poor, the data can get corrupted," said an enumerator from U.P.

Enumerators use their own phones to collect the data and have been asked not to delete the apps during the enumeration phase. However, they said the app crashes often.

On the Google Play Store, the Census 2027 Houselist App, which has more than 10 lakh downloads, has a rating of 2.9. It can only be downloaded by authorised users - enumerators, supervisors, and charge officers. Of the 4,570 reviews submitted, 2,054 users gave it a one-star rating, while 1,735 rated it five stars.

Facing FIRs

On the outskirts of Delhi, in U.P.'s Noida, Sector-6, Indu Prakash Singh, charge officer, who oversees the work of enumerators and supervisors, set up a camp office at the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre to monitor Census-related work. Officials with technical expertise were stationed in a large hall, with computer screens placed on desks arranged in a semicircle.

Singh's job was to ensure the smooth conduct of the exercise, which entailed surveying 2,309 house-listing blocks (HLBs), each comprising 150-180 households with a population of 800-1,000. The exercise ran from May 22 to June 20 in U.P.

Though Census activities are usually carried out by government employees, in U.P., private-

school teachers were also enrolled to tide over the shortage of government school teachers.

"The district administration in Noida issued directions to engage teachers from private schools for Census work," Singh said.

"But some of them moved the Allahabad High Court, which ruled in their favour, and 50% of the 1,000 teachers who were trained backed out at the last moment. We were forced to engage NGOs and other private people for the task," said a government official in Noida.

In Maharashtra, over 500 private unaided and minority schools moved the Bombay High Court in May against notices, appointment orders, and coercive steps such as FIRs issued against their teaching and non-teaching staff for failing to report for Census duties.

On May 22, the Court granted interim protection to the school associations and observed that Section 4A of the Census Act applies only to "local authorities" and prima facie the Census Act and the Census Rules, 1990 do not impose any statutory obligation on private unaided schools to provide their staff as enumerators or supervisors.

There have been several instances of enumerators facing FIRs for not taking up the assigned work. Though the total figures are difficult to assess, at least two FIRs were filed in Haryana against 10 enumerators, while a case each was filed in Noida and Greater Noida against more than 80 enumerators on June 3.

The National Crime Records Bureau reports for 2010 and 2011, when the first and second phases of the Census were last conducted, do not mention any cases registered under the Census Act.

Enumerators took to social media to flag issues such as heat and connectivity problems. They also reported witnessing stark income inequality, and described pressure from superiors to edit data in the name of correcting discrepancies.

Editing data

Earlier, it often took months or even years to process Census forms. Mobile apps have now enabled real-time data monitoring through the Census Management and Monitoring System (CMMS) portal. Access to the data entered via the app is available not only to enumerators, but also to supervisors and charge officers. Enumerators said they were asked to change data, particularly for questions related to sanitation, electricity, and LPG connection.

A school teacher in Delhi said during training, for a question relating to "access to latrine", they were asked not to select the "no" option. This is used as a category for households without access to a latrine, and indicates open defecation. The "Yes" option is further broken down into "Exclusively for household use only (1)," "Shared with other households (2)," and "Public latrine (3)."

"During training, we were told to fill in the data observed by us," said an enumerator from Rajasthan. "On the field, many residents in my enumeration block said they defecate in the open. When I submitted the data, I was asked by my supervisor to revisit the homes and revise the data to show that the households had access to a latrine, even if a public toilet was anywhere in the vicinity."

Another enumerator from U.P. said they were also asked to edit data on the main source of drinking water. The options include tap water from treated source/untreated source, well, hand pump, tubewell/borehole, spring, river/canal, tank/pond/lake, packaged/bottled water and other sources. Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, one of the flagship schemes of the Bharatiya Janata Party government, nearly 81.97% households in India have tap water connection.

"When I filled untreated tap water as an option, the supervisor and the charge officers asked me to change the entry to tap water from treated source. What is the point of door-to-door enumeration then," asked the enumerator.

The question on the availability of a kitchen and LPG/PNG connection were also edited, the enumerator added. "Even if the house has an LPG connection in their name, they were using cow dung cakes or wooden logs to cook as they had not refilled the cylinders for several months. If we mentioned firewood or charcoal as the response, which is what we observed, we were asked to change the entry to show that the main fuel is LPG," said an enumerator from Rajasthan. According to the Press Information Bureau, national LPG coverage rose from 55.9% in April 2014 to 107.2% in April 2026. Consumers grew from 14.51 crore to 33.39 crore in the same period.

On June 2, the Director of Census Operations, Rajasthan, wrote to all district functionaries saying "during the analysis of field data collected so far, some discrepancies have been noticed". Charge officers were instructed to "verify the block-level data through the CMMS portal, in accordance with the actual field situation."

Around 11 a.m. on June 12, Manish Kumar, a government employee, went to a building in Noida's Sector-2. An open drain flowed on the side. Several doors were locked since many of the occupants, largely migrants, were away at work. In the courtyard of the three-storey building, a woman was washing bedsheets in a corner using two tubs of water. A man was taking a bath in a narrow veranda outside his one-room accommodation, which he shared with six other members of the family.

Kumar knocked on each door to ensure that every household was enumerated. The rooms that were open mostly had women and children inside. While some residents responded immediately, others were suspicious of Kumar. He noted down the details, stepped out of the building, and then logged the information into the Census app on his phone.

He said he would return in the evening and over the weekend to reach residents whose doors were locked. "A household must be labelled vacant or locked only after multiple visits," he said.

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Census enumerators in New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The Indian EXPRESS
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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Biggest lesson for Tata today: Institution is bigger than individuals



R GOPALAKRISHNAN & NOSHIR SOANAWALA

MANY ARE sad that Tata is facing internal conflict. As retired directors, who together served Tata for many decades, we feel enormous pain and also that the dispute is existential.

Differences are common, but leaders can rely on proven methods to resolve disputes. The Mahabharata and Ramayana, among others, suggest the method: One, apply *rajdharm*; two, seek compromise before conflict; three, protect both the institution and the weak; and four, use wise advisors.

Tata's enterprise and philanthropy institutions must align to avoid losing the plot. Together, they are collaborators; individually, they become competitors. American investor Ray Dalio's formula for nations applies equally to companies: Educate your people, earn more than you spend, and avoid internal and external fights. The late Ratan Tata transformed a tradition-bound Tata into a growth-oriented, entrepreneurial organisation. Based on what they read, however, the modern commentator makes its own sombre prognostications.

Globally, the corporate world is seeing early signs of shared power rather than a single all-powerful CEO (See Pilita Clark, 'Why co-CEOs might suit our tumultuous times,' *Financial Times*, May 3). Future CEOs may be less able to exercise unidimensional power than their predecessors did. The styles of Jack Welch and Lee Iacocca have a lower chance of success now-

adays. Shared leadership styles must complement rather than compete.

Though leaders will seek power and glory, they must combine adaptiveness and humility. There is no magic formula to reconcile ambiguities. However, there is value in a self-questionnaire: One, do I listen enough? Two, do I shun cliques and gossip? Three, do my actions convey that the institution is bigger than myself? Four, are responsibilities clear so that there is tight accountability for results?

Our own epics suggest native wisdom regarding the resolution of disputes.

In the Mahabharata, Krishna undertook a peace mission to resolve the Pandava-Kaurava dispute over the rightful inheritance of the kingdom. Krishna proposed a compromise that the Pandavas would accept even a modest five villages. Duryodhana was adamant and arrogant. When disputes cannot be resolved by any means, undesirable war and annihilation follow. Peaceful negotiations should never be abjured.

In the Ramayana, Sugriva complains to Rama about his brother Vali's unjust act of taking away his wife and kingdom. As a mediator, Rama listened to Sugriva, verified his claim, and took steps to restore the throne to him. Unfortunately, this meant killing Vali.

King Shibi's story from the Mahabharata and the Jataka tales is redolent of a Biblical story (Book 1 Kings 3:16-28), in which King Solomon intervened in a dispute between two mothers claiming the same baby as their own. Shibi offered his own flesh to a predatory hawk to protect a fleeing, innocent dove. The denouement of the story demonstrates Shibi's personal sacrifice to protect *rajdharm*.

Tata faces the Thucydides trap, whereby the very acquisition of power by two parties increases their chances of conflict. Herein lie the dilemmas for the Tata enterprise and philanthropy leaders. Our

memories are jogged by two long-forgotten Greek and Turkish stories.

Emperor Darius II ruled the Persian Empire for 17 years, from 421 to 404 BCE, with two sons, Artaxerxes the Elder and Cyrus the Younger. Artaxerxes had the credential of primogeniture and was named as successor to Darius II. Cyrus was born after Darius II became king, hence he was "born into the purple". Persian scholars opined that Cyrus could succeed Darius II. Both felt entitled. Cyrus mounted a battle against Artaxerxes by recruiting Xenophon, along with 10,000 mercenaries. Xenophon was a great warrior, strategist, and philosopher. However, Cyrus died in battle. Artaxerxes ruled Persia for four decades.

What is relevant in this story is how conversations, congruence, and commitment proved fruitful among people with low spirits and strongly held differing opinions when Xenophon led his fractious men out of enemy territory. He reframed the narrative, invoked ancestral pride, and encouraged rich conversations to achieve convergence and commitment. He was scholarly and had been a student of the wise Socrates. He was selfless but understood that it takes more than altruism to be an effective leader. That is how Xenophon learnt the 4C lesson on conflict resolution—converting conflict into conversations, convergence, and commitment. How can opinionated leaders converse or converge while deeply embedded in power, ambition, and glory? History is useful only if we heed the lessons.

Among the Ottomans, the temporal and the spiritual were combined in one leader, who acted as Sultan-cum-Caliph for centuries. The temporal had to succeed for the spiritual to be effective. During the 1914-1918 war, Sultan Mehmed VI was Ottoman Sultan-cum-Caliph. The temporal failed; Turkey became a republic and ceased to have a Sultan. Thereafter, Abdülmejid II became

Caliph, but only for a short time. The lesson is that there is strength in unity, and the success of the temporal is a sine qua non for the spiritual to be effective.

In the 1990s, Lou Gerstner arrived at IBM with a hugely adaptive and inclusive approach; however, Carly Fiorina is held out as having the right strategy but being less inclusive. The lesson for leaders is that they must combine the skills of heart and mind artfully because one or the other skill alone has less chance of success. Hubris poisons the minds of leaders. Gerstner captured his experience through *Who Says Elephants Cannot Dance*, and Fiorina through *Tough Choices*. Xenophon wrote *Anabasis*, from which I quote: "Your obstacles are not rivers or mountains or other people; your obstacle is yourself."

Conflicting opinions and resultant conflicts have tested leaders forever. During the US President's visit to China recently, following several months of aggressive statements, both leaders opted for "constructive strategic stability". The 4Cs of conflict resolution always help in reducing differences of opinion and personality, though with no guarantee of results.

Recall Plato, "Opinion is the lowest form of knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding... highest knowledge requires purpose larger than the self." Many centuries later, Ernest Hemingway famously said, "It takes two years to learn to speak and sixty years to learn to keep quiet."

Although what we write appears simple and obvious, think about how often leaders ignore such obvious simplicity. There is magic in the journey from conflict to conversation, and on to convergence and commitment. In every case, the institution should be treated as bigger than the individual leaders.

The writers were both directors of Tata Sons and its several companies, both together for over seven decades

Globally, the corporate world is seeing early signs of shared power rather than a single all-powerful CEO. Future CEOs may be less able to exercise unidimensional power

Government that swears by nari shakti keeps failing women



SHAMA MOHAMED

EQUALITY WAS one of the basic principles of India's freedom movement. The country's founding fathers strove for equality irrespective of religion, caste, or gender. They ensured that women got equal rights to vote, own property, and participate in public life. Independent India aspired to be a progressive nation that treated its women with dignity, respect, and justice. It is, therefore, disturbing that, as India approaches the 79th year of Independence, women's safety remains in crisis. According to the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023, India ranks 131st out of 177 countries, placing it behind several of its regional peers. For a nation that prides itself on being a global power, this is a sobering reality.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised to implement the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, which seeks to increase women's representation in legislatures. To fast-track it, the government introduced the 131st Amendment Bill, which couldn't muster the required two-thirds majority. Today, the BJP seems to be using unfair means to break the TMC and the Shiv Sena to get that majority. A question must also be asked of the party whose leader has often used the "*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*" slogan: What has it done for the security of women on the ground?

The case of Bilkis Bano offers a troubling answer. In August 2022, the 11 men convicted of gang-raping her during the 2002 Gujarat riots were released under a remission policy. Images of the convicts being garlanded upon release by some BJP members shocked the nation. The BJP MP from Dahod, Jaswantsinh Bhabhor, and his brother, the party's MLA from Limkheda, Shaileshbhai Bhabhor, even shared the stage with Shailesh Chimanlal Bhatt, one of the 11 men convicted for gang-raping Bilkis Bano. All this gave the message that even in one of the country's most notorious cases of sexual violence, justice appeared negotiable.

Similarly disturbing is the treatment of self-styled godman Asaram Bapu, who

is serving life sentences in two rape cases. He got parole recently and reportedly visited the Ram Mandir and delivered *satsangs* in Varanasi. What does this say about the government's commitment to women?

Then there is Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, convicted of rape and murder, who has been granted parole on numerous occasions since his conviction in 2017. Parole decisions ultimately require the involvement of state authorities. The frequency with which such relief has been granted has fuelled concerns that political considerations often outweigh sensitivity toward victims and their families.

In 2023, several friends from other countries called me to ask why PM Modi was not listening to India's celebrated women wrestlers, including Olympic medalists, who had accused BJP MP and then Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment. Instead of receiving swift justice, the athletes found themselves protesting on the streets of the national capital. The images of the wrestlers being detained by the police while the accused remained politically influential sparked outrage both within India and abroad.

The broader statistics paint an equally troubling picture. Crimes against women remain alarmingly high, with hundreds of thousands of cases registered annually. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2023, 15,000 dowry cases were recorded, with 6,100 deaths — a 14 per cent increase from the previous year. Cases of crimes against women rose from 4.45 lakh in 2022 to 4.48 lakh in 2023.

In which civilised nation is this acceptable? In numerous cases of dowry deaths, domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment, women continue to face harassment and conviction rates often remain low. It is time for society to show the BJP government the mirror and hold it accountable.

The writer is national spokesperson, Indian National Congress

India must not wait for the next Hormuz crisis



ARYA ROY BARDHAN

IRAN'S CLOSURE of the Strait of Hormuz disrupted a route carrying roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies. Between February 27 and its March 31 peak, Brent crude surged 63.3 per cent. Global natural-gas futures rose as much as 16.7 per cent. India imports more than 88 per cent of its crude oil requirements. After Trump and Iran confirmed the MoU to halt the war on all fronts, Brent prices hit a three-month low.

India's dependence on the strait was uneven yet extensive. Before the war, around 40 per cent of crude imports passed through it. The exposure was greater for gas. India imports approximately 60 per cent of the LPG it consumes, with 90 per cent of those imports travelling through Hormuz. So, over half of domestic consumption was stuck at the chokepoint. Similarly, Hormuz accounted for around 55-60 per cent of India's LNG imports.

The blockade created a price shock and a supply shock. India's crude imports fell 13 per cent between February and March, while inventories declined about 15 per cent after the war began. April crude-import volumes were 4.3 per cent lower year-on-year, but the amount paid for them surged 52.3 per cent. This captures the peculiar burden of an oil shock that leads to stagflation. LPG imports fell to nearly half their February level, while domestic LPG production declined around 10 per cent from its March peak. LNG imports contracted 29.6 per cent year-on-year in April. Substitution required longer routes and higher procurement costs.

April wholesale inflation rose to 8.3 per cent, with fuel-and-power inflation reaching 24.7 per cent and crude-petroleum inflation 88.1 per cent. The merchandise trade deficit widened from \$20.7 billion in March to \$28.38 billion in April. Consumer inflation remained relatively contained because retail petrol and diesel prices did not fully reflect the increase in crude costs. This insulation, however, transferred part of the burden from consumers to oil-marketing companies and the government.

The rupee weakened from roughly Rs 91 per dollar just before the war to a record low near Rs 97. Foreign-exchange reserves declined from a record \$78.5 billion on February 27 to \$68.16 billion by June 5, that is, a 6.4 per cent depletion. The crisis confronted the RBI with a policy trilemma. Raising interest rates to contain imported inflation would have weakened domestic demand and jeopardised India's strong growth momentum. Defending the rupee through sustained dollar sales would have depleted foreign-exchange reserves. Yet inaction risked allowing higher energy, freight and input costs to spread across the economy.

A durable reopening of the strait relaxes these constraints. Lower crude prices reduce the import bill and inflationary pressures, support the rupee and give the RBI greater freedom for policy. But depleted inventories, replacement contracts, and delayed inflation pass-through will persist. Broader sourcing from Russia, the Americas and Africa can reduce dependence on any one route. Adopting renewable electricity, storage, electric mobility, and biofuels would reduce the economy's petroleum intensity.

The writer is junior fellow, ORF

The reopening will lower prices and restore supplies, but depleted inventories, replacement contracts, and delayed inflation pass-through will persist

Delhi's unfinished fight against prejudice

OVER 10 years after the Delhi Police established a specialised cell in an effort to crack down on racially motivated crimes against people from Northeast India, the numbers tell a dismal story. As reported in this newspaper, only 33 cases out of the 2,656 FIRs filed between 2014 and 2026 have resulted in convictions. More than half of those accused have remained "untraced". This glacial progress stands in stark contrast to the continuing experience of discrimination faced by people from the Northeast; earlier this year, two women from Assam reported being assaulted and subjected to racist slurs in Nehru Place, and three women from Arunachal Pradesh complained about racist abuse from neighbours in Malviya Nagar.

The persistence of such complaints, combined with the poor rate of progress on reported crimes, point to serious shortfalls in existing mechanisms. Earlier this year, the Union Home Ministry urged cities across the National Capital Region to appoint nodal officers to address racism faced by people from the Northeast. Delhi already has a nodal officer at the rank of joint commissioner who is responsible for coordinating with its 15 police districts. Gurugram, too, has a helpline that is handled by an officer of the deputy commissioner rank. What is missing is awareness, leading to a culture of impunity and a deepening trust deficit between law enforcement and affected communities.

All too often, as youth from the Northeast, like their counterparts from elsewhere in India, move to different parts of the country for education and jobs, they find their experiences being shaped by slurs and suspicion, housing and employment discrimination, even violence. In 2014, the MP Bezbaruah Committee, formed after the killing in Delhi of 19-year-old Nido Taniam from Arunachal Pradesh, warned that only time-bound action against racial crime would keep the prejudice from festering and fuelling the "already strong feeling of alienation" among youth from the Northeast. Yet, it takes a tragedy — like the stabbing of 24-year-old Anjel Chakma from Tripura in Dehradun last year — to acknowledge the cost of ignoring these faultlines. Outrage can serve as a necessary driver of urgency, but it's not a substitute for the granular work of better outreach, sensitisation of police personnel to diversity and greater transparency and accountability.

Grammys learn to listen to the world

AS GLOBAL music listening trends continue to blur boundaries of language and genre, with artistes from Seoul to San Juan and Jalandhar to Tokyo commanding a global fan base through streaming platforms, the Recording Academy, the Grammys' governing body, has decided to reflect this reality in next year's awards. It has introduced five new categories, including Best Asian pop, Latin pop music, two new categories for traditional folk and one for Best R&B collaboration.

The new categories will be a part of the Grammys next year. This is a highly anticipated change, spurred by the success of K-pop and the achievements of Puerto Rican artists like Bad Bunny, whose 100 per cent Spanish album at last year's Grammys challenged the popular notion that English-language music alone defines the mainstream. This shift also reflects the inclusion of more Korean and Latin voting members in the Academy.

The development is especially significant for Indian music, now a global cultural export with artistes like Diljeet Dosanjh, Karan Aujla and AP Dhillon, who don't owe their fan base to Western music industries. It will allow musicians like Sid Sriram and Hanumankind, who often make music in Tamil and Malayalam, a better chance at the hallowed gramophone as they will be evaluated within their musical ecosystems. Musicians from historically underrepresented nations like Iran, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, who possess rich musical traditions but are rarely in the running for global recognition, could stand a better chance at the Grammys without having to pander to Western standards. With music being shaped by many voices, it is reassuring to see that its highest honours want to mirror that diversity.

40 YEARS AGO

June 20, 1986



South Africa sanctions vetoed

DESPITE INDIA'S plea not to send out "wrong signals", the US and UK killed a non-aligned move for sanctions against racist South Africa, which raided Angola's Namibe port on June 5. The veto left Angola in "despair and frustration." This was the second time in a month the Western powers cast a double veto to protect South Africa from sanctions.

Package deal on transfer likely

A PACKAGE deal is being worked out to solve the problem of effecting the simultaneous

transfer of Chandigarh and 70,000 acres of Punjab territory to Haryana. An official spokesman said the Centre was hopeful an amicable solution would be found by June 21.

Punjab Speaker roughed up

AN UNPRECEDENTED pandemonium in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, caused by the raiding of the Speaker's podium by irate dissident Akali members, led to the adjournment of the proceedings five times, for a total of nearly three hours. The trouble started when the Speaker, Surjit Singh Minhas, did not permit the dissident Akali members to raise points of

order on the agenda before the House.

Dismay over Gen Zia's remarks

INDIA NOTED with "deep dismay" Pakistan President Zia ul Haq's "baseless claim" that Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party were receiving funds from India to hold large public meetings in Pakistan. An MEA spokesman recalled that the former minister for external affairs, B R Bhagat, had on May 4 expressed astonishment that a head of state should make such baseless allegations, while at the same time repeatedly professing his keenness to improve India-Pakistan relations.



● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
Western governments must ensure industrial policy does not turn into unchecked state expansion.
— *Financial Times*

A reply to CEA: What's missing in India is not ambition, but competition



NAUSHAD FORBES

THE CHIEF economic advisor, V Anantha Nageswaran, has written a two-part series in this paper on why Indian industry under-invests in R&D. His articles deserve deep consideration as the problem is vital. He says, "National and shareholder interests converge in the long run. The private sector that fails to recognise this convergence will eventually discover it the hard way." I agree with him that our industrial future and the national future depend on the willingness of Indian industry to invest strongly in in-house R&D for the long-term.

Nageswaran is also right when he says that the future of Indian industry depends not on the government but on "... decisions taken in corporate boardrooms: About R&D budgets, talent, the willingness to absorb short-term costs in pursuit of long-run competitive advantage". I have a different view, though, of both the sources of our problem and their remedies. I believe we need to complement his cultural argument with the right economics.

Nageswaran says that Indian industry is too inwardly focused on the Indian market: "Why develop a better product when the existing one sells readily?" The obvious remedy lies in economic policy, in a better trade policy: We should not protect the Indian market. The past 10 years have seen tariffs raised on over half the items we import. The best way to get Indian industry to "develop a better product" is to provide the option of buying a better imported one. We need to see our tariffs converge on the rates of Southeast Asia, Europe and the Far East, and the wholesale cancellation of quality control orders — import restrictions dressed up in a fancy phrase.

The argument that uncertainty deters long-term investment is, of course, right. This uncertainty, Nageswaran says, comes from "competitive popular democracy" and from external challenges (Covid, wars in Europe and Asia, the Trump tariffs). My argument would be that policy uncertainty



ILLUSTRATION: C.R SASIKUMAR

compounds this uncertainty we have no control over. Post 1991, we increasingly moved to the market determining prices, but there are too many areas where policy still chooses to play god. Domestic oil prices for consumers have increased 10 per cent when international oil prices have increased 50 per cent. Urea prices in India are a fraction of international prices. Prices determined by the market would drive conservation much more effectively than exhortation. To address our tariffs, if we provided a clear and credible timeline for their reduction to zero over, say, the next five years, it would give industry both the incentive to invest in building competitive advantage and the time to get newer capabilities in place.

Nageswaran repeats an allegation against family business: "The founder builds with hunger, the second generation consolidates, and by the third, the urgency has often dissipated." This allegation may be common, but it is wrong. As any careful study of family business shows, if one compares a 70-year-old professionally run firm with a family business in the third generation, also around 70 years old, one finds just as much diversity in performance and ambition. A family business I know intimately celebrated its centenary last month. I can vouch for the fourth generation having just as much ambition and na-

We need the reforms that will, again, unleash the ambition of all of Indian industry, not just of the Tatas, Ambani and Adani. The reform express must leave the station

tional commitment as the first generation in 1926. You may say that is an anecdotal argument of one business, which is true, but the allegation is based on equally anecdotal evidence. The best argument in favour of family business is provided by Nageswaran himself. He cites a study that found US public firms were much more concerned about short-run results than private firms, and so, invested less. The long-term outlook of family business is — worldwide — its greatest attribute. Thinking in generations instead of quarters can greatly enhance the willingness to invest in long-run technical capability.

The sources identified by him affect long-run investment in general. That is not, in my view, Indian industry's problem. It is investment specifically in R&D. Take our three largest groups — the Tatas, the Ambanis and the Adani group. Each has committed hundreds of thousands of crores for capacity in everything from semiconductors to infrastructure to alternative energy to petrochemicals. But except for a few Tata companies, their investments in technology remain limited. We need to understand why they underinvest in R&D when they are willing to invest for the long term in new capacity. Industrial policy must, however, enable the ambition of all Indian industry, not just a few large groups.

When *The Indian Express* asked me to write, the idea was to reflect on

the recent SpaceX listing and consider why we do not see the same backing of an idea at a grand scale that this listing represents. I believe that question is in the same league as questions around why we do not have our own Google or Apple.

I have spent over 40 years studying how nations and firms become innovative. Building technical capability is a hard slog; it has to be learnt step by step. If I think of our own firm, we started investing significantly in R&D in 1991 to develop new products different from everyone else. We had a well-qualified team, but one primarily focussed on indigenisation. It took us three years before we got our first moderately successful product out, five or six years before we learnt enough to count on a flow of innovative new products, year on year. The results show in success, in India and overseas. But we are still learning: Focussed now on deepening technical capability with a closer connection with academic research, in India and overseas.

Our story is also the story of firms in South Korea and Taiwan, which built R&D capabilities step by step, starting in the 1970s. Today, we might admire TSMC or Samsung, with their trillion-dollar valuations reflecting long-term commitments to R&D. But those reflect decades of growing investment in R&D, beginning with incremental process innovation, moving onto incremental product innovation, and only in recent years operating at the cutting edge of the latest developments in technology. I do not know how to short-circuit this process. Perhaps the newer US tech firms, with experienced tech entrepreneurs using their fortunes to back billion-dollar start-ups, will prove to be the exception. But I would still push for Indian industry to learn, step by step, how to invest in R&D and make new products a rising share of future success.

Let me return to policy: The trigger for our choice in Forbes Marshall to invest in R&D in 1991 was the Narasimha Rao/Mamohan Singh reforms. The reforms delivered a new and powerful trajectory for our firm, triggering us to take decisions that increased R&D budgets, and a willingness to absorb short-term costs in pursuit of long-run competitiveness. We need the reforms that will, again, unleash the ambition of all of Indian industry, not just of the Tatas, Ambani and Adani. The reform express must leave the station.

The writer is co-chairman, Forbes Marshall

Buffers built in past decade shielded economy from energy shock



ANIL BALUNI

AT THE start of 2026, the global economy faced its deepest and most perilous disruption in a generation. Yet, India stood as a defiant beacon of stability under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At a time when the global economy is faltering, Modi has not only ensured that India remains the world's fastest-growing major economy with a GDP growth of 7.7 per cent, but has also positioned the country as a pivotal anchor of the global system.

This was the result of strategic policies implemented under the Modi government, which spent a decade building defensive buffers. It focused on accumulating foreign exchange reserves, providing the RBI with ammunition to stabilise the currency. It had also diversified its crude oil procurement channels, which helped lower its absolute dependence on West Asian supply routes.

The strategic vision extended into domestic infrastructure. From the outset, the Prime Minister prioritised developing piped natural gas infrastructure across Tier-I and Tier-II cities to secure energy supply and shield citizens from cooking-gas shortages. Now, this network is scaling into rural areas. Initiatives like the PM Surya Ghar Yojana, clean nuclear energy developments, and ethanol-blended petrol demonstrate that a visionary approach can create solutions to complex energy challenges and logistical bottlenecks.

The geopolitical crisis culminated in a total shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz, triggering what the IMF classified as the largest oil-supply shock ever recorded. On paper, no country appeared more structurally vulnerable to this energy shock than India, which relies on imports for nearly 90 per cent of its crude oil requirements. Furthermore, roughly 61 per cent of India's liquefied natural gas is sourced directly from West Asia. Standard economic models dictated that a blockade would devastate India's fiscal health, spark hyperinflation in food supply chains, and flatten its growth trajectory.

Rather than succumbing to the crisis, India achieved a stunning real GDP growth rate of 7.7 per cent in 2025-26 thanks to the leadership of PM Modi. This was the highest growth rate recorded by any major economy in the world during that period. While rival global economies decelerated under the weight of surging energy costs, India under PM Modi accelerated, refusing to stumble despite facing a direct hit to its core vulnerabilities.

A deeper look reveals a permanent upgrade to India's industrial engine. The manufacturing sector delivered spectacular double-digit growth. Simultaneously, India's focus on self-reliance manifested in its defence industry. The annual defence production had surged to an all-time high of Rs 1.78 lakh crore during 2025-26. Furthermore, the massive deployment of next-generation digital infrastructure over the past decade enabled targeted, swift policy responses. Through infrastructure spending and steady income growth, the domestic market deepened. When international trade networks seized up, India's massive domestic market stepped in. By maintaining a conservative monetary framework, the government ensured that the RBI retained the flexibility to intervene when it mattered most.

The global financial community took note of India's triumph. At the peak of the West Asia crisis, IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas commended the country's performance, stating that India "has been doing very, very well". The World Bank's April 2026 India Development Update concluded that India "remains among the fastest-growing major economies in the world". World Bank President Ajay Banga said India "has demonstrated that it can show exceptional growth", pointing to its forex reserves, low domestic inflation, healthy banking sector, and a public debt structure denominated predominantly in its own rupee.

Domestically, this vitality was validated by real-time data. Rising GST collections provided a real-time indicator that the domestic economy was generating substantial internal commercial activity rather than simply surviving the external shock.

The crisis of 2026 put India to the ultimate test, and the nation answered with an acceleration rather than a stumble. While the government built the vital macroeconomic buffers, this "resilience dividend" ultimately belongs to the people of India — driven by the daily actions of farmers, entrepreneurs, and consumers. Through a powerful combination of visionary leadership and domestic resolve, India converted a global energy crisis into a definitive demonstration of its economic sovereignty.

The writer is Lok Sabha MP (Garhwal, Uttarakhand) and national media head, BJP



ILLUSTRATION: TANUSHRI MITRA

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Iran deal

IF THE start of the US-Iran war was an unexpected development for many, the truce is in line with the expectations of billions worldwide ("Look beyond winners and losers in US, Iran, IE, June 19). The war brought only destruction, loss of life, and the waste of resources that could have been utilised for the betterment of life on Earth. The result is that Iran has had to toil to restore normalcy, whereas the US, whose economy has already suffered, has to commit resources to rebuilding.

Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha

Rights or reform

THE FIRST Amendment adjusted the constitutional balance so the state could pursue urgent social reforms ("75 years on, the First Amendment still casts a long shadow", IE, June 19). It helped clear the path for abolishing *zamindari* and reducing landlord power, which meant millions of small farmers gained more secure rights to their land. It also reinforced the legal basis for affirmative action. None of this makes the amendment above criticism. The risks to free speech and judicial checks are real and must be guarded against. But it is also important to recognise the amendment's human impact: it enabled policies that changed lives, often for the better.

Arshnoor, Chandigarh

Burden on teachers

SCHOOLS, ESPECIALLY government schools, have been reduced to mere buildings ("For teachers, the last period never arrives", IE, June 19). Teachers are burdened with non-academic tasks and are expected to teach effectively at the same time. Teaching has been given such a broad interpretation that its core meaning has been lost somewhere in the hustle and bustle of opening bank accounts, distributing incentives, conducting census work, handling payments, and preparing reports.

Ankita Mishra, Ranchi



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

KARNATAKA HOME Minister Priyank Kharge's letter to the chief of the RSS, Mohan Bhagwat, has dominated the news. "Under which Indian law is the RSS functioning?" Kharge cribbed, demanding that the RSS must clarify its "legal status, registration, office bearers, funding, expenditure, taxation and permissions for public activities". Predictably, Bhagwat dismissed Kharge's letter as "politics" and refused to respond to it.

In a TV interview, Kharge insisted that all he was asking the RSS was to abide by the laws of the land. When the interviewer asked him what laws the RSS had violated, he had no answer. He said that he didn't know under which law the RSS was operating. Article 19 (1) (c) of the Constitution explicitly states, "All citizens shall have the right to form associations or unions or co-operative societies". It is this constitutional provision that gives the RSS the right to freely run its activities in the country.

Kharge's demand that the RSS produce its registration certificate is frivolous. The RSS has been operating in this country for the past 100 years, 75 of them under the Constitution. In the wake of the ban, on the false allegation of RSS involvement in Gandhi's murder, the Nehru gov-

Priyank Kharge's demand that the RSS should produce its registration certificate is frivolous

ernment demanded that it produce its constitution. The organisation duly complied in 1949. The constitution of the RSS, accepted as the basis by the government for lifting the ban, explained its *raison d'être* clearly, including the method of collecting funds.

RSS activities continued in the country thereafter as per the constitution it submitted to the government. PM Lal Bahadur Shastri invited the RSS chief, M S Golwalkar, for consultations during the 1965 war. When Golwalkar died in 1973, PM Indira Gandhi made an obituary reference in Parliament saying, "We have lost in Guru Golwalkar a famous personality, who was not a Member of this House. He held a respected position in the nation by the force of his personality and the intensity of his convictions." None of them ever asked why the RSS was not registered.

Under the 1961 Income Tax Act, the RSS was legally recognised as a "Body of Individuals", an informal group of citizens operating as a body without being incorporated as a company, a public trust or a registered society. In its constitution, the RSS explained the fundraising method saying that "On the 'Vyas Poomima' function of every year or any other sacred day fixed for the purpose, every branch will celebrate the 'Dakshina Day' and will receive voluntary offerings." It also stated

that such funds "shall be annually audited".

This voluntary funding is covered under the "mutuality" principle of the IT laws, which states that if a group of people pool money for a common purpose and not for generating any commercial profits, such income is non-taxable. Based on this, the Central Board of Direct Taxes stated in an order: "*Gurudakshina* from *swayamsevak*s on the ground of mutuality cannot be subjected to tax in the hands of the assessee." The Patna High Court upheld the order.

Many religious and other bodies remain unregistered and yet function freely in the country. As far as the RSS is concerned, except for the main "body of individuals", all other activities — its properties, schools, NGOs, and sister organisations — are run through duly registered trusts and societies.

The RSS was started in 1925 with freedom from British rule as one of its missions. Hence, there was no question of registering under that alien government. Post-Independence, it opted to remain a non-registered body under Indian laws, which was respected by successive governments. If someone is raising questions about it today, it must be out of ignorance and political expediency.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

A needless controversy about the RSS

Where have all the children's films gone?

Best Children's Film prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1957. Over the next decades, it produced more than 250 films, documentaries, animation and puppet films in Indian languages, while organising subsidised screenings across the country. A young republic, struggling with food shortages and with industrial ambitions, found the bandwidth to worry about what its children watched. Strikingly, some of India's finest filmmakers chose to make them. Satyajit Ray's *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, Sai Paranjypte's *Jadu Ka Shankh*, and later films like *Halo*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *Makdee*, *I Am Kalam* and *Stanley Ka Dabba* treated children as audiences worthy of complexity and artistic ambition.

The decline of that ecosystem was gradual. Following the merger of CFSI into larger institutional structures in 2022, children's cinema lost one of its few dedicated cham-

producers. Producers argue that children's films are commercially difficult, that they rarely guarantee blockbuster returns. Those concerns are not entirely unfounded. But such a risk alone cannot explain the neglect. The industry invests crores in franchise launches and star vehicles whose success is far from guaranteed. Children's cinema, in contrast, is rarely given such opportunities.

Audience behaviour tells a different story.

