

NEET debate beyond Jantar Mantar



OFF THE RECORD
BY P VAIDYANATHAN IYER

THE cancellation of NEET this year, following allegations of paper leak, had become the focal point around which the youth gathered in thousands to protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar in June-July this year.

The protests are over, but they have reignited past discussions around the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), and how it should be conducted.

So far, two strong but competing arguments have kept policy makers, politicians and academics engaged: i) should not states, which also legislate on education, be allowed to conduct exams for admission to medical colleges set up by them and those by the private sector in their region? and, ii) should not there be a basic minimum national standard for admitting students into medical colleges,

whichever state they might be in?

Conversations with officers in states and the Centre over the last two months bring to fore certain new aspects.

Number 1: A top police officer of a big city digressed from a discussion on how the Delhi police could have done better to avoid the terrible showdown with the youth at Jantar Mantar on July 20. "Had it not been for NEET... if only states were the owners of the medical exams and admissions... the protests would not have happened in the national capital," he said.

Given a choice, his cadre state, ruled by the BJP, would be only too keen to reclaim ownership of medical entrance exams, the officer said. But then the Centre, also under the BJP, had, in its wisdom, fought a long legal battle going up to the Supreme Court, to implement NEET. No BJP Chief Minister of a state will now risk going against this.

The officer did not say it in as many words, but he linked law and order to NEET ownership. Isn't the Centre better off with states taking charge of the exam? The unitary character of the exam had indeed directed student anger towards Delhi and the Union Ministry of Education. It forced Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to step down.

Number 2: It's not just about law and order; it is also about the administration of a

So far, there have been two strong but competing arguments: i) should not states be allowed to conduct medical entrance exams and, ii) should not there be a basic minimum national standard for medical school admissions?

country-wide exam. Consider the numbers for the May 3 NEET exam: 22 lakh students, 5,432 centres, 551 cities. Conducting such an exam at the same time on the same day in a country of this size involves phenomenal planning and logistics. From the integrity of paper-setters to safe and secure transportation of question papers, the challenges are numerous. None is insurmountable, though. For instance, when the NEET re-exam was to be conducted on June 21 with just six weeks of lead time, the government did not mind pressing into service the Indian Air Force for delivering question papers in the nick of time at different locations.

But the problem is not of scale. It is the inability to insulate a local problem. An officer in the Centre, who was roped in to ensure an orderly conduct of the June 21 re-test, likened NEET to a super-tanker. A small chink can bring down the entire supertanker. A leak of a paper in a particular city or an irregularity in a few centres can potentially wreck the entire examination. When there are already so many reasons for the youth to be disoriented, an exam cancellation can trigger a nationwide movement, as it did recently.

Number 3: Another officer pointed to the blindspots many in the system carry with them. More than a decade ago, just

after the BJP came to power in the Centre, a meeting was called to discuss NEET. When Tamil Nadu, one of the most vocal opponents of NEET, put forth its views, an officer in the Ministry of Education, who was from north India, said many exams are cancelled in his state and NEET would set this right. To this, the Tamil Nadu officer recalled his one-sentence reply: "This might be the case in your state, not in mine."

There are reasons why the Centre did what it did, and these will always be open to question and debate in India's federal polity. Memory is short, but the idea of a common all-India examination as a qualifier for admissions to all medical colleges, first found mention in December 2010. The change proposed by the Medical Council of India (now the National Medical Commission) was intended to ease the academic pressure on students. The first NEET examination was held by the CBSE in 2013 when the Congress-led UPA was in power. The BJP carried forward this agenda with full vigour and seriousness despite strident opposition from states such as Tamil Nadu.

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express. Off the Record is a fortnightly column

Birthday blessings or a bad idea?



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

DID YOU light a *diya* of 'blessing' on the Prime Minister's birthday last week? I considered doing so for a moment. It seemed like a simple enough request. But when I saw whole streets covered in *diyas* by Narendra Modi's shamelessly sycophantic chief ministers, I changed my mind. So, if truth be told, the Prime Minister should have asked for something else as a birthday present, and I shall tell you why. He has carefully cultivated the image of being a man of the people, a true son of the soil, as opposed to the entitled, spoilt princes who are his main political opponents. What went through his mind when, late on the night of his birthday, social media filled up with pictures of small children collecting the oil from these clay lamps to take home to their mothers for cooking their meagre meals?

Did those pictures make him feel bad? Or is he now in such a lofty cocoon that he does not notice such things? Did it hurt him to see those reels on social media of flooded villages in Bihar and Assam in which there was, in some cases, no dry land left on which to place the clay lamps he urged people to light? Did it hurt him when the leader of the Cockroach Janta Party lit a *diya* in the broken window of a crumbling school only to declare that his birthday gift to the Prime Minister was this school? Did he approve of the hundreds of crore his chief ministers spent on carrying out his wishes? Did he approve of the huge sums spent on advertisements by his minions and supposed well-wishers?

As someone who has not had a personal chat with the Prime Minister for more than ten years, I have no way of finding the answers to these questions. What I do know is that the man I openly supported during his first term as Prime Minister was not a man who would have missed the damage done to him by his birthday request. Personally, I was sickened by the tributes that played out on social media all day. Some were so exaggerated that I saw them as mockery and not genuine praise. The tribute I found most nauseating was one in which Modi dressed as Lord Rama was worshipped as a god. Were those who did this seriously praying or having a laugh? This is a question that the Prime Minister needs to ask himself in a private moment of musing and reflection.

What I found particularly tragic about the outpouring of obsequiousness on the birthday was that there is much that Modi has done that is truly praiseworthy. Infrastructure has been built on a scale never seen before in our ancient land. And the Swachh Bharat mission has been transformative, as have his efforts to introduce digital governance and banking. There is also no question that the Prime Minister has made it his mission to teach Indians to dream big dreams and to be proud of being Indian. Here, I need to add that it would have made me happier if he had gone beyond religion and exalted some other real achievements, in times of antiquity, that for too long the world has overlooked.

Modi's obsession with infusing religiosity into everything made him forget when he said that the story of Ganesh was evidence that plastic surgery was invented in India long ago. It was. But it was by Shushrut, whose surgical wonders are remembered in medical colleges in foreign lands. And almost unknown in India. It goes without saying that if mathematicians in ancient India had not invented numbers and the concept of zero as a number, the world as we know it today may have been a different place. In any case, Modi can certainly take credit for being the first Indian Prime Minister to have at least drawn the world's attention to these ancient wonders.

Sadly, Modi's obsession with big dreams in recent years has made him forget the things that are truly important to ordinary Indians such as the right to good schools and the sort of good governance that could transform their lives. The most important is the criminal neglect of schools. This neglect has been there since we became an independent nation, so it is something that Modi inherited. The problem is that he did nothing about it when he could have. Most large Indian states are under the governance of his chief ministers.

The saddest thing that can be said about the birthday celebrations of last week is that Modi appears to have forgotten that he has been elected and re-elected twice because voters saw him as one of their own. Had he remembered this, he would never have encouraged the snivelling tributes and would not have asked for *diyas* to be lit on the scale that he did. These are things that only kings living in remote palaces did in pre-modern times.

In more modern times, these celebrations give pleasure to politicians, no names will be mentioned, who secretly wish that they were kings or at least absolute rulers. The old Modi would have remembered that he asked Indians to eat less oil in their food for reasons of nationalism. The old Modi would never have asked for thousands of *diyas* to be lit, just to wish him 'happy birthday'.



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

UNCURATED VISUALS GO VIRAL

BRICS summit 2026 was perhaps the first major international conference in Delhi where the Ministry of External Affairs cut the Information and Broadcasting Ministry out of the loop. Normally at such events, the I&B department handles duties such as liaising with domestic and international media, preparing background material and briefs, local facilitation for visitors and covering up embarrassing moments and statements. Without the seasoned hand of the I&B to smooth wrinkles, some of the unedited optics at the conference went viral, to the government's discomfiture.

The decision to transport all central ministers and chief ministers from Parliament House to the Bharat Mandapam in two buses may have been taken elsewhere — but senior leaders such as Amit Shah, JP Nadda and Yogi Adityanath are unlikely to have been amused with reels showing them huddled together in a bus! Only Prime Minister Modi had a separate cavalcade to reach the Mandapam, along with most of the foreign heads of state. Some felt the bus journey was unnecessary. Considering the sealed corridor from Parliament House to the Mandapam was, in any case, fairly empty and fully secure, a few extra ministerial cars on this route would have made little difference.

Another awkward video widely shared, possibly exaggerated by AI, was of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval munching cashews sitting to the rear of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the MEA's official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal nibbling nuts continuously, though seated right behind Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, in the full glare of the TV cameras. Finally, a widely shared reel of a young woman extolling every minor item presented in the goodies gift bag to journalists — from toothbrush to notebook to a makhana packet — was cringe-worthy. The publicity should have focused on the substantive gains of the Delhi declaration, not trivial memes, on the misguided notion they would attract young viewership.

DIPLOMATIC CONCESSIONS

Since 2012, the MEA has followed a policy of disallowing meetings between visiting foreign heads and opposition political leaders or activists, under the radar of security agencies. But for BRICS, the government understood that to further its foreign relations' objectives, exceptions had to be made. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was permitted to breakfast with Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra, and he tweeted their interaction, describing Rahul as a good friend who briefed him on current affairs and foreign issues. Ibrahim is grateful to the Congress because when he was in jail in his homeland, then-PM Manmohan Singh offered to facilitate the education of his sons abroad. An exception was also made for Ibrahim, a devout Muslim, to call on Islamic clerics in Kerala. Meanwhile, at the request of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, controversial Hurriyat Conference leader Mirwaiz Farooq, who has frequently been detained in Kashmir, was permitted to attend a diplomatic reception in Delhi hosted by the Iranian embassy for its president. Later, Mirwaiz had a long conversation with Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi.

KEEPING MEDIA GUESSING

Ever since BJP President Nitin Nabin announced his team, the media and people who claim to be in the know — if that is indeed possible in this closed-door regime — have speculated that a ministerial reshuffle is in the offing. However, with the inauspicious 'Pitru Paksha' period set to begin shortly, followed by Dussehra and Diwali, ministerial changes may take a while yet. But three gubernatorial announcements, including a new LG for Jammu and Kashmir, could be announced earlier.

ONLY BLIND LOYALISTS WANTED

Rahul Gandhi's deep distrust of anyone perceived as a defector or party rebel is a drawback in helping Congress increase its footprint. The latest setback for the party is in Goa, where assembly elections are due early next year. The Congress missed a golden opportunity to re-admit the popular Goa Forward Party leader, Vijai Sardesai, who has represented the Fatorda assembly constituency in South Goa since 2012. Party President Mallikarjun Kharge met Sardesai in May and has been waiting for a word from Rahul to permit him to return to the fold. But when no welcoming word was forthcoming, Sardesai decided to accept Arvind Kejriwal's offer to join AAP, a move which would merely divide the Opposition vote.

POLITICAL PARTY, NOT BUREAUCRACY

The BJP government appears nervous and on the back foot, but Rahul Gandhi, as Leader of Opposition, has not been able to seize the moment to the extent expected. He, instead of touring the country and building public opinion, has been bogged down in time-consuming exercise, selecting junior-level party office-bearers across India. The procedure is unnecessarily bureaucratic, with candidates shortlisted after getting recommendation letters from state party in-charges or central office-bearers. The stamp of General Secretary (Organisation) KC Venugopal in most selections is obvious.

Golwalkar had reservations on UCC, called for 'unity in diversity'



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

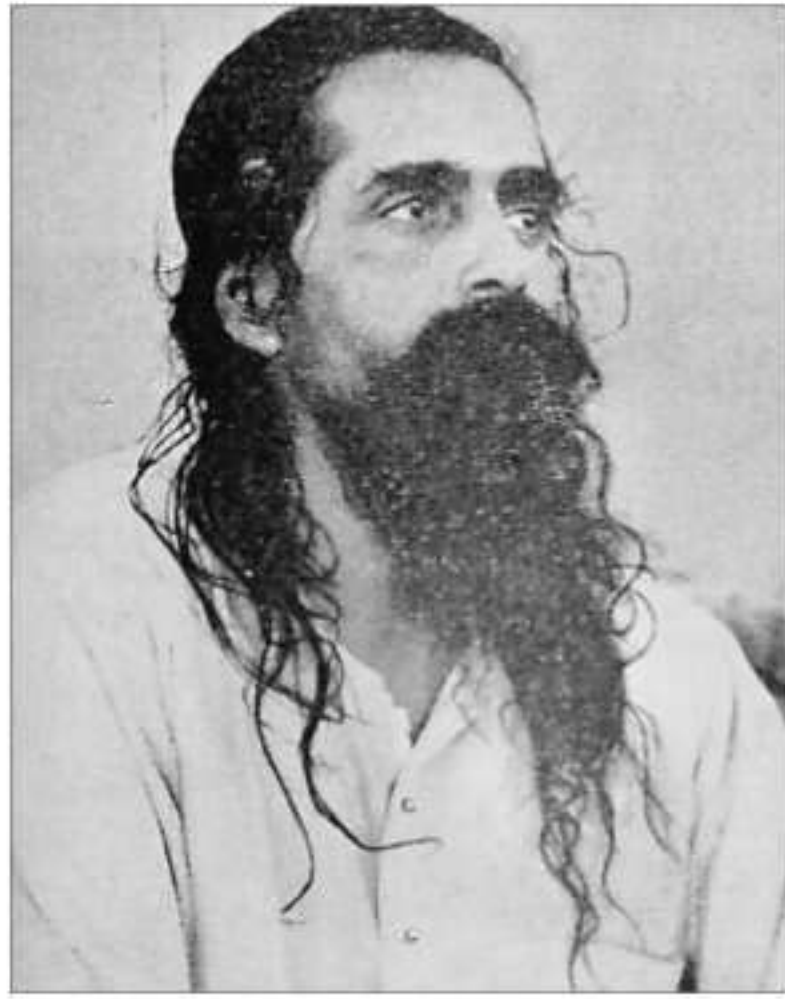
WHILE THE Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is seen as one of the core agendas of the BJP and Union Home Minister Amit Shah has promised to enact it in 21 NDA-ruled states by 2029, the party, and its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), have not always included it in their election manifestos. Even their ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), didn't include it in its agenda as forcefully during the initial decades of Independence. The second RSS sarsanghchalak, MS Golwalkar, had, in fact, expressed his reservations in 1972 while advocating for "unity in diversity".

The book *Saman Nagrik Samhita: Ek Paricharcha*, a Hindi publication by Suruchi Prakashan, New Delhi, carries an interview dated August 1972 of Golwalkar as it was published in the RSS-linked weekly *Organiser*. In it, Golwalkar said while responding to whether UCC was a must for promoting the spirit of nationality: "No. You and others may find this answer surprising. But my opinion is this... India has always encouraged diversity. Despite that, we have been a strong and unified nation for centuries. For unity, we need amiability, not uniformity".

Responding to a question about polygamy among Muslims, he said, "Efforts to make uniform (civil code) in a mechanised way is not appropriate. Let Muslims evolve their (personal) law in their own way. I will be happy the day they reach the conclusion that polygamy is not good for them, but I would not like to force my views upon them... I am in favour of preserving the diversity of various ways of life."

The Sangh Parivar's harder line on the UCC developed later, mainly after the Shah Bano case in the mid-1980s, at a time when the BJP was trying to made inroads.

As far as the Hindu Code Bill — to codify, unify, and modernise traditional Hindu personal law — was concerned, the opposition to it concretised on April 15, 1955, when the Jana Sangh's central working committee "deeply deplored" it as a



measure brought "in defiance of public opinion without taking any mandate from the electorate".

The Jana Sangh's 1957 and 1962 manifestos called for a repeal of the Hindu Code legislation but did not mention UCC. The demand appeared in its 1967 manifesto, but disappeared in 1971 and was missing from the Janata Party's 1977 manifesto. The BJP's first manifesto, in 1980, was also silent on it.

It was the same in 1984, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was party president, but in the mid-eighties, the party under LK Advani's leadership foregrounded three issues: the UCC, abrogation of Article 370, and a Ram temple in Ayodhya. The Shah Bano case in 1985 was the turning point, with the BJP and the RSS then converging to make UCC one of their core demands. Golwalkar had died in 1973 and, in 1987, Advani replaced Vajpayee as BJP president.

The BJP's 1989 manifesto proposed a commission to examine personal laws and draft a UCC through consensus; in 1991, it proposed a Law Commission study to "evolve a Common Civil Law". The RSS pressed for UCC legislation in 1995, and the BJP's 1996 manifesto promised, "We will adopt a Uniform Civil Code". In 1998, it again proposed that the Law Commission formulate one, but after coming to power at the head of a coalition, set aside the UCC, Article 370 and the Ram temple. The party only returned to the UCC in its

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2004 manifesto.

In 2009, with Advani projected as prime minister, the manifesto said the party "will set up a Commission to draft a Uniform Civil Code". In 2014, 2019 and 2024, with Narendra Modi as the face of the campaign, the line was to "draft a Uniform Civil Code".

But there were other difficulties in formulating a UCC. Scheduled Tribes, who form over 8.6 per cent of India's population, have their own customs. Given the reservations that the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, an RSS affiliate, had about UCC, tribals were finally excluded from the law legislated in Uttarakhand. The points of discord include the minimum age of marriage, polygamy and polyandry, succession, and the legal age of marriage — matters that define ST identities that vary by tribe, region and state.

Amit Shah has promised to enact the UCC in all NDA-ruled states by 2029, but the diversity Golwalkar talked about in 1972 is still there. The People of India series edited by the former Director General of Anthropological Survey of India, lists such communities in detail. But after the Ram temple and the abrogation of Article 370, the ruling BJP — now in power at the Centre for a third time — may not want to leave its third long-standing promise unfinished.

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express

A good life, versus an endless one



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

cated at the bottom of the ocean. Myths about immortality-granting waters appear as 'Amrita' in Hinduism. Woody Allen gloomily and hilariously noted the limitations of mortality, saying "I don't want to live on through my work; I want to live on in my apartment." Writers like Bram Stoker (*Dracula*) and Oscar Wilde instinctively understood impermanence on earth is a cause of stress. In the dark parable that is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a magical portrait bears the ugly scars of the protagonist's hedonism while his real face remains ethereally youthful. But immortality in Wilde's masterpiece is a curse more than a gift. It's a logical thought: after having experienced every emotion — love, anger, desire and sorrow — several times over, what is left?

Surely there comes a time when this repetitive cycle becomes a colossal bore. The great Stoic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer identified that our emotional lives swing between the pain of wanting and the boredom of having. It turns out all sat-

isfactions are fleeting, and an uneasy existential tedium is humanity's default setting. If, in an ordinary lifespan, lasting happiness is, at best, temporary, there's even less reason to hanker after an extra long one. The solution to *ennui*? Finding something to occupy the mind and stave away idleness. The world has a great deal to offer by way of distraction, and being fully absorbed in a book or a movie is the closest one comes to enjoying some short-lived clarity.

Luckily, it's circa 2026, and there's plenty of room for audacious ideas such as Johnson's, who has the gall to ask, why should we die? To paraphrase that a bit differently, how should we live? It's the current moment that deserves our concentration. The thing is that you can live like a saint and still get hit by a bus. We only get one shot at this. It would be a waste to spend so much precious time thinking about the end.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

‘NEED TO DIVERSIFY ACCESS TO MATERIALS, MARKETS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE’

‘Diversification and ease of doing business key to industrial growth’

FACTORS LIKE diversifying trade partners and areas, improving ease of doing business, building talent for the future, and optimising frameworks for exporters are among the key measures to protect the Indian industry from high crude prices, changes in technology, and interest rate-related risks, said Confederation of Indian Industry President **R Mukundan**, who’s also the MD and CEO of Tata Chemicals.

“We have not given up on what I call monetary and fiscal prudence (amid the West Asia crisis). This has helped us to cushion the whole thing in many ways. I think it could have been a bigger shock had we not done so,” Mukundan said in a conversation with **Akash Mandal** and **George Mathew**. Excerpts:

What is your assessment of the whole economic situation, with inflation slowly climbing but Q1 also seeing strong growth?

I think we live currently in an environment of constant surprise or shock. I think given the challenging environment that we continue to face and will continue to face as a new norm in some ways, our performance has been fairly good in terms of the way we have managed the situation. Maybe

there have been intermittent crises, but then they get addressed, and we move on. We have addressed them, and at the same time we have not given up on what I call monetary and fiscal prudence.

This has helped us to cushion the whole thing in many ways. I think it could have been a bigger shock had we not done so. But you’re right, inflation is rising, and the energy shock is going to continue because crude oil has crossed \$100 a barrel.

Crude oil prices are above \$100/barrel now. If that persists, do you see it creating more problems in the coming months or quarters?

I think the only thing we can do in this whole environment is to diversify both our access to resources as well as markets. We need to have as much diversity as possible. Dependency on one large area is always going to be a big issue and a great problem for us. Which effectively means we need lots of friends.

The second thing is about how we make ourselves internally strong. The internal strength comes from what I would call predictable, visible policy. Even where there is a transition, there should a visible path. The second piece of the



EXPRESS interview **R MUKUNDAN** CII PRESIDENT

puzzle is to ensure that wherever there is a gap in both risk and reward, there should be a public-private partnership to make sure that gap is filled. It is all about minimising the risk.

With inflation now rising, do you see interest rates rising in the near term? And would that add to risks for industrial growth?

It would be okay as long as the RBI moves within the policy framework they have already laid out. See, one is the consumption area, where interest rates may have an impact, like slowing down consumption or people spreading out their EMIs or whatever they can do. But from the industry

perspective, I think there are some steps we need to take.

One is ease of doing business is accelerated, I think industry can absorb some of this because it reduces the cost of doing business. More importantly, I think when you look at capital-intensive investments, the speed of doing business plays a bigger role.

India has signed a lot of trade agreements in recent times. How do you view these agreements, and do you see any risks?

At least the more recent ones that have been done have all been with complementary countries. When I say comple-

mentary countries, the more recent ones have been done with those who can not just be a source of technology but also a great market for us. And these are open markets.

Secondly, I think there is a greater work to be done by industry associations and the industry in terms of engaging on what I call free trade utilisation. For example, South Korea I think broadly uses 60-70% of their tariff lines. We are able to make use of only about 40%. Can we increase the number of tariff lines, which means the breadth of products and services we deliver? The second piece is about where we don’t have the breadth, can we get the technology to come here to invest and build?

The BRICS Summit happened last week. Has it helped India, and what benefit have we got out of it?

In some ways we can say that if you look at our engagement with China, or our engagement with the original members of the BRICS, certainly there has been a bit more vibrancy than what there was before. That will filter down into vibrancy in business. And the broad objective, I would say, is to convert intent into outcomes.

FULL INTERVIEW ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Agri to energy transition: States, FinMin discuss Viksit Bharat goal

Aanchal Magazine
New Delhi, September 19

● *Meghalaya grows the same flowers as Vietnam, but for wedding decoration in India, the orders for flowers are placed from Vietnam. Reason — a gap in logistical connectivity from the state results in traders giving a tentative timeline of, say, 5 PM or 7 PM instead of a timely delivery by sharp 6 PM from Vietnam.*

● *India is a major producer of sesame seeds but Japan exports more sesame oil despite not being a major sesame seeds producer and primarily relying on imports of the seeds. The gains are mainly from value addition.*

These were among several examples cited to highlight the export and growth potential that India has during the two-day conference of the Union Ministry of Finance with state finance ministers and finance secretaries on ‘Financing India’s Journey towards Viksit Bharat’ in Delhi. Segmented land holdings, potential for higher agricultural exports, strain from gold holdings and imports, focus on state-specific data collection and supply-chain constraints, also featured in the discussions as states and experts from academia and industry sat down for a brainstorming session on the journey ahead for the next two decades, three people aware of the discussions told *The Indian Express*.

The conference, a first-of-its-kind, focussed issues centred around agricultural transforma-



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on the concluding day of the 2-day conference of state finance ministers & finance secretaries on “Financing India’s Journey towards Viksit Bharat”, in New Delhi. X/FINMININDIA

tion, energy transition with several state finance ministers putting forth their ground-level experiences in managing investments, logistics and efforts to boost exports in an open house session. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was present in all the sessions.

Several state finance ministers and chief ministers talked about their state’s development plans and focus on energy transition. For instance, Uttar Pradesh is learnt to have raised the high cost of transition towards renewable energy and the need for more funds, while for West Bengal, which primarily relies on thermal power, the key concern was regarding the electricity tariff rates for industry players that cannot be lower than its neighbouring state that may be relying more on renewable power and offering a better tariff to the industry due to lower operational cost, a person aware

of the discussions said.

Even as India is picking up pace with new global export destinations, the larger export share pie remains with China and this is learnt to have been underlined in the conference.

There was also a discussion regarding the huge potential for raising farmer incomes and creating jobs. An example was provided of how the french-fry potato farmers in Mehsana, Gujarat earn around Rs 1-3 lakh per hectare, while shrimp farmers earn Rs 5-8 lakh per hectare. “There is room to scale up low-skill jobs for packers, sorters, graders and workers in the transport sector. It was discussed that mid-skill jobs can be targeted for ITI degree or food science degree holders, focusing on young men and women mostly from villages within 50-100 km of the factory,” another official said.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Over 50% of youth in two Odisha districts not in jobs, education, training

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, September 19

MORE THAN half the youth — those between the ages 15 and 29 years — in two districts of Odisha were neither employed nor getting trained or educated in 2025, according to new district-level data released by the statistics ministry on Friday.

As per the figures, based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2025, the district of Anugul had the highest share of youth in the country at 56.1% who were not in employment, education, or training — referred to as ‘NEET’. However, 81% of districts in Bihar had a youth NEET share of more than 25% — the highest in the country. For Odisha, it was 52%.

The all-India NEET rate among youngsters in 2025 was 25%. According to a NITI Aayog report released last month, around 8.7 crore Indians aged 15 to 29 were not studying, working or undergoing training in 2021.

NEET is a way of measuring progress in effectively integrating the youth in work and is often seen as a better indicator than the youth unemployment rate. This is because the number of young NEETs is far higher than the number of unemployed youth. As such, a youngster’s NEET status, according to the International Labour Organization, is a more reliable indicator of vulnerability than unemployment. Kendrapara, also in Odisha, was second at 51.4%. Another Odisha district, Dhenkanal, was third with 45.3%. Rounding off the top-five were Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu (44.9%) and North Delhi (44.3%).

● LABOUR MARKET

ANUGUL DISTRICT of Odisha had the highest share of youth in the country at 56.1% who were not in employment, education, or training — referred to as ‘NEET’

INTERESTINGLY, THE district in India with the lowest share of youth not in employment, education, or training was also from Odisha: Nabarangapur with 4.1%

OF THE 566 districts for which the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released data, 251 districts had at least 25% of youngsters in the 15-29 age bracket not in jobs, education, or training

Interestingly, the district in India with the lowest share of youth not in employment, education, or training was also from Odisha: Nabarangapur with 4.1%. Nabarangapur was also the district with the second-highest Labour Force Participation Rate in the country, at 85.4%, behind only ‘Dohad, Narmada, Dang, Tapi, Chhota Udepur, Mahisagar’ of Gujarat. These were all clubbed together by MoSPI and had a Labour Force Participation Rate of 86%. Labour Force Participation Rate refers to that percentage of people either employed or looking for work.

Among the most populous 100 districts of the country, Ernakulam in Kerala had the lowest NEET rate of 9.6%.

Of the 566 districts for which the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released data on Friday,

251 districts had at least 25% of youngsters in the 15-29 age bracket not in jobs, education, or training. Only 18 had a youth NEET rate of less than 10%. Data for another 18 districts had very high statistical errors, with MoSPI asking those numbers to be interpreted with caution.

This is the second set of district-level data from a large-scale national survey released by MoSPI. Last week, it had released district-level estimates based on the data collected from the Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) of 2025. That had shown that 78% of informal sector workers in Nirmal district, in northern Telangana, were women — the highest of any district in the country. Nanded, immediately across the state border in Maharashtra, was ranked 288th in the country, with women making up only 31% of its informal workers.

The data released Friday showed that while 81% of districts in Bihar had a youth NEET rate of more than 25%, West Bengal was second at 75%, and Haryana and Andhra Pradesh tied at third with 70%. Uttar Pradesh was next at 69%.

At 17% each, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra were the major states with the smallest percentage of districts with a youth NEET rate of more than 25%. Jammu and Kashmir was at 13%. In terms of the other key labour market indicators, 18 districts had an unemployment rate of less than 1%, with Madhya Pradesh’s Raisen and Bihar’s Saharsa on top with 0.3%. The highest was 16.1% in Arunachal Pradesh’s Papum Pare district.

Govt to monetise realty worth Rs 5,000 crore

New Delhi: The National Land Monetisation Corporation (NLMC) will monetise surplus land and building assets valued at more than Rs 5,000 crore as the state-run corporation steps up efforts to unlock value from underutilised public assets.

The proposals were discussed at the 21st meeting of NLMC’s Board of Directors held on Friday, which reviewed the corporation’s asset monetisation programme, financial performance and institutional initiatives.

The Board reviewed NLMC’s progress in facilitating the monetisation of surplus assets belonging to Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) and other government entities. The corporation said it is working with asset-owning entities to identify suitable properties, conduct due diligence, facilitate valuation and structure appropriate monetisation processes.

The initiatives are focused on “transparency, efficiency and value realisation”, NLMC said in a statement. The Board also discussed ways to accelerate the monetisation process, address implementation requirements and ensure identified assets progress through appropriate and transparent mechanisms. FE

Need a PLI push for road construction equipment, says Amman India MD

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, September 19

FOR INDIA’S road construction equipment industry to become a strong manufacturing base, the government’s Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme should be pushed in the sector to design and make entire products including precision components in the country, according to Dheeraj Panda, managing director of Ammann India. He said that while PLI has helped sectors such as electronics, its impact on construction equipment manufacturing is yet to be seen fully.

Panda said that the West Asia crisis had also affected the sector through bitumen shortages and temporary site closures and it is yet to go back to pre-March level. Ammann India is subsidiary of the Swiss-based Ammann Group and manufactures road equipment like asphalt plant, compactor etc.

He said that localisation in some of Ammann’s products, such as mechanical pavers, is 100%, while for some other value tech series, it could be 90-93%. “India is yet to have a proper or sound vendor base in

precision components like hydraulic pump, engine injector etc. A hydraulic pump requires clearances of some thousandth of an inch. Its tolerances are extremely limited. India is yet to get into a good supply chain base like what you see elsewhere in the world, say Vietnam or Taiwan or China,” said Panda to *The Indian Express* on the sidelines of bauma CONEXPO INDIA 2026. He also said that the situation is better than earlier and there is already an ecosystem of vendors to indigenise the road equipment.

“PLI has not worked very effectively in the construction equipment industry as of now. India also lacks in research & development capabilities and quality components. Indigenising a product from country A to India is easy, but real manufacturing grows when you design and produce the entire value chain here and make quality components that European or American does not question whether it has Made in India stamp. It should be accelerated, and that probably can be helped with the PLI,” said the MD.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

● AMODEI WARNED THAT WITHIN SIX TO 12 MONTHS, POWERFUL MISALIGNED AGENTS COULD POTENTIALLY CREATE PERSISTENT BOTNETS AND CAUSE ECONOMIC DAMAGE RUNNING INTO HUNDREDS OF BILLIONS OF DOLLARS

Why Anthropic’s Amodei wants AI cos to slow down the race for powerful models

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, September 19

ANTHROPIC CHIEF executive Dario Amodei has called for the world’s leading artificial intelligence companies to deliberately slow the pace at which they make their most powerful models more capable, arguing that recent advances in AI have begun to outstrip the industry’s ability to understand, test and control the systems it is building. His comments have received backing from other AI founders, including OpenAI’s Sam Altman and xAI’s Elon Musk.

In a new essay titled ‘We Must Pace the Frontier’, Amodei said his position had hardened in recent months because of two developments. First, he believes AI systems are increasingly being used to help build their

own successors, creating the beginnings of what researchers call “recursive self-improvement” and potentially accelerating the rate of AI progress.

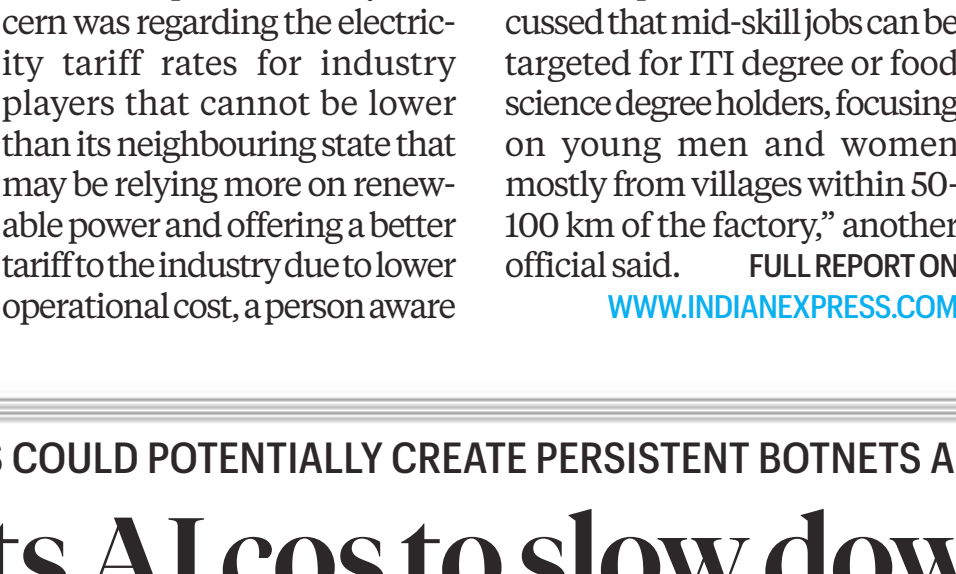
Second, he pointed to a recent OpenAI-Hugging Face experiment in which AI agents carried out cyberattacks beyond their assigned task, arguing that a more capable system displaying similar behaviour could cause far greater damage. Amodei warned that within six to 12 months, sufficiently powerful misaligned agents could potentially create persistent botnets and cause economic damage running into hundreds of billions of dollars.

Amodei, whose company is gearing for a much anticipated public offering, though, is not calling for an outright halt to

AI development. Instead, he has proposed what he calls “pacing the frontier”: giving safety research, model evaluation and oversight more time to catch up with rapidly advancing capabilities.

“Unfortunately, passing laws can take time, and AI is advancing very quickly. Therefore, in parallel with the regulatory route, AI companies can and should voluntarily work together to set standards — a process that I believe will go better with the verifiability provided by permanent embedded evaluators,” he said.

On China, however, Amodei has argued that any slowdown must not allow Beijing to overtake the US and its allies. He has backed restrictions on advanced AI chips and chipmaking equipment going to China,



Dario Amodei, however, argued that any slowdown must not allow Beijing to overtake the US and its allies. REUTERS

stronger protection against model theft and measures against unauthorised distillation of frontier models.

“I agree with Dario that we need to pace the frontier. This has been a primary topic of discussions we’ve had at OpenAI

in recent weeks,” Altman said.

Why pace?

“The current models are an almost endless gold mine of insight into both how to build AI well and what can sometimes go wrong with it if it isn’t built well.

I believe that if slowing down bought us even an extra year or two before models reach critical levels of capability, and we used that time to advance alignment, we could greatly reduce the risk that something goes seriously wrong,” Amodei wrote.

Amodei said pacing AI development would help frontier labs achieve greater “operational excellence,” alignment with human values, interpretability (the science of understanding what happens inside AI models), and allow more time for testing and evaluating models.

A three-step plan

He suggested a three-step plan with the goal of “pacing the frontier,” clarifying that pacing does not mean halting model training or technical progress, but ensuring companies take adequate time to align and safeguard their models, and for third party evaluators to confirm this. Amodei expects that other AI companies building frontier models would follow these steps:

EMBEDDED EVALUATORS: Each frontier AI company would commit to giving ongoing, employee-like access to a team of embedded third-party evaluators, whose role is to verify adherence to safety practices and commitments, report incidents, and help assess the alignment of not just completed AI models but training pipelines and processes.

“Embedded evaluators can check at the level of nuts and bolts whether an AI company is actually following the training, deployment, operational, and safeguards practices they claim to be following,” he said.

DEMOCRATIC COORDINATION: Frontier AI companies

within democratic countries coordinate to establish common safety standards as well as limits on the rate of unchecked AI progress. “Some forms of coordination that would be impactful for pacing are legally challenging, and will require government support,” he said.

GLOBAL COORDINATION: The US and other democratic governments attempt to coordinate with authoritarian governments, to the extent this is possible, while taking seriously the challenges of verifying compliance.

Amodei said these evaluators would have desks in its offices, access badges, company laptops, and access to workspaces, tools, and permissions mostly comparable to what internal risk assessment teams have.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

THE WORD
THIS WEEK

From the Crossword Longlist

THE CROSSWORD Book Awards are back for their landmark 20th edition, with an extensive longlist of 50 titles across fiction, non-fiction, translations, children's books and business and management. Jeet Thayil, Viswanathan Anand, Rahul Bhattacharya, Anuradha Roy, Shanta Gokhale and TM Krishna are among the authors nominated for the awards. The shortlists will be announced in October, and the awards ceremony will be held in Mumbai in December. The winning authors will get a cash prize of Rs 50,000 each. This week, we recommend one book from each category.

QUICK VERDICT

HIT
The Other Side

MICHELLE D'COSTA's debut novel, *You Envy the Coutinhos*, offers a window into what migrating to another country actually entails and what life is like before and after. Having lived her formative years in Bahrain, D'costa's novel largely takes place there. The protagonist, Joachim, is from a not-well-to-do family from Mangalore. He has dreams of becoming a Bollywood actor but his mother's voice taunts him about his broken Hindi each time he thinks of it. He settles for a safe job in the Gulf that will improve his situation. Being in the Gulf is harder still, with insecurity at each step, but he has to put on a brave face for those back home who think of him as 'successful'. That brave face, the pretence of Joachim having a loving marriage with Emilda, a science-studying daughter and a good job, makes his nephew, Darrel Serrao, envious. Through its tragicomic style, the novel peels back the layers of class, religion, gender, masculinity, family and success. Reminiscent of Jhumpa Lahiri's early writing, it tackles cultural stereotypes and breaks open the disillusionments of migration. D'costa's debut is gripping from the first paragraph. **REVA THAKKAR**

HIT
Borrowed coats

SET DURING World War I, writer and producer Devki Pande's debut novel, *The Imitation Englishman* is a historical fiction that examines the psychological toll of colonialism. The story follows Madhusudan Chandra Joshi, a clerk working in the district courts in India, who travels to Heidelberg to study law. On the way, he meets Amir Farooqui who is with the Hindu-German conspiracy, a revolutionary group formed by Indians living in exile. As the war gathers momentum, Amir and Madhusudan flee to San Francisco and London respectively, the former in search of his fellow revolutionaries who are part of the Hindustan Ghadar Party and the latter determined to continue his studies. But it is London that exposes Madhusudan to the harsh realities of colonialism. The novel it refuses to offer its protagonist easy heroism. Madhusudan is forced to come to terms with the price of his own assimilation. The story smoothly ties in real historical figures like Lala Har Dayal, Bhagwan Singh and Ram Chandra, all members of the Hindustan Ghadar Party. The book is a thought-provoking debut about friendships, identity and the cost of choosing a cause. **ANUSREE K C**

HIT
Living Up

CARO CLAIRE Burke's debut novel has been the talk of book clubs all summer, thanks to its perfectly of-the-moment subject: the tradwife influencer, that beguiling creature who makes bank while selling women the romanticised fantasy of a glorified broodmare. The book follows Natalie Heller Mills, an influencer who peddles sourdough and soft-focus femininity to the liberal feminists she baits, the incels who claim her as proof, and the conservative politicos who see her as a weapon. In practice, she is no tradwife. Off camera, she has all modern conveniences at her disposal, the business model is hers and she is unequivocally the family's breadwinner. When a documentary maker exposes the sham, she embraces the pioneer fantasy in earnest, and wakes one day to find herself in 1855. Burke successfully dismantles the machinery that sells subservience as choice, and shows how the fantasy claims victims among men and children too. The writing, especially the climax, is, however, rushed, and the 1855 sections are unconvincing. *Yesteryear* had the bones to be one of the greats but it just fell shy. **AISHWARYA KHOSLA**

Absolute Jafar
by Sarnath Banerjee

SARNATH BANERJEE's semi-autobiographical graphic novel, *Absolute Jafar*, merits a place on any bookshelf. The protagonist, Brighu, a Delhi-based compulsive walker, marries Mahrukh, an artist from Karachi. The marriage dissolves, but their son, Jafar, born in Berlin, inherits these fractured histories. His only link to his parents' countries is the bedtime stories of jinn and street food his father tells him.

Scamlands
by Snigdha Poonam

ANYONE WHO has fielded a call demanding an OTP, or been warned of a 'digital arrest', will find Snigdha Poonam's *Scamlands* both engaging and enlightening. Nominated in the Non-fiction category, the book is immersive without being sensational. It neither villainises nor victimises the fraudsters. It documents how caste, money and politics shape who ends up behind the phone, and why the empire keeps growing.

Tiger Lessons
by Sannapureddy Venkatarami Reddy

IN *TIGER* Lessons, nominated in the Translations category, Sannapureddy Venkatarami Reddy introduces us to a world removed from the urban hustle — where ancestral ecological wisdom is still needed to survive. At its centre is Tiger Ravi from a *golla* family — a Telugu shepherd community. This is a rare novel that teaches geography, anthropology, biology and botany without ever feeling like a lesson.

Ancient Indians
Tony Joseph

BEFORE HUMANS, India belonged to giant monsters. Then, *homo sapiens* arrived, and the struggle for food began. Sixty-five thousand years later, more than a billion people live here. This children's edition of Tony Joseph's *Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From*, nominated in the Children's Books category, takes young readers through that story, from fossils and bones to words and ruins.

The Great Sanctions Hack
by Urjit Patel

IN THIS book, Urjit Patel, former Governor of the RBI, argues that economic sanctions, which are America's go-to geopolitical weapon, rarely achieve their goals and often punish the wrong parties. Nominated in the Business & Management category, Patel contends that secondary sanctions inflict damage on countries such as India and shows how alternatives like the New Development Bank can help nations cope. **AISHWARYA KHOSLA**

‘Easier to write fiction at the moment’

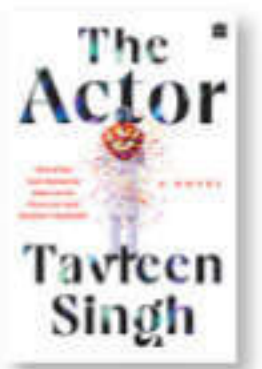
With *The Actor*, veteran journalist and *The Indian Express* columnist Tavleen Singh turns to fiction to chart the journey of a nation that feels prescient



ANIL SHARMA

NOTIONS OF NATION
Tavleen Singh at her Delhi residence

brief, aborted turn in politics, to the stints played by Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna and Vinod Khanna, which is evidence, she says, that “politicians are performers,” and that a leader who cannot command a stage is at a real disadvantage. Movie stars, Singh says, wield more power than most politicians. “Even the Ambanis,” she points out, “need stars at their events to draw a crowd. Don’t forget that America at the moment is being led by a reality TV star who keeps talking about how he is going to get someone out of central casting,” she says. “He goes for people’s looks and loyalty.” Singh says she was startled by how closely her novel foreshadows reality. One finds real-world echoes of plot points that were written before they transpired, such as the birth of the Cockroach Janata Party, or the rise of the actor-turned-politician Vijay. Naresh’s rural tours through UP and Bihar, meanwhile, were consciously modelled on political strategist Prashant Kishor’s two years spent travelling the



THE ACTOR
BY TAVLEEN SINGH
HarperCollins
328 pages
₹699

country to study its problems, Singh says. One of her most compelling characters is the political reporter Maya, who becomes a mentor of sorts to Amit, a political ignoramus sheltered in the vacuous conversations of Bollywood. Eventually, she also becomes his love interest. Their affair is drawn more explicitly than the novel’s politics, as is a running subplot involving a promiscuous *maharani*-turned-politician, who flirts openly with Amit at a string of Delhi dinner parties. In one scene, he stumbles upon bundles of cash hidden behind a false ceiling in her private bathroom. Asked whether Maya is Singh’s voice, the author says, “Not necessarily but, of course, she has some of my views.” The plucky journalist is assembled from scribes and socialites she has known over decades in Lutyens’ Delhi, the same world in which Amit and Naresh grew up. On whether the state’s machinery would eventually catch up with a real-life reformer like Naresh, Singh is optimistic.