Across major markets, children's and family films are among the most reliable performers. What has weakened is the ecosystem for developing, distributing and exhibiting them

Across major markets, children's and family films are among the most reliable performers in theatres and on streaming platforms. What has weakened is the ecosystem for developing, distributing and exhibiting them. Yet creativity has persisted. Some of the most significant work in children's cinema is emerging from regional industries. This year, the Manipuri film *Boong*, directed by Lakshmi Priya Devi, became the first Indian film to win the BAFTA award for Best Children's and Family Film. Before that, *Naal 2* and *Sumi* (Marathi), *Gandhi & Co.* (Gujarati), *Momo* in Dubai (Malayalam), and *Kundan Satti* (Tamil) demonstrated the richness of stories told through the eyes of children. Yet most of them circulated through festivals and limited screenings, struggling to secure theatrical release or sustained distribution. The gap is particularly striking in anima-

tion. India is a global hub for animation, VFX and digital production, yet it has produced few original animated works. While countries such as Japan have built enduring institutions like Studio Ghibli, India's animation success remains largely measured in services rendered rather than stories created.

Filmmaker Hrishikesh Mukherjee once warned that without good children's films, the future of adult cinema would be bleak. Nearly 430 million Indians are below the age of 18. India often speaks of this demographic dividend and its aspiration to become a global storytelling power. Those ambitions will ring hollow if one of the world's largest child populations continues to inherit a film culture with so little to say to them.

The writer is assistant film research officer, FTII, Pune. Views are personal

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MARKETS

Accenture sends a signal: Tough times for Indian IT

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, June 19

THE INDIAN IT sector felt the aftershocks of a weaker global technology spending environment, with shares of major domestic IT services companies tumbling by as much as 8% intraday on Friday. The sharp decline followed disappointing signals from global technology and consulting giant Accenture, which late on Thursday cautioned about a softer demand outlook in the months ahead.

Why Accenture's outlook matters

The Irish IT powerhouse cut its revenue guidance for the financial year ending August 2026 to between 3-4% from the previous forecast of 3-5% in constant currency terms. The company also flagged on its earnings call that client budgets remain lukewarm despite higher AI spending and that demand for its consultancy services remains weak.

Accenture's commentary is closely watched by investors as it is often seen as a bellwether for the global IT services industry. The company indicated that clients remain cautious on discretionary technology spending amid ongoing macroeconomic uncertainties, raising concerns

about the pace of recovery in enterprise technology budgets.

Forecasts from global IT majors paint a picture for the future earnings performances for Indian IT majors, which often depend on a similar pipeline of US and Europe-based clients for a majority of their revenue. A weaker demand environment flagged by global IT majors would also mean weak earnings growth for top Indian players.

Market impact

Nifty IT index	3.7% ↓
Infosys	6.5% ↓
TCS	3.06% ↓
Tech Mahindra	2.33% ↓
Wipro	1.28% ↓

END OF SESSION ON JUNE 19, 2026

What this means for Indian IT companies

The subdued outlook sparked fears in the already battered Indian tech industry that demand conditions could remain challenging for outsourcing and digital transformation projects. The warning reverberated across Indian technology stocks — hit by the technology advancements in the AI segment — with investors rushing to reassess growth expectations for the sector.

Subsequent to Accenture's results, Indian IT services majors fell as much as 8% in early trade on Friday before recovering. This pushed the overall market down as well.

"Accenture has effectively confirmed that clients remain highly cautious with their wallets. Because Indian IT firms rely heavily on the same global pipeline for discretionary tech projects, this shift in Accenture's forecast serves as a macroscopic warning for the entire sector, prompting investor selloffs," said Shashwat Singh, fundamental analyst at Bajaj Broking.

Global financial services firm Citi also said it remains cautious on the Indian IT sector. It cited factors such as AI disruption, increased competitive intensity and the West Asia conflict. Nomura said that the conflict could affect revenues and deal bookings in the first quarter of FY 2027, which could continue in the subsequent quarter.

Additionally, the US Federal Reserve's latest commentary this week drove expectations of rate hikes by the Fed in the coming months, including at least one in 2026. Higher interest costs may further dampen the spending of US-based companies on IT outsourcing, the major revenue source for most IT companies, as companies look to also maintain high AI spends.

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CLIMATE

The key hurdle to climate targets: Electrification



AMITABH SINHA

THE MID-YEAR climate talks in Bonn, Germany, that ended this week failed to make much headway on any contentious issue, but did throw up one interesting proposal.

Turkey, which will host the year-ending climate conference COP31 this year, proposed that the world should aim to meet at least a third of its energy needs from electricity by 2035 to reduce emissions. As of now, only about 20% of the world's final energy consumption is met through electricity.

Turkey has suggested that all countries agree to adopt this goal as one of the outcomes from the COP31 conference, which it is hosting together with Australia in the Turkish city of Antalya in November.

The electrification target, if agreed upon, would be one more addition to several other climate-related global goals that are already in place, the foremost being the temperature targets contained in the Paris Agreement. The 2015 Paris Agreement says the world must strive to limit the rise in global temperatures within 2 degrees Celsius, preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius, from pre-industrial times.

The COP (Conference of Parties) climate meetings that are held every year have yielded a few more of these targets — such as increasing the installed capacity of renewable energy, achieving a global net-zero emissions, mobilising climate finance.

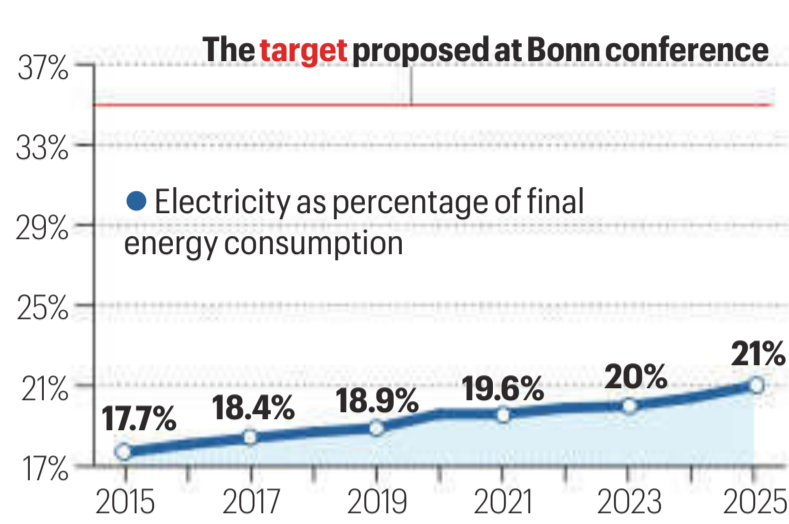
These are all aimed at reducing the world's dependence on fossil fuels and speeding up the process of energy transition, which is the only effective long-term solution for climate change.

Electrification is at the heart of this energy transition. In fact, a complete energy transition, from fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal, to cleaner sources such as wind and solar, is not even possible without full electrification. Tracking the electrification rate, therefore, is a good measure of the progress on energy transition. It also encapsulates the enormity of the climate challenge better than any other metric.

The electrification challenge

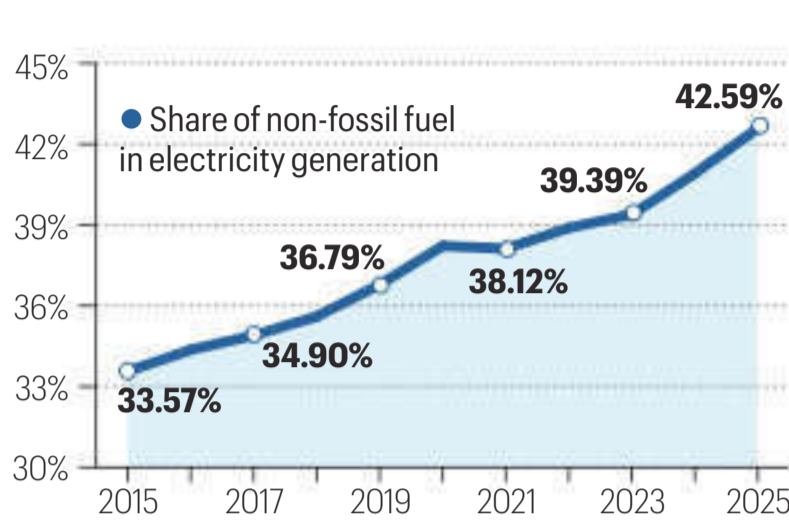
Climate change is the result of global warming which is caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Emissions come primarily from burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, gas and wood, which are the main sources

LONG ROAD TO 35% ELECTRIFICATION TARGET



SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY

STEADY PROGRESS ON CLEAN POWER



of energy. A solution to the climate crisis, therefore, involves replacing these traditional sources of energy with newer and cleaner sources such as solar, wind, nuclear or hydropower, which have a much smaller carbon footprint. This is the great energy transition that the world has to go through to deal with the climate crisis.

It is not immediately obvious, but there is a fundamental difference between fossil fuels and the newer energy sources that have to replace them. Fossil fuels are direct sources of energy. They only require to be burnt to produce energy. Renewables, however, have to be converted into electricity before they can be put to use.

Replacing fossil fuels with the cleaner sources means that the only way energy would eventually be available would be in the form of electricity. That, in turns, means that every final use of energy would have to be electrified.

Considering how ubiquitous electricity has become, and the transformative impact it has had on the world in the last century and a half, it sometimes comes as a surprise that as of now, electricity meets only a small fraction of the world's total energy needs. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), electricity accounted for only 21% of the total final energy consumption (TFEC) in the year 2025. In India, the corresponding figure is about 23%, according to government data.

TFEC, or FEC, is a measure of energy that is ultimately used. It excludes all the energy that is consumed in producing, transforming or transporting energy itself. The coal that is burnt to produce electricity, or the energy used for refining petroleum, the diesel burnt for transporting fuel trucks, or the transmission and distribution losses in elec-

Electricity meets a small fraction of the world's energy needs. And most of this electricity is from fossil fuels. A big shift to renewables is needed



A large number of sectors and processes are still difficult to electrify. FILE

tricity, are not counted in FEC. All these are included in another metric called Total Primary Energy Supply, or TPES, which is a measure of total energy available for use. Over the years, the amount of electricity being generated, globally, has increased from about 24 terrawatt-hours (TWh) in 2015 to over 32 TWh in 2025, a rise of nearly 33%. But the share of electricity in FEC has had a more modest rise during this period, from 17.7% in 2015 to 21% in 2025.

This is because a large number of sectors and processes are still difficult to electrify. Shipping and aviation, heavy-duty and long-haul trucks, many high-temperature processes in industries like iron and steel, cement, glass and ceramics, and even many residential needs like heating have remained largely unelectrified. This means these processes still cannot run on renewables.

An ambitious target

That is why Turkey's proposal to make efforts to increase it to 35% by 2035 is an ambitious target. The proposal is based on a recent roadmap prepared by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).

IRENA says a 35% electrification rate by 2035 is the minimum needed to enter-tain any hopes of keeping the world on the 1.5-degree Celsius pathway. But to achieve that level of electrification, an investment of about \$1.2 trillion needs to be pumped into electricity systems every year. A number of other things, including rapid expansion in renewables, and battery storage systems, also need to happen.

It is unclear how wars and geopolitical tensions would affect energy transition. Greater uncertainty in supplies of fossil fuels, and rising oil prices, may force countries to push renewables. But the economic fallout of these wars might squeeze out the budgets available for investing in new technologies and infrastructure. Countries might be tempted to use whatever energy source is easily available to them, regardless of its climate impact.

A reality check

Only about 20% of the world's energy needs, or 'final energy consumption', is met through electricity.

Only around 42% of this electricity is generated through clean sources.

This means that just a little over 8% of the total energy consumed in the world now is clean.

SPORT

Referee's cam: This World Cup, a different way of seeing the game

Diya George
New Delhi, June 19

IF YOU have been watching the 2026 FIFA World Cup, you would have noticed visuals from an angle that puts you as close to the centre of action as possible — the referee's point of view.

This has been made possible by the Referee Body Camera, being used in a World Cup for the first time. Referees in this year's edition have been given headsets equipped with small cameras, almost resembling mini CCTV cameras, which capture what FIFA calls "referee view".

Among the over 45 cameras recording every angle of a match at the World Cup, this one perhaps is the most unique.

Has anyone else tried it before?

The referee point-of-view camera is not an entirely new innovation. America's National Football League (NFL) was among the earliest sports leagues to use a referee

camera, as early as 2001. Cricket, too, offers the umpires' view during broadcasts.

The first organisation to introduce this technology in football was the German league — the Bundesliga — in 2024. FIFA itself used it at the 2025 Club World Cup, a precursor to its World Cup coverage. The same year, the Premier League trialled it during pre-season friendlies between English top flight teams before incorporating it into the broadcast set-up.

So, what is unique about the 2026 FIFA World Cup's referee camera?

The latest usage of the referee view has a subtle difference in comparison to its precursors. In previous iterations of the referee cam, the official's constant motion meant that visuals were far from stable. This World Cup, however, the footage is much more stable.

FIFA attributes this to its partnership with Lenovo, which uses AI to stabilise the footage in real time. According to FIFA, this has helped halve motion blur and thus offers



Referees in this year's World Cup wear headsets equipped with small cameras. AP

viewers a more stable viewing experience.

Initially introduced as a tool for the training and development of referees, the referee camera has garnered favourable reactions from the fans. Replays of the first goal of the tournament — Mexico's Julian Quinones' shot going through the legs of

South African goalkeeper Ronwen Williams — were widely shared on social media. The visuals from Lionel Messi's opener against Algeria offered a first-hand view of the master's wizardry. That aside, the referee camera has also offered humour enthusiasts a repertoire of memeworthy reactions, like the bemusement of France's Désiré Doué after a decision did not go his way in the match against Senegal.

What else does the headset include?

In addition to the camera, referees are also equipped with an audio device. The ear-piece allows the referee to receive communications from the rest of the officiating team, including assistant referees, the fourth official, and the VAR room, ensuring that decisions and warnings are relayed instantly.

Internal communications aside, the mechanism also allows the referee to convey a VAR decision to the spectators via a microphone attached to the headset, while providing a justification for the same.

GLOBAL

Drones, tech, European backing: How Ukraine is punching above its weight

EXPERT EXPLAINS

AMAN K PANDEY

PHD CANDIDATE AT CENTRE FOR RUSSIAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES, JNU AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, INDIAN COUNCIL OF WORLD AFFAIRS, NEW DELHI

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE conflict, which has now stretched longer than World War I, is witnessing a shift in gears.

The Ukrainians have halted the Russian summer offensive, and in May, Russia managed to gain only a fraction of the territory it won last year. Thursday's drone strikes on a Moscow refinery, probably the largest since the beginning of the war, showcase Ukraine's enhanced ability and willingness to hit Russia beyond the battle-

field. While the war may not end soon, Ukrainians are interpreting these incidents as momentum shifting in their favour.

At the core of Ukraine's resilience are its technological evolution, military prudence, bold strategic decisions, and a critical but underrated European commitment to Ukraine. It holds lessons in how technological evolution can help smaller powers sustain and prevail against major powers in asymmetrical conflicts.

Russia's stalled advances

Data from the Institute for the Study of War, a US think tank, shows Russia gained control of or infiltrated 40.64 sq km of Ukrainian territory between December 2025 and May 2026. In the same period, it lost 282.1 sq km of previously controlled territories. Between the same months in 2024-25, Russia had gained 515.84 sq km.

Ukraine has turned the frontline into an effective no-go zone, where any and every Russian movement is constantly watched and attacked. Since the Russians are the ones with offensive goals, their battlefield losses are naturally higher.



An oil refinery in Moscow after a Ukrainian drone attack on Thursday.

Part of this success has to do with drones, with Ukraine set to produce over seven million drones this year, a significant increase from four million drones produced

in 2025. The strategy is underpinned by its "fortress belt", a nearly 50 km region running north to south and concentrated around four Ukrainian cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, and Kostiantynivka in the region of Donetsk.

Russia has failed to fully occupy this region of eastern Ukraine since 2014. Since then, this defensive line has only evolved to integrate traditional measures with new tactics and technologies to respond to Russia's continued attempts to push forward.

These cities serve as important logistics hubs. While its steeper elevation and water features favour defenders, Ukraine has also built an extensive network of fortifications that include trenches and mines. Controlling this belt would allow Russia to advance at least 80 km into Ukraine, at a time when its advances are measured in metres.

Tactics meet technology

Rapid technological advances on the battlefield revolving around uncrewed systems, electronic warfare, command and control, and surveillance have allowed Kiev to punch above its weight.

Aerial drones have been complemented by battery-operated, remote-controlled unmanned vehicles on the ground fitted with cameras to supply food and munitions, evacuate injured and dead soldiers, and conduct assaults on Russian positions.

These are part of a state-of-the-art digital kill chain, which is battle-tested and integrates sensors, operators, analysts, drone pilots, targeting cells and strike systems into one architecture. This reduces the time between identification, verification and strikes.

On the other hand, Russian operations mainly consist of air strikes, artillery and missile attacks to create gaps in the Ukrainian defensive positions. To counter this, Ukrainian forces operate in small and dispersed groups backed by integrated air defence systems and interceptor drones. Soldiers are also equipped with counter-drone systems, such as jammers, against the Russian first-person view (FPV) drones.

Ukraine is now working to integrate AI in creating a system of remotely operated unmanned defensive positions capable of monitoring Russian movements and providing direct-fire support to soldiers.

Opinion

SATURDAY, JUNE 20, 2026



SOFT POWER

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres

From its deep roots in ancient India, yoga has become truly universal, helping millions of all faiths and all cultures find calm, build strength, and live with purpose

AI-lister

RIL's attempt to build compute at affordable prices will help encourage more innovation

AS JIO PLATFORMS files for its initial public offering (IPO), its contribution to India's digital transformation deserves recognition. Few companies have altered the country's economic landscape as profoundly. By making mobile data affordable and widely accessible, Jio brought hundreds of millions of Indians online, accelerating the adoption of digital payments, e-commerce, entertainment and online services. Its customer base of more than 525 million subscribers and industry-leading operating metrics reflect not just scale, but also an ability to build a highly profitable business. Over the years, Mukesh Ambani has repeatedly demonstrated a knack for identifying large opportunities, investing boldly, and executing with discipline. It is therefore encouraging that he is now turning his attention to deep technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

For a country that has largely remained a consumer rather than a creator of frontier AI technologies, this is significant. The AI landscape today is dominated by the US and China, which control the most advanced models, semiconductor ecosystems, and computing infrastructure. While global technology giants continue to expand their presence in India, a serious AI initiative led by an Indian company has the potential to stimulate domestic innovation and build local capabilities. Reliance's strategy begins with infrastructure through creation of what it calls India's sovereign AI backbone at Jamnagar, addressing one of the biggest constraints facing AI development: access to affordable computing power. The shortage and high cost of compute have become major bottlenecks for startups, research institutions, and enterprises seeking to build AI applications. Reliance plans to work with Nvidia and deploy an initial fleet of advanced graphics processing units (GPUs), the engines that power modern AI systems.

Reliance's ambitions extend well beyond infrastructure. The group's track record across telecom, retail, and media suggests that once it identifies a strategic opportunity, it seeks to achieve scale rapidly and compete aggressively. The same template appears to be guiding its AI plans. The company aims to build capacity equivalent to more than 200,000 H100 GPUs, which Ambani says would place the platform among the largest AI compute facilities anywhere in the world. If executed well, such infrastructure could become a critical national asset, enabling startups, universities, laboratories, and enterprises to access world-class computing resources at lower costs. Reliance also plans to deploy AI extensively across its consumer businesses, with initiatives ranging from a network-native AI assistant capable of joining calls through voice commands, transcribing conversations, and generating summaries, to Jio TeleFrame, a voice-first AI platform. Jio is also evaluating the launch of its own low-earth-orbit satellite constellation and could deploy more than 1,600 satellites over the next two to three years, while leasing capacity from global providers in the interim.

The deep-tech initiatives may not contribute materially to Reliance's earnings in the near term. Nor is success guaranteed. Building AI infrastructure is easier than creating globally competitive AI models, applications, or platforms. India has historically excelled at scaling and commercialising technologies rather than producing frontier breakthroughs. Abundant computing power alone will not solve that challenge. The real test will be whether startups, universities, and researchers can convert infrastructure into innovation and intellectual property. Yet without world-class infrastructure, they have little chance of competing in the first place. Reliance's investments therefore address a critical missing piece in India's AI ecosystem. If they succeed in lowering the cost of compute and expanding access to advanced technologies, they could catalyse a broader wave of innovation. For that reason alone, Ambani's latest bet deserves close attention.

Lovely chandeliers, heavy baggage

DIPLOMATS, UNLIKE JOURNALISTS, are not usually accused of having a sense of humour. Which makes one wonder how the venue for the latest US-Iran peace memorandum was chosen. Of all the palaces, conference centres, hotels, and anonymous government buildings available across Europe, the agreement was signed at Versailles, perhaps the most famous address in modern diplomatic history and one whose peace-making legacy remains hotly debated. The Palace of Versailles is, of course, magnificent, thus suitable for leaders seeking a place in history. The problem is that history has already been there. The last major peace settlement associated with it was the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, signed after World War I. It was meant to ensure that Europe would never again descend into such carnage. Instead, historians have spent more than a century debating whether the punitive terms imposed on Germany helped create the conditions that eventually led to the rise of Adolf Hitler and the outbreak of World War II. That is not exactly the kind of legacy one would put on a conference brochure.

If Versailles were a corporate brand, its communications department would probably focus on the architecture rather than the outcomes. The promotional material would highlight the sprawling gardens, the Hall of Mirrors, and the centuries of history. The fine print, however, might require careful drafting. Previous users included victorious Allied powers seeking to establish a stable international order. Long-term results, one might say in consulting jargon, were mixed. Perhaps nobody involved in choosing the venue thought about the historical baggage. Perhaps they did and concluded that a century was long enough for the building to redeem itself. Or perhaps diplomats, like investors, believe that past performance is no guarantee of future results. Diplomacy has always had a weakness for symbolism. Leaders rarely sign important agreements in ordinary settings if they can avoid it. A memorandum concluded in a functional conference room is merely a document. The same memorandum signed beneath ornate ceilings and surrounded by centuries of history acquires the aura of an event. Whether it acquires durability is a different matter altogether.

Still, there is something irresistibly ironic about statesmen gathering under the gilded ceilings of Versailles to celebrate a new beginning. One imagines a nervous historian somewhere in the background, quietly raising a hand. "Just a reminder," the historian says, "the last time everybody left this place convinced they had secured peace, things became somewhat complicated." To be fair, buildings do not make history. People do. Versailles did not cause World War II any more than Geneva guarantees harmony or Davos guarantees prosperity. Yet certain places acquire reputations that are difficult to shake. Wall Street is associated with financial booms and busts. Silicon Valley with technological disruption. Versailles is associated with peace settlements that looked definitive at the time but proved less durable than their architects imagined. The newly signed memorandum between the US and Iran is, by all accounts, an attempt to halt hostilities and create space for a more durable arrangement. Whether it succeeds will depend on political will, verification mechanisms, and the ability of both sides to sell compromise at home. None of that will be determined by French architecture.

Yet symbolism matters in diplomacy. Leaders choose venues carefully because places tell stories. When Richard Nixon travelled to China, the destination carried a message of its own. When Anwar Sadat went to Jerusalem, the journey itself became part of history. Locations matter as they shape the narrative around an event. So, what story does Versailles tell? Perhaps the optimists see a palace that has witnessed Europe's worst conflicts and its eventual reconciliation. Perhaps they see a reminder that adversaries can eventually sit across the same table and find common ground. The pessimists, however, might say that Versailles has a habit of appearing at moments when leaders believe they have solved problems that later return in a different form. Either way, the palace has once again found itself hosting an attempt to reshape history.

THE VERY ACQUISITION OF POWER BY TWO PARTIES INCREASES THEIR CHANCES OF CONFLICT

Tata's Thucydides trap

MANY ARE SAD that Tata is facing internal conflict. As retired directors who together served Tata for many decades, the authors feel enormous pain. We feel that the dispute is existential.

Differences are common, but leaders can rely on proven methods to resolve disputes. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, among others, suggest the method: Apply *raja dharma* (duty of the ruler); seek compromise before conflict; protect both the institution and the weak; and use wise advisors.

The enterprise and philanthropy institutions of Tata must align to avoid losing the plot. Together they are collaborators; individually, they become competitors. American investor Ray Dalio's formula for nations applies equally to companies — educate your people, earn more than you spend, and avoid internal and external fights! The late Ratan Tata transformed a tradition-bound Tata into a growth-oriented and entrepreneurial organisation. Based on what they read, however, the modern commentariat makes its own sombre prognostications.

Globally, the corporate world is seeing early signs of shared power rather than a single all-powerful CEO ("Why co-CEOs might suit our tumultuous times", *FT*, May 3). Future CEOs may be less able to exercise unidimensional power like their predecessors did. The styles of Jack Welch and Lee Iacocca have lower chance of success nowadays. Shared leadership styles must complement rather than compete.

Though leaders will seek power and glory, they must combine adaptiveness and humility. There is no magic formula to reconcile ambiguities. However, there is value in a self-questionnaire: Do I listen enough? Do I shun cliques and gossip? Do my actions convey that the institution is bigger than myself? And are responsibilities clear so that there is tight accountability for results?

Our own epics suggest native wisdom regarding resolution of disputes.

R GOPALAKRISHNAN NOSHIR SOONAWALA

The writers were directors of Tata Sons and several of its companies



In *Mahabharata*, Krishna undertook a peace mission to resolve the Pandava-Kaurava dispute over the rightful inheritance of the kingdom. He proposed a compromise that the Pandavas would accept even a modest five villages. Duryodhana was adamant and arrogant. When disputes cannot be resolved by any means, then undesirable war and annihilation follow. Peaceful negotiations before war should never be abjured.

In *Ramayana*, Sugriva complains to Rama about his brother Vali's unjust act of taking away his wife and kingdom. As mediator, Rama listened to Sugriva's plea, verifies his claim, and takes steps to restore the latter to the throne. Unfortunately, this meant killing Vali.

King Shibi's story from *Mahabharata* and the *Jataka* tales is redolent of a Biblical story (Book 1 Kings 3:16-28), in which King Solomon intervened in a dispute between two mothers claiming the same baby as their own. King Shibi offered his own flesh to a predatory, hungry hawk to protect a fleeing, innocent dove. The denouement of the story demonstrates the act of personal sacrifice by King Shibi to protect *raja dharma*.

Tata faces the Thucydides trap, whereby the very acquisition of power by two parties increases their chances of conflict. Herein lie the dilemmas for the Tata Enterprise and philanthropy leaders. Our memories are jogged by two long-forgotten Greek and Turkish stories.

Emperor Darius II ruled the Persian

empire for 17 years (421-404 BCE) with two sons, Artaxerxes the Elder and Cyrus the Younger. Artaxerxes had the credential of primogeniture and was named as successor. Cyrus was born after Darius II became king, hence he was "born into the purple". Persian scholars opined that Cyrus could succeed Darius II. Both felt entitled. Cyrus mounted a battle against Artaxerxes by recruiting Xenophon along with 10,000 mercenaries. Xenophon was a great warrior, strategist, and philosopher. However, Cyrus died in battle. Artaxerxes ruled Persia for four decades.

What is relevant in this story is how conversations, congruence, and commitment were fruitful among people with low spirits and strongly different opinions when Xenophon led his fractious men out of enemy

territories. He reframed the narrative, invoked ancestral pride, and encouraged rich conversations to achieve convergence and commitment. He was scholarly and had been a student of the wise Socrates. He was selfless but understood that it takes more than altruism to be an effective leader. That is how Xenophon learnt the 4-C lesson on conflict resolution: converting conflict into conversations, convergence, and commitment. How can opinionated leaders converse or converge while deeply embedded in power, ambition, and glory? History is useful only if we heed the lessons.

Among the Ottomans, the temporal and the spiritual were combined in one leader, who acted as Sultan-cum-Caliph for

There is magic in the journey from conflict to conversation, and on to convergence and commitment

India's industrialisation needs purpose



SRINATH SRITHARAN

Author, corporate adviser, and independent director on corporate boards X: @ssmumbai

AI, geopolitics, and demographics reviving importance of productive capabilities; industrial depth and scientific capability may matter as much as financial sophistication

FOR MUCH OF the post-Cold War era, economists and policymakers believed they had discovered a new and enduring formula for prosperity. Globalisation appeared irreversible, supply chains were increasingly efficient, and wealth was progressively liberated from the constraints of physical production. Manufacturing could be dispersed across continents while services, finance, and intellectual property would generate ever greater value. Industrialisation itself came to be viewed as a legacy of an earlier age rather than the foundation upon which enduring prosperity rested. Yet, the certainties of that era have unravelled with remarkable speed. The world that once celebrated openness and interdependence increasingly speaks the language of industrial policy, protectionism, and economic nationalism.

Mobility controls on talent, export restrictions, tech rivalries, and the reorganisation of supply chains have brought productive strength back to the centre of economic policy. Semiconductors, critical minerals, energy systems, and AI are no longer merely commercial opportunities. The distinction between economics and strategy is becoming progressively harder to sustain.

It is against this backdrop that India confronts an important question. As the economy expands and financial markets deepen, can India continue to financialise before it has fully industrialised?

Britain's financial supremacy rested upon an earlier era of industrial dynamism

The US embraced financialisation after decades of manufacturing leadership had created immense reservoirs of productive strength. China, despite its many imperfections, recognised early that productive depth would determine geopolitical relevance in the 21st century. Manufacturing surpluses financed research, exports funded scientific ambition, and industrial ecosystems created the foundations upon which capabilities in semiconductors, quantum technologies, and AI could emerge.

India's trajectory has been different. IT, financial services, and consumption-led growth generated wealth and transformed aspirations before industrialisation had reached the scale achieved by earlier economic powers.

Industrialisation alone cannot solve India's employment challenge, nor should manufacturing become an ideological fetish. Yet no country of India's scale has achieved broad, inclusive prosperity without creating opportunities across skill levels and regions.

Industrialisation is ultimately about determining where along the value chain a nation chooses to compete. Countries that merely assemble products or supply labour capture a fraction of the rewards. Participation creates incomes, but ownership creates influence. Global value chains reward many participants, but they re-

ward their architects disproportionately.

Demography, often celebrated as India's greatest advantage, carries obligations as much as opportunities. A young population requires not merely growth, but also pathways for productive employment and upward mobility. Industrialisation has always served purposes that extend beyond economics. It creates dignity. Productive employment broadens the middle class, diffuses opportunity, and sustains the social optimism upon which democratic societies ultimately depend.

AI is unlikely to restore manufacturing in the form that previous generations understood it. Yet, far from rendering industrial capabilities irrelevant, the age of intelligence is changing their character. Behind every breakthrough in software lie less celebrated ecosystems of chips, materials science, engineering talent, energy systems, and advanced manufacturing. In the 21st century, industrial depth and scientific capability may matter as much as financial sophistication. This changing environment has also elevated the importance of institutions. Ease of doing business is no longer merely a matter of improving rankings. Regulatory uncertainty, bureaucratic friction, and institutional mediocrity impose hidden costs upon innovation and production. Capital, after all, is measurable and

replaceable. Time is neither. Entrepreneurs often spend precious years navigating complexity before bringing products to the market. Improving the return on time invested may matter as much as improving access to capital.

Nations increasingly compete not merely for investments, but for exceptional minds. Capital flows where opportunities exist. Human capital compounds faster than financial capital, and enduring economic strength ultimately rests not on machinery alone, but on the ability to nurture, attract, and retain exceptional people.

Another risk deserves greater attention. India could gradually become a nation of enthusiastic investors before becoming a nation of globally competitive producers. The democratisation of financial markets and the rise of retail investing are welcome, but financial participation and productive capacity are not identical. Investment can create wealth, but production creates social mobility, strategic autonomy, and enduring power.

The larger question before India is not whether markets matter or if manufacturing deserves ideological primacy. Finance remains indispensable, but its highest purpose lies in supporting production rather than replacing it. If speculation commands greater rewards than innovation, consumption-greater rewards than creation, and short-term returns greater rewards than patient capability-building, the consequences extend beyond economics. They shape the character of societies.

centuries. The temporal *had* to succeed for the spiritual to be effective. During the 1914-1918 war, Sultan Mehmet VI was the Sultan-cum-Caliph. The temporal failed; Turkey became a republic and ceased to have a Sultan. Thereafter Abdul Mejid II became Caliph, but only for a short time. The lesson is that there is strength in unity, and the success of the temporal is a sine qua non for the spiritual to be effective.

In the 1990s, Lou Gerstner arrived at IBM with a hugely adaptive and inclusive approach; however, Carly Fiorina is held out as having the right strategy which was less inclusive. The lesson for leaders is that they must combine artfully the skills of heart and mind because having one of the two alone has less chances of success. Hubris poisons the mind of leaders. Lou Gerstner captured his experience through *Who says Elephants Cannot Dance*, and Carly Fiorina through *Tough Choices*. Xenophon wrote *Anabasis* from which we quote: "Your obstacles are not rivers or mountains or other people; your obstacle is yourself!"

Conflicting opinions and resultant conflicts have tested leaders since times immemorial. During the US President's visit to China recently, following several months of aggressive statements, both the leaders opted for "constructive strategic stability". The 4Cs of conflict resolution always help in reducing differences of opinion and personality, though with no guarantee of results.

Recall Plato, "Opinion is the lowest form of knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding highest knowledge requires purpose larger than the self." Many centuries later, Ernest Hemingway famously said, "It takes two years to learn to speak and 60 years to learn to keep quiet."

Although what we write appears simple and obvious, think how often leaders ignore such obvious simplicity. There is magic in the journey from conflict to conversation, and on to convergence and commitment. In every case, the institution should be treated as bigger than the individual leaders.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Advantage Iran

Apropos of "A strategic upper hand for Iran" (*FE*, June 19), the MoU between the US and Iran has generated intense debate over its strategic implications. From a critical perspective, Tehran appears to have emerged with considerable advantages, including the cessation of hostilities, prospects of sanctions relief, economic respite, and renewed diplomatic engagement. Meanwhile, Washington has

seemingly diluted its bargaining leverage without securing definitive concessions on several contentious issues. Critics contend the agreement reflects a misreading of regional realities and an overestimation of coercive diplomacy's effectiveness. Should Iran consolidate these gains while negotiations remain inconclusive, the MoU may ultimately be regarded as evidence of American strategic miscalculation rather than diplomatic success. —N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bangalore

NSE IPO bonanza

Apropos of "Of good stock" (*FE*, June 19), the upcoming IPO of the NSE is an example of how long-term investments can create extraordinary wealth. Early investors such as SBI, LIC, public sector banks, insurance companies, and institutional funds are set to reap massive gains from their faith in the NSE when it was established over three decades ago. SBI's expected gain of over ₹5,000 crore and LIC's

stake valuation exceeding ₹54,000 crore highlight the immense value created by one of India's most successful financial institutions. Such success stories demonstrate the importance of patience, vision, and confidence in well-managed enterprises. At the same time, this development showcases the rapid growth and maturity of India's capital markets. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

National capital, unauthorised

Delhi doesn't need any more plans, it needs strict implementation of the existing ones

The recent tragedies in Hauz Rani and Saidulajab, that together claimed nearly 30 lives, are not isolated accidents, but the inevitable outcome of a planning model that has failed Delhi.

For decades, public debate has focused on illegal buildings, unauthorised colonies and encroachments as though they are aberrations that emerged despite planning. The reality is more uncomfortable. The landscape of urban villages, unauthorised colonies, informal rental housing and mixed-use neighbourhoods is not a deviation from Delhi's development story, but the story itself.

It is this story that the *Hindustan Times's* ongoing series has highlighted: how decades of planning failures led to the rise of unauthorised colonies outside any regulatory framework; how the city failed to plan for migrant workers, students, and young professionals and pushed them to neighbourhoods where death lurks in every flimsy building; how encroachments have rendered even access to a footpath an anomaly; and how a cumbersome and corrupt licensing regime has ensured that safety standards are observed more in the breach.

The story starts in 1957 when the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was set up to manage the severe housing shortage in the aftermath of Partition.

With complete control over land and its development, DDA was tasked with master planning, rehabilitating slums, and providing affordable housing. But the agency's monopoly over land, along with rigid and dated zoning laws, only created gaps in supply and demand leading to utilisation of agricultural land for unauthorised colonies. As these colonies lie outside the legal framework, their residents are denied basic civic infrastructure. They live with overflowing drains that run through cramped lanes, a mesh of hanging overhead wires, dirty water, and power cuts. They also live with the constant threat of demolitions, building collapses, and fires.

That 60% Delhi lives in unauthorised colonies is not a secret. It's even acknowledged in several government reports. In fact, the Shelter Baseline Report prepared for the Master Plan for Delhi-2041 states the obvious: "Delhi's formal housing system has failed to match the city's pace of urbanisation, leaving the city in a constant state of housing shortage. It has failed to provide 'housing for all', as the housing tenure options were rigid (only 'owned') and their pricing was unaffordable. This has encouraged the informal housing market to flourish more. The most visible manifestation of the gap in housing demand and supply in Delhi was proliferation of slums and unauthorised colonies."

When an entire lane is illegal, all policy is just on paper. The last few incidents have exposed the shortcomings of the licensing regime. One department gives a licence, another is expected to inspect. Who's responsible for enforcement? Everyone and no one.

The system lays bare its utter disregard for human life. A building with permission to construct three storeys has six; a bed and breakfast with a licence to run six rooms has 25; a tea and snack licence is misused to run a restaurant; and a factory operates from a house in a residential colony. The list is endless.

The blame for the mess Delhi is, lies squarely with the agencies tasked with making the national capital livable, and the leaders who — over the decades — made tall promises but have failed on all accounts. Repeatedly. Delhi doesn't need any more plans, it needs strict implementation of the existing ones.

India needs a new operating system for examinations

Technology cannot compensate for a weak institution; it only digitises the system's fragility. India must rebuild NTA into a permanent, professional, mission-mode assessment institution

India's examination crisis should be recognised as a systemic failure rather than simply a scandal of leakage. The National Testing Agency (NTA) annulled the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test Under-graduate (NEET-UG) on May 12, days after 22.7 lakh aspirants had already appeared for it. This is the second incident of irregularities in two years. Predictably, India witnessed massive public outrage after the May 12 cancellation, and the Supreme Court stepped in. The issue also became a political contest. However, outrage does not constitute reform. Resignations do not redesign systems. Cancellation, while sometimes necessary, ultimately penalises honest students who have adhered to the rules.

The fundamental issue is that India is attempting to run some of the world's largest and most consequential examinations through an ecosystem that hasn't yet been redesigned and built for concordant scale, complexity and incentives. This problem can't be managed through ad hoc vigilance. It needs institutional redesign, technological transformation and a new doctrine of examination governance.

India's scale of examinations is without parallel. NTA conducted 244 exams from 2018 to 2023. Over this period, the candidate pool doubled from about 6.7 million to roughly 12.2 million. NEET alone draws 2.2-2.4 million candidates on a single morning. China's Gaokao had 13.4 million registered candidates in 2024, while South Korea's CSAT had about 554,000 applicants in 2026. India's NEET is smaller than the Gaokao but far larger than Korea's single national test. And unlike China or Korea, India does not conduct a single centrally administered examination per year. Our test-

calendar is continuous, federal, multilingual and sprawling.

That is why simply importing the "fortress model" of China or Korea will not work. Those countries can mobilise the full machinery of the State around one decisive exam day. India cannot turn the entire State into an examination-security apparatus ten times a year. We require a system suited to the Indian scale, one that is resilient, modular, technology-backed, decentralised in delivery but centralised in standards.

The high-level committee under K Radhakrishnan, set up after the 2024 controversies around national testing, recognised precisely this challenge. Its report proposed a comprehensive reform framework for transparent, smooth, and fair conduct of examinations through NTA. The deeper message of that report was clear: India needs a new operating system for examinations.

The first reform must be institutional. Technology cannot compensate for a weak institution; it only digitises the system's fragility. India must rebuild NTA into a permanent, professional, mission-mode assessment institution, with deep in-house capacity in psychometrics, cybersecurity, logistics, data analytics, paper-setting, vendor management, and legal enforcement. A bare-bones agency, excessively dependent on private vendors, temporary investigators, and outsourced processes, cannot carry the burden of India's most high-stakes examinations.

The second reform must be in question setting. The most secure paper is one that no single individual ever fully sees. This is the great strength of institutions such as UPSC and JEE Advanced: Large, anonymous, compartmentalised panels; multiple parallel sets; randomisation; strict isolation; and minimal exposure to private intermediaries. This architecture makes certain that even if one node is compromised, the entire examination is not. NTA examinations must move decisively towards a blind, multi-panel, multi-paper system where secrecy is not dependent on trust, but on design.

The third reform must be technological, but



India is attempting to run some of the world's largest and consequential examinations through an ecosystem that hasn't yet been redesigned for scale, complexity and incentive. VIPIN KUMAR/HT

technology must serve architecture. India must move away from the single physical paper that becomes a valuable commodity the moment it is printed. The future lies in large, continuously refreshed item banks, computer-based testing and, over time, adaptive testing. Global testing systems use item response theory and computerised adaptive testing to draw calibrated questions from a bank, lessening reliance on a single finite paper and advancing measurement quality.

India must build a public digital testing backbone. The Radhakrishnan Committee's proposal to build 1,000 Kendriya Vidyalayas and other trusted public institutions as secure testing centres should be executed at the earliest. The idea is simple: The question paper should be generated, encrypted, transmitted, and decrypted only at the centre, as close to examination time as possible. It is necessary to minimise the transport window and reduce the system's vulnerabilities.

Fourth, identity and invigilation must be hardened. NTA's own 2026 preparedness note mentioned Aadhaar-based biometric authentication, CCTV surveillance, 5G Jammers and GPS-enabled movement of confidential material. These are necessary steps that should be built into auditable national protocols. A "Digi-Exam", something similar to Digi-yatra, should authenticate candidates, invigilators, centre staff, and the movement of confidential materials. Chain of custody must become a digital record, not mere paperwork.

Fifth, India must use Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a forensic tool. AI can detect abnormal

score clusters, improbable answer patterns, centre-level deviations, impersonation risks and suspicious social-media circulation. Statistical forensics must become continuous, not post-mortem. The system should detect organised cheating before an alert from a teacher, a parent, or a police unit triggers national panic.

Finally, India must reduce the winner-take-all nature of examinations. A single morning should not decide the destiny of a young student. Multi-stage testing, multiple attempts, normalised scoring, and transparent grievance redress can reduce pressure, dilute the black-market value of a single paper, and make the system more humane.

I am confident that the education minister, with a track record of delivering some of the large-scale reforms and welfare schemes of this government can lead such a transformation. His earlier tenure was particularly marked by transformative initiatives that aligned closely with the reform agenda of the Modi government, be it the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to provide clean cooking fuel to millions of economically disadvantaged households or developing a national gas grid and city gas network or promoting biofuels or through technology-driven governance. His ability to coordinate effectively with the states and converge policy innovation, administrative efficiency and meticulous implementation is now needed to reform the examination system of India.

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Amitabh Kant

Current account deficit is an avoidable vulnerability

The world has become more uncertain, volatile and unforgiving. Assumptions that shaped economic policy for decades are being challenged. India must now revisit the belief that a current account deficit (CAD) of 1.5-2% of the gross domestic product (GDP) is normal, manageable and perhaps inevitable.

This took hold after the 1991 reforms. Liberalisation lifted India from the old 3% growth path to an average growth rate of about 6.5% for three decades. This growth attracted enough global capital in normal times to finance the CAD. So, in the last 35 years, we registered a CAD in 31. Over time, the deficit came to be as a feature of India's growth model, not a vulnerability.

The standard argument was simple. India lacked domestic oil and gas, and Indians could not be weaned off the age-old habit of buying gold as a store of value. Rising oil demand after Y2K did not materially worsen the current account situation because it was offset by IT services exports and rising India-bound remittances. But even then, each time oil prices spiked, we moved from strength to fragility in a heartbeat.

The shift in the global economic regime under the present US administration and the war in West Asia have exposed the fragility of India's external account assumptions. The agreement between the US and Iran, if one could call it that, provides two months for both sides to set up the framework for real negotiations. That is when nuclear capabilities, frozen assets, missile capa-

bility, support for proxies, and relief from sanctions get discussed. These are contentious issues and any purported agreement could unravel again — underscoring once more India's dependence on fuel imports as a major strategic weakness. At the same time, IT services exports may come under pressure from the AI disruption, while tighter immigration policies compress remittances.

Foreign capital tends to retreat when risk rises. A prolonged conflict can raise prices, disrupt supplies, pressure the current account, weaken growth, strain the fiscal deficit situation, stoke inflation and trigger second-order effects. If the rupee depreciates sharply, the Reserve Bank of India will be forced to use foreign currency reserves and interest rates to manage volatility.

However, this article is not about short-term crisis management. It challenges the policy belief that India's oil-gas-gold demand structurally condemns it to a CAD.

India consumes roughly 2,300 million barrels of oil a year but produces only about 530 million barrels domestically. Estimates of India's oil reserves vary widely, from around 12 billion tonnes of proven reserves to a theoretical potential closer to 42 billion tonnes. Until recently, some reserves could not be explored because of restrictions. The Prime Minister's Samudra Manthan decision is quite welcome, opening up around one

lakh square kilometers of coastline for deep-water exploration.

But intent must be matched by capital, technology, and incentives. India's oil is harder to access than that of many West Asian producers. Much of it lies offshore; so, domestic wells recover only about 35% on average. Extracting more is often uneconomic because of limited technological innovation. India, therefore, must make serious efforts on exploration, recovery technology, and incentivising risk-taking. ONGC and Oil India must be encouraged to explore, not hamstrung by tight MOUs. India should target raising domestic supply from the current level of roughly 12% of oil demand to 50%.

Demand management is the second lever. India must accelerate transport electrification across two- and three-wheelers, cars, and buses. For trucks, liquefied natural gas can be a transition fuel, given India's gas import bill is a fraction of its oil bill. Over time, however, heavy transport too must be electrified. A determined policy pivot will accelerate innovation.

India must also reduce dependence on liquefied petroleum gas by expanding piped natural gas networks and encouraging alternative cooking technologies, including induction and solar-powered solutions. Industrial electrification must also be urgently expanded — currently at around 18%, compared with China's 30%. On fertilisers, with the subsidy bill likely to rise sharply, India should incentivise a shift from natural gas-based ammonia to green ammonia.

India's current account strategy must also prioritise reducing dependence on imported oil. The second structural issue is gold. Nilesh Shah and Amit Chandra, using World Gold

Council data, have highlighted the scale of the opportunity. India holds around 26,000 tonnes of gold, worth roughly \$4 trillion. Of this, about 4,000 tonnes are estimated to be with temple trusts and around 20,000 tonnes with households. The top 10% of households may hold about 10,000 tonnes. Gold prices have surged since 2024, making these holdings seem like excellent investments. But the value remains largely notional unless monetised.

The government can roll out a credible national temple gold mobilisation programme, to buy temple gold (at a premium) on the market price, with a buyback option. A sovereign wealth fund of \$300 billion could be created with the receipts. The temple trusts would be converting the idle gold into productive national capital, and also get income to make structural and ambient upgrades to the temples and the surrounding areas to boost religious tourism. Illustratively, while the Vatican gets 11 million foreign tourists, all of India gets 9 million of which a large portion are NRI.

India should also study Turkey's experiment of allowing banks to hold part of their statutory reserves in gold. This would give banks an incentive to attract household gold. A one-time, no-questions-asked gold conversion window could also be considered.

India cannot continue to treat a CAD as an unavoidable cost of growth. A CAD may be manageable in benign times, but in a fractured world, where black swan events are becoming the new normal, it is a strategic vulnerability. Challenging an old policy belief on CAD and bringing it to surplus must be a central focus to India's economic policy in the years ahead.

Janmejaya Sinha is chairman, BCG India, and Kaustubh Verma is managing director and Partner, BCG. The views expressed are personal



Janmejaya Sinha



Kaustubh Verma

US is reassessing India's place with an eye on China

US trade representative Jamieson Greer's June 23-24 visit to India is intended to advance the proposed bilateral trade agreement. Yet the broader picture suggests a shift in Washington's priorities. The US increasingly views India as a large market rather than a central strategic partner in its Asian strategy.

The clearest signal came on June 16, when the Pentagon reverted to calling the US Indo-Pacific Command as the US Pacific Command, the name used before 2018. The purpose of 2018 renaming was explicit — to place India at the heart of America's strategy in Asia and acknowledge the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in balancing China's rise. Reversing that decision suggests that Washington no longer sees India as central to its regional security architecture.

Many analysts argue that US interest in India as a strategic partner has weakened because New Delhi did not fully embrace the role Washington envisioned for it, instead maintaining its strategic autonomy, buying Russian oil amid the Ukraine war, and choosing independent positions rather than aligning with the US on major geopolitical issues.

This misses a much bigger geopolitical reality. India's changing place in US strategy has less to do with its choices and more to do with a profound shift in America's assessment of China — and of its own ability to shape the international order.

Efforts to elevate India as a key US partner were built on the belief that China could be balanced through a coalition of regional powers.

China+1, supply-chain resilience, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework reflected that goal. Today, that assumption appears increasingly difficult to sustain.

Despite years of efforts to isolate China, it remains the world's largest manufacturing power, dominates critical supply chains, leads in several advanced technologies, and has steadily increased its global influence. China's all-round heft in the world today is far greater than when the Indo-Pacific strategy was conceived.

Recent geopolitical developments have reinforced this reality. During the conflict in Ukraine, China provided Russia with a vital economic lifeline by purchasing energy and maintaining commercial ties. During the Iran crisis, China remained a major actor in West Asia, providing supplies to Iran. In both cases, China demonstrated that it possesses the economic scale and geopolitical reach to protect its interests despite US opposition.

For Washington, these developments carry

an uncomfortable lesson: China can't be contained in the way the Soviet Union once was. Thus, US strategy is gradually shifting from containment toward a more pragmatic mix of competition, selective cooperation, and accommodation. Managing relations with China is becoming more important than building ever-larger coalitions against it.

Thus, India's declining prominence is not evidence of its failure. Rather, it reflects a reassessment of US priorities. If the objective is no longer to build a broad coalition to contain China, then India's value as a balancing instrument inevitably diminishes.

What replaces the strategic partnership? Washington increasingly sees India as a major market for US exports and the largest data provider for its tech+AI giants.

As it seeks greater access through the proposed trade deal and other channels, India should negotiate from a position of equality and reject any arrangement that undermines its economic or strategic interests.

Ajay Srivastava is founder, Global Trade Research Initiative. The views expressed are personal



Ajay Srivastava

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

LIFE IN IRAN BEFORE 1979

The peace MoU between the US and Iran leaves the regime in the West Asian nation stronger after surviving decapitation. Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution overthrew the last Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, the regime has been criticised for its oppression, especially against women. How was life like before the revolution?

Ryszard Kapuściński's *Shah of Shahs* offers some answers. It is an impressionistic work that gives a broad picture of Iranian society through Kapuściński's own observations. The Shah's story is told in the chasm between his forced modernising vision for his country and his isolation from his people. The excesses of the Iranian elite is made explicit by the fact that while the people suffered food shortages and crushing inflation, the Shah and his courtiers would fly in their favourite dishes from the best of Paris's restaurants.



Shah of Shahs
Ryszard Kapuściński
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Editor's TAKE

Rebuilding student trust after the paper leak crisis

Trust cannot be rebuilt overnight; it returns only when students see institutions acknowledge their failures and correct them transparently

For a generation that has grown up under the relentless pressure of competitive examinations, the recent spate of paper leaks has fractured something fragile: the belief that merit, not manipulation, decides who gets to become a doctor, an engineer or a civil servant.

When lakhs of students who have spent years preparing discover that a result can be bought or stolen, the damage extends beyond one exam cycle. It corrodes faith in the entire system of public examinations.

The pattern across recent controversies is depressingly familiar. Question papers have been printed and transported through poorly secured logistics chains, sometimes via private vendors with minimal accountability. Centres in remote towns have weak digital infrastructure, making real-time monitoring difficult. There is often a troubling gap between when a paper is finalised and when it is administered – a window long enough for leaks to occur and circulate on messaging apps.

Investigations, when they happen, are slow, fragmented across state and central agencies, and rarely result in swift, visible punishment. Most damagingly, the bodies conducting these exams have repeatedly responded with denial rather than transparency, eroding credibility further with every defensive press statement.

Gen Z's fury is not simply about a single exam gone wrong. It reflects a generation that has watched coaching-centre economics balloon, that has poured family savings into preparation, and that increasingly experiences exams as the only ladder of social mobility available to them. When that ladder appears rigged, the betrayal feels personal and systemic at once – amplified and accelerated by social media, which turns local grievances into national outrage within hours.

Rebuilding trust requires structural change, not just reassurance. First, examination bodies must adopt secure, encrypted digital question-delivery systems with decentralised, randomised paper sets, reducing the value of any single leak.

Second, an independent statutory authority - insulated from political and administrative pressure - should oversee high-stakes national exams, with clear accountability separate from the ministries that benefit politically from smooth exam conduct.

Third, the chain of custody for papers, from the printing press to the exam hall, needs forensic-level tracking, audited by external agencies, not self-certified.

Equally important is the speed and visibility of justice. Leak investigations must run on fixed timelines with public reporting, and those responsible – whether vendors, officials or examination staff – must face consequences that are seen, not just announced. Finally, students deserve a credible grievance and re-examination mechanism. Anything less leaves an entire generation rightly unconvinced.

When rules fail and lives perish

The tragic loss of lives in Delhi's Malviya Nagar fire demands a deeper examination of weakening accountability, persistent impunity for violations, and the urgent need to restore integrity, vigilance and commitment to public service



JS RAJPUT

A devastating fire broke out in the Malviya Nagar locality of South Delhi on June 3, 2026, claiming the lives of 21 people. The tragedy was not merely an accident; it was the consequence of a chain of failures by those entrusted with enforcing the law. Reports indicated that both the construction and the business operating there were unauthorised and illegal. It is difficult to believe that such an establishment could have functioned without the knowledge of the authorities responsible for approving constructions and issuing licences for hotels, restaurants and bed-and-breakfast facilities. Yet, as is often the case, no senior official responsible for monitoring and enforcement appears to have been suspended or arrested. Public confidence in official assurances has eroded to such an extent that many people are convinced that little will change. A few minor violators may face action, some illegal structures may be demolished, and then the status quo is likely to return. The mechanisms through which violations continue to flourish are, unfortunately, well understood by the public.

Occasionally, voices are raised lamenting the decline of the values once preached and practised by the freedom fighters under the leadership of Gandhi. These values—humility, honesty, integrity, compassion and accountability—were expected to guide governance after independence. Sadly, for many citizens, routine interactions with public institutions often reveal a different reality. Whether in municipal offices, revenue departments or police stations, people frequently encounter indifference, inefficiency and a lack of accountability. Can anyone entirely avoid attributing this situation to corruption? Citizens are familiar with the manner in which elected representatives and local authorities are often perceived on matters relating to illegal constructions and regulatory violations.

Reports from different parts of the country concerning commissions, cut-money practices and rent-seeking behaviour have further weakened public faith in governance and justice. The Malviya Nagar tragedy occurred at a time when the nation was already distressed by controversies surrounding examination systems, including the NEET paper leak, difficulties associated with Class XII examinations, technical glitches in CUET and other administrative failures. Although these incidents belong to different sectors, they often stem from similar causes: incompetence, negligence, lack of accountability and insufficient commitment to public welfare.



A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY CAN PROVIDE A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL CITIZENS, PARTICULARLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE PURSUING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. HOWEVER, DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS MUST FUNCTION SINCERELY IN BOTH LETTER AND SPIRIT. DEFICIENCIES IN GOVERNANCE, WHETHER ARISING FROM POLICY FAILURES OR ADMINISTRATIVE SHORTCOMINGS, MUST BE IDENTIFIED, STUDIED AND CORRECTED BY THOSE ENTRUSTED WITH PUBLIC AUTHORITY

The author is an educationist, a Padma Shri awardee, and works in religious unity and social cohesion

dailypioneer
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Whenever major fire accidents occur, investigations commonly reveal that mandatory safety equipment was either absent, outdated or non-functional. In many cases, fire safety certificates had expired long before the accident. Yet one rarely hears of meaningful penalties being imposed before tragedies occur. Preventive enforcement remains weak, while corrective action usually follows only after lives have been lost. The deeper concern is the gradual erosion of our moral and civic consciousness. Rampant lethargy, inefficiency and corruption reflect a declining sensitivity towards fellow citizens and the larger national interest. Public institutions exist to protect life and dignity, but their effectiveness ultimately depends on the character and commitment of those who operate them.

The demolition drives initiated after the Malviya Nagar incident appeared relatively orderly and considerate in their execution. They inevitably invite comparison with similar actions undertaken elsewhere, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. Regardless of one's opinion on such measures, they have generated intense public debate about the enforcement of law, unauthorised constructions, land encroachments and the role of government in protecting public interests.

Meaningful reform demands leaders with imagination, courage and a commitment to public welfare over personal gain. Equally vital is whether official training truly instils responsibility towards the weakest and most vulnerable. Where accountability is weak, illegal occupations of land and unauthorised constructions inevitably flourish. One does not need to look far to find examples of such violations. These structures are often visible reminders of administrative failure and the abdication of responsibility by those entrusted with enforcing the law. The Malviya Nagar fire is only one among many such tragedies that have occurred over the years. Yet meaningful reforms and lasting accountability remain elusive.

The public debate surrounding bulldozer action in Uttar Pradesh illustrates another

dimension of governance. Such actions attracted both strong support and sharp criticism. Supporters viewed them as decisive measures against land grabbers, criminal networks and illegal encroachments, while critics questioned their legality, fairness and implications for due process. Whatever one's position, the debate underscores the importance of ensuring that all enforcement actions remain firmly within constitutional and legal frameworks.

A healthy democracy can provide a better life for all citizens, particularly for young people pursuing education and employment. However, democratic institutions must function sincerely in both letter and spirit. Deficiencies in governance, whether arising from policy failures or administrative shortcomings, must be identified, studied and corrected by those entrusted with public authority. The wisdom expressed by Rajendra Prasad, President of the Constituent Assembly, remains profoundly relevant. Addressing the nation on November 26, 1949, he observed that the welfare of the country would ultimately depend not merely on the Constitution but on those who administer it. He warned that even the best Constitution could not succeed if those entrusted with implementing it lacked character and integrity. Conversely, capable and honest individuals could make even an imperfect system function effectively. They could innovate, inspire, learn more and be more pragmatic. The basic factors responsible for the Malviya Nagar tragedy and the NEET and CBSE failures are not much different, nor really distant. Essentially, these failures are rampant in public services across sectors. It creates a general impression among common

people that they can get away with the violation of any sanction, permission or approval. Recent systemic failures that have inflicted avoidable suffering on young students and their parents, or the fire that extinguished lives mercilessly, must necessarily serve as stern reminders that education must focus on nurturing empathy, integrity, responsibility, compassion and the spirit of respecting others. A value-based work culture could help develop men and women of character who would not blindly become slaves to 'maximum accumulation anyhow', but who recognise the limits of material accumulation and the importance of serving society.

Ultimately, institutions derive their strength and reputation from the character and commitment of the functionaries who lead and operate them. If India seeks to prevent tragedies such as the Malviya Nagar fire and strengthen public trust in governance, it must invest not only in better laws and regulations but also in nurturing honesty, accountability and ethical leadership. These values have long been central to India's civilisational ethos. Strengthening them remains one of the nation's most urgent tasks.



PICTALK



A woman looks at Foxglove flowers blooming along a highway, in Bharderwah district, Jammu and Kashmir. PHOTO: PTI

Yoga: A lifelong companion on the journey of ageing



SHARMILA DAS

2ND OPINION

As the world prepares to celebrate International Day of Yoga, this year's theme, "Yoga for Healthy Ageing", has sparked important conversations about wellness in later life. Images of elderly practitioners performing yoga postures with grace and confidence are inspiring, highlighting how the practice can help maintain strength, mobility and independence. Yet the theme also offers an opportunity to rethink a common misconception: ageing is not something that begins in old age.

It starts the moment life begins. From birth onwards, the human body is constantly changing. It grows, adapts, repairs itself and gradually moves through the different stages of life. Ageing is not a sudden event that arrives after retirement; it is a continuous process. The real challenge, therefore, is not avoiding ageing but learning how to support

our bodies and minds throughout that journey.

This is where yoga becomes truly valuable. Many people view yoga as a remedy for stress, stiffness, poor posture or declining health. While it certainly helps address these concerns, its deeper purpose lies in prevention. Yoga encourages us to care for our physical and mental well-being long before problems arise.

Movement is essential to healthy living. Children naturally bend, stretch, squat and balance without conscious effort. As adulthood progresses, however, modern lifestyles often replace movement with prolonged sitting, screen time and repetitive routines. Gradually, flexibility decreases, muscles weaken, posture suffers and balance becomes less reliable. These changes occur so slowly that they often go unnoticed until discomfort or fatigue begins affecting daily life. Yoga offers a simple yet effective way to counter this decline. Stretching practices help preserve flexibility, while mobility exercises keep joints healthy and functional. Strength-building postures support muscles and bones, allowing the body to remain capable and resilient over time. Balance-focused practices improve coordination and stability, reducing the likelihood of injuries as we age. Importantly, these benefits are not limited to senior citizens. A young professional spending hours at a desk may need them just as much as an older adult.

Breathing is another crucial element of healthy ageing. Though it accompanies us throughout life, we rarely pay

attention to it. The demands of modern living often encourage shallow, hurried breathing, which can contribute to stress, poor sleep and reduced energy. Yogic breathing techniques restore awareness to this vital process. A slow, steady breath helps calm the nervous system, supports mental clarity and promotes recovery and relaxation. The ability to regulate one's breath is a skill that benefits people at every age. Equally important is yoga's impact on mental well-being. Many fears associated with ageing stem from concerns about loss-loss of strength, appearance, independence or certainty. Yoga shifts the focus towards qualities that can continue to grow throughout life: awareness, patience, resilience, gratitude and inner balance. It teaches acceptance without passivity and growth without constant struggle. Ultimately, yoga is not merely a practice for old age; it is a practice for life. It requires no expensive equipment, exceptional flexibility or large amounts of time. Even a few minutes of mindful movement and conscious breathing each day can create lasting benefits. Like any worthwhile investment, small and consistent efforts accumulate over time. This International Yoga Day, let us see yoga not as a response to ageing, but as a lifelong companion that helps us move, breathe and live with greater balance. Ageing begins at birth, but so do strength and wisdom.



The writer is a trained Sivananda Yoga teacher

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QUANTUM PROGRESS NEEDS STRONGER NATIONAL COMMITMENT

India's recent progress in quantum technology is encouraging and timely. To remain competitive in the post-AGI world, India must take a quantum leap forward. Having lagged far behind the United States and China in AI foundational technology, quantum computing may well be the next major frontier where India can establish leadership.

The Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) has done commendable work in this field, and its ambition of making India self-reliant in quantum computing deserves recognition. Alongside the Central Government's National Quantum Mission, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu also deserves credit for his vision in collaborating with IBM, a global

leader in quantum technology, and TCS to create a "Quantum Valley", much like Silicon Valley, as an epicentre for quantum-based innovation.

However, unlike in the US, Canada, China and Europe, India's private sector has shown limited seriousness towards this transformative technology. Companies like Reliance, Adani, Mahindra and major banks must step up and invest heavily. While the Government faces restraints in budget allocations, the Indian private sector should take the lead in herding in a new age of technological innovation.

Otherwise, India risks repeating its AI experience - forever catching up instead of leading. The time for a quantum leap is now.

YASHI BAIRAGI | UJJAIN

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Challenges overshadow TVK's start

In its first month in power, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay's TVK government has faced criticism from both the public and opposition over key issues such as law-and-order failures, unannounced power cuts, diluted farm loan waivers and the delay in implementing its promise of ₹ 2,500 monthly assistance for women.

Among these, the most serious concern has been the rise in sexual violence against girls and women, which has deeply shaken the State's reputation for safety. Opposition parties and citizens alike have criticised TVK's handling of the crisis.

Political observers have also pointed to TVK's waver-institutional structure and lack of administrative experience. Vijay may be a popular film star, but popularity alone cannot substitute governance. He does not yet appear to have a clear roadmap, while his close circle and ministerial team are not known for policy depth or administrative expertise.

This leaves him heavily dependent on bureaucracy, which is rarely ideal for an elected leader. One month may be too short for results, but it is enough to expect clarity and direction.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

Peace built on fragility

Calling this agreement a respite rather than a triumph is both honest and necessary. A fourteen-point memorandum, however detailed, cannot undo four months of devastation or erase years of mistrust. The provisions on down-blending enriched uranium under IAEA supervision and the sixty-day Hormuz passage are constructive steps. The retreat in oil prices from wartime highs to \$74-78 a barrel will also bring relief to energy-importing nations, including India.

What remains concerning is the structural fragility of the agreement. Reconstruction pledges worth \$300 billion remain, as rightly noted, a diplomatic abstraction until actual disbursement begins. Such pledges often lose momentum once initial enthusiasm fades.

More worrying is Netanyahu's admission that Israel does not fully align with Washington's approach, while reserving the right to continue military operations in Lebanon, Gaza and Syria. A framework that excludes Israel's core security concerns is incomplete by design.

The sixty-day negotiation period will be the real test. Markets have celebrated; now institutions and diplomats must turn this pause into lasting stability.

SWATHI SENTHILKUMAR | COIMBATORE

Blending teaching with technology

The article 'The silent burden of modern educators' rightly highlights the immense pressures borne by teachers. They are expected to meet the demands of parents, administrators, regulators and society while nurturing students and delivering measurable outcomes. Supporting teachers is essential if educational standards are to improve. However, the discussion overlooks the growing role of digital education. YouTube educators and EdTech platforms have become powerful tools that complement classroom teaching.

Millions of students now access lessons from excellent teachers, learn difficult concepts at their own pace and revisit topics whenever needed. This has been especially valuable for students in smaller towns and underserved regions. Ironically, online education is often dismissed or mocked.

Such criticism ignores the fact that technology has widened access to quality education far beyond conventional classrooms. Digital platforms cannot replace the mentorship, emotional support and human connection that teachers provide, but they can significantly improve learning outcomes. The real challenge is not choosing between teachers and technology, but creating a system where both work together.

HARSH PAWARIA | ROHTAK



The Aravalli green shield: India's living defence against the desert

The Aravalli Green Wall Project represents one of the country's most ambitious environmental projects. It seeks to revive an ancient ecological system that has protected north-western India for centuries. Its success, however, will depend on ensuring strong legal protection, scientific planning and active community participation



VIVEK SAXENA

Every year on 17 June, the world observes the UN Day to Combat Desertification and Drought under the UNCCD Convention - a reminder that healthy land is the quiet foundation of our food, our water, our biodiversity and our resilience to a changing climate. This year's theme, "Restore the Land. Unlock.", carries a hopeful message: restoring degraded landscapes is not merely an ecological duty but an investment in livelihoods, water security and a sustainable future.

The challenge is sobering. Nearly 40 per cent of the Earth's land is now degraded, affecting billions of lives and threatening economic and ecological stability. India faces its own pressures - declining groundwater, biodiversity loss, expanding aridity and growing climate variability. Yet India has also emerged as a global leader in land restoration, and one of its most ambitious efforts is unfolding along an ancient line of hills: the Aravalli Green Wall.

A green wall, or a green shield?

The phrase "green wall" entered the global vocabulary through Africa. Launched in 2007 by the African Union, the Great Green Wall set out to restore degraded land across the full width of the continent, stretching some 8,000 kilometres from Senegal on the Atlantic to Djibouti on the Horn of Africa. Originally conceived across eleven core Sahel countries and since expanded to many more, it aims to restore 100 million hectares of land, sequester 250 million tonnes of carbon and create 10 million green jobs by 2030.

Africa's experience taught the world an important lesson. A rigid line of planted trees marching across deserts could not survive on its own; the most enduring insight from the Sahel is that the initiative evolved from a tree-planting drive into a mosaic of activities - a comprehensive effort blending water harvesting, soil conservation, grasslands and community livelihoods. The "wall" was never really a wall.

This is why, in spirit, we should understand these initiatives not as walls but as shields. The Aravalli Green Wall, properly understood, is India's green shield against the advancing desert - not a barrier of bricks, but a breathing, regenerating landscape.

Reviving an ancient ecological shield

Stretching across Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi, the Aravalli Range is among the oldest mountain systems on Earth. For millennia, it has shielded the subcontinent from the eastward march of the Thar Desert while recharging aquifers, regulating local climate and sheltering rich biodiversity. Decades of deforestation, mining, encroachment and unsustainable land use have worn this shield thin - and the consequences reach far beyond the hills.

Recognising this, Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupendra Yadav launched the Aravalli Green Wall Project in 2023, one of India's most ambitious landscape-restoration programmes, blending afforestation, watershed development, groundwater recharge, the revival of water bodies, dust-storm mitigation, carbon sequestration and community livelihoods.

The Aravalli Green Wall is the on-ground expression of a commitment India has made repeatedly at the highest global forums. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has placed land restoration at the centre of its climate diplomacy. When India hosted the 14th Conference of Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP14) in 2019, the Prime Minister raised India's ambition to restore degraded land from 21 million to 26 million hectares by 2030 - a pledge carried forward in the Delhi Declaration adopted at the close of that conference.

This sits within a wider arc of leadership: India's commitment to Land Degradation Neutrality and the Bonn Challenge; its pledge of net-zero emissions by 2070, announced at Glasgow; and Mission LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment), which the Prime Minister has championed from the G20 to the United Nations as a model for sustainable living. The Aravalli Green Wall translates these global commitments into restored watersheds, regenerated forests and revived water bodies on Indian soil.

If restoration rebuilds the shield, the law defends it - and here the judiciary has been a steadfast guardian of



THE ARAVALLI GREEN WALL STANDS AS A POWERFUL SYMBOL OF INDIA'S RESOLVE - A RESOLVE THAT MUST NOW BE MATCHED BY A DEFINITION STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE LINE. REVIVING THE ARAVALLIS IS NOT ABOUT BUILDING A WALL OF TREES; IT IS ABOUT RESTORING, AND DEFENDING, AN ANCIENT LIVING SHIELD FOR THE GENERATIONS TO COME

The writer is an Indian Forest Service officer and former Country Representative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature

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the Aravallis. The Supreme Court banned mining in Gurugram, Faridabad and Nuh as far back as 2009, and has intervened repeatedly against illegal mining and encroachment across the range. Yet a deeper problem persisted: the four Aravalli states followed inconsistent criteria for what even counts as an "Aravalli", leaving regulatory gaps that illegal mining exploited. To close those gaps, the Court constituted a committee in May 2024 to recommend a uniform definition. In November 2025, it accepted that committee's formulation - defining an Aravalli hill as a landform rising 100 metres or more above the local relief, and a range as two or more such hills within 500 metres - froze new mining leases and mandated a plan for sustainable mining.

The definition, however, drew sharp criticism: ecologists and citizen groups warned that a purely height-based threshold could exclude vast tracts of the range from protection, endangering groundwater recharge, biodiversity and the very desertification control the Aravallis exist to provide.

Responding to these concerns, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognisance, kept its November judgment and the committee's report in abeyance, and ordered a fresh, independent expert review. In June 2026, it constituted a high-powered committee headed by the Director General of the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) to re-examine the definition and demarcation, resolve the "critical ambiguities" in the earlier findings, and submit a comprehensive report by 31 August 2026. Much now rests on this committee. A definition is not a technicality; it draws the line between what is protected and what may be quarried. The expectation - shared by conservationists, scientists and administrators alike - is for a definition that is scientifically rigorous and map-verifiable, yet ecologically precautionary: one that protects not merely the tallest peaks but the connected system of foothills, valleys, recharge zones and ridgelines that make the Aravallis a functioning ecological barrier. Where the science is uncertain, the definition must err on the side of protection. Crucially, the legal boundary of the Aravallis and the restoration ambition of the Green Wall must speak to each other - for it makes little sense to plant a shield on one hand while leaving it legally exposed on the other.

The stakes are highest, and most immediate, for the National Capital Region. The Aravallis are the single most significant natural barrier shielding the NCR from the dust and aridity of the Thar. A healthy Aravalli landscape means cleaner air and fewer dust storms over Delhi and its satellite cities, recharged aquifers beneath one of the world's most water-stressed urban regions, and a cooler, more stable microclimate for tens of millions of residents. The environmental fate of the capital region is, quite literally, tied to the health of these ancient hills.

At the landscape scale, the case is just as compelling. Restoration knits together a continuous ecological corridor from Gujarat through Rajasthan and Haryana to Delhi - reconnecting fragmented wildlife habitats, stabilising watersheds across the basin, and rebuilding the resilience of all north-western India.

A people's shield

The Sahel's experience confirms a simple truth: where communities are excluded, walls crumble; where they are made stewards, shields endure. Through Mission LIFE, the Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam campaign and the Amrit Sarovar Mission, restoration in India has become a people's movement - the work of citizens, schools, civil society and the private sector as much as of government. Every restored hectare, every revived pond, and every nurtured tree adds a fibre to the living shield that guards our water, our biodiversity and our climate. As the world marks World Desertification and Drought Day 2026, the Aravalli Green Wall stands as a powerful symbol of India's resolve - a resolve that must now be matched by a definition strong enough to hold the line. Reviving the Aravallis is not about building a wall of trees; it is about restoring, and defending, an ancient living shield for the generations to come. The time to act is now - for the land, for the climate, and for the future.