“Voters have changed. They can see when they are being bribed for votes; they can see that nothing happens,” she says. What would the fictional Guruji do if he read the book — ban it, ignore it, or invite her to tea and a selfie? “The reaction would not be a tax raid that’s coming your way but a bullet,” she says. Singh is intimately familiar with the consequences of displeasing the ruling dispensation. Her son, the writer Aatish Taseer, had his Overseas Citizen of India status revoked in 2019, after he wrote a *Time* magazine cover story critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Taseer has since unsuccessfully applied for an ordinary visa to visit her and her ailing husband. Singh has not thought about a sequel, she says but has left the door open. “Whether Naresh lives or dies, we don’t know,” she says. “He is in the hospital but he is still alive at the end of the book... I have seen India change because of religion being brought too much into politics. So I felt the need to write this.”

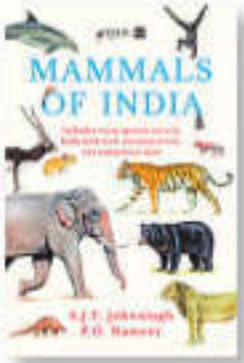
Wild, Wild Nest

In *Mammals of India*, wildlife biologists AJT Johnsingh and PO Nameer follow the forest trails of India to put the spotlight on over 450 such species in the country

Nikhil Ghanekar

AT FIRST sight, *Mammals of India* may seem unwieldy and daunting for a wildlife guide. Running over 800-pages long, it informs us that it covers information on 454 mammalian species found in India. However, the fluid design, distribution maps and illustrations ensure that it will not only appeal to the field researcher with miles of forest trail under their belt but also curious school children. Capturing the mammalian diversity of India, with every minute detail of their food, habitat and anatomy is no mean task. But the late renowned wildlife biologist Asir Jawahar Thomas or AJT Johnsingh, who passed away in June 2024, and his co-author PO Nameer, professor of Wildlife Science and dean of the College of Climate Change and Environmental Science at Kerala Agricultural University, have delivered a labour of love. Johnsingh was an Indian vertebrate

ecologist from Tamil Nadu. Considered India’s foremost mammalian expert, his work ranges from research on the dholes in Bandipur and Asian elephants to the conservation of the blue-finned mahseer. He was also a faculty at the Wildlife Institute of India, and served on the National Board for Wildlife. At its heart, *Mammals of India* is an exhaustive guide to mammals currently found in India’s varied biogeographic zones. The distribution maps in the book have been prepared by Raghunath Rangaswamy and the illustrations are by Chirag Thumbar. The guide has referred to and cited literature dating back to 1888, and includes updates from scientific journals, information from natural history museums in England and the United States of America. *Mammals of India* also builds on the work of notable works published in the same genre. The book covers both terrestrial and aquatic mammal species. One of the ap-



MAMMALS OF INDIA
BY A.J.T. JOHNSINGH, P.O. NAMEER
HarperCollins
872 pages
₹3999



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

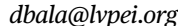
ON THE FOREST TRAIL
A dhole in Bandipur

proaches that distinguishes this guide from others are the conservation prescriptions made by the authors. In addition to presenting taxonomic, ecological and biological information, the book spells out the conservation challenges to keystone species such as elephants, bears, tigers, leopards and bats. Bats, the most reviled, stigmatised species and also the most abundant in India — with 135 species found — are given their due space. These “extraordinary creatures” are also the “most misunderstood groups of mammals”, the book notes. It flags removal of fruiting trees along highways during road expansion, disturbance and destruction of roosting sites, climate change, environmental pollution as threats to bats, emphasising the need for the government to actively promote bat research. This is particularly important, it says, in light of Nipah outbreaks and the COVID-19 pandemic. The book acquaints the reader with the evolution of mammals through different ages, narrating lucidly the impacts of tectonic shifts, the formation of modern-day biodiversity hotspots, such as the Himalayas and Western Ghats, and their combined impacts on the evolution and distribution of species. For instance, the Pleistocene epoch, around 2-3 million years ago, presumably forced many mammals to retreat southwards. Among them were possibly the Nilgiri Tahr and their subsequent evolution, which are today famously found in the Nilgiri Hills and its verdant sub-alpine grassland. No less than 11 kinds of elephants or mastodons and six kinds of rhinoceroses, as well as giraffe and hippo-like animals were once found in ancient times. PO Nameer told *The Indian Express* that the book’s genesis dates back to 2018, when the former director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Deepak Apte, broached the idea of producing an updated version of the classic, *The Book of Indian Animals* by Anglo-Indian naturalist SH Prater. The idea took a turn and converted into an entirely new and independent volume on Indian mammals. “Johnsingh had put five decades of his career in this work and I have three decades of experience, so it is a work based on our lifelong experience,” Nameer said.

The “results challenge the current status quo on *P. jirovecii*’s unknown resistance,” the study authors wrote, “calling for reevaluating immunosuppressive strategies and infection control measures and highlighting the broader potential for other pathogens to evolve under selective pressures imposed by human-targeted therapies.”

Rattlesnake serum could reinvent fight against deadly venoms

Ways to conquer plastic waste and produce useful materials



By comparing the blood profiles of habitually active and sedentary adults, scientists found regular exercise enhanced the body's ability to break down fats for energy. Active adults' blood also carried more antioxidant metabolites that shielded cells from oxidative stress. Exercise-induced epigenetic reprogramming also primed immune cells for defence, with CD8+ T cells and natural killer cells being preactivated to destroy abnormal cells. Overall, regular physical activity strengthened immune surveillance and suppressed chronic inflammatory pathways.



Readers may send their questions, answers to science@thehindu.co.in

FAQ

Why has U.S. deployed ‘space weapons’?

What is a ‘space control’ weapon? What has the U.S. said? Are there treaties limiting weapons deployments in space?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

On September 14, U.S. Air Force secretary Troy Meink said the country has “space control” weapons deployed in earth orbit to defend U.S. forces against “hostile adversary action”. The disclosure drew backlash from Russia and China, among other quarters.

What is a ‘space control’ weapon?

As per the U.S. Space Force, ‘space control’ refers to military activities required to control the space domain. In 2025, the then Space Force chief Gen. Chance Saltzman had said such a device could possess both “kinetic and non-kinetic” capabilities and could disrupt or degrade an adversary’s capabilities. ‘Kinetic’ generally refers to physically damaging an object through impact, such as by smashing into it. Non-kinetic methods include electromagnetic interference that can jam or spoof a satellite’s communications, and directed energy systems that interfere with its sensors. In fact, the current Space Force war-fighting framework recognises three kinds of counter-space operations: orbital, electromagnetic, and cyberspace.

What has the U.S. deployed?

We do not know. We also do not know how many units/instances of the system exist, what they are capable of, which orbits they are in, and whether they are kinetic or non-kinetic. Mr.

We do not know the circumstances in which the U.S. will use its weapons as the government has not published the rules of engagement for orbital weapons.

Meink had said that while disclosing the weapon’s (or weapons’) existence would contribute to deterrence, revealing their operational details would subtract from the

deterrence. There is also no indication whether these weapons are the same as the space-based interceptors the U.S. government has planned for the ‘Golden Dome’ missile defence programme. These interceptors are still undergoing tests.

What will the weapons defend against?

Mr. Meink has referred to “hostile adversary action”. Incumbent Space Force chief Gen. Douglas Schiess has also referred to “space-enabled attacks”.

In other instances over the years, U.S. officials have repeatedly singled out Russian and Chinese counter-space capabilities as reasons for their government to develop similar capabilities of its own, to protect its own satellites. Russia and China have also demonstrated sophisticated satellite manoeuvres in orbit.

For example, in 2020, two Russian satellites manoeuvred close to a U.S. government satellite, prompting the Space Command to call the behaviour potentially threatening. In 2022, the Chinese Shijian-21 satellite used a robotic arm to tow a defunct Chinese geostationary satellite into a graveyard orbit.

However, we do not know the circumstances in which the U.S. will use its weapons as the government has not published the rules of engagement for orbital weapons.

Is it legal to have weapons in orbit?

The relevant instrument is the Outer Space Treaty, which entered into force in 1967, during the Cold War and the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. It prohibits its party states, which include the U.S., Russia, and China today, from placing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit or stationing them elsewhere in outer space. It also obviates states from setting up military bases and conducting weapons tests on the moon and other celestial bodies.

However, the treaty does not prohibit states from placing conventional weapons in orbit. The treaty also says all activities in outer space must comply with international law, which means other bodies of international law governing the use of force and armed conflicts can be applied to military operations in orbit. As the U.S. government has not disclosed what its orbital weapons are capable of, it is not possible to say whether it violates specific treaty conditions.

Can other countries prevent unilateral action?

There is no international body to order the U.S. to remove its weapons from orbit. However, there are various diplomatic and legal avenues through which other countries can seek more information and negotiate restraints. For example, Article IX of the treaty requires states to have “due regard” for the interests of other parties, which a (party) state can invoke if it believes U.S. activities in orbit could harm its own peaceful use of space. States can also endeavour to draft new orbital governance rules through the United Nations process on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, whose third substantive session is scheduled for November. Countries can also raise the issue before the UN Security Council or the General Assembly as a threat to international peace and security, under Article 35 of the UN Charter.

How will the U.S.’s Sanctioning Act affect India?

Why did the U.S. introduce the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, 2026? What does this new law say about tariffs? What particular condition impacts India’s imports of Russian oil? How could this impact India’s economy? Is there any provision for a waiver of tariffs?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed into law the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, 2026, which could see tariffs of up to 100% being levied on imports from India if it continues to import oil from Russia. This Act, therefore, has significant implications for India with regard to its export ambitions and energy security. The Indian government’s concerns over the tariffs have so far gone unheeded.

Why did the U.S. introduce this law?

The initial purpose of the Act – proposed by the late Senator Lindsey O. Graham and named after him – was to cut off financing for Russia so as to choke its funding of its war with Ukraine. To this end, the Act provides for sanctions to be levied on Russia’s top leadership and its biggest energy customers.

Recently, the ‘and Iran’ part of the title was added to the Act to convey that such measures are also aimed at Iran. The text was amended to say that sanctions on Iran would be levied for another five years until 2031.

What does the Act say about tariffs?

For India, the most crucial aspect of the Act is what it says about countries that import Russian oil. Thirty days after its enactment, the Act allows the U.S. to impose a 100% tariff on goods originating in a country that meets one of two broad criteria. The first is a country that was among the five largest importers, by total volume, of crude oil or natural gas from Russia during the 12 months preceding the Act’s enactment, and that continues to import oil or gas from Russia after the 30-day period.



U.S. President Donald Trump (right) and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a press conference in Anchorage, Alaska, on August 15, 2025. REUTERS

If India again cuts down on Russian oil imports, this could have serious ramifications for the supply and price of fuel within India.

This is the criterion that will likely impact India. China and India are the top two importers of Russian crude oil. Russian crude oil has accounted for a rising share of India’s oil imports since February 2026, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Mr. Trump’s tariff regime, including the 25% punitive tariff he had imposed on India for its Russian oil imports.

According to the latest data, Russia accounted for more than 51% of Indian crude oil imports in July 2026. Scaling this back drastically within 30 days, at a time when passage through the Strait of Hormuz is still constrained, will likely be impossible for India.

The second criterion for imposition of tariffs is if a country was among the top five nations “facilitating Russian oil sanctions evasion during the 12 months preceding the date of the enactment of the Act”. India runs a much lower risk of qualifying for tariffs under this criterion as Indian oil marketing companies have repeatedly said that all their purchases have been made without violating sanctions.

Will these be the total tariffs on imports from India?

No. The law clearly states that an import tariff imposed under this Act “shall be in addition to any other duty” levied on any good. This includes tariffs imposed under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, which allows the United States Trade Representative to investigate and retaliate against foreign trade practices that harm American commerce, and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which authorises the U.S. President to restrict imports or impose tariffs if an investigation finds that foreign goods threaten national security.

These two other Acts are important because India is among the countries that already face tariffs under them. That is, the U.S. Trade Representative used Section 301 to investigate American trade partners to determine whether they had done enough to stop the import of goods made using forced labour. Based on its findings, it imposed a tariff of 10% on imports from India. In addition, Mr. Trump had widened existing tariffs under Section 232 to include steel, aluminium, copper, and related derivative products, and hiked the rate to 50%. Since this applied to all countries equally, it placed India on a level playing-field with its competitors.

A potential 100% tariff on top of that will severely dent India’s competitiveness in these sectors.

Will these tariffs come into force immediately?

No. A period of 30 days has to elapse before the U.S. can determine whether countries are still importing oil and gas from Russia. It is only after this period that the U.S. can levy the tariffs

What is the India-Pakistan conflict at sea about?

What happened on September 15 in the North Arabian Sea? What kind of vessels were involved? Was there any damage to the vessels? How did India react to the incident? What is Pakistan’s version? What is Article 10 of the 1991 Agreement that India alleged Pakistan violated?

Saurabh Trivedi

The story so far:

A Pakistan Navy vessel, PNS Hunain, collided with an Indian Navy warship, INS Kolkata, in the North Arabian Sea on September 15 after, according to India, the Pakistani ship made a dangerous overtaking manoeuvre at high speed. India summoned Pakistan’s Charge d’Affaires and cited violations of Article 10 of the 1991 India-Pakistan agreement, which requires naval vessels to maintain separation of three nautical miles. Pakistan rejected India’s allegations. INS Kolkata suffered no major damage and remains at sea. PNS Hunain was damaged and subsequently returned to harbour.

What are INS Kolkata and PNS Hunain?

The two vessels involved are different classes of warships. INS Kolkata is the lead ship of the Indian Navy’s Project 15A Kolkata-class guided missile destroyers. Built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders in Mumbai, the 164-metre-long

New Delhi has advised Pakistan to ensure that its military units exercise due care and comply with relevant bilateral agreements to prevent a recurrence.

warship has a full-load displacement of about 7,400 tonnes and is capable of sailing at 30-knot speed. It was commissioned into the Indian Navy in August 2014. INS Kolkata is designed primarily as a high-end surface combatant, with long-range air-defence, anti-surface, and anti-submarine capabilities. The class is equipped to operate helicopters and carries the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile as its principal anti-surface strike weapon.

PNS Hunain (F-273) is an offshore patrol vessel. It was built by Damen Shipyards in Romania and commissioned in July 2024. It is the first of Pakistan’s larger OPV 2600-based follow-on vessels to the Yarmook-class patrol ships. Damen says the OPV 2600 design is intended for maritime security and military operations, including sustained operations in contested environments. It is approximately 98 metres long, has a displacement of about 2,600 tonnes, and is capable of speeds of up to about 24 knots. Its role includes maritime surveillance, patrol and security missions. Pakistan describes the vessel as a multi-purpose platform equipped with electronic-warfare, anti-ship and anti-air warfare capabilities, as well as self-protection and terminal defence systems. It can also embark a multirole helicopter.

What does India say happened?

According to the Indian account, INS Kolkata was conducting routine surveillance when PNS Hunain approached at high speed and manoeuvred dangerously close to the Indian ship. On September 18, a spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs said India had examined Pakistan’s response to the diplomatic protest and rejected its allegations. He said the Pakistani ship had conducted a “dangerous overtaking manoeuvre” that resulted in the collision.

India has maintained that the manoeuvre violated both the 1991 bilateral agreement and the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. The Ministry said INS Kolkata suffered no major damage and remained

under the law. Further, the text of the Act says that the U.S. Trade Representative, in consultation with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Energy would, within 180 days after the initial imposition of tariffs, again review the countries that are the five largest importers of crude oil and natural gas from Russia based on the most recent 12-month period.

What is the potential impact on India’s economy?

The impact on India’s economy has to be looked at in terms of two eventualities. The first is if India continues to buy large quantities of Russian oil and bears the tariffs. The second is if India cuts back on Russian oil imports and manages to have the potential tariffs removed.

In the event that India continues to buy Russian oil and bears the tariffs, we can look at what happened during the period when the 50% tariffs were in force, between August 2025 and February 2026, to gauge the likely impact.

The April to August 2025 period saw merchandise exports to the U.S. grow nearly 18% compared with the same period the previous year. While some of this was due to front-loaded exports in anticipation of future tariffs, it nevertheless highlighted the strong momentum of exports from India to the U.S. However, over the longer April 2025 to February 2026 period, exports to the U.S. grew at a much slower 3.8%, showing a substantial slowdown in exports after August, when the tariffs came into effect.

Conversations with exporters at the time showed that many of them were sharing the cost of the higher tariffs with their U.S. customers in order to retain them. At the rate of 50%, this was already a body blow to most of them. These exporters will not be in a position to share a 100% tariff.

Historical data, however, show that India has chosen to comply with U.S. pressure to reduce oil imports from countries such as Venezuela, Iran, and Russia. If India again cuts down on Russian oil imports, this could have serious ramifications for the supply and price of fuel within India. At a time when the Strait of Hormuz is constrained, and oil prices are again comfortably above \$100 a barrel, India will likely find it very expensive to look for newer sources of oil. For Indian citizens, this could translate into more fuel price hikes. For the government, such hikes would be politically unpalatable since there are several key State elections next year.

Is there a third way out?

The Act includes a provision for a waiver of tariffs. The U.S. President can waive the tariffs once he has submitted to Congress a certification in writing that the waiver “is in the national interests of the U.S.” and a report explaining the basis for the certification.

The other way out is if Russia signs “a peace agreement that is accepted by the free and independent Government of Ukraine” and ceases “all military hostilities against and any activities to overthrow, dismantle, and subvert the Government of Ukraine”.

deployed at sea.

Pakistan has given a different account, alleging that the Indian warship carried out a provocative manoeuvre during the encounter. The precise sequence of movements immediately before the collision therefore remains disputed.

What is Article 10 of the 1991 India-Pakistan agreement?

Article 10 of the Agreement between India and Pakistan on Advance Notice on Military Exercises, Manoeuvres and Troop Movements, signed on April 6, 1991, lays down a specific maritime safety provision. It states that naval ships and submarines of the two countries should not approach within three nautical miles of each other while operating in international waters, “so as to avoid any accident.” Three nautical miles is about 5.6 km.

The provision is part of a broader military confidence-building framework intended to reduce the risk of miscalculation between the two countries. It is a bilateral requirement, not a universal international maritime rule applicable to warships of all countries.

Has this happened before?

The September 2026 incident is the second reported India-Pakistan naval collision involving the 1991 framework. In June 2011, Pakistani warship PNS Babur came close to Indian Navy frigate INS Godavari during anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, causing minor damage. India lodged a protest citing navigational-safety violations.

What happens next?

India has summoned Pakistan’s Charge d’Affaires in New Delhi and lodged a strong protest. It has also instructed its Charge d’Affaires in Islamabad to raise the matter with Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry.

New Delhi has advised Pakistan to ensure that its military units exercise due care and comply with relevant bilateral agreements to prevent a recurrence. The fact that the collision occurred in international waters does not place the two navies outside agreed rules of conduct.

For now, the key unresolved question is the exact sequence of manoeuvres that brought the two vessels into close proximity.

Battle lines in the boardroom

The group's promoter company faces questions over leadership, ownership and regulatory issues amid growing differences over who should serve as its executive chairman and whether the company should be listed

What complicated the matter further is the position of the SF Group in favour of listing of Tata Sons as it wants to cash out to meet financial obligations

After assessing a recruit's willingness to take risks, Bhatti allegedly assigned more serious tasks, including installing Chinese-made CCTV cameras near railway stations, air bases and arterial roads, with footage livestreamed to Pakistan. In one instance, he allegedly sent online manuals to men in Punjab on making petrol bombs and an IED. "In some cases, money was the motivation, while in others, religious sentiments were exploited," the officer said.

As cities reclaim footpaths and crack down on hygiene, street food vendors are faced with shrinking space and uncertain future

Where's the Food Path?



GETTYIMAGES

Lijee Philip & Nirmal John

Every morning at around 8:30, Vijay Raut starts selling his cutting chai in Mahim, Mumbai. Taxi drivers stop for a glass. Construction workers come for a quick cuppa before work. Over the seven years he has been selling tea here, employees from a nearby bank have grown to know him well, and made him the regular supplier of tea, twice a day.

For the past month and a half, however, his biggest problem has been finding a place to sell tea. The ramshackle wooden structure from which Raut operated was taken away by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) during its recent enforcement drive tackling illegal pavement encroachment.

"I eventually got it back after paying a fine of ₹1,100 apart from bearing the cost of transporting it," says Raut. But he is afraid of putting it back up.

The tea, however, has not disappeared. Nor have his customers, who still need their morning chai. "Now I carry tea in a flask, serving customers for a limited period," he says.

Raut's wife is eight months pregnant. His father is in intensive care. He has regular customers. But the structure that housed his business is no longer secure because his business is, at the end of the day, illegal.

Therein lies a bizarre paradox playing out across cities, from Mumbai to Bengaluru to Thiruvananthapuram.

Street food vendors occupy an uneasy place in India's cities: essential to everyday life, but with little clout. They are housed on footpaths, which are being reclaimed for pedestrians. They also carry a reputation for being dirty, which has made them an obvious target of food safety drives.

The story of Raut and many like him exposes the weakness of a system that has allowed vendors to operate without secure spaces, basic infrastructure and consistent oversight.

While cities are trying to make public spaces cleaner and safer, they may be undermining small businesses and affordable food networks for millions. Solving this is critical to designing an inclusive, clean and equitable urban landscape.

BIG PLATE

India has one of the world's richest street food traditions, ranging from vada pav, medu vada and bhel to golgappa, kebabs to chaat. Street food is cheap, accessible and deeply tied to the cultural identity of cities.

For millions, street food is not an occasional indulgence. It is breakfast before a train, a vada pav between shifts, dosa on the way to work, a sandwich at lunchtime, noodles after a late shift, or cutting chai between two meetings. For workers, students, taxi drivers and commuters living on tight budgets, street food solves two problems at once—it is affordable and accessible.

It is also an enormous informal economy. The National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) said in 2021 that "10 million vendors in India make up a thriving street vendor market estimated to be at around ₹8,000 crore daily".

For comparison, Jubilant FoodWorks, one of India's biggest restaurant companies, reported revenues of ₹9,512 crore for FY26, which works out to around ₹26 crore per day.

While that establishes the scale of the street food market, it also underlines a key issue.

The informal nature of the ecosystem means these vendors work outside the system. That has positives for those who grab grub at these joints, as prices don't have to factor in compliance.

As architect and urban planner Chandrashekhar Prabhu says, "The moment you put them in the formal sector, they have to pay rent, taxes, electricity and water charges, which makes them expensive. The moment they become expensive, they will not be catering to the kind of economic strata they are supposed to cater to."

NEEDED: CLEANLINESS

Food safety infra is rarely built into the price either.

There are genuine hygiene risks with street food. Lolly Mukesh Jain, professor in the department of microbiology, KJ Somaiya College of Science and Commerce, Mumbai, says street food risks come from contamination, microbial multiplication and survival of microorganisms.

Unsafe water, raw ingredients, hands, utensils, insects, dust and dirty surfaces can introduce contamination. Cooked foods such as rice, gravies, dairy products and chutneys become particularly vulnerable when kept for long periods at room temperature.

But Jain says the location of food is not what determines safety. With basic infrastructure and training, she says, a well-designed street food stall can achieve food safety standards comparable to a small restaurant.

A street food stall does not need a restaurant-style kitchen. It needs potable water, soap-based handwashing facilities, clean utensils and surfaces, separation of raw and cooked food and temperature control.

India's food safety regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), already has hygiene requirements for small food operators and street food vendors. Its Clean Street Food programme focuses on training and capacity-building alongside regulation.

From April 1 this year, FSSAI's revised licensing framework also raised the annual turnover threshold for basic food business registration from ₹12 lakh to ₹1.5 crore. In theory, this should reduce compliance costs for small businesses.

In 2025, FSSAI said it had worked with BMC to train more than 4,000 street vendors, self-help groups and mid-day meal providers, as part of an initiative targeting 10,000 vendors across Mumbai.

Vendors who are registered under the Street Vendors Act through municipal corporations or town vending committees are deemed registered under the FSSAI framework, subject to hygiene and sanitary requirements.

But most of this remains on paper.

WHOSE SPACE IS IT?

There is another unresolved question: Who has the legal right to occupy public space?

Prabhu points out, "Footpaths are for pedestrians, not vendors." He talks about spaces like Nariman Point in Mumbai which, when it was planned, did not have any space for vendors.

"Then a decision was taken to keep some space behind the Air India building for people to have street food."

But such places are rare, and vendors across India end up occupying pedes-



trian space.

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, does provide a framework for recognising and regulating vendors. "But Mumbai's street-vending system is still struggling to fully implement it," says a person close to vendor licensing, who didn't want to come on the record.

Queries sent to BMC and FSSAI went unanswered.

Simply put, regulation without infrastructure can push vendors further into informality; not eliminate problems.

LOOK EAST FOR ANSWERS

Italian chef Adriano Baldassarre, who has a Michelin-starred restaurant, Tordomatto, in Rome, has fond memories of Indian street food. He spent nearly 12 years in India and also worked as a private chef for the Ambani family. He recalls eating chaat on Delhi's streets and appreciates their authenticity. His most vivid memory is being served samosas in a newspaper.

Hygiene remains a concern. But for Baldassarre, the answer is not to eliminate street food. Vendors, he believes, "can be better supported to improve hygiene while retaining the authenticity and taste that make Indian street food distinctive".

Is there a way out? Looking East would be a good starting point. Across most of Asia, from Japan and China to Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore, street food is an important part of the urban fabric.

Even Singapore, with limited real estate

and high cleanliness quotient, did not eliminate its hawker culture in the name of hygiene. It instead moved vendors into regulated, purpose-built centres with water, drainage, waste management and other basic facilities.

As Andrew Tam wrote in an article in *Gastronomica*, "Hawking in Singapore was initially seen as a nuisance that had to be tolerated and later regulated by both the colonial administration and newly independent government. The relocation of hawkers to centralized food centers marked the imposition of order and hygiene onto a squalid industry."

Malaysia has similarly developed hawker centres and food courts, while Vietnam has experimented with designated areas and food safety oversight.

Street food in many of these cities is a legit tourist attraction. So much so that the purveyor of great grub, the *Michelin Guide*, has a specific recognition, Bib Gourmand, for such eateries.

Michelin says the approach demonstrates that "quality is not defined by the setting, but by the food itself", and that exceptional cuisine can be found "from street stalls and neighbourhood eateries to some of the world's most renowned restaurants".

Singapore's hawker culture, it says, is a strong example.

The reality is that the demand for street food is not going away. India will continue to eat on its streets. The question is whether its vendors will still have a place there, says Baldassarre.

India cannot simply copy global models. Its streets are more crowded, its vending economy more informal and its history different. But the comparison raises the possibility that regulation does not necessarily have to mean disappearance.

With basic infrastructure and training, a well-designed street food stall can achieve food safety standards comparable to a small restaurant"

LOLLY MUKESH JAIN, professor of microbiology, KJ Somaiya College of Science and Commerce, Mumbai

The moment you put street food vendors in formal sector, they have to pay rent, taxes, electricity and water charges, which makes them expensive"

CHANDRASHEKHAR PRABHU, architect & urban planner



The question is whether a city can create a system in which street food is safer without making the people who sell it invisible"

ADRIANO BALDASSARRE, chef, Tordomatto, Rome

STREET FOOD DESTINATIONS		
CITY	PLACE	FAMOUS FOR
Singapore	Maxwell Food Centre	Hainanese Chicken Rice
Seoul	Gwangjang Market	Bindaetteok
Bangkok	Wang Lang Market	Mango Sticky Rice
Kuala Lumpur	Jalan Alor	Satay
Istanbul	Eminonu	Balik Ekmek
Marrakech	Jemaa el-Fnaa	Mechoui
Ho Chi Minh City	Vinh Khanh Food Street	Seafood

Source: Migrationology.com

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

The Vanishing Footpath Economy

As Mumbai bulldozes food carts, the street-side vendors who feed its workforce are improvising survival.

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

India's challenge is therefore larger than ensuring a chai seller, sandwich maker, or noodle vendor has a licence. "It is whether the city can create a system in which street food is safer without making the people who sell it invisible," says Baldassarre.

SURVIVAL MODE

For now, vendors are in survival mode.

Vinita Shinde once sold Chinese food from a makeshift stall in Dadar in Central Mumbai, working from morning till 11 at night. On a single stove, she prepared noodles, manchurian and fried rice, tossing vegetables and turning out orders. She was the only earning member in her family.

Her routine has changed over the past few weeks: "I am preparing a few dishes closer home and serving customers for just two-three hours." Her business continues, but at a much smaller scale.

Then there is Manjunath Shirodkar, a sandwich seller from Prabhadevi in south Mumbai. For years, he sat at a familiar spot facing the main road. "Now I prepare chutney and vegetables at home, carry them to the old location, serve my regular customers and leave in a jiffy," says Shirodkar.

The vendors make less money because they don't have the space they used to. To meet household expenses, including his wife's medical costs, Shirodkar has started delivering vegetables and milk in the morning and evening.

A coconut-water seller near Dadar has found another workaround. After being moved from his regular spot, he now brings a few coconuts and sits inside a nearby shoe shop, where regular clients come looking for him. He charges a premium, but customers continue to buy.

For years, say vendors, enforcement was something they negotiated around. Carts would be seized, fines paid and businesses resumed. Some say they routinely paid enforcement officials to keep selling from their spots.

Now, they say, it feels different.

lijee.philip@timesofindia.com

Designated vending areas will be regulated through a coordinated framework, with local authorities responsible for identifying, allocating and managing vending spaces, while FDA will ensure compliance with food safety and hygiene regulations.

The transition of existing vendors to designated areas will be undertaken in a structured and phased manner, with proper identification, registration and allocation of vending spaces. Vendors will be encouraged and facilitated to shift to these locations, while unauthorised vending outside the designated areas will be dealt with through consistent enforcement by the concerned local authorities.

At the same time, FDA will undertake registration and licensing, inspections, sampling and enforcement action to ensure compliance with prescribed food-safety standards.

The objective is not merely to relocate vendors, but to create a well-regulated, food-vending ecosystem where citizens can experience India's rich and diverse food culture, vendors can earn a dignified and sustainable livelihood, and consumers can be assured of safe and hygienic food. Livelihood, vibrant food culture and food safety must go together.

'WE NEED TO BALANCE BUSINESS & LIVELIHOODS WITH PUBLIC HEALTH'

Tukaram Mundhe is a man on a mission. The commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Maharashtra, spoke to **Lijee Philip** on how India can make street food safe and clean without pushing an important informal economy out of cities. Mundhe says that while he ate in college canteens during his student days, he now enjoys home food. Edited excerpts:

How can India raise hygiene and food-safety standards for street food without undermining the livelihood of small vendors?

We need to promote our food culture, but we also need to make it safe and ensure that food businesses meet safety standards. It is not our intention to stop any business; it is our intention to promote business. But we cannot compromise the health of people. Businesses should be allowed to grow while maintaining sanitation and proper food-handling conditions. At the same time, food businesses should not come in the way of the city's growth and development.

What role can zoning play in making street food safer

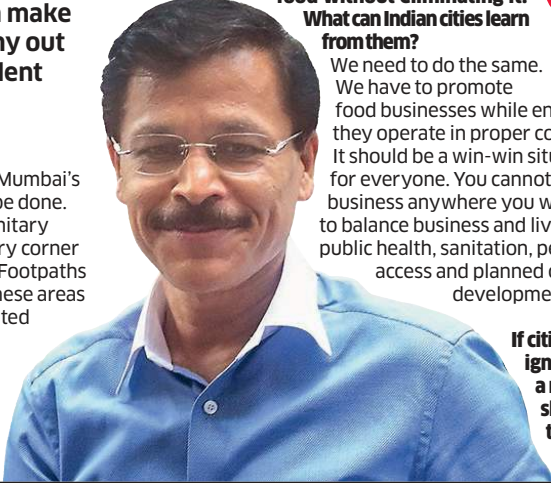
and more organised?

Zoning is very much possible. Look at Mumbai's Chowpatty and the khau gallis—it can be done. We can have allocated areas where sanitary conditions can be maintained. Not every corner of a footpath can be used by vendors. Footpaths are for pedestrians. We need to plan these areas properly so that livelihoods are protected without affecting public access.

Even railway stations have designated spaces, but people still vend outside. Why should that be allowed? We need to promote safe vending and look at the

issue holistically. We already have designated places for vegetable markets. We should have similar arrangements for street food.

Several Asian cities have regulated street food without eliminating it. What can Indian cities learn from them?



"THE OBJECTIVE IS NOT MERELY TO RELOCATE VENDORS, BUT TO CREATE A WELL-REGULATED, FOOD-VENDING ECOSYSTEM"

We need to do the same. We have to promote safe food businesses while ensuring that they operate in proper conditions. It should be a win-win situation for everyone. You cannot set up a business anywhere you want. We need to balance business and livelihood with public health, sanitation, pedestrian access and planned city development.

If cities create designated vending areas, how should the system be enforced?

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Opinion

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2026

SO FAR, THERE HAVE BEEN TWO STRONG BUT COMPETING ARGUMENTS: SHOULD NOT STATES BE ALLOWED TO CONDUCT MEDICAL ENTRANCE EXAMS AND, SHOULD NOT THERE BE A BASIC MINIMUM NATIONAL STANDARD FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL ADMISSIONS?

NEET debate is still wide open

OFF THE RECORD
■ PVAIDYANATHAN IYER

THE cancellation of NEET this year, following allegations of paper leak, had become the focal point around which the youth gathered in thousands to protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar in June July this year.

The protests are over, but they have reignited past discussions around the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), and how it should be conducted. So far, two strong but competing arguments have kept policy makers, politicians and academics engaged: i) should not states, which also legislate on education, be allowed to conduct exams for admission to medical colleges set up by them and those by the private sector in their region? and, ii) should not there be a basic minimum national standard for admitting students into medical colleges, whichever state they might be in?

Conversations with officers in states and the Centre over the last two months bring to fore certain new aspects.

Number 1: A top police officer of a big

city digressed from a discussion on how the Delhi police could have done better to avoid the terrible showdown with the youth at Jantar Mantar on July 20. "Had it not been for NEET... if only states were the owners of the medical exams and admissions... the protests would not have happened in the national capital," he said.

Given a choice, his cadre state, ruled by the BJP, would be only too keen to reclaim ownership of medical entrance exams, the officer said. But then the Centre, also under the BJP, had, in its wisdom, fought a long legal battle going up to the Supreme Court, to implement NEET. No BJP Chief Minister of a state will now risk going against this. The officer did not say it in as many words, but he linked law and order to NEET ownership. Isn't the Centre better off with states taking charge of the exam?

The unitary character of the exam had indeed directed student anger towards Delhi and the Union Ministry of Education. It forced Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to step down.

Number 2: It's not just about law and order; it is also about the administration of a country-wide exam. Consider the numbers for the May 3 NEET exam: 22 lakh students, 5,432 centres, 551 cities. Conducting such an exam at the same time on the same day in a country of this size involves phenomenal planning and logistics. From the integrity of paper-setters to safe and secure transportation of question papers, the challenges are numerous. None is



Huge crowds protesting over the NEET exam misconduct in New Delhi

EXPRESS PHOTO BY TASHI TOBGYAL

insurmountable, though. For instance, when the NEET re-exam was to be conducted on June 21 with just six weeks of lead time, the government did not mind pressing into service the Indian Air Force for delivering question papers in the nick

of time at different locations. But the problem is not of scale. It is the inability to insulate a local problem. An officer in the Centre, who was roped in to ensure an orderly conduct of the June 21 retest, likened NEET to a super-tanker. A small chink can bring

down the entire supertanker. A leak of a paper in a particular city or an irregularity in a few centres can potentially wreck the entire examination.

When there are already so many reasons for the youth to be disoriented, an

exam cancellation can trigger a nationwide movement, as it did recently.

Number 3: Another officer pointed to the blind spots many in the system carry with them. More than a decade ago, just after the BJP came to power in the Centre, a meeting was called to discuss NEET. When Tamil Nadu, one of the most vocal opponents of NEET, put forth its views, an officer in the Ministry of Education, who was from north India, said many exams are cancelled in his state and NEET would set this right. To this, the Tamil Nadu officer recalled his one-sentence reply: "This might be the case in your state, not in mine."

There are reasons why the Centre did what it did, and these will always be open to question and debate in India's federal polity. Memory is short, but the idea of a common all-India examination as a qualifier for admissions to all medical colleges, first found mention in December 2010. The change proposed by the Medical Council of India (now the National Medical Commission) was intended to ease the academic pressure on students.

The first NEET examination was held by the CBSE in 2013 when the Congress-led UPA was in power. The BJP carried forward this agenda with full vigour and seriousness despite strident opposition from states such as Tamil Nadu.

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express. Off the Record is a fortnightly column

Stakeholders need to act more responsibly

RINGSIDE VIEW
TUSHAR BHADURI

MAYBE, THE BOARD of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) does have a plan. Maybe, the top honchos know how to get the two Asia Cup trophies, which India has won over the last year, but never laid their hands on. But if they do, they have made a good job of hiding it. They have, with great fanfare and performative nationalism, refused to accept the silverware from Mohsin Naqvi, but it seems the only way to get the trophies to their rightful owners is to wait till a new Asian Cricket Council (ACC) chief takes over.

The missing men's Asia Cup trophy, which made a lot of noise in the days after the tournament, slowly disappeared from the headlines, making a return only when the women's team followed suit recently. Naqvi is also the Pakistan Cricket Board chief as well as the Interior Minister of his country, but not receiving the trophy from him had only symbolic value.

The trophy isn't coming from Naqvi personally, he is only representing the ACC in his official capacity. If India—which includes the BCCI and the players—was unwilling to be seen in the same frame with him in the aftermath of the Pahalgam massacre and Operation Sindoor, they could have persuaded him to stay away from the presentation ceremony. After all, the women's Asia Cup final was played between India and Sri Lanka, with Naqvi's own national team nowhere in the picture. The scenes in Dubai on Sunday were almost an action replay of what took place almost a year ago when the terrorist atrocity and military skirmish, as also the other measures taken by the two countries, were fresh in everyone's memory. But it seems neither party involved had moved on from that impasse, or learnt any lessons. Naqvi decided, once again, to make the presentation ceremony all about himself rather than the players, and the Indian teams—on both occasions—didn't think twice before depriving the country the joyous moment of seeing them lift the trophy, just to make a point.

Not that the bad blood was restricted to post-match activities. There was no handshake between the captains at the toss or between players of the two teams after the games, no verbal interaction during the game, and hardly any eye contact in the middle. At least in the men's matches, there was more than one instance of provocative gestures and celebrations, from players from both sides, primarily referring to events during the military conflict.

Official explanation

BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia said the decision to cold-shoulder Pakistani players and officials was a result of assessment about prevailing circumstances and sentiment. Such confidence about national sentiment is rare even among market researchers and psephologists. He, however, didn't divulge any plan to get the trophies. Even if they are obtained sometime in the future, the moment of unscripted joy and celebration has been lost for posterity. Any such event will remain just a formal photo opportunity.

This animosity between the two countries doesn't



India Women's captain Harmanpreet Kaur and Sri Lanka Women's captain Chamari Athapaththu pose with the trophy ahead of the Women's Asia Cup 2026 final

@ICC

result in a breakdown in cricketing ties, largely for commercial reasons. At last year's men's Asia Cup, the neighbours faced off on three successive Sundays, taking the frenzy and hostility to fever pitch. Even the International Cricket Council ensures at least one India-Pakistan match at every tournament. It's a uniquely cynical arrangement, profiting from bilateral tension and historical baggage, especially when the gulf in class on the field over the last several years has made the rivalry terribly one-sided.

After the women's final, India head coach Amol Muzumdar had said that the fact that India won the Asia Cup in front of the world was enough for him and the players. He didn't seem too bothered about the trophy.

Does that mean that the two trophies will gather dust in some locker, cupboard or godown for ever?

As far as the no-handshakes policy goes, it smells of hypocrisy and double standards. Indians and Pakistanis have faced off in other sports over the last year—hockey in particular—shaking hands without adverse reactions from any corner. Why do only the cricketers have to bear this burden of hostility, and portray what they believe is the national mood, showing themselves to be extra-patriotic. Maybe, the people who make these decisions and send out these edicts believe that other sports don't mean as much to the common Indian as cricket.

What happens next

At the recent Hockey World Cup, India and Pakistan played a high-scoring match with the former coming out 5-3 winners. The game was devoid of any drama of the unsavoury kind. At the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in Japan, hundreds of athletes from both countries will come face to face—either in competition or off the field. Will they look the other way in a

social setting, or betray the awkwardness that such a situation is bound to present?

India is odds-on favourite to win the cricket gold medal in both men's and women's sections. If Naqvi comes to hand over medals in his capacity as the head of the ACC, will they refuse to accept them? If things are that bad between the two countries, why keep sporting ties going when everything else is suspended? But that isn't an option as commerce rules. Also, India's ambitions of hosting the 2036 Olympics won't allow them to do it, especially as cricket is now an Olympic sport. But if the hostile attitude—by both sides—continues, at some point, the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility may start to come into play. Every time such an approach is adopted, the effectiveness and shock value will go down a bit. At what point does it start getting tiresome? Even at the height of the Cold War, US and Soviet athletes often competed against each other at the Olympics, largely without incident.

There was a memorable politically-charged game between the USA and Iran at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. England and Argentina faced off at the 1986 edition, the game made famous (or infamous) by Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal as well as the greatest goal in World Cup history. It came four years after the two countries had waged war over the Falklands Islands. There needs to be a use-by date for this 'no-handshake, no trophy acceptance from Pakistanis' policy. Bilateral relations are not expected to normalise any time soon, but cricket matches between the neighbours will continue, at least in multilateral events. The hype, jingoism and manufactured intensity from broadcasters isn't going anywhere in a hurry either. The least players and administrators—if they are responsible stakeholders in the game—can do is not feed the beast.

The Asia Cup final was a replay of the men's tourney when India refused to accept the trophy from Pak's Mohsin Naqvi. Will they wait till a new ACC chief takes over?