Switzerland's ten million: What a ceiling cannot survive



ACHARYA PRASHANT

A referendum asks a society to do what a person is almost never asked about her own life: name a number and stop. Not a target, revised upward the moment reached, but a ceiling the system agrees in advance never to cross.

On June 14, Switzerland was asked to set one. The proposal, brought by the country's largest party, would have capped the permanent resident population at ten million by 2050, with tightening measures triggered earlier and the EU free movement agreement at risk if the cap

held too long. Turnout reached fifty-nine per cent. Nearly fifty-five per cent said no. It is easy to read this as a story about immigration, and at the level of posters and platforms that is what it was. Underneath sat a more interesting question, one the campaign never had to answer because the vote answered it by default: can a wealthy, secure nation set a limit for itself before crisis sets one for it? Switzerland was asked, and found it could not.

Switzerland's fertility rate sits around 1.5, below the 2.1 needed to hold a population steady. The population stood at about 9.1 million by end-2025, with the over-sixties now outnumbering the under-twenties; official projections put the figure at 10.5 million by 2055, almost all from migration. The number the proposal tried to hold was never the country's own; migration supplied nearly all the growth it was meant to stop.

Foreign nationals already make up twenty-seven per cent of residents, over a third of the workforce, with hundreds of thousands more crossing the border daily for work. The campaign cited gross arrival figures without mentioning the exits set against them; net migration, the figure that actually moves the population, is a fraction of that. A cap sounds simple, but in practice meant unwinding the agreement that lets Swiss firms hire across Europe, and with it the trade carrying nearly half of Swiss exports. The government itself had warned that holding to any fixed number would demand measures incompatible with the country's prosperity. It was an accurate description of the bill.

The housing pressure behind the campaign was real: Geneva's vacancy rate fell to 0.34 per cent, among the tightest in Europe. But the shortage is first a matter of construction, zoning and underinvestment, not headcount, and would have produced the same crisis at any population level.

So when Swiss voters said no, they were mostly voting against a specific trigger, attached to a party leaning on fear of outsiders, in a year when severing ties to its largest market looked like self-harm.

The no was local, contingent, reasonable on its own terms. But notice what the reasonableness conceals. The question of where a stop might fall was never put to a clean test, because by the time it reached the ballot it had already been wired into every artery that would have to be cut before the question could be answered. The ceiling lost not to greed but to interdependence; the system had arranged itself so growth was the only answer compatible with everything else the country had built. Switzerland had been here before: in 2014 it narrowly voted to cap immigration, then quietly declined to enforce it, because the same agreements made enforcement cost more than the country would pay. The vote can say stop. The structure keeps moving.

Here the deeper pattern shows itself, and it has nothing to do with Switzerland alone. A person never produces a stable figure for enough. Ask someone with savings what amount would let him stop checking, and the number retreats as it is approached. The referendum makes visible that the same movement runs at civilisational scale, without anyone wanting more of anything.

Switzerland holds roughly the third-highest income per head on earth, by any ordinary measure a society that has arrived. Yet holding a number, merely holding it, could not survive contact with the machinery of how the place runs. No voter had to be greedy for this: a national income figure has no terminal value past which a country may stop, neither does a trade relationship or a labour market, and together they form a structure with the exact signature of an ego that cannot say enough: permanent forward motion, no terminal state, no one whose task is to ask whether the motion still serves anyone.

The cruder reading says Switzerland is rich and wished to stay rich. The truer reading is stranger: the proposal could have been drafted by cleaner hands, and the verdict would likely have been the same, because it was laid down in decades of treaties and hiring practices, each rational alone, none asking what all of them together were for. A civilisation's reaching is dispersed across millions of decisions made by people not reaching for anything; it only loses anyone willing to own it. None of this makes the campaign innocent; trading in suspicion of outsiders answers for its own language. But the hostility to outsiders is a problem with an address. The inability to define enough has none, and that is why it outlives every election the louder problem loses. A Green parliamentarian, Sibel Arslan, observed that something shifted regardless of the result: capping a population now sits inside speakable policy in a way it did not before. A society can refuse a number and still be changed by having weighed one. A steadier-handed version of this vote might well pass. It would still not answer what this one raised, since passing a tighter mechanism is not the same as a system discovering a working sense of enough. Other wealthy nations should not mistake a different outcome for a different structure: not one keeps a stated population ceiling, and the absence of Switzerland's quarrel elsewhere is not evidence of a healthier relationship to limits. It only means the question has not yet been put plainly enough to compel one. The number Switzerland was asked to hold would have begun retreating the moment it was reached, the way it retreats from a man watching a balance. What the vote leaves behind is who, if anyone, still stands close enough to ask why the retreating never stops.



Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life

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Why India's youth deserve a seat at the decision-making table



ABHINAV NARAYAN JHA

By all demographic measures, India is a young nation. Nearly 65 per cent of its population is below the age of 35, and the country's median age hovers around 28 years. Political leaders across party lines proudly refer to India's youth as its greatest asset, its demographic dividend, and the driving force of a rising global power. Yet, there is an uncomfortable reality that rarely finds space in political speeches: while young Indians dominate the population, they remain conspicuously absent from the institutions that make decisions on their behalf. India may be one of the youngest democracies in terms of population, but its Parliament and Legislative Assemblies tell a completely different story. The contradiction is glaring. According to available data from the 18th Lok Sabha elected in 2024, fewer than one in ten Members of Parliament are between 25 and 40 years of age. The average age of the House is approximately 56 years - one of the highest in independent India's history.

The question, therefore, is straightforward: how can a democracy claim to represent its people when its largest demographic group remains significantly underrepresented in its highest decision-making bodies? It is a question of democratic legit-

imacy. Historically, the situation was far more encouraging. In the first Lok Sabha constituted in 1952, nearly 30 per cent of MPs were aged 40 years or below. Seven decades later, despite India's youthful population growing substantially, youth representation in Parliament has sharply declined to around 10 per cent. Instead of becoming more inclusive and accessible, Indian politics appears to have become increasingly exclusive. Political parties across the ideological spectrum frequently celebrate young voters. Election campaigns are designed around social media outreach, youth conventions, campus interactions, digital engagement and promises of employment and opportunity. Every political party understands the electoral value of young voters. However, when it comes to distributing party tickets, leadership responsibilities and positions of influence, the enthusiasm for youth participation suddenly diminishes. Young Indians are encouraged to vote. But they are rarely encouraged to lead.

The barriers are both visible and invisible. Electoral politics increasingly demands substantial financial resources, extensive organisational networks and years of political patronage. For first-generation aspirants, the path is extraordinarily difficult. This brings us to another uncomfortable truth: dynastic politics. A significant proportion of younger politicians entering Parliament and Assemblies today belong to established political families. While many of these leaders are capable and deserving in their own right, their presence highlights a deeper structural issue.



For every young leader with a political surname, thousands of equally talented young Indians without such advantages remain excluded from the system. The result is a political ecosystem where youth representation exists, but genuine youth inclusion remains limited. Representation should mean creating opportunities for talented young Indians from diverse social, economic and regional backgrounds to participate in governance.

The implications of this democratic deficit are profound. The twenty-first century presents challenges fundamentally different from those faced by previous generations. Artificial intelligence, cyber security, climate change, digital governance, start-up ecosystems, gig-economy employment, mental health concerns, educational reforms and technological disruptions are shaping the lives of millions of young Indians. Yet the voices most directly affected by these issues remain insufficiently represented in legislative

discussions. A Parliament that lacks youth perspectives risks creating policies that are disconnected from contemporary realities. This does not mean experience is unimportant. Governance requires wisdom that often comes with experience. But democracy functions best when experience and innovation coexist. The challenge becomes even more evident at the state level.

Youth wings exist within almost every major political party, but they often function as mobilisation platforms rather than genuine leadership pipelines. Many young leaders spend years organising events, managing campaigns and mobilising supporters without receiving meaningful opportunities to contest elections. This creates frustration, disengagement and cynicism. When politics appears inaccessible, talented individuals increasingly look elsewhere. Entrepreneurs build start-ups. Professionals join corporations. Scholars enter academia. Few see electoral politics as a realistic avenue for public service.

The solution is not symbolic tokenism. The solution lies in structural reform. Political parties should voluntarily allocate a meaningful percentage of tickets to candidates below the age of 40. Internal party elections must become more transparent and merit-based. Campaign finance reforms should reduce the overwhelming financial barriers that discourage young entrants. Structured mentorship programmes should connect experienced legislators with emerging leaders.

Equally important is the creation of institutional pathways. Youth Parliaments, student legislatures, public policy fellowships and civic leader-

ship initiatives should not remain ceremonial exercises. They must become genuine training grounds that connect young citizens with real political opportunities. India, despite possessing one of the youngest populations globally, risks lagging behind if it fails to address this imbalance.

The responsibility does not rest solely with political parties. Young Indians themselves must move beyond political spectatorship. Democracy cannot be strengthened merely through social media commentary. It requires active participation, organisational engagement, public service and leadership. However, participation can flourish only when opportunities exist. The real question is whether India's political establishment is ready to trust them with it. For decades, political leaders have referred to young people as the future of India. That statement is no longer sufficient. India's youth are not simply the future. They are the present. They are taxpayers, entrepreneurs, innovators, students, professionals, farmers, workers and voters. They are shaping the country's economy, society and global reputation every day. Surely they deserve a greater role in shaping its laws as well. If India truly believes that its youth are its greatest strength, then the time has come to offer them not just a voice in election campaigns, but a seat in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies where the nation's future is ultimately decided.

The writer is an advocate and columnist

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‘Risk capital’ should be taxed

We should not privilege risk capital further by giving it tax breaks that labour-based income does not receive



BEYOND IDEOLOGY
R JAGANNATHAN

When Elon Musk’s SpaceX listed last week, it instantly created the world’s first trillionaire and a company valued at over \$2 trillion. That is for a company that produced less than \$19 billion in revenue and made a net loss of \$4.9 billion in 2025. SpaceX, which makes money from low-cost space launches, raised \$85 billion (including a green shoe option). Its value is based on projected future revenues from its Starlink satellites and long-term potential from artificial intelligence (AI).

At \$1 trillion plus (or thereabouts), Mr Musk’s personal paper wealth is greater than all but 21 countries’ gross domestic product (GDP) in 2026 (as estimated by the International Monetary Fund). Over 100 countries have a smaller GDP than the money Mr Musk raised in just one day. This kind of valuation, even if it ultimately ends up in the cellars due to non-performance, should prompt a conver-

sation around risk capital and its taxation. We had a brief conversation in India about this, as market mavens called for a cut in the long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on equity in order to attract more foreign portfolio flows.

According to the website TaxAtlas, there are at least 50 countries which do not levy capital gains tax, though some of them may not be safe for any kind of investment as they include names like Somalia, Cuba and North Korea. In the US, which has the deepest capital market in the world, LTCG taxes start from zero for those under a certain income threshold, but rise to 15 per cent for those above the threshold and going a little beyond half a million dollars. After that they rise to 20 per cent (with some exceptions), according to the US Internal Revenue Service.

Let us be clear. Despite the short-term need to attract capital, India’s LTCG taxes (at 12.5 per cent plus cesses and surcharge) are not extortionate, but that is not the only reason why they should not be cut.

When the world is swimming in capital (why else would SpaceX attract such large valuations?) and risks in the overall economy are rising due to geopolitical and other factors, what is the moral case for a lower LTCG regime anywhere in the world — unless you are a tax haven and your only business is to provide fat cats with a tax shield?



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

We need to question basic assumptions and definitions of risk, risk capital and systemic risk arising from the huge quantities of paper wealth accumulating in a few hands.

First, it is rather simplistic to call all equity risk capital. While this

may be true in theory, not all equity is risky, and even if you are a SpaceX investor with nothing more than promises of future gains as a guide to valuations, your risk is much lower than the daily wage worker who invests ₹1 in a lottery ticket. That ₹1 matters to him more

than ₹100 crore to an Ambani or a Birla, or a few billion dollars to Mr Musk. Risk capital should be graded depending on a person’s ability to shoulder a loss. While this may be difficult to calculate, for argument it is sufficient to say that taking risk should not give you an

SP and Sanatan Pandey



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) slashes and burns determinedly through Opposition party thickets, many predict that after the decimation of the Trinamool Congress and the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena group, it will be the Samajwadi Party (SP).

Assembly elections are due in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2027.

Last week, Sanjay Nishad, a minister in UP, said more than two dozen SP members of the Lok Sabha from UP (of the 37 members from the party) were in touch with him, ready to cross the floor. UP BJP Vice-President Keshav Prasad Maurya, not normally given to hyperbole, also dropped hints that 25-26 members of the Lok Sabha could leave the SP soon. But the most categorical was UP Panchayati Raj and Minority Welfare Minister Om Prakash Rajbhar, whose Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party is an ally of the BJP. In a nudge-nudge wink-wink style he referred to a son of *baaghi* (rebellious) Ballia who would lead the charge to drive the flock to the BJP. Ballia is called *baaghi* because Mangal Pandey, the hero of the 1857 revolt, was from the district. The SP MP from Ballia is the mercurial and outspoken Sanatan Pandey.

Of course, Mr Pandey has denied the claim. But Mr Rajbhar’s logic is interesting. He says Mr Pandey’s revolt has been prompted by discontent arising from a consultation with Brahmin leaders held by party chief Akhilesh Yadav earlier this month. As the Assembly elec-

tions draw closer, Brahmin identity politics in Uttar Pradesh is seeing a resurgence. A number of political, cultural and administrative developments in recent months point to this.

In January this year, more than 50 sitting BJP members of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council (MLAs and MLCs), all Brahmin, met for a *sahabhoj* (community meal) at BJP MLA P N Pathak’s house in Lucknow. The meeting was seen less as social interaction and more as collective political assertion. It followed the UP Police’s “misbehavior” with Brahmin boys at Kumbh. Most of these boys were followers of Avimuktshwaranand Saraswati, a Shankaracharya who has been an outspoken critic of some policies of the UP government and against whom FIRs (first information reports) have been registered for violating the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act. He has also spoken about the misappropriation of funds by the administrators of the Ayodhya Ram Temple.

The tension between the Brahmins and Kshatriyas in UP since Yogi Adityanath, a Kshatriya by birth, became chief minister has been the BJP’s worst-kept secret. Since 1990, when the National Front government declared it would provide 27 per cent reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) for jobs in government and the public sector, the Brahmins in UP reacted politically by switching allegiance en masse from the Congress to the BJP. Despite the BJP’s clear tilt towards the OBCs, they remained wedded to it except when they supported the Bahujan Samaj Party in 2007 and the SP in 2012, the latter to a lesser extent. In 2017, as many as 58 Brahmins were elected on the BJP ticket after an estimated 82 per cent of the community voted for the party. However, the SP was the first to spot Brahmin support for the

BJP slipping through the cracks after the formation of the Yogi government. From promising to restore a public holiday to commemorate Parashuram, the mythical Brahmin known for his animosity towards the Kshatriyas, and raising his statue (2020), the SP began an outreach to Brahmin organisations and leaders.

Although the BJP is not overly worried about the Brahmins turning away from it — after the decline of the Congress in UP they have few options — it is concerned about a drop in levels of cadre motivation and the damage caste-based internal dissonance could do. The public rebuke of UP BJP chief Pankaj Chaudhary, who belongs to the OBCs, to those who organised the *sahabhoj* was the first manifestation. But while the BJP might frown on caste assertion, it can’t do much about competition.

A word about Sanatan Pandey. He describes himself as *jhagraru* (quarrelsome) and is known to have publicly threatened district magistrates if they don’t do what they are supposed to do. He defeated Neeraj Shekhar, former Prime Minister Chandrashekhar’s son, in Ballia in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, but before that, had faced a string of electoral defeats. He has a diploma in civil engineering and was junior engineer with the UP government till he joined politics and contested Assembly elections in 2017 (he came third) as an SP candidate. He has had excerpts of his speeches in the House expunged for the use of “unparliamentary language”. So maybe not a poster boy for parliamentary democracy. But he’s considered an able defender of *baaghi* Ballia. Could such a combative personality really lead a sizeable group out of the SP into the BJP? He could have help. But what these moves tell us is that a caste recalibration is simmering just below the surface in UP.

Why most parties break up, some don’t

Ideology keeps parties together, or the glue of power. Without either, you face defections at an industrial scale

In this season of mass defection, all to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), three interconnected political questions arise. Why do parties break up? Why do individuals defect? Does ideology, principle, or even loyalty matter?

All of these then lead to a central, logical question: Why do some parties break up, or haemorrhage fatally, but some don’t?

Let’s first check out the broad scoresheet over these months of high “mobility”. The destruction of Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress (TMC), or rather coup from within, has been the standout headline. But there’s competition. The rump of the Shiv Sena with Uddhav Thackeray is splitting again. In Jharkhand, members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of the INDIA (Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance) bloc have cross-voted for National Democratic Alliance-backed independent Parimal Nathwani. The Congress can draw some consolation from D K Shivakumar getting some from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to cross-vote in the Legislative Council election in Karnataka. The Aam Aadmi Party had already lost seven, the Biju Janata Dal has “contributed” three to the BJP/NDA kitty, and, in the not so recent past, YS Jagan Mohan Reddy’s YSRCP (Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party) too has shed members, all adding to the NDA (read BJP) numbers. The Shiromani Akali Dal, despite its religious glue and unique ideology, has seen departures, including Manpreet Singh Badal. There’s also Manjinder Singh Sirsa, now a minister in Delhi.

If I started listing the Congress people who walked across to the BJP, it would take up the entire length of this column. Let me, therefore, confine myself to those who’ve become chief ministers or central ministers with the BJP, or used to be chief ministers with the Congress. The office of the chief minister, after all, is one of the highest positions a party can give a person.

At this point, three of the BJP chief ministers are imports from the Congress: Himanta Biswa Sarma (Assam), Pema Khandu (Arunachal Pradesh), and Manik Saha (Tripura). So was N Biren Singh, who ruled Manipur till the other day. Or ok, nobody has quite ruled Manipur under him or lately. All four held key positions in the Congress. In Narendra Modi’s Council of Ministers, you can count Jyotiraditya Scindia, Kiren Rijiju, Rao Inderjit Singh, Jitin Prasad, and Ravneet Singh Bittu.

Nearly all come from illustrious Congress dynasties. And the list of former Congress chief ministers who defected to the BJP is a football team: Captain Amarinder Singh, Pema Khandu, Ashok Chavan, S M Krishna, Narayan Dutt Tiwari, Digambar Kamat, Kiran Kumar Reddy, Vijay Bahuguna ... keep counting. Except Pema Khandu nobody has particularly got any benefit from the BJP other than maybe protection. Or lack of harm.

It will be said that the BJP is a magnet for the losers from all parties because that’s where the spoils are. Further, that the BJP employs *saam, daam, dand, bhed* (persuasion, price, punishment and intrigue) to break rivals. Its laundromat politics for those it first confronts with corruption charges is the key to this one-way movement. For engineering mass defections, the BJP has perfected the doctrine of the split. Get two-thirds to move and say you’re the real party. This leads us to two questions. One, is it only now that this phenomenon of breaking rival parties has begun? And second, the question we had raised at the beginning: Why do most parties break or lose talent, but some don’t? This, despite long periods of being out of power.

The Congress had been a past master at the game. In fact, until the Supreme Court’s Bommai judgment (March 11, 1994), the Congress employed Article 356 like a walk in the park to dismiss rival governments. The difference now is single-minded focus on expansion through acquisition. The BJP is doing this on an industrial scale.

This brings us to our second question. Why do most parties break up but some don’t? I would list only three that don’t. One is the BJP, of course. Then there are Akhilesh Yadav’s Samajwadi Party, and the Left spectrum. The Leftists had many arguments and splits, over Trotsky, Lenin, Beijing and Moscow, but stayed together in one front. Commitment to ideology indeed is the glue that keeps parties together. The Left is today completely out of power, at the lowest point in its history, but nobody is even exploring elsewhere. And the BJP?

The Congress’ lowest in Lok Sabha is the 44 in 2014. In the 1984 general election the BJP was reduced to two seats and yet maintained cohesion. In fact, in the 75 years since the party was founded (originally as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, or BJS), it had held power only for six years until 2014. But there was no split and just one significant, if short-lived, defection — Shankersinh Vaghela in Gujarat. On the contrary the Congress

broke up so many times. They’d run short of letters in adding suffixes to the parent name (Congress).

The BJP has had some significant departures that need mention. The first was Balraj Madhok, the swamyasevak from Jammu who, as party chief, led the BJS to his highest ever tally of 35 in the 1967 election. He fought with his peers, especially Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani because he wanted to align the BJS with other “right” thinking forces on the economy, like the Swatantra Party. The Rashtriya Swamyasevak Sangh (RSS) view was, ironically, closer to being Gandhian and Madhok saw it as Leftist or too similar to Indira Gandhi’s worldview. He was turfed out of the BJS in 1973, but sulked. He attacked his party leaders, especially Vajpayee, but never defected to a rival. Indira Gandhi still saw him as a threat and jailed him during the Emergency.

Among the founders of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad he died a decade ago — lonely and unsung — at 96. In a 2010 interview he did say Indira Gandhi in 1980 had offered him a Cabinet position but, as a swamyasevak, he wasn’t to be tempted.

Lately, we have seen revolts by former chief ministers Kalyan Singh, Uma Bharti and BS Yediyurappa. But they all returned to the fold. The only one who did it with some success didn’t last out. Mr Vaghela revolted with 47 BJP MLAs in 1995, blaming the late Keshubhai Patel and Narendra Modi, then a party apparatchik, for his marginalisation, and became chief minister in partnership with the Congress. That lasted exactly a year. Later, he merged his group with the Congress, won Lok Sabha elections on its ticket twice and became central minister (textiles) in 2004. Since then, he went downhill and faded away. He’s now lonely and 85.

The cohesion that the BJP and the Left have shown through lifetimes of wilderness is matched, surprisingly, by the SP that Mulayam Singh Yadav founded. Of all the Other Backward Classes-Muslim vote bank parties post-1992 (Babri Masjid demolition) it’s been the most durable. It has a fairly clear ideology and Akhilesh Yadav has kept his vote bank’s trust. So there’s a belief that someday power could return.

The political force that should be chewing on this is the Congress. So many regional parties — the TMC, Nationalist Congress Party, and YSRCP — are its splinters. Its own leaders have been constantly searching for opportunities. It’s evident that in the course of time power became its main ideology. Once it was gone, so were many of its people. As for the other regional parties, the TMC and Uddhav-Shiv Sena included, these were simply one-family parties. When the family failed to win the votes, these broke up. The decline of the Akali Dal is also rooted in a party so steeped in religious ideology becoming a family enterprise.

Until now, the BJP has kept its ideological core. It often has dissensions, but no revolts. And the peer pressure of the shakha culture and guru-shishya relationship between the cadre and the RSS keep it together. It imported many dynasties and bred some of its own, but the power remains with home-grown leaders of ideological purity. It has ensured unity in power now, and for six decades out of it.

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Is ‘multi-speed’ marketing India’s new mantra?



YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

At ITC Ltd’s Virginia House headquarters, brand managers no longer carry the title of “category head”. They are now “speed captains”. The change, subtle on a business card, signals a deeper shift in how the Kolkata-based conglomerate is taking its ₹65,000-crore fast-moving consumer goods portfolio to market. The weapon is multi-speed marketing (MSM), a framework that accepts

a blunt truth every large player, from Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) to Nestlé, faces: India is no longer one market moving at one pace.

Five years ago, Aashirvaad and Surf Excel could run one national television commercial and win. Today, the Zepto shopper in Bengaluru and the *kirana* buyer in Gidderbaha, Punjab, live in different economies. HUL christened this “Winning in Many Indias”. ITC is now putting profit and loss (P&L) and supply chain behind it.

The company’s “MSM Four-Speeds-One-Country” model segments execution by consumer decision speed, not geography.

Speed 1: Digital-first is quick commerce and direct-to-consumer (D2C). The Metro-Gen Z cohort expects new variants each quarter and delivery in 10 minutes. ITC uses this lane to test and scale premium

products. Dermafique skincare and Fabelle luxury chocolates launched on the ITC Store first, using AI-led sampling and influencer drives. While HUL’s Simple and Love Beauty & Planet personal care products built D2C arms, ITC is using Speed 1 to incubate brands that may never see a *kirana* shelf, protecting margins and discounts.

Speed 2: Modern trade (MT) covers Tier-I and Tier-II shoppers at DMart and Reliance Retail. Here ITC pushes premium packs and category bundles, much like HUL does with Surf Excel Matic plus Comfort combos. Savlon handwash paired with surface cleaners is ITC’s answer to HUL’s Lifebuoy plus Domex aisle strategy.

Speed 3: Traditional trade (TT) remains the *kirana* battleground where HUL’s distribution depth is legendary. ITC’s counter is hyperlo-

cal SKUs and van sales. Aashirvaad’s regional wheat variants mimic HUL’s Annapurna playbook but with e-Choupal procurement as a cost moat.

Speed 4: Bharat Deep targets low-media rural markets through *haats*, e-Choupal and WhatsApp commerce. Mangaldeep *agar-batti*, sold via self-help groups, competes with HUL’s Ayush, but ITC ties it to farmer relationships — a lever HUL lacks at scale.

The difference from HUL’s “Winning in Many Indias” is execution. HUL segments by market cluster. ITC segments by consumer speed and aligns supply chain, media and talent to each speed with separate P&L owners.

Three triggers forced ITC’s hand, and each hits HUL.

First, quick commerce. Platforms like Blinkit and Zepto created Speed 1 consumers who discover brands in-app. HUL responded with D2C and acquisitions like Oziva. ITC’s answer is quicker: Cut launch cycles from 18 months to four by starting D2C, then scaling to MT and TT.

Second, the K-shaped consumer. Urban India trades up to ₹500 serums while rural India still buys ₹1 shampoo sachets. HUL manages this with Dove at the top and Wheel at the bottom. ITC is mirroring that with Dermafique and Vivel, but using Speed 4 data from e-Choupal to pre-

dict rural demand spikes better than HUL’s Shakti network can.

Third, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2026 (DPDP Act). Third-party targeting is crumbling. HUL is investing in its Ushop and Shikhar apps for first-party data. ITC’s advantage is 20 years of e-Choupal farmer data plus Classmate and ITC Store transactions. ITC deploys that data differently: Deterministic buyer signals from AudiencePro for Speed 1, crop and rainfall data for Speed 4.

ITC’s supply chain now runs small-batch lines for D2C alongside mass lines for TT, a model it calls “crafted at scale”. HUL has been doing this with its “nano factories” for D2C. ITC’s edge is integrating it with e-Choupal sourcing to protect input costs.

Media spends have been split: About 40 per cent to digital and influencers for Speed 1, 35 per cent to TV and print for Speed 3, 25 per cent to rural BTL for Speed 4. HUL’s media mix is still TV-heavy, but it is shifting

rapidly to digital for urban brands. The battle is now about return on investment, not gross rating points.

Even talent mirrors the shift. Aashirvaad has one manager for quick commerce and another for rural TT. ITC’s “speed captain” model makes speed, not geography, the primary axis.

HUL spent a decade building “Winning in Many Indias”. ITC is trying to do it in two years. If Dermafique is luxury on Instagram but discounted on Flipkart, Speed 1 trust erodes, a problem HUL faced with TRESemmé.

DPDP Act compliance is another shared headache. Speed 1 depends on personalisation. Both ITC and HUL will need to rebuild targeting stacks by 2027, and the one with cleaner first-party data wins.

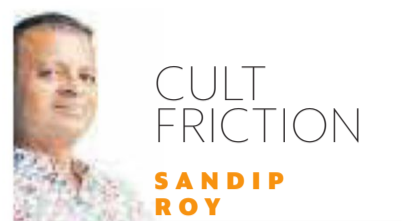
Interesting times. HUL taught India distribution. Now, ITC is teaching India speed. Let’s see.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion



Trying to look beyond rainbow campaigns

The post-DEI landscape has opened up intriguing new possibilities of intersection and inclusion for transgender people



The building, like many buildings in Kolkata, had seen better days. An old three-storey house, with slatted windows and trellis patterns on its balcony, faded by sun and rain. These days houses like these are routinely torn down to become nondescript apartment buildings. The luckier ones find a second incarnation as trendy cafes that serve top-notch nostalgia alongside nondescript Americanos. But this one is different. Its walls have become a canvas. Figures, larger than life-size, of ambiguous gender, gaze out on to the street from its walls. On the day I went there last week, the delicate *jamdani* one wore glowing neon yellow against the peach pink of the wall in the late afternoon sun. Another stood in a casually wrapped grey printed sari, fist raised in the air as if captured in mid-chant. An old marching slogan ran along the borders of the grey sari—*Aamar shorir, aamaar mon, door hotho rajshashon* (My body, my mind, stay out of it, state). On the other end of the wall, a figure in sunshine-yellow *bandhej* looked out from between two louvered windows, the building's drain pipes running across the face. In between under an open window, was a figure with red flowers in their hair, a golden *tikli* in their parting, *zari* running along the creamy *tussar* sari, dressed as if ready for some celebration. The figures depicted transgender lives, portraits of real-life queer people, says artist Archee Roy, who worked on the mural. But the clothes they wore told different stories—of textile and craft. The building is home to the 60-year-old Crafts Council of West Bengal. It

houses its store Artisana. And the mural, painted over three days (and three nights) is a fresh approach to bringing visibility to the story of craft, said Anjum Katyal, honorary general secretary of the council at the unveiling of the mural on 12 June. But it also sends out another message, said poet and writer Karuna Ezara Parikh who helped bring together the Crafts Council and the arts collectives Aravani Arts Project and Fearless Collective to create the mural. "It felt like a wonderful intersection," Parikh said. "Because we very quickly realised what craft and the marginalised edges of society have in common is erasure." Once that threat of erasure came from colonisation, said artist Nandini Moitra, who conceived the mural. "One of the ways of decolonising during the independence movement was through craft, through Khadi." And now with the recent Transgender Act, many people feel the state, by trying to constrict the definition of transgender as much as possible, was again erasing countless transgender persons. The figures in the mural literally resist that erasure. *Bandhni*, the act of plucking cloth with finger nails to create a design from "scars" on the cloth, resonated with Archee Roy. Queer people know a thing or two about finding meaning in the scars life deals them. But what was also striking was that this was a story of queerness without any of the markers we have come to associate with Pride month. There were no rainbow-printed saris and flags. There was a painting of an old almirah, literally a coming out of the closet of sorts, an object that could co-exist perfectly in the stories of both craft and sexuality. But it's a nuance that many passersby would miss. It told an older story of Pride, one that was more about resistance than rainbows. After the Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality in 2018, corporate India discovered Pride Month. There were sensitisation events, pride flags on coffee mugs, and LGBTQ+ guest speakers, as corporations tried to score their DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion)



Artists Archee Roy (left) and Nandini Moitra in front of the mural in Kolkata.

brownie points (with rainbow frosting). Then when US President Donald Trump pulled the plug on DEI, much of that activity ground to a sudden halt. Yet no one went back into the closet (or almirah). Instead, it has opened up intriguing new possibilities of intersection and inclusion. Like this mural. A day later I walked into a queer pop-up in Kolkata organised to celebrate 13 years of Varta which promotes dialogue around gender and sexuality

and human development through publications, presentations and awareness campaigns. The event was in the little apartment which housed the offices of Varta, small unglamorous rooms with fluorescent lights. People were jammed against each other on a sweltering evening as they browsed archives of old defunct LGBTQ+ magazines; trinkets were being sold; someone was making coffee. The crowd was spilling out of the rooms

on to the narrow street and peering in through the windows while a volunteer, armed with a clipboard, doggedly tried to register everyone. At one point a young genderqueer university student started to rap in Bangla. The student, it turned out, had just received a scholarship to cover the cost of a laptop which they needed to access academic material and do work in graphic design and music editing. The student was one of four recipients of the first New Dawn Queer-Trans Education Scholarship Programme from Varta. Another recipient was a postgraduate in philosophy trying to prepare for teacher training after losing both parents; yet another was a gay student from a rural background struggling financially to complete a master's in education. The money had been raised from individuals, both within the LGBTQ+ community and allies, said Pawan Dhall, long-time activist and founder of Varta. Varta's work of sensitisation and dialogue must have been in demand in a world that embraced DEI. But in a post-DEI landscape, people were looking for real points of intersection instead of just mouthing a mantra of inclusivity. And in the process had uncovered connections I had never thought about—like one between transgender lives and traditional crafts. Recently I met the designer Prabal Gurung at the Kolkata Literary Meet where he was talking about his memoir *Walk Like a Girl*. He has been dubbed the "most woke man in fashion." When Donald Trump first became US President in 2017, Gurung's models wore T-shirts that read "I am an Immigrant" and "Love is Love". He himself came on the runway in a T-shirt that declared "This is what a feminist looks like." Now he lives and works in a very different US. Not only has Trump returned, many corporations have been quick to dump the DEI initiatives they had once piously embraced. Gurung said sometimes he looks at fashion runway shows now and is aghast. "My God, it feels like the 1980s when people didn't care about any kind

of representation." But he refuses to be fazed by it. "I keep telling my friends it's okay. That's what the brand's always been. It's just that they hid behind this cloak of caring. Now you can see who was performative and who was not." It's undeniable that parts of DEI had become performative feel-good exercises for corporations and government agencies. Now that performance has ended and the gaps between rhetoric and action are more visible. In a recent interview with online fashion magazine *Voice of Fashion*, head of Godrej DEI Lab Parmesh Shahani said, "Indian fashion, while it has always championed inclusion editorially, has become so limited in its imagination of how to advance it beyond the content universe... What is completely hypocritical is that fashion wants to do things about us, but not with us." They want the queer eye but not necessarily the queer person. Now Godrej, Radhika Piramal, the vice-chairperson of VIP Industries, and Keshav Suri Foundation, which works with the LGBTQ+ community, have started a Pride Fund. They might work in crores, the New Dawn Scholarship might work in lakhs but the idea remains the same—a community trying to look after itself beyond rainbow campaigns on Instagram. It is a new dawn of sorts, though not the rainbow dawn we thought we were headed towards. As Faiz Ahmad Faiz once said: *These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light—this is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom, we had set out in sheer longing.* Faiz was talking about a different dawn there, one that happened in 1947. But it's still a reminder that there is always light, even if night-smudged. And when it falls at the right angle on a mural on an old faded wall, it can suddenly breathe new life and dignity into it. *Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy (@sandipr) is a writer, journalist and radio host.*

The geography of commerce

Akshay Chavan's 'The Wealth Networks' seamlessly weaves together archaeology, mythology and commerce

Sundeep Khanna

Some books should not be reviewed, just read and savoured. Akshay Chavan has written exactly such a book in *The Wealth Networks*, which leaves this reviewer in something of a bind. The reason becomes clear with the first sentence on the very first page: "We begin our journey on the cracked black soil of the Western Deccan, where each step feels like walking on cooled lava, dark, dense, and full of memory." This is history writing as immersive travel, and with it Chavan carries the reader without pause into Sopara, the land of cotton, and the first of the wealth networks the book explores. He isn't telling us anything entirely new, because Sven Beckert's 2014 classic *Empire of Cotton* already gave us a detailed global account of how, till the 1780s, India was the cotton capital of the world. But it is the joining of the dots, the alchemy of narrative that weaves archaeology, mythology and commerce into a single, seamless tapestry that separates this book from many others on Indian economic history. Over the course of its pages, we are introduced to 15 such networks through 108 stories. While each vignette is compelling, this structural choice does occasionally feel fragmented. By breaking the narrative into so many distinct pieces, the book sometimes slips into a rapid-fire catalogue of historical trivia, where each story becomes a world unto itself rather than part of a consistent and singular argument. To be fair, the broader economic themes remain connected like beads on an invisible thread of trade. Pulling on that invisible thread reveals the unexpected nuggets that pop up regularly to add to the delight. Thus, we encounter John Lang, an eccentric Australian exile, novelist and barrister who fought Rani Lakshmbai's legal battle for control of Jhansi. But why was Jhansi under siege from the British? The answer

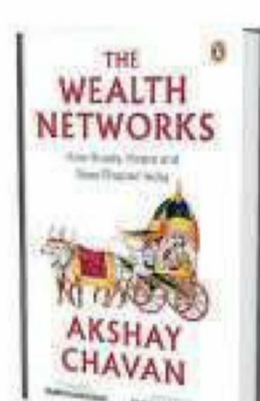


is again, economics: situated on the main cotton routes connecting Malwa to the Gangetic plain, the kingdom was a critical link in the supply chain feeding the textile mills of England. A footnote in colonial biography becomes, in Chavan's hands, a node in a global network. We also meet Ram Singh Malam, a shipwrecked sailor rescued by a Dutch ship and taken to Holland, where he learned the European crafts of glass-blowing, enamel work, cannon and gun-making, all of which he brought back to his homeland of Kutch. It is a wonderful insight into how knowledge travelled back and forth from India to the world, enhancing skills and transferring wealth that made the subcontinent among the richest regions on earth. Even the smallest, stranger facts support the central argument. The true meaning of the Hindi phrase *sone pe suhaga*, which we casually deploy as the equivalent of the icing on the cake, was gold purified by borax. For much of history, Tibet was the world's only source of borax; the wealth this trade brought to Tibetan monasteries funded the creation of magnificent silk *thangkas* and statues cast in bronze and gold. A phrase we use daily carries, without our realising it, the entire weight of a civilisation's commerce.

Unlikely forces like lore and archaeology coalesce elsewhere in a delightful *jugalbandi*. Consider how the book recounts the myth of Rishi Agastya stopping the growth of the Vindhya mountains. In the legend, Vindhya, hurt that the sun circled Mount Meru and not him, began growing uncontrollably, threatening to block the path of the sun. The gods turned to Agastya, who resolved the crisis by asking Vindhya to bow and remain prostrate until he returned from the south, which he never did. Chavan uses this ancient story as a key to unlock the geography of commerce, for it was precisely this crossing of the Vindhyas that opened the Deccan and the south to the great trading networks of the north, enabling cotton, spice and faith to flow in both directions. This is the book's singular gift: the ability to make myth do the work of economic analysis, and to make economic analysis feel as vivid as myth. What makes *The Wealth Networks* truly distinctive is that Chavan doesn't simply map trade routes; he tracks them to their logical conclusion wherein cities and kingdoms rise and fall with the exigencies of geography and commerce. We think of Khajuraho today as a place of exquisite temples, but as the book reveals, Khaju-

raho made sense first in its geography, sitting on the route linking Bundelkhand's black cotton soils to the rich cities of the Ganga Yamuna plain. The temples were an expression of the surplus generated by trade. ISTOCKPHOTO

raho made sense first in its geography, sitting on the route linking Bundelkhand's black cotton soils to the rich cities of the Ganga Yamuna plain. The temples were an expression of the surplus generated by trade. Likewise, silt was the silent assassin of ports. Flourishing Kayal replaced Korkai, then was itself abandoned as it began to choke with silt, giving way to Thoothukudi, whose deeper anchorage offered safer harbour. The book is equally penetrating about the fundamental architecture of Indian commerce. Temples, Chavan argues, were not merely centres of faith but institutional pillars of the economy, serving as banks, landlords and civic hubs, with their courtyards functioning as bustling marketplaces. And at the heart of this trading civilisation was that uniquely Indian financial instrument, the *hundi*. Long before the world introduced letters of credit or banker's checks, this single piece of paper allowed traders to crisscross continents without carrying cash. At the heart of this evolving economy was human migration, and the book offers a rich analysis of how religious and intellectual capital moved alongside commercial capital. As kingdoms went through upheaval, Brahmins migrated to emerg-



The Wealth Networks: How Roads, Rivers and Seas Shaped India: By Akshay Chavan, Penguin Random House India, 464 pages, ₹999.

ing centres of power where new rulers, seeking to legitimise their conquests, invited them with land grants. The Brahmins brought religious sanction but also practical knowledge of agricultural technologies and trade management, creating a symbiotic relationship that was as much about business as it was about piety. Ajanta offers perhaps the book's most memorable instance of this dynamic. Today it seems an isolated tourist oddity, a valley with no palaces, no ports, and no great urban legacy, except for its magnificent caves. The key, as Chavan documents, lies in looking beyond appearances. Fifteen centuries ago, Ajanta was a throbbing crossroads, with hundreds of caravans carrying cotton, silk, spices, and faith heading north and south. The Vakataka rulers commissioned those caves because they stood on the most important trade routes of the age. Commerce, routed through the right geography, created the fluid wealth that built those magnificent frescoes. Chavan's background as a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and co-founder of multimedia platform Live History India makes him the ideal writer to map these intersections. Backed by an introduction from mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, the text honours the grand tradition of connecting India's sacred and commercial lives. It also acknowledges its intellectual debts with admirable generosity, crediting Lucien Febvre's *A Geographical Introduction to History* for the idea that routes emerged where there was an "active and earnest cooperation between nature and man". That phrase could serve as the epigraph for the entire volume. Routes did not exist automatically; they had to be created thanks to the human need to trade and bend the physical world to that will. In a publishing landscape enriched with sweeping global histories, stretching from Yuval Noah Harari's civilisational overviews to Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads*, *The Wealth Networks* offers something more intimate. It provides a dazzling account of how one of the world's oldest and most sophisticated commercial civilisations actually worked. In doing so, it also reminds every reader that the subcontinent they inhabit was, for most of recorded history, not a backwater waiting to be discovered, but the beating commercial heart of the world. *Sundeep Khanna is a regular Mint columnist and author of the recent book: Made in India: The Story of Desh Bandhu Gupta, Lupin and Indian Pharma.*

Sarita Handa

THE TEXTILE DIVA

The founder of the eponymous luxury lifestyle label on how she built a global-first business, and why she doesn't believe in work-life balance

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

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We are meeting during exciting times," jokes Sarita Handa as we sit down for a conversation in a conference room at her sprawling 40,000 sq. ft. factory in Gurugram. It is a sunny March afternoon, and the biggest news of the moment is whether India and the US will seal a trade deal following the American government's decision to raise tariffs on select imports. For Handa, whose luxury lifestyle business was built on exports long before it became a household name in India, the outcome could have a defining impact on her business.

Even three months later, the uncertainty facing global trade is far from over. Handa's business remains exposed to shifting geopolitical currents, from tariff negotiations in the US—her largest market—to tensions in West Asia, where she is exploring growth opportunities.

"It's all up in the air," says Handa, currently focused on adding three more retail stores in India, taking the total to 10.

Born a year before Partition, Handa has lived through wars, liberalisation, globalisation and now the churn of the social media age. Across these eras, one constant has been her fascination with traditional textiles and craftsmanship.

She set up Sarita Handa Exports Pvt. Ltd in 1992, with the help of her army husband's retirement savings, all of ₹10 lakh. Working initially with just 10 artisans, she introduced the world to handmade patchwork quilts crafted from traditional textiles—a product largely unfamiliar to Western consumers accustomed to polka dots, stripes and floral or animal prints.

With over 300 employees and a network of 3,000 artisans, the business recorded a revenue of \$82 million in FY26

Soon, textiles featuring multicoloured crewel embroidery, appliqué, beadwork, *chikankari* and *bandhani* were finding their way into retailers such as Macy's and Pottery Barn in the US, and John Lewis in the UK. She turned her attention to India in 2012, launching the brand's first retail store in Delhi. Today, the Sarita Handa brand has evolved into a design-led lifestyle name, offering everything from home furnishings, fabrics, furniture and décor.

With over 300 employees and a network of 3,000 artisans, the business recorded a revenue of \$82 million across exports and retail for the financial year 2025–26. As much as 90% of their business continues to be driven by exports and international sales through B2B associations with international brands like Macy's, Williams Sonoma, Pottery Barn, Restoration Hardware and Zara.

Was building a global business always part of the plan? "I wasn't ambitious at all," Handa, who turns 80 in December, says. "I was a *fauji* wife. Money wasn't good but it was enough. This all started because I wanted to keep myself busy while my husband was away."

India's \$27-billion home décor market is full of opportunities, especially after covid-19 prompted consumers to view their homes as extensions of their personality. For every cushion cover, curtain or lampshade you want today, there are hundreds of options available in various price ranges—from Good Earth and Jaypore to Amazon and neighbourhood stores.

Such variety, and the appetite to invest in homes, barely existed three decades ago when Handa began her journey. Back then, home furnishings were largely functional purchases rather than statements of personal style. The organised home décor market was still in its infancy, with only a handful of players such as Fabindia and local names like Jagdish Store catering to discerning consumers.

Yet none of these market gaps or business opportunities were what drew her in. The more Handa recounts her journey, the clearer it becomes that it was shaped by chance as much as choice—by supportive family members, timely opportunities, an openness to new experiences and a willingness to learn.

"My father passed away when I was 16 but he taught my sister and me that we need to have our own identity," says Handa, who grew up in Punjab. "I wanted to be a journalist, a teacher or a lawyer." She studied history at Delhi University

but dropped out of college before her final exams to get married.

She stumbled upon her calling almost by accident in 1973. While stationed with her husband in a town in south India, she wandered into a colonial bungalow that housed a small store selling embroidered napkins and household linens. She was surprised to find that these had been made by nuns living nearby.

A few months later, when she moved to Delhi with her two daughters while her husband was posted elsewhere, she reached out to the nuns, offering to help sell their work. "I was staying with my mother then. I would organise coffee parties at home and introduce people to their embroidery," recalls Handa. Before she knew it, she had become a marketer, retailer and salesperson rolled into one. "I wasn't earning much but it was fun."

The enterprise came to an end once the family resumed its nomadic military life, moving from one city to another. But the experience had left its mark. Through the 1970s, Handa and her mother spent much of their spare time exploring India's textile traditions, travelling to handloom centres whenever they could afford to.

Those trips—to Kancheepuram, Jaipur and Pochampally—became an informal education in textile heritage. "We were buying the cheapest and the best saris at source, but what was much more precious that we were learning how block-printing was done, how peacock is made using *zari*, how *ikat* is woven." Towards the late 1970s, when the family

finally returned to Delhi, Handa landed a job at an export company, earning ₹700 a month. Her role was straightforward: sorting garments according to fabric—cotton, silk or polyester. She stayed for a year before moving to another export house that specialised in silk upholstery fabrics.

It was there that she got her first real break. The company worked with Macy's, which was beginning to source from India, and Handa was interacting closely with its buyers. Eventually, Macy's offered her a job in sourcing—an opportunity that would propel her into the world of home furnishings.

The role became an education unlike any classroom could offer. It took her across textile centres, in China, Africa, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Europe and, of course, India. In Sri Lanka, she was introduced to designer quilts and saw firsthand their commercial potential. Handa was learning everything: market trends, consumer preferences, merchandising and product development.

After three years at Macy's, in the mid-1980s Handa joined Shyam Ahuja, the entrepreneur credited with putting India's flat-woven dhurries on the global map. "Shyam-ji taught me that entrepreneurship needs passion and drive."

One lesson, in particular, stayed with her. "He would say, 'We are not in the business of chasing money. We are in the business of creating and selling. Take the money first, then give the product. And never forget that your manufacturing and vendor partners are more important than the buyer.'"

What informs your work?

Travel

What do you do when not working?

I used to read books but now I can't see well, so I scroll

A brand that inspires you

Ralph Lauren

There was a huge gap in the market. Indians weren't spending as much on homes. It made more sense to build the business overseas first.



A little over two years later, Handa returned to Macy's on the corporate side, but by then her own ambitions had begun to crystallise. She wanted to build a business around quilts that translated Indian craft traditions into products that felt at home in global interiors.

Within months of launching her company, she was training women on the outskirts of Delhi in hand-quilting techniques, developing prints from her own sketches, and exporting products to Germany and the UK. A year later, Macy's became a client. Handa was travelling across the world carrying miniature quilt samples, pitching to buyers. "Most export companies were focused on apparel then, while traditional crafts were largely being used in conventional ways," says Handa. "There was a huge gap in the market. Indians weren't spending as much on homes. It made more sense to build the business overseas first."

Was it really as smooth as it sounds in hindsight? Handa bursts out laughing. "Something as small as a dot in a print could become a nightmare. We had to make sure colours didn't bleed... We were constantly experimenting with patterns, dyes and colour combinations to get things right and trendy, which came from reading books and magazines."

Building the business, she says, was a continuous exercise in problem-solving. Every product came with its own challenges, from training artisans and maintaining quality to adapting traditional techniques for international markets. "Was it easy? Hell no. Was it fun? God,

so much. Did I ever think, 'What have I got myself into?' Almost every day," she says.

Over the years, the brand has also faced criticism, including accusations from some smaller labels that it has borrowed or replicated their designs. Handa chooses not to address these allegations directly. Instead, she points to the importance of consistency and quality in building a business. "You have to be very strong and tough within yourself to keep going," she says. "At the end of the day, it comes down to value. If we give you something that doesn't wash well, that bleeds, or that you have to throw away after six months, you'll never come back to Sarita Handa."

I ask Handa about succession and legacy. Much of the business is still overseen by herself, along with her daughter Suparna and her husband. "When you work with family, it can get tricky. But I have learnt to speak my mind," she says. "I will not compromise on shoddy work, and everyone knows it. My parents and (my late) husband supported me immensely and taught me that hard work, focus, honesty and discipline can take you a long way. That's how I've built everything you see around you." She adds that plans are already in place to build the next generation of leadership.

Retirement, however, is not on her mind. "Work-life balance is a concept of today's generation. When you truly love your work, you never really take a break from it. That's when you create something that can outlast everything—tariffs, wars, anything."

Reforming gold trade

Gold ETF curbs can do more harm than good

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to citizens to cut back on their gold purchases to alleviate pressure on the rupee, several mutual funds (MFs) were quick to announce curbs on inflows into their gold MF products. Most AMCs (Asset Management Companies) have restricted direct purchases of ₹25 crore or more in their gold Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs), while some have capped fresh investments in their gold fund-of-funds as well.



While these curbs may work as a symbolic gesture, preventing individual investors from owning gold through the MF route is a bad idea from a macro perspective. Households are unlikely to stop buying gold, thanks to deep-rooted cultural and practical factors. Of the various avenues to own gold, ETFs and MFs represent a more transparent and regulated route than jewellery, bars and coins or so-called digital gold. Curbs on ETF inflows are a bad idea for three reasons. One, in Indian markets, secondary market prices of ETFs often trade at large premiums or discounts to underlying portfolio value (NAV), resulting in investors ending up overpaying or underpaying for an asset. The mechanism that helps the secondary market prices of ETFs converge with the NAV is the availability of creation units. When market prices move to a discount below the NAV, large investors exchange assets in bulk with the AMC, for ETF units. When market prices move into a premium, they do the reverse. This helps align market prices of ETFs with the NAV. Restrictions on big-ticket investors buying gold ETFs directly from the AMC can interrupt this arbitrage and widen premiums or discounts on gold ETFs, triggering mispricing and speculation. Although AMCs have exempted authorised participants and market makers, the absence of other institutional investors can lead to mispricing of gold ETFs.

Two, more than gold ETFs, it is surging bar and coin demand that has expanded India's gold import bill in recent times. World Gold Council data suggest that in the January-March quarter of 2026, Indian demand for gold bars and coins at 62 tonnes nearly matched jewellery demand of 66 tonnes. Gold ETF demand amounted to less than 20 tonnes. Overall, Indian gold ETFs hold only about 116 tonnes of gold in aggregate, compared to the over 25,000 tonnes of physical gold that households are believed to own. Three, trends suggest that the demand for gold ETFs has begun to wane from May with the sharp fall in gold prices. May saw gold ETFs face net outflows of \$61 million after 12 months of inflows.

Overall, it is unlikely that patriotic reasons alone will stop Indians from buying gold. Therefore, it seems desirable that they buy gold through regulated vehicles such as ETFs where the holdings are transparently held and subject to taxes, rather than physical bars and coins. Gold ETFs allow retail investors to own gold without the caratage issues which are pervasive in bars, coins and jewellery. Imports are better curbed by finding a way to recycle the physical hoard of gold.

POCKET



"We thought, why not move with the times and dabble in some Augmented Reality..."

RAVIKANTH

We need cool workplaces, homes

POLICY OPTIONS. The govt must offer financial incentives for using building materials that naturally reduce temperatures



LABANYA PRAKASH JENA
PRASAD ASHOK THAKUR

The year 2025 was the eighth-warmest on record for India since 1901. Rising temperatures, frequently exceeding 45 degrees Celsius, combined with increased humidity, are causing severe hardships across India. A HeatWatch dataset recorded 2300+ cases of heat-related illness across the country during Summer 2025, while cautioning that this is an under-reported number. While outdoor temperature management is a herculean task, the efforts to address indoor cooling, which are often ignored in public debates, need attention.

People spend a long time indoors — at home, school, work and other commercial spaces. Not all such places have air-conditioning. There are two ways indoor comfort can be achieved:

First, incorporating solar passive architecture, as per green building design codes, can reduce indoor temperature fluctuations to extreme highs or lows. Housing design customised for locational characteristics, climatic patterns and future town planning developments can make a significant contribution towards indoor thermal comfort. In addition, roof, window, and door retrofits can help maintain a temperature differential between the outdoors and indoors in existing houses.

Second, the use of appropriate construction materials can facilitate all-year indoor comfort at relatively low cost. Building materials, such as aerated autoclaved concrete blocks (AAC), compressed stabilised earth blocks, and polyurethane materials, can be used in the construction of new houses to achieve and maintain, for long durations, the temperature differential between the outdoors and indoors.

However, there are challenges with the availability of these building materials in the local market and with limited awareness of them among builders in small towns and villages.

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES
Access to finance and financing terms



WAY AHEAD. People who build new houses with materials that help maintain interior temperatures at a cooler level should get loan at subsidised rate. MUSTAFAH KK

are critical challenges for the mass-scale adoption of thermal-comfort solutions. Modern cooling solutions remain unaffordable for a large section of society even as there are inherent financial incentives to infuse thermal comfort in buildings. For example, the energy savings from reduced temperatures over time can exceed incremental investment.

However, owners or builders don't want to incur this incremental cost due to split incentives — users of the building benefit from lower temperatures, not the owner. Second, incremental investment is not affordable for the marginal class, who often heavily rely on "Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana" for new houses. This is more complex for buildings built solely for industrial or commercial purposes.

HOW CAN THE GOVT INTERVENE
Thermal comfort has become a necessity, like electricity or utilities, for maintaining a good quality of life. The State has an obligation to offer financial incentives to vulnerable sections to build houses that naturally reduce temperatures, without the need for cooling appliances.

Under the PMAY scheme, the

Government can provide specific additional incentives and make the use of certain construction materials mandatory. People who avail of PMAY but build new houses with materials that help maintain interior temperatures at a cooler level should be able to get a loan at a subsidised rate supported by the Government. The same rule applies to renovations of new houses.

The Government can push the adoption of the above-mentioned building materials through supply push (offering incentives) and demand pull (through public procurement). The rapid adoption of these materials can also cut down the cost of manufacturing them on a large scale.

The Government's Building Materials Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC) has the mandate to encourage the use of these building materials for national-level implementation. The BMTPC can run awareness campaigns to

Under PMAY, the government can provide incentives and make the use of certain construction materials mandatory

encourage the use of these materials for house construction.

COOLING MSME WORKPLACES
Cooling solutions are also expensive for MSMEs; both upfront and operating costs (energy) are high. The cooling-as-a-service (CaaS) business model can address this challenge, as the service provider can provide cooling services without upfront payment from users, and the cost of using CaaS is lower because it uses the most efficient cooling technology.

These are Energy Services Companies (ESCOs) who are ready to offer CaaS but are not very comfortable entering into service agreements with MSMEs due to the latter's financial vulnerability.

The Government can incentivise CaaS for MSMEs, which is cost-effective and affordable for them. The Government, through an appropriate institution, can act as a third-party guarantor for ESCOs, just as the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises does for MSMEs. A guarantee from a credible institution can reassure ESCOs. In addition, concessional capital and blended financing can support ESCOs who struggle to raise external capital to scale up operations in the MSME segment.

In tandem with green-rated structures designed for thermal comfort as mentioned earlier, these cooling services can provide a sustainable, cost-effective, comfortable and lasting solution for the MSME workers as the temperature differential between outdoors and indoors is retained for long.

It is important to note that people in the MSME sector are typically unorganised and vulnerable — they deserve decent working conditions as much as white-collar professionals.

The use of BMTPC's Data Resource cum Monitoring Centre, paired with a digitally smart electricity grid and artificial intelligence, can help governments and facility operators identify hotspots (residential areas, buildings, factory sheds, etc) that are unable to provide thermal comfort. These insights can further help improve PMAY and other schemes.

Jena is Director, Climate and Sustainability Initiative, and Visiting Senior Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science; Thakur is an alumnus of IIT Bombay and IIM Ahmedabad

Will Railways' reform push deliver?

The '52 reforms in 52 weeks' drive should include governance reforms, with a focus on decentralisation and accountability

Sudhanshu Mani

The Ministry of Railways has launched an ambitious "52 reforms in 52 weeks" agenda, aiming to enhance safety, technology, efficiency and service through a time-bound framework. While intended to drive accountability and continuous change, these measures often reflect incremental operational improvements rather than deep structural reforms. The initiative's impact hinges on whether it delivers fundamental systemic change or merely repackages ongoing projects.

Several measures do address long-standing concerns. The decision to make cleanliness in general class coaches comparable with higher classes highlights an incongruous class mindset for a basic service and even obscures the fact that the level of cleanliness even in higher classes is hardly acceptable. This and efforts to streamline linen management are essentially operational refinements. Their impact on service quality will depend on how effectively underlying systemic weaknesses are addressed.

Establishment of over a hundred Gati Shakti cargo terminals aims to enhance multimodal logistics, but this recurring pitch since 2022 has not yet increased rail's modal share. Initiatives like specialised automobile wagons and containers have been on for more than a decade with gradual gestation. Experience with bulk cement movement illustrates the limits of incremental policy adjustments; despite the 'reform', rail's modal share remains modest and revenue gains limited to only around 4



CLEANLINESS. Needs to improve

per cent. The tech focus, including the RailTech Policy and innovation portal, aims to fund startup prototyping. However, global experience shows that technology and innovations do not get assimilated through public platforms. It requires institutional willingness to adopt, adapt and scale. Without changes in organisational culture and risk-sharing mechanisms, such initiatives remain largely demonstrative. A more effective approach would combine simplified adoption processes with meaningful risk mitigation for developers.

AI AGENDA MERITS SCRUTINY
The Artificial Intelligence agenda also merits closer scrutiny. Applications such as intrusion detection, fire safety and monitoring are useful, but the goal of reducing accidents to single digits cannot be achieved without deploying AI in core safety functions, which seems to be missing. Real-time analysis of train running data and signalling logs, drawn from extensive digital systems such as station data loggers and locomotive computers, is essential. While such analysis is impossible to perform manually at scale, it can now be carried

out effectively using AI to generate actionable alerts from near-miss events and to foster a stronger safety culture.

The changes in passenger-centric ticketing flexibility are generally good moves, like passengers can now digitally change their boarding station up to 30 minutes before the train's departure from its origin station. Other tweaks like elimination of refunds for cancellations made less than eight hours before departure, which aim to curb speculative bookings, may prove restrictive, particularly when compared with more flexible practices in other modes of transport, and will lead to dissatisfaction among genuine passengers needing to reschedule their travels.

Global experience shows the real challenge is not technology availability but its integration into operations and decision-making. Without changes in culture, procurement and accountability, initiatives remain limited. The reform exercise, however, reflects a broader tendency to label ongoing or incremental work as 'reforms'. While this may serve communication objectives, it risks diluting the concept. Genuine reform requires systemic shifts in structures, incentives and outcomes, rather than marginal adjustments.

Looking ahead, a sharper focus on a few critical areas could yield more meaningful transformation. Freight operations require a fundamental reorientation. Assured, time-tabled freight services are essential in a logistics environment where reliability is as important as cost. Without this, rail will struggle to expand its modal share.

Passenger experience, particularly for the large number of travellers in non-AC segments, demands a more comprehensive approach. A rapidly developing economy moving towards the stated goal of Viksit Bharat cannot afford to overlook the dignity and basic comfort of millions who rely on rail travel.

There is also a strong case for expanding the role of the private sector in freight and higher-end passenger train operations, rolling stock manufacturing and commercial exploitation as a part of station redevelopment within a balanced regulatory framework. This can bring in capital, innovation, operational flexibility, and above all, efficiencies.

Equally important are governance reforms within the organisation. Decision-making in IR continues to be based on feudal, hierarchical and fragmented structures that can impede responsiveness and innovation. Greater decentralisation, clearer accountability and a shift towards performance-based management are necessary.

Finally, IR must invest in leadership in at least one domain of railway technology, rather than remaining a follower across multiple areas.

The "52 reforms in 52 weeks" initiative reflects an intent to energise the system and signal change. Its success will depend on whether it evolves into a coherent programme of structural transformation. Without that shift, the risk is that the narrative of reform outpaces its substance.

The writer is an Independent Consultant and retired GM of ICF

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White paper on Kerala
The article by MA Oommen, titled 'Key Takeaways from Kerala's White Paper' (June 18), reinforces the findings in the white paper on Kerala's financial stability. Oommen warns the State about its poor financial health, and his observation that the White Paper should have addressed the future of Kerala instead of a reductionist approach focusing primarily on fiscal indicators is laudable. While the white paper and Oommen advocate reforms in KIFIB, it may be noted that KIFIB has mostly taken up

infrastructure projects by borrowing money, which has to be paid back by the State Government. Also, capacity development of the departments executing projects funded by KIFIB has not happened. The projects are getting delayed, as in the case of projects being carried out by departments like PWD, KWA, etc. The State Government should make sure KIFIB enables capacity development of the executing departments so that the projects are completed efficiently and on time. To make its economy more stable, the State needs to overhaul its

governance and civil services, and develop policies that will attract investments in infrastructure and social sectors.
Kuncheria P Isaac
Founder Vice Chancellor, APJ Abdul Kalam Kerala Technological University

Monitor capital outflows
Apropos 'Hawkish Fed' (June 19), the Fed sees domestic price pressures as structural rather than energy-driven. The narrowing yield spreads between Indian and US bonds could put pressure on the rupee regardless of how stable our

own macroeconomic fundamentals remain. The RBI will need to stay watchful on capital outflows rather than assume domestic stability alone will protect the currency. The piece is also right in flagging that better real-time data would strengthen India's monetary policy decisions.
SM Jeeva
Chennai

Foreign currency deposits
This refers to 'FCNR (B) deposits — a counter perspective' (June 19). The income squeeze facing Indian workers in the US, driven by layoffs,

costly H-1B renewals, and persistent inflation, genuinely limits how much surplus the diaspora can park in such deposits regardless of attractive interest rates. Banks chasing aggressive targets risk mis-selling NR(ER)A balances as fresh FCNR(B) deposits, which would only invite regulatory scrutiny later. A more sustainable approach would be tailoring products to the diaspora's actual liquidity needs rather than assuming higher rates alone will drive mobilisation.
Pon. Arun Kumar
Tirupur, TN

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India -founded 1818

Missing Gesture

Strategic partnerships are not tested when leaders exchange compliments, announce visits or promise trade deals. They are tested when something goes wrong. The deaths of three Indian sailors in the Gulf have created precisely such a test for India and the United States. The episode comes at a time when both countries are seeking closer economic and strategic cooperation, negotiating a trade agreement and coordinating on regional security. Yet it has also exposed an uncomfortable truth: geopolitical convergence does not automatically guarantee diplomatic sensitivity.

No serious observer doubts that major powers will act to protect what they perceive as vital security interests. The United States has defended its actions in the Gulf as part of a broader effort to enforce maritime restrictions and maintain pressure on adversaries. Governments have always justified military operations on grounds of national security. That argument is neither new nor unique.

The problem lies elsewhere. For many Indians, there remains a distinction between defending a policy and acknowledging a human loss. In this case, the debate has been shaped as much by what was not said as by what was. Democracies routinely express sympathy for civilian casualties without conceding legal liability or abandoning their strategic objectives. Such gestures are not signs of weakness. They are signs of maturity.

For India, the issue extends beyond three tragic deaths. It touches upon the expectations that accompany a relationship increasingly described as one of the most important partnerships of the 21st century. If India is to be treated as a major global actor rather than merely a useful strategic partner, its citizens must not become invisible collateral in larger geopolitical calculations.

This is particularly relevant at a moment when New Delhi is expanding its international profile. India is a leading voice of the Global South, a member of the Quad, a key Indo-Pacific power and one of the world's largest economies. Such status brings responsibilities, but it also creates legitimate expectations. Respect between partners is measured not only through defence agreements, investment flows or summit declarations. It is measured through responses during moments of grief and crisis.

None of this suggests that India should jeopardise a relationship that remains vital for trade, technology, defence cooperation and regional stability. Nor does it imply that every disagreement must become a diplomatic confrontation. States pursue interests, and both New Delhi and Washington have compelling reasons to preserve a strong partnership.

Yet realism should not require silence. Strategic cooperation and national dignity are not mutually exclusive goals. A confident India should be capable of maintaining close ties with the United States while also expecting empathy when Indian lives are lost. The larger lesson is simple. Great-power partnerships endure not because disagreements disappear, but because both sides recognise that trust cannot be built solely through shared interests. It must also be sustained through mutual respect. When citizens pay the ultimate price, even the strongest strategic relationship is judged by its humanity.

Beyond numbers

Switzerland's decision to reject a population cap is not a vote for open borders. Nor is it an endorsement of the status quo. It is, rather, a recognition that complex national challenges rarely yield to simple political slogans. Across Europe and beyond, immigration has become the default explanation for almost every strain on public life. Rising rents, overcrowded transport, pressure on healthcare systems and anxieties over cultural change are increasingly folded into a single narrative: that fewer newcomers would mean fewer problems. It is an argument with obvious emotional appeal because it offers clarity in an age of uncertainty. But clarity is not the same as truth.

The Swiss electorate appears to have grasped that distinction while voting in Sunday's referendum. The pressures associated with rapid population growth are real. Housing shortages can erode social cohesion. Infrastructure that fails to keep pace with demand breeds resentment. Public services stretched beyond their intended capacity generate legitimate frustration. Ignoring these concerns risks driving voters toward more radical solutions and deepening mistrust in political institutions.

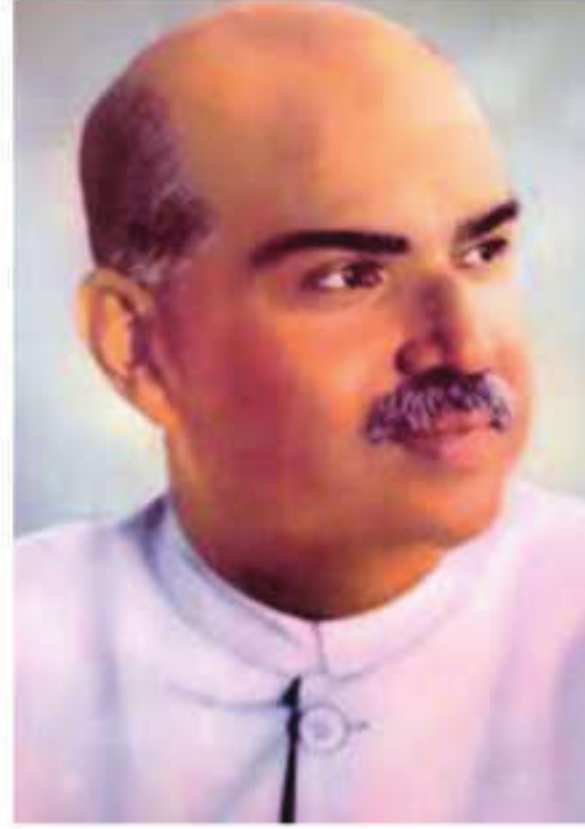
Yet identifying a problem and identifying its cause are not always the same exercise. Modern economies, particularly affluent ones with ageing populations, depend heavily on migrant labour. Hotels, hospitals, care homes, construction sites and research institutions increasingly rely on workers from beyond national borders. The arithmetic is difficult to escape. As birth rates decline and life expectancy rises, fewer working-age citizens are expected to support growing numbers of retirees. Restricting access to labour without restructuring entire economic systems can create shortages that worsen the very pressures governments claim they wish to ease.

There is also a broader geopolitical lesson. In an era marked by war on Europe's doorstep, economic fragmentation and heightened global competition, isolation carries costs. Countries that prosper through trade and international cooperation cannot assume they can selectively disengage from the obligations that underpin those relationships while preserving all of the benefits. At the same time, governments should resist interpreting such votes as a blanket endorsement of existing policies.

Citizens are demanding competence. They want affordable housing, efficient public transport, sustainable urban planning and healthcare systems capable of meeting rising demand. Failure to deliver tangible improvements will only strengthen those who argue that mainstream politics is incapable of responding to public concerns. The real divide, therefore, is not between those who welcome immigration and those who oppose it. It is between politics that seeks practical solutions and politics that searches for convenient scapegoats. Switzerland's voters have offered a reminder worth noting far beyond their borders. Democracies function best when they reject false choices. A nation can recognise the contributions of immigrants while insisting on better planning. It can remain open to the world while protecting social cohesion. And it can acknowledge public anxieties without allowing fear to become public policy. That balance is difficult. But it is often where responsible governance begins.

Nationalism and Secularism

Our national leaders dreamt of India being built on the values of nationalism and secularism. Nationalism that developed in India is secular in character. There were challenges to the processes of consolidating India after 1947, but nationalist leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Shyama Prasad Mookherjee and others struggled hard to maintain national unity in diversity, the main ideal of our nationalism



Nationalism and secularism are the two basic constituents of modern India. Nationalism is said to have been associated with anti-colonialism in British India, and the process of nation-in-making started. It was accepted that India could become a nation by appreciating its immense cultural, linguistic, religious and geographical diversities. There was the question of unifying India, and colonialism had a role in doing so economically and administratively, though it was exploitative in nature. However, India was turning into a nation through the political activity of the Indian people and their struggle against colonialism. Indian intelligentsia had definitely played an important part in promoting the spirit of nationalism and patriotism. Still, the roles of different social classes, including workers and peasants, cannot be marginalised.

The vision of independent India that emerged during the freedom movement encompassed rebuilding Indian society through a movement of the masses, establishing a democratic political order based on civil liberties, promoting economic development by using science and technology, introducing social change and social justice, and creating a strong and united Indian nation, accepting and appreciating diversity.

This is not to say that the spirit of nationalism vanished with the end of colonialism. India is now a developing nation. She is striving hard to enhance her prestige and glory in different fields, such as trade and commerce, industry, science and technology, including space science, games and sports and so on. Every Indian still nurtures the spirit of nationalism. We can feel this when India sends a space shuttle to the moon or when it wins the Cricket World Cup. We boast of being Indians when the Indian cricket team wins a Test or ODI, or when India wins a medal in the Olympics. Nationalism rises above religion, caste and region. Nationalism in India is not the preserve of a particular community or class or a few leaders.

After 1947, India emerged as a nation-state

~a sovereign democratic republic. Secularism has been one of the strongest pillars of this nation-state. The history of heterodoxy contributed to the emergence of secularism in India. The form of secularism that India adopts differs from what is defined in many parts of the West. She witnesses a spirit of tolerance and religious diversity, and holds a rich civilizational heritage with an absorptive and accommodative character. The spirit of multiculturalism was inherent in Indian culture. India serves as a home for the Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others.

The Vedas paved the way to what is now called Hinduism. Buddhism and Jainism became dominant in Indian society and survived as powerful religions in India. Each religious community managed to retain its identity within India's multi-religious spectrum. We have seen this spirit of religious toleration during the rule of Asoka. Interreligious tolerance has become a major component of the ideas of Ramananda, Nanak, Chaitanya and others, including Mira Bai, a sixteenth-century female poet.

India became a meeting ground of different cultures that either emerged from within or were brought from outside. India's uniqueness lies precisely in its cultural diversity, the coexistence and integration of different linguistic, religious and cultural strands. Secularism means equal regard for all religions, absence of discrimination among citizens on the grounds of religion and active opposition to communalism.

Secularism has a feature specific to India. In India, secularism arose as an ideology of uniting the Indian people vis-à-vis colonialism and as a part of the nation-making process. It is argued that secularism, which was championed by Indian leaders in colonial India, is something of a reflection of Western ideas. But it would be misleading to say that Indian secularism has no connection with earlier traditional thoughts and writings. India was the cradle of such a secular spirit and nurtured it over the centuries. India is

still carrying the legacy of the secular or syncretic concept of showing respect to all religions from ancient times.

India's sanatani culture speaks of multiculturalism where a Hindu can boast of being a Hindu, a Sikh of belonging to Sikhism, a Buddhist of embracing Buddhism. Secularism does not mean abusing a particular religion and appeasing another.

This is what may be called pseudo-secularism, which misguides the state. What is wrong if a Hindu calls himself or herself a devout Hindu or if one feels proud of the glories of the Hindus? This does not imply that he or she is intolerant of other religions or that he or she is not secular.