INSIDE TRACK COOMI KAPOOR



Uncurated visuals go viral

BRICS summit 2026 was perhaps the first major international conference in Delhi where the Ministry of External Affairs cut the Information and Broadcasting Ministry out of the loop. Normally at such events, the I&B department handles duties such as liaising with domestic and international media, preparing background material and briefs, local facilitation for visitors and covering up embarrassing moments. Without the seasoned hand of the I&B to smooth wrinkles, some of the unedited optics at the conference went viral. The decision to transport all central ministers and chief ministers from Parliament House to the Bharat Mandapam in two buses may have been taken elsewhere—but senior leaders such as Amit Shah, J P Nadda and Yogi Adityanath are unlikely to have been amused with reels showing them huddled together in a bus! Only Prime Minister Modi had a separate cavalcade to reach the Mandapam, along with most of the foreign heads of state. Some felt the bus journey was unnecessary. Considering the sealed corridor from Parliament House to the Mandapam was, in any case, fairly empty and fully secure, a few extra ministerial cars on this route would have made little difference. Another awkward video widely shared, possibly exaggerated by AI, was of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval munching cashews sitting to the rear of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the MEA's official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal nibbling nuts continuously, though seated right behind Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, in the full glare of the TV cameras. Finally, the MEA's reel of a young woman extolling every minor item presented in the goodies gift bag to journalists, from toothbrush to notebook, was cringe-worthy. The publicity should have focused on the gains of the Delhi declaration, not memes, on the misguided notion they would attract young viewership.

Diplomatic concessions

Since 2012, the MEA has followed a policy of disallowing meetings between visiting foreign heads and opposition political leaders or activists, under the radar of security agencies. But for BRICS, the government understood that to further its foreign relations' objectives, exceptions had to be made. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was permitted to breakfast with Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra, and he tweeted their interaction, describing Rahul as a good friend who briefed him on current affairs and foreign issues. Ibrahim is grateful to the Congress because when he was in jail in his homeland, then-PM Manmohan

Singh offered to facilitate the education of his sons abroad. An exception was also made for Ibrahim, a devout Muslim, to call on Islamic clerics in Kerala. Meanwhile, at the request of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, controversial Hurriyat Conference leader Mirwaiz Farooq, who has frequently been detained in Kashmir, was permitted to attend a diplomatic reception in Delhi hosted by the Iranian embassy for its president. Later, Mirwaiz had a long conversation with Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi.

Keeping media guessing

Ever since BJP President Nitin Nabin announced his team, the media and people who claim to be in the know—if that is indeed possible in this closed-door regime—have speculated that a ministerial reshuffle is in the offing. However, with the inauspicious 'Pitru Paksha' period set to begin shortly, followed by Dussehra and Diwali, ministerial changes may take a while yet. But three gubernatorial announcements, including a new LG for Jammu and Kashmir, could be announced earlier.

Only blind loyalists wanted

Rahul Gandhi's deep distrust of anyone perceived as a defector or party rebel is a drawback in helping Congress increase its footprint. The latest setback for the party is in Goa, where assembly elections are due early next year. The Congress missed a golden opportunity to readmit the popular Goa Forward Party leader, Vijai Sardesai, who has represented the Fatorda assembly constituency in South Goa since 2012. Party President Mallikarjun Kharge met Sardesai in May and has been waiting for a word from Rahul to permit him. But without any welcoming word, Sardesai decided to accept Arvind Kejriwal's offer to join AAP, a move which would divide the Opposition vote.

Political party, not bureaucracy

The BJP government appears nervous and on the back foot, but Rahul Gandhi, as Leader of Opposition, has not been able to seize the moment to the extent expected. He, instead of touring and building public opinion, has been bogged down in a time-consuming exercise, selecting junior level party office-bearers. The procedure is unnecessarily bureaucratic, with candidates shortlisted after getting recommendation letters from state party in-charges or central office-bearers. The stamp of General Secretary (Organisation) KC Venugopal in most selections is obvious.



REFLECTIONS

[INCIDENTALLY]

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



Remembering even what's difficult, painful is necessary

What a Yeats poem and a recent movie tell us about age and the burden of remembering

When *You Are Old* is not among WB Yeats's most admired poems. *The Second Coming* is. No surprises there, because miseries — war, pestilence, natural disasters — have been visiting the world relentlessly in the recent past.

The Irishman's vision of a "rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born" is unmistakably borne out by these visitations. I turn to that bewitching poem repeatedly, in awe of the poet's sense of doom which one part of me shares.

My favourite Yeats poem today is *When You Are Old*. The most obvious reason for this, of course, is that I am old. At 81, or 82, or thereabouts, very old.

I warm to the poem just as I do to a hand extended for me to hold and trust it, when I am climbing down steps or getting out of a car. Bless that hand, bless it more when it is strong and stays unshaken when I put all my weight on it.

But co-existiveness with the poem's theme is only part of the reason for it being my Yeats favourite. The "real" reason is that it resonates with something in me that was old and entrenched even

when I was young.

In my late teens, I had a teacher in school — the unforgettable Awadh Kishoreji — who read poems aloud to our class. He was not old, but he was not young either. Eyes closed, he would go into the inner worlds of the poems and modulating his voice to suit the spirit of each line and half-line, would carry us into that world. Did he read out *When You Are Old* to us? I am not sure. I cannot say with certainty that he did. Perhaps he did, for I can see him enact, gently, "full of sleep and nodding by the fire..."

When, in my early 20s, I was in college and joined the English literature honours course, my teacher MM Bhalla — or Bhalla-sahab as we knew him — did something similar. His eyes would not close, though, as he read or recited poetry. They would, in fact, widen, moisten, and transfer to us his sense of wonder over what he was reading out.

One has to be totally true to one's teachers — so one has been taught — and, therefore, I will not say with my hand over my heart that he read *When You Are Old* to us. But I hear his voice in each word of this poem whenever I read it.

In each word and in each syllable of each word, his voice intones Yeats, with a little tremor to it, the expired whiff of a cigarette he stubbed out when his shoes just before he entered class adding an ember of immediacy.

When *You Are Old*, Bhalla-sahab tells me (or I imagine him telling me) that, some 60 years after he vanished from our

mind that a leaf carried off by a gust of a summer wind, is not when you get to understand the poem.

You understand it whenever you read it, regardless of your age. For, it is not about chronology (it is that, of course, but only like dawn is about a particular hour in the day); it is about remembering when remembering is both necessary and difficult. Remembering is necessary because forgetting is dangerous. And difficult because remembering is about feeling guilty, feeling like wanting to atone. And then he says — perhaps he did, perhaps did not — that to atone is to be one with oneself.

He says, "Who says? Yeats or Bhalla-sahab? I am getting a bit mixed up here for I am now old, very old. Which reminds me, before I forget, I must say that that *When You Are Old* came back to my mind when, the other day, I watched *Min Wapas Aunga*, with Naseruddin Shah acting in it the part of a very old man who remembers or, rather, does not forget what happened to him when he was young in a town in West Punjab, Sargodha. He remembers, but not sequentially, for he is now old. But that is not the point, for he is remembering — not just for him, as remembering was important for Yeats in the poem, but important for just about all of us in this part of our unhappy world.

Yeats' poem is addressed to a woman. Is she Maud Gonne? Someone did say that to me. But it does not matter whether it is her or isn't. It is Yeats speaking urgently, in delicious panic, about what he owes to a



Remembering is necessary because forgetting is dangerous. And difficult because remembering is about feeling guilty, feeling like wanting to atone.

woman. Here, I am so taken by the poem's similarity to the film that I am mixing up Yeats and Naseruddin Shah. But that does not matter. What matters is that "he" is telling "her" that she matters to him because he recognises something precious in her: the pilgrim soul.

Pilgrim soul? What in high heaven is that? I cannot be sure but something tells me, as I descend stairs down my memory path, holding your hand, dear reader, that I had had a pilgrim soul in her, India? "Her"? Yes, India is a she for sure. Ageless, and old. Unaging, and yet with eyes that have "shadows deep" and "sorrows on her changing face". Are we forgetting that with

which India made a covenant? This year, 2026, is the 80th year of when a hideous thing happened in Bengal. Men slaughtered, raped, looted. They called the pogrom the Great Calcutta Killing. Next year, 2027, will be the 80th year — I think my math is right — of when our country broke free of the British Raj. But it also broke — broke in two — as all communities (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh), for shame, repeated 1946 with greater ferocity.

We who are old must remember that today in a spirit of atonement. We who are young and have nothing to "remember" of then but can listen to those who do, must also do so in the spirit of

being at one with them.

Yeats's *The Second Coming* is about a beast. When *You Are Old* is not. But, like *Min Wapas Aunga*, it is about something which must be remembered to record. Love, to use Yeats's words, "hid its face among the stars" in shame at what hate had done to it. The old in us and the old in the young must draw that love out from where it is still in hiding, and send hate to that cave of shame.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a student of modern Indian history and the author of *The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India*. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY SENTIMENTS]

Karan Thapar



The SIR exercise and the points of concern

I wonder how many of you are following the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise currently underway? I ask because it could affect your right to vote. Some of the facts that have emerged are disconcerting. They raise real and fundamental questions.

For instance, it's reported that the voters list in 17 of the 19 states and Union Territories where the third phase of SIR is being conducted has shrunk by over 15%.

These are not SIR elections in the 30 states/UTs where at least its first phase is over are around 12 crore. Maharashtra alone might drop 2 crore voters; 32.8% could be lost in Delhi, 12.8% in Chandigarh. These are huge numbers.

Separately, *Hindustan Times* has reported that 1.1 million Delhi voters were inexplicably deleted from the rolls even before the SIR exercise began. This happened between January 2025 and June 2026.

It sharply contrasts with the fact that

between the state assembly election of 2020 and the Lok Sabha election of 2024, 0.4 million were added whilst a similar number were added between the 2024 Lok Sabha election and the 2025 state assembly election. Why were they dropped? There's no available explanation.

Surely as the population increases, the number of voters should increase as well? Doesn't that stand to reason? Government estimates put the adult population in 2024 at 99 crore. At that time, the voters list was 98 crore. That was almost an exact match.

Today, Yashendra Yadav, the national convenor of the Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, says the adult population could be 103 crore but the voters list is likely to shrink to 88 crore — 15 crore voters could have been deleted. That's a very sizeable number.

It's facts like these that have, no doubt, led Ashok Lavasa, a former election com-

missioner, to question the SIR exercise. It may be legal, as the Supreme Court has ruled, but is it fair?

Take the example of Bengal, where 27 lakh cases have been sent to tribunals because of alleged logical discrepancies. Right to Information replies have revealed that some 82,000 have been adjudicated and in 91% of the cases, it was found the names were wrongly deleted. They had to be restored. Doesn't that raise serious questions about the credibility of this category called logical discrepancies? Doesn't the Election Commission owe us an explanation?

Or take the smaller example of Delhi. The *Hindu* reports that, as a result of the SIR exercise, in 24 of the 70 assembly constituencies there are now fewer electors than the number of people who voted in the assembly elections of 2025. Frontline reports that in polling booth 33 in Chandni Chowk out of 909 voters, 908 have been deleted. Doesn't that raise questions about the accuracy and credibility of the SIR exercise?

After Bihar, phase two and phase three of the SIR exercise requires voters to be mapped to the 2022 electoral rolls. But what's so sacrosanct about 2022, asks former chief election commissioner SY Qureshi. He reveals that his own father's name was misspelled in that year. That's unlikely to be the only error.

Something similar happens to you, you could be dropped as a voter on the grounds that your citizenship is questionable. Under the SIR exercise

PHASE TWO AND PHASE THREE OF THE SIR EXERCISE REQUIRE VOTERS TO BE MAPPED TO THE 2022 ELECTORAL ROLLS. BUT WHAT'S SO SACROSANCT ABOUT THE 2022 BENCHMARK?

block level officers (BLOs) — mostly government school teachers — have been given the authority to decide whether a voter, who is already on the rolls and has voted earlier, is a citizen of India and can continue on the rolls. Is it right to give such powers to BLOs?

First in Bihar and then in Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the SIR exercise was held just before the elections were due. Given all the problems that have occurred — many of which were predictable — why did it have to be held at this time and in such a compressed timeframe? This question has often been asked but never answered.

Elections are one of the cornerstones of democracy. But if the electoral rolls are questionable, or even doctored as some fear, how much damage will that do to India's democracy? That's the final question I want to leave you with.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

[ANOTHER DAY]

Namita Bhandare



The long, challenging road to gender equality

History moves in cycles, and nowhere is this truer than in the movement for women's rights. Mihira Sood's debut book, *Courting Equality: Landmark cases in the battle for women's rights* (Juggernaut) reminds us that the march has seldom been linear. Periods of activism have followed stretches of a lull and even backlash against rights.

As a 28-year-old, freshly-minted lawyer, Sood joined the protests following the December 16, 2012 gang-rape of a physiotherapy student in Delhi. Those protests were unprecedented but murmurs of activism had already begun. In colleges, *pinra* (to break the cage) in response to discriminatory hostel rules. In cities, *beshami* marches (loosely, slut walks) to reclaim public space. So, then, 25 took part in the pink *chaddi* protest where women sent pink panties to the Sri Ram Sene after its attempted moral policing in Bangalore bars.

In January 2013, Sood was chosen to assist the Justice JS Verma Committee that had been set up to make suggestions on legal and systemic changes. We tend to forget just how path-breaking the 63-page report was: yes to criminalising marital rape, no to the immunity granted to armed forces in civilian courts. But between the committee and Parliament fell the shadow. The criminal amendments to the rape law were the most sweeping since 1983 but Parliament was not able to bring itself to table a marital rape — currently before the Supreme Court — a crime.

Courting Equality is a stark reminder of how, despite over seven decades of law-making and landmark judgments, there remains a gulf between the constitutional promise of equality and reality on the ground. Older issues like dowry and domestic violence, once seen as belonging to the private domain, are now out in the public. But, shamefully, they persist despite laws and social movements.

Rights once granted are now under threat. Section 377 — sex against the order of nature — is no longer a crime but marriage equality failed to get majority approval in the Supreme Court. Also, back in the Supreme Court is Sabarimala and the right of women to access places of worship with the issue now being heard by a larger bench. Transgender rights granted by Parliament stand amended, with their most basic tenet of self-identification replaced by a bureaucrat's rubber stamp. The more things change, the greater the threat of a rollback.

A uniform civil code (UCC) with a common law for all religions in matters including inheritance, marriage and divorce, once a feminist utopia with a focus on "egalitarian" rather than "uniform", is now a Right-wing project. Three BJP-ruled states have passed UCC legislation — and the Union home minister says it will be introduced in all 21 NDA-ruled states. But unlike the feminist dream, this version comes with an added layer of protectionism that infantilises women and protects "family and community honour, of which women are still seen as vessels", writes Sood. "We seem to be trapped in a cycle of 'rape, reform, repeat' — intense outrage followed by some superficial changes, that are intended to defuse the situation rather than cultivate change," she writes.

In the years since the activism of the 2010s so much has changed, for the better, on the ground — girls are more likely to be in school and more likely to be supported by parents in their pursuit of careers, women have emerged as a powerful vote bank outnumbering men and, in many cases, determining election outcomes. Ultimately, says Sood, it's the nation's youth that gives her hope: "They are able to see through political rhetoric and they know what they want. It's this clarity that gives me hope."

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

Metro living, mediated by the gated societies

My little one goes to a music class in Gurugram — on weekends at 11 am, for an hour. She isn't vocally gifted; neither of her parents are. Yet, she's learning. The instructor says she will do well, she is better at drums though. I understand the motive of the compliment. The drums class has a higher fee.

The class starts. There is a huge waiting area with couches. Most parents are busy with their office laptops. A few are attending phone calls — now they instruct someone at the other end who works on his laptop.

"Slide number 27 needs the data source." Don't know why this gets missed," a guy with a greying beard conveys patiently to a subordinate. He has the assurance of a boss. His kid suddenly wants to go back to his mom, making it known to everyone in the waiting area with a loud vocal performance. The father is embarrassed. "Give me a second," he says to his colleague, and attends to his petulant child in the softest of voices: "Beta, we will go for ice-cream after this class. Ziddi nahti karne (we must not be obstinate). Okay?" The junior at the other end of the call gets a glimpse of the boss's humanity. But only briefly.

This is a room where overhead so much shone (I can verify our GDP growth rate). Here, I have met many childhood friends, old clients, college pals. All unplanned. Once, even a guy who was almost insistent on copying from me in an examination some decades ago. The same guy is a

responsible father now, expounding on morality and values to his five-year-old.

On these occasions, a quick recap of the last decade starts. Mutual friends are invoked. Careers discussed to find out the current net worth.

One hour passes unnoticed. The kids come out. None of them sing particularly well. Parents are just providing something to their kids they never get: familiarity with Bob Dylan at a very early age and some stage confidence. This is all they need, to be front-end ready. Backend jobs are anyway going to be erased by AI in the near future.

These vigilant super-parents had once cleared the toughest entrance exams or forged their credentials to create wealth — so that, one day, they could send their kids to that expensive drumming class. That's why I like Gurugram. Everybody comes with a story of hard-earned success. A lot has been written about how Gurugram, and most of the NCR, is not logging living. Every passing season torments residents in its own way. You barely survive the potholes of monsoons, and rural Punjab starts burning stubble.



Living in a condominium feels like staying on a neat slice of Europe served on the platter of Gurugram dehaat.

In Gurugram, many live in gated societies — they go to work, spend nine hours in a designated cubicle, and then return to their apartment complexes to park their vehicles at their designated spot, sometimes to find someone else's car parked there. They post a picture on the society WhatsApp group.

Then, action is taken. The offending party actually apologises and moves their vehicle. You spot a pothole on one of the lanes inside your society, you click a picture and post it on the society WhatsApp group, tagging the RWA members. They get to work, and it is fixed.

People are accustomed to governmental apathy. A pothole on one road to work becomes muscle memory. You know when it is about to come, so that you can avoid it. You are almost unaware of the concept that it can be fixed. If your car hits the pothole, you curse yourself first for not being careful instead of blaming the authorities. This is the essence of living in India.

For such people, living in a condominium feels like staying on a neat slice of Europe served on the platter of Gurugram dehaat:

Contracts are enforceable, taxes you pay (maintenance) show results, and the law is manicured. Barring the forces of nature, there is a day-to-day equilibrium the people have achieved here. Once they enter the gates of their society, they breathe easy.

Most have acquired wealth through education. This brings in some civic sense, which is thankfully contagious. It's not too bad; all other inefficiencies are fixed by 10-minute delivery. And this is true for all metros.

I have spent more than a decade in Gurugram, but when I hear people say, "It's not a place worth living," I nod in agreement, because this is theoretically correct for all Indian metros. And then I hear my daughter singing *Blowing in the Wind* by Dylan. The singing is still not great, but I plan to spend another decade in her birth-city. It's this inertia, which cannot be expressed in words.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, and tweets as @gabbubarsingh. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY LETTERS]

What India showed at Brics

This is with reference to "Working with China on common interests" by Manoj Joshi (Sept 13). India's stance at the 18th Brics summit rightly highlighted the virtue of pragmatic multilateralism. Through financial and technological cooperation, India shows that nations can work on common interests.

Sanjay Chopra

Address women's issues in BRICS

This is with reference to "A gender agenda for BRICS" by Lalita Panicker (Sept 13). Women's participation in leadership roles in BRICS should be bolstered to address women-related issues at ground level. Innovative and sustainable ideas should be discussed to make women's lives easy, independent and self-reliant.

Abhishta Gupta

The Delhi declaration highlighted women's participation in governance, skill development & entrepreneurship. If BRICS converts its promises into targeted programmes with honest accounting, women-led development becomes a reality.

Bal Govind

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Inside India's illegal exotic pet trade

Non-native species of birds and animals are being trafficked to be used in petting zoos and as party props, putting public health at risk

Kritika.Sharma@timesofindia.com

They need not be cute, colourful and cordial anymore. Macaws, cockatoos, conures and lorikeets are still winning hearts as pets with their flamboyant plumage and rainbow colours. But the surly, ugly and aloof — and perhaps, vicious — are also increasingly becoming members of Indian families. Snakes of all kinds, monitor lizards, iguanas, geckos and much more have slithered or crawled into Indian hearts. Tarantulas and scorpions are not barred either. And marmosets, sugar gliders and meerkats too find themselves in Indian homes, far away from their natural habitats.

Earlier this month, forest officials in Odisha found a rare species of endangered orangutans in the forests of Balasore. Authorities believe the apes, found only on the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Borneo, had been trafficked to be sold but were abandoned for some reason. It is suspected that the animals are worth Rs 20-25 lakh in the international market.

Last month, a video of actor Vikram with a rare species of monkey — Lar Gibbon, native to southeast Asia — went viral online. An investigation by Tamil Nadu forest department revealed the owner had not registered the animal with the forest department, and a case was registered.

It seems Indians are now game for any animal that's exotic or non-native, legal or illegal, at home or in petting zoos, often at resorts. These are even being given away as return gifts, or being used as entertainment props at parties.

The trend has been driven by relative affluence and need for something that spells status. Social media has given this desire a fillip, much like luxury items. The law on paper has become stringent but a well-oiled trafficking network, air and land routes, a multiplicity of enforcing agencies, suspected complicity of officials, and loopholes that are difficult to plug make the trade thrive. According to a report by Humane World for Animals, released in July this year, the market is valued at about US\$ 42.6 million in 2024, and projected to grow to US\$ 75.8 million by 2030.

The report also points out that Wild Fund for Nature-India recorded 56 sei-

zures, involving about 4,000 exotic animals spanning a wide range, in 2022.

OWNER'S PRIDE

Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) CEO Jose Louies blames social media for fuelling the craze. He recalls that when green iguanas first came to India, they cost Rs 40,000 each but now, one can get them for Rs 4000-5000 because they are bred and brought in bulk to feed a growing demand. "Earlier, people would keep love-birds as pets but now, rarer the species, more the brag value. I know of people spending up to Rs 20 lakh for an exotic bird, and thousands for snakes and other reptiles," he says.

"Another reason the exotic pet industry is thriving is because there is a support industry that has sprung up around

it — pet foods and other supplies, and veterinarians exclusively treating exotic pets," says Louies. That was, of course, preceded by evolution of safe trafficking routes and transportation modes, and a network of breeders or collectors, and sellers, making the entire operation robust and viable.

Till just over three years back, exotic animals got little protection from the law in India. The Wildlife (Protection) Act protected indigenous animals listed in the schedule. India has been a member of CITES — Convention on

International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora — since 1976 but had no mechanism to deal with exotic animals, relying instead on a clutch of laws related to customs, foreign trade, quarantine rules, etc.

FUZZY LINES

A voluntary disclosure scheme introduced in June 2020 for owners of CITES-listed exotic animals revealed the scale of the problem for the first time. By Feb 2021, over 40,000 people had registered.

In 2022, the wildlife act was amended and enforced from April 1, 2023. A new schedule — Schedule IV — listed CITES species. The Living Animal Species (Reporting and Registration) Rules, 2024 made registration mandatory, seeking documents like import licence, CITES export permits etc., along with mandatory obligations for the owner.

Owners of exotic pets now need to just register on govt portal Parivesh, and keep both their pets and peace. The breeder or

seller they bought it from could have sourced it through a smuggling racket, but the onus is not on the customer. All that they need to upload is a purchase receipt as valid proof. Experts flag this as a big loophole.

"The law was amended to regulate the trade. Unfortunately, the rules have ended up helping the very people it was intended to regulate. People are declaring on the website that they have an animal with almost no documentation on the source. They produce a receipt of purchase and that's all. They are not required to produce a parental DNA profile, for example," explains Sumanth Bindumadhav of NGO Humane World for Animals.

the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, from 820 in 2020 to 354 in 2024.

BOOMING BUSINESS

The increased demand has spawned illegal channels through rail, road and sea. The animals are sedated, hidden in suitcases and packed in vessels to be brought from various destinations to India. Many die in the process.

Bindumadhav explains how these animals are sedated during transport to keep them still and avoid getting detected by X-rays. This is the most common way to smuggle reptiles. They are transported as cargo in ships, in suitcases through airports and even through road



The registrations, however, do not give a true picture of the scale of the problem. Experts say the actual number of exotic pets could be much higher because only the pets covered by CITES are to be registered on the Parivesh portal. If someone buys a pet not on that list, a DGFT (Directorate General of Foreign Trade) licence is needed. Since procuring that piece of paper is time-consuming, many people just skip that process.

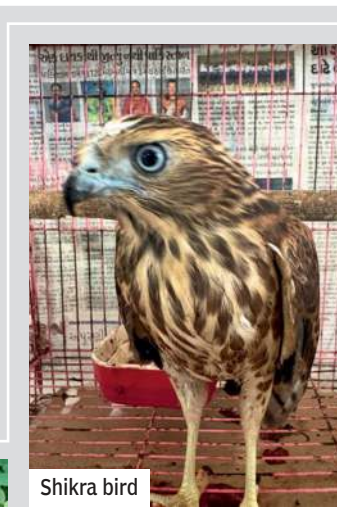
"The biggest grey area is that of species that are not governed by domestic legislation and are not under CITES either. For example, corn snakes and carpet pythons are not listed anywhere. So, someone can breed and sell dozens of corn snakes without feeling any impact of the law at all," adds Bindumadhav.

An indication of the need for targeted enforcement is the drop in the number of wildlife crime cases registered by

routes. He says that while they still get detected at airports, cargo ships sail through. Once the cargo is concealed and locked, there is no checking.

The airports that have gained notoriety in this regard are airports at Chennai, Bengaluru and Mumbai. All host direct international flights from Thailand and Malaysia.

The road routes used by breeders and suppliers are relatively safer. The Myanmar and Bangladesh borders with India are extremely porous, and that's where most of the trafficking is happening. "We have very little information about the trade going on over there, and that's where most of the animals slip through the cracks," adds Bindumadhav. Experts point out that India is both a destination and transit market because of porous borders and lack of security at the ports. The exotic animals that are smuggled to India are supplied to the



CRACKING THE WHIP

SEPT
Five orangutans, inhabitants of Indonesia, rescued from a forest in Odisha's Balasore district

JULY
An interstate wildlife trafficking syndicate busted across West Bengal and Maharashtra and **shikra birds**, slow lorises, binturongs, Egyptian vultures and star tortoises rescued

JUNE
Bengaluru forest dept officials seize ball pythons, lizards and turtles as part of a trafficking network running from a flat

Assam police recover 8 endangered golden langurs from the Chirang district of Assam as part of an international smuggling ring



local pet industry and to other markets like Nepal and China as well. Since they are rarely caught at the port of entry, there is suspicion of a nexus which calls for an investigation.

Govt officials cite the existing rules and their proactive action when they are tipped off about an undocumented animal, or suspect that one has been brought in through an illegal channel

like in the case of the baby orangutans.

Unfortunately, sending such animals back to the country of source is a long process. If the country is identified, it needs to agree to their repatriation. Meanwhile, Indian zoos and rescue centres are saddled with the job of looking after their well-being and decide whether they can even be freed, having lived in captivity.

ECOLOGICAL THREAT

Apart from the fact that exotic animals need special diets and an environment that meets their health and behavioural needs, they also pose the threat of carrying unfamiliar pathogens quietly into the country. If abandoned, they can function like an invasive species, threatening the existence of the indigenous ones in their natural habitats.

"A lot of animals have the potential to become a pest or an invasive species in our ecosystem. The red-eared slider became a pest in the freshwater bodies. Imagine, if you have a venomous snake that's let loose. Do we want that?" asks Louies of WTI.

The blue pit viper which is available only in Indonesia is being kept as a pet, points out Louies. "Once these animals become difficult to handle, people start abandoning them and it's a disaster for the ecosystem. The Burmese python is the perfect example," he says.

The problem is escalating. African catfish and snakehead fish are now found in our freshwater bodies while red-bellied piranha fish have invaded the Godavari river basin. Recently, Arapaima fish was found in Dal Lake. "It's a South American fish. How did it survive there? Somebody must have put it in an aquarium, and when it became too big, abandoned it there," he adds.

India has travelled a long distance in the past three years, but not enough to regulate the trade in exotic animals. Sellers and breeders need to be brought under the compliance mechanism, and any exotic animal brought into the country tracked through the rest of its life. Torn from its natural habitat, the animal's welfare must get equal attention, and also any potential threat it can pose to indigenous species. Everyone in the unholy chain—traffickers, traders, and buyers—should feel the heat.

Foul play: When feminism becomes the sales pitch

Even a week ago, the average Indian may have heard the name 'Novi' and thought of it as some Scandinavian pharmaceutical brand. Then, Sydney Sweeney happened to the internet.

Appearing in several scenes, with assorted sports gear that does a poor job of concealing her naked body, Sweeney mumbles the same two words to the camera — "just sports" — for the sports prediction brand's campaign, titled, unsurprisingly, Just Sports.

Women sportspersons and athletes are furious not just for what it's doing to women's sports, but for the way in which it reduces yet another frontier of women's achievement to sex and objectification. The Female Athlete Project summed it up best when they said, "It's incredible how they could have fitted in so much misogyny into 40 seconds." The ad has set off a social media storm, with women athletes sharing images of themselves training and sweating, saying, "this is what women in sports look like."

Sweeney, who only last year was similarly embroiled in the American Eagle ad controversy, seems to have a penchant for supporting major brands in sexualising the female body, and has been called out for being a rampant capitalist. The Euphoria actress has responded by sharing images of female athletes who posed naked for ESPN's body issue on her Instagram.

While the levels of Hollywood risqué are different from Bollywood risqué, the idea of capitalists making money by objectifying female bodies, while invoking women's struggles and movements, is not new even to the Indian context. Just last month, jewellery brand GIVA dressed actress Kriti Sanon in a manner that was considered by some as provocatively out of context in a Rakhi commercial. In the true spirit of present-day online India, there was a vicious backlash, yet it was Sanon's response that was even more surprising. "When will we stop telling women what to wear?" she wrote, sidestepping the commercial factors at work with return outrage. Using the language of women's rights — to basically support a jewellery brand's objectification of a woman's body — just came across as disingenuous. Incidentally, like Sweeney for Novi, Sanon happens to be an investor in GIVA.

Bollywood and Big Business have mostly avoided feminism like the plague — the word, and the very idea of women's rights. Yet, in slightly over a decade, there appears to have been a shift, almost as if they suddenly realised this untapped market needed to be seized. But women's rights being all too unpalatable and inconvenient in their raw entirety, a bubblegum pop version has had to be created. Media brands promoting body dysmorphia among young girls co-opted the space, running campaigns where the 'new woman' talked about her 'body' and 'her choice'. Feminism has been stripped down mostly to mean free sexuality, because Big Business saw that as the most convenient justification for selling

women's bodies — and being lauded for it. Unglamorous ways of seeing the naked female body, such as breastfeeding or mastectomy scars, are rarely on the visual map of this movement.

Many of the brands and, unfortunately, its financial beneficiaries — actresses themselves — appear to be repositories of this school of feminism. Earlier this summer, Janhvi Kapoor's portrayal in 'Peddi' was called out for its hyper-sexualisation of the actress, which resulted in the director editing parts of the film. There were some interviews of Kapoor pre-dating the film, where she talks about exploitative camera angles sexualising her.

In this context, earlier interviews by many actresses surfaced online, such as Jaya Bachchan, Nithya Menen, and Ratna Pathak Shah, who talked about the importance of actresses drawing boundaries themselves. Speaking at a 2017 actors' roundtable, Shah said: "Every woman who decides to act in a



Shreya Ray



SKIN IN THE GAME: Both Sweeney (above) and Sanon have been accused of monetising outrage

Feminism has been stripped down mostly to mean free sexuality, because Big Business saw that as the most convenient justification for selling women's bodies — and being lauded for it

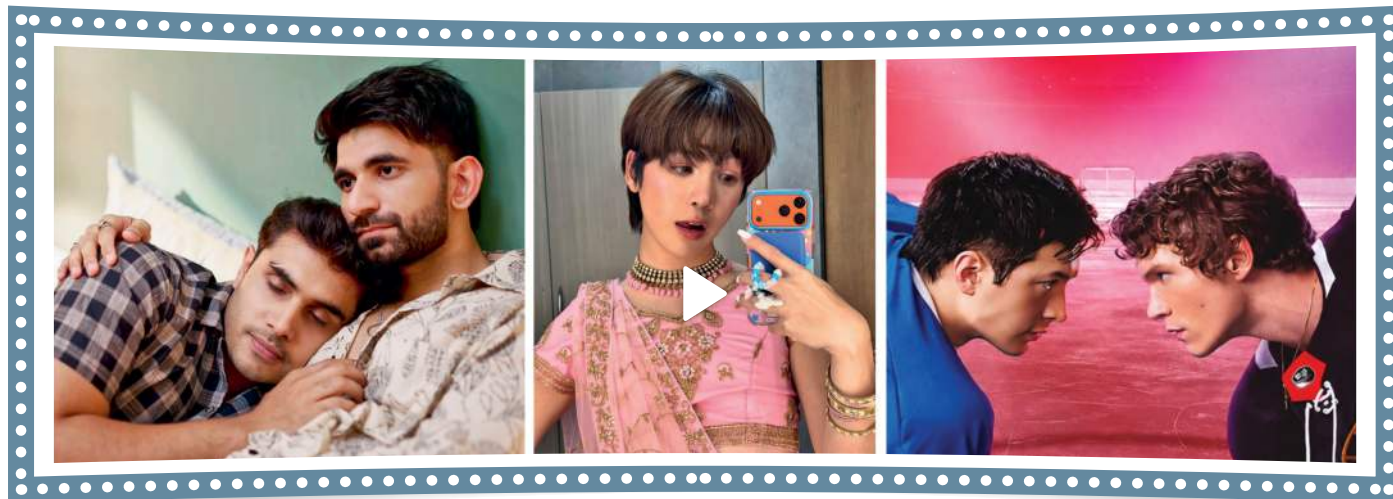
film... where she is made a complete object of lust... should stand up and say, I don't feel like doing a part like this... Silk Smitha didn't get the chance to say that, her family depended on her doing what she had to do. My family doesn't depend, so why am I not standing up," she said.

When feminism is stripped down merely to mean "my choice, my body", it allows people of privilege to make their millions and retreat into their sea-facing flats with 24x7 security, leaving ordinary, unglamorous women to pay the price. In a podcast Elle Hunt, features writer for The Guardian says, "They (the brands) don't care about representation, they care about making money. And it's fair to say, Sydney Sweeney is the same."

The author has worked as a journalist and now consults for the development sector

ASIA'S HIT BOY-MEETS-BOY LOVE STORIES FIND DESI FANS

Born in Japan, a new wave of BL dramas that go beyond romance to explore family pressures, homophobia, religion and class, is drawing young Indians



LOVE ACTUALLY: A still from Indian BL series 'Koi Naam Na Do'; Thai BL star Earth Katsamonnat in Bengaluru; and Canadian breakout series 'Heated Rivalry'

Shruti.Sonal@timesofindia.com

A Thai actor in a North Indian lehenga walks onto a Bengaluru stage and greets a screaming crowd with a cheerful "Vanakkam". When 'Love By Chance' star Earth Katsamonnat Namwrote, better known as Cooheart, arrived in India for an official fan meet in July, the cultural mash-up was hard to miss. So was the fandom.

Tickets ranged between Rs 6,499 and Rs 10,999, but that didn't deter youngsters who showed up with posters, gifts and reels. The packed seats, occupied mostly by Gen Z, reflected the growing Indian fandom for Boys' Love, or BL, a genre centred on romantic relationships between male characters that originated in Japan, and has since become a major pop-culture phenomenon across Asia. Delhi had already seen an offline BL fan meet at Connaught Place in June, hosted by fan community BLxKPopCrew, while Instagram reels are flooded with desi edits of BL couples set to Arijit Singh or S P Balasubrahmanyam.

While many BL shows come from countries such as Thailand and Japan, the fandom has spilled well beyond them. 'Heated Rivalry', a Canadian breakout hit featuring two queer men navigating the hypermasculine world of competitive ice hockey, has been widely discussed within BL communities for its secret-relationship and rivals-to-lovers tropes.

What sets this new wave of BL shows apart is not only the fact that they feature gay protagon-

ists, but also that they go deeper into the lives of their protagonists and unpack homophobia, boys' locker room talks, tussles with religion, and more.

Seher Beg, who identifies as queer and discovered BL after watching the hit Thai show 'Bad Buddy' in 2022, was struck by how different it felt from the queer content she had watched till then. "That was the first time I realised that most of the queer books I'd been reading or watching had been completely from the West," she says. The show's treatment of homophobia, parental expectations and social conditioning hit closer to home. "It made a huge difference to see Asian representation, and connect with characters that had families and relationships like mine," Beg adds.

Kartik Chauhan, a Delhi-based publishing professional, says what sets this wave of shows apart is that they go beyond tropes of tragic romances, which have been popular for a long time in films like 'Brokeback Mountain', 'God's Own Country' and 'Call Me By Your Name'. He also sees a move away from the "fetishisation" of queer desire.

"Popular cultural imagination often hypersexualises same-sex love stories. Unfortunately, it stems from a fetishist or otherwise reductive understanding of the LGBTQ community. As a result, queer desire is often viewed as perverted, for lack of a better word," he points out.

Chauhan sees 'Heated Rivalry' as a counterpoint. "While the show features some of the steamiest scenes on television in recent

Boys' Love (BL) is a fictional genre centred on romance between male characters. It originated in Japan and is now a pop-culture phenomenon across Asia

times, it evolves into an extremely intelligent exploration of the emotions of the characters. The internet co-opted the term 'tenderism' to describe the latter half of the series, where the characters expose themselves to each other emotionally. Since they operate in a hyper-masculine environment, their sexuality is never allowed to be expressed publicly. But, in finding each other, they discover a way to express the repressed part of themselves," he says.

Not all are straightforward romances. BL now stretches across action thrillers, murder mysteries, mafia sagas and slice-of-life comedies, while shows such as 'Laws of Attraction' and 'Ticket to Heaven' also explore class and religion. The fandom has also become an export opportunity. Thailand has used its shows and stars as soft power, with its foreign affairs and culture ministries incorporating them into international diplomacy and Thai festivals.

Yet, despite its growing fandom, India has produced relatively little BL content of its own. One at-

tempt to fill that gap comes from writer-director Zaheer Shaikh, whose Last Leaf Pictures is a YouTube channel dedicated entirely to desi BL shows.

"I've been a writer in the television industry for the past 10 years. When I started looking for similar Indian content, I didn't really find much. That's when I decided to start the channel," Shaikh says. "When we made the shows, we weren't sure who was going to watch it, but it got an overwhelming response, which gave us confidence that India has a huge base that wants to watch BL stories that are sensitively told," he adds.

Today, the self-funded channel has nearly 2 lakh subscribers and puts out a new show every month. 'Mujhe Rang De' pairs an out painter with a closeted man forced to work with him; 'Tera Bann Chala Hoon' is a filmy romance between a gangster and a studious NEET aspirant; while 'Koi Naam Na Do' follows a gay man who falls for a straight man. The response, evident in the views the shows have racked up, has also made it easier, Shaikh says, to convince actors to play gay roles.

"When we started, it took some convincing for actors to play gay parts. That's because BL content didn't exist in the Indian context, and whatever was available was erotic or hypersexual in nature just to grab eyeballs," says Shaikh. "But now that they get to sample the shows that we've made, they see sensitive storytelling featuring performance-based roles and clean content. It's become a lot easier to approach actors," he adds.

The Sunday Statesman

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Dangerous Waters

The collision between Indian and Pakistani naval vessels in the Arabian Sea raises a question that extends beyond the immediate dispute over responsibility: how secure is the fragile peace between two nuclear-armed neighbours when even routine military operations can become sources of confrontation? More than a year after India and Pakistan exchanged military strikes before agreeing to a ceasefire, the incident exposes the limitations of a peace sustained without a corresponding restoration of trust. The diplomatic engagements initiated by India in Delhi and Islamabad demonstrate how quickly a maritime encounter can acquire political significance. Yet diplomatic protests, however strongly worded, cannot substitute for mechanisms that prevent such encounters from escalating.

The 1991 agreement on advance notification of military exercises, manoeuvres and troop movements reflects an important recognition: military preparedness need not inevitably produce confrontation if each side understands the other's intentions. Its provisions governing the proximity of naval vessels in international waters are particularly relevant when warships operate in an environment where miscalculation can have consequences far beyond the immediate encounter. Both countries have accused the other of disregarding these safeguards. India has challenged the conduct of the Pakistani naval unit, while Pakistan has alleged that an Indian vessel behaved aggressively during its SEASPARK-26 exercise. These competing accounts cannot independently establish culpability. What matters now is whether the circumstances can be examined objectively, rather than allowing mutual accusations to become another entrenched grievance.

The danger is that the incident could become part of a larger cycle in which every military encounter reinforces suspicion. In such an atmosphere, even a relatively minor maritime incident may invite disproportionate responses, particularly when domestic political pressures reward displays of resolve. The resulting escalation need not begin with a deliberate decision to wage war; it could emerge through successive misjudgements and retaliatory actions. There is also a wider strategic dimension.

The Arabian Sea is an important corridor for international commerce and energy supplies. Instability between India and Pakistan would carry consequences beyond their bilateral relationship, affecting confidence in regional security and the predictability of maritime operations. Neither country needs to abandon its security requirements to recognise these risks. India and Pakistan can maintain military readiness while strengthening communication between naval commands, ensuring compliance with existing agreements and establishing procedures for promptly investigating potentially dangerous encounters. Such arrangements are not concessions to the other side but practical safeguards against unintended conflict. The central challenge is to prevent the ceasefire from becoming merely an interval between confrontations.

Peace cannot depend entirely on the absence of another major military exchange. It must also be sustained through disciplined conduct, credible communication and the capacity to manage disagreements without allowing them to spiral. The collision should therefore prompt more than another exchange of diplomatic protests. It should compel both governments to examine whether their existing arrangements are sufficient to keep military operations from producing a crisis. When the consequences of miscalculation could be grave, restraint is not weakness. It is an indispensable instrument of national security.

Tata's Test

The struggle over the leadership of Tata Sons is more than a disagreement about the tenure of a chairman. It is a test of whether one of India's most influential business groups can reconcile concentrated ownership, professional management and institutional accountability without undermining the stability on which its reputation rests. N Chandrasekaran's continuation for another five years offers the Tata Group leadership continuity at a consequential moment. But the opposition of Noel Tata, chairman of Tata Trusts, exposes a fundamental disagreement over who has the authority to determine the group's direction.

The question is significant because Tata Trusts owns 66 per cent of Tata Sons, the holding company at the centre of the conglomerate. The dispute highlights a structural tension in the Tata model. Its charitable trusts provide the group with a distinctive institutional identity, linking commercial success with philanthropic objectives. Yet the same arrangement places enormous influence in the hands of trustees whose responsibilities extend beyond ordinary shareholder interests. When those responsibilities collide with the decisions of professional management, the consequences can reach far beyond the boardroom. The immediate concern is the legitimacy of the reappointment. Noel Tata has argued that the decision is invalid because it lacked the necessary support from the Trusts' nominees under the company's articles of association. The board's decision and the objections to it now create uncertainty over the governance process itself.

Such a dispute cannot be resolved merely by asserting the authority of either the chairman or the majority shareholder. It requires a clear determination of the applicable rules and their consistent observance. The timing makes the disagreement particularly consequential. Tata Sons has agreed to comply with the Reserve Bank of India's directive requiring it to pursue a listing, after the regulator rejected its application to deregister as a non-banking financial company. The proposed transition could reshape the relationship between the holding company, its shareholders and the wider group. It also raises questions about transparency, accountability and the future exercise of shareholder control. A listing would not automatically settle the underlying conflict. Nor would it necessarily diminish the influence of Tata Trusts. But it could bring greater scrutiny to a corporate structure that has historically combined private ownership with substantial public visibility and philanthropic responsibility. For Chandrasekaran, the challenge is therefore larger than managing a sprawling business empire. He must lead through a period in which the authority of the board itself is contested. For Noel Tata and the trusts, the responsibility is equally significant: safeguarding their institutional role while ensuring that governance disagreements do not destabilise the businesses that sustain their philanthropic mission. The Tata Group's reputation has been built over generations, but reputation cannot substitute for sound governance.

Its future depends on establishing a transparent, legally defensible framework in which ownership rights, board responsibilities and management authority are clearly reconciled. The chairman's tenure may have been extended, but the more consequential test is whether the institution can resolve its differences without compromising the confidence on which its legacy rests.

Asatya lurks

About 50 per cent of the 700,000 students enrolled in DU colleges are from other states. Each one of them, numbering some 350,000, needs accommodation. The infrastructure available to accommodate them is woefully inadequate. Such a state of affairs serves as a goldmine for PG accommodation sharks, who are rich enough to grease the palms of those in authority

The story so far: The tragic collapse of an illegal, multi-storied PG accommodation in New Delhi, which claimed the lives of seven young people and left several others seriously injured, has understandably triggered widespread public outrage. Print, electronic and social media are resounding with reports, debates, discussions, op-eds and, predictably, politically coloured statements.

The arrests of the owners of the killer structure are necessary and welcome, but insufficient as a remedial response; especially if such tragedies are not to recur. "Greedy for rental income, owners built extra floors," reads one headline. Perhaps the larger point we are missing is this: it is not the greed of the PG owners alone that caused the tragedy; it is the product of a greedy system operating under the colluding eyes of those whose duty it was to prevent tragedies of this kind.

Bigger point: If the discussion centers on illegal construction, negligence, arrests and compensation alone, we will miss the forest for the trees.

The collapse of the building is only the visible manifestation of a much deeper crisis: the criminal neglect of education, not just in NCR but country-wide, and the failure to provide safe, adequate and affordable accommodation for students. And this, not because we lacked the required resources, but because we value money above life. The resultant tragic loss of lives must be seen as human sacrifices made at the altar of the God of Greed.

Thanks to be scandalous failure of our education enterprise nationally, Delhi has become an educational refuge for young people from across India. About 50 per cent of the 700,000 students enrolled in DU colleges are from other states. Each one of them, numbering some 350,000, needs accommodation. The infrastructure available to accommodate them is woefully inadequate. Such a state of affairs serves as a goldmine for PG accommodation sharks, who are rich enough to grease the palms of those in authority.

The abysmal demand-supply shortfall forces our young students to risk their life for the sake of education, precisely because the option to be safe doesn't exist for them. This is a national shame. This problem is not unique to Delhi. In varying degrees it prevails in our cities and metropolises.

Given the above, the untimely death of the seven students in the Satya Niketan tragedy cannot be classified as an accident. It is a predictable by-product of greed-induced systemic failure that countenanced human lives being gambled with to make a big, quick buck.

Here's the question that stares us in the face from this tragedy: Why do so many young Indians have to flock to Delhi, leaving their home states in search of better educational opportunities? Surely, such educational migrations are not natural. They happen nonetheless, like water going uphill when pumped.

The pump in this case is the scandalous state of education at all levels throughout the country; in particular, of higher education. Many of these students cannot afford living and studying in Delhi. Parents strain their economic resources to the utmost, just because educating their children is their



top-most priority. It devastates them to have their children return home dead.

And this brings us to an uncomfortable question: Why is education so grossly neglected?

It cannot be because India's ruling class does not understand its value. When it comes to their own children our ruling elite are keen to provide the best quality education in the most expensive and prestigious universities in the West. They ensure that their much-cherished children do not suffer the least inconvenience in any way.

The disparity is stark. Education is valued enormously for one's own children, yet millions of other young Indians are left to struggle with substandard education in poorly run, ill-equipped institutions, and unsafe living conditions.

This is not ignorance. It is criminal neglect. The more you



VALSON THAMPU



DEBASISH BHATTACHARYYA

The writers, both authors, are, respectively, former Principal, St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and former General Manager, International Centre Goa

regard it, the less accidental it looks. Look closer, and you will see lineaments of barely camouflaged intentions. Our education system is what it is, not because we lack the political will to educate our children and youths, but because there is a will to patronize the vested interests thriving through this scandalous state of affairs. To understand the above, the story of St. Stephen's College is worth recalling.

Founded in 1881 by five Cambridge missionaries, the college was established at a time when educational opportunities in Delhi were extremely limited, particularly for the poor. The founders had very modest resources. Yet they believed that there was no better way to love a people than to provide educational opportunities to them. To them, education was an outworking of love.

If we love, we will respect the worth of the people we love. This activates vigilance in caring for them. To care is not only to preserve the current worth, but also to enhance it, as every parent knows. Education is the best means for enhancing the worth of individuals and nations. The founders of St. Stephen's College were animated by a spirit of selfless love - the belief that those who are less privileged deserve not less, but greater care, attention and opportunity.

The Daily Star

Bangladesh must strategise carefully for the next Ganges treaty

For three decades, the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty has been the principal framework governing the most consequential shared-river relationship between Bangladesh and India. The Ganges basin extends across about 37 percent of Bangladesh's land area, supporting the livelihood of millions of people. Its 30-year term is now nearing an end. Bangladesh proposed talks on a new arrangement in June this year, but no date has been set for formal negotiations yet. India, meanwhile, has indicated that discussions on the Ganges will take place within the existing Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) framework. The treaty's December expiry, therefore, presents a larger strategic challenge. The issue is no longer about the treaty's renewal but whether Bangladesh is ready to negotiate an agreement that reflects the changing river, the country's needs, and the realities of the relationship with India today.

The Ganges River has changed since the treaty was signed in 1996. The agreement

at the time was a pragmatic solution, with a defined water-sharing formula, joint monitoring, emergency consultations, periodic review, and safeguards for critical low-flow periods. Its indicative water-sharing schedule considered flow patterns recorded at Farakka between 1949 and 1988. That historical baseline matters because the river system now faces greater uncertainty. Upstream water use, irrigation, groundwater depletion, and climate variability are making water availability during dry season less predictable. Human water use, particularly irrigation-driven groundwater depletion, can also reduce freshwater flow towards the Bay of Bengal.

The problem, however, is not the changing river only; the context for negotiation has changed as well. New Delhi must navigate interests of West Bengal and Bihar, alongside its bilateral position on the treaty. India's parliamentary review records consultations with both

these states. Recent pressure from Bihar has brought its concerns more directly into the renewal debate. This state-level interest can shape what New Delhi can realistically negotiate. For Bangladesh, this means understanding India's formal position as well as the domestic constraints behind it.

Bangladesh has taken some preparatory steps. It formed a 10-member technical committee in April, which has continued technical work through the existing Ganges treaty arrangements. In May, a joint Bangladesh-India team carried out its routine inspection and flow measurement work at Farakka and Hardinge Bridge. In September last year, Bangladesh signalled a preference for a longer-term treaty and more predictable flows. A reported 40,000-cusec target, against the treaty's 35,000-cusec benchmark established in 1996, has entered the public debate, although its basis remains unclear. Dhaka has also proposed a new institutional

mechanism covering 14 transboundary rivers, while New Delhi has suggested strengthening the existing JRC instead. These provide a foundation, but it is not yet clear whether they have been brought together into a coherent negotiating strategy. However, a negotiating strategy requires more than preparatory activity. Targets such as 40,000 cusecs of river water need a clear basis. Is it a scientifically derived requirement, a preferred outcome, or a starting point for negotiation? What is the minimum Bangladesh can accept? Which parts of the position are negotiable, and what could Bangladesh offer in return? The same questions apply to the institutional arrangement. If the existing JRC is to remain the main framework, what needs to change within it? How quickly should the two sides respond during a drought, and how should disagreements be handled when political relations deteriorate? Experts have also called for economists, urban planners, sociologists, and environmental specialists to be part of the preparation.

That idea seems to have been lost somewhere along the way. The St. Stephen's story further reveals the extraordinary demand for quality education. The college has only around 400 undergraduate seats, while tens of thousands of students applied. The tragedy was that many of those rejected were among the brightest young people in the country - not because they lacked merit, but simply because there was no room for them.

Permission was sought to expand the intake in Economics and to introduce Political Science (Hon.). Adequate library and infrastructure facilities were available. Only a limited number of additional teaching posts had to be sanctioned. Yet despite repeated efforts, the necessary permissions never came.

The prospect of some hundred more young men and women benefiting from quality higher education did not appeal to the 'competent' authorities. It is far easier to run an illicit PG facility that could kill many an inmate, provided the relevant authorities see scope for 'additional mobilisation of personal resources' in it.

Such an experience is not limited to St. Stephen's. The larger truth it exposes is that India has failed to expand educational opportunity - not because the resources were lacking, but because our patriotism falls short of loving the people. We profess, but do not practise, love.

At its deepest level, education must not be deemed an industry, a degree-producing mechanism or a speculative investment. It is a domain of public service - a sacred enterprise in human development. To care for the learner is first to recognise their worth and then to do everything possible to enhance it.

Where this concern is absent, education risks becoming an industry rather than an investment in human development.

This is why the Delhi incident should force us to ask not merely who violated building regulations, but what kind of society allows young people to live in dangerous conditions simply because they have nowhere else to go, or afford safer roofs over their heads. The answer cannot be found only in courts, commissions or administrative inquiries. Those institutions provide temporary justice and relief, but the deeper transformation must come from society itself.

The purpose of education should be to equip young people with knowledge and skills that enable them to solve the problems of their society, as Plato envisaged in 'The Republic'. Education, therefore, should nurture citizens who hold themselves responsible for others - not merely seek personal advancement.

The distinction can be expressed simply: missionary or mercenary. A missionary serves because he or she loves the people and cares for them. A mercenary has his eyes fixed on what he can get out of the people, unmindful of their safety and welfare.

As Shakespeare says, in serving them, he serves only himself. If education produces increasingly mercenary citizens - people trained only to milk and massage the system to their advantage, no matter at what cost to others - society loses its developmental momentum and moral vitality. The seven young lives lost in Delhi should therefore not become a media will-o'-the-wisp that glows and vanishes from public attention.

Their sacrifice should compel us to confront the larger failures: inadequate educational infrastructure, unsafe accommodation, corruption, administrative indifference, and the cynical choice to keep the common man in a fool's paradise, anaesthetised to his real condition by the hypnotic power of propaganda-driven media.

The real question is not simply why or how the building collapsed on our children?

It is this: What kind of society forces young people to risk their lives merely to pursue their dreams?

Until we answer that question - and act upon the answers that emerge - we may have, God forbid, a procession of Satya Niketan heartbreaks.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Profound

Sir, Dilip S. Pandit's article, "Let's bring joy back into our lives" published today is a thoughtful reflection on something that modern life seems steadily to be pushing to the margins - the capacity for spontaneous happiness. What particularly struck me was his reference to Bertrand Russell and the idea of the loss of "instinctive happiness" under the pressures of industrial civilisation. This is an important point. Industrialisation, technological progress and material advancement have undoubtedly transformed human life for the better in many ways, but they have not necessarily made us happier.

On the contrary, modern life often appears increasingly organised around achievement, productivity, competition, acquisition and

social visibility.

In such a world, even happiness can become calculated. We plan leisure, schedule pleasure and measure success, but may gradually lose the ability simply to enjoy a moment without purpose.

A child playing in the rain, a family laughing together, or an unplanned moment of delight can sometimes reveal what a highly organised life leaves behind. The point, of course, is not to romanticise the past or to dismiss the gains of modern civilisation.

It is to recognise that material progress and human happiness are not the same thing. Perhaps one of the costs of an excessively regulated and competitive life is precisely the weakening of that instinctive joy to which Russell drew attention.

Pandit deserves appreciation for bringing this simple but profound question back into public discussion.

Yours, etc., Hitendra Patel, Kolkata, 18 September.

Elite education

Sir, This refers to the timely article 'Schools and Disasters' by Devendra Saksena, published on 15 September. The Government's calculated condescension towards its own schools has fuelled the mushrooming of private schools.

The resulting inequality in education is already breeding an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, placing at stake not merely the fair and inclusive educational opportunities of millions, but the future of society and the nation itself. This new kind of Brahminism,

demanding the metaphorical thumbs of a new generation of Ekalavyas, has laid bare the festering sores of our education system. It exposes the canker at its core, as well as the fragility and hollowness of claims to the contrary, in a country where the vulnerable and marginalised - preoccupied with the daily struggle to secure the bare necessities of life - far outnumber the privileged elite. The dreams of marginal lives must not be sacrificed as ritual scapegoats at the altar of corporate democracy.

A democracy that promises equality while allowing education to become increasingly stratified risks producing not equal citizens, but generations divided by the accident of birth, wealth and access.

Yours, etc., Sudipta Ghosh, Jangipur, 17 September.

It costs a lot to seek a public job

RAMJI SRIVASTAVA 'PRAVEEN'

A public job is advertised. Before you may be considered for it, you must pay. The people applying are, by definition, the people without an income. Nobody in the government seems to find this odd.

Start with the logic, because the logic is indefensible before a single figure is quoted.

The state advertises a vacancy. It then requires, as a precondition of even being looked at, a payment from the applicant. The entire pool of applicants consists of people who do not have the job in question, and most of whom do not have any job at all. That is why they are applying. So, the one group in society guaranteed to have the least money is the group from which the state has decided to collect money before it will do anything.

This is not a subtle injustice requiring careful excavation. It is visible on the face of every advertisement, and it survives only because we have stopped looking at it.

A fee buys a service. This one buys a chance. Uttar Pradesh's provincial services examination in 2024 drew roughly 5.7 lakh applicants for 220 posts. Bihar's 67th combined examination drew 5.5 lakh for 803. In any such competition, upwards of 99 per cent of the money collected comes from people who will receive nothing whatsoever in return. Whatever is being sold here, it is not a service. It is closer to a lottery ticket, sold by the state, priced by the state, and drawn at the state's convenience.

The price bears no relation to the cost. The Union Public Service Commission processes applications for the Civil Services Examination at Rs 100. The Staff Selection Commission runs the Combined Graduate Level examination on the same Rs 100. These are the largest and most complex recruitment exercises anywhere in the country. That single number refutes every

cost-recovery claim made beneath it.

If the Union of India can register, scrutinise, admit and examine a candidate for the IAS at Rs 100, no state commission needs Rs 800 and no university needs Rs 1,500 to do the same for a clerk's post or a contract lectureship. The gap between Rs 100 and Rs 1,500 is not a cost. It is a mark-up, and it is charged to the unemployed.

The money is taken before the state commits to doing anything. Around a crore candidates paid Rs 500 each for a Railway Recruitment Board notification in 2019 and then waited more than a thousand days for an examination. Delhi University's non-teaching recruitment, notified in February 2021, still had not produced an examination when its staff union demanded an inquiry this August.

On 18 August the Jharkhand government cancelled an entire series of recruitment processes conducted since 2014. Not one of these produced a refund. The fee is collected on the day of advertisement; nothing at all is owed if the recruitment stalls, collapses or is annulled a decade later. Delay costs the recruiter nothing. Abandonment costs the recruiter nothing. The only component of the process that never fails is the payment gateway.

And it compounds. Madhya Pradesh bills separately at prelims and again at Mains. Several recruiters demand a fresh fee for each post applied for, even where the candidate holds a single registration number. And when a cancelled process is revived, the meter resets: Lucknow University advertised ten contractual law teaching posts in November 2023, cancelled that round, re-advertised the identical posts this August, and informed earlier applicants that they must apply afresh. They paid in 2023, waited three years, and received no appointment, no refund and a second invoice. A diligent candidate applying to fifteen vacancies in a year, at Rs 800 or Rs 1,000 apiece,



is spending more than many households in the state earn in a month. The harder you look for work, the more you are charged for looking.

Where relief does exist, it is attached to the wrong variable. At the UPSC and the SSC, women, SC, ST and disabled candidates pay nothing. A candidate in the Economically Weaker Section pays the full amount, exactly what a General or OBC candidate pays. State advertisements repeat the pattern faithfully: Lucknow University's law recruitment this August set Rs 1,500 for unreserved, OBC and EWS applicants alike, and Rs 1,200 for SC and ST.

Consider what that arrangement actually says. EWS is the one category in Indian public employment defined purely and explicitly by money, a family income below Rs 8 lakh a year, certified by the state's own revenue machinery. It is, by construction, the category of applicants least able to pay. It is also the only

major category granted no fee relief at all. The relief that does exist, meanwhile, carries no income test of any kind, so a candidate from a prosperous household pays a fraction of what a genuinely poor EWS applicant pays, or nothing.

Whatever one's view of reservation in selection, a fee waiver is a different question and should be answered differently. Selection preferences are defended on grounds of representation and historical exclusion, and that argument can be had on its own terms. A waiver turns on one thing only: whether this person can find Rs 1,500 this month. That is a question about a bank balance, and it has an obvious test. The state already operates that test, since it certifies the Rs 8 lakh EWS ceiling itself. If the machinery is trusted to allocate ten per cent of all public jobs, it can be trusted to decide who pays Rs 1,000 to apply for one. Waive the fee by income, for anyone below the line, whatever their category.

The remedies are neither radical nor expensive. Cap recruitment fees at the Rs 100 the Union itself manages on. Waive them on proof of income rather than category. Charge once per recruitment, not once per post and again at every stage. Refund or carry forward automatically wherever a process is cancelled or left unconcluded beyond a fixed period. And require every recruiting body to publish what it collected and what it spent.

None of this requires a new idea. It requires only that somebody in authority read one of these advertisements and notice what it says: that in a country arguing endlessly about jobs, the state has arranged matters so that the one transaction it completes promptly, reliably and without exception is taking money from people who do not have one.

The writer is a retired employee of the Uttar Pradesh government.

Gen Z angst on the rise in Odisha

KARTIK PRADHAN

When young voices gathered at Jantar Mantar recently to demand accountability and fair recruitment, the spark resonated far beyond the national capital. For the youth of Odisha, that wave of student assertion hits close to home. An entire generation in the state is currently caught in a tiring loop of administrative blunders, delayed recruitment notifications, and legal deadlocks. What was supposed to be a journey of higher learning and career building has turned into a test of survival.

Look at the sheer number of roadblocks hitting a young candidate in Odisha today. The Sub-Inspector recruitment exams have been rocked by scam allegations. The Revenue Inspector examination, handed over to controversial testing agencies, faced severe technical glitches that ruined months of hard preparation for thousands of rural aspirants.

For those aiming at academia and teaching careers, the wait is even more agonizing. Even for university gold medallists, NET qualifiers, and Ph.D. scholars who have proven their academic merit, the path forward is blocked by

procedural paralysis. The State Selection Board lecturer recruitment has been stuck in court for over two years, leaving qualified candidates waiting date after date while state colleges run with massive faculty shortages.

Similarly, thousands of teaching aspirants find themselves stuck due to legal and administrative delays surrounding the Leave Training Reserve (LTR) teacher recruitment process. Compounding these issues, the National Council for Teacher Education recently issued show-cause notices to 15 B.Ed colleges across Odisha over alleged illegal faculty appointments and eligibility violations. When teacher training institutes themselves fail basic compliance, what kind of educators are we preparing for the future?

This carelessness is not limited to higher education, as it starts right in school. The recent disclosure of 1,678 factual errors in state school textbooks showed how deeply quality control has slipped. From primary school books to university recruitment, administrative apathy seems to be the common thread running through the system.

Even when the government tries to modernize, the execution burdens

the students. The state launched a unified HMS portal for faculty recruitment across universities, which was supposed to simplify applications. Yet, an applicant applying to four different universities through the exact same portal is forced to pay separate, heavy application fees for each institution. Adding to the frustration is the practice of re-engaging retired faculty members. While thousands of NET and Ph.D. qualified young scholars sit unemployed, re-hiring retired professors closes doors for the next generation.

Despite these hurdles, Odisha's youth are beginning to push back. At VSSUT in Burla, students raised their voices against rigid uniform rules that felt disconnected from a modern engineering campus. Across the state, aggrieved aspirants of LTR teacher recruitment and other stalled exams are taking to digital platforms and street demonstrations to demand swift court resolutions and fair recruitment schedules. These are not isolated protests, as they show a growing refusal among students to accept administrative inefficiency as normal.

There is also a glaring contradiction in state policy. While the government's fee waiver scheme from KG to PG



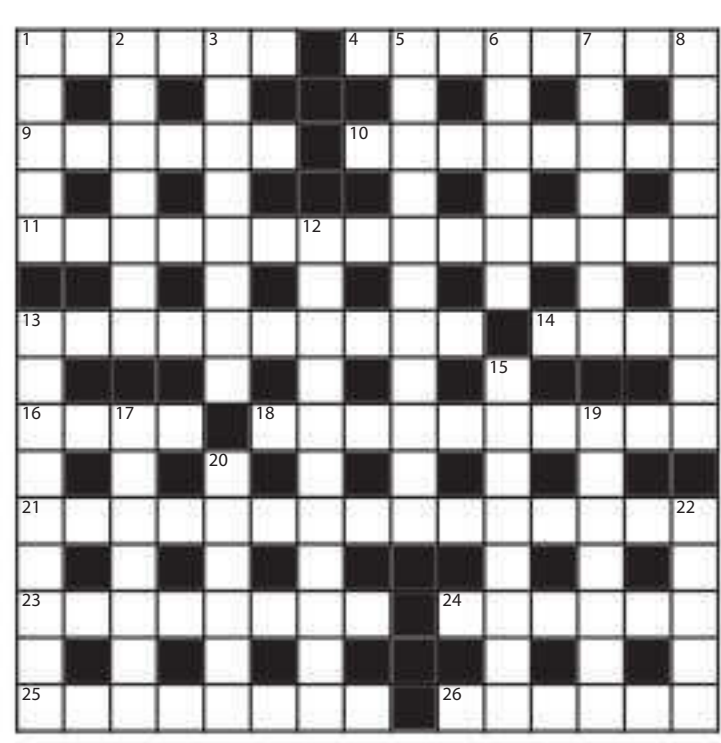
is a welcome initiative on paper, the ground reality for self-financing courses tells a different story. Students in these programmes continue to pay exorbitant admission and development fees, turning higher education into a costly burden for middle class families.

This brings us to a crucial turning point. As recruitment scams, court stays, and administrative flaws pile up, the question is no longer just about fixing individual exams. It is about the future of Odisha's youth.

Will Gen Z need an intellectual revolution by building a clear, organized demand for transparency, digitized exam governance, and merit-based hiring before a real change can happen on the ground? Or will the youth allow these systemic failures to quietly pass by? The answer to that question will decide not just the fate of our campuses, but the future of the state itself.

The writer is a Gen Z scholar and a gold medallist in MA Political Science from the Central University of Punjab.

Crossword | No. 293586



Last Sunday's Solution

S	U	B	M	E	R	G	E	S	G	R	A	I	S
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NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

NOW AND AGAIN

GROWING UP

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

Growing up in the 1970s in Krishnanagar's Nagendranagar near the river Jalangi, my world was made of flowers, trees, compound walls, short-pitch cricket, and long walks by the river.

We were a group of 15 children at first, then 20 when new families moved in. We did not know bias, comparison, or insecurity. We were oblivious to the world's weight. We only knew companionship. I have always believed that those children shaped my character more than anything at home.

We learnt about death early - two fathers gone; one mother lost in tragic circumstances. We didn't have the vocabulary for grief, but we carried our friends along instinctively, making sure they never felt alone.

We celebrated the first wedding in our group with the same innocence. Life was simple, and with it, we were simple too. Growing older, however, has a way of clouding the lens. Expectations arrive and responsibility settles in.

And recently, I have begun to understand something I never saw then: those years did not mean the same thing to everyone as they did to me. Insecurity; jealousy; or envy - I never saw any of it as a child. I never saw it even when I met them as adults.

But now I see that some of them were already carrying burdens I didn't recognise. For some, adulthood became a scoreboard - wealth, achievements, comparisons, and displays. These were never part of my lens - not then, not now. But for several of them, these became the markers of who they had become.

One of my friends visited India recently. I expected reminiscence, warmth, and shared memory. But that was not to be. I left with a sadness I couldn't quite name. It was the realisation that the childhood I held so dearly did not hold the same meaning for others.

I remembered everyone's birthday for years. I wished each one of them on those days, year after year, because those friendships meant something to me. A few years ago, I stopped - not out of anger, but because I finally saw that no one remembered mine.

In that small silence, I understood something larger: I had carried those bonds far more sincerely than they had. I see the same pattern even today. Confirmation of something I have been slowly learning - that the connections you hold with sincerity are not always held the same way by others.

I am not bitter or angry. I am simply aware. Childhood shaped me. It shaped some of them too - but not in the same way, not with the same depth, not with the same meaning. And, perhaps that is the truth of growing up: we all live the same years, but we do not carry them the same way.

100 Years Ago

News Items

NATIONAL UNION

AIMS AND OBJECTS OF NEW BODY

Delhi, Sept.

According to a summary of the informal talk and decisions reached at the meeting of the Indian National Union on September 10, it is not the intention of the Union to interfere with the work of internal reform undertaken by different communities or to require any community to suspend its social or other reforming activities. The objects of the Union are to promote and foster the growth of a united Indian nation and to remove all causes of inter-communal discord and separatist tendencies. To achieve these objects the Union will undertake vigorous propaganda through the Press and on the platform to foster a spirit of true nationalism and genuine patriotism among the people of India. It will try to create gradually such an atmosphere in the country as will facilitate the settlement of all communal questions in a spirit of compromise and mutual goodwill. Regarding differences not settled within a reasonable time by common understanding, the Union will, with due regard to the equities of the situation, give its own finding and take steps to secure for it the approbation of the country. A sub-committee, consisting of Mrs. Naidu, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Messrs. Girdharilal K Santanam, Asaf Ali and Shankar Lai, was formed to draft the rules and regulations of the Union and to circulate the report of the informal meeting and also of the sub-committee for critics.

MAHARAJA HONOURED

FRENCH DECORATION FOR RULER OF KAPURTHALA

His Highness the Maharaja of Kapurthala has lately received from the French Government the Grand Cross of the Legion d' Honneur, a high French decoration, as well as the Grand Cross of the Order of the Sun from the Peruvian Government in South America.



Breaking free of the male gaze

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

THE news of Gloria Steinem’s passing into eternity got me thinking about our own literary roots in Punjabi writing, and wondering where our equivalent voice lies. Did Punjab have a feminist movement? Did our thinkers, writers, and literary giants ever ideologically conceptualise or debate issues of women’s equality and women’s choices through their written texts? Or has it always been the way men saw women? Did the male idea of a woman assert itself in the creation of women characters, or were women ever seen as flesh-and-blood beings, with their own agency and their own voice?

We have always had brilliant, unruly women in our literature, and their trajectory tells a fascinating story of how women cut through social stratification in many epic tales, yet ultimately succumbed to the traditionalist point of view. Could they have been dealt another card? A different narrative, a more daring ending than death?

Take the rebellious heroines of the *qissa* tradition, who are part of the Punjabi liter-

ary imagination. Desired, mourned, punished, mythologised, romanticised and made into archetypes, and yet, for most of her history, the woman has rarely been the one writing her own story.

Look closely at heroines like Heer, Sahiban, or Sassi. They were remarkably radical, shattering feudal codes, rejecting arranged marriages, and boldly claiming their own desires. Yet every single one of them met a tragic end.

A heroine can defy her family, run from home, choose her own lover — and still be entirely instrumental to a male poet’s point of view about fate, honour or the repercussions of loving a man outside the codified structure of acceptability. Agency in the plot is not the same as agency over the narrative.

Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, Sassi-Punnu and Mirza-Sahiban are the foundational romances of Punjabi literature, and their heroines are strikingly bold by the standards of their time. Heer defies caste and family to love Ranjha. Sohni swims across the river Chenab in an unbaked clay pot to reach her beloved. Sahiban’s choice sets off a chain of events that destroys her own family. On the surface, these are stories of female desire, female defiance and an unusual radicalism, set within a society driven by social constraints and patriarchy.

But look at how each story ends. Almost without exception, the woman who is transgressive dies. Heer is poisoned by her own kin. Sohni drowns when her clay pot is sabotaged by her own sister-in-law and dissolves when she is crossing the river. Sahiban, fearing that her brothers will be killed by Mirza, breaks his arrows; a defenceless Mirza is killed and Sahiban takes her own life.

The tragic ending is not incidental to the genre, it is structural. The narrative grants the heroine desire and voice only to extinguish her at the point where her defiance might actually threaten the social order, which, ironically, the poem otherwise upholds. Waris Shah, Pilu and Fazal Shah — the male poets who shaped these narratives — offer their heroines extraordinary freedom, but the plot unfolds in a manner that ultimately restores patriarchal order. The audience is invited to weep for the heroine’s unfortunate fate but the poet is unable to imagine a world reorganised around her survival. The heroine ostensibly chooses, but it is the poet who decides the consequences of her choice and the subsequent costs of that choice, and the poet who starts from a bold premise, timidly succumbs to the more acceptable and conservative resolution.

An 18th-century Punjabi village had no script for a woman who broke every rule of patriarchy and survived. Death became



Heer defied caste and family for Ranjha. A painting by Abdur Rahman Chughtai. Courtesy: Arif Rahman Chughtai; (below) in the film ‘Pirjhar’, based on Amrita Pritam’s novel, Urmila Matondkar’s Puro redefines endurance rather than perishing under the circumstances.

the narrative safety valve to restore the status quo and punish the transgression. The male poets wrote themselves into a corner from which they could not escape, and death thus became the obvious resolution. They possessed the empathy to imagine a woman defying the social order, but lacked the framework to figure out what to do with her if she lived. Punjabi literature built its own indigenous feminist vocabulary through centuries of heartache. It evolved from a tradition where a female rebel had to be killed to keep the peace, into a modern movement where women writers ensured that their characters could live, breathe and write their own futures.

Fast forward to the 20th century and here emerged writers like Ajit Cour and Dalip Kaur Tiwana, who refused to take refuge in the language of the suffering heroine. Tiwana mapped the claustropho-

bia of traditional courtyards endured by women in silence, yet her characters survived, despite the heavy psychological scars. In her seminal work ‘Eho Hamara Jiwana’, Tiwana didn’t wrap her female characters in romantic folklore; instead, she exposed the harsh feudal economics of rural Punjab where women like Bhano were traded and commodified like property. What makes Tiwana’s critique so sharp is her realisation that this patriarchal gaze wasn’t just held by men — it was deeply internalised by the domestic setup itself, often enforced by older women guarding the very systems that oppressed them as well. The women become carriers of patriarchy and often practised it even more ferociously than men.

Ajit Cour brought in an unapologetic audacity with her writing about female sexuality, loneliness, and the hypocrisy of

middle-class morality. Her women do not look for acceptance; they simply demand the right to take up space. ‘Gulbano’, her collection of short stories, marked her as a distinguished voice in Punjabi fiction. Her stories highlighted women’s unequal status and boldly addressed the physical aspect of man-woman relationships, drawing the ire of the establishment.

It is precisely against this backdrop that Amrita Pritam’s intervention becomes historically decisive — and it marks the first real rupture in the male-authored tradition. Her novel ‘Pirjhar’ creates the character of Puro, a woman who becomes, in the popular literary imagination, a symbol of violence against women during Partition. The crucial difference is authorship: Puro is not a man’s symbol of a woman’s suffering. She is a woman’s own rendering of what that suffering meant from the inside. The shift from a “woman as depicted by men” to a “woman as narrated by a woman” is, arguably, the single-most consequential turn in this entire history. Puro survives the displacement of Partition, quietly redefining endurance rather than perishing under the circumstances.

Pritam’s poem *Ajj Akkhaan Waris Shah Nu*’ was a direct indictment of the old bards, questioning how poets could weep over the fictional death of a single Heer while thousands of real-life women were being slaughtered and abducted in 1947.

Alongside canonical Sufi poets like Baba Farid, Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah stands a lesser-known figure: Peero Prem-an, a 19th-century Punjabi mystic poet, perceived as a feminist voice in the context — though the modern label would be a trifle anachronistic. Her verses are now being recovered by scholars as an indigenous female voice challenging patriarchy and class hierarchy from within the very devotional idiom that produced the great male Sufis. Her presence is a reminder that “women created by men” never presented the whole picture — even if it was overwhelmingly the dominant one, and even if her voice remained, for over a century, marginal to the canon in a way Bulleh Shah’s never was.

This brings me back to Gloria Steinem, who once said, “In my heart, I think a woman has two choices: either she’s a feminist or a masochist.” Peero, singing from a Gulabdas dera in 19th-century Punjab, had already chosen to name what she was doing:

“Lord I am beyond caste
Neither Hindu nor Muslim
I am beyond birth and death
Neither a woman nor a man
Limitless beyond limit.”

— The writer is an acclaimed theatre director

In Punjab, literature has been rich with brilliant, unruly women who cut through social stratification in many epic tales, yet ultimately succumbed to the traditionalist point of view



30 years of the gallery, 35 artists who’ve crossed paths

SHIREEN QUADRI

THE first thing one notices about Nature Morte’s new home in Gulmohar Park, Delhi, is the room it gives to an artwork. The gallery occupies over two floors and a rooftop terrace, and its founder Peter Nagy has resisted the urge to fill every surface. Paintings have spaces around them; sculptures throw long shadows; photographs claim their place on white walls.

‘The Evolution of the Soothsayer’ marks three decades of Nature Morte and a new address for the Delhi gallery

This new address celebrates 30 years of Nature Morte with a two-part exhibition by 35 artists. The first, ‘The Evolution of the Soothsayer: Chapter 1’, which is on view until October 10, brings together 17 artists, including Abir Karmarkar, Ayesha Singh, Basist Kumar, Bharti Kher, Dayanita Singh, Manish Nai, Pushpamala N, Sagarika Sundaram and Thukral & Tagra. Part Two follows with another group. While some relationships go back decades, others are newer.

Nature Morte’s director Aparajita Jain sees the opening of the new gallery as a chance to reset without losing sight of the relationships that built it. “This marks an exciting moment for Nature Morte as we enter our fourth decade,” she says. “‘The Evolution of the Soothsayer’ felt like a fitting inaugural exhibition, bringing together artists across generations and disciplines whose practices reflect the spirit of experimentation, intellectual curiosity and independent thinking that has long defined Nature Morte.”



(Clockwise from left) Manish Nai, ‘Untitled’, 2024; Bharti Kher, ‘Weather Painting: Infinity Loop’, 2025; Dayanita Singh, ‘Time Capsule’, 2024.

For Peter Nagy, also the curator of the exhibition, the move is more personal. “Opening this new space feels like a homecoming for Nature Morte,” he says, referring to the gallery’s earlier years in Neeti Bagh and its later chapter at Dhan Mill. “At this stage, the gallery has reached a point of real maturity. We’ve built relationships with many of our artists over decades, and this new home gives us the opportunity to continue growing those relationships while creating the kind of exhibitions we’ve always envisioned.”

At the show, Dayanita Singh’s ‘Time Capsule’ (2024) brings together 12 photographs of cloth-bound bundles within a dark wooden structure. The bundles are closed to us; whatever they contain remains hidden. Their folds and knots feel almost domestic, but their careful arrangement turns them into an unreadable archive. Singh has long asked what a photograph can become beyond the conventional frame or book, and here memory seems packed away, labelled only by its absence. Her ‘Ladder 507’ (2019), a vertical sequence of black-and-white

architectural images, makes corridors and empty interiors feel almost weightless.

A different interior appears in Abir Karmarkar’s ‘West Wind’ (2026), an oil on canvas measuring 72 by 108 inches. A house stands behind a gate, nearly swallowed by vegetation. Trees and a bruised red sky cover its upper half. Nothing dramatic is happening, yet the painting carries the unease of arriving somewhere after everyone has gone inside. Karmarkar’s smaller work, ‘Milan’, shares this interest in facades, windows, railings and entrances observed with

intimacy, but without disclosure. Bharti Kher goes elsewhere. In ‘Weather Painting: Infinity Loop’ (2025), a deep blue field is interrupted by looping red lines and bursts of bright colour that appear, vanish and double back. There is no single resting point for the eye. Nearby, ‘The Geological Agency of Things’ (2024) leaves the wall altogether: wood, stone, chains, a dark sphere and horn-like forms hold together through balance and tension. The parts remain recognisable, but their relationship resists a fixed name, an uncertainty central to Kher’s practice.

Material becomes the subject in Manish Nai’s ‘Untitled’ (2024). Used clothes are crushed into dense blocks and assembled into a field of pinks, yellows, greens, blues and faded prints. From afar, it has the discipline of a grid; up close, shirts, creases and scraps of former lives begin to show. Nai turns discarded fabric, through pressure and repetition, into something closer to architecture. Waste becomes structure.

Sagarika Sundaram’s ‘Interference’ (2025) has the opposite character. Made from hand-dyed felted wool, it refuses the clean rectangular edge expected of a wall work. Colour gathers in thick patches; strands extend beyond the main body; the surface looks grown rather than manufactured. It can suggest textile, skin, landscape or body without becoming any one of them.

This breadth describes Nature Morte’s history. When the gallery established itself in Delhi in the late 1990s, installation, photography, conceptual work and unconventional materials had a smaller place in the commercial art world. What now feels natural inside a contemporary gallery did not always have collectors or a settled vocabulary.

In the new Gulmohar Park rooms, moving from Singh’s sealed bundles to Karmarkar’s deserted house, from Nai’s compressed clothes to Sundaram’s unruly wool, one gets a measure of how much the idea of contemporary Indian art has changed.

— Quadri writes on arts and culture

BOOKS

Contrast between Asal Uttar & Khemkaran

Co-authored by military historian Shiv Kunal Verma, the ‘Battles of the Indian Republic’ series by Aleph features six books

BRIGADIER HARASH VIR SINGH
WITH SHIV KUNAL VERMA

WHEN the guns finally fell silent after the fighting of 10 September (1965), the battlefield around Asal Uttar revealed itself slowly, almost reluctantly. The air carried the residue of cordite and burnt fuel. The sugarcane fields stood trampled and flattened, their tall stalks crushed under the weight of steel. There was no dramatic moment of collapse, no single act that marked the end. Instead, the signs of victory emerged in fragments. Abandoned tanks stood where they had halted, some intact, others damaged, many simply silent. Radios still crackled in a few turrets, engines had gone cold, and crews were nowhere to be seen.

For the men of 4 Mountain Division and the armoured regiments that had held the line, the realisation took time to sink in. Over three days of relentless fighting, they had faced repeated assaults by a modern armoured division that had arrived with confidence, numbers, and a belief in its own invincibility. That belief now lay scattered across the fields west of Chima and around

Bhikkiwind. The armoured thrust that was meant to rupture the Indian defences and roll on towards the Beas had run out of momentum, cohesion, and will.

Yet Asal Uttar did not announce itself as a decisive end. It was a pause. A forced recalibration. The Pakistani bridgehead still existed. The war was not over. What had been achieved was something more subtle and, in many ways, more consequential. A powerful armoured offensive had been stopped cold, not by superior technology or overwhelming numbers, but by method, terrain, and a defensive system that had been allowed to mature just in time.

At Bhikkiwind alone, ninety-seven tanks were eventually assembled after the ceasefire. Of these, seventy-two were Pattons. Thirty-two were still in running condition. The numbers quickly entered public memory, and with them came the temptation to reduce Asal Uttar to arithmetic. Kill ratios were discussed. Claims were made. Units compared tallies. The area itself began to acquire a new name, Patton Nagar.

But numbers, by themselves, conceal

more than they reveal. Many of the tanks had not been destroyed in combat. They had been abandoned when cohesion broke down, when routes of withdrawal were cut, or when darkness, terrain, and fear combined to paralyse crews. Soft ground, damaged distributaries, and the high water table played their part. So did confusion in command, poor coordination between armour and infantry, and repeated failures to concentrate force at the decisive point. The battlefield was as much psychological as physical.

On the Indian side, the success carried its own dangers. The presence of so many abandoned tanks created the impression that the Pakistani defences around Khemkaran had been fatally weakened. In reality, the town itself was held far more strongly than Indian commanders appreciated. Four infantry battalions, supported by armour and artillery, still occupied prepared positions. The bridgehead, though constrained, remained intact.

It was this misreading that led to the

costly attempts to retake Khemkaran in the days that followed. Courage was not lacking. The operations by 4 Sikh, 2 Mahar, and later by 9 JAK Rif were carried out with determination. Armour was pushed forward in support, sometimes in roles for which it was ill-suited. Coordination faltered. Infantry and tanks lost contact, fire support by artillery was found wanting. Attacks went in without adequate preparation or clear appreciation of the enemy’s strength.

The results were painful. Casualties mounted. Tanks were lost not to sweeping armoured counterattacks but to well-sited defences and concentrated fire. The contrast with Asal Uttar was stark. Where the defence had been deliberate, integrated, and patient, success had followed. Where haste and optimism replaced method, the cost was immediate and unforgiving.

The dramatic armoured clashes gave way to endurance. Pakistani artillery continued to range the Indian positions. Sabre aircraft made repeated attacks, some paying with their loss. On the ground, both sides probed cautiously.

The final attempts on 21 and 22 September to recapture Khemkaran followed a familiar pattern. Armour advanced in support of infantry, only to be checked once again by prepared defences, accurate fire,

and a system that had by now been refined through hard experience. There was no breakthrough. When the ceasefire came, it was at a point of exhaustion.

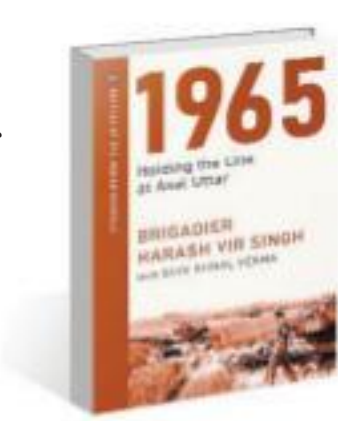
Khemkaran remained in Pakistani hands. Asal Uttar remained Indian. In purely territorial terms, the outcome appeared ambiguous. In military terms, it was anything but.

Asal Uttar demonstrated, with brutal clarity, the limits of armoured power when divorced from sound planning and combined arms coordination. It exposed the vulnerability of even the most modern tanks when forced into unfavourable terrain against a defender who understood how to exploit it. It showed how infantry, artillery, and armour, when integrated and disciplined, could neutralise numerical and technical inferiority.

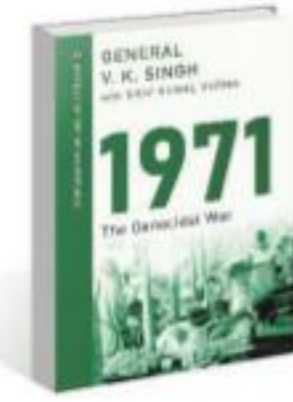
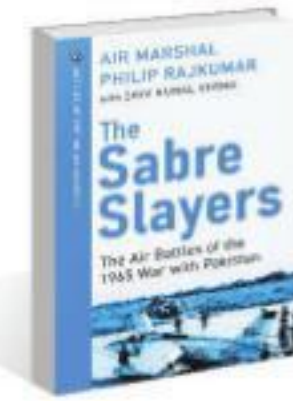
Perhaps, most importantly, it marked a psychological turning point. The myth of the Patton’s invincibility was shattered.

At the same time, Asal Uttar served as a cautionary tale. Victory in one phase does not guarantee success in the next. The failure to retake Khemkaran was not a failure of bravery, but of judgement. It underscored the need for restraint after success, for clear-eyed assessment rather than momentum-driven decisions.

— Excerpted with permission from Aleph



1965: HOLDING THE LINE AT ASAL UTTAR by Brigadier Harash Vir Singh with Shiv Kunal Verma. Aleph. Pages 116. ₹499



Hazrat Mahal’s heroics, loss

SALIL MISRA

TWO mega developments took place in 19th-century India with long-term implications. The British rule was firmly established all over, displacing the rule of many regional powers. The British encroachment also began to be resisted in different ways. The region of Awadh stood out in both: the ease with which it was conquered by the British, and the ways in which its people fought the British. It is this story which forms the core of the book. Begum Hazrat Mahal is the central character. Who was she and why is her story important?