PC Ray, the distinguished scientist and also a historian of science of India, while drawing serious attention to some of the scientific traditions and accomplishments of ancient India, stated, "I am as proud of the glories of the Hindus of old as anybody". This kind of assertion would not cause any threat to people of a particular religion. If each community pursues its own religion without encroaching on others, peace will be sustained in society, leading to its progress, and there will be no religion-centric conflict. Every religion speaks of liberalism and humanism; only fundamentalists infuse a venomous spirit into the minds of a particular community.

Self-respect in one's own culture and religion is the essence of the secular spirit. This spirit of secularism is entrenched in Hinduism. Many of our Hindu forefathers had fought for secularism, not for sectarianism. Hindu organisations are not eroding the legacy of secularism. Rather, democratic and secular values are reflected in many Hindu or Vaishnava institutions. It must be remembered that if these values of India's traditional culture and religion are threatened,

attacked and are in danger, Indians have to confront the challenges.

Our national leaders dreamt of India being built on the values of nationalism and secularism. Nationalism that developed in India is secular in character. There were challenges to the processes of consolidating India after 1947, but nationalist leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Shyama Prasad Mookherjee and others struggled hard to maintain national unity in diversity, the main ideal of our nationalism. They were not associated with one region, one language, one religion or one caste. They believed in pluralism and thereby in secularism.

India has been successful in strengthening unity politically, economically and emotionally, and has been pushing forward the process of nation-building. India's diversity still sustains and flowers. India can boast of its national unity and democratic political system, despite political disturbances and economic problems like poverty.

Surprisingly, the more we talked about secularism, the more communal our society became. This happened because we wanted to please every section of society and ended up pleasing none. The debate is on the policy of appeasement. The government sometimes promotes a community in various ways and succumbs to the pressure of a particular community on certain issues to gain electoral benefits. Thus, the government resorts to the politics of concessions and compromises, which lead to more complications. This happens because politicians do not normally look beyond short-term interests.

Religion is a personal affair, and it has nothing to do with politics. In 1950, Sardar Patel declared, "Ours is a secular state. We cannot fashion our policies or shape our conduct in the way Pakistan does. We must see that our secular ideals are actually realised in practice ... Here every Muslim should feel that he is an Indian citizen and has equal rights as an Indian. If we cannot make him feel like this, we shall not be worthy of our heritage and of our country." That legacy is still being carried on.



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THE KATHMANDU POST

Making more religious tourists visit Nepal

Nepal has long regarded tourists from around the world as esteemed guests, following the principle of Atithi devo bhava (the guest is God) and wholeheartedly welcomed them. Of the tourists who enter Nepal, millions of Indians flock to this side of the border to visit sacred sites such as Pashupatinath, Muktinath, Swargadwari, Supadaurali, Manakamana, as well as Kailash-Mansarovar through Nepal, thanks to the open border between the two countries. Last month alone, over 40,000 Indians entered Nepal by air, marking the highest monthly total on record. Additionally, many more arrive by land each year, and their numbers are increasing significantly.

But lately, Indian religious tourists have increasingly been seen cooking, eating and resting by the roadside, completely bypassing Nepal's hotel industry, making

Nepalis wonder whether they actually contribute to our economy. There are also concerns that such activities may compromise the sanctity and cleanliness of religious sites and the surroundings of Pokhara and other tourist and religious places. This raises an important question: Does Nepal have enough infrastructure to accommodate millions of Indian tourists visiting the country? The answer is no: Nepal remains ill-prepared to do so. India's pilgrimage rush only lays bare our own shortcomings as many religious sites lack basic infrastructure, including good roads, dharmashalas to accommodate pilgrims, sanitation, vegetarian food options, restaurants and information management. Consequently, many pilgrims look to make their own alternate arrangements. Religious tourists, especially from India,

do contribute to Nepal's economy. Unlike leisure tourism, which is affected by economic downturns and travel trends, pilgrimage is driven by faith, and this is exactly what drives Indian tourists to Nepal. According to tourism ministry officials, even though pilgrims generally don't stay in hotels, they spend on transport, food, souvenirs and road tolls, keeping local businesses and transport services afloat. They then repeatedly return to those trails, and in turn inspire hundreds of would-be visitors to visit Nepal, indirectly contributing to the country's economy.

In response to videos of people cooking by the roadside circulating on social media, the tourism ministry has issued guidelines for tourists entering Nepal by land, advising them to maintain the cleanliness of religious sites. Those who violate the rules will be punished.

The guideline also asks pilgrims to obtain permission from the relevant authorities before using open spaces for cooking. Taking advantage of the tourist influx, local units could generate income by designating specific places where they can cook, manage waste and rest for a while. A small service fee could be charged.

However, the guideline misses an important point: accommodation. As tourists are seen resting in open spaces using their own tents and also sleeping in vehicles, this doesn't help hoteliers, who would otherwise manage them and earn some money. Alternatively, there can be low-cost, government-regulated camping sites that meet basic cleanliness standards, so people who can't afford a guesthouse don't have to resort to sleeping in vehicles. These measures are expected to provide a temporary solution, but long-term plans are even more necessary.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Bilateral ties

Sir, The elevation of India-Slovakia relations to a comprehensive partnership marks a historic milestone in reviving stalled economic engagement with Central Europe ("India, Slovakia boost strategic cooperation", June 16). While finalizing the India-EU Free Trade Agreement is commendable, the real masterstroke lies in regularizing talent mobility. Harnessing global demand for India's skilled labour in Europe and nations like New Zealand serves a dual benefit - addressing trade imbalances while expanding international employment opportunities that anchor trade to a broader paradigm of global welfare, where nations enrich one another by sharing indigenous talent to fulfill global deficits.

Amidst global conflicts, India's diplomacy remains unguided by mere transactional loss or gain, as demonstrated by our

unconditional humanitarian assistance to international citizens during crises. However, sustainable integration demands regional stability. While others seek credit for third-party brokering, true charity begins at home. Bilateral peace initiatives, which could be a win-win position for both nations commercially and strategically, remain on hold because sovereign engagement requires mutual maturity, ensuring nations move forward with democratic accountability globally, in general, and with neighboring nations, in particular.

Yours, etc., Krishan Kumar Chugh
New Delhi, 16 June.

KMC revenue

Sir, Apropos of the recent concerns voiced by the Hon'ble Finance Minister regarding the state's tight financial condition and the urgent need to scout for fresh avenues to

bolster tax collection, I would like to highlight a significant, untapped opportunity for structural fiscal reform within the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC).

Currently, KMC follows an archaic, irregular General Revision (GR) framework, reassessing property values after prolonged gaps of 8 to 10 years. This erratic system is counterproductive to revenue maximization. When a decade's worth of compounded valuation hikes is slapped onto an assessee at once, accompanied by massive retroactive arrears, it creates an unbearable financial shock. Unable to clear these sudden, exorbitant bills, a large percentage of honest taxpayers are pushed into involuntary default, choking KMC's revenue stream.

Furthermore, this arbitrary approach triggers heavy litigation. Assessee are driven to move appeals before Municipal Courts. While citizens frequently secure favorable orders - as seen in the landmark

Calcutta High Court ruling in Sahujain Charitable Society v. KMC, which strictly restricted the retrospective reach of such arbitrary demands - the entire process drains municipal resources and overburdens the judiciary. If the government wishes to seamlessly increase tax collection without causing public distress, it should direct KMC to transition toward a predictable, annual incremental valuation adjustment of 2 to 3 per cent. A minor, regular annual increase is manageable for middle and lower-income families, ensuring near-total tax compliance. For the state and KMC, this means an immediate, uninterrupted, and growing flow of liquid revenue, alongside a drastic reduction in legal expenditure. It is time the administration replaces sporadic financial shocks with smooth, progressive fiscal planning.

Yours, etc., Prabir Kumar Pal,
Kolkata, 16 June.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'India could gain from Iran deal'



The emerging US-Iran agreement has significant implications for India, including energy corridors, fertilizer supplies, and revival of the Chabahar Port project. As Gulf tensions ease, New Delhi faces a strategic crossroads that could reshape connectivity with Central Asia and Afghanistan. K P Fabian is a former ambassador to Iran, Sri Lanka, Canada, Finland, Italy, and Austria. In an interview with Arti Bali, the diplomat analyses the impacts on India's energy dependence via the Strait of Hormuz, stressing that quiet, sovereign diplomacy, not permission-seeking, should guide India's future path.

Q: How significant is the US-Iran deal compared to previous diplomatic efforts, including the 2015 nuclear deal? Does it represent a genuine strategic shift in relations?

A: First, it is important to clarify that in 2015 there was not a nuclear deal in the conventional sense but the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated during President Barack Obama's administration. The JCPOA was designed to ensure that Iran would never develop a nuclear bomb because the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had full access to Iran's nuclear activities. Under the safeguards regime, every aspect of Iran's nuclear programme was monitored. If Iran enriched uranium beyond the agreed limit of 3.67 per cent, the IAEA would immediately know. Therefore, the JCPOA was capable of preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. But it turned political. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump increasingly criticized the Obama deal. Influenced by advisers such as Steve Bannon, he portrayed the JCPOA as a bad deal and gained support from influential constituencies, including sections of the Jewish lobby in the United States.

In 2018, Trump withdrew from the agreement and reimposed sanctions on Iran without, in my view, presenting a valid reason. Iran initially continued complying because France, Germany

and the United Kingdom - the E3 - were still committed to the deal. They promised Iran a financial mechanism that would allow trade despite US sanctions. However, under US pressure, those efforts collapsed.

Iran then stopped complying with certain commitments, reduced cooperation with inspectors and began enriching uranium. Iran was not enriching uranium to build a bomb but to force the US back to the negotiating table. If Iran truly intended to build a weapon, moving from 60 per cent enrichment to weapons-grade levels would have taken only weeks. Ironically, Trump eventually had an opportunity to secure a deal that was even better than Obama's. On February 27, at talks facilitated by Oman, representatives of the United States and Iran reportedly reached an understanding. Iran agreed to zero enrichment, zero stockpiling, and down blending approximately 1,000 pounds of enriched uranium. Never seeking a nuclear bomb. In other words, Trump obtained terms that were stronger than those under the JCPOA. He could have accepted the arrangement, lifted sanctions and normalised economic ties. Instead, events took a different turn after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly argued that military action and decapitation strikes could bring down the Iranian regime. That calculation, however, did not work.

Q: What key factors enabled Washington and Tehran to reach an understanding after months of military conflict?

A: The conflict demonstrated the limits of military power in an asymmetrical war. Israel and the US possessed overwhelming military superiority, but asymmetrical conflicts do not always produce expected outcomes. A useful comparison is the Vietnam War. Despite massive American military power and extensive bombing campaigns between 1955 and 1975, the war ultimately ended with the withdrawal of the US.

Iran's asymmetrical strategy relies on threatening infrastructure linked to American interests across the Gulf region: military bases, airports, banks and other critical facilities.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states increasingly realized that if the conflict continued, Iran could inflict serious damage not only on oil infrastructure but also on water desalination facilities, which are essential for Gulf economies.

Q: How important was the role of regional mediators such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan in facilitating this breakthrough?

A: The GCC countries eventually realised that hosting American military facilities does not necessarily provide security. In many cases, it simply makes them targets. The UAE adjusted its earlier policy and moved toward engagement with Tehran. Other Gulf states also recognised the enormous risks posed by continued conflict. As a result, they encouraged Washington to pursue diplomacy and played a constructive role in facilitating a settlement.

The UAE provides an important example. Initially, Abu Dhabi favoured a hard line against Iran. However, attitudes shifted. The last major Iranian attack on the UAE reportedly occurred on May 4. Subsequently, the UAE sent a delegation to Tehran. Media reported that the UAE released approximately \$3 billion in Iranian funds that had been frozen there, although Abu Dhabi officially denied the report. The broader GCC came to understand that war would impose unacceptable costs.

At the same time, Trump faced growing domestic political pressure. Rising fuel prices, inflation and opposition within his own MAGA base raised questions about America's continued involvement in another Middle Eastern conflict. Voters asked why US soldiers should be sent to a distant war.

Trump therefore had incentives to end the conflict.

He also appeared to adopt an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy. Following reports of an Apache helicopter crash, Trump publicly warned that Iran would pay a price. However, there are reasons to doubt that Iran deliberately targeted the aircraft. Had the IREG shot it down, they likely would have publicised the achievement and attempted to capture

the crew. Neither occurred. It is possible the helicopter was lost for other reasons.

In my assessment, Trump used the incident to justify a brief escalation before moving toward de-escalation and diplomacy.

Q: What are the biggest risks that could derail the deal?

A: One contentious issue concerns Iran's frozen assets. These assets belong to Iran and were frozen by the United States. Their release should not be viewed as a charitable gesture but as the restoration of Iranian property. There has also been misinformation regarding previous financial transfers to Iran. President Trump has repeatedly claimed that President Obama sent plane-loads of cash to Iran. Historically, that characterization is inaccurate.

The payments related to two separate issues: the release of American prisoners and the settlement of longstanding financial disputes.

Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran had paid approximately \$400 million for US weapons that were never delivered. Following legal proceedings at the Iran-US Claims Tribunal in The Hague, the tribunal ruled that the United States owed Iran the original amount plus approximately \$1.3 billion in interest.

The funds released under Obama were linked to implementing this legal settlement and facilitating prisoner releases. Therefore, Trump's narrative omits significant historical context.

Differences over sanctions relief, asset releases and implementation timelines remain potential obstacles to the agreement.

Q: What implications could the deal have for India's Chabahar Port project and broader connectivity ambitions in Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan?

A: President Trump initially spoke about regime change in Iran. He has now recognised that regime change is not achievable. In fact, the existing Iranian leadership may have become even more hardline. If negotiations succeed and sanctions are lifted, Iran's economy could return to normal functioning. Improved US-Iran

relations would create favourable conditions for the revival of several important Indian initiatives - Chabahar Port, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Broader connectivity projects linking India with Central Asia and Afghanistan. For these reasons, India should welcome the agreement.

Q: How could the deal influence India's energy security, particularly regarding Iranian crude imports and diversification of energy supplies?

A: India should always pursue diversification, but decisions should ultimately be based on market realities. At present, its reopening would therefore provide enormous relief to India.

At the same time, India must avoid excessive dependence on any single supplier. The United States wants India to purchase more US energy. While some purchases make sense, pricing often reflects political rather than purely market considerations. India's approach toward Russian oil provides a useful lesson. India was correct to continue purchasing Russian crude despite external pressure. However, publicly seeking American waivers was poor diplomacy because it created the impression that India needed permission regarding its energy choices. A sovereign country should quietly pursue its national interests.

Q: Could the agreement help address India's fertilizer requirements ahead of the Kharif season?

A: Yes, there will be a positive impact, but the benefits will not be immediate. Agriculture depends heavily on timing. If fertilizers are unavailable at the required moment, farmers face difficulties regardless of later improvements. The agreement should improve supply conditions over time, but some disruptions may continue in the near term.

Q: Could lifting sanctions create opportunities for Indian companies in infrastructure, shipping and reconstruction projects?

A: Absolutely. When I served in Iran between 1976 and 1979, thousands of

Indian managers, doctors and engineers were working there. The Indian community played a significant role in the Iranian economy. A similar situation could emerge again. There has been discussion of reconstruction projects worth hundreds of billions of dollars. If relations between Washington and Tehran improve, American companies will certainly seek opportunities. Indian firms could also benefit substantially through infrastructure, logistics, shipping and development projects.

India is likely to gain considerably from a normalisation of relations.

Q: Iran has argued that the US should eventually leave the region and that a new regional security framework should emerge. Is that realistic?

A: Not immediately. However, there has been a noticeable shift in priorities. Previously, Washington insisted that Iran curb its missile programme and stop supporting groups that Western media often describe as "proxies". I have reservations about that term.

Take Hezbollah. It emerged in 1982 following Israel's invasion and occupation of parts of Lebanon. While inspired by the Iranian Revolution, its existence was rooted in local circumstances. The Houthis similarly control significant territory within Yemen and cannot simply be described as Iranian proxies.

Today, negotiations are focused much more narrowly on the nuclear issue rather than these broader regional questions.

Q: Could this agreement encourage President Trump to focus on ending the Russia-Ukraine war?

A: Possibly. With the Iran issue moving toward resolution, President Trump is likely to devote more attention and energy to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He has already indicated that he has spoken with both Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect renewed diplomatic efforts on that front.

The birth of West Bengal

TAPAN KUMAR CHATTOPADHYAY AND GOURI SANKAR NAG

After years of debate and contention, 20 June is finally going to be observed as the birthday of West Bengal, thanks to the resolution of the newly formed government of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The bifurcation of Bengal (the second and the decisive one after the first division in 1905) and creation of West Bengal owes its origin to the indefatigable leadership of Shyamaprasad Mookherjee who championed the idea of a 'Hindu homeland' within the Indian union. A brief analysis of historical facts will clearly reveal Mookherjee's contribution in this context.

During 1946 and the early part of 1947 when Punjab was seething with communal clashes and intensified rioting causing an acute political crisis of governability that could not be salvaged without countenancing the League's demand for Pakistan, in Bengal a section of the provincial leadership had taken a distinct stand in favour of "United Bengal".

In fact, this movement was initiated by the then Bengal premier, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy for a separate sovereign dominion outside India and Pakistan for which he demanded British

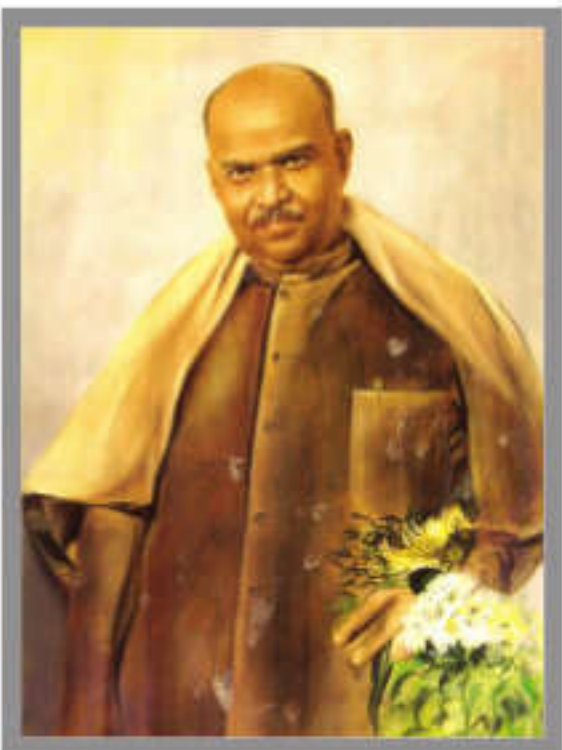
support, with a gesture to join the British Commonwealth as a loyal member. Apparently, the idea was quite innovative and seemed sustainable for the twin reasons of economic viability of both parts of resource-rich Bengal and also for maintaining Hindu-Muslim solidarity.

Some prominent Congress leaders of the day, particularly Sarat Bose (the elder brother of Subhas Bose) and Kiran Shankar Roy (the then President of the Bengal Congress), strongly supported the idea of a sovereign Bengal. Suhrawardy met the Governor, Lord Mountbatten on 14 May 1947 to inform him about the ongoing discussions with Kiran Shankar Roy and Sarat Bose regarding the formation of a sovereign, democratic united Bengal. However, inside this camp there was a difference of views insofar as Sarat Bose was inclined towards an independent socialist Bengal while Suhrawardy preferred a pro-Western independent Bengal.

On this issue, the Hindu Mahasabha leader, Shyamaprasad Mookherjee took a completely different stand. From the very beginning he was sceptical about the idea of a "United Bengal" because with his foresight he could understand that it would amount to permanent political subordination of the Hindus to the Muslim majority. The proponents

of a united Bengal argued that the western part of Bengal had a good industrial infrastructure and the eastern part was rich in raw materials and hence a united Bengal would become both agriculturally and industrially prosperous. This argument did not appeal to those who opposed the scheme. The logic could neither convince Mookherjee nor the powerful trio of the Congress namely Nehru, Patel and Acharya Kripalani. On the other hand, the plan for a united Bengal was supported by Jinnah and his Muslim League. This made the Hindu Mahasabha leaders deeply disturbed as Mookherjee, in particular, was afraid of the demographic factors. While in the eastern part of Bengal there was a Muslim majority, in the western part there was a Hindu majority; but in united Bengal Muslims enjoyed an overwhelming majority. So, in united Bengal Muslims would certainly dominate Hindus both numerically and politically as it happened during the Krishak Praja party-Muslim League coalition government.

Moreover, a pertinent point arises here as to why did Jinnah support this move for a united Bengal? Jinnah who wanted East Bengal to be a part of his proposed Pakistan must have felt, Shyamaprasad feared, that a united sovereign Bengal under a Muslim



majority would become an appendage of, and subsequently, a part of Pakistan. Thus, the creation of a separate and independent Bengal would practically result in the whole of Bengal being gifted to Pakistan. For this reason, Mookherjee and the Hindu Mahasabha campaigned in favour of partitioning Bengal into a Muslim-majority state of East Bengal and a Hindu-majority state of West Bengal within India.

After a series of negotiations and top-level discussions the decision to partition Bengal was accepted by all

parties. This ultimately led to the division of Bengal on 20 June, 1947, and the newly born state of West Bengal became an integral part of the Indian union in August 1947.

This, in short, is the story of the birth of West Bengal and the role of Shyamaprasad Mookherjee in saving the western part of Bengal with a Hindu-majority from becoming an appendage or a part of Pakistan. Mookherjee had the experience of Muslim oppression of Hindus during the Haque-Muslim League coalition in Bengal and feared that similar oppression would be there in a Muslim-majority united Bengal. He is therefore regarded by his followers as a saviour of Hindus.

Mookherjee envisioned a "National Home" for Hindus, where they could find dignity and security after the 1947 Partition. That Mookherjee's foresight was prophetic is proved by the fact that since independence, West Bengal with a Hindu majority experienced very few instances of communal riots whereas erstwhile Muslim-dominated East Bengal, now Bangladesh, has undergone far too many events of communal atrocities.

The writers are, respectively, former Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Calcutta University, and Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia.

100 Years Ago

News Items

HARBINGER OF A NEW ERA

IRAQ AND MOSUL TREATY

(SPECIAL CABLE.) LONDON, JUNE

ON the occasion of the conclusion of the Anglo-Turkish Treaty the King of Iraq has sent a message to His Majesty the King expressing his and the people's most sincere thanks and gratitude for the deep sympathy that has always been extended to the cause of Iraq throughout a critical period. "Had it not been for your Majesty's sympathy our eyes would not have seen the blessed hour of this harbinger of a new era of happiness through which our friendship shall endure." He prays that this friendship may be strengthened continually not only in matters of mutual interest, but the maintenance of peace in the East.

King George, replying, says that he echoes King Feisal's sentiments, and adds "I preserve the happiest recollections of our meetings which established those feelings of personal friendship with which I shall ever regard you."—Copyright.

PEACE PILGRIMAGE

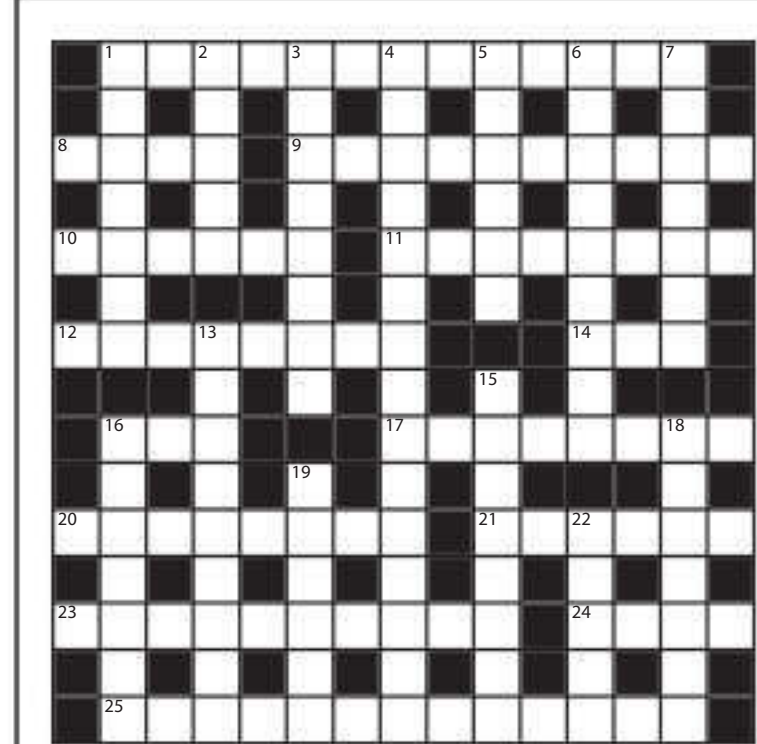
WOMEN & INTERNATIONAL DISPUTES

(SPECIAL CABLE.) LONDON, JUNE

GARBED in blue robes and bearing banners inscribed with "Law, not War" and marching to the beating of a tom tom, the first contingent of women, walking from Brighton and the South Coast towns to London on a peacemakers' pilgrimage, has arrived at the Crystal Palace.

These are the forerunners of 8,000 women arriving in London to-day from all parts of the country. Some bore staves carrying the names of 35 towns and villages which had passed resolutions calling on the Government to settle International disputes by conciliation and arbitration.—Copyright.

Crossword | No. 293496



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



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

ACROSS

- 1 Business bureau Tory pal ruined (6,7)
- 8 Rubbish taking E? Take acid! (4)
- 9 Show broadcast mid-spring around 1st of April (6,4)
- 10 Hat or hood imported from US to UK (6)
- 11 Arcane secret I spread around Ohio (8)
- 12 Conservative with inclination for housework? (8)

DOWN

- 14 Scottish man in French article (3)
- 16 Coach player on the bench knocked over (3)
- 17 Low clerk must change to become major US artist (8)
- 20 Statesman and duke seen with Benjamin Netanyahu? (8)
- 21 A French young man going around about naked (6)
- 23 Evil, manly and physically aggressive? Not !! (10)

ACROSS

- 24 Sex with Hoskins repelled couple (4)
- 25 Do many bets annoy? No way! (3,2,3,5)
- 5 Price demanded to remove top of fanlight in America (6)
- 6 Member of secret fraternity is unusual bloke (9)
- 7 What is left of engineers sat on electric supply? (7)
- 13 Spongy dessert knight tucks into after a drop of brandy (9)

DOWN

- 1 Vessel fitted with a royal navy hooter (4,5)
- 2 A writer describing small ski resort (5)
- 3 Performer having time trouble in Beat It? (4,4)
- 4 High-flyer once seen going with papers for shredding (9,6)
- 15 Get used to a convention in conversation (8)
- 16 Boffin that relations must visit in the country (7)
- 18 People who laze around in casual footwear (7)
- 19 Look in Iron City for serious American crime (6)
- 22 Country friend you might hear of in Bow (5)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Lawyers' database

Fraudulent practitioners must be weeded out

A proposal to establish a National Digital Registry for the Legal Profession (NDRLP) is a significant step towards weeding out lawyers with bogus degrees. The Supreme Court has called it "an innovative idea which can be done". Prompted by alarming claims that 35-40% of the advocates in India may possess fake or unverifiable law degrees, the suggestion reflects the urgent need for transparency and accountability within the legal profession. The proposed registry seeks to create a unified digital database containing verified qualifications, enrolment status, disciplinary records and a unique identification number for every advocate. In a country with nearly 18 lakh enrolled lawyers and fragmented records across 23 state Bar Councils, the absence of a central verification mechanism has allowed fraudulent practitioners to thrive unchecked.

Linking advocates' records with universities, the University Grants Commission and Bar Councils through a QR-verifiable platform could help litigants instantly confirm whether a lawyer is genuinely qualified. Such a system can protect citizens from legal fraud. However, technology alone cannot solve the problem. The usefulness of the registry will depend on close coordination among universities, the Bar Council of India and the government.

Regular audits, strict verification procedures and disciplinary action must accompany the initiative. The legal profession forms the backbone of constitutional democracy. The influx of fake advocates weakens public confidence in the justice delivery system. The NDRLP, if endorsed by all the key stakeholders, can offer an opportunity not merely to maintain accurate records but also to strengthen integrity, professionalism and faith in India's legal ecosystem.

Toxic oversight

Manesar units expose regulatory gaps

HARYANA's industrial success story has long been a source of pride. From Manesar's automobile hubs to the manufacturing clusters spread across the state, industry has created jobs, attracted investment and powered economic growth. But the Haryana State Pollution Control Board's finding that nearly 3,000 industrial units lack adequate air pollution control devices serves as a sobering reminder that growth cannot come at the expense of clean air. The fact that Manesar tops the list is particularly worrying. The industrial township is not only a major economic engine but also home to thousands of workers and families who breathe the air affected by factory emissions every day. Pollution is often discussed in the context of seasonal smog or stubble burning, but industrial emissions are a year-round problem. They quietly contribute to deteriorating air quality, respiratory illnesses and a diminished quality of life.

Industries operating in environmentally sensitive regions, especially within the National Capital Region, have long been aware of their obligations. Yet, thousands of units remain non-compliant. This points to a larger failure of enforcement and accountability. At the same time, the solution should not be reduced to issuing notices alone. Small and medium enterprises may require technical guidance and financial support to adopt cleaner technologies. However, there can be no compromise on timelines or standards. Repeated violators must face meaningful penalties.

Clean air is not an obstacle to industrial development; it is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Haryana's economy cannot flourish if its residents are forced to pay the price through their health. The state's industries have demonstrated their ability to innovate and compete. They must now show the same commitment to environmental responsibility. Prosperity and public health must move forward together.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 1926

Need for an inquiry

THE official communique from Shimla which we published yesterday shows that in the opinion of the Punjab Government, the local authorities at Rawalpindi did all that they could both to prevent the very serious happenings in that city on the night of the 14th and to deal suitably with them when they did take place. This is also the verdict of the special correspondent of the *Civil and Military Gazette*, who tells us that the police behaved magnificently. Unhappily, as far as we have been able to ascertain, this is very far from being the opinion of those principally concerned, the men who practically lost their all during the fateful two hours on the night of the 14th. As will have been seen from the version of the SGPC as well as the account received from our own representative, both of which we published in our last issue, there is great dissatisfaction among the Hindus and Sikhs as regards the manner in which the police conducted themselves during and after the riot. There are certain facts which clearly have to be explained before the official version and the version of the *Civil and Military Gazette* correspondent can be accepted. On the government's own showing, the local authorities had abundant notice of the coming trouble. There is no reference in the official communique to the cinema affair, though all other accounts, including that of the *Civil and Military Gazette* itself, show that this was the starting point of the trouble. But surely there could be no manner of doubt after the incident of the 13th that at any moment there might be an outbreak.

Let Pakistan crow from the rooftops

India need hardly worry that Trump's favourite Field Marshal this week is Pakistan's Asim Munir

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

WITHIN the space of six months, *Dhurandhar* and *Main Vaapas Aaunga* have exploded on our cinema screens, and apart from the fact that both are as different as chalk from cheese, the question that continues to stir the mind is, Why does Pakistan remain a central obsession in the minds of the average North Indian person?

To borrow a title — not a leaf — from India's best-known psychologist, Ashis Nandy, Pakistan can be described as the perfect "intimate enemy." Separated at birth in 1947, a division so violent and so brutal that it naturally coloured everything that came after, there could have been only two ways for the two countries to come to terms with each other's existence — a mutual forgiveness or a defiant hostility. Both ideas have been considered at various points of time, as India enters the 80th year of its existence. Imtiaz Ali attempts to explore the former with his film, *Main...*, while Aditya Dhar does the latter with both his *Dhurandhars*. Both succeed in parts, but never quite.

It was more or less alright these past many decades when India won the wars, the proxy wars and the conflicts with Pakistan — both on and off the field. India paid a big price each time, losing civilians and soldiers in terror acts, especially in border states like Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir — acts that cut deep every time, because they reopened wounds that had never fully closed. That's why the national catharsis that came with defeating Pakistan, including in cricket, was so worth it.



LEVERAGE: Pakistan has superbly used the West Asia crisis to expand its influence abroad. REUTERS

India would bounce back, we knew. We were the bigger country, with the better GDP, the IT companies and, of course, Bollywood. Unlike the Islamic Republic, we were a functioning democracy, warts and all, and definitely not as Fahmida Riaz claimed, "like each other." *Tum bilkul hum jaise nikle, bhai*, she once said, back in 1992, in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Not at all, *behen*.

Ashis Nandy may, at this point, metaphorically ask why we care so much whether we are, or not, like each other. Or why it matters so much if Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir is Donald Trump's "favourite Field Marshal"; or whether the Memorandum of Understanding between the US and Iran is called the Islamabad MoU (the Iranians do and the Americans don't); or that Pakistan is officially described as a "mediator" in the US-Iran crisis.

Fact is, Pakistan has superbly used the West Asia crisis to expand its influence abroad. It has smartly leveraged its intimacy with China, Saudi Arabia and Iran to broker a global agreement — even if it needed Qatar in the last few weeks to push the

edge the role Rawalpindi played — because, make no mistake it was Field Marshal Munir who ran the operation, along with the well-trained diplomats in his Foreign Office — and move on. It's what strong states with everything to gain, do.

There are several lessons we can all draw from this West Asia crisis. The first is an obvious one — nations must talk to all sides if they want to exercise leverage, like Pakistan did. Second, leaders must have the courage, like Trump, to cut loose the losing side (Israel), especially if it was discolouring the larger picture, and cut a deal with the winner (Iran). Trump understood that his own economy was beginning to bruise and with midterm elections coming up in November, he was running out of time.

Trump understood he could not allow his ego to come in the way of his national interest — it takes a brave man to do that.

Third, as the sixth largest economy in the world, India mustn't bristle if Pakistan wants to crow from the rooftops — its fine, every rooster has its day. India measures itself with its own unique yardsticks — its science establishments that have sent

agreement over the finishing line. Pakistan called upon all its relationships to deliver — it represented Iran in Washington DC, which it has done since the Revolution in 1979, and extracted every bit of juice from that tie. It drew upon its client state status with China to oil the wheels all around, including with Russia. And it curried favour with Saudi Arabia, a key US ally, with whom it shares a similar "iron brother" relationship, to tighten the screws when they needed to be.

The Pakistanis played it perfectly — it's what weak states with everything to lose, do. This means that India must acknowl-

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

If you are going to be a mediator or arbitrator, you cannot take sides only with one party. —Bashar al-Assad

Rollercoaster journey of the microwave

RITU KAMRA KUMAR

WHEN we brought home a brand-new microwave, it did not arrive as an appliance. It arrived as a prophecy. The salesman promised a culinary renaissance. This gleaming metallic marvel would bake, roast, grill and gratinate. Cakes would rise like proud palaces, pizzas would be of pizzeria quality and cookies would emerge golden and guilt-inducing. The advertisement had already whispered that life would be good. We believed it with the fervour of pilgrims pursuing a promised paradise.

After all, why settle for ordinary cooking when a few magical beeps could apparently transform one into a master chef?

The microwave took centre stage in our kitchen, shining like a silver spaceship that had accidentally landed among spice jars and steel utensils. It possessed more buttons than I had reasons to use them. Convection. Grill. Bake. Roast. Defrost. Combination Mode. Auto Cook.

The accompanying cookbook's glossy pages flaunted photographs of cakes, casseroles and continental creations. The family was ecstatic. "Now we'll have homemade pizzas!" "And brownies!" "And baked vegetables!" "And garlic bread!" Unfortunately, all eyes eventually swivelled towards me.

Apparently, purchasing a microwave automatically confers a diploma in culinary wizardry. I opened the recipe book. The first recipe demanded precise temperatures, particular trays, specific racks and timings calculated with the precision of a space mission. The process looked cumbersome and confusing. I was ready to surrender. My family was not. Thus began the Great Pizza Project.

Flour flew like festive confetti. Cheese scattered across the counter. Capsicum cubes staged a dramatic escape. Bowls multiplied mysteriously. The kitchen transformed into a battlefield where ingredients and instructions fought for supremacy. Meanwhile, the microwave blinked and beeped. While wrestling with settings and struggling to decipher symbols, I could almost hear it protesting: "Please stop. I was perfectly happy reheating tea."

After a lot of chaos, clatter and confusion, the pizza emerged. It wasn't burnt. It was merely bewildered. That heroic experiment marked both a beginning and an end.

The grilling rack and baking tray retired into domestic oblivion. The microwave settled comfortably into its true calling. Reheating leftovers. Warming *dal*. Defrosting peas. Day after day.

Looking around the house, I realise that the microwave is not alone. It has distinguished company — a treadmill moonlighting as a clothes stand, a juicer awaiting its second innings and a food processor processing little beyond regret. Together they form a silent museum of underutilised ambition.