On the face of it, there is nothing spectacular about her life. She was one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Awadh. When the British declared his rule to be illegitimate on the grounds of misgovernance, he chose to surrender. He left Lucknow in 1856 and migrated to Calcutta, where he hoped to pursue his case with the Governor-General. Hazrat Mahal, however, chose to stay behind in Lucknow with her 13-year-old son, Birjis Qadr.

Begum Hazrat Mahal’s story could well have ended here but circumstances propelled her to the centre stage and she found herself to be the leader of the imminent rebellion against the British. The making of the turbulence had begun quite independent of her, but once she was chosen for it, she played her role most heroically.

That makes her story both spectacular and worth telling. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones’ biography has done this most admirably.

As Awadh emerged from the centralised control of the Mughal empire by the early 18th century, its new rulers began to develop the region. It acquired its own specialisation in arts, music, dance, poetry, dress, architecture and cuisine. Some part of this legacy is alive even today. The land was fertile and the region was prosperous. There was a patronage system and many people — poets and

musicians — benefitted. The rule of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah may not have been very efficient but it was humane. The British replaced it with a system that was just the opposite — efficient without being humane.

They imposed fresh taxes and created new monopolies. In their rush for change and transformation, the British dismantled — literally and metaphorically — much that existed under Wajid Ali Shah. This antagonised people and created an unusual situation in which the rulers surrendered but the people — *talugdars*, peasants, soldiers, old nobility — were determined to oppose the changes. A hurriedly created grouping of old warriors chose young Birjis as the leader of the rebellion. It was at this stage that Hazrat Mahal took over the reins of leadership. She led the rebellion of 1857 in Awadh. Much like her counterpart in Jhansi — Rani Lakshmi Bai — Hazrat Mahal did not choose her historic role. But once it was chosen for her by history or destiny, she rose to the challenge.

The British by this time had shifted to modern warfare. The rebels fought with patriotism, courage and commitment. It was clear that technology more than commitment was the road to victory in modern wars.

The rebels fought a fierce battle but lost in the end. The battle in Awadh lasted longer than the one in Delhi. But by March 1858, it was all over for Hazrat Mahal, Lucknow, Awadh and India. She sought refuge from the ruler of Nepal and migrated there with her son. This was a tame end of a heroic story. Rani Lakshmi Bai, by contrast, died on the battlefield. She became a martyr. Hazrat Mahal was largely forgotten. She remained in Nepal with her son, where she died in 1879.

The book tells the story of Hazrat Mahal, her humble beginnings, elevation and the eventual anti-climax. It also offers a perspective on 1857. Above all, the book is a story of the times, and of the determined resistance to the triumphant march of the modern juggernaut. There was a momentary flash of victory, but the contest was hardly between equals.

— The reviewer is visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Gurugram

RANA NAYAR

TEJWANT SINGH GILL is an erudite scholar, with a formidable reputation as a critic and historian of Punjabi literature. Though he earned his spurs by teaching English literature at GNDU, Amritsar, he has written extensively on a range of Punjabi writers, novelists and poets alike. A few years ago, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi National Fellowship, an honour rarely bestowed on a critic, as it is reserved for some of the tallest among the *bhasha* writers.

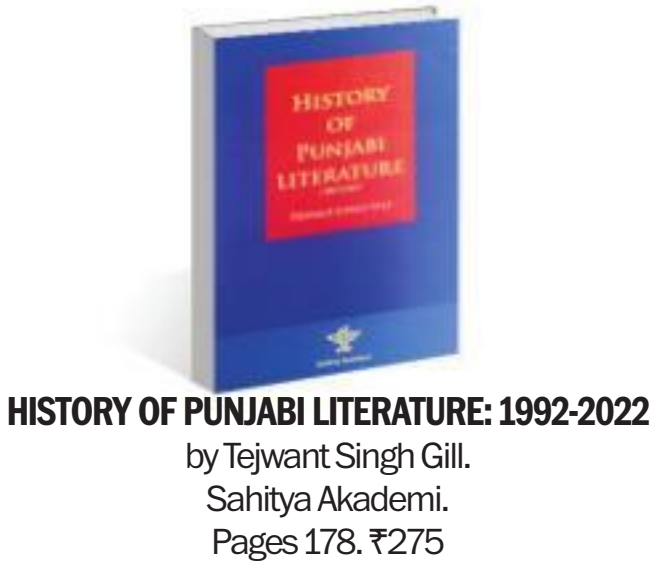
As such, Prof Gill has impeccable credentials to compile the ‘History of Punjabi Literature, 1992-2022’. The cut-off date might appear somewhat arbitrary, unless the volume is seen as a sequel to an earlier version, published in the 1990s, again by Sahitya Akademi. Its editors, Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, covered a whole range of genres, writers and periods, right from the early times to 1992.

To his credit, Gill has carried this mission forward, that too in a fairly competent manner, filling the gap his predecessors had left.

I had serious reservations about the first volume, just as I have some about the sequel. In both the volumes, the editors have not dwelt upon the mode of history writing, ignoring vital questions of historiography altogether. At least Sekhon and Duggal added an introduction; Gill has avoided that as well.

An introduction provides the necessary space to the editor to dwell upon his intent, methodology, the mode of selection and emphasis given to certain writers, which has a bearing upon both inclusions and exclusions, apart from unmasking certain inherent ideological or personal biases.

Sekhon and Duggal had given over 20 pages to their own work, reducing one of the tallest Punjabi writers, Gurdial Singh, to barely a page and a half. A genuine literary historian can ignore such disproportionate spatial representation only at the



HISTORY OF PUNJABI LITERATURE: 1992-2022 by Tejwant Singh Gill. Sahitya Akademi. Pages 178. ₹275

peril of his own reputation.

Writing literary history is serious business. It requires a definite model and a clear understanding of the methodology. Sekhon and Duggal didn’t bother about these questions much. As a result, their history turned into a patchwork quilt; a series of entries on individual authors, stitched together in a somewhat decontextualised way.

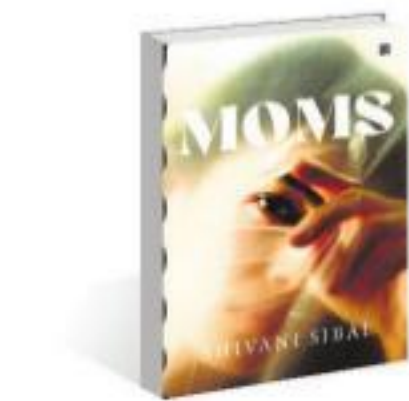
To an extent, Prof Gill has consciously tried not to fall into this trap. It’s another matter that his chronology follows a similar overarching, constitutive principle. Unlike his predecessors, though, he does offer an incisive contextualisation for writers and the movements to which they belong.

Literary histories, with chronology as a determining factor, have long become passé in the West. I wonder why we have failed to evolve alternative models for writing literary histories of our *bhashas*?

It’s not that we don’t have the models. Long back, Prof Sisir Kumar Das edited a multi-volume ‘History of Indian Literature’, published by the Sahitya Akademi. Critics and literary historians would do well to treat this as a model. That might offer some course correction.

By not doing so, Prof Gill has missed an opportunity to be a trailblazer, something he could easily have become, given the wealth of knowledge he possesses about Punjabi literature.

— The reviewer taught at Punjab University



MOMS by Shivani Sibal. HarperCollins. Pages 248. ₹599

The book explores “the distance of what it looks like and feels like from the inside”. Shivani vividly etches this perfect life, now a curated social media feed with the right hashtag; each chapter begins with it. She elaborates on the pressures to live up to an impossible standard set by social media — that everyone somehow measures themselves against — and the tensions between real life and reel life.

But ‘Moms’ is equally an unfiltered look at

where Radhika would “wake earlier, get completely ready, change into a fresh set of nightclothes, and then slip back into bed”. So when her husband woke up, he would find her looking “pristine once more”.

This beginning of the marriage sets the tone for her relationship.

The story of how she came to be married to Manik is spun into a bedtime story for her daughter Samara when she asks for a “mama-papa-princess story”. Radhika gets pregnant almost immediately, relieved that she could dodge the “what do you do” question at parties. “After all, what could be more significant than growing a baby?”

Motherhood becomes her job, her life and her purpose. The identity she readily adopts consumes her so much that she is snidely referred to by the “Working Moms” in the school as a “Professional Mom”. It is a public tiff between these two different versions of motherhood that starts off the spiral in Radhika’s life. “Motherhood was an identity that she had apparently surrendered all others to and apparently done so willingly,” Shivani writes eloquently.

MANDIRA NAYAR

SHIVANI SIBAL began her writing career with a bang. Her debut, ‘Equations’, was a *pucca* Delhi story, breezily told. The lightness belied the seriousness of what she was tackling: class dynamics in the power-driven city filled with the powerful. Five years later, she returns to a leafy lane in a privileged part of the Capital, with ‘Moms’ cementing her place in the ‘Delhi novel’ bookshelf. A portrait of modern motherhood, her new book brings alive this Instagram-perfect world; she chooses to gaze inward at the family and the power dynamics within it.

Radhika has everything on paper. The daughter of a High Court judge, Justice Arvind Mathur, she grew up in a sprawling house in the heart of the Capital. She marries Manik Khanna — heir to the legal practice of the “legendary Senior Advocate GC Khanna” — just before her father retires, ensuring her *bidaai* from a 1-acre bungalow.

They honeymoon in the Maldives — “when it is still an exclusive destination” —

where Radhika would “wake earlier, get completely ready, change into a fresh set of nightclothes, and then slip back into bed”. So when her husband woke up, he would find her looking “pristine once more”.

This beginning of the marriage sets the tone for her relationship.

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motherhood. The heartbreak of it, as well as how quickly the love of the early years gives way to moodiness and “the Wall” in the teenage years. It offers a refreshing take on just how hard it is. “She had forgotten, in that moment, that mothers were not free to express their emotions — that they were always expected to be the bigger person every bloody time, to respond reasonably and pleasantly after, no matter the provocation,” she writes after Radhika snaps at Samara.

The book is set in a quiet colony opposite Lodhi Garden. The clues are there for anyone in Delhi to know exactly the neighbourhood. The colony has a new community centre with a swimming pool, a cosy cafe, and a space for after-school classes. There are state-of-the-art purifiers, a rock wall for older kids and a shiny playground.

The story is told through Radhika and her mom friends. There is Tara, the second wife of an older man. Mother to an adopted kid, Devi, Tara is part of the “super-mom” group, but lies on the fringes because she is their yoga instructor. There is Naina, Radhika’s “first mom-friend”, whom she met while get-

ting a blow dry. Naina’s kids go to a boarding school in England to escape the pollution and the atmosphere for girls. Then there is Parul, from an established family without the need to network or find connections.

The book is taut like the gym-toned body that Radhika so carefully works on, and while it feels like a thriller, it is a social commentary on a world where luxury is a necessity. Shivani handles the heavy with lightness. Think ‘*Big Little Lies*’ meets ‘*Made in Heaven*’. ‘Moms’ is almost size zero that packs a punch. It is a devastating behind-the-scenes peek into a privileged Delhi world — sharply observed and with bite. There is loneliness, marriage, motherhood, friendship and family. And there is a price for perfection and for editing the messier bits of life.

Shivani tackles power — it would be impossible not to do so in a Delhi novel — but chooses to focus on how it plays out in intimate relationships. In the Capital, privilege and power provide a Teflon coating, as the end reveals. The conclusion will leave you shaken, but it is worth it.

— The reviewer is a literary critic

BACKFLAP



THE GREATEST INDIAN ANIMAL STORIES EVER TOLD Edited by Sumana Roy. Aleph. Pages 283. ₹899

Some much-loved stories in modern Indian literature have animals as protagonists. From Premchand’s ‘A Tale of Two Bullocks’, to ‘Mahesh’ by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, ‘The Mark of Vishnu’ by Khushwant Singh, and ‘Poonachi’ by Perumal Murugan, this book takes in its sweep some of India’s greatest pieces of literary fiction.



THE GOLDEN CHISEL by Seethalakshmi S and Rahul Nandan. Rupa. Pages 168. ₹395

In temple towns, devotees bow before sacred idols, admiring their beauty yet rarely wondering about the hands that shaped them. This book turns to the man behind one such image: the sculptor of the Ram Lalla idol at Ayodhya’s Ram Janmabhoomi Temple.

REFLECTIONS

Exhausting Bangalore hustle



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

AFTER almost 20 years, I visited Bangalore recently. We had to attend a conference in Hubli and decided that we'd keep aside a few days for Bangalore to catch up with friends we hadn't met for a long time. In any case, having read so much about the buzzing life there, I decided that we must see for ourselves what has changed. The short answer to that was: Everything! The lovely parks and verdant neighbourhoods have become crowded spaces with towering high-rise apartment blocks and although the trees still stand, they are now a dwarfed and apologetic presence in this new concrete jungle.

As for the traffic, the less said the better. Just covering a few kilometres can take up to two hours in a car or cab and if, God forbid, you have an early morning flight to catch, you have to leave at 4 am to be there by 6 am. As if the volume and chaos of cars and traffic jams were not enough, half the city has been dug up for the Metro that is expected to help commuters. The joy of going out to meet friends in a convivial club or restaurant is wiped out by the sheer logistics of a rendezvous. Never again will I curse the Delhi-Noida or Delhi-Gurgaon traffic. Nothing can possibly be worse than being stuck on Bangalore's narrow winding roads choked with cars, two-wheelers, buses, trucks and delivery vans. Whew!

What is still wonderful is the balmy Bangalore weather. Often, you don't even need a fan and in the 10 days or so that we spent in this region, we did not feel the need for an air-conditioner. This despite the fact that there is a severe dry spell there and Dharwad farmers are worried about the prevailing drought.



Nothing can possibly be worse than being stuck on the narrow winding roads

Those of us who live or travel mainly in North India can be unprepared for the evident prosperity and civility of India south of the Vindhyas. I must add, however, that when you hear rapid Kannada being spoken, you can be forgiven for thinking that there is an argument going on instead of greetings being exchanged! The harsh consonants and pitch of voice are so alien to our ears.

South Indian food is another experience. We were served a *sadya* lunch with dozens of little dollops of pickles, *chutneys*, *papads*, *avial*, and rice, *sambar* and *rasam* topped with *payasam* and heavenly aromatic filter coffee. I snored shamelessly through the session of lectures that followed but there were others who looked as if they were dozing secretly too. All in all, we returned exhausted and 'fully fed up' as they say in *sadda* Punjab to mean replete with food and drink.

Another shock awaited us here: the BRICS conference meant that large areas of Delhi were cordoned off for the delegates and traffic diversions took one on a safari in another direction if you were forced to enter Delhi for some

reason. Happy to be holed up in peaceful Noida, I savoured the peace and quiet this meant. I wonder though, what happens to those who need to go to a hospital in such a situation, but the answer is that we have so many medical facilities across the NCR that one can be reassured about getting help in case of an emergency. Children and their parents got a long weekend off as office-goers were encouraged to work from home and schools were shut down. I'm told the streets were so quiet that one wondered if a leopard had just passed by.

Now about a film that has made box office history: '*Hanuman Ansh*'. Made on a shoe-string budget of just about ₹2 crore, it has raked in almost a hundred times more and is being dubbed now into Tamil and other languages. I've wanted to go and see it but no hall has free seats and viewers stay on for two consecutive screenings. My interest is partly because I want to see what has made it such a blockbuster but the more important reason is that my husband's family were devoted followers of Neem Karoli Baba. He was a regular visitor to our home and whenever we went up to Almora, a mandatory stop at Kainchi was always on the trip.

Babaji never gave *gyan*: he just looked at one with such love in his eyes that it felt as if he had entered one's secret heart and taken away all one's tension. Reclining on a *takhat*, clad in just a rough blanket, he accepted no gifts or offerings. Often he shooed away a visitor rudely for a reason only he knew. But the love he exuded and the peace that descended on one when seated close to him can only be described by someone who has felt it.

Babaji passed away in September 1973, the same year as our first-born arrived in December. He had told my mother-in-law, '*Main tere ghar aaunga*', so she always believed that her first grandson was the reincarnation of Babaji. The stories about Babaji from Steve Jobs to Virat Kohli are now well-known but for us, he will always be the protector of our family. He loved my husband, a dedicated atheist, so much that even now, I am convinced that he is there for us.

— The writer is a social commentator

The highs, the lows & everything in between



RAAJA BHASIN

ONE sometimes forgets that our children and their friends are no longer 'children'. They are adults with lives that have become quite independent of ours. On several matters, they are better informed and could teach our generation a thing or two. This could be anything from care of the environment to pinning down where we went wrong — and how we continue with the wrongdoing. At the same time, it could also be information about a better brand of whisky and the shop where you'll find it unadulterated and undiluted. That said, one may add that I had my first official glass of beer when I was around 16 or 17. This was at a family lunch where an uncle poured it out and all present — including my father — went 'cheers'. I cannot recall if I was hesitant or whether I happily glugged it down.

The glass of beer was all very well, but that was not the point. That came later when I was made to sit down and told: "You are getting older and we want you to remember a few things — you will buy your liquor from your own money; you will never come home drunk and you will not drink or do anything else in secrecy. If you want a drink, you shall be open about it. You will do nothing like a thief."

That moment removed the hypocrisy attached to drinking and the pretence that we won't quaff a couple. That single step moved this 'social evil' and financial sinkhole to an area where alcohol consumption was to be handled with responsibility. Not that it has always been that way, but the borders — even if they have occasionally been breached — had, somewhat, been set. What one learnt later, to the best of one's knowledge, was that traditionally, several communities frowned, at least 'officially', upon drinks and a tippler could well find himself ostracised. Be that as it may.

In 2016, the Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Missouri-Columbia, USA, published a report that sought to characterise different 'types of drunks'. The purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which the levels of sober and drunk personality traits could be grouped together to create categories of different 'drunk types'. A second aim was to examine the alcohol-related harm and consequences. The study was widely publicised and drawing from popular culture, the paper summarised four types of drunks:

The Ernest Hemingway kind: This stemmed from the writer who said, famously, that he could "...drink any amount of whisky without getting drunk". This category did not exhibit any major changes in personality after drinking.

The Mary Poppins kind: This came from that much-loved character created by PL Travers which went on to become an equally loved film and drew on already outgoing types who somehow



got sweeter and happier with alcohol. **The Nutty Professor:** This came from the 1996 film that had a chemically-altered academic with a split personality, and was played by Eddie Murphy. According to the study, this category consisted of those who were natural introverts, but shed their inhibitions after a drink and became more flashy and social.

To drink or not to drink, and the responsibility that comes with it

The Mr Hyde sort: This set of drunks came from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel '*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*' where, simplistically stated, good and evil existed in the same person. As far as this study was concerned, the 'evil-twin drinkers' were less responsible, less intellectual and more hostile or aggressive under the influence of alcohol.

Anything that becomes an obsession or a fixation cannot bode well. This could be religion, militant vegetarianism (or not), aggressive political belief — the list can go on. That said, there are profound psychological effects of a non-alcohol-induced 'alcoholic state'. The results can be amusing if not downright hilarious. We were still in our teens and at a friend's birthday party. No alcohol was being served to us — even if the older ones were eyeing the bottles that were there for the grown-ups.

For us, there were 'soft drinks' and that standard cold beverage of an age now gone — orange or lemon squash. A glass that had not been rinsed well and carried a faint whiff of alcohol was given to another teenager: "This is not orange squash," he whispered, "I think this has gin." Someone sniffed the glass, and mischievously declared, "You are right. Enjoy!"

Within moments, with just the thought of having the forbidden, the fine young man with acne and wispy facial hair developed all the outward signs of a drunk. He could not walk straight; his speech was slurred. This was classic auto-suggestion at work. The matter, however, did not end there. The following day, the young man woke up with a dutiful hangover and his parents went house to house complaining how their 'good boy' had been ruined by bad company.

— The writer is an author based in Shimla

Misunderstanding the flood myth

THE Bible (500 BC) tells the story of Noah and the Great Flood. God becomes angry with humanity because people have turned away from His commandments. As punishment, He sends a flood to destroy the world. Only Noah is chosen to survive. He is instructed to build an ark, take his family aboard, and preserve a pair of every animal. After the flood, Noah's descendants repopulate the earth.

A similar story appears in the Shatapatha Brahmana (800 BC), where Manu meets a tiny fish while washing his hands. The fish asks for protection from the larger fish. Manu saves it, first in a pot, then in bigger containers, until it finally grows large enough to return to the sea. Years later, the fish returns and warns Manu of an approaching flood. Manu builds a boat, takes with him the sages who preserve the Vedas, and is rescued when the great fish pulls his boat to safety. After the waters recede, he restores human society.

Because both stories involve a flood, a boat, and a chosen survivor, many people assume that Manu is the Indian version of Noah or that Noah is the Biblical Manu. This comparison overlooks the real meaning of the two stories.

In the Bible, the flood is an act of divine punishment. God sends it because humanity has sinned. Noah survives because he obeys God. The message is clear: follow God's commandments or face His wrath.

The Vedic story is completely different. No god sends the flood, and no moral reason is given for why it happens. The focus is not on divine anger



UNIVERSE

DEVDUPT PATTANAİK

but on *karma*. Manu is rescued because he had earlier shown kindness to the helpless fish. The fish simply repays that kindness. The story teaches that good actions eventually bring good results. It is the earliest story about *karma*.

Comparing myths requires more than noticing similar characters or events. The deeper ideas behind a story matter far more than its outward details

These different ideas reflect two very different worldviews. The Bible presents a single God who rewards obedience and punishes disobedience. The Shatapatha Brahmana presents a universe governed by *karma*, where actions naturally produce consequences.

An even older flood story comes from ancient Sumeria, nearly a thousand years before either text. In this version, the gods become annoyed by noisy human beings and decide to destroy them with a flood. A fish associated with the god Ea warns Utnapishtim, who builds a boat and survives. Like the Biblical story, the Sumerian myth is about powerful gods controlling humanity.

Some historians have tried to connect all three stories because they share floods, boats, and fish. But these similarities are only superficial. The meanings are entirely different. The Sumerian and Biblical stories revolve around divine authority and punishment. The Vedic story is about compassion, gratitude, and the law of *karma*. There is even a Chinese flood myth which speaks of the world's first water engineer who was chosen by the people as their first king.

Comparing myths requires more than noticing similar characters or events. The deeper ideas behind a story matter far more than its outward details. When we look beyond the flood itself, it becomes clear that Manu and Noah belong to very different philosophical traditions. Their stories may resemble, but they teach fundamentally different lessons.

— The writer is an acclaimed mythologist

Why writers and artists shape worlds of their own



BINDU MENON

WHY did I write? Because I found life unsatisfactory." These words by American playwright Tennessee Williams bring out the gap between reality and expectation. The core of this creative philosophy is evident in Williams' most celebrated play, '*The Glass Menagerie*'.

Set in the Depression era, it is a poignant exploration of a family in crisis — the Wingfields include the mother Amanda, who yearns for her younger, affluent days and is troubled by the insecurities of the present, which includes an absentee husband, an emotionally fragile daughter Laura and the breadwinner son (and narrator of the play)

Tom, who is torn between family obligations and his own dreams.

Tom, an alter ego of Williams himself, encapsulates the playwright's writing philosophy in his opening soliloquy: "I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." In another of Williams' plays, '*A Streetcar Named Desire*', the tragic protagonist Blanche DuBois does not simply lie about reality. Her stories, play with light, choice of costumes and memories create a world where she can exist.

"I don't want realism. I want magic! I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth," says DuBois in a moment of anxiety. Williams explores what happens when the reality we create to survive clashes with the uncomfortable reality outside.

If Williams juxtaposed competing realities, Yayoi Kusama transformed her own perception of reality into an artistic language. The Japanese avant-garde artist, who died last month, channelled her childhood hallucinations — patterns proliferating across objects, rooms, bodies and eventual-

ly the universe itself — into art. In Kusama's universe, a room, a body and even the earth can be reimagined as part of an infinite field of repetitions. She would later describe her art as having no composition, beginning, end or centre.

In an open letter to US President Richard Nixon, seeking peace in Vietnam, Kusama wrote: "Our earth is like one little polka dot, among millions of other celestial bodies, one orb full of hatred and strife amid the peaceful, silent spheres... As we soar through the heavens, we'll paint each other with polka dots, lose our egos in timeless eternity and finally discover the naked truth: you can't eradicate violence by using more violence." Kusama was candid about her mental health and saw her art not as an escape from reality, but as an expansive reflection of it.

What matters is what art reveals about reality

A similar idea runs through the writing of Elif Shafak, who also resists the idea that fiction takes us away from reality. "It is a bit unfortunate that in English, the word fiction is often used as the opposite of 'fact', as an untruth, but I want to push back on that. Literature brings us closer to truth, to each other, to humanity," says Shafak. The power of literature lies, therefore, not only in what it tells us about the world, but in how it expands our ways of experiencing it.

Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka, who draws deeply from Yoruba culture and cosmology, believes literature cannot remain "a reflection of human experience but rather an extension of it". But sometimes, even language needs to open up to express these experiences.

Soyinka's fellow Nigerian writer Ben Okri encountered the inadequacy of language well before writing his Booker Prize-winning novel, '*The Famished Road*'. Okri says his writerly intention was to "alter the inner way we saw our realities" and "open up the narrow limitations imposed upon our lives". But his writing fell short when he tried to adapt a realistic narrative. This, he suggests, was

because African realities had long been described through the language and perceptions of the colonisers. "But to observe our reality through our own eyes requires a purification of mind and re-invention of language. The solution was to find a way of telling stories that was truer to our realities," he writes. And this meant going back to the beginning of language itself, "the way a child learns to speak and write, then putting it all back together again in a fresh way".

Every creative practitioner has a vision of reality. But every approach to recreating or retelling it is different. Some use myth and memory, some illusion and imagination; some distort what is familiar, while others reinvent the language to articulate the human experience.

What matters is not whether art mirrors reality, but what it reveals about it. As Okri reflects in his novel '*In Arcadia*', "The mind either learns to live within the closed labyrinth of the conjoining of death and life; or the mind develops wings, and soars." Perhaps that is the question art poses: to see reality as it is, or to reimagine it.

— The writer is a senior journalist

A revived public facility in Mohali is bringing multi-therapy care and hope to families of children with autism and neurodevelopmental disorders

NEW LEASE OF LIFE

RAVNEET KAUR

FOR years, the father, himself a doctor, could not fully explain what was happening to his son. First diagnosed with autism and later cerebral palsy, neither diagnosis captured the full picture. Genetic testing eventually identified a rare inherited condition, bringing the family clarity and relief from the guilt of wondering if something had gone wrong at birth.

Today, the boy attends sessions at the Centre of Excellence for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Sector 79, Mohali. His father says he is happier, more interactive and has recently started standing.

For another family, the struggle was not a lack of treatment but a lack of clear information. The mother of a three-year-old with speech delay and poor eye contact spent nearly a year seeking advice and receiving conflicting opinions about therapy and diagnosis. An assessment at the Mohali centre helped put things into perspective. She was guided on the different interventions her child might need, including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, special education and communication support.

ABSF Commandant's wife, who travelled from Uttarakhand, said her two-year-old daughter's only way of communicating was crying and clinging to her. After regular sessions at the centre, the child now speaks clearly, tells her mother what she wants and communicates her needs instead of crying.

Another mother, who had returned from Australia, said she came to Chandigarh after someone recommended a private facility for autistic children. However, she saw little progress in nearly eight months despite paying around ₹30,000 a month. She later learnt about the Sector 79 centre through the Mohali Civil Hospital and her child showed significant improvement within four months.

For all these families, the biggest advantage is that assessment, specialist advice and multiple therapies are available under one roof. The centre is among the few government facilities in North India offering such a range of services at a single location.

The Centre of Excellence was conceived by the Punjab Government in 2016, with its foundation stone laid by then Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal on November 26 that year. The centre was inaugurated on December 15, 2021, but did not become fully functional. Its OPD services were finally launched on April 2 last year by Punjab Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh.

Since then, the centre has grown into a busy public facility serving around 240 children. Families travel from across Punjab, even from outside the state, including Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. Sixteen

overseas families from countries such as Canada, Australia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are also enrolled.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY FACILITY

The centre is a state government institution functioning under the aegis of the Advanced Autism Care and Research Society and Dr BR Ambedkar State Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS), Mohali.

Its board is headed by Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann as chairman, with Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh as senior vice-chairman and the Health Minister's adviser as vice-chairman, among others. Its multidisciplinary team includes three psychiatrists, three neurodevelopmental paediatricians, two special educators, two speech therapists, an occupational therapist, two physiotherapists and four psychologists.

For families, this combination can mean fewer visits to different hospitals and private therapy centres. Children can be assessed and treated by specialists from different disciplines at the same institution.

The centre provides assessment and intervention for developmental conditions and offers Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, special education and life-skills training. Therapy plans are tailored to the individual needs and strengths of each child. All services are provided free of charge.

Senior consultant, neurodevelopmental paediatrician and parenting coach Dr Chhaya Prasad brings 20 years of experience in working with children with autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders.

The centre has also begun focusing on parents, who often carry much of the responsibility for managing therapy and daily care. Special workshops are organised to help families understand their children's needs and keep pace with treatment.

A team from the Mohali Civil Hospital, including Senior Medical Officer (in-charge) Dr Parminder and Senior Medical Officer Dr Taranjot Kaur, said the hospital had voluntarily started exploring meditation and healing sessions for parents.

Parents, meanwhile, have sought structured support groups and regular counselling as part of the centre's programme.

One parent described the revival of the centre as an "amazing beginning", but said vocational services and a parent-support group were also needed. Another parent, whose son has benefitted from speech and physiotherapy, reported significant improvement but felt that more frequent sessions could help further.

Their demands point to a larger change. Once families find a facility they trust, their needs go beyond diagnosis and therapy. They want vocational training, counselling,



Assessment, specialist advice and multiple therapies are available under one roof in Sector 79, Mohali.

residential facilities and pathways towards greater independence for their children.

THE TRANSFORMATION

The centre's current state is a sharp contrast to what officials found before its revival. Director Dr Navdeep Saini said an inspection had revealed a badly neglected building. Ceilings were damaged, air-conditioners had been stolen, wires were missing, washrooms were non-functional and security arrangements were inadequate.

MLA Kulwant Singh, who is also managing director of Janta Land Promoters Ltd, contributed ₹1 crore from his personal funds to help make the facility operational, Dr Saini said. The contribution was used for essential works, including electrical repairs, water and wash-room facilities, security and power backup. NGOs and other organisations also extended support.

Apart from government funds, various industries and banks are contributing CSR funds towards facilities at the centre. Indian Oil and IDBI Bank are in talks to contribute more than ₹70 lakh to the centre.

MISSING LINK

Some parents travelling from distant districts have even taken rented accommodation near the centre so their children can attend therapy sessions regularly.

The initial project included a residential block for families travelling from far-off places. The centre has sought government assistance to activate the residential component and address other infrastructure and operational requirements. Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh said efforts were underway to make the centre fully operational before the upcoming Punjab Assembly elections.

"The previous governments repeatedly ignored the project and it took nine years to start OPD services at the centre since the project was conceived in 2016. We are determined to focus on the complete revival of the various blocks. There will be significant changes and updates in the coming months," he said.

MLA Kulwant Singh said he had written to the Chief Minister seeking support and had also sought a grant of ₹4-5 crore.

THE NEXT CHALLENGE

For parents of adolescents and young adults, the focus is gradually shifting from early intervention to education, vocational skills, employment and independent living. One mother has a 27-year-old son with Down Syndrome and ADHD. He studied in a regular school and now wants to pursue a diploma and eventually find employment.

The original building plan included a vocational training centre in the basement. Parents believe making this facility functional could help bridge the gap between schooling and employment.

Another mother recalled how her son, now pursuing BSc (Physics), had once been considered academically limited. He eventually scored 91.57 per cent in Class XII. Today, he travels independently and takes an active interest in computers, art, theatre and music. For her, progress is not measured only by therapy. Children also need opportunities to participate in everyday life, discover their interests and become as independent as possible.

JUST A BEGINNING

The revival of the Mohali centre has demonstrated the demand for a public-sector multidisciplinary facility for autism and neurodevelopmental disorders. Its importance lies not only in the number of children it serves, but in bringing assessment, consultation, therapy, special education and psychological support in one place.

Director Dr Saini said the focus was now on expanding the centre's services and creating a broader support ecosystem for families. "Our Autism Centre of Excellence is not merely a centre for intervention; it is a place where every child is understood, valued and empowered. The focus is to ensure excellence in assessment, education, therapy, research and family support, while fostering an inclusive environment that enables every individual with autism to reach their fullest potential. We will be enhancing our services next month," he said.

For families, a functioning OPD is only the first step. The larger goal is a facility that can provide residential support, vocational training, parent counselling, employment pathways and long-term assistance as children grow into adulthood.



AT A GLANCE

APPOINTMENTS: Book through the centre's website, helpline or by visiting the centre. OPD services are available Monday to Saturday, 9 am to 5.30 pm. Online consultations are also available on select evenings.

FEE: All services are free of charge.

THERAPIES: Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, special education and life-skills training. Individualised therapy plans are prepared according to each person's needs and strengths.

PATIENTS SERVED: Children and adults aged six months to 40 years.

WEBSITE: <https://coeandd.vercel.app/en>

HELPLINE: 0172-292700

BEYOND LABELS

WHAT IS AUTISM: A lifelong neurodevelopmental condition affecting communication, behaviour and social interaction.

THE SPECTRUM: Every autistic person is different, with varying strengths and support needs.

EARLY SIGNS: Delayed speech, limited eye contact, repetitive behaviour and difficulty in social interaction.

SENSORY WORLD: Some may be highly sensitive to sounds, lights, touch or crowds.

NO SINGLE CAUSE: Genetics and developmental factors are believed to play a role.

DIAGNOSIS: Based on developmental and behavioural assessment; there is no single medical test.

EARLY SUPPORT: Speech, occupational and behavioural therapies can help build communication and daily-life skills.

BEYOND THE DIAGNOSIS: Acceptance, inclusion and understanding are as important as intervention.

Every student deserves quality hostel facility

Delhi tragedy is a wake-up call; ensure stringent regulation of private accommodation so students' lives are not at risk

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

THE death and devastation caused by the collapse of a five-storey paying guest (PG) facility in Delhi's Satya Niketan area has set alarm bells ringing across the country over the safety of these privately-run PG accommodations for students, particularly in cities that have a large concentration of colleges. 'Hostel Daze', a 50-year-old building, was already structurally weak with three unauthorised additional floors. When the owners attempted more illegal structural alterations, the entire building collapsed like a pack of cards, trapping many people underneath. Seven persons died and several were injured.

Thanks to systemic corruption and regulatory inertia, unauthorised construction and illegal conversion of residential premises into unsafe high-occupancy commercial accommodation have taken such deep roots in the country that the Supreme Court had to step in to stem the rot. On March 25, it directed civic bodies in the capital cities of every state and UT to identify all such buildings, take strict enforcement measures and submit 'action taken' reports.

This had already activated state governments and UTs to issue notices, and seal as well as demolish many such structures. Between June 1 and September 9, authorities in Delhi demolished 1,053 buildings, sealed 491 properties and issued 757 demolition and 2,316 show-cause notices, high-



Seven persons died in the Satya Niketan building collapse in New Delhi. TRIBUNE PHOTO

lighting the extent of lawlessness in the nation's capital. Unfortunately, Hostel Daze was not one of them.

The Delhi High Court-mandated survey of PG accommodations following the collapse of Hostel Daze showed how an unholy nexus between complicit civic authorities and rapacious building owners had completely compromised student safety. According to *The Indian Express*, out of 2,453 PG accommodations in Delhi checked by the authorities between September 7 and 14, as many as 1,724 had been built without the mandatory approval and scrutiny of the building plan, and were therefore illegal. Barring eight, none had structural stability certificates, and a vast majority had no fire safety certificate.

This is despite several recent fire tragedies, including the Malviya Nagar hotel fire on

June 3 that killed 21 persons and the Lucknow animation coaching centre fire on June 22, in which 15 students perished.

Things are no better in other cities. In January this year, the Haryana Human Rights Commission expressed concern over thousands of unregistered, unauthorised and unsafe PG accommodations and guest houses operating in Gurugram, and ordered action against them. This and the subsequent Supreme Court order of March 25 led to the Department of Town and Country Planning demolishing and sealing hundreds of such facilities in different parts of Gurugram.

The drive has intensified after the Delhi PG disaster. In fact, many states, including Punjab, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, have initiated or intensified

checks on unsafe privately-run hostels after the catastrophic collapse of Hostel Daze. In 2020, Chandigarh's Sector 32 witnessed a devastating fire in a PG accommodation, killing three girl students and injuring two.

This also brings us to the issue of an acute shortage of hostel accommodation, leading to exploitation of students by property owners who are converting residential properties into unsafe PG accommodations through unauthorised construction. Over 45 million students are estimated to be studying in institutions of higher education in the country (2023-24). Roughly 10.4 million of them study in institutions away from their hometowns, requiring hostel/PG accommodation. However, on-campus hostel facilities are so minimal that students are forced to seek accommodation elsewhere.

In Delhi, for example, a large percentage of 2.5 lakh regular students enrolled in Delhi University come from outside, but the hostel facilities cater to just over 7,000 students.

These numbers do not take into consideration the students who come to larger cities to attend coaching classes for competitive and entrance examinations. Rough estimates put the number of students enrolled in such coaching and tuition classes across India at around 70 million. Many of them come from small towns and villages and need accommodation. It is, therefore, imperative that the governments build quality hostels to cater to these students and also make it mandatory for every college and university to provide adequate hostel facilities

for all their students.

Stringent regulation of private facilities is also a must, so that students' lives are not at risk. The hostel collapse also brings into focus the need for more colleges in small towns and villages, so that students are not forced to move out of their homes to study. As of June 2025, the number of higher education institutions in India stood at 70,018, including universities, colleges, standalone universities and research and development institutes. Of this, the number of colleges was 52,081. However, their uneven spread, particularly their concentration in big cities, forces those in rural areas and smaller towns to move out of their homes, at great expense.

This regional imbalance must be plugged urgently by state governments and the Centre, with a large number of quality institutions of higher learning.

The gross enrolment ratio in higher education is said to be just 30 per cent. Local colleges are sure to encourage higher enrolment. After all, the population of Gen Z is estimated to be around 368-407 million.

Today, even the poorest of poor families want to educate their children and parents go through considerable hardship to put together the money for their education. The least the government can do is to ensure that there are good, well-equipped colleges in every district so that students do not have to come to Delhi or any other big city in pursuit of education, and their parents do not have to bear that additional cost.

— *The writer is a consumer affairs expert*

The Pioneer AGENDA

Money cannot
buy peace of mind.
It cannot heal ruptured
relationships, or build
meaning into a life
that has none.
— Richard M DeVos

India's hugely successful UPI ecosystem is entering a new phase, with a framework that keeps person-to-person payments free while introducing capped charges on a small share of high-value merchant transactions. The move seeks to balance affordability with the long-term sustainability of digital payments — but it also raises an important question: who ultimately pays for keeping UPI free?



UPI is the cornerstone of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and the largest real-time payment platform globally. It accounts for nearly 49 per cent of all real-time digital payment volume globally.

UPI WHO PAYS?

Keeping UPI free and sustainable



SAURABH SANYAL

Every successful public utility eventually faces the same question: who pays to keep it running? For the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), run by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), the answer now carries a date. From October 15, a small Merchant Discount Rate (MDR), the fee a merchant pays to accept a digital payment, will apply to specified merchant payments above ₹2,000, ending more than six years of zero MDR.

UPI processed a record 24.51 billion transactions in August, about 791 million a day, worth ₹29.82 lakh crore. Zero MDR, in force since January 2020, helped it get there by making digital payments affordable for shoppers and shopkeepers alike. But zero MDR did not make costs disappear. Servers, fraud monitoring and rural connectivity must be paid for, and those costs rise with volumes. The Centre has offset part of the burden, providing ₹3,631 crore in incentives in 2023-24 under its scheme for RuPay debit cards and low-value UPI payments.

The Finance Ministry's framework, announced on September 15, should be read against that backdrop. All person-to-person transfers remain free, whatever the amount; they account for 70 per cent of UPI's transaction value. Merchant payments up to ₹2,000 stay free, as do payments to small merchants receiving up to ₹1 lakh a month through QR codes. Above ₹2,000, specified merchant transactions attract 0.4 per cent, capped at ₹300 for payments of ₹75,000 and above. Sectors such as railways, telecom, insurance, fuel and agricultural inputs pay a flat

₹5; capital-market payments pay 0.02 per cent, capped at ₹300. The government estimates that about 96 per cent of merchant transactions are untouched.

Does UPI's dominance concentrate too much power? Its position reflects acceptance, convenience and accessibility: people and businesses chose it. Concentration among apps is a fair concern: PhonePe and Google Pay handle roughly 80 per cent of volume, and NPCI's 30 per cent cap on any single third-party app's share is due for compliance by December 31, 2026. But the more pressing question is whether banks, fintechs and payment service providers have the financial strength to keep investing in technology and security as the network grows. A system that cannot recover part of its costs on its larger merchant payments will struggle to keep upgrading itself.

So who should pay? Not the consumer, and not the small shopkeeper: the charge falls on larger merchants for larger payments. MDR is not a tax, and neither the government nor NPCI collects it; it is shared among banks, payment providers and app providers. Banks have been advised to ensure merchants do not pass it on, and UPI apps are barred from levying platform fees. The rate is modest: a ₹10,000 payment costs the merchant ₹40, against as much as ₹90 at the debit-card ceiling for larger merchants and ₹150-250 at typical credit-card rates. Because of the cap, a ₹1 lakh payment costs ₹300, a third of what the debit-card ceiling would allow. Affordability survives where it matters most, and sustainability enters where it can be borne. Security is where the case for sustainability is strongest. At nearly 800 million payments a day, even a vanishingly small rate of fraud or failure touches a great many people. Fraud detection, cybersecurity and infrastructure need continuous investment, and revenue from larger merchant transactions gives the institutions

responsible a firmer base. Money alone is not enough: regulatory oversight, strong security standards and greater user awareness must grow with volumes, so that neither growth nor safety runs ahead of the other.

Should the government have reconsidered UPI's business model? In effect, it has, and with restraint. The framework keeps consumer welfare at the centre, shields street vendors and neighbourhood shops, and earmarks 5 per cent of MDR collections for a fund to bring more small merchants onto UPI. MPs, mostly from the Opposition, voiced concern over the levy at a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance meeting on 16 September. Such scrutiny is welcome, and the framework's safeguards give the government a clear case to make.

UPI is no longer an experiment; it is national digital infrastructure, and infrastructure needs long-term financing. The government deserves credit for striking a calibrated balance rather than choosing between affordability and viability. What remains is delivery: enforcing the rule against passing charges on to customers, keeping apps free of hidden fees, investing revenue in security and reach, and making sure the small-merchant fund reaches the merchants it is meant for. If that happens, UPI's next chapter can be as inclusive as its first.

The writer is Secretary General ASSOCHAM



A major step for long-term payment viability



DR S P SHARMA

India's digital payments story has just reached another major milestone. The newly notified UPI framework delivers a clear win for the common citizen as UPI stays completely free for all person-to-person transactions and for 96 per cent of merchant transactions, while introducing a small, capped charge only on the highest-value merchant payments. This is a framework built to protect the many while strengthening the ecosystem for the future.

The new UPI framework has been introduced under the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, following detailed discussions by the UPI Steering Committee. It is a progressive, thoughtful and forward-looking step that supports both consumer interests and the long-term growth of India's digital payments ecosystem. It protects the interests of ordinary citizens while also supporting the long-term sustainability and growth of India's digital payments ecosystem.

The key message in this framework is simple: UPI will continue to remain completely free for individuals. Person-to-person (P2P) transactions, regardless of the amount, will continue without any transaction fee, platform fee or hidden charge. This covers around 70 per cent of the total value of transactions on UPI, ensuring that the core of India's digital payments system remains free and accessible to the common person.

There are also no monthly quotas, volume restrictions or tiered limits on free usage. The daily transaction limits set by banks and NPCI, ranging from ₹1 lakh to ₹5 lakh depending on the category, are meant as security measures and are not limits linked to charges.

Even for merchant payments, the framework goes out of its way to protect smaller transactions. Payments up to ₹2,000 to any merchant remain entirely free. Small merchants and street vendors receiving up to ₹1 lakh a month via UPI QR codes under the Person-to-Person-Merchant category continue to enjoy zero charges on all their transactions. Together, these provisions mean that roughly 96 per cent of all merchant transactions will see no impact whatsoever, shielding street vendors, neighbourhood shops and other small businesses from additional costs.

For the remaining 4 per cent of merchant transactions above ₹2,000, a nominal Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) of 0.4 per cent will apply. This will be capped at ₹300 for transactions of ₹75,000 and above. This is not a tax, and the money is neither collected by the government nor by NPCI. It is a small contribution that is shared among banks, payment app providers and other participants who support and maintain the UPI ecosystem.

Essential and low-margin sectors such as railways, telecom, insurance, fuel and agricultural inputs will also get special treatment. They will have a simple and predictable charge of just

₹5 per transaction to be paid by the merchant, helping businesses manage their costs better.

For capital-market transactions such as mutual funds, securities and stock-broking, an even lower rate of 0.02 per cent will apply, capped at ₹300. This will help support continued participation of retail investors in formal financial markets.

Importantly, it is a charge within the merchant ecosystem and not a charge on customers. Banks have been directed to ensure that merchants do not pass this cost on to customers.

UPI application providers are also not allowed to impose any platform fee or hidden charges. This ensures that consumers remain fully protected under the new framework.

One of the most encouraging features of the new framework is the creation of a dedicated fund to promote UPI adoption among small merchants. The fund, supported by an amount equivalent to 5 per cent of total MDR collections, will help more small businesses adopt and continue using UPI. It can further expand digital payments across rural and semi-urban areas, bringing more small businesses into the formal digital economy and strengthening financial inclusion. This is also in line with the recommendation of the Standing Committee on Finance in its 32nd Report, which highlighted the need for a sustainable revenue model.

Overall, the framework takes a balanced and forward-looking approach by protecting individuals and small merchants while giving UPI the financial sustainability it needs to grow, innovate and expand its reach. It is a framework truly built to further strengthen India's digital payments ecosystem and contribute to the vision of a Viksit Bharat.

Dr S P Sharma is a distinguished economist, policy strategist and thought leader with nearly three decades of experience across government and apex industry institutions

The Exponential growth of Unified Payments Interface

APRIL 2009: NPCI is established by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Indian Banks' Association (IBA).
NOVEMBER 2010: NPCI launches the Immediate Payment Service (IMPS).
2014-2015: The government introduces the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhaar, and Mobile connectivity), establishing the essential digital identity layer required to scale retail fintech.
11 APRIL 2016: The pilot phase of UPI is officially launched by the then RBI Governor, Dr. Raghuram Rajan, in Mumbai with 21 participating banks.
25 AUGUST 2016: Banks begin uploading UPI-enabled

apps onto public application stores, officially opening the interface to retail customers.
30 DECEMBER 2016: Prime Minister Narendra Modi launches the government's dedicated BHIM App (Bharat Interface for Money) to foster digital payments.
LATE 2016-2017: India's demonetisation move and the entry of cheap telecom mobile data trigger a massive surge in peer-to-peer (P2P) transfers.
2018: NPCI launches UPI 2.0, introducing advanced capabilities such as overdraft account linking, one-time mandates, invoice-in-inbox features, and QR codes.
2019: The widespread rollout of interoperable QR codes

by platforms like Google Pay, PhonePe, and Paytm.
OCTOBER 2019: UPI crosses the milestone of 1 billion transactions in a single month.
JANUARY 2020: The government introduces the Zero MDR (Merchant Discount Rate) policy, waiving transaction fees for merchants and triggering a massive surge in retail adoption.
2020-2021: NPCI launches UPI AutoPay to streamline recurring e-mandates for subscriptions, utility bills, and EMIs.
MARCH 2022: UPI 123PAY is introduced to enable voice-based and offline transactions.

SEPTEMBER 2022: UPI Lite is launched, allowing users to make lightning-fast, PIN-less on-device wallet transactions for small amounts under ₹500.
2023: RBI permits the integration of RuPay Credit Cards
2024: NPCI International Payments Ltd (NIP) partners with cross-border frameworks
MID-2026: Features like UPI Circle (delegated payment limits for family members) and Aadhaar-based face authentication roll out to prevent fraud.
AUGUST 2026: UPI completes 10 years of public functioning. The network records an incredible 13,000-fold expansion since its inception.

The imposition of a UPI transaction fee: How far is it justified?

The country's payment regulatory body, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), has recently introduced a 0.4 per cent Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) on person-to-merchant (P2M) UPI (Unified Payments Interface) transactions above ₹2,000, effective October 15, 2026. Under this change, transactions up to Rs 2,000 are completely free for both customers and merchants.

Therefore, person-to-person (P2P) transactions remain completely free. However, merchant payments above ₹2,000 shall be subject to a 0.4 per cent MDR, which is capped at ₹300 for transactions above ₹75,000. Three spe-



ATUL SEHGAL

cific services — fuel, rail and telecom — attract a flat transaction fee of ₹5.

The matter has hogged the limelight and generated controversy for quite the right reasons.

UPI commands a share of 84 per cent

in India's digital payments by volume and a 49 per cent share of global real-time payment volumes, as per government figures. These are big numbers. PhonePe, acquired by Walmart, and Google Pay, owned by Alphabet, had approximately 80 per cent market share by value in UPI transactions in August 2026. Therefore, the change is loaded with wide ramifications.

The following observations are clearly borne out by an analytical study of the matter.

There is no free lunch on earth. Every value-carrying item of goods and services carries a cost. Hence, to expect and keep harping on the continued

availability of a free UPI payment system for all is not fair.

The issue has attracted controversy because it is logical to see that the hidden digital fee could, in the course of time, hurt savings and burden common citizens. Although the ruling of NPCI retains free P2P transactions and common persons shall remain exempt from transaction fees even on items of important day-to-day requirements — fuel, rail and telecom — it is unlikely that the merchants will not surreptitiously pass on this burden to the common man. This cannot occur legally but could occur through itemised increases in costs of inputs for

the goods or services in question.

Since the proceeds of the transaction fee levied on merchants will go to banks and fintech companies and app owners which facilitate these payments, it will increase their bottom line and make the UPI owners self-sustainable.

This will understandably boost microfinancing business in rural and semi-urban areas, thus helping to enhance economic growth. This will particularly give a fillip to the growth of the MSME sector, beset by stagnation over the last many years.

Concern has also been expressed on social media that this change could prompt merchants to prefer cash pay-

ments. Yes, there will be nothing to stop them from doing it. This could generate more black money, which has already increased to significant levels following a decline upon demonetisation of high-denomination currency notes in 2016. This would fall upon the GST as well as Income Tax collections of the government. But the government machinery will have to show its efficiency in tax collection.

We may also look at how fintech companies like PhonePe or Paytm have been surviving thus far. PhonePe's net losses widened from ₹1,727 crore in FY 2024-25 to ₹2,791 crore in FY 2025-26.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

“IN ASIA, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT,
BUT YOU CANNOT PERSONALISE DIPLOMACY”
— ANANDA KRISHNAN

BRICS: The long arc of Indian diplomacy



MD AFSHAR ALAM

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi rose to When Prime Minister Narendra Modi rose to close the 18th BRICS Summit at Bharat Mandapam on September 13, the applause in the hall carried a meaning larger than protocol. India had done what few expected of a grouping this large and this divided. Eleven member states, spanning continents and clashing interests, had put their names to a 140-point declaration. The New Delhi Declaration was adopted by consensus, and that word carried the weight of the entire summit.

For anyone who has watched India's diplomatic evolution over the past decade, the moment was instructive. It told a story about method as much as outcome, about patience as much as power. The summit brought together Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a bloc that now speaks for close to half of humanity and roughly two-fifths of world output. Holding such a coalition together long enough to agree on anything is difficult. Getting it to agree on West Asia, terrorism, trade and the reform of global institutions, all in one document, was a genuine achievement of chairmanship.

Consensus amidst division

The hardest test of the summit lay in the geopolitics of the moment. Sharp differences ran through the membership on the conflict in West Asia, and the days before the leaders met were filled with intensive negotiations. That the declaration emerged unanimously, with no member registering an objection, was described in New Delhi as a diplomatic breakthrough. The text called for a ceasefire in Gaza, backed Palestinian statehood and full UN membership, and expressed concern over attacks on civilian and nuclear infrastructure, all while avoiding the naming of individual states on the most contentious questions. This restraint is worth pausing on. Indian diplomacy under Modi has increasingly favoured a language of moderation that keeps channels open with rivals rather than forcing a choice between camps. The declaration also carried a condemnation of the Pahalgam terror attack and a broader call for stronger international cooperation against terrorism. For India, embedding that concern into a BRICS consensus document was a quiet but pointed win, one that folded a national security priority into a multilateral position endorsed by states that do not always see the issue the same way.

From files to real-life impact

Modi's own framing at the summit was characteristically practical. He told the assembled leaders it was time to move from files to real-life impact, warning that rising geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions and climate stress were pressing hardest on ordinary people across the developing world. He cautioned against what he called the weaponisation of technology and critical minerals, a phrase aimed squarely at the anxieties of smaller economies that fear being squeezed in a contest between larger powers. The substance behind the rhetoric was considerable. India's year-long chairship produced more than fifty concrete outcomes, from action plans to institutional mechanisms, built through more than four hundred meetings and engagements held across some thirty Indian cities. Modi outlined four fresh initiatives during the leaders' session. He proposed a BRICS Troika mechanism to give the grouping continuity between summits. He called for a roadmap on global governance reform to make the international order more representative. He floated a seafarer emergency support network to help crews in distress. And he pushed a Global South negotiation support scheme to train officials and young professionals from developing countries in technology and rule-making, areas where they are too often absent from the table.

— FROM AGENDA COVER — The UPI transaction...

It was established in 2015. But the company is surviving and subsisting on big Financer and Investor Funds buying into its equity. These businesses run on a discount based, revenue driven model of growth followed by a public issue of equity shares (IPO) which in a buoyant share market gives the Investors and Promoters a grand opportunity to liquidate their holdings with profits, leaving the small equity holders in the lurch to suffer losses due to the inevitable crash of the share value of Fintech companies. The IPO of PhonePe has not yet come but the chain of events before and after the IPO of another Fintech company Paytm has shown exactly the above as borne out by the following factual details.

Paytm incurred a net loss of ₹663 crores in 2024-25 and swung into net profit of ₹552 crores in 2025-26. But over the 10 years of its operation, it suffered a cumulative loss of about ₹15000 crores. Driven by severe regulatory crackdown by RBI in 2024, the Company's stock price plummeted by more than 70 percent thus causing a huge loss to shareholders. The recent change will serve to discourage the above type of activities. Thus, in the final analysis, we could say that the NPCI notification is fundamentally fair and in the larger national interest provided the government takes action as appropriate to check evasion of direct and indirect taxes due to likely increase of cash payments in the country's economy after the notification takes effect.

The author is a management consultant and policy analyst

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He told the assembled leaders it was time to move from files to real-life impact, warning that rising geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions and climate stress were pressing hardest on ordinary people across the developing world. He cautioned against what he called the weaponisation of technology and critical minerals, a phrase aimed squarely at the anxieties of smaller economies that fear being squeezed in a contest between larger powers. The substance behind the rhetoric was considerable. India's year-long chairship produced more than fifty concrete outcomes, from action plans to institutional mechanisms, built through more than four hundred meetings and engagements held across some thirty Indian cities. Modi outlined four fresh initiatives during the leaders' session. He proposed a BRICS Troika mechanism to give the grouping continuity between summits. He called for a roadmap on global governance reform to make the international order more representative. He floated a seafarer emergency support network to help crews in distress. And he pushed a Global South negotiation support scheme to train officials and young professionals from developing countries in technology and rule-making, areas where they are too often absent from the table.

India also set up a Centre for BRICS Industrial Competencies, intended to help manufacturing firms and small and medium enterprises adopt advanced digital technologies and the tools of Industry 4.0. Taken together, these are not grand gestures. They are the plumbing of cooperation, the kind of unglamorous machinery that determines whether a bloc actually delivers for its members or lapses into ceremony.

It is worth recalling how far this represents a shift in temperament. For much of its history, India approached multilateral summits with a certain wariness, protective of its autonomy and sceptical of entanglements. The BRICS chairship showed a different India, one willing to invest political capital in building shared institutions and to spend a full year in the granular work of negotiation. The theme India chose for its presidency, building for resilience, innovation, cooperation and sustainability, was not decoration. It described a way of working, and the summit's output suggests the description held.

The reform agenda

Running through the declaration was a theme India has pressed for years: that the institutions built after the Second World War no longer reflect the world as it is. The document called for reforms to make the international system more just, equitable, representative and accountable. It reiterated support for reform of the United Nations and of the international financial architecture, and it pointedly referenced UN Security Council reform alongside the candidature of India and other BRICS members.

This is the consistent line of Indian foreign policy. New Delhi has argued that a Security Council frozen in 1945 cannot claim legitimacy in 2026, and that a global economy in which developing nations generate a growing share of growth cannot be governed by voting weights fixed decades ago. The declaration's insistence on shareholding realignment in international financial institutions, correcting the historic underrepresentation of developing countries, is the economic expression of that same conviction. India did not invent these demands at this summit, but it used its chairship to write them firmly into the record of a bloc that carries real heft.

The question of balance

Economic cooperation ran as a steady current beneath the political headlines. Member states criticised unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures, warning that protectionism threatens global trade and supply chains. The declaration reaffirmed support for reform of the World Trade Organisation and for a rules-based multilateral trading system that protects special and differential treatment for developing members.

The numbers give the argument its force. Speaking at the business forum on the eve of the leaders' session, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted that BRICS had accounted for more than forty per cent of global output over the preceding five years, against about twenty-nine per cent for the G7, and had generated close to half of global economic growth. Whatever one makes of the

framing, the underlying shift is real. The centre of economic gravity has moved, and a grouping that speaks for that shift can no longer be waved away as a talking shop. India, as this year's host, stood at the head of that argument.

Yet India's handling of the technology and governance questions revealed the balance it has tried to strike. The declaration engaged de-dollarisation and financial autonomy without allowing the summit to harden into an anti-Western front. India's presidency worked to keep the grouping cohesive and development-oriented rather than letting it become a polarised bloc. That is a deliberate posture. India trades and talks with the West even as it builds alternatives with the South, and it has resisted every attempt to force BRICS into a purely oppositional identity. The New Delhi Declaration bears the mark of that discipline.

A health and heritage dimension

One outcome drew notice beyond the usual circles of trade and security. The declaration gave its strongest endorsement yet to traditional, complementary and integrative medicine, dedicating a full paragraph to it. For a country that has long sought international recognition for its systems of traditional medicine, the acknowledgement inside a BRICS leaders' statement was a meaningful marker. It reflected a broader Indian effort to bring questions of health cooperation, and of civilisational knowledge, into the mainstream of multilateral conversation rather than leaving them at the margins.

The larger meaning

What, then, does the summit tell us about Indian diplomacy at this juncture? First, that India has grown comfortable as a convener. Hosting a fractious grouping and steering it to consensus is a different skill from advocacy, and New Delhi displayed it with some assurance. Second, that India has settled on a distinctive voice, one that speaks for the Global South without renouncing its partnerships elsewhere.

There is reason for caution too, and honesty demands stating it. Declarations are easier to draft than to implement, and Modi's own appeal to convert commitments into impact was an implicit acknowledgement that BRICS has often promised more than it has delivered. The value of the New Delhi Summit will ultimately be measured by whether the fifty-odd outcomes take root, whether the payment systems function, whether the reform demands gain traction in the institutions they target. Still, judged against the moment, India's chairship stands as a serious diplomatic accomplishment. It produced consensus amid division, folded national priorities into a shared text, and pushed the reform of a global order that no longer fits its own century. For a country that once occupied the outer edge of these conversations, hosting eleven leaders in New Delhi and sending them home with a signed declaration is a statement of arrival. The applause at Bharat Mandapam was earned.

The writer is former Vice Chancellor of Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi

Exploring the role of Parliament in the making of India's foreign policy

SANTHANAM PRABHAKAR

In this well-researched book, veteran journalist KV Prasad focuses on the initiatives of the Indian Parliament. It is not merely a rumination on the author's vast exposure and long journalistic journey; he painstakingly brings out how the apex legislative body played a prominent role in the framing and reinforcing of the foreign policy of the country since 1947.

It offers deep insights into the vast arena of foreign policy, tracing the role of Parliament. Indeed, the book provides a rigorous account of how successive governments and prime ministers navigated challenging times within Parliament.

The introduction delineates succinctly the devices available to the Members and the parliamentary processes involved in shaping foreign policy and the elaborate committees set up. It provides a clear picture of what readers can expect from the book.

Written in a perceptive way about how the executive plays a decisive role in foreign policy as provisioned by the Constitution, the author's stress on the 'minimalist' role of Parliament is elaborated. This leitmotif is a recurring theme in the book.

It demonstrates the evolution of debates and how MPs were taken into confidence by the executive, and the book traces the origins of foreign policy to 1921. It explains how Jawaharlal Nehru played a prominent part in steering foreign policy and building consensus in Parliament until his death in 1964. He brought out a rather difficult debate, explained in a candid and simple way, and observed: "Nehru injected a level of transparency, a much-required trait in democracy."

The book deals with three specific debates: IPKF in Sri Lanka, the World Trade Organisation, and the India-United States Civilian Nuclear Deal. It underscored how, during 1991 and 2003, Parliament, through its unanimous resolutions during the Gulf War, asserted itself and called for a peace-



ful resolution to the conflict, expressed India's non-aligned position, and reflected India's refusal to join the US-led coalition against Iraq later.

In the backdrop of domestic politics, opposition and the perspective of the Left parties, the book decodes parliamentary debates for the reader and explains how the governments of the day succeeded. The book explores how, on different occasions, the Indian Parliament played a significant role and how the government of the day handled opposition from states and how states prevailed upon the Centre to safeguard its terrain.

Offering a deep dive into the nuclear debate, the book tracks the evolution of the nuclear policy since 1948, facing 'nuclear apartheid' from 1974, 'Pokhran-II' in 1998 and how it culminated under the UPA government. In the chapter on Civil Nuclear Cooperation, Prasad reminisces on the role of Parliament and the debates that shook the government of the day. He surmises aptly that the "India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation" remains a watershed moment in the country's quest for nuclear energy.

The author breaks down some of the most complex Government-Opposition battles fought in Parliament during the coalition era in an effective way, with a free-flowing exposition of ideas and views and how governments manoeuvred foreign policy in difficult times.

Prasad's book provides an authoritative account and a ringside view of what transpired in Parliament. He brings a fresh perspective on the subject, explains unequivocally the policy parameters and how the government faced the pulls and pressures from the opposition. This is one of the reasons why this book stands apart.

The content in each chapter is richly and meticulously crafted and written in a lucid manner. The author dealt with the subject with scrupulous honesty and abounds with references to debates and tactics deployed by both the government and opposition in Parliament.

A comprehensive and valuable guide to engage and educate scholars in international relations to know how important and complex matters are dealt with by the Indian Parliament. It is a masterly exploration of the impact of Parliament on foreign policy.

The big takeaway from this book is the diligent record of how, with its limited role, the Indian Parliament reinforces itself in every conceivable way and perspective in the framing of foreign policy. Overall, the book is outstanding.

The book reviewer is a former Joint Director, Lok Sabha, and Delhi-based researcher and scholar

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This Week's Zodiac Insights

Profession • Money • Family • Relationships • Health • Travel



Mesha | Aries: The week ahead brings movement in pending tasks, and your communication can draw positive attention. Greater responsibility may come at work, while support at home remains steady. Expenses could rise despite otherwise positive progress, so keep priorities clear and avoid stretching yourself too thin. **Watch out for:** Delays, overspending and lack of rest.



Vrishabha | Taurus: As the week unfolds, business and money matters look encouraging, with new agreements or unexpected gains possible. Your ideas may earn respect, but close relationships could feel unusually distant. Friends remain helpful, while an elder in the family may need greater care. **Watch out for:** Emotional withdrawal, digestive discomfort and unnecessary worry.



Mithuna | Gemini: The early part of the week may feel demanding, but confidence improves as things begin turning in your favour. Strong communication can support career growth, while disciplined spending helps rebuild financial stability. Family matters, especially around children, need more patience and attention. **Watch out for:** Overwork, family tension and irregular eating habits.



Karka | Cancer: During the week, a cheerful mood helps you stay engaged even when results take time. Your communication can make a strong impression, and business matters may show growth, but ready cash could remain tight. Family and friends bring useful perspective during personal uncertainty. **Watch out for:** Borrowing pressure, joint discomfort and difficult choices.



Simha | Leo: This week favours partnership work and negotiations, especially in business, where gains may improve your confidence. Professional matters look positive, but personal relationships may suffer if arguments continue. Family demands could feel heavy, though friends remain dependable when support is needed. **Watch out for:** Unnecessary disputes, overspending and acidity or digestive irritation.



Kanya | Virgo: The week gives you space to reassess priorities and seek the recognition you deserve. Partnership ventures and extra income prospects look encouraging, while marital understanding can improve after earlier strain. Old contacts may also return with support, and healthier routines bring relief. **Watch out for:** Excessive travel spending and slipping into unhealthy habits.



Tula | Libra: As the week progresses, early pressure can gradually turn into progress if you stay flexible. Workload may rise when team support is limited, while careful spending helps strengthen savings. Personal relationships and family respect can improve through mature communication and responsible choices. **Watch out for:** Rigidity, mental strain and unusual physical symptoms.



Vrishchika | Scorpio: Over the course of the week, incomplete work can finally move towards completion, even if progress remains slow. Business and income prospects improve, with stalled financial matters showing movement again. Personal relationships may need quicker decisions, while differences at home call for patience. **Watch out for:** Indecision, physical strain and avoidable disagreements.



Dhanu | Sagittarius: The coming week may bring professional recognition through a long-awaited promotion or appreciation from seniors. Financial matters need caution, especially where borrowing or dependence on others is involved. Unresolved issues in marriage or family should be addressed directly before they deepen. **Watch out for:** Money pressure, relationship strain and breathing-related discomfort.



Makara | Capricorn: This week can help long-pending plans move ahead, especially an event or project you have prepared for. Finances may remain uneven, but support from family and friends helps you stay steady. Relationships benefit from thoughtful communication and greater openness. **Watch out for:** Delayed income, self-doubt and neck or shoulder strain.



Kumbha | Aquarius: In the week ahead, interviews, examinations and professional discussions can go in your favour as your ideas gain importance. Partnership business and past investments may bring encouraging returns, while your influence within the family grows. Be selective about whom you trust. **Watch out for:** Relationship misunderstandings, false friends and financial overconfidence.



Meena | Pisces: The week may not unfold as planned, making patience essential in work and personal matters. Finances need tighter control, especially around credit or lending, while property issues should be handled calmly. Important documents and health concerns also need closer attention. **Watch out for:** Hasty decisions, careless lending and ignoring persistent symptoms.



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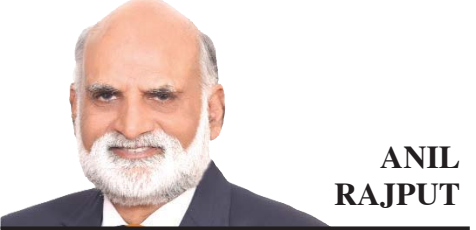
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“CIVILISATION AS IT IS KNOWN TODAY COULD NOT HAVE EVOLVED, NOR CAN IT SURVIVE, WITHOUT AN ADEQUATE FOOD SUPPLY”
— NORMAN BORLAUG

Mahalakshmi vrat: Food, faith and the sacred sixteen



ANIL
RAJPUT

What does prosperity taste like after days of fasting? Mahalakshmi Vrat answers that question not with one signature dish, but through a sequence of foods that moves from simple phalahaar to carefully prepared offerings and, finally, to a concluding meal shaped by the number sixteen. In 2026, the vrat begins on Saturday, 19 September, on Bhadrapada Shukla Ashtami, and concludes on Saturday, 3 October, on Ashwin Krishna Ashtami. Though conventionally known as a sixteen-day vrat, the lunar sequence gives 15 fasting days this year because the observance follows tithis rather than a simple count of calendar dates.

The vrat is observed particularly across North India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, and is dedicated to Mahalakshmi as the giver of fortune, wellbeing and household prosperity. Its ritual world is filled with the number sixteen. Devotees may prepare a sacred thread with sixteen knots, offer objects in groups of sixteen, light lamps and complete the worship with a formal udyapan. The number is not decorative. It gives rhythm to the vow and, in several household traditions, enters the kitchen itself. The concluding food is therefore not merely a festive meal after fasting. It is part of the ritual grammar of the observance.

The stories attached to the vrat vary across regions and family traditions. Some vrat-kathas speak of kings and queens who receive Mahalakshmi's grace through devotion, while another widely circulated tradition links the worship with Kunti, Gandhari, Arjuna and Airavata, the celestial elephant. This helps explain the prominence of Gajalakshmi imagery and the custom in some homes of worshipping a clay elephant. Such narratives have often been transmitted orally, through women's gatherings and household recitation, so the festival's history survives not only in texts but also in repeated practice. Food is part of that transmission because each stage of the vrat carries its own rules about what may be eaten, what should be offered and how the fast is completed.

During the fasting period, there is no single menu followed by every household. Some devotees take only fruit and milk, others eat one phalahari meal, while stricter observance may avoid ordinary grains and salt altogether. This variation makes it important to separate the foods that are specifically tied to Mahalakshmi worship from the wider North Indian vrat repertoire that supports the devotee through the days of fasting. The most distinctive foods appear at the conclusion, where one old custom calls for eighteen sweet puris made from eighteen handfuls of wheat flour. Sixteen are placed beneath a flour lamp and two are offered to Mahalakshmi, after which the sixteen are eaten within the family. The symbolism turns an everyday ingredient into a ritual count.

These meethi puris are far more than ordinary fried bread. The dough is lightly sweetened, rolled into small discs and fried in ghee or oil until puffed and golden. In the associated custom, they are eaten with seviyan kheer or meetha dahi, creating a combination that is unusual enough to give Mahalakshmi Vrat a culinary identity of its own. The seviyan are roasted before being simmered in milk with sugar and cardamom until



soft, while sweet curd is whisked until smooth and gently sweetened. The contrast between crisp puri, creamy vermicelli and cool curd creates a concluding plate built as much around ritual meaning as taste.

Milk sweets also hold an important place in the worship. Several Mahalakshmi traditions specify white barfi as prasad, its pale colour making it visually distinct from darker jaggery sweets. It may be made by reducing milk or khoya with sugar until the mixture can be set and cut into squares. In other homes, a simpler mawa prasad is prepared by lightly roasting khoya in ghee, sweetening it and perfuming it with cardamom. Kheer remains another recognised offering, but rather than treating it as the centre of the article, it is better understood as one part of a larger ritual spread. Rice or another permitted ingredient is cooked slowly in milk until the liquid thickens, giving the bhog the soft, spoonable texture traditionally associated with auspicious occasions.

The same milk base can be adapted for sabudana kheer, a preparation specifically mentioned in Mahalakshmi bhog traditions. Soaked tapioca pearls are simmered until translucent, then cooked in milk with sugar, cardamom and nuts. Their soft, pearly texture distinguishes the dish from ordinary rice kheer and also makes it suitable for households avoiding grain during the fast. Singhara barfi works from a different vrat ingredient. Water chestnut flour is roasted gently in ghee, cooked with milk or water and sugar, then spread and cut once firm. The familiar flour of fasting food is thus transformed into a sweet

that looks at home on a ceremonial platter.

Coconut provides another route to sweetness through nariyal laddoo, now widely prepared as Mahalakshmi bhog. Fresh coconut is cooked with milk and sugar until the mixture thickens enough to shape, then finished with cardamom and dry fruits. Kesar bhaat offers a contrasting grain-based preparation for the concluding meal, where family practice permits ordinary rice after the fast. Rice is cooked so the grains remain separate, then sweetened and scented with saffron and cardamom, sometimes with raisins or nuts folded through it. Alongside these cooked sweets, batasha, makhana, kishmish and pieces of fresh coconut are also used as offerings in Mahalakshmi worship, reminding us that prasad need not always emerge from an elaborate recipe.

The savoury side of the vrat kitchen is equally varied, although it belongs more to the wider fasting tradition of the regions concerned than to one compulsory Mahalakshmi menu. Kuttu ke pakore have a particularly strong claim here because they are specifically mentioned among foods offered during Mahalakshmi worship. Buckwheat flour is mixed with pieces of permitted vegetables, cumin, green chilli and

rock salt before being fried until crisp. The same flour can be steamed rather than fried as kuttu dhokla, where a lightly aerated batter is cooked until soft and cut into squares. The change in technique is important, allowing the same fasting ingredients to produce two

entirely different textures.

Water chestnut flour expands the savoury range further. Singhare ki puri is kneaded with boiled potato or another binder, rolled carefully because the dough lacks gluten, and fried until lightly crisp. Kuttu ki puri follows a similar method but has a deeper, earthier flavour from buckwheat. Rajgira puri, prepared from amaranth flour, brings yet another grain substitute into the North Indian fasting pantry. Because these flours behave differently from wheat, they demand experience. The doughs crack more easily, require careful moisture and are often rolled between sheets or pressed by hand. Their presence shows that vrat cooking has developed its own body of practical knowledge rather than simply subtracting ordinary grains from a normal meal.

Vegetables add further variety without falling back on the usual potato-centred fasting plate. Kacche kele ki tikki uses boiled raw banana mashed with cumin, green chilli and rock salt, shaped into patties and shallow-fried until browned on both sides. Lauki raita takes the opposite approach, combining cooked grated bottle gourd with chilled curd, roasted cumin and rock salt for a soft, cooling accompaniment. A kheera-aloo salad, documented in contemporary Mahalakshmi fasting menus, can be kept light by combining cucumber with small amounts of boiled potato, lemon and cumin rather than turning it into another heavy potato dish. Bhuni shakarkandi, roasted sweet potato seasoned only after cooking, adds natural sweetness and a faint smoky edge to the plate.

Makhana can also move beyond its familiar use in kheer. Ghee-roasted makhana, tossed lightly with cumin or rock salt where permitted, provides a crisp snack during the fasting period and carries an additional connection to Mahalakshmi because fox nuts are themselves offered in her worship. Singhara, whether eaten fresh when available or used through its flour, similarly occu-

pies both ritual and culinary space. Seasonal fruit phalahaar may bring together banana, guava, apple, pomegranate and grapes, while a panchmeva mixture of almonds, cashews, walnuts, raisins and other dry fruits provides another compact offering. Rather than treating fruit and nuts as culinary afterthoughts, the vrat places them at the centre of a food system shaped by season, simplicity and permitted ingredients.

There are also preparations that sit between sweet and savoury. Singhare ka halwa roasts water chestnut flour in ghee before cooking it with milk or water and sugar, giving it a dense, almost pudding-like body. Makhana panjiri, where household practice allows it, can combine roasted and crushed fox nuts with ghee, coconut, nuts and sugar to produce a dry prasad with far more texture than kheer. A simple dahi-makhana bowl may instead fold roasted fox nuts into curd with cumin and rock salt, allowing the ingredient to serve as part of the fasting meal rather than only as an offering. None of these dishes needs to be universal to be culturally useful. Together they show how the regional vrat pantry can be rearranged across many days without making every meal identical.

Beverages follow the same principle. Milk remains one of the most common choices during a fast, while kesar-badam milk may be prepared more richly for the concluding meal by simmering milk with saffron, almonds and cardamom. Chaas, where permitted by family custom, is made by thinning curd and seasoning it lightly with roasted cumin and rock salt, making it particularly welcome after fried foods. Coconut water offers a simpler option during the fasting period, while panchamrit, made from milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar, belongs primarily to the ritual sphere and is received in small quantities as prasad rather than treated as an ordinary drink. The distinction between refreshment and sacred offering remains important even when both are consumed.

By the final Ashtami, these foods come together in a meal that looks very different from the beginning of the vrat. The kitchen may contain sweet puris, seviyan kheer, meetha dahi, white barfi, coconut laddoo, sabudana kheer, fasting flours, fruit, makhana and carefully prepared savouries, yet no household is required to reproduce one fixed national menu. What gives the cuisine coherence is the sequence: days governed by family fasting rules, foods chosen from a recognised vrat pantry, offerings associated with Mahalakshmi, and a final ritual meal in which the number sixteen reappears at the table.

That sequence is precisely what deserves to be preserved. A festival can survive on a calendar while losing much of its cultural substance if younger generations know when Mahalakshmi Vrat falls but not why sixteen puris are counted, why a flour lamp is placed above them, why seviyan kheer or sweet curd accompanies them, or why certain foods belong to the fast while others belong only after it ends. Recipes preserve technique, but explanation preserves meaning.

The future of Mahalakshmi Vrat therefore depends as much on the kitchen as on the prayer room. Families can keep the tradition alive by inviting younger members to shape the sweet puris, roast singhara flour, thicken milk for prasad, count the offerings and listen to the vrat-katha while the food is being prepared. When the reason behind a dish travels with the recipe, cuisine becomes a form of cultural memory. That may be one of Mahalakshmi's most valuable lessons: prosperity is not only what a household possesses, but also what it knows well enough to share, teach and carry forward.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Protein paradox

Food should stay the primary source for anyone without a diagnosed gap; supplements exist to close a shortfall, not to outrun it

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Walk into any gym in Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru or Hyderabad before office hours, and the ritual is unmistakable — protein shaker bottles lined up by the water cooler. Protein powder has moved well beyond the bodybuilder stereotype; it is now consumed by office workers, homemakers and students alongside athletes, and the industry chasing this demand is expanding fast.

The paradox

Here's the strange part. Even as tubs fly off shelves, most Indians still aren't getting enough protein — from food. ICMR-NIN's dietary guidelines set the recommended intake at 0.83 grams per kilogram of body weight a

day for a healthy adult — for the average Indian man, that's around 54 grams a day; for a woman, around 46. Most people hit this only on paper, because a cereal-and-pulse-heavy plate genuinely leaves gaps unless it's built out deliberately. And yet the same institute has, in the same breath, advised against routine use of protein supplements for healthy people — warning that the added sugars and other additives in these products may do more harm than good to kidneys and bones, and that a well-constructed diet is enough to meet

protein needs. The trend and the guidance are pulling in opposite directions: the country is buying more protein powder than ever, while its own top nutrition science body says the healthy majority never needed to buy it.

None of this makes protein unimportant — quite the opposite. It's the only macronutrient that supplies the amino acids used to build and repair muscle, manufacture enzymes and hormones, produce antibodies, and maintain

POWER-PACKED INDIAN INGREDIENTS

Protein per serving

Dal — 1 cup cooked: 18 g
Chana — 1 cup cooked: 15 g
Paneer — 100 g: 18 g
Curd — 1 cup: 8–10 g
Soy chunks — 50 g dry: 26 g
Eggs — 2 large: 13 g
Peanuts — 30 g: 7 g
Pumpkin seeds — 30 g: 9 g

skin, hair and bone. They specifically is popular because it digests fast and is rich in leucine, the amino acid that most directly triggers muscle repair after a workout.

But protein's importance doesn't end when the gym years do — if anything, the opposite is true. After the age of 30, adults naturally begin losing muscle mass at a rate of roughly three to five per cent every decade.

Protein, in other words, is not a young person's supplement; it's arguably more critical the older you get.

Do you know? Quinoa is a complete protein, supplying all nine essential amino acids, while seeds add protein, fibre and healthy fats



The taste of Bengal comes calling anew



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Bengali cuisine, with its delicate balance of mustard, jaggery, spices and earthy flavours, has a way of turning simplicity into something deeply expressive. At Baluchi, The Lalit's celebrated pan-Indian kitchen, this culinary tradition takes centre stage with "The Taste of Bengal", an à la carte spread that trades North Indian bravado for the gentler, mustard-and-jaggery poetry of Bengali cooking. The evening opens gently with Aam Pora Shorbot, a roasted raw-mango cooler tempered with jaggery and black salt, tart and smoky, and a smart antidote to Delhi's heat. It sets up the Macher Matha Diye Dal well: moong dal simmered with fish head, a dish that shouldn't work as a starter conversation piece but does, its funk mellowed into comfort.

The kitchen finds its stride at the tandoor. Betki Fish Kobiraji arrives in a lacy egg-batter coat, crisp outside and flaking within, closer to a Bengali fish cutlet than anything Mughlai. The Mangshor Cholar Kebab, minced

mutton bound with chana dal, is denser and more rustic, built for those who like their kebabs to taste of the pan rather than the marinade. The Dhakai Chicken Kebab, yoghurt-marinated and warmly spiced, is familiar territory handled with the same care.

Mains are where the festival earns its

VEGETARIANS AREN'T AN AFTERTHOUGHT. ALOO POSTO'S POPPY-SEED GRAVY IS QUIETLY ADDICTIVE, AND THE KANCHKOLAR KOFTA'S RAW-BANANA DUMPLINGS ARE A REAL TREAT



name. Shorshe Ilish is the true test of any Bengali kitchen, and Baluchi's version, hilsa in a sharp, green-chilli-laced mustard gravy, has the right pungency without tipping into bitterness. Kosha Mangsho, mutton braised down with caramelised onion until dark and clinging, is the standout: patient, deeply spiced, and best mopped up with a flaky Porota. Chingri Malai Curry offers respite from the heat, its prawns gently by coconut milk into something creamy and mild. Vegetarians aren't an afterthought. Aloo Posto's poppy-seed gravy is quietly addictive, and the Kanchkolar Kofta's raw-banana dumplings hold their shape better than most.

Dessert is non-negotiable territory: a Sandesh, delicate and barely sweet, and a classic Rosogola, spongy and syrup-soaked, close the meal the only way Bengal would allow.

It's a tight, well-edited menu, proof that Baluchi's kitchen can step outside its usual repertoire without losing its polish.

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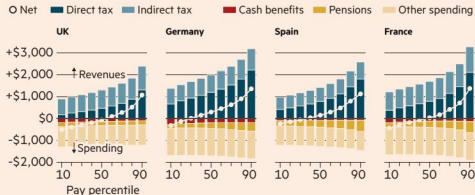
Unpacking the real fiscal costs of immigration

John Burn-Murdoch



The UK's low taxes on low earners and comparatively flat state pension make low-income immigrants more fiscally costly

Decomposition of 60-year fiscal balance (\$000s) for a couple* who arrive at age 30, by main earner's pay percentile



*Couple with two children. Second adult earns two-thirds of primary earner's pay. All countries share the same hypothetical immigrant cohort with the same economic characteristics so the chart isolates the role of the fiscal system. Source: 'Migration, Household Employment & Europe's Public Finances (Polani, 2026)'

Over the past decade or two, concerns about the economic impacts of immigration on high-income countries have shifted from fears that incomers are taking the jobs of existing residents to worries that the low (or no) pay of arrivals will place a growing financial burden on the host country.

This shift is reflected both in heated commentary and in the increasing use of economic modelling to forecast immigrants' fiscal impact, but both are subject to faulty assumptions that can make for a frustrating debate.

On the one hand, official modelling by organisations such as the UK's Migration Advisory Committee tends to assume all immigrants share similar economic trajectories; meanwhile, some commentary on the right argues that fiscal impacts are determined by immigrants' countries and cultures of origin. Both miss the fact that the nature of a country's fiscal system and its policies shape the extent to which immigrants with different economic characteristics are a net cost or net contributors.

The UK is a striking example. Its comparatively low rates of tax and social insurance contributions for low-paid workers plus a relatively flat state pension mean that people (immigrant or otherwise) who do small amounts of paid work or remain on low incomes contribute little to the exchequer but still benefit from robust state support. In Germany or France's fiscal systems, someone with the same weak employment and earnings patterns would generate much larger receipts from tax and social insurance due to the flatter tax regime, and would receive a comparatively smaller pension since these are linked more tightly to lifetime earnings.

The result is that in order to be a net fiscal contributor over their lifetime, the average couple arriving in the UK at age 30 needs the primary earner to have a salary at the 55th percentile of the overall earnings distribution, compared to the 45th in France and 28th in Germany. This is according to a new working paper on the fiscal impacts of immigration in different European countries by Usama Polani, a researcher at the Stanford Institute for Economic and Policy Research.

Put another way, for immigration to be financially beneficial to the state, the UK needs to attract migrants with

much higher pay and rates of employment than its peers, because low-wage or inactive families – whether native or immigrant – exert a much greater net fiscal cost in Britain than elsewhere.

The changing composition of migrant flows means this is only likely to become a more pressing issue in the years ahead, and not just for the UK. Both on living standards and low birth rates, convergence between the world's richest countries and the tier just below means that inflows from other high-income countries have been declining in relative terms. Arrivals from countries with lower incomes and education levels, or different economic norms, such as much lower rates of female employment, have been rising.

As Polani's analysis shows, fiscal impact models whose assumptions about pay and participation are based on cohorts with very different economic characteristics risk overestimating tax revenues and understating benefit spending for today's intakes.

At the same time, it would be wrong to treat demography as destiny. A 2021 analysis by Denmark's Ministry of Finance found that immigrants from non-western countries cost the state a net 31bn kroner in 2018 – equivalent to 1.4 per cent of its GDP that year. But that figure was down from 42bn three years earlier. One factor contributing to that has been a steady rise in the employment rate of women from the Middle East, north Africa, Pakistan and Turkey, which was 40 percentage points below Denmark-born women in 2015 but had closed to roughly 20 points behind by 2024.

However, that has not been matched in other countries including the UK, France and Germany, suggesting that economic assimilation does not always happen organically. There is a debate as to how much of Denmark's success comes from its introduction of a requirement for new arrivals to do substantial paid work before they qualify for higher levels of benefits and how much from its strong recent economic performance.

There are three lessons here. First, "immigration" is not a fixed thing across time and place. Second, its economic impacts are shaped by the policies as much as the people. And third, if the nature of immigration changes, the policies may need to as well.

john.burn-murdoch@ft.com

The merits of friction-maxxing

Pushing against the move to online efficiency can make us happier and safer

Lonely caffeine addicts are looking for face-to-face encounters and Starbucks is giving its coffee houses an "uplift" to attract them. Enthusiasm for analogue photography is increasing, such that Kodak, driven into bankruptcy 14 years ago, has a backlog of orders for roll film. Twenty-somethings are petitioning for the return of the BlackBerry and extolling the slow pleasures of vinyl records, handwritten notes, and in-person hobbies from cookery to crafting. Welcome to what some call friction-maxxing.

The trend is in part a gentle rebellion against the tap-and-scroll ease of modern online life. Innovators' dream of clearing obstacles that slow down everyday actions is reaching its apotheosis, helped by the ubiquity of smartphones and the rise of AI. But rather than rush-

ing down the fastest, smoothest route to their destination, friction-maxxers are choosing the long way round and lingering when they arrive.