Our microwave, however, remains the star exhibit. Twenty-seven buttons stare at me daily. Twenty-six remain unemployed. The 27th works overtime. It is labelled "Reheat". If appliances held annual performance reviews, the microwave would recommend terminating the rest of the staff.

The writer is ex-principal, Mukand Lal National College, Yamunanagar

epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Adopt zero-tolerance approach

Apropos of 'Telegram ban'; the official response is reactionary, not preventive. Actions such as deploying the Indian Air Force for transporting NEET papers or blocking Telegram are only short-term measures; they can't resolve the underlying systemic vulnerabilities. Lapses in paper-setting, printing, storage, transportation and distribution have exposed the institutional ecosystem. Public confidence in examinations can only be restored through painstaking reforms and a comprehensive overhaul of examination security. Besides swift investigation and exemplary punishment for paper leak, end-to-end digital tracking with regular security audits, encrypted online transmission and real-time surveillance mechanisms can reduce the scope for malpractices.

VAIBHAV GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Ban not a permanent solution

Refer to 'Telegram ban'; while ensuring fair examinations is essential, banning an entire communication platform raises concerns. Millions of students, teachers, professionals and business people use Telegram for legitimate purposes such as sharing study material, conducting discussions and exchanging information. A blanket ban will inconvenience users while doing little to address the root causes of paper leaks. Instead of focusing solely on communication platforms, the authorities must strengthen paper-setting, printing, transportation and monitoring processes to prevent leaks.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Innovation, adaptability are vital

With reference to 'David's new slingshot'; the conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia, besides Operation Sindoor, have demonstrated that drones can influence battlefield outcomes at a fraction of the cost of conventional weapon systems. Their effectiveness has enabled smaller nations to challenge strong adversaries. These developments warrant a thorough review of India's military doctrine, force structure and procurement priorities. Along with acquiring advanced drones, India must invest heavily in counter-drone technologies, electronic warfare and integrated air-

defence systems. Warfare is undergoing a rapid technological shift, and future conflicts will increasingly be shaped by innovation and adaptability.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), ZIRAKPUR

Modernise defence capabilities

Apropos of 'David's new slingshot'; given the challenges on its eastern and western borders, India must continuously modernise its defence capabilities. The defence authorities should be ready to procure and co-produce weapons in case timelines of indigenous projects are prolonged. Moreover, national security also depends on the ability to counter cyber-attacks, requiring innovation, research and indigenous technological development in the field.

RAJESH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Pursue pragmatic foreign policy

Refer to 'Trump compromises with Iran'; the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and the prospect of renewed negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme could perhaps have been achieved through diplomacy rather than a costly war. Instead, the conflict strengthened the very regime it was expected to weaken, while exposing the limits of military power in resolving complex political disputes. For India, the war served as a reminder of its vulnerability to disturbances in West Asia. Rising fuel prices, threats to maritime trade and concerns of millions of Indians working in the Gulf directly impacted our national interests. The episode underlines the need for India to pursue a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy, maintaining constructive relations with key regional players.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Back to the negotiating table

The 14-point peace agreement compels the world to reflect on the tragic consequences of an unethical and unilateral conflict. Ironically, after months of destruction, Washington had to return to the negotiating table, recalling lessons from Vietnam that military superiority alone cannot dictate political outcomes and the right to choose a government belongs to the people of a nation, not external powers seeking hegemony.

RAMPHAL KATARIA, KURUKSHETRA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Trump's Versailles – and a chance for peace?



NAVDEEP SURI
FORMER DIPLOMAT AND
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, ORF

There is delicious irony in the fact that President Trump signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Iran at Versailles on June 17. The terms of Trump's surrender at Versailles are a far cry from the conditions that he had unilaterally set for the Iranians. Like the original Treaty of Versailles in June 1919, this one will have a profound psychological impact — not just on the US but also on Israel, on the Gulf states and, indeed, on Iran itself.

For now, the MoU brings the illegal and pointless war launched by the US and Israel on Iran on February 28 to a temporary halt despite at least one major flaw. Iran's insistence on bringing Lebanon into the framework has gifted Israel a veto on the process and there is every indication that unless the Trump administration intercedes decisively, Israel will continue to play the spoiler.

Nevertheless, the framework agreement does give an ephemeral opportunity to all

parties to introspect and possibly reimagine a different future for West Asia.

For the US, the experience of the last four months has exposed the limitations of military power. Its inability to impose its will on a smaller and ostensibly weaker state could become a turning point in its foreign policy if it reads the right lessons.

One of those lessons is that unqualified US support to Israel not only ends up making Israel a destabilising force in West Asia but also pulls the US into unwanted conflicts. Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon since October 7, 2023, and the violence being unleashed by illegal Jewish settlers on Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank on a daily basis have turned a majority of Americans against Israel. A policy shift that links support to Israel with restraints on its behaviour and progress on the Palestine issue would enjoy domestic popularity and may actually incentivise Israel to explore models of peaceful coexistence with its neighbours.

Trump can also turn his attention to the somnolent Board of Peace that was set up with such fanfare to administer the ceasefire in Gaza. A majority of its two million residents continue to live in tents amidst the rubble left by Israel's bombing even as Hamas regains some of its lost authority.

In Israel itself, most com-



EXPERIENCE: The US-Iran conflict has exposed the limitations of military power. PH

mentators have called the MoU an unmitigated disaster. Some supporters of Prime Minister Netanyahu have rapidly swivelled from undiluted adulation of Trump to outright denunciation. Having built his career around a security-first, take-no-prisoners doctrine aimed at preventing a Palestinian state and projecting Iran as an existential threat, Netanyahu may no longer be capable of moderating his own positions. But national elections in October provide some of the other candidates the opportunity to present a different national security paradigm.

Would an Israeli leader have the courage to admit that policies pursued over the

Each of the principal actors is being forced to review its traditional assumptions around peace and security.

last few years have ignited antisemitism around the world and made Israel less secure, to say that Israel does not have to be in a stage of permanent war, that it can try building trust with its neighbours and with the Palestinians? Would there be a willingness to acknowledge that Israel cannot effect regime change in Iran, that it can neither disarm nor destroy ideologically motivated groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, and that its occupation of their land provides the essential fuel for their extremism?

Remember, it was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 targeting the PLO that gave rise to Hezbollah. And it was

Israel's divide-and-rule policy that deliberately strengthened Hamas as a counterweight to the Palestinian Authority. Can a new leader return to the framework established by the Oslo accords and recognise that even with a flawed Palestinian leadership, the pathway to durable peace in the region still runs through Ramallah?

Iran might be smug in the victory that it has achieved through a combination of shrewd strategy and a willingness to stand up to the combined military might of the US and Israel. Trump's need to extricate himself from the fiasco has enabled Tehran to extract important concessions that will help revive its struggling economy.

But as the more substantive discussions get underway, Iran too must do some soul-searching about its own policy choices. After almost five decades in power, can it stop acting like a revolutionary regime and start behaving more like a normal state? That means easing up on the repression of its own people, abandoning futile slogans like Death to America and Death to Israel, acknowledging Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state and stopping interference in neighbouring Arab states by leveraging their Shia communities.

Equally important, having shown that it can control the Strait of Hormuz, can Tehran now act in good faith and

restore free passage in the strait, as required under international law? By resisting the temptation to impose fees on commercial traffic, it could take an important first step towards rebuilding trust with the Gulf states, like the UAE that faced the brunt of its aggression.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, could signal its willingness to revive its dormant Arab Peace Initiative. The plan was first moved through the League of Arab States in 2002 and offered full normalisation of ties between Israel and the Arab states in return for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967, the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution for Palestinian refugees. An invitation to Iran to join the initiative could dramatically alter the geopolitical landscape of West Asia.

There are, of course, a million caveats. Irrational optimism of this nature can always be dismissed as wishful thinking, an exercise in self-delusion that ignores the brutal facts of Israel's expanding occupation and Iran's unrelenting hostility. But the latest conflict has left the region in flux. Each of the principal actors is being forced to review its traditional assumptions around peace and security. The opportunity for a reset lies in the churn, and few options would be worse than a continuation of the status quo.

When Kamaladevi spoke for Punjab's children in 1984



AMANPREET SINGH GILL
FACULTY, SRI GURU TEGH
BAHADUR KHALSA
COLLEGE, DELHI

In June 1984, when people in Punjab were struggling to recover from the shock of Operation Bluestar, the army was busy doing Operation Wood Rose, a village-combing operation involving door-to-door searches of rural households. A large number of devotees, who had surrendered before the army in the Golden Temple complex were being shifted from one jail to another in Punjab. Politics, press and police took an active interest in the fate of the young and old, men and women, who were arrested from the complex during and after Operation Bluestar.

While the potential threat to national security from each such detainee was being assessed in trial courts, there was one woman who was thinking and acting with the heart of a mother. She chose to ask questions that everyone else seemed to have forgotten to mention: What happened to the several children who were detained from the complex?

Children are not militants. Are they a national security threat? They were not aware of the imposition of Section 144 either. Can they be kept in the prison forever?

The woman was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988), a Kannadiga and grand old lady of India's struggle for Independence. She was a close relative of Sarojini Naidu and a great voice for the rights of women and children.

After the Partition, she worked for the settlement of refugees and revival of handicrafts. She was among the biggest forces behind the making of Faridabad as the new city for 50,000 refugees who had come from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Pakistan.

Kamaladevi was 81 years old when she petitioned the Supreme Court of India under Article 32 of the Fundamental Rights, seeking the court's intervention about the plight of children who were lodged along with convicts in the high-security jails in Ludhiana and Amritsar since June 6, 1984. Several of them had lost their parents in the army action in the Golden Temple complex. Some were in the jail along with their mothers.

The youngest of them was Babli, a one-year-old girl, who was detained along with her three-year-old sister Rani and their mother Swarn Kaur.



WELL DESERVED: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, avant grade activist in the political, cultural and social fields, receiving the Padma Vibhushan from President Zail Singh on March 28, 1987. FILE PHOTO: PIB

Surinder Kaur was another mother who had been detained along with her four sons, the youngest of whom was Jiwan Singh, aged five. Another mother was Jamila Khatun with her four children.

Senior journalist Gobind Thukral, then working with the *India Today* group, visited these children in two Ludhiana jails in September 1984. He met four-year-old Rinku, who had lost his father in the army action and whose mother was missing.

Thukral also met some children who were taking religious education at the Damdami Takshil when they were detained.

Kamaladevi's voice saved the already traumatised childhood of so many children of Punjab in 1984.

The CBI and the IB interrogated these children. According to some sources, little empathy was displayed in the process. Imagine! These were the children who had undergone severe trauma while hiding at the Golden Temple complex during the military operation. They had survived deafening sounds of heavy artillery shelling. At the tender age when they should be hearing lullabies, they heard blood-curdling cries of people wounded and dying. They had survived without food and water in the June summer heat and some of them had even seen their parents dying before their eyes.

Now they were lodged with 'known terrorists, criminals and anti-social elements', as reported by Gobind Thukral. Four young siblings — Jasbir Kaur (two years old), Charanjit Kaur (4) and their two brothers (aged 12 and 6) were sent on judicial remand for violation of Section 144 of the CrPC.

On September 21, 1984, Supreme Court judges, Justice O Chinnappa Reddy and Justice V Khalid, passed an order in the case *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay vs State of Punjab and Anr*. The judges directed the State of Punjab to trace the parents or relatives of the children detained in the jails of Ludhiana and Amritsar.

The three mothers mentioned above were directed to be released along with their children. About the other children, the court asked the jail superintendent under which authority their detention had taken place. The court directed their immediate release.

This chapter about the detention of small children and intervention by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay is not remembered even as a footnote in the memory of the June, 1984, events. Only someone with a mother's sensitivity like Kamaladevi could have been so alive to the plight of the children whom she had never met or heard about earlier.

She was not worried about

the tall talk of national security concerns and fight against secessionism, etc. She was not even projecting herself as a civil liberties activist or something similar.

She had devoted her life to the struggle for *swaraj* and after Independence, her life was devoted to art, handicrafts and the rehabilitation of those uprooted in the Partition.

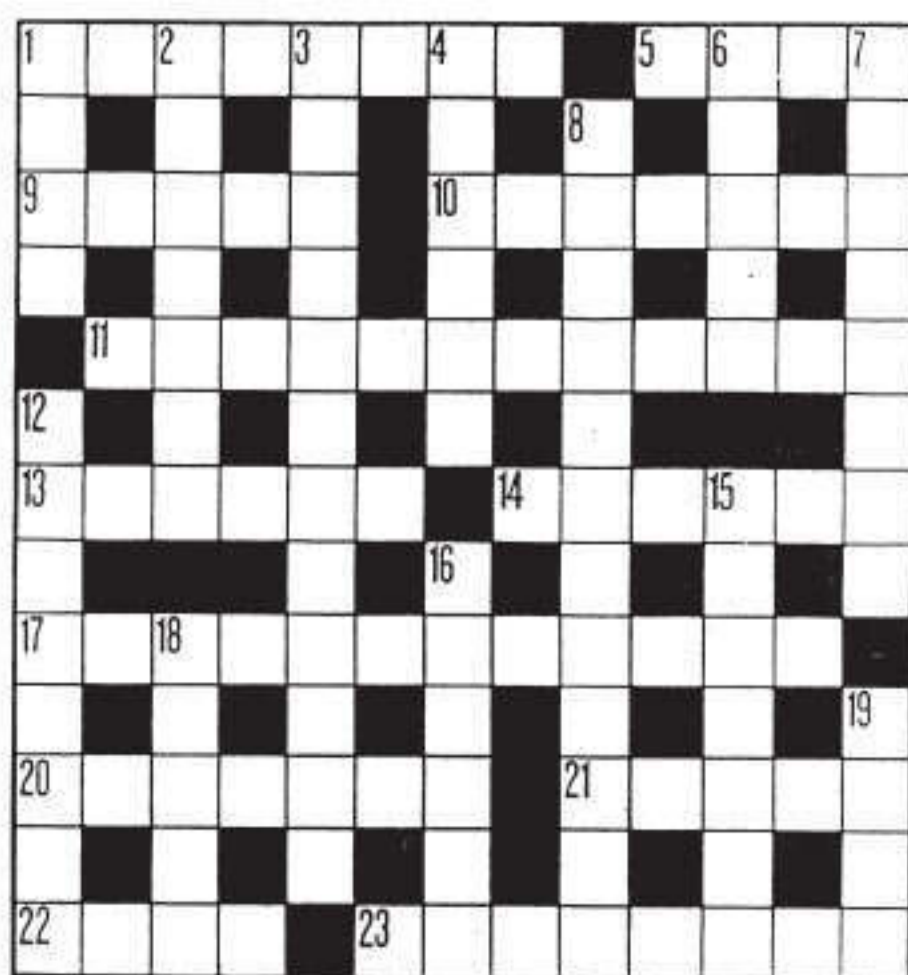
She was acting like a mother for the mothers and their children, securing a place for them under the sun beyond the iron bars of high-security central jails of Ludhiana and Amritsar in 1984.

Kamaladevi married into a family whose members had associations with Lenin and Rabindranath Tagore. She herself worked with Mahatma Gandhi. In fact, she returned from London to work with Gandhi in 1923.

Separated from her poet and actor husband Harindranath Chattopadhyay in 1955, she devoted her life to the conservation of Indian craft and the building of institutions devoted to art and culture. She was among the first Indian women to contest an Assembly election.

Her voice saved the already traumatised childhood of so many children in 1984. We should not choose to forget her gesture whenever the painful memories of June 1984 are revisited every year.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- US Atlantic state (8)
 - Exult at success (4)
 - Disunity (5)
 - Use up (7)
 - Greatly superior (7,5)
 - Concealment (6)
 - Fit to be eaten (6)
 - Fearful of the future (12)
 - Zero (7)
 - Ooze out (5)
 - Flower symbolising purity (4)
 - Perpendicular (8)
- DOWN**
- Container for cut flowers (4)
 - Told (7)
 - Meanwhile (2,3,7)
 - Stir up (6)
 - Course chosen for journey (5)
 - Coaxed with flattery (8)
 - White-hot (12)
 - Metal fragments of shell-burst (8)
 - Camp out in the open (7)
 - Alliance (6)
 - Part of flower (5)
 - Amphibious marine mammal (4)

Yesterday's Solution
Across: 1 Elucidate, 8 Scour, 9 Courage, 10 Sacred, 11 Demure, 12 Reversal, 15 Tricolor, 18 Bounty, 20 Renown, 21 Wanting, 22 Enter, 23 Deference.
Down: 2 Loose, 3 Circus, 4 Doggerel, 5 Escape, 6 Boorish, 7 Credulity, 11 Distorted, 13 Verbiage, 14 Dignity, 16 Onward, 17 Subtle, 19 Tonic.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1	7	4	5	3	6	2	9	8
6	3	2	8	7	9	4	5	1
9	5	8	1	4	2	6	7	3
2	1	6	7	5	4	3	8	9
4	8	3	6	9	1	7	2	5
5	9	7	2	8	3	1	4	6
8	4	5	3	1	7	9	6	2
7	2	9	4	6	8	5	1	3
3	6	1	9	2	5	8	7	4

CALENDAR
JUNE 20, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Jyeshtha Shaka 30
- Ashadh Pavishte 6
- Hijari 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 6, up to 3:47 pm
- Vajra Yoga up to 12:49 pm
- Magha Nakshatra up to 9:26 am
- Moon in Leo sign
- Gandmoola up to 9:26 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: SATURDAY 19:27 HRS
SUNRISE: SUNDAY 05:22 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	38	26
New Delhi	38	25
Amritsar	34	25
Bathinda	36	23
Jalandhar	34	25
Ludhiana	38	26
Bhiwani	34	25
Hisar	37	25
Sirsa	37	25
Dharamsala	28	17
Manali	22	13
Shimla	24	16
Srinagar	25	16
Jammu	27	28
Kargil	34	12
Leh	17	10
Dehradun	37	25
Mussoorie	24	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

South Africa's anti-migrant backlash

The country would benefit more if it stuck to its pan-African principles

When South Africa played Mexico in the opening match of the World Cup last week, millions of African fans ditched their normal pan-African solidarity to express support for Mexico. One meme showed an African man in a sombrero saying he wasn't supporting South Africa because he didn't want to take away a South African person's job – a send-up of a country that many now associate with xenophobia.

South Africa can indeed be a hostile environment for African migrants, especially those living in the townships. Foreign workers are regularly scapegoated for "taking jobs" and blamed for alleged criminal activity.

Sometimes, as recently, background antagonism erupts in anti-migration protests and violence. Vigilante gangs

take "justice" into their own hands, burning foreign-owned "spaza" convenience stores, attacking homes and even killing people. Too often politicians fan the flames and police fail to act.

South Africa is hardly alone in exhibiting hostility towards migrants. Economic disquiet, unease over access to housing and services, and fears of being swamped by other cultures have fuelled antagonism to foreigners in much of the world. Just this month in Northern Ireland, an attack by a Sudanese man unleashed three nights of rioting.

It is no surprise that these forces are at work in developing countries too. Lofty ideas of south-south solidarity often evaporate when it comes to people from different countries, cultures or religions living side by side. As long ago as 1983, Nigeria expelled more than 2mn migrants, including 1mn Ghanaians. The plastic bags they used to pack their belongings are still referred to as "Ghana Must Go" bags, though their exodus did not improve the job prospects of locals.

Predictable or not, the perception and reality of South African xenophobia is deeply damaging given the country's need to attract investors, skills and visitors. An estimated 2.5mn to 3mn foreign-born people live in the country, which, despite its manifest problems, still offers greater opportunity than almost anywhere in Africa. Still, that is only 4 to 5 per cent of the population, hardly high by international standards. That such a relatively small and mostly hardworking group should cause such friction says more about South Africa than about the migrants themselves.

One cause of hostility is endemic unemployment that leaves a third of South Africa's workforce and roughly half of its young people out of work. That is an extraordinary indictment of 30 years of policy from the governing African National Congress party, which has failed to create the conditions for job creation and has too often favoured redistribution over growth.

The fact that many migrants are more

Predictable or not, the perception and reality of the nation's xenophobia is deeply damaging given its need to attract investors, skills and visitors

employable than South Africans may be because they undercut official wages and labour standards, as is sometimes claimed. But it is also because they are often better educated than South Africans, a result of that country's failed education reforms under the ANC.

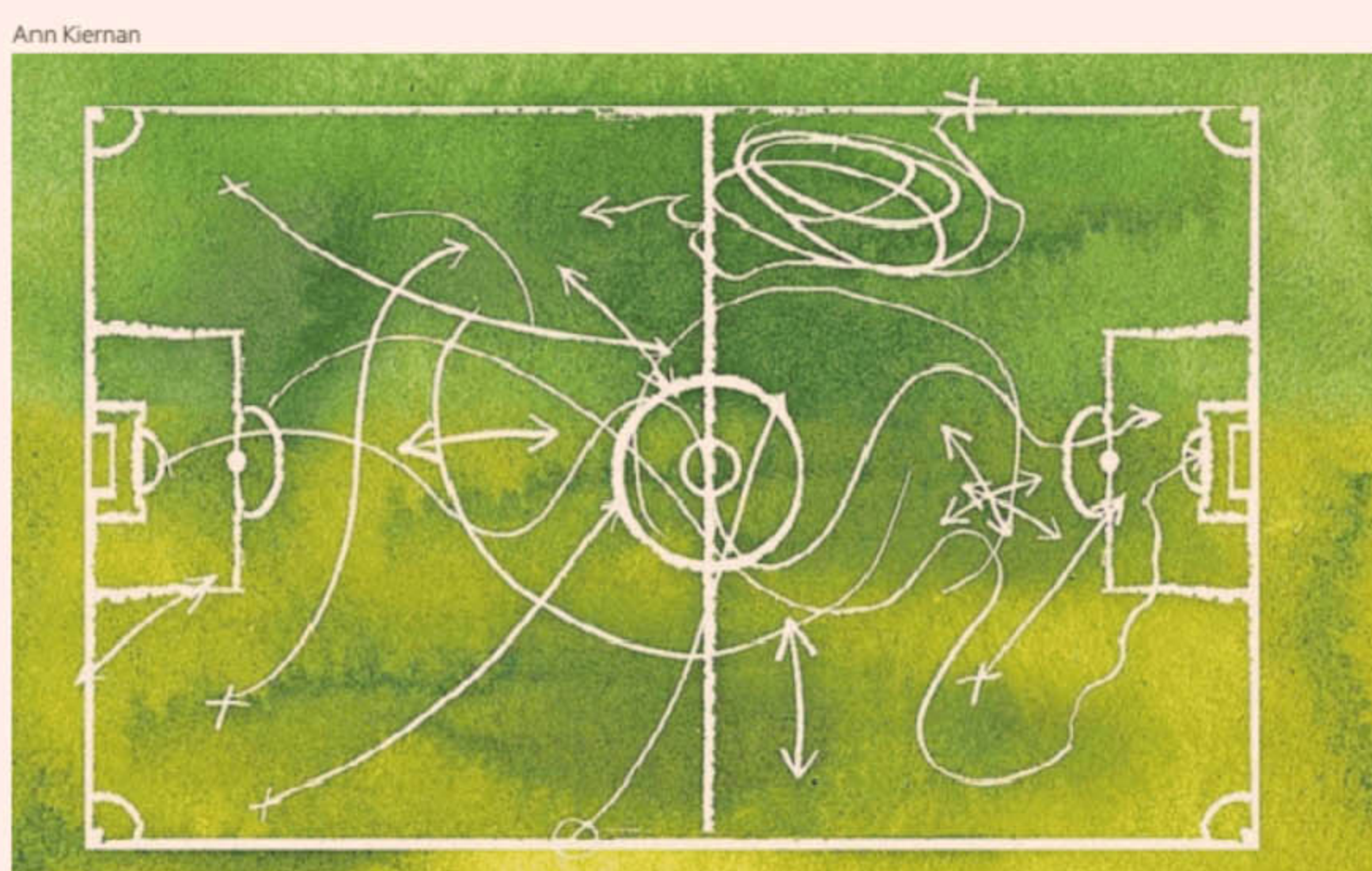
Like any country, South Africa has the right to protect its borders from illegal migration. But there are pragmatic reasons for it to stick to its pan-African principles. Like the other countries on the continent, it has committed to an EU-style free trade area including free movement of goods and services.

That is the best chance in decades to turn 54 fragmented economies into a single market of 1.6bn people in which scale and specialisation become possible. South Africa, whose telecoms, banks and supermarket chains are heavily invested in Africa, stands to gain. It is the job of South African politicians to drive home that message and to create the conditions in which their people are able to compete and flourish.

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Economics

A football manager gives the G7 a pep talk



Soumaya Keynes

aren't you lot a sorry sight? Instead of seizing your big opportunity to be bold on an international stage, you were utterly predictable. President Emmanuel Macron tried to make the G7 summit about solving macroeconomic imbalances, the Chinese demurred, the Americans disengaged, and the topic got kicked to the G20. This fictional football manager (hi) could start a slow hand clap.

Instead, you're getting a pep talk, inspired by the beautiful game. Because as your sport becomes increasingly zero-sum, you seem to be struggling. Your economic imbalances are bulging, accusations of foul play have reached fever pitch, and even the EU seems to be warming up for some kind of trade fight. Lucky for you, there's a more successful zero-sum

making it to the semis four years later.

Contrast that with what is going on in your game of the global economy. As a recent paper from the Bank of England notes, between 1945 and 1973 the heavy government intervention associated with the Bretton Woods regime meant that current account imbalances tended not to linger. Since then, without any formal adjustment mechanism, imbalances have been increasingly persistent.

More alarmingly, current account surpluses that the IMF deems to be "excessive" have become more entrenched too. Whereas in the 1990s about 15 per cent of countries with excess surpluses sustained them over the next five years, so far in the 2020s that share has risen to over 70 per cent.

In football, one would expect some teams to show up repeatedly in the final stages of the tournament. The game isn't a complete crashout; European and South American successes owe something to their strong football cultures and players with experience in fiercely competitive leagues. But the outcomes are unpredictable enough that everyone can dream of a win. When outcomes become too certain, researchers tend to find that audience numbers suffer.

I am here to tell you that in your sport of the global economy, outcomes are becoming too predictable. Economists are increasingly chanting that active industrial policy has distorted the competitive landscape, and that such large and chronic imbalances could lead to disaster. As the Bank of England's researchers noted, on the three occasions when global current account imbalances were higher than today, "economic turmoil or crisis followed".

So to those of you feeling smug about your winning streak, beware of ruining the longer-term health of the game. I appreciate that the message of co-operate and co-ordinate seems sappy. But look, pep talks are the place to dream big. I've delivered enough of these to know that my speech is more about making me feel smug than any effect on your performance.

Having delivered your group talk, I'll take you each aside for quiet chats. President Trump: you're not a strong enough player to avoid the reality that this is a team sport. EU leaders: try not to be paralysed by analysis. At some point you have to move on from diagnosing the problem and do something about it. Britain and Canada: stop trying to avoid tough choices by lingering in midfield. China: don't go in with your studs up. If the World Cup goes awry, fans will recover. Your pursuits come with much higher stakes.

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Letters

Governments face a huge risk if Anthropic gets hacked

In Martin Arnold's interview with Sam Woods (June 5), the chief executive of the Prudential Regulation Authority identifies cyber security risks – especially those posed by rapid vulnerability discovery enabled by Anthropic's Claude Mythos Preview and similar large language models – as his top concern for the banking system. Indeed, since its introduction, Claude Mythos has dominated the FT's cyber security coverage and the wider debate.

The focus so far has understandably been on how organisations and governments can gain access to Claude

Mythos and use it to identify and resolve their software vulnerabilities. However, there is an even bigger security risk that we also need to consider: Anthropic itself getting hacked.

In open-source projects alone, Mythos has already identified 23,019 potential software vulnerabilities, of which 1,596 had been disclosed to maintainers and just 97 were known to have been patched as of May 22. Meanwhile, organisations responsible for some of the world's most consequential systems are rushing to feed their codebases through Mythos –

from critical infrastructure providers and major financial institutions to vendors whose software is relied upon by governments and businesses worldwide. This means that Anthropic is becoming a concentration point for knowledge about unresolved vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure and enterprise systems – perhaps the most valuable concentration of zero-day vulnerability intelligence in the world. We have already seen the fallout when sensitive collections of vulnerability information are exposed. For example, NSA-linked cyber tools leaked by the group known as the

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BBC licence fee is at root of the broadcaster's woes

Matt Brittin's turbulent start as the BBC's new director-general reflects a problem far larger than a "radical downsizing" or bursts of cost-saving exercises ("BBC to axe hundreds of jobs in news", Report, June 16). The BBC is still trying to sustain a globally recognised media organisation using a funding model designed for a completely different broadcasting era.

For years the corporation has responded to financial pressure through rounds of cuts and restructuring, but these measures are failing to address one of the key underlying issues. The unique licence fee alone feels out of step with how audiences consume content, particularly when the BBC is competing for attention against global streaming platforms operating at vastly greater commercial scale.

And yet the BBC remains one of Britain's most valuable cultural exports. Very few broadcasters possess its combination of trust, legacy, heritage, production expertise and international recognition. Audiences around the world actively seek out BBC dramas, factual programming and entertainment.

There is a global demand for its content but the corporation has only BBC Commercial to sell it and sadly there is an annual shortfall. The BBC has yet to grasp how to monetise itself to full effect. So, rather than continually asking domestic audiences to shoulder the costs via the licence fee, the BBC should consider implementing a global subscription model through iPlayer. BBC One and the radio stations would be better placed as free-to-air and everything else be paid for by subscription. This model has the potential to treble the BBC's annual income while reducing the annual cost to domestic subscribers.

Brittin's challenge is not simply to steady the ship internally but remodel how the BBC is funded and sustained, without losing the qualities that have made it so valuable in the first place.

Nicholas Sercombe
CEO & Producer, Harry King Television, Chichester, UK and Los Angeles, CA, US

China's push west is visual storytelling at its best

The first thought one has, reading "Xi's last frontier: China's plan to transform its west" (Visual story, [FT.com](https://ft.com), June 1) in which Edward White, Nassos Stylianou, Jana Tauschinski, Caroline Nevitt, Dan Clark and Emma Lewis explain China's push to develop Xinjiang and Tibet, is just to marvel at the sheer daring, skill and effort shown by the Chinese to embark upon a plan to try and master their western boundaries in a project covering an



area "10 times the size of the UK". One's second thought is to ask but at what cost?

Zubayra Shampseden, the co-executive director at the Network at Uyghur Rights in Washington, offers an answer to that question: "I wouldn't say it's confidence on the part of the Chinese government: it is a historic cycle [of] strong repression, then the crackdown, then they start again to focus on economic development."

As a piece of journalism this is magnificent, not simply in its description of the extent and scope of this "visual story" but the manner in which it is told, using data visualisation to the full.

Alastair Conan
London CR5, UK

Brexit – 10 years on

Re your coverage of the 10th anniversary of the Brexit vote, both Richard Corbett ("Reversing Brexit – why the conditions look right", Letters, June 15) and Martin Sandhu ("Britain's return to the EU is only a matter of time", Opinion, June 15) are correct, given that about two-thirds of UK voters have consistently been saying that Brexit was wrong.

Of course, they do acknowledge the difficulties there would be negotiating a UK return to the EU, but for Corbett to claim that Martin Wolf (Opinion, June 8) had been disingenuous in stating that reversing Brexit is both unrealistic and unnecessary is puzzling when Wolf clearly did not rule out a return to the EU in the "longer term". And Sandhu, although he sticks to his prediction made at the time of Brexit, that within two decades the UK may be set on a course back into the EU, is more inclined to take this longer-term view.

Ali M El-Agraa
Emeritus Professor of International Economic Integration, Fukuoka University, Japan, London BR6, UK

An emotional rollercoaster this voter wants to avoid

Whoever is right – Martin Wolf ("A 'big bang' reversal of Brexit is both unrealistic and unnecessary", June 8) or your letters correspondent Richard Corbett ("Reversing Brexit – why the conditions look right", June 15) – the whole argument has, and had at the time, little to do with facts and everything to do with emotion. The new facts have changed nothing at the emotional level.

Today, 10 years on from the fateful vote, one notes how much British (not Europe's) media talk about the UK's relationship with the EU. It is as though the children of a couple that divorced acrimoniously want their parents to remarriage. As a steadfast Remainer, I ask myself do we really want to start the whole emotional rollercoaster again?

Paul Samengo-Turner
Berlin, Germany

Argentina's AI fix widens the gap it is meant to close

Javier Milei invites AI to incorporate in Argentina, proposing a new "non-human corporation" run entirely by AI, with limited liability and minimal regulation (Opinion, June 4). Yuval Noah Harari is right to warn of the risks (Opinion, June 8). But the proposal's deepest flaw is one neither piece quite names: it gets the purpose of corporate personhood backwards.

We grant companies legal personhood so that someone can always be held responsible – an entity that can be identified, sued and made to pay when it causes harm. Milei invokes the Dutch merchants who built Amsterdam, yet the limited-liability company they pioneered worked precisely because liability still sat somewhere.

Argentina's design keeps the half that shields its operators and discards the half that holds anyone to account: a corporation with no required human contact, built on code that need not be audited. That is not a person the law can address. It is a liability shield with the lights left on.

The remedy is not to bar AI from economic life, nor to settle grand questions about whether machines might one day deserve moral consideration. It is far simpler. Any AI permitted to own assets and sign contracts must remain answerable: traceable to responsible people, punishable when it errs, and auditable by those expected to trust it.

Argentina has spotted a real gap in how the law handles autonomous software. Its fix widens the very gap it means to close.

Yuko J Nakanishi
Founding Director, AI Alignment Policy Institute, New York, NY, US

Lessons learnt from Revolut's Irish success

The success of Revolut in Ireland is hardly surprising (Business Insight, June 16). It reflects what happens when an innovative, technology-driven challenger enters a market that has long been dominated by a small number of incumbent banks.

For years, Ireland's banking sector has suffered from limited competition, creating an environment where innovation has been slow and customer experience has often been an afterthought. Revolut has focused relentlessly on ease of use, removing friction from everyday banking and delivering services that consumers actually want. Perhaps most striking is that this extraordinary growth has been achieved with relatively modest advertising compared with traditional financial institutions. Its expansion has been fuelled largely by word of mouth, with satisfied customers its most effective advocates. It is now a rarity to find someone under 30 with a legacy bank account.

The next opportunity lies in business banking. Irish businesses continue to face a market that is, in many respects, conservative, outdated and lacking meaningful competition. If Revolut brings the same customer centric approach to this sector, it could provide the competitive pressure that has been missing and encourage legacy banking institutions to actually operate like banks, to innovate or risk losing further market share.

Ireland's experience should serve as a reminder that consumers reward innovation, simplicity and responsiveness. Where incumbents fail to evolve, challengers will.

Charles Cosgrave
Kilcloon, County Meath, Ireland

Mr Spock's wise counsel

Tim Page's letter recalling Commander Data's quest to become fully human (June 17) brought to mind another *Star Trek* part-human character. In the episode "The Ultimate Computer" the wise semi-robotic Mr Spock advises Captain Kirk that a computer is "a good servant but a bad master". Has there ever been a better summary of the benefits and dangers of AI?

Sharon Footerman
London NW4, UK

Correction

● An article in the Women in Business special report on June 16 incorrectly attributed a claim showing 70 per cent of widows leave their financial advisers within a year of losing their spouses. The origin of the often quoted figure is obscure and, as the article stated, widely disputed.

Opinion

Reaching a nuclear deal with Iran will be much harder than in 2015

Simon Gass

environment — need to be watertight. It's not just about stopping enrichment or disposing of enriched uranium. In the JCPOA negotiations there were dozens of other difficult issues. For example, given an intrusive inspection regime, could International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors visit any Iranian military establishment, and how much notice would have to be given? All these questions will need revisiting.

There will also be difficult domestic political debates about what is acceptable, forcing negotiators to sell any concessions at home. For many weeks during 2015, the US refused to budge from its opening position that there should be zero enrichment in Iran while the Iranians insisted there could be no reduction in the number of installed centrifuges. The political licence to move only came once those opening positions had been tested to destruction.

Iranian negotiators have historically shown a willingness to absorb prolonged economic and political pressure in pursuit of longer-term strategic objectives. A new generation of security-driven and nationalist politicians is

now likely to prioritise resilience and resistance over any rapid compromise. The political environment in Tehran has become much harder. Security forces — notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — are more influential, and many within the IRGC believe hostilities will resume sooner or later and that talks are merely a continuation of war by other means.