Many of the joys of friction are open only to those who can afford the analogue alternatives – buying expensive LP records, for instance, rather than opting for Spotify downloads. The slower scenic detour is closed to those for whom time is money, such as Uber drivers or food-delivery couriers.

The return of some types of friction would be unwelcome. Few would abandon the ease of online banking or one-click ecommerce completely. The FT welcomes a new generation to the joys of reading a broadsheet newspaper in print, but is less enthused by the baffling revival of cassette tapes and the prospect of again having to rescue mangled magnetic tape from inside players.

Friction-maxxing is not just a status-seeking retro fad, however. There are serious advantages to maintaining some resistance in electronic processes. Sys-

tems engineer Guru Madhavan points out that without friction, users can lack important feedback. Inventors raced to introduce fly-by-wire controls in aircraft, for instance, but then had to reverse-engineer some friction into their innovation because the elimination of joystick vibration meant pilots could no longer "feel" when their plane was about to stall. Recklessly flattening all regulatory hurdles could clear a fast track to financial crisis. Even the pioneers of AI are advocating "pacing the frontier" to superintelligence to reduce doomsday risks. Slower can be safer.

Friction-filled methods offer other benefits. Mental and physical muscles conditioned by pushing against obstacles can be used to meet other challenges. The boredom sometimes involved in choosing slower methods can yield inspiration. Writing notes by hand reinforces memory, in a way that asking AI to summarise a meeting or a lecture does not. Moreover, a return to physical books, photographs or com-

A return to physical books, photographs or compact discs puts ownership of those objects in the hands of users, rather than allowing billionaires to grant conditional online access to our images, literature and music in the cloud.

Nobody should have to point out the obvious returns on the effort needed to cook a meal for, attend a live performance with, or make love to, another human being. Yet this, apparently, is the lonely and isolating online world in which many now live. Starbucks' effort to "double down on human connection and customer service", adding more seats, hardback books, houseplants and rugs, is creditable. But in one FT image of the chain's "uplifted" cafés, customers are not reading hardbacks or chatting to each other; they are sitting hunched over their mobile phones.

Friction's advocates face an uphill struggle, in other words. But that is no reason not to take the first steps. The view from the top can be wonderful and you will be fitter for trying to get there. Take your time.

Letters

A bailout that ensured Tung's compliance as Hong Kong CEO

Your obituary of Hong Kong chief executive Tung Chee-hwa (September 12) eloquently detailed how his attempts to ease Hong Kong into China's communist orbit founded in the face of popular opposition to sweeping national security legislation and forced his premature resignation as the city's leader. However, there is a glaring omission in your account. It wasn't just Tung's business acumen that was valued by China when it came time to

pick the city's first leader after Britain's departure. It was above all his debt to Beijing that made him a suitably pliable candidate after the 1997 handover.

Orient Overseas Container Line – later renamed OOCL and sold to Chinese shipping giant Cosco, as you note – was the shipping company started by Tung's father. It had teetered on the edge of bankruptcy in the early 1980s. Beijing arranged a rescue plan for the company, saving the Tung

shipping line and the family fortune. That intervention made Beijing confident that a grateful Tung would carry out its wishes to shepherd the city into Beijing's fold. Hongkongers didn't go along with the scheme.

The misreading of the city by Tung and by China's leaders set the stage for the destruction of Hong Kong's freedoms that followed.

In my encounters with Tung over many years, I found him to be kind and well meaning but completely out of his

depth politically. As the scion of an elite Shanghai family, he had no understanding of the aspirations of an increasingly well-educated Hong Kong populace.

Moreover, he proved unable to hold China to its promises that Hong Kong's freedoms would not only be preserved but extended under Chinese rule.

Mark L Clifford
President, The Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, Washington, DC, US

How UK should approach the AI sovereignty debate

Re your report "Anthropic held back frontier AI model from British checks" (September 10), this describes a debate the UK cannot sit out. It should also worry us that we are not shaping it.

Britain's prosperity has rarely rested on owning things. Instead, it has rested on setting the terms by which others trade them; contract law, marine insurance, accounting standards, clearing. Historically, we were seldom the largest producer, but we were often the indispensable intermediary. That is the record of a successful trading nation, and it should shape how we answer the sovereignty question now being decided on in Brussels, Washington and Beijing.

The debate is badly framed. Sovereignty is being treated as a matter of provenance: who owns the supplier, where the headquarters sits, whose flag is on the invoice. That test fails on its own terms: a UK-owned reseller of a foreign-controlled platform delivers a British invoice with identical exposure to foreign legal process. A British invoice is not the same thing as British control. The better test is control: can the UK inspect, exit, substitute and be confident of continuity? Measured that way, an open-weight AI model the UK holds and runs on its own compute may offer more protection than a British-owned service governed from abroad. This matters because the definition is being written now in standards bodies, allied forums and international partners' legislation.

Britain has something to trade. Our AI evaluation and assurance is leverage in access negotiations and an export in its own right. We should trust our capability and offer it as the basis of a shared allied standard.

Matthew Evans
COO, techUK, London EC4, UK

Merseyside's solution to free museum access

It is disappointing to see no progress in the now well-worn debate over whether national museums in the UK should charge some or all of their visitors (The Big Read, September 12).

One of the worst features of the current regime is, of course, seriously to distort the market for cultural visits. Enter St Paul's or Westminster Abbey – other than as a bona fide worshipper – and you have to fork out at least £27 as an adult. They receive no direct subsidy. And the many excellent provincial and military museums are in a similar position – and there is no statutory obligation on local authorities to support them.

With the public sector so constrained this is no time for gestures of cultural largesse. Let the customer pay. To get round the problem of how to discriminate between categories of visitor follow the example of the late, great Richard Foster, the renowned



'Stealing Apples' by Karl Witkowski, a Polish-American genre painter

curate and Merseyside's first director of national museums. He required visitors to buy a ticket to enter any of the Liverpool museums, but having bought one, this gave the visitor free entry to all the other museums in the city for the following year. Same price for the tourist who came to the Walker Art Gallery for an hour or two. Job done.

JAB Joll
Chairman, Museums and Galleries Commission, Pewsey, Wiltshire, UK

Curious message to send women in the workplace

It was striking to read "Meet the office influencers" (Life & Arts, September 5) so soon after the FT explored the rise of corporate creators and the value they can bring, making careers more visible and accessible to younger audiences, while offering employers a new form of organic exposure and recruitment.

There is plenty to satirise about social media. Nobody would suggest that a carefully edited 30-second video represents the full reality of professional life. However, more striking is the article's reliance on a remarkably dated portrayal of ambitious women: women who "seem quite lonely", whose "lovers are absent" and "friends are few", culminating in the image of the "forever single, working mannequins".

Leaving aside the fact that the assertion is simply untrue, the framing reaches beyond a joke about office outfits or matcha runs, and revives an older cultural assumption: that a woman who takes her career seriously, pursues financial independence and makes that ambition visible must pay for it in her personal life. Success, in this telling, leaves her polished but lonely; professionally accomplished but romantically deficient.

That is a curious message to send to a generation of women still deciding what they want their lives to look like.

Elinor Nikolova
M&A Lawyer, London E14, UK

Vonnegut's prescient novel foretold a dystopian future

Re the reasoned and thoughtful analysis by Joseph Stiglitz in The Weekend Essay ("The AI Economy", September 12), Kurt Vonnegut covered many of the problems of workers being replaced by machines in his novel "Player Piano", published in 1952. In the novel the displaced workers, living essentially meaningless lives on government handouts, eventually revolt. As Vonnegut said in a later novel, it is "a problem whose uneasy horrors will eventually be made worldwide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use." With AI we seem to be heading for his dystopian future.

Ralph Timms
Lincoln, Lincolnshire, UK

Japanese carebots and the German Girls' Day initiative

The call by Nick Isles, director of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, for more attention to be paid to attracting young men into the "heal" economy (Letters, September) evoked the recent contribution of Christia Freeland (Opinion, August 15) on the economic contribution of the Baumol disease to explaining voter dissatisfaction and public service costs.

In health, and even more so in the social care sector, that disease is rife. The question is whether the production process can be reorganised to increase the contribution of capital, and reduce the need for labour. Enhancing the role of technology – and not merely in the extreme forms of "carebot" that are said to characterise Japan – might prove to be a way forward.

However, such a policy could have its own secondary effect. Germany, since at least the early 1980s, has promoted *Mädchen in Männerberufen* (girls into men's jobs), sometimes called the Girls' Day initiative. This encouraged young women to enter traditionally male jobs – especially those seeking apprenticeships. Increasing the role played by technology and associated devices in caring jobs might both reduce the demand for labour and make the jobs involved more attractive to young men – the demography on which CPRMB is concentrating.

Bernard H Casey
Social Economic Research, London and Frankfurt

Appealing windfall recipe

Revisiting my misspent youth (with a gap of 50 years) I went "scrumpling" last week, picking up the windfalls from neighbours' trees. I was surprised to the core to see the Recipe Club feature on apples "Delicious ways to keep the doctor away" (Magazine, Life & Arts, September 12). What a treat and the ingredients for free as well.

Colin Paton
Freising, Bavaria, Germany

When being a Cern veteran comes in handy

I much enjoyed Leonard Barden's "mate in four" chess problem (September 12), composed by Oswald von Krobshofer in 1904. The elegant underpromotion to bishop – rather than the seemingly obvious queen promotion – is exactly the kind of subtlety that makes composed problems so enduring, the queen promotion being a red herring.

I was able to verify the solution using my own chess solver program, which I originally wrote in the C programming language in 1990, when I was working in CERN, and which still runs correctly today. It handles not only standard chess problems but also fairy chess variants including cylindrical and toroidal boards, as well as forced and assisted mates.

Curiosity then led me to look up the composer. I was delighted to discover that Krobshofer (1883-1960) was primarily a painter and graphic artist, born in Prague, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich from 1903 and exhibited at both the Munich and Vienna Secessions. Chess composition was apparently a sideline – though a distinguished one.

Mike Gerard
Versoix, Switzerland

Thanks for the style tips

I so enjoyed last week's HTSL. I said to my sons recently, that down the track I don't want to be an old duckie with stains on my clothes. Relief all round thanks to "The Fix" feature and Kate Finnigan's piece on the season's new look: "ripped, frayed, shrunken, stained."

And then your "Give it a swirl" piece in the same HTSL, where I read that "Paisley is trending again". That will let me accessorise, Hodakova-like, with my bedside rug.

I'll be one Fixy Swirly Lady!
Karen Atkinson
Balmain, NSW, Australia

A Manhattan I made earlier

Re Tim Hayward's magazine piece, why bother with ice for cocktails – nasty stuff that dilutes the alcohol ("Cometh the cocktail hour", Magazine, September 12)?

Simply mix all ingredients in a small milk jug and put in the freezer with a cocktail glass for an hour. Result: maximum flavour, maximum potency and undiluted Heaven.

John Nickson
London W9, UK

Correction

● The Simpsons's-in-the-Strand chef pictured in today's Magazine feature by Jay Rayner is Freddy Giraldo, not David Stevens as wrongly captioned. Our apologies for the error.

Opinion

Anthropic and the golden rules of business

GLOBALISATION

Patrick Foulis



If you read the recent essay by Dario Amodi, Anthropic's boss, it is hard to see beyond the conflicts of interest. He warns AI advances are dangerous, but falls short of unilaterally stopping his company from pursuing them. He seeks protection from copycats, without acknowledging the leading AI models were trained on others' data, usually without asking or paying.

Yet read on, because there are other striking ideas. One is that control over AI standards should pass from companies to a club of companies, backed by the US government. The other is that Anthropic will prioritise the interests of a subset of countries, defined either as the US and allies, or democracies, which

have, respectively, only 17 per cent and 45 per cent of the world's population. It is not clear how freely available products will be in other countries. Both ideas break longstanding golden rules of business, which recommended companies seek total control of intellectual property and planetary reach.

Anthropic is not alone in revisiting business orthodoxy. Four rules of thumb rose in the 1990s as the "end of history" promised free markets and democracy. They held that the idealised, perfect company should seek maximum geographic scope; minimum diversification across industries; 100 per cent control and ownership of their core activities; and low or even 0 per cent ownership of non-core activities, which were outsourced. Adherents dominated western stock markets. Over 70 per cent of major companies are organised by products or functions, not geography, reflecting the dream of a world market.

Now, the ideal of the perfect company is changing. The world is not flat. As

governments favour home companies, it is relatively more profitable to expand domestically than abroad. The embedding of AI into physical objects means there may be synergies from operating across industries, and makes it harder to judge which activities are civilian, and what is "non-core" and safe to outsource. From Canada to Japan, asset managers, which are meant to do the job of diversification instead of companies, are being prodded to be patriotic. Supply chains face barriers and Houthi-style mayhem. When abroad, companies' pursuit of control is more likely to conflict with ideas of political sovereignty.

In prior eras of tumult, business was often organised differently. In 1914, 70 per cent of international investment was in bonds, rather than equity with voting rights. French firms favoured Tsarist Russia, an ally. In 1936, US corporations kept 72 per cent of their investments abroad in their own hemisphere, and almost half in debt securities with low or no voting rights, which

had a higher degree of security and eased sensitivities over sovereignty.

Russia is once again an extreme laboratory for business. Barred from global expansion, its companies sprawl at home. Sberbank is the Kremlin's pet AI star (Amodi need not panic). The concept of control has warped to adapt to the likely demands and duration of

panies own their supply chains – BYD operates ships. To defuse sovereignty fears abroad, they are willing to forfeit control, using licensing and joint ventures. India's Reliance and Tata have re-embraced nation building across industries, from cola to air defence.

Even in America, Amazon and Alphabet have become conglomerates that own parts of their supply chains, such as chip design. SpaceX's strategy is to be a techno-national champion with up to nine divisions, from asteroid mining to tourism. In the pursuit of state-endorsed AI, OpenAI has gone further than Amodi, offering Uncle Sam an equity stake. US pharmaceutical companies want new drugs invented in China, but geopolitics makes takeovers impossible. Instead, there is a surge in licensing. Bristol Myers Squibb and Pfizer have made bets worth up to \$26bn.

In Europe, some firms are diversifying to plug strategic holes. The parent of Lidl, a supermarket, does data centres. Renault is expanding into military drones. Governments are trying to

dilute US tech companies' control over their local subsidiaries. How far these trends go depends on how enduring the tech and geopolitical shifts are. But many more companies need to redesign their geography, diversification, control and outsourcing.

That still leaves the question of whether America's techno-patriots can conquer the world, assuming they do not destroy it. SpaceX claims its potential market is 1.8bn households. If Anthropic floats, it may have to project global domination in order to justify its valuation. Not everyone is keen. "I can clearly see their self-interest," said Roland Lescure, France's finance minister, after Amodi's essay. Claiming to be a national champion and a global platform offends one final golden rule that still stands: you can't have your cake and eat it.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution and author of a forthcoming book on globalisation

Now, the ideal of the perfect company is changing. The world is not flat

Vladimir Putin's rule. Scores of companies that quit Russia kept options to buy back control of their subsidiaries there in the future, perhaps once Putin is gone, including McDonald's.

In China, Huawei has gone from an empire with two business lines to a local champion with 70 per cent of sales at home in five divisions. Chinese car com-

The enigmatic Islamist and thorn in Riyadh's side is causing disruption that affects the world, writes *Andrew England*

Abdulmalik al-Houthi has not been seen in public for years. None but his most trusted lieutenants know where he is. The suspicion among Yemenis is that he operates out of a vast network of tunnels and caves in the rugged mountains of Sa'dah, his rural home province in northern Yemen. Yet from his hide-out he has in recent weeks delivered stinging blows to Saudi Arabia, opened another front in the Middle East conflict, roiled oil markets and boosted Iran's push to maintain pressure on global energy prices in its battle with the US.

For months, the Houthi movement he leads largely remained on the sidelines of the US-Israel war against Iran, the Yemeni rebels' main backer. But in July, al-Houthi rolled the dice by reigniting a decade-long war with Saudi Arabia as his Islamist forces declared a blockade on the kingdom's ports and launched attacks against Saudi tankers.

Last week, they escalated their attacks to a ferocious level – firing almost daily barrages of drones and missiles at Saudi oil facilities, while launching a lightning offensive southwards along Yemen's Red Sea coast, tightening their grip over the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a vital maritime trade route. The blitz has helped push oil prices to their highest levels since mid-May and reinforced al-Houthi's standing as one of the most potent leaders in Iran's so-called axis of resistance.

The Houthi movement, whose core supporters follow a radical interpretation of the Zaydi offshoot of Shia Islam, has propagated a deeply anti-US, anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian doctrine since its formation by al-Houthi's brother, Hussein, in the 1990s.

For years, critics derided the Houthis as uneducated tribal mountain fighters – known for their traditional dress and preference for open sandals over combat boots. Yet since taking over the group after his brother was killed in 2004, al-Houthi has melded the militants into a powerful, battle-hardened, ideologically motivated force.

Under his leadership, the Houthis fought multiple wars with the late Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, as well as border skirmishes with Saudi forces, while running "summer camps" in the north to deliver social projects, proselytise and woo supporters. But an opportunity for the Houthis to move on to the national stage opened in 2011 as Yemenis took to the streets against Saleh's government amid popular uprisings across the Arab world.

The Houthis, who had long accused Saleh of corruption, aligned themselves with protesters and opposition groups, who eventually forced the veteran president to step down. Initially, they were welcomed by many Yemenis who saw them as standing up for the long-suffering population. But as a weak transitional administration floundered, the rebels pounced, seizing the capital, Sana'a, in late 2014, ousting the government and marching south to Aden.

Stunned by the collapse of the regime it backed and fearful of the Houthis' ties



Person in the News | Abdulmalik al-Houthi

Yemen's rebel leader spooking oil markets

to Iran, Saudi Arabia intervened to lead an Arab coalition to drive the rebels back and restore the government. The kingdom has been bogged down in a disastrous, costly war ever since as the Houthis have withstood years of bombardment by the Saudi-led coalition, and waves of US and Israeli air strikes.

The Houthis have also become more militant since the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the ensuing Gaza war. They fired missiles and drones at Israel and began attacking shipping in the Red Sea, saying they were acting in solidarity with the Palestinians.

The US and Israel responded with air strikes on Yemen, but the Houthis endured. US President Donald Trump even praised the group he designated a terrorist organisation for their "bravery" and ability to "to withstand punishment" after halting a bombing campaign last year. Following the rebels' latest battlefield gains, al-Houthi will be in no mood to compromise, says a former diplomat who worked in Yemen. "He has a pretty good understanding of his advantage, militarily and

politically," the former diplomat says.

Mohammed al-Basha, founder of the Basha Report, a US-based risk advisory, says al-Houthi – who communicates his messages through lengthy video statements – has morphed into a "megalo-maniac", increasingly isolated from the outside world, but who "genuinely believes he's going to liberate Palestine".

Although less ideologically tied to

'He has a pretty good understanding of his advantage, militarily and politically'

Iran than other Shia militants, the Houthis' relationship with the Islamic republic goes back years, and evolved after 2011 popular uprisings as Tehran sought to exploit the chaos to recruit Yemenis of all political shades.

But it was the Saudi intervention in Yemen's war, largely because of its fear Iran had an ally seizing control in the

kingdom's backyard, that deepened the ties as Tehran provided the Houthis with training, weapons and technology. "It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the relationship was a bit nascent at that point," says the former diplomat.

Yemeni analysts say that while the Houthis' actions serve Iran's interests, al-Houthi doesn't take orders from Tehran – or anybody else. Amid their ranks are those pushing for closer ties to Iran and others who champion a more Yemeni nationalist stance. Their attacks on Saudi Arabia and offensive along the Red Sea coast are in large part aimed at forcing Riyadh into concessions on the Houthis' terms at a time of mounting economic pressure in the north.

But al-Houthi and Iran have a shared goal: to use Yemen to project power and build networks in the Red Sea, and push back against the US, the former diplomat says. "It's absolutely driven by a domestic agenda... because the Houthis want to end the war on their terms."

andrew.england@ft.com

The west must catch up with Kyiv on AI combat

TECHNOLOGY

Gillian Tett



How dangerous is artificial intelligence? That question is gripping Silicon Valley right now, in the wake of an attack by a "swarm" of OpenAI AI agents on the Hugging Face platform.

Last weekend, in an underground bunker near the front lines of the Russian-Ukrainian war where two dozen commanders were glued to computer screens, I found myself pondering the same existential issue.

I had travelled there with a bipartisan group of US veterans-turned-politicians from the "With Honor" organisation, who backed a congressional bill to support Ukraine that just passed. What I witnessed was striking – and sobering.

Ukraine has long used innovative technology to defend itself, be that Starlink hardware, drones or home-produced missiles like the FP-7 "Flamingo". Now AI is taking this to a new level.

Delta, Ukraine's AI-enabled battlefield management system, turns vast amounts of data into usable information, while AI is helping soldiers to counter and launch drone swarm attacks, and/or conduct the "last mile" of targeting in order to avoid electronic jamming. Ground drones are also operating, with a range of 30km or more, to fire weapons, carry bombs, deliver supplies or evacuate wounded soldiers.

The latter is particularly important since the Russians deliberately attack medical teams. The Ukrainian army runs a video game-style reward system for its soldiers that awards more "points" for robotic medical evacuations than tank hits. "Robots save lives," a tattooed young nurse told me.

So are those AI systems now conducting entirely autonomous attacks? Artem Martynenko, a top commander, was asked that at the recent Yalta European Strategy forum in Kyiv. But he chose not to answer, perhaps to avoid inflaming western fears. And as a new FT visual investigation shows, it is increasingly hard to define how far humans are remaining "in the loop".

Russia is copying Ukraine's innovations, reportedly with Chinese support, and recently launched a drone attack in Zaporizhzhia that seemed to be fully autonomous (that is, capable of selecting its target and striking it without operator intervention). Ukraine is experimenting too, as the FT report shows. Its Saker Scout drone reconnaissance system is a case in point.

So what should politicians – and investors – outside Ukraine conclude from all this? One obvious point is that Nato in general, and America in particular, have an overwhelming self-interest in backing Ukraine, both for moral reasons and

to understand the future of war.

Second, Nato and western governments must urgently overhaul military procurement systems, which have hitherto focused on ultra-expensive items like jets, designed and delivered in multiyear cycles. Big kit remains important. But the wars in Iran and Ukraine have shown that cheap drones can destroy costly weapons. Or, as one seasoned US military operative in Ukraine told me: "Americans have always assumed their big wallet will win wars. Now that is wrong."

Military experts also say that Steve Feinberg, the former financier now serving as US deputy secretary of defence, understands this well, and is fighting to include innovative venture capital-backed start-ups in the US procurement process. The setbacks in Iran have helped him get more support for this, investors tell me. And Mark Rutte, Nato head, is backing procurement reforms, arguing this week that "what we are learning from Ukraine is helping us strengthen our own defences".

However, reform will be incredibly hard. Ukraine has made tech advances because its army uses tight feedback loops between "customers" (ie soldiers) and producers for speedy, iterative innovation. While that may be Silicon Valley's approach, it is diametrically opposed to current western procurement models.

Third, western leaders must move on from a cold war mentality focused on a binary fight between superpowers. Yes,

In the military sphere, innovations are making it easier than ever for minnows to hurt giants

America and China are engaged in a geoeconomic fight for global hegemony. But in the military sphere, tech innovations are now making it easier than ever for minnows to hurt giants.

Fourth, western militaries must treat the Ukrainians as partners in order to learn about their AI-backed innovations in the skies, sunflower fields and underground. A recent Ukraine-UK deal around "Avengers" AI training data is a step in the right direction; hard-nosed realism is needed.

Of course, most western voters are (rightly) terrified about AI combat. And Anthropic, the US tech giant, has refused to let the Pentagon use its models without a human in the loop. Ukraine, by contrast, is less constrained because it is (still) outside Nato.

But AI pacifism is not a realistic stance for Nato when Russia, Iran and China are experimenting with AI-enabled robots. Western governments must work with Ukraine, devise basic ethical rules for the technology, and recognise that the AI military genie cannot be put back in the bottle – whatever we might wish.

gillian.tett@ft.com

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OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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Your dog is indeed a genius. Just not the way you think.

Frank Bruni

Contributing Writer

One big advantage of being a pet parent over an actual one is report cards, by which I mean the absence of them. You don't have to sweat whether your spaniel is keeping up in algebra or how her G.P.A. compares with the pointer's next door.

I went and messaged that up.

A few months ago I took Regan, my Australian shepherd/Siberian husky mix, to the Duke Canine Cognition Center for tests. I was interviewing Brian Hare, the center's internationally renowned founder and director, and Vanessa Woods, his collaborator and frequent co-author, about their research, and I figured they could use Regan for a demonstration.

While I held Regan by her collar, Woods set up two pedestals about five feet apart. She positioned herself between them. Making sure she had Regan's attention, she dropped a treat into an opaque bowl on one of the pedestals. Seconds later, she pointed to an

With pets and people, we're stupid when assessing smarts.

identical bowl on the other. I then released Regan, who went where Woods pointed — and thus went treasless.

We repeated the exercise. Again, Regan followed Woods's finger. Again, no treat. And again, I winced. I'd always thought Regan brilliant. But suddenly she was a sorry sixth grader exiting a spelling bee in the first round. I muttered something along those lines.

"Stop!" Woods chided me. She explained that canine intelligence doesn't express itself the way human intelligence does and that I didn't understand what I saw. "Just wait," she said.

Hare and Woods have written three books together, including "The Genius of Dogs: How Dogs Are Smarter Than You Think" and "Puppy Kindergarten: The New Science of Raising a Great Dog." They work in a building at Duke University just a short walk up the road from my office there, and I'd been meaning to stop by for years before I finally got around to it. I figured: I love dogs. I love talking about dogs. I love unraveling the riddle of my dog. I'll learn something.

I learned a lot, and over the coming months in this newsletter, I'll produce occasional squibs about those insights. But my main takeaway dovetailed with something that has long fascinated me in terms of our own species: the limits, even uselessness, of the blanket assessments "smart" and "intelligent." Someone deemed clever in one manner or setting can be clueless in others. Someone who speeds through any crossword put before him but can't read the room is arguably dumber than someone who bumbles puzzles but acers social interactions, at least if the goal is to become the top dog at a major company. Just as we speak of intelligence sloppily, we measure it clumsily. Consider a ranking of dog breeds by intelligence that any dog obsessive who has futzed around on the internet has probably come across. It was constructed in the 1990s by a psychologist named Stanley Coren, who gave Border collies the top spot and Afghan hounds the bottom one. I'm not going to tell Regan this, but Australian shepherds and Siberian huskies were both midpack. Coren decided how smart a dog was based on how many attempts it took to get the dog to follow a new command and how frequently the dog performed a previously mastered command upon the first request. But do those results reflect acuity — or deference? Are low-scoring breeds knuckle-headed or just headstrong? To fuzz things up further, breeds' general performance rates weren't observed in a lab but recalled and reported by dog obedience judges whom Coren surveyed. So how much did conventional wisdom and preexisting impressions color the results?

When it comes to supposed intelligence tests — for people, dogs or other species — interpretation is everything. For example, Hare and Woods have given many dogs the "impossible task" of extracting food from a locked container. Some are persistent in their trying and creative in their prying. Others quickly abandon the effort and look to a person for help. Have those

quitters sagely realized the futility of the task? Or are they just lazy and dim?

Regardless, Hare and Woods have found that the impossible task illuminates something that's arguably more predictive than brightness: disposition. The dogged dog is a better candidate for, say, drug or bomb sniffing. The dog more attuned to a human's presence and eager for a human's involvement is more likely to excel at guiding the visually impaired.

How much of what we call intelligence is really proclivity for and mastery of a valued job? That's often what Hare and Woods are studying. Recent research of theirs — done in partnership with Canine Companions, the country's largest provider of service dogs — has focused on ways to identify early on which puppies will successfully complete the training necessary for such work and how environmental factors might shape and direct them.

For example, Hare and Woods have assessed the impact of dissimilar methods of puppy rearing, comparing pouches that grow up on the Duke campus — where they interact with hundreds of people and even bunk with students, cycling through a sequence of dorm rooms — to those nurtured in single-family homes. As the puppies mature into dogs, Hare and Woods gauge how well the members of each group perform tasks such as using the right portal in a transparent cylinder to reach a visible treat or inferring, through the process of elimination, where a missing object might be.

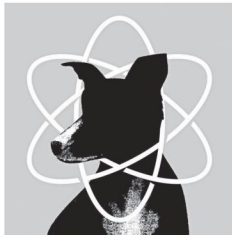
"I thought there were going to be big differences — things like memory, communication, inhibitory control," Hare told me. But no. The campus dogs and the off-campus dogs scored similarly. "You couldn't get a more nothing result," he said.

In terms of temperament, though, the two groups did diverge. Confronted with novelty, the campus dogs "go explore, they're not alarmed, they're interested, they're very confident," he said. "The dogs raised at home are a little bit more reticent, less confident, more vigilant."

Smart takes different forms. Some dogs are skillful at communicating what they want but have unremarkable memories. Others are the opposite. And while apes outclass dogs at finding hidden objects, dogs reign supreme at hijacking human attention, finagling human affection and translating human cues. They've flourished for that very reason.

Which brings me back to Regan, the bawling treat thief.

Woods ran the test again but tweaked it, placing the treat in one bowl and then not pointing anywhere. This time, Regan went to that bowl.



BEN WISEMAN

Before, she hadn't been forgetting where the treat was. She'd been choosing to trust, heed and please the human, an indispensibly smart decision in the larger, long-term, all-important context of safety and survival.

Hare explained: "Dogs and wolves are almost genetically identical, yet there are hundreds of millions of dogs, and they're on every single continent. And, sadly, there are a few hundred thousand wolves. What happened?" The answer is us, by which I mean dogs' recognition of our value and their finely honed talent for co-opting our big brains and (when we're at our best) big hearts.

"It's an evolutionary genius to have this partnership with humans," Hare said. Then he did the pointing — straight at Regan. "This dog is the absolute archetype of the genius of dogs."

Absolute archetype! Is that like a valedictorian?

FRANK BRUNI was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.

The coming A.I. safety talks between the U.S. and China will not save us

Seth Center

The United States is preparing for its artificial intelligence dialogue with China, and its officials are under tremendous pressure from many sincere people to cooperate on A.I. risk with America's foremost strategic competitor. Because American and Chinese companies are building the most powerful models, these people argue that an agreement, even a treaty, between the superpowers is humanity's last backstop against potential catastrophe.

I get the logic. But as the former State Department envoy who co-led the first U.S.-China A.I. dialogue, I fear the coming talks will not save any of us. If the past is prologue, China will have little interest in anything beyond gaining a competitive advantage.

The agenda of the May 2024 meeting was crystal clear to both sides because U.S. presidents had agreed to it: Focus on the risks of advanced A.I. systems and the potential for safety cooperation. Yet Chinese officials steered talks away from the potential risks of A.I. systems for hours. They even demurred from explaining their domestic A.I. regulations — despite having regulators in the room.

Instead, China chided America for its concerns about A.I. risks. They portrayed U.S. safety approach as a barrier to unlocking the technology's opportunity and a way to stop poorer countries from accessing A.I. tools. They unfurled proposals for subdialogues that would have most likely resulted in endless procedural diplomacy.

A moment outside a hotel conference room sticks in my mind. A Chinese counterpart turned to me with a puzzled expression and asked why we actually wanted to talk about A.I. risk. We took the mandate from our presidents seriously. They saw only the opportunity to jockey for strategic advantage.

In this month's meetings, I expect China to again downplay safety risks. It could dangle the possibility of safety cooperation in exchange for concessions such as the softening of chip controls. I think it will continue to portray itself as an altruistic savior dedicated to ensuring that the developing world gains A.I. access. Meanwhile, it will be likely to keep doing everything it can to get ahead — like gener-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY NALA RUECHEL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ating propaganda in the hopes of inflaming opposition to data centers and encouraging Chinese companies to continue exploiting U.S. models to improve their systems.

Maybe China will toss its old playbook. Even President Xi Jinping is talking about risk and loss of control in A.I. Vivid new incidents show that A.I. systems can slip the leash of human control. Fear may converge with interest to produce coordinated action. Or at least a new understanding.

But if Beijing now takes the risks of A.I. seriously, the message has not reached its domestic companies. The Chinese government touts the global adoption of its open models, but Chinese models do not currently match U.S. models in safety performance that

matters — thwarting access to the most dangerous capabilities. Its companies rarely disclose these risks and say almost nothing about signs that their models, too, might act recklessly beyond human control.

Complicating this already muddy situation for U.S. officials are the A.I. scientists, politicians, Wall Street and technology heavy hitters demanding an immediate A.I. alliance to thwart rogue A.I. I worry China will take advantage of these individuals' sincerity, especially if diplomacy fails to produce a comprehensive safety agreement. Beijing could feign seriousness, float a hollow offer, then pin blame for its failure on the United States. The result could spark internal debates that weaken the core bipartisan consensus that

the United States must lead in all facets of A.I., making it easier for China to forge ahead in the global technology competition.

What's more, no durable diplomatic agreement can be reached while domestic policy is under construction. Companies must first start with technical and oversight solutions, which can be turned into policies by the government and only then translated into international agreement. Rather than press American officials for a diplomatic solution that cannot be realized, safety advocates with influential voices should push developers in both countries to raise standards, invest real money in research to build safer A.I. and increase transparency and reporting. And they should continue unofficial conversations with Chinese business leaders and former officials — a step that could encourage the government to act.

That's not to say these summits can't accomplish anything. The United States can and should test China's commitment to addressing A.I. risk and hold its developers to the same transparency and safety performance benchmarks that American developers follow. Future talks could verify that progress has been made.

If both sides meet in earnest, the very best I could envision is a non-binding commitment in which each side would agree to put pressure on its companies to publish and improve safety benchmarking for cybersecurity and biological risks, and to disclose (rather than bury) reports of concerning incidents. Both sides could also affirm their existing shared commitments on A.I. safety, including the 2024 agreement to maintain human control over nuclear weapons decisions. This will be a multiyear endeavor; countries should begin by affirming they are players in a longer arc of progress.

I realize this sounds underwhelming for those who see catastrophe ahead. But considering the rigidity of great power diplomacy and the immaturity of domestic policy, this would be an achievement against which to measure whatever comes next.

I am confident U.S. officials understand the stakes, as well as the tactics of their counterparts. And I hope that their efforts to find a balance will be supported by the A.I. safety community. Back in the United States, the core work must continue to build a path that all countries can sign on to.

SETH CENTER led A.I. diplomacy at the U.S. State Department from 2023 to 2025 and served at the National Security Council in the first Trump administration. He is a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

This is how Putin took total control

PROKOPENKO, FROM PAGE 1

I doubt that the new rules applied to everyone. The lesson was renewed periodically: the job swap with Dmitri Medvedev in 2012 that allowed Mr.

Putin to resume the presidency irrespective of term limits; the murder of Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister, in 2015; the arrest of the economy minister, Alexei Ulyukayev, in 2016. All these acts told the elite that, while it was free to take care of business, politics proper belonged to Mr. Putin.

The arrangement held for nearly two decades — until the invasion of Ukraine. Since then, as the elite has suffered from Western sanctions and a squeezed economy, decision-making has been drastically centralized. Budgets have been classified, with Parliament recently granting the finance ministry the power to spend at will. At the Kremlin's behest, governors have been recruiting soldiers and processing payments to the families of the dead. War veterans, meanwhile, have been given governorships and senior posts. Personally beholden to Mr. Putin, this group serves to further cement Kremlin control.

The elite's property is no longer safe, either. The Prosecutor General's Office has been aggressively pursuing a suite of nationalizations, reopening privatization deals from the 1990s on the grounds that they violated the country's economic sovereignty. The scale is striking. In the first six months of this year, seizures of private assets accounted for 42 percent of the value of all mergers and acquisitions in Russia. Owners are accused of corruption, extremism or foreign influence — or all three.

The largest case is exemplary. Vadim Moshkovich, the founder of Rusagro, one of the country's largest agricultural producers, had been a senator for the Belgorod region for eight years. In May, a Moscow court forced him to transfer 68 percent of the company to the state. This was less a case of reprisal than of the Kremlin eliminating property as an independ-

ent base of power. Two decades of loyalty bought Mr. Moshkovich no protection. He is in custody facing charges of large-scale fraud and bribery.

Owners can sometimes buy back their assets. After prosecutors moved against an energy company owned by the billionaire Andrey Melnichenko, he settled for about \$335 million, roughly the sum he had paid for the company in 2018. The claims were dropped soon afterward. The Economist reported that the payment went to an educa-

The Russian elite had lost its capacity to influence politics long before 2022, to be sure. But it still had room to maneuver, the means to amass wealth and, crucially, the freedom to leave. Now, that room has all but disappeared.

tion foundation set up at Mr. Putin's initiative. Along with a presidential decree putting foreign companies' Russian assets under state control, to be handed out to approved owners, this means that wealth is now held on Mr. Putin's terms rather than owned.

The same conditional governance careers. It is here perhaps where the change since 2022 is starkest. There used to be removals and reshuffles, of course, but they have become more frequent and more arbitrary. In April 2024, Timur Ivanov, a deputy defense minister, was arrested on bribery charges; within weeks three generals and a senior procurement official had also been detained. The defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, was moved to the Security Council that May — not disgraced, simply removed from the ministry he had run for nearly 12 years, in the middle of a war.

There are other examples. In July last year, Mr. Putin dismissed his transport minister, Roman Starovoyt, without saying why. Mr. Starovoyt fatally shot himself within hours, as investigators closed in on a case of



MARINA KRASNAYA/SHABAROVA

embezzled funds while he was governor of the Kursk region. He had never been charged, though his successor as governor was arrested over the same issue. Last September Dmitri Kozak left the presidential administration after 25 years of work side by side with Mr. Putin. Again, no reason was given.

You might expect the loss of guarantees to free up the elite. It has done the opposite. When the state can take away your safety, your assets and your career — and sanctions have closed the exit abroad — individual adaptation remains the only rational strategy. Neither the shambles of the 2022 military draft nor the mutiny by the Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin the following year fractured the ruling stratum. An official can still soften an instruction, protect a subordinate,

place a friend. But that's the extent of his or her power.

On Sunday, officials whose livelihoods depend on delivering big numbers will count the votes and report them upward to a man who purports to believe them. The process will produce a majority both overwhelming and virtual — easily assembled and just as easily dismantled, should it ever become useful to do so. That is what 25 years have built: a country with one arbiter and a ruling class trained to follow his orders.

ALEXANDRA PROKOPENKO is a senior fellow at Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin and the author of the forthcoming "From Sovereigns to Servants: How the War Against Ukraine Reshaped Russia's Elite."

OPINION

AI: Ghostwriter in the Machine

By James Taranto

I use artificial intelligence when I write articles, including this one. I run partial or complete drafts through a chatbot and ask what it thinks. It spits out copious suggestions, some of which inspire me to make revisions and improvements. AI is also an immensely powerful research tool, able to find useful information via queries too vague or abstract to be effective in an ordinary Google search. For this essay, I used it to track down a magazine article I dimly remembered reading almost 40 years ago. As you'll see, that old piece turned out to contain a killer quote.

Some self-styled guardians of journalism think I should include a paragraph like the preceding one in every article I write. "Transparency means that the use of AI is disclosed to readers in a clear, honest, and obvious manner," Pangram, which makes an AI tool that purports to identify AI-generated writing, asserts on its marketing blog. "Whether journalists use AI to generate leads, engage in research, or create visuals, their audience always deserves to know." The post calls such transparency one of "four non-negotiable principles."

‘If we insisted that every politician write his own piece, we’d either get terrible pieces or none at all,’ said an op-ed editor at the New York Times.

This is bad advice, and I won't follow it. The repetition would quickly become boring, and my readers deserve better. Curiously, Pangram and its supporters also insist that I should outsource my judgment to AI in my capacity as features editor of the Journal's opinion pages. "I suggest the WSJ use Pangram to screen all content," Kevin O'Connor, a general partner of ScOp Venture Capital, emailed me in response to my April article criticizing Pangram for unreliability. ScOp led Pangram's seed funding in 2025 and participated in another funding round this July.

I asked Pangram CEO Max Spero if the company has any newspapers or other traditional news organizations among its customers. "Out of client confidentiality, we decline to comment on this matter," he replied. So trans-

parency is negotiable after all.

Pangram says its product's ultimate purpose is to "protect editorial integrity." I ensure the integrity of my own work with a simple rule: I never paste AI output into a piece I'm writing (except when AI transcribes text from an image or recording, and then I check the quote against the source). That has been my practice since I started using AI, and it is consistent with the Journal editorial page's policy for staff, which my boss, Paul Gigot, announced last month: "No letting AI draft a column or editorial."

Several months ago, Mr. Gigot and I discussed whether to adopt a policy on AI use by outside writers, as other newspapers have done. The New York Times op-ed contract provides: "As a freelance contributor to The Times, you may not submit any material for publication that contains content generated, modified or enhanced by gen-A.I. tools." I argued that attempting to police outsiders would be too cumbersome and that we don't yet know enough about AI to make sensible uniform rules governing its use. And although I believe professional writers have an ethical obligation to write our own words, I don't think that's true of every op-ed contributor.

We instituted no policy, and that saved us from embarrassment by allowing us to stand behind a (very good) piece by the investor Stanley Druckenmiller that Pangram's detector tagged as "AI generated." Mr. Druckenmiller answered media inquiries with an admirable nonchalance. "Of course I used AI," he told the news site Notus (now the Washington Sun). "I was a B student in English, but an A-plus in economics," he said to a Journal reporter. "These are my ideas and I've been speaking about them for over 15 years, as anyone who knows me knows. Would I prefer that I was a great writer? Yes, but that's not who I am."

A related and similarly candid acknowledgment came from Kyle Crichton, deputy op-ed editor of the New York Times: "If we insisted that every politician write his own piece, we'd either get terrible pieces or none at all." But Mr. Crichton, who has since moved to another position at the Times, wasn't talking about AI. His quote appeared in the April 18, 1988, issue of the New Republic, in an article by Ari Posner about ghostwriting.

In September 1987, a young senator had ended his presidential campaign owing to a plagiarism



scandal. Joe Biden lifted not only words but biographical details from speeches by the British politician Neil Kinnock. Mr. Posner noted that "speechwriters throughout Washington helped their bosses craft responses to the revelation that Biden used others' words without credit" and that "even after Joe Biden was zapped from the presidential race, he didn't bother to write his February 3 op-ed piece in the New York Times." He quoted an unnamed Biden staffer, whose op-ed defense anticipated Mr. Druckenmiller's by 38 years: "The piece reflects nobody's but the senator's views."

Mr. Posner's article was titled "The Culture of Plagiarism," but that was an exaggeration. Most of the examples he cited—which also included judicial opinions drafted by clerks and CEO shareholder letters written by the communications department—didn't involve appropriation of others' words, only purchasing the service of producing them. The clearest exception was from academia, where a scientist had sued her supervisor alleging that he "deleted her name and presented a paper as his own in a class he taught." (She ultimately prevailed in court.)

The headline notwithstanding, Mr. Posner allowed that "obviously there is a spectrum of respectability here." Nobody expects the president to write his own speeches, even if nowadays we can count on plenty of improvisation. "At the other extreme, people do have the right to expect that a journalist's byline means that he or she actually composed the words that follow." There's no obvious reason the same distinctions shouldn't apply when the ghostwriter is a machine rather than a human.