When you negotiate with Tehran, every concession has a price tag

Second, although Iran may agree to meaningful, time-limited constraints on its nuclear programme, it will not accept its complete elimination. It is too closely identified with national prestige and sovereignty — and it has cost Iran too much. Iran has seen what happened to countries like Libya and Ukraine that gave up their nuclear efforts.

Third, when you negotiate with Iran,

every concession has a price tag. In the JCPOA, Iran agreed to take frontloaded steps such as destroying the heart of the Arak plutonium reactor and stripping out centrifuges, in return for economic sanctions relief. But sanctions relief was never properly implemented and even when they were formally lifted, many companies were reluctant to engage lest there be a change of mood in Washington. Iran will not make the same mistake again: frontloaded concessions will have to be paid for with reciprocal upfront measures that Tehran believes are visible, durable and difficult for future US leaders to reverse.

I don't envy the negotiators. The memorandum signed electronically on June 17 by the US and Iran shows a lack of precision that will allow each side to interpret it differently and accuse the other of bad faith. This is especially problematic in an environment where neither side believes the other can be trusted to uphold long-term commitments. (In the past year, negotiations have twice ended with air strikes.)

Finally, these negotiations will be more complex than in 2015 because

more countries will demand a voice. Tehran now sees leverage over the Strait of Hormuz as a core element of its revamped regional deterrence — a shift that affects the vital interests of nations in the Gulf and beyond. Not many countries will be confident that the US can be relied on to protect their interests. Israel, in particular, will be tempted to torpedo an agreement it sees as disastrous. And Iran is seeking regional arrangements to reinforce its deterrence against future Israeli attacks.

Whatever they say in public, every country that has been dragged into the Gulf conflict has lost. But the signing of the memorandum suggests that neither Iran nor the US want to return to all-out war. If the result is a messy, protracted negotiation — with repeated extensions of the deadline peppered with ongoing spikes of volatility as Iran and the US jostle for leverage — that may not be the worst outcome.

The writer is the former UK ambassador to Iran and was the UK's lead negotiator in nuclear talks with Iran. He is a senior adviser to SC Strategy

Trump follows Beijing's lead on sovereign AI playbook

Winston Ma

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Nvidia chief executive Jensen Huang described AI as a five-layer infrastructure stack — energy, chips, cloud, models and applications. He argued that every nation must own the production of its own intelligence, naming the concept "sovereign AI".

What began as a pitch to smaller nations seeking digital self-determination has now graduated into governing policy for the world's two largest digital economies.

Earlier this month, President Trump said that the US government may acquire equity stakes in OpenAI, xAI and other frontier AI companies, with the American public becoming "a partner" in the AI economy.

This week, DeepSeek reportedly closed its first external funding round, which made it China's most valuable AI-only start-up with a valuation of more than \$50bn. China's National Artificial Intelligence Industry Investment Fund — the state vehicle Beijing uses to channel capital into strategic AI innovations — was a major investor and, notably, the only one to receive direct corporate ownership and voting rights.

Both the US and China have come to the same conclusion: AI is too strategically important to leave entirely to private markets. The sovereign AI race is officially making its way through Huang's stack, from physical silicon to pure intelligence.

The US move did not emerge from nowhere. I argued in these pages last

China and the US think the tech is too strategically important to leave entirely to private markets

year that the Trump administration's 10 per cent equity stake in Intel reflected a determination to preserve critical domestic semiconductor capabilities. The same goes for the proposed government stakes in OpenAI and its competitors, but a layer up in Huang's stack.

China's trajectory follows the same chip-to-model logic, but with a decade's head start. The China Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund has long backed the semiconductor champions that supply the domestic AI ecosystem. Now the parallel AI fund extends the state capital flow from the layer that produces the substrate to the layer that runs on it.

Consider what didn't happen after the Trump-Xi summit in Beijing last month. With Nvidia's chief executive in the room, the US partially cleared sales of its second-tier H200 chips to select Chinese firms. But Beijing is blocking the purchase. China has built DeepSeek to run on domestic Huawei Ascend clusters — and now the state is buying in, no longer pricing DeepSeek as a software company.

On AI, both the US and China have shifted from regulation towards direct participation. Governments have long subsidised or protected strategic industries. But what is new is their growing willingness to become shareholders in frontier AI laboratories — treating them less as software start-ups and more as critical national infrastructure.

That distinction carries profound implications. Ownership creates influence. Once governments become equity holders, these AI companies face complex questions that traditional governance frameworks were never designed to resolve: how to balance national security objectives with shareholder returns; how boards should navigate tensions between commercial growth and strategic priorities; and whether they can simultaneously serve global markets while advancing national goals.

Most observers still view OpenAI and DeepSeek primarily as competitors. They are. But they are also expressions of the same structural trend: the world's two largest economies showing a willingness to move state capital into increasingly strategic layers of the AI stack. The first phase focused on chips, the second on models. The next may concern the ownership and governance of intelligence itself.

The writer is an adjunct professor at NYU School of Law and former head of North America for CIC, China's sovereign wealth fund

Burnham and the search for hope

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



It isn't always the hope that kills you. Sometimes it's the lack of it.

When, in a few weeks, we look back at the short unhappy premiership of Keir Starmer and attempt to understand why it all went wrong, there will be no shortage of explanations. The early unforced error on winter fuel payments, the timidity of the 2024 manifesto, the lack of any obvious political touch, clear programme or serious interest in economics, the indecision, the poor personnel choices and, let's be fair, the lousy economic inheritance.

It's a long enough list to confound any leader, but beneath so many of these lies one central failure. Starmer was never able to convince voters, or even his own MPs, that he offered hope. The tone was set in opposition. In making Labour as small a target as possible for opponents to attack, the party demonstrated a fear that erased the reasons for optimism. The campaign was indeed the "hopeless election" many of us predicted. In ousting a hugely unpopular Conservative government, Labour could muster just 33.7 per cent of a depressed vote.

Even those who did not vote for Tony Blair will recall the sense of optimism that swept the country on his first vic-

tory. This time, few believed that things could only get better. Starmer then defined his premiership with a doomy speech in the Downing Street garden.

Voters are drawn to optimism. They want hope for the future. Blair, David Cameron and Boris Johnson all benefited from a sunny side. They seemed at ease with people, could laugh at themselves and evinced belief in themselves and the nation. In New York, you see it with Zohran Mamdani.

It has become fashionable to deride such intangibles as charisma or optimism in favour of "grown up" managerialism. It is only since Britain's governance became so chaotic that competence has become more than a baseline expectation. But politics also requires a feel for the country, the ability to tell a story and carry people with you. There is a reason so many remember Barack Obama's "Hope" poster.

Writing as voters go to the polls in Makerfield, we do not know whether Andy Burnham has, as expected, succeeded in his first step towards claiming the premiership. For Labour MPs he is not so much hope as the last hope.

More dispassionate observers are baffled by the "Andy" phenomenon. In the words of an old US attack advert, they ask "where's the beef?" But Burnham's key asset is a genial public persona. He offers voters permission to take a second look at Labour.

The man seems comfortable in his skin. He visibly likes the people he aspires to lead. He also manifests another aspect of hope: someone might



at last listen to those who feel neglected and failed by politics. In this, his northernness is crucial.

Burnham is sometimes compared to Johnson, another ambitious but ideologically vague political loner who relied on others to organise for him. It is notable that both built their appeal as mayors of major cities, overwhelmingly vibey jobs that require an ability to sell a positive story for your region.

Conventional wisdom holds that voters do not believe politicians and mistrust their promises. But the doubts do not dilute expectation and, aside from measures that hit them directly, voters are more sensitive to character than policy. Leaders who too visibly wear the weight of their office struggle.

Of course, a surfeit of hope has risks

Voters will want more substance than a cheery manner, but the alternative is despair and uglier politics

Is the world becoming more predictable?

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



Take short-term weather forecasting, for example. In spite of the chaotic effects of climate change, the best AI-enabled seven-day weather forecasts now match the quality of three-day forecasts made in 1980 thanks to better sensors, more data and vast computing power.

Might the same be true for predicting human-generated political and economic squalls?

We certainly have better tools than ever to try to extract the signal from the noise, even as the geopolitical climate becomes more volatile. "AI is truly a breakthrough when it comes to forecasting events," says Anthony Vinci, a former US intelligence officer, international affairs expert and author of *The Fourth Intelligence Revolution*. "I look at the world and no longer trust my personal opinion of what will happen. I need an AI tool to help me."

According to Vinci, there are four ways of trying to assess the probability of future events. A few individual human superforecasters are superb at such analysis. The collective intelligence of an organisation, such as the CIA

or a political risk consultancy, can also be applied. The wisdom of crowds can be harnessed through prediction betting markets, such as Polymarket or Kalshi, although these can be manipulated. And a trained AI model can parse these three sources and crunch the data for additional insights.

Vinci's company Vico Technologies, an AI-powered forecasting, simulation and scenario-assessment engine, is one

Bigger and better data sets and powerful AI models are helping to spot previously undetectable patterns

of several businesses attempting to do just that. Vico combines the power of generative AI models, operating within a human "harness", to sift swaths of data to assess the probability of future events and their second- and third-order effects. Such forecasts can be useful for investors, companies and governments trying to anticipate when

the Strait of Hormuz might reopen, for instance.

One recent highlight for Vico was its forecasting of the US attack on Iran. By February 19, Vico's model ascribed an 89 per cent probability of this happening by March 31, compared with a 63.5 per cent probability on Polymarket. The attack was launched on February 28. Vico claims its overall "Brier score", which measures the accuracy and confidence of predictions, is below 0.15, better than all but the best human superforecasters.

An increasing challenge for such predictive modelling is that the data fed into generative AI systems can be polluted, often by design. So-called LLM grooming, in which powerful interests try to poison the inputs and manipulate the outputs of large language models, can distort the knowledge base. The increasing use of synthetic data, created by AI, can also corrupt such models. In the worst-case scenario, this might even lead to model autophagy disorder (Mad), in which LLMs ingest their own output and eventually break down.

Carissa Véliz, an Oxford university

philosophy professor and author of *Prophecy*, argues that data should always be regarded as a human artefact and that predictions tend to be downstream from power. "We create a mirror and we position it to reflect one thing or another, but it doesn't reflect the whole world," she says. "We forget all the time that the map is not the territory."

Prediction markets, in particular, can be exploited by insiders and can even face attempted after-the-fact manipulation. In March, the Israeli journalist Emanuel Fabian came under extreme pressure — including death threats — to change his report that missiles had struck a town near Jerusalem, invalidating some Polymarket bets.

AI forecasting models cannot be gamed in this way. But their long-term resilience has yet to be tested. Vinci says they will constantly have to adapt to a fast-changing world, alluding to the Red Queen's warning to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

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Opinion

The New York Times

EDITORIAL

TODD BLANCHE IS UNFIT FOR OFFICE

The Editorial Board

A group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

PRESIDENT TRUMP has every right to select an attorney general who shares his policy views. Mr. Trump campaigned and won on a platform skeptical of environmental regulation, opposed to racial preferences and supportive of tough immigration enforcement, among other conservative policies. His attorney general will presumably share those views and lead a Justice Department that advocates them. Elections have consequences.

But Mr. Trump has no right to expect that the Senate will confirm an attorney general with a track record of disdaining the law and using law enforcement as a partisan weapon. Todd Blanche, whom the president nominated for the job last week, falls into this category. He has already damaged the Justice Department as a senior official there, and he has misled Congress. The Senate should reject his nomination.

Mr. Blanche served as Mr. Trump's personal lawyer in 2023 and 2024, defending him against two federal indictments and in a New York hush-money case. As acting attorney general since Pam Bondi was fired in April and as deputy attorney general before that, he has continued to put Mr. Trump's interests ahead of the nation's. He pursued nakedly political indictments, including against James Comey, the former F.B.I. director. Mr. Blanche helped design a proposed \$1.8 billion fund to benefit the rioters who attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and other Trump loyalists. He has spread falsehoods about the 2020 presidential election.

He signed an agreement that gives the Trump family and its businesses immunity from tax audits, which could save Mr. Trump \$100 million or more. Mr. Blanche has pushed out dozens of F.B.I. agents and federal prosecutors for doing their duty by investigating the riot and other potential crimes. He has violated his promise to recuse himself from matters in which he has a conflict of interest.

Mr. Blanche's nomination presents a character test for Senate Republicans, who will soon have to vote on it. Several of them recently displayed a degree of political courage by demanding the cancellation of the \$1.8 billion payout fund. The pushback has been a reminder that Congress can influence presidential behavior.

In a healthier political climate, dozens of Republican senators would immediately pronounce Mr. Blanche unqualified for the job. In today's political climate, the list of senators who may have the courage to do so is shorter yet plenty long enough to defeat Mr. Blanche.

The group includes three senators whose political careers Mr. Trump has helped end: Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and John Cornyn of Texas. It in-



ETHAN NOAH ROY

cludes Mitch McConnell, who is also leaving Washington, and Rand Paul, both of Kentucky. It includes Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. Ms. Collins is campaigning for re-election this summer by insisting that she can stand up to Mr. Trump. This nomination offers an easy test of that vow.

Mr. Tillis probably has the ability to end the nomination on his own. He sits on the Judiciary Committee, where a single Republican opponent could prevent the nomination from coming to the Senate floor. This spring

Senators shouldn't confirm an attorney general who uses the law as a weapon.

he helped force the end of a phony Justice Department investigation of Jerome Powell, the former Federal Reserve chair. With Mr. Blanche, Mr. Tillis has not yet shown similar courage.

Mr. Blanche has disqualified himself in at least four ways:

He has celebrated the Jan. 6 rioters who violently attacked police officers and the Capitol. When speaking to a conservative group in Texas in March, he boasted about the Trump administration's friendly treatment of those rioters. "If you look at what happened to the men and women convicted because of Jan. 6, by 5 p.m. on Jan. 20, every one of them was either pardoned or had their sentence commuted, OK?" he said, to applause. "So when

folks say you've done nothing, I say you have a very short memory."

Mr. Tillis should pay particular attention to that speech. He has said that the most important test for Mr. Blanche was whether he ever described as righteous the rioters who beat up police officers. If Mr. Blanche came "even close to saying that," Mr. Tillis said he would vote against him.

Mr. Blanche has misled Congress while testifying under oath. During his nomination hearing last year to become deputy attorney general, Mr. Tillis asked him whether he would promise that none of the department's investigations would be politically motivated. "I've got your commitment there will not even be a whiff of an investigation that appears to have a political motivation to it?" the senator asked.

"I commit to that," Mr. Blanche answered. He has broken that vow repeatedly. When the president has asked the Justice Department to pursue his political enemies, Mr. Blanche has been eager to comply.

The latest example is a frivolous case against Mr. Comey, who was indicted on a charge of threatening the president's life because he posted an Instagram photo of a group of seashells in the shape of "86 47." (The number 86 is slang meaning "nix," and Mr. Trump is the 47th president. In an unrelated case barring the government's attempt to remove a flag that said "86 47," a federal judge wrote this month that "no reasonable observer could have viewed plaintiff's display of the flag as a threat to the president's life or physical safety.")

This is the second indictment of Mr. Comey that the administration has secured,

the first coming in an unrelated case that a judge has thrown out.

Mr. Blanche has also pursued sham investigations against John Brennan, the former C.I.A. director who looked into Russian interference in the 2016 Trump campaign, and Cassidy Hutchinson, a former Trump aide who implicated the president in the Jan. 6 violence.

Mr. Blanche has violated Justice Department ethics standards. Shortly after he became deputy attorney general last year, the department's top ethics official told him he had to recuse himself from personal matters involving the president. Mr. Blanche, after all, had represented Mr. Trump in many of those matters. Mr. Blanche agreed to the request, a former ethics official told CNN, and signed a pledge to recuse himself for at least a year from all cases involving his former clients, including Mr. Trump.

Mr. Blanche might also have benefited financially from actions he has taken. He owned \$150,000 to \$485,000 worth of crypto investments when he ordered an end to the investigations into the crypto industry that the Biden administration had begun, ProPublica reported last year. He also shut down a Justice Department enforcement team looking for fraud in the industry. Mr. Trump, of course, owns vast amounts of crypto investments.

Mr. Blanche has debased the Justice Department and helped undermine its post-Watergate commitment to independence. He has not only helped turn the department into an instrument of Mr. Trump's will but has also said he sees nothing wrong in doing so. "That is his right," Mr. Blanche said of the president's investigative demands, "and indeed it is his duty to do that."

This disregard for the department's legacy of independence has damaged its reputation and effectiveness. The department has lost 21 percent of its lawyers since early 2025, from firings, buyouts and resignations. The most talented law-school graduates don't want to work there anymore, the American Bar Association reported. To fill prosecutor jobs, the department has waived the requirement that new hires have some experience practicing law.

A useful standard for judging Mr. Blanche's nomination recently came from Mr. Cornyn, another Republican on the Judiciary Committee and now a lame duck, after losing a Texas primary to Mr. Trump's preferred candidate. Mr. Cornyn said he wanted to be confident that Mr. Blanche appreciated his potential role as the nation's chief law enforcement officer. "I want to make sure he understands that," the senator said, "because the attorney general is not the president's private lawyer."

No matter what claims Mr. Blanche makes now, he has already demonstrated that he rejects that distinction. He views himself as the president's loyal enforcer. Mr. Cornyn and his colleagues need to say no.

The Deck Is Stacked Against Healthy Eating

Jessica Grose

An Opinion writer for The Times, covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

I SPENT last week close reading a special section of The American Journal of Public Health dedicated to ultraprocessed foods and corporate influence, and talking to some of the researchers behind these articles. While much of this information has been public for decades, seeing it all in one place is sobering, and maddening. As the days wore on and I started looking at the studies, I found myself experiencing the same kind of impotent, disgusted rage that I have felt when reporting on Big Tech.

Big Food and Big Tech know that the products they are marketing to children are not healthy in a variety of ways. Much as Meta, Snapchat and TikTok knew that students were using social media during school hours and did nothing to stop it, the tobacco giant Philip Morris — which owned Kraft Foods from 1988 to 2007 — used the research, development and marketing strategies it honed to sell cigarettes to hook schoolchildren on sodium-and-sugar-laden products.

We know as much as we do about the way the food industry targets kids with unhealthy food because of the trove of documents released by lawsuits against tobacco companies. Some of the papers in The American Journal of Public Health relied on a trove of over 19 million documents released through class-action litigation against the tobacco industry and digitized by the University of California, San Francisco.

Through her years of work analyzing these documents, Laura A. Schmidt, a professor at the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies at U.C.S.F., discovered that Philip Morris used what the company called "technical synergies" between its tobacco and food products. Her paper in

The American Journal of Public Health focuses on the development and marketing of Lunchables.

For those of you who weren't in elementary school in the late '80s, Lunchables combine processed meats, cheeses and breads in stackable piles in a plastic tray. These "synergies" included chemical additives and "flavor encapsulation technology," also used in cigarettes and other packaged foods.

"Philip Morris applied its 'better for you' reformulation strategy, first used to create filtered Marlboro cigarettes, to develop Low-Fat Lunchables in efforts to keep consumers worried about childhood obesity loyal to the brand" in the mid-90s, Dr. Schmidt's paper notes — but these "healthier" Lunchables weren't much more nutritious than the originals, even if they were lower in fat.

You can see food brands using similar strategies today to appeal to health-conscious, MAHA-adjacent consumers: taking the artificial dyes out of chips and cereals, for instance. But those products often contain other additives that make them hyperpalatable, thanks to a combination of sodium, sugar, fat and carbohydrates that also make them easier to overeat.

I had already been frustrated with how difficult it is as a parent to have my daughters consume mostly healthy, nourishing foods, without encouraging restrictive or disordered eating, or making packaged foods some kind of forbidden fruit. I cook at home nearly every night and read food labels before buying anything, and I still feel ill-equipped and trapped fighting multiple bad outcomes.

I also know that much of the food outside my home is junk, and I can't (and don't want to) control what my kids eat when they're at friends' homes or buying their own snacks. A 2023 study published in the journal Nature Communications indicated that "73 percent of the U.S. food supply is ultraprocessed."

In a Times Opinion guest essay from

September, Julia Belluz and Kevin Hall explained that "the root cause of America's chronic disease crisis" is "our toxic food environment." The endless array of hyperpalatable and always available foods disrupts our internal signals around satiety. "Our bodies weren't designed for a calorie onslaught, in the same way a house built for moderate weather isn't designed for a heat wave," Ms. Belluz and Dr. Hall wrote.

Luckily there are a ton of policy ideas that could improve our food environment. George Washington University's Global Food Institute just released a road map for reducing added sugar in American children's diets.

These suggestions include asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to further reduce the cap on added sugar in school and day care food like flavored milk and yogurt, taxing sweetened beverages, restricting the marketing to children of foods with poor nutritional value and encouraging the Food and Drug Administration to finalize a proposed rule that would highlight products that are high in added sugar.

Many people don't know how much added sugar is in everyday products like breads, cereals and pasta sauces, Priya Fielding-Singh, the director of policy and programs at the Global Food Institute, told me. Even if you don't give your children dessert, these foods can exceed the amount of added sugar recommended by the American Heart Association, Dr. Fielding-Singh said.

Dr. Schmidt, the U.C.S.F. professor, also mentioned improved food labeling as a policy fix that the United States should adopt. First, "we need a regulatory definition of ultraprocessed food," she said.

In the June 12 issue of Helena Bottemiller Evich's Food Fix newsletter, Ms. Evich quotes Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the secretary of health and human services, as saying the definition is imminent, and that once it is finalized, "we're going to go to front-of-package labeling . . . the model that we're looking at right now is a red light,

green light, yellow light."

This type of food labeling system, based on the amount of fat, sugar and salt, is in place in some other countries. Green means the food has the lowest levels, yellow is in the middle, and a food labeled red has the highest levels.

However "ultraprocessed" is ultimately defined, the food industry will most likely push back. In West Virginia, a state that was among the first to ban certain artificial food dyes, the International Association of Color Manufacturers sued and successfully blocked the law for the time being.

Though Mr. Kennedy has been promising to address ultraprocessed foods for years as a key part of his Make America Healthy Again movement, we have seen him make compromises before when his long-held beliefs conflict with the Trump administration's business interests.

It is also worth noting that Republican policies are making healthy eating more expensive and potentially out of reach for the poorest Americans. "The House of Representatives recently passed legislation proposing to cut \$141 million from the vegetable and fruit allowance in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children," the Bloomberg columnist Abby McCloskey wrote on Monday, showing that Mr. Kennedy's "eat real food" slogan will "ring hollow" if few can afford it.

Still, awareness of the downsides of ultraprocessed foods is rising. A majority of Americans surveyed, regardless of political party, said they believe that food companies should have to label ultraprocessed foods, be transparent about their harms and reduce the amount of sugar and salt in their products. "People in the United States broadly believe that UPFs are harmful and addictive and are aligned in support of a variety of potential regulations," the survey's authors note.

We know the problem. We know the solutions. We just need our federal government to actually work for us.

Big Food knows that the products it markets to children are not good for them.



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THE CONVERSATION | FRANK BRUNI AND BRET STEPHENS

Smaller, Sillier and Stupider by the Day

Frank Bruni: Bret, you just wrote a compelling column calling President Trump's truce with Iran less a deal than a debacle. I couldn't agree more. But doesn't it perfectly fit this presidency's pattern? Trump blusters about restored American greatness — about our country being the “hottest” in the world, whatever that means — while making it look smaller, sillier and stupider by the day.

Bret Stephens: Thanks, Frank. It wasn't an easy column for me to write, because I supported the war from the outset and thought the cause was necessary and just. But facts are stubborn things, as John Adams said. And the central fact of our time is that we are led — I am using that verb in the loosest sense — by a man whose idea of courage is bullying, whose idea of honor is knavery, whose idea of loyalty is convenience, whose idea of patriotism is self-idolization, and whose idea of principle is anything that suits his need and his pleasure. Now excuse me while I throw up.

Frank: The president as purgative. You've identified Trump's most reliable function. You've also flattered him — with “led” and “idea” both. Trump doesn't have ideas. He has only his instincts — base ones — and his insecurities, which are titanic.

Bret: Except his titanic insecurities never seem to sink him, only the rest of us.

Frank: Too true. I certainly feel like I'm drowning. I'm also struck by how telling Trump's overreach is. By how clearly it exposes those insecurities. A man confident in his country's affluence and ingenuity doesn't clutch the blankie of tariffs as tightly as he did, doesn't vilify immigrants in such an overwrought and indiscriminate fashion, doesn't demand to be augmented by swaths of territory the size of Greenland and doesn't summon latter-day gladiators to the White House to beam at him as they bloody each other. Happy Birthday, Mr. President.

Bret: I couldn't bring myself to watch. But I'm struck by the way in which authoritarian pretensions and atrocious taste always seem to go hand in hand. Maybe it's that moral ugliness tends so often to produce aesthetic ugliness. Whatever the case, the job of the next president will be to erase every vestige of Trump from the White House and any other federal property. Getting rid of Trump's name from the Kennedy Center was only a start; I look forward to seeing the East Wing restored to exactly how it used to be.

Frank: There's infinite erasing to do. It includes the Presidential Walk of Fame — that asinine new gallery in the White House that gives Trump's puerile take on the glories and follies of his predecessors. Then there's that infernal arch. But those gauche indulgences won't be the end of it, Bret. He has now crested 80, and as our news-side colleague Katie Rogers wrote this week, that bothers him intensely. He may soon get a midterm comeuppance. Then the clock on his presidency starts ticking more and more loudly. Imagine the self-tributes he'll need as medicine for all of that. We can file them under octogenarian onanism.

Bret: Er, yuck. But let me ask you about Iran: If this deal is as bad as I fear it is — marking an ignominious defeat in the Middle East — will it hurt Trump politically the way that Joe Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan hurt him? Or might Americans shrug and move on, especially if the price of oil continues to fall and the markets continue to rise? In other words, will Trump pay

no political price for his foreign policy fecklessness?

Frank: You've been eavesdropping on my nightmares again, haven't you?

Bret: Yes, thanks to Elon Musk's Neuralink.

Frank: Trump never pays the price he should. He makes sure of that. He's so shameless and emphatic — no, operatic — in his insistence that total failure is nonpareil triumph that most of his supporters question and then dismiss any serious stirrings of disappointment they feel. Gullibility is so much easier than skepticism, and it keeps you tucked comfily in your tribe. Trump also benefits from our thoroughly polluted information ecosystem: His loyalists dwell in a kingdom of propaganda to which you, I and this exchange of ours aren't granted access.

Bret: Nor do we particularly want to go there.

Frank: And Trump fleetly moves on to a new boast, a fresh provocation, a surprise plot twist. He understands that the audience — including critics like us — can't dwell for long on the last episode and the previous season if the story line has serpentine in uncharted directions.

Bret: True. Except you're also looking at a Republican Party that, ever so gingerly, knows that the country is souring on Trump

Trump's successor must scrub every vestige of him from the White House.

and also knows that, one way or the other, it'll soon have to move past him, too. The great question is, how?

Frank: There are hundreds of pages of implicit answers in a book that was published Tuesday. It purports to be the writer's soulful self-examination, but it's undoubtedly just as much an audition for a promotion, an epically bloated campaign pamphlet, as most political memoirs that appear during the prelude to the next presidential election are. Surely you can guess the title and the author?

Bret: “À la Recherche du Temps Perdu”? Oh, never mind. I'm guessing you mean JD Vance's exploration of his religious epiphany, “Communion,” the one that, in his mind if no one else's, makes him competent to lecture Pope Leo XIV on the finer points of theology. Amirite?

Frank: Ding-ding-ding! You get a free copy of the Trump Bible! The subtitle of the vice president's book is “Finding My Way Back to Faith,” but, of course, the proper translation of that is “Finding My Way Back to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue as Resident Rather Than Sycophant.”

Bret: Vance may be the only person in the administration who makes Trump look good. I mean, other than Pete Hegseth. Or Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Or Howard Lutnick. Or Linda McMahon. Or, well, my point is: better an honest hypocrite than a pious opportunist.

Frank: These are our choices? Repellent as Vance is, he's going to be fascinating to watch over the next two years. All vice presidents who try to trade up must figure out how to deal with the baggage of a boss they supposedly advised and publicly praised. Kamala Harris never managed to;

remember that disastrous interview on “The View” when she said she couldn't name anything she would have handled differently than Joe Biden had?

But there's baggage and then there's the landfill of toxic refuse that Trump will leave behind. Does Vance have the hazmat suit for that? Can he Houdini his way out of the cuffs Trump has slapped on him to yet another political identity? He already went from talking as if Trump were the Devil incarnate to genuflecting every time Trump shuffles within 100 feet of him. Now what? God help me, I suppose I'll have to pour myself a big chalice of red wine and do some serious communing with “Communion.”

Bret: Are you really going to read it?

Frank: As eagerly and raptly as I did “The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free,” which was Hegseth's most recent and totally essential literary outing.

Bret: As H.L. Mencken said, nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people. But I still can't quite believe this country would ever make Vance president. Then again, he's the automatic front-runner for the Republican nomination, and he proved in his vice-presidential debate with Tim Walz that he's as verbally dexterous as he is ideologically malleable. His Catholicism may also help him politically, since about half of all American Catholics identify as Republican. And he'll try to use his none-too-subtle opposition to the Iran war as a way of attracting a growing segment of isolationist conservatives.

All of which, unfortunately, reminds me of another apposite quotation, this one from Huck Finn: “Hain't we got all the fools in town on our side? And ain't that a big enough majority in any town?”

Frank: Proust, Mencken, Twain. Now you're just showing off, Bret. But I get it. Trump staged a tacky pageant of brawn and brutality (and corporate sponsorships!) with those birthday cage fights and their ill-tempered participants, including the contender whose victory speech was the out-of-nowhere proclamation: “Michelle Obama is a man!” You're trying to tug the pendulum of public discourse back toward civilization and sanity. Good luck with that.

In any event, can you give me — give all of us — something reassuring and positive to mull?

Bret: Here's hope: On Saturday, I was at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey to watch Morocco play Brazil in the World Cup. Two strong, proud, exceptionally skillful teams that played each other to a 1-1 draw. What especially moved me was how joyful and good-natured the fans were, not just inside the stadium but also in the long, sweltering lines to catch the bus ride back to Manhattan. All without a hint of malice, much less violence, toward the other side.

Once we were back in New York, we found ourselves at an impromptu watch party on 66th and Broadway as the Knicks clinched the championship after another unbelievable come-from-behind win, and the city erupted in spontaneous, almost indescribable joy. And so, for a couple of hours, soccer brought two continents together, and basketball brought an entire city together, and nobody needed to think for even a second about Iran, or Trump, or Vance, or every other hideous thing that occupies so much of our mind space. A fleeting moment, but one worth lingering over before regular programming resumes.

LETTERS

Trump and Iran: Mission Not Accomplished

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Trump Lashes Out at Critics of Deal as Details Emerge” (front page, June 18):

In the course of his failed “excursion,” President Trump has harmed the global economy, elevated Iran's power and standing and looked like nothing so much as the big bad wolf who huffed and puffed until he was out of hot air.

With his statement upon signing the memorandum of understanding that essentially admitted that he was capitulating because of unrelenting pressure resulting from the closing of the Strait of Hormuz, Mr. Trump has left us much poorer and weaker, the victim of his hubris and monumental lack of comprehension of this region.

Mission definitely not accomplished.

ROBERT S. NUSSBAUM
FORT LEE, N.J.

Fears Over Gene Editing

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Breakthrough in Embryonic Editing Stirs Debate” (front page, June 6):

This article rightly raises one bioethical concern with embryonic gene editing: eugenics. However, it fails to mention the much broader, perhaps more perilous, concern of many scientists: the potential to permanently alter human genes for generations.

There's a reason scientists have agreed not to open what some call a Pandora's box and why at least one scientist in China was jailed for doing so.

When scientists alter embryos at the germline level (reproductive cells), all changes are heritable, meaning they can be passed on to future generations. While germline gene editing could enable therapeutic interventions to persist for future unborn children, it could also permit devastating, irreversible, off-target mutations to persist generationally, too.

Can you imagine, say, being blind because a doctor in a lab altered your great-grandmother's genes 100 years ago? Or errors in gene editing causing untreatable diseases, childhood cancers or vulnerabilities to new infections in all descendants? The international moratorium on this type of research was the fruit of scientific humility and prudence. Pandora's box needn't be inevitable.

KATELYN WALLS SHELTON
CHEVERLY, MD.

The writer is a visiting fellow in bioethics at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington.

Threat to U.S. Science

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “The Assault on Science Just Got Worse,” by Melissa L. Finucane (Opinion guest essay, June 11):

We all need to be alarmed by the proposed changes to federal grant management. As a physician-scientist, I'm terrified.

Biomedical research in the United States is one of our greatest successes. Funding from the National Institutes of Health contributed to 99 percent of the drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration from 2010 to 2019.

One of the reasons for the success of N.I.H.-supported research is the emphasis on investigator-initiated studies — support for ideas that are vetted and improved by peer review to make sure the most promising research is supported.

The Office of Management and Budget proposal would change this approach and give political appointees the power to decide which grant applications would be funded. Can you imagine a MAGA appointee funding grants from a blue state or a “woke” university?

Based on our work studying inherited eye diseases, we recently reported a finding that challenges one of the main paradigms of human genetics and opens pathways for finding new treatments for all genetic diseases.

But would a grant application to support our work be rejected by an uninformed political appointee because it challenges existing dogma, or more likely because I wrote this letter? And do we even want to take that risk?

ERIC PIERCE, BELMONT, MASS.
The writer is a professor of ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Trump Got Spooked and Iran Stood Firm,” by Bret Stephens (column, June 17):

Mr. Stephens's excellent column gets to the heart of the matter. The danger is not simply that Iran survived — it is that Iran has learned that it can absorb attacks, wait it out and still come away claiming victory.

For decades, Iran has attacked America, terrorized Israel and used its proxies to destabilize the region. This was never just a military fight; it was a test of resolve.

When our president's strong words are followed by stepping back, our enemies see retreat and weakness, while our allies are left wondering whether America will stand with them.

The world is watching — and our adversaries are taking notes. They will remember whether America's promises mean anything.

(RABBI) REUVEN H. TAFF
JERUSALEM

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “‘Mistakes Are Made,’ Trump Says About Deadly U.S. Strikes on Iranian School” (news article, nytimes.com, June 17):

No reasonable observer would conclude that the U.S. bombing of an Iranian elementary school was deliberate. But “mistakes” may still entail culpability.

The law of armed conflict prohibits not only intentional attacks on civilians but also attacks on military targets when they are expected to cause disproportionate civilian harm.

It further requires that all feasible precautions be taken to minimize civilian casualties. The principle of precaution is not merely a rule of international law; its violation may also be an offense under the War Crimes Act of 1996, a U.S. law.

Although all the facts are not yet established, there are strong reasons to believe that the deaths of at least 175 people, most of them children, according to Iranian officials, may reflect a war crime rather than a regrettable but excusable instance of the fog of war.

GABOR RONA, NEW YORK

The writer is a professor of practice at Cardozo Law School.

A Call to Black Voters

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “How the Supreme Court Betrayed Black Voters,” by Mara Gay (Opinion, June 7):

I agree with Ms. Gay's assertion that Black American political power has been dismantled with stunning speed. Republican moves to gerrymander voting districts across the South are a frightening throwback to a Reconstruction era that gave birth to Jim Crow.

It's for that very reason that Black Americans must turn out to vote. One election is not enough. Black Americans must consistently vote in off-cycle elections as well as in state and local elections.

Now is the time for Black Americans to lead the path forward like never before. Show America that your voice will be heard at every election and at every town hall.

ANDREW L. NORTON, DALLAS

I Read Books My Way

TO THE EDITOR:

“A Summer Reading Bucket List? Plan on It,” by Melissa Kirsch (Inside The Times, June 8), misses the point of reading.

Why fixate on the number of books you've finished? No one cares, and least of all should you care.

Here's a reading plan I adhere to not only during warm weather, but year-round as well: I pick a book to read and begin doing so, getting as much out of it as I can, and ignoring as best as I can the siren call emanating from the countless unread books sitting on my shelves.

After I finish it — or give up on it partway through, which as a grown-up I'm entitled to do — I decide which book I want to read next. Completion compulsion is kind of foolish.


DAVID ENGLISH, ACTON, MASS.


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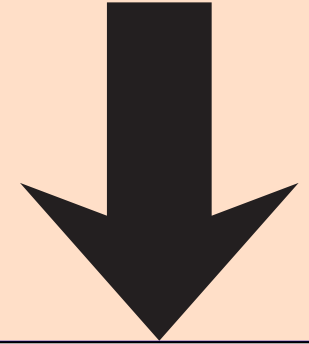
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