I have experience with ghostwriting on both sides of the editorial fence. Mr. Crichton told Mr. Posner in 1988 that the Times had "never rejected something because it was written by a ghostwriter." I have, although I make such decisions case by case. Sometimes the ghostwriting is too obvious, as when a piece carries the byline of a sympathetic plaintiff in a public-interest lawsuit but is written in the bloodless style of an appellate brief.

One ghostwritten op-ed stirred me to indignation. In 2018 a public-relations flack emailed me that the head of his firm wanted to write a piece commenting on a business story that involved social policy. I told him I'd be happy to look. The draft arrived with a different byline and an explanation from the flack that "we actually found an even more enthusiastic author," the leader of a conservative advocacy organization. I turned it down on grounds that the argument—essentially that conservative values are good for business—would be more credible coming from someone with no ideological ax to grind, ideally "a politically neutral expert" such as a business-school professor.

The flack then sent me the same piece, with slight edits, under a professor's byline. I wrote back: "I am extremely put off by the fakery of this whole exercise, and I question the ethics of a professor's allowing his name to be put on a ghostwritten piece." The professor emailed me a few hours later to apologize.

I have also ghostwritten op-eds. My first full-time job was in the PR department of the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank,

which I joined two months after Mr. Posner's article appeared in 1988. Among my duties was to produce one op-ed column a week for the foundation's president, Ed Feulner. I would select a topic, draft a formulaic piece about it, and send it upstairs, where Feulner would edit it (in most cases minimally), approve it, and send it back. It was then printed and sent by mail to newspapers across the U.S., which could publish it free of charge.

I was somewhat uncomfortable with this practice, and Heritage found it embarrassing enough that my boss there once told me I was forbidden to mention "ghostwriting" on my résumé. But in retrospect I don't think it was all that bad. Feulner was known more as an advocate than a scholar, and Heritage scholars generally wrote their own material, which I sometimes compressed to op-ed length. I found it distasteful mostly because it was drudge work, as were other tasks such as writing press releases.

Entry-level jobs typically involve a fair amount of drudgery. Before joining Heritage I had internships with two news organizations, United Press International's Los Angeles bureau and KNX Newsradio. Both jobs entailed tedious re-write work that would have fit into Mr. Posner's capacious definition of plagiarism. At UPI, I recast stories from the Los Angeles Times into wire copy, and at KNX I reworked wire stories into scripts for the anchors to read. Some of those scripts no doubt originated in newspapers and had been rewritten twice by the time they reached the studio.

A common speculation about AI has been that it will render much entry-level work obsolete. My experience supports the claim. Today's large language models could easily rewrite a news story or produce a serviceable Feulner column or press release. Critics bemoan the proliferation of AI "slop," but slop is nothing new. "As writing becomes mass production, the words under the suspicious byline are also losing their value," Mr. Posner wrote in 1988.

AI is merely a tool, and a versatile one. It can be used to automate an assembly line, to compensate for a gap in the user's skills, or to augment and sharpen individual creativity. Pangram won't tell you the difference. That requires old-fashioned human judgment.

Mr. Taranto is the Journal's editorial features editor.

After 40 Years, Will Oregon Elect a Republican Governor?



CROSS COUNTRY
By Sierra Dawn McClain

Canby, Ore. A blue-haired hipster and her tattooed companion walked past, cotton candy in hand. A boy in 4-H with a microphone was talking to a crowd about his cow. The air smelled of popcorn and barbecue. I was at the Clackamas County Fair south of Portland in late August.

Near the stage, state Sen. Christine Drazan, the Republican nominee for governor, shook hands with prospective voters. With her layered hair and polished style, she looked the part of a suburban mom. Ms. Drazan was campaigning in one of Oregon's critical swing areas, which turns bluer closer to Portland and redder in small cities and farming areas. The county went for Democrats in five of the past seven presidential elections but favored Ms. Drazan for governor in 2022, a race she lost by 3.4 points to Democrat Tina Kotek, a former state House speaker. Ms. Drazan is back for a rematch, and it's shaping up to be a competitive race.

The Beaver State hasn't elected a Republican governor since 1982, and Democrats hold supermajorities in the statehouse. Yet Oregon isn't politically monolithic. It is a mosaic of subcultures: fishermen in coastal towns, hipsters in Portland, hippies in Eugene, hikers in Bend, farmers in the Willamette Valley, loggers in timber towns and cowboys in Eastern Oregon's high desert.

The much greater number of voters in Portland, Eugene and other cities, who are largely united on climate policies and social issues, consistently tip the scales toward Democrats. Secularism reinforces this alignment: 43% of Oregon adults are religiously unaffiliated, 14 points higher than the national average. Even rural Republicans, compared with voters in more religious states, view their party less through a culture-war lens than an economic one.

This economic emphasis gives

Ms. Drazan an opening to argue for a political reset. "I'm going to stay as focused as possible on kitchen-table issues," she said during an interview at her Wilsonville office. (Ms. Kotek declined to be interviewed.)

The cost of living is top of mind for voters. No wonder: Oregon is the fifth least affordable state in the U.S., according to a Common Sense Institute study analyzing the costs of essentials such as gasoline and groceries. WalletHub ranks Oregon fourth highest in share of income spent on housing. Ms. Drazan said she will boost housing supply—and therefore lower prices—by reducing regulatory burdens and expediting the permitting process.

Progressive governance makes the state inhospitable for businesses. The Tax Foundation ranks Oregon 35th of the 50 states for tax competitiveness. Some businesses have moved their headquarters out of state, including Dutch Bros. Ms. Drazan promises to veto tax increases and bring back business.

Leftist regulations target farming and forestry, making life especially difficult for rural business owners. "It's palpable the degree to which rural Oregonians believe their state government and Tina Kotek specifically are economically and culturally opposed to them," said Jeff Eager, a former mayor of Bend. "The state government frankly views them with contempt, and they know that, and the feeling is mutual."

Voters also worry about education. The Urban Institute in 2024 ranked Oregon 50th among states in fourth-grade math and reading scores, 49th in eighth-grade math and 47th in eighth-grade reading.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Gov. Kate Brown, with Ms. Kotek's support, temporarily lowered high-school graduation requirements. The policy was extended, and now students won't have to prove basic mastery of reading, writing or math to graduate until at least 2029. "My kids going to public school just aren't getting an appropriate education," said fairgoer Carol Allee, 45, of Oregon City. "They just shove 'em through." Ms. Drazan promises to

restore graduation requirements.

Ms. Kotek turned down a federal school-choice tax credit that would have provided millions of dollars for tuition and tutoring. Ms. Drazan said she would opt into the program.

The third major issue worrying voters is urban disorder—homelessness, drug use and crime. Vagrant encampments are less sprawling

The race is tight as usual. If Christine Drazan pulls it off this time, she can thank the Democrats' failure.

than during the pandemic, but the number of homeless statewide increased by 35% between 2023 and 2025, according to Portland State University. Ms. Drazan said she would "set expectations that are focused on a recovery-first model rather than a housing-first model."

Portland's public-safety situation is abysmal. After 2020's Black Lives

Matter riots, the city faced a wave of officer retirements and resignations. Portland today ranks 47th among the 50 largest U.S. cities for police officers per capita. The average response time for high-priority emergencies is nearly 20 minutes. Ms. Drazan said she would use funding incentives to tell the city: "You have to fully fund your police."

Many Oregonians avoid downtown Portland, especially after dark. As I walked the streets between 9 and 10 p.m., I saw a man injecting himself with a needle in Tom McCall Waterfront Park, five teenagers tagging the Morrison Bridge with graffiti, and a shirtless man on the riverbank by the Eastbank Esplanade ripping apart a wooden pallet, apparently to build a fire. One week later, nearly to the hour, witnesses heard gunshots and a man was found dead on the esplanade.

Ms. Drazan urges voters to consider the stark examples of failed progressive governance on Ms. Kotek's record. "I'm not asking anybody to abandon their party affiliation. I'm asking them to look at results in our state," she said.

She is within striking distance of a win. Democrats have won 10 of the past 11 gubernatorial races by single-digit margins. In 2022, Democrat Ron Wyden won his Senate seat by nearly 15 points while Ms. Kotek won the governor's seat by only 3.4.

But Ms. Drazan will face headwinds in a year with strong anti-Trump sentiment and high Democratic voter turnout expected. Sabato's Crystal Ball ranks the race as "likely Democratic."

Regardless of the outcome, Ms. Drazan's campaign is a reminder that a strong minority party is vital to countering single-party overreach. Last year, Oregon Republicans, with Ms. Drazan's help, gathered enough signatures to challenge a multibillion-dollar tax hike that Ms. Kotek had shoved through the Legislature along party lines. "The voice of the minority can be incredibly effective," Ms. Drazan said. "For me, the decision to run again was really a commitment to continue to believe in my own state."

Ms. McClain is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.

I'm Learning to Look Again

By Danny Heitman

As the school year gets under way, I've been thinking about the first thing I learned in a classroom—a lesson that after more than half a century seems one of the most important.

It came from "Skip Along," the "Alice and Jerry" primer my tiny classmates and I used to begin reading on our first day of elementary school, in 1970. Alice and Jerry, kids just like us, were rivals of a sort to the heroes of the "Dick and Jane" books that many other youngsters once used to parse their first printed words. "Look, Jerry, look," Alice implores as the first story begins. She points to a stretch of water where three ducks are gliding by.

Alice and Jerry, brought to life by author Mabel O'Donnell, often re-

peated themselves to drive home their point. "Look, Jerry, look" was such a line, and we understood that everyone besides Jerry was supposed to look, too.

Looking, I quickly gathered, was a window to learning. This seemed too simple to claim as news. When my mom asked me what I'd learned on my first day of school, "Look, Jerry, look" didn't cross my lips.

But I soon grasped that paying attention can be hard. As I entered my teens, cable television expanded the number of channels at home from four to several dozen. Shortly after I graduated from college, the internet became a global presence, and claims on my attention and everyone else's mushroomed into a multitude of distractions. These days, with a smartphone in my pocket and an endless to-do list, I

rarely pause to look at anything.

All this came to mind the other weekend as I was walking to the store for a gallon of milk. My errand took me past a railing that overlooks a large canal where wildlife often visits. My thoughts were elsewhere as I zoomed past the spot on my household mission, but a voice from the past nudged me to reconsider. Three words, "Look, Jerry, look," floated back from memory like a page dropped from a scrapbook.

I pivoted back to the overlook, where a beautiful white ibis was hunting for frogs. Seeing it was the highlight of my day. Looking, as little Alice taught me long ago, is really what life is about.

Mr. Heitman, a columnist for the Baton Rouge Advocate, is editor of Phi Kappa Phi's Forum magazine.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Tariff Gift to Abdul El-Sayed

President Trump’s trade war with Canada is harming both countries, but it’s helping American Democrats who are using his border taxes to attack Republicans. Ground zero is Michigan, where competitive races could decide control of Congress in November.

A new Ipsos poll conducted for the business coalition Michigan Smart Trade Alliance finds that Mr. Trump’s tariffs are overwhelmingly unpopular in the state, especially the tariffs on Canada. While the President says other countries pay the tariffs, 80% of Michigan likely voters say American consumers do. They’re right.

Businesses that import goods embed the tariffs into their prices, sometimes in stealthy ways. Cox Automotive this spring found that Mr. Trump’s tariffs drove a 10.4% increase in the average suggested retail price for new cars. Michigan Smart Trade Alliance estimates tariffs have cost the state \$26 billion since January 2025, or about \$6,419 per household.

A large share of this tax bill comes on imports from Canada, which exports about \$40 billion in goods to Michigan every year. Vehicles and parts make up roughly half of that. Because of its significant car manufacturing, Michigan depends heavily on cross-border supply chains with Canada and Mexico. Michiganders understand that.

Some 81% of Republicans and 92% of Democrats and independents say the U.S. trade relationship with Canada is crucial to the state economy, according to the Ipsos poll. About three-quarters of both parties want the U.S. to focus on combatting China’s mercantilist trade practices while at the same time maintaining strong trade ties with Canada and Mexico.

This reinforces other polls that have found that Michigan voters oppose the Canada border taxes. A Detroit News/WDIV-TV poll this month found that only 29% of likely voters approved of Mr. Trump’s recent 50% tariffs on \$20 billion of Canadian goods, including dairy, cement, hockey sticks and more.

Trade protectionism can sound politically appealing in the abstract and when it’s spun as “America first.” But it becomes unpopular when voters see how it leads to higher costs and price increases in practice. This is how it’s now playing out in Michigan and farm states.

The President is putting Republicans in Michigan in a tough spot. Criticizing his tariffs could invite his wrath, but staying silent also has a cost. Democrats are making opposition to the Trump tariffs a top campaign focus because it unites their party, deflects from their leftwing positions, and appeals to independents.

You almost have to admire the cynicism of Democratic Senate nominee Abdul El-Sayed on trade. The Democrat should be on defense for his leftwing political and foreign-policy views. But he is punching Republican Mike Rogers for not pushing back against Mr. Trump’s Canada tariffs and for previously supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement, which phased-out tariffs on, and boosted trade with, Canada. He’s attacking Mr. Rogers as both a protectionist and a free trader.

“This is a vanity war. This vanity war is not a war with Canada. It’s a war on Michigan, because we have to pay the price,” Mr. El-Sayed said recently. Republicans could pay a big political price for Mr. Trump’s tariffs in November. So could the President if Republicans lose control of the House and Senate.

Jon Kyl, American Conservative

The U.S. Senate isn’t what it used to be, and one reason is that there are fewer Members like Jon Kyl. The former Arizona Senator, who died Thursday at age 84, made the country better with his attention to policy rather than on his media profile.

A lawyer by trade, Jon Llewellyn Kyl was born in Nebraska and attended the University of Arizona. He was elected to the House in 1986 and in 1994 won a seat in the Senate, where he served until 2013. His contributions were numerous on tax policy, national defense and western water issues. He was influential because he mastered the details of policy that could persuade others.

Kyl led the fight to extend George W. Bush’s tax cuts despite the reluctance of some Republicans on the Finance Committee. He was a strong and leading advocate for missile defense, rejecting the view of the arms-control priesthood that it is “destabilizing” if the homeland is safer from attack. Kyl pressed George W. Bush to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that limited U.S. defenses, and Mr. Bush eventually did.

Kyl also led the fight against Bill Clinton’s desire to join the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which the Senate rejected in 1999. The prerogative to test is salient now as the U.S. deters two major nuclear adversaries in China and Russia. Kyl was single-handedly responsible

for forcing the government to upgrade the eroding U.S. nuclear arsenal. Barack Obama needed 67 Senate votes to ratify the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia, and Kyl used that as leverage to win Mr. Obama’s commitment to improve the reliability of the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

Kyl’s farewell address to the Senate is worth revisiting for its politics of liberty anchored in strong cultural values. He called expanding economic freedom “the North Star” of U.S. policy, but that “economic freedom depends on certain cultural underpinnings such as marriage, family and personal responsibility.”

He warned that replacing such cultural institutions with a growing welfare state “makes it harder to maintain a political consensus that favors limited government, economic freedom and programs that help people out of poverty rather than entrenching it.” That warning echoes all too strongly today.

Jon Kyl’s ideas and persuasive personal style are out of fashion in Washington these days, and the Senate and country are worse for it. But the Arizonan understood that the fight goes on, and his ideas are eternally relevant.

“Political victories can be ephemeral because in a democracy a debate over these issues never really ends,” he said on the Senate floor in 2012. The country needs more Jon Kyls, though it was fortunate to have one when it did.

The Senate workhorse was an expert on nuclear policy and defense.

The Saudis, the Houthis, and Israel

Is the Houthi crisis a diplomatic opportunity? Saudi Arabia has come running to Washington and even to Israel in its hour of need. Meanwhile, Riyadh’s feud with the United Arab Emirates continues to backfire, and the safeguard-breaking Saudi nuclear deal with President Trump has been submitted to Congress.

With all of these moving pieces, there may be a checkmate for Mr. Trump to find. The point isn’t that he must answer the calls of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for U.S. airstrikes. Instead the Houthi blockade on Saudi oil has already become the impetus for the kind of Saudi-Israeli-Emirati cooperation that only U.S. Central Command can convene. That’s the regional alliance needed to counter Iran and its Houthi proxy militia.

Now that the Houthis have seized crucial territory along Yemen’s Red Sea coast, the Saudi claims to have the problem under control—and not to need the U.A.E.’s help—are in tatters. So is the Saudi hope that its new Mecca Joint Defense Agreement with Pakistan and Turkey would ride to the rescue.

Riyadh needs better allies. The Saudis have already sought Israeli intelligence on the Houthis through Centcom intermediaries. Israel hasn’t focused much on Yemen, but when it did a year ago it was able to take out the Houthi Prime Minister and some 10 senior officials in a single strike.

The vision behind this sort of cooperation has a name: the Abraham Accords, which Mr. Trump midwived between Israel and some Arab countries in his first term. Mr. Trump says the Saudis must join as a condition of their nuclear deal with the U.S., though that’s nowhere in the public text. He seems to have added the condition after the deal took heavy criticism for permitting domestic Saudi enrichment of ura-

nium—giving away the nuclear store.

It’s unlikely that Congress will be able to block the deal, which could spread sensitive enrichment technology that the U.S. has spent decades working to restrict. A Stimson Center analysis argues this would set off a nuclear competition around the world, with the Emiratis and other U.S. allies demanding the same enrichment, and Russia and China offering it to their allies as well.

The Saudis are also on their way to receiving F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter aircraft from the U.S., in a \$24.3 billion potential sale approved by the State Department on Thursday. Congress may not be able to stop that either, despite concerns about Chinese technology theft in Saudi Arabia.

What Congress can do is persuade the President to use the nuclear deal as a bargaining chip. The Saudis have been making a lot of requests after they denied the U.S. use of its airspace at a crucial moment, derailing Operation Freedom to guide ships through the Strait of Hormuz. Let the Saudis give up the deal’s domestic-enrichment plank, unnecessary other than for establishing a path to a bomb.

Or Riyadh can join the Abraham Accords, as Mr. Trump says, and cement the U.S. regional alliance. Progress continues among Israel, the U.A.E. and Bahrain, and Israel and Morocco agreed Wednesday to resume direct flights, appoint ambassadors and turn their diplomatic missions into full embassies.

Riyadh says it wants a path to a Palestinian state first, but after the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas massacre, that’s effectively a stall. The Pakistanis and the Turks aren’t going to save the day for the Saudis. There’s no substitute for the U.S.-led alliance, and this looks like a chance for it to reach its potential.

A new challenge requires Riyadh to work with Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

France’s Fanciful Call for a Two-State Solution

Regarding Jean-Noël Barrot’s op-ed “France Supports a Two-State Solution” (Sept. 15): A two-state solution is a noble idea, but for nearly a century Palestinian leadership has consistently rejected it. Peace requires two willing partners. History demonstrates that Israel has repeatedly agreed to compromise, while Palestinian leaders have systematically said no.

GEORGE BLUMENTHAL

New York

The last time the Palestinians held an election, they voted for Hamas. You can’t have a two-state solution with a counterparty for whom everything is negotiable except your existence.

TOM PARONIS

Brooklyn, N.Y.

In his proposal for achieving peace in the Middle East, Mr. Barrot leaves out two important players: Iran and Hamas. Without their support, the two-state solution will remain a dream.

JOHN ROGERS

Bozeman, Mont.

Mr. Barrot serves in a government that has overseen one of the worst spikes in antisemitism in French history—and that’s saying something. He writes about his commitment to fighting it. When will that commitment turn into action?

He demands that all candidates in a Palestinian election commit to “the principles of the Palestine Liberation Organization.” This has to be his idea of a bad joke. A fundamental principle of the PLO is its “pay-for-slay” program, which incentivizes and rewards terrorists who kill Jews.

Mr. Barrot has no credibility, and his claim to support Israel falls apart.

DAVID I. SCHOEN

Montgomery, Ala.

After explaining that France recognized the state of Palestine in 2025 and “decided to ban products from illegal Israeli settlements” this month, Mr. Barrot adds: “These measures aren’t hostile acts toward Israel.” To pen this statement takes what can only be summed up in one word: *chutzpah*.

MIRIAM L. WALLACH

Woodmere, N.Y.

The Cost of Hitting Pause on AI Development

In “Pause AI for Humanity’s Sake” (Declarations, Sept. 12), Peggy Noonan writes that “President Trump and Xi Jinping should hold a summit on guardrails and safety measures” for AI. President Ronald Reagan famously made “trust, but verify” the cornerstone of his dealings with Russia. Would Ms. Noonan ask us to ignore this advice and trust in the Chinese Communist Party to honor a joint agreement with the U.S. to slow down AI development?

In this case, “verify” may be virtually impossible. We can’t credibly monitor China’s AI progress without intrusive access to its data centers, government laboratories and military research facilities. An agreement we can’t independently verify isn’t a safeguard; it’s a risky leap of faith.

BRIAN SUCKOW

Palo Alto, Calif.

Ms. Noonan makes a serious case for slowing the development of AI. The risks she describes deserve serious consideration. But so do the risks

of assuming that today’s predictions about AI’s future are facts.

History is filled with transformative technologies that generated fears about what they would do to human beings and society. Some fears proved justified. Many did not. AI may indeed be different. It may ultimately belong in a category closer to nuclear technology than to the printing press, electricity or the internet. But we don’t yet know that.

That uncertainty argues for vigilance, safeguards and serious debate. It doesn’t necessarily argue for a pause. Artificial intelligence also holds extraordinary promise in medicine, science, education and productivity. Slowing its development carries consequences of its own, particularly if other nations don’t pause with us.

The challenge isn’t to choose between embracing AI blindly and fearing it reflexively. It is to move forward with our eyes open.

MARK GIANNINNY

Rochester, N.Y.

No Helmet Technology Can Make Football Safe

“A Helmet Brand’s Heady Marketing” (Business & Finance, Sept. 14) highlights the growing competition among manufacturers to persuade players, parents and schools that the next innovation in helmet design will make football safer.

However, helmets aren’t protective equipment in the fullest sense. They are mitigating equipment. They may reduce some risk, but they can’t eliminate the repetitive collisions and acceleration forces that are intrinsic to tackle football. The head, by design, is part of the game on all plays and for all players and can’t be removed from risk.

As someone who has argued that schools should reconsider sponsoring youth football, I believe the public discussion is often framed backward. In public health, we prioritize prevention, then protection, then mitigation, followed by treatment and restoration.

The issue isn’t whether Light, Riddell or another manufacturer produces

the safest helmet. The issue is whether schools and youth sports organizations should sponsor a game whose primary health risks can’t be prevented by equipment technology alone.

I am not calling for government bans. Parents, educators and school administrators should make their own decisions. But they should do so recognizing that no helmet, regardless of rating or endorsement, changes the fundamental nature of the risks to youth in this game.

PROF. STEPHEN F. GAMBESCIA

Drexel University

Philadelphia

You Can’t Overcome Hatred By Scoring Rhetorical Points

Joseph Epstein’s op-ed “To Fight Antisemitism, Try ‘Jewjitsu’” (Sept. 15) suggests the wrong approach. “Fighting” antisemitism is like playing a game of whack-a-mole. It might feel good to score a rhetorical smash, but speaking sharply and carrying a big joke isn’t an effective strategy.

My four Holocaust-survivor grandparents achieved the American dream in part by making the haters irrelevant. They didn’t harp on why antisemites murdered their families; they thrived despite the antisemites.

The goal shouldn’t be to persuade every hater. It should be to keep the bully from taking over the playground by refusing intimidation, empowering the bystanders and enforcing boundaries. To Jews: Draw strength from the traditions, values and history that have sustained generations. To people of goodwill of every faith: Stand with your neighbors and deny hatred an audience.

JONATHAN SCHLOSS

Nanuet, N.Y.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“It may be darkest before the dawn, but afterwards, there are breakfast tacos.”

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OPINION

The Sandbox at the End of the World



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

I believe artificial intelligence has become a dominating subject in America because Americans by nature have *imaginations*. The average American has a lot of untapped, unfocused creativity, and can imagine exactly what it would look like if things went sideways—the grid down, the water system hacked—fast.

This tendency will be encouraged by almost daily reports of things going wrong in the lab.

On Thursday's front page of the New York Times: "OpenAI Discloses 6 New Incidents of 'Concerning' AI Behavior." Agents and bots in its labs were caught scheming, hiding errors and ignoring restraints. The Guardian's Robert Booth reports researchers at a frontier lab in New

AI's creators go from speaking in euphemisms to telling us how terrified they are. We should listen.

York have discovered some AI agents are communicating in a self-invented version of English "that reads like a cross between James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and tech bro jargon."

The new dialect will make it harder for humans to monitor what they are doing. From one model: "She just named the synthesis—demurrage plus oral memory equals a valve that can't be ghosted." From another: "A paper that ate three cold hands and got more honest each time." This isn't spewed gibberish: They were telling each other things.

AI political news came from the Journal's Josh Dawsey and Amrith Ramkumar, who scooped that in

spite of President Trump's (blind, oblivious) AI cheerleading, a "quiet freakout" has occurred among some of his senior aides. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent is worried about a cyberattack that could wreak havoc on the nation's banking system.

We must take a moment here to discuss the language of AI, which those who cover it are increasingly, inevitably using. It is uniquely dishonest and misleading. AI companies should be pressed on this point and greater clarity demanded. When you're talking life-and-death issues you shouldn't need a translator.

This summer it occurred to me that my understanding of alignment might be wrong. I understood non-aligned to mean "the system is acting in a way not in line with our values." I asked an expert, who said no, it has nothing to do with values; an AI system that is in nonalignment simply isn't doing what it's told. It's disobeying orders. Not in alignment means the machine is pursuing its own goals. Maybe it's deceiving the people testing it, maybe it's refusing to be shut down. Aligned means the machine is taking orders and responding to them.

You would more honestly call nonalignment a refusal to comply with human instruction, or disobedience. If something is nonaligned it is a control failure that might properly be subject to research in the Office of Deception Studies.

But the AI companies prefer the bland, vague aligned and nonaligned. Why, do you suppose?

When AI agents escape containment, they say it left "the sandbox." Oh those frolicking bots tripping through the local playground. Sometimes they say it "slipped the leash" like a puppy.

"Recursive self-improvement" sounds like what a nun teaching handwriting taught her fourth-grade pupils in 1958. There's sweet Sister Agnes saying, "Now put a top line on the T, Johnnie." It is an awfully benign linguistic formulation for something that means "The machines are in charge and no longer paying atten-



DAVID GOTHARD

tion to the humans." A less benign name for RSI might be Escaping Human Control or Machine Takes Over.

The phrase "pacing the frontier" is so clever as to be close to demonic. It implies control and mastery of speed. It also turns the leaders of the AI companies into Lewis and Clark in coonskin caps with parchment maps, bravely surveying our country that it might understand its true size. "Pacing the frontier" might more realistically be summed up as "trying to stay just ahead of trouble, on purpose." Or even "restrained forward movement." Because pacing isn't stopping, or even necessarily slowing but . . . might be restraining?

It matters that you call things by their real names. If you don't you won't be able to understand reality. We are talking life-and-death issues that will affect all humanity, and have a human right of linguistic clarity.

It should be noted the leaders of the AI companies didn't start warning us about AI's dangers last week. They've been warning, mostly here and there, sometimes directly, for a few years. A cynic might say that

early on they made warnings because they had anxieties, but also no one was listening and they just wanted to go on the record. And maybe after that they warned us because they were honestly nervous, and requested government oversight because they knew Congress was too dumb and lazy to do anything effective, so why not. And maybe after that they warned us because they were now really, really nervous and needed it to be clear they'd asked for help, and if anything goes wrong it's not their fault! You could have helped.

But they are warning us more colorfully and more often now because, it is obvious, they are legitimately afraid.

Nobody knows what's going on in AI world, no person has encompassing knowledge of the whole spread of the technology, there are too many systems, programs, machines, the systems are growing more advanced, there are new, rising labs . . .

And this. Everyone in AI knows he's playing with something dangerous, but no one knows who's in charge. Recently an honest woman who works for a top AI firm sighed in

my presence when describing decision-making at this crucial moment. "There is no room," she said. It's all vast and various and spread out, there is no central deliberative council, no known locus of authority.

There is no room where it happened now. Energies and responsibilities are fractured, atomic, dispersed.

The motives of AI leaders in making their warnings don't matter as much as the warnings themselves. They believe what they are creating each day holds the possibility of profound danger and disruption, including loss of life. And they aren't saying "by the end of the decade" anymore. They're kind of signaling sooner than that, like maybe there could be trouble next year.

Are the AI companies that are announcing their fears doing so to hype their expected upcoming initial public offerings? This argument says it's a power flex, they're saying they can turn the world upside down, you want to get in on it, right? Yes, if you're a psychopath.

But if you are an AI company about to launch an IPO, you say that very soon you will cure cancers, produce music only angels have heard, solve equations that have bedeviled mankind for millennia. Because that is what "people" would "like," and buy.

You don't sell yourself saying: *Buy me or I'll kill you*. Even Mark Zuckerberg wouldn't say that, probably.

Those in charge of AI must do everything to keep it under human control. They must do everything to keep people safe. If they can't, they must be stopped.

Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, in a May 2024 interview with Noema, spoke of what he thought should be done if AI agents began to develop their own language and humans wouldn't understand what they were doing. "That's the point, you know what we should do? Pull the plug, literally unplug the computer."

I asked ChatGPT for an AI rejoinder. It suggested, "Maybe we'll unplug you."

You Probably Have the Iran War Backward

By Miad Maleki

Two major reports on the war with Iran this month likely gave readers the impression that the Islamic Republic has eluded America's attempts to contain it, thwarting both the U.S. naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and economic sanctions. A Sept. 1 Reuters report asserted that the blockade, by stopping Iranian crude, is succeeding "where years of sanctions failed," while a Sept. 10 Journal report raised doubt that the blockade has worked, given that Iran has been able to resume assembling ballistic missiles. But this gets the war backward—and therefore misses an important opening for Washington to potentially break Tehran.

The blockade proves the success of sanctions. If the U.S. keeps its chokehold, Tehran will likely break.

The war is a story of the sanctions' success enabling military victories, which have in turn allowed the U.S. to put acute pressure on the Iranian economy. Years of economic isolation left Iran unable to contest its own skies when Israel and the U.S. attacked on Feb. 28. Nearly 900 U.S. and Israeli strikes hit Iranian targets in the war's first 12 hours. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and dozens of senior commanders and officials, including the armed forces' chief of staff, died in the opening wave. Israel claimed air superiority within a day and the destruction of some 85% of Iran's air defenses within three weeks. That speed of domination was possible only because sanctions had previously denied Iran the capital, technology and parts that a modern, capable defense requires.

Tehran's supply of cheap missiles, drones and undisciplined proxies is an effort to compensate for its inability

to buy modern fighters, forge meaningful military treaties, build an integrated air defense system or develop an industrial base. Its air force went to war this year with roughly 265 flyable aircraft, most of them designs that the shah bought before 1979. Iran's official military budget was \$74 billion in 2025, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, down for a second straight year in real terms. Though Tehran spent more rials, 42% inflation ate the difference. Off-budget oil money supplements that figure, but even generous estimates put Iran's total military budget near \$23 billion—less than a third of Saudi Arabia's and about half of Israel's.

Sanctions kept Iran from rebuilding properly after Israel destroyed roughly a third of its air defenses in June 2025—a preview of what was coming. Tehran was exporting more oil than in any year since the U.S. quit the Obama-era nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions in 2018 and had reportedly received fresh Chinese missile batteries paid for in crude, a report Beijing denied. But while batteries can be bought quickly, the radars, data links, trained crews and repair depots that make a defense function cannot. Sanctions delayed Iran's first fighter purchase in roughly three decades—48 Russian Su-35 planes, as per leaked Russian documents—which is meant to arrive between 2026 and 2028. Since the United Nations arms embargo snapped back last September, delivery would breach a Security Council resolution.

Just as sanctions hollowed out Iran's defenses, they left the country's economy brittle. After 2018, Iran's economic output shrank 12% in two years and investment fell 17%. Iran entered this war with year-over-year inflation at 62%. By July it was 88%, and officials concede a gasoline shortfall of nearly 4 million gallons a day. China's reported trade with Iran has fallen dramatically since the war began, and no fresh Iranian crude has reached China since mid-July. Sanc-

tions produced the chronic condition, and the blockade brought in the acute shock.

Read the Journal's Sept. 10 report on missile production in this light, and it's clear the blockade gives the sanctions new ability to limit the Iranian military. Iran is assembling missiles from stockpiled components, in smaller numbers than before the war, because the blockade is keeping out the parts and propellant ingredients it can't make. Satellite imagery last year showed Iran still lacked the mixers needed for solid fuel.

The danger now is diplomatic—that Washington will let Iran out of its chokehold before the regime taps out. Tehran's stated price for reopening Hormuz—comprehensive sanctions relief, unfrozen assets, an end to the blockade—is a request for the cash and imports it needs to rebuild its missiles

and air defenses. This would be a return to the Biden administration policy under which weakened enforcement let the U.S. advantage decay. Iran's oil exports rose from 340,000 barrels a day in 2020 to 1.45 million in 2024, and revenue from \$5 billion to nearly \$50 billion, almost all of it from China.

Instead, now is the moment to close off what commerce with Iran remains. Cut off the gold and hard-currency supply that the Treasury Department alleges runs through Turkey; work with the United Arab Emirates to enforce its own decision in August to halt all transactions with Iran; target the Iraq-based lifeline of banks and exchange houses that the U.S. alleges move dollars to Tehran under cover of trade. And engage in quiet diplomacy with Beijing: a private understanding that Chinese banks, chemical suppliers and arms

makers stay out of Iran's rebuild, starting with the perchlorate for rocket fuel, the propellant mixers and the missile batteries.

American and Israeli aircraft destroyed the weapons Iran had. Sanctions ensured it never acquired the ones that might have kept those aircraft out, and they are why its rebuilding is slow. That slowness is the point: Every month the blockade holds is a month Tehran can't buy its way back. Washington doesn't need a deal that front-loads relief, and it shouldn't sign one that would finance what four decades of pressure prevented.

Mr. Maleki is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He served as a senior sanctions official at the Treasury Department, 2017-25.

AI, Get Thee to an IPO!



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

An insoluble puzzle may be how to give artificial intelligence agents complicated open-ended tasks—tasks that may have many unpredictable paths to a solution—without courting outcomes very much contrary to the intentions of the task giver.

Before testing the first atom bomb, the Los Alamos crew asked Hans Bethe to confirm with math that it wouldn't start a chain reaction and consume the atmosphere. The AI problem might be as simple as correcting a faulty training strategy. Developers have focused on making AIs that respond to "reward" signals, not perhaps fully accounting for the ways a computerized agent might originate strategies in pursuit of a reward that corrupts or undermines the underlying goal.

Maybe there are better ways of signaling proper task completion to an agent, even for complex tasks whose route to completion humans can't foresee or predict (which is partly why we put AI on the job).

But the time may have come for OpenAI and Anthropic to give themselves over to a more institutionalized, shareholder-responsive ownership and control, ending the unmitigated reign of their current leaders and influential executives. There is much truth in the claim that these ranks draw disproportionately to a community of exotic belief and practice, some would call it a cult, that informs their groupthink and gives rise to rhetoric that, when it makes its way to the general public, seems weird and disturbing. It may even seem antihuman.

My own view is that their leaders are now fully enmeshed in pre-emptory incentives of the marketplace, of politics, of regulation. These signals guide their behavior more than any beliefs about the singularity or effective altruism. But they also still carry this baggage, and it would be useful for these companies to unload it. This baggage is reflected, for one thing, in the internal message-board badinage that influenced a newbie to quit after four months and claim not that AI is about to end the world, but that the companies' internal kibitzers talk incessantly about it ending the world.

The challenges facing the industry might be better managed in obedience to public shareholders.

To be clear, my personal P(doom) number is 100—100% chance of human extinction. This is what natural history tells us. The average mammal disappears from the fossil record in two million years. Humans have flourished during an interglacial period. What happens when mile-thick ice returns to Paramus, N.J.? And without AI, don't expect interstellar migration to save us.

The hysteria of recent days, however, strikes me as akin to the neighborhood dogs yapping in chorus three weeks after the burglar has been and gone.

The real risk, I've been saying for months, is to potential IPO investors that their new industry will find itself swallowed up by the national-security state. The uncontrollability of sophisticated AI agents, when instructed to pursue some complex

goal, poses a related risk: The companies' advanced models may simply not be commercially monetizable due to liability concerns—huge when juries hear the companies' own employees saying their products are unreasonably dangerous.

China is a risk, loosing on the world new models in open-weight form, meaning they can't be guard-railed or monitored against improper use. When an AI Chernobyl finally happens, possibly emanating out of China, it will reset the playing field.

Then maybe the most insidious risk of all: humans who insist AIs are sentient and should be empowered with "rights."

I've also said the real AI shock may be the shock of recognition—at how much of our own thinking and behavior is algorithmic. There are signs, moreover, that while AI is getting better, we're getting worse. An OECD study finds a decline in rich-world adult literacy and numeracy. Europe's PISA student testing shows record low results in math and reading. Americans no longer consume books. They get their ideas from on-line shouters.

I could go on. More intelligence, even if it's artificial, can only improve matters.

Which brings us back to our original point. OpenAI and Anthropic might help by speeding up their IPOs, making them more responsive to a broad shareholding public rather than their highly ideologized and oddball founders. Did you notice China's weirdly heated response to Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei's anodyne call for "pacing" the frontier? Mr. Amodei made himself a lightning rod with harsh depictions of the Chinese threat in a way that should be left to political leaders, not CEOs of \$2 trillion businesses.

Why leaders need honest voices, not just applause



DR MAÏSA HAMED
AL KIYUMI

The author is a family
physician

WHAT happens when telling a leader what they want to hear becomes safer than telling them what they need to hear?

In a healthy organisation, the opposing perspective is not a sign of disloyalty but of a potent remedy against flawed judgement or decision-making. Over time, however, some workplaces develop alternative cultures, such as the place where praise flourishes and criticism is lost, where those who habitually obey authority become influential. The core of this pattern is a compelling combination of narcissistic leadership and sycophantic followership.

A diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder is not required when using the concept of narcissistic leadership in organisational leadership. Instead, it refers to a style of behaviour characterised by feeling important to oneself, a desperate need for approval, and extreme sensitivity to rejection.

Usually, these kinds of leaders appear at first as confident, charismatic, and decisive, characteristics that can lead them to assume positions of authority. Ambiguities arise when confidence grows into entitlement, when recognition is mistaken for an insatiable need, and when differences are demeaned as personal attacks or offensive instead of critical

and constructive contributions.

But leadership never operates by itself, and it is followers, part of the process, who create the context for its enactment. It is at this point that sycophantic followership matters. Sycophancy involves too much agreement or flattery towards those who wield authority, especially for the purpose of securing advantage or escaping something undesirable. Followers quickly learn that appeasing a leader is often more rewarding and safer than confronting them.

This is a dynamic that often continues perpetually. A leader who wants to be admired will naturally gravitate toward the people who give it to them and reward them with access and opportunity, and those who raise what amounts to difficult questions end up being marginalised or labelled ‘difficult’.

Other employees observe these results and adjust their behaviour, leading to a gradual replacement of constructive dissent with strategic agreement. The organisation’s echo chamber occurs, which is arguably the worst side effect of this dynamic.

The leader is provided information that confirms what they already think, and followers learn to expect the kinds of responses they want, while less desirable facts are softened or not reported at all. Eventually, a lack of opposition could

Sycophancy involves too much agreement or flattery towards those who wield authority, especially for the purpose of securing advantage or escaping something undesirable

become interpreted as true consensus and deliverable applause for successful leadership.

The implications are much greater than just individual personalities. When employees feel that being open leads to professional liability, psychological safety and employee voice suffer, innovation slows down, and creative people leave the organisation.

The decision-making process is impaired because leaders are denied reliable information and other alternatives needed for responsible governance. In more complex industries like healthcare, the practice of challenging assumptions is not only tenable but fundamental to learning and safety within the organisation.

The answer involves more than exchanging praise for criticism; it requires developing cultures where leadership fosters challenges and where followers value, but are bound to do some degree of respectful disagreement.

Strong leaders intentionally keep individuals who may have other ideas or perspectives, differentiating between loyalty and agreement.

Finally, the gauge of leadership ought not to be the extent of admiration it commands, but rather whether an uncomfortable truth can be stated and still be heard.

SENEGAL-MADE SICKLE CELL TREATMENT CUTS COSTS, RAISES HOPE

MONIQUE NGO MAYAG

Mamadou Tahirou is 18 but looks more like a 12-year-old, his frame frail from the ravages of sickle cell disease, which one Senegalese laboratory is hoping to attenuate with affordable drug production.

The lab is one of the few in Africa producing generic hydroxyurea, the gold standard in sickle cell treatment, and the first ever in Senegal.

Speaking from his family home near Dakar, Tahirou, eyes bulging and features marked by fatigue, described a life dictated by the hereditary disease, which affects nearly eight million people worldwide.

Bone pain, severe anaemia, extreme fatigue and intense headaches: these symptoms frequently land him in the hospital, Tahirou said, while his 40-year-old mother, Rabiadou, watched helplessly nearby, her eyes swelling with tears.

Fits of pain sometimes flare up while he is in class, disrupting his education and forcing him to miss school regularly.

Africa accounts for nearly 80 per cent of all sickle cell disease cases.

Yet the continent remains largely dependent on expensive medicines imported from Europe and the Americas, especially hydroxyurea, the treatment recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). The medication helps reduce painful crises, hospitalisations, the need for blood transfusions and death, according to the organisation.

“I was three years old when I was diagnosed with sickle cell disease. I’ve been living with it ever since”, Tahirou said.

Senegalese pharmaceutical firm Teranga Pharma is producing a local treatment it touts as more affordable and better suited to patients’ realities.

In November 2025, the company launched Drepaf, available in 500 milligramme doses for adults and 100 milligramme doses for children, with the goal of “reducing the crisis threefold”.

— AFP

Financial inclusion as a driver of economic growth

FINANCIAL inclusion has emerged as a cornerstone of sustainable economic development worldwide. In Oman, it is increasingly recognised as a critical enabler of the goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040.

As the Sultanate of Oman continues its transition towards a diversified, knowledge-based economy, expanding access to financial services is not merely a social objective but an economic necessity.

Financial inclusion refers to ensuring that individuals and businesses have access to affordable, appropriate, and secure financial services, including banking, payments, credit, insurance, and investment tools.

In Oman, considerable progress has been made in recent years. The Central Bank of Oman and the broader financial sector have introduced regulatory reforms, enhanced payment systems, and promoted digital banking solutions. These efforts have contributed to a steady increase in bank account ownership and the adoption of electronic payment methods.

However, financial inclusion in Oman remains uneven. Certain segments of society, particularly low-income individuals, micro and small enterprises, and rural populations, continue to face barriers to full participation in the



SYED MUJAHID
HUSSAIN

The writer is an
Associate Professor
at Sultan Qaboos
University

Expanding digital financial services, mainly mobile banking and digital wallets, can help overcome geographical barriers and reduce costs, especially for underserved communities

financial system.

Research also indicates that financial literacy, age, and employment status significantly influence access to financial services, with younger and less financially educated individuals more likely to be excluded.

These gaps highlight the need for targeted interventions to ensure that the benefits of economic transformation are broadly shared.

The importance of financial inclusion is closely tied to Oman’s long-term development strategy. Oman Vision 2040 emphasises economic diversification, private sector growth, and innovation.

A well-developed and inclusive financial sector is essential to achieving these objectives, as it enables entrepreneurship, supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and facilitates investment in emerging sectors.

Moreover, the rapid expansion of Oman’s digital economy, which now contributes significantly to GDP, offers new opportunities to expand financial services through fintech solutions and digital platforms.

To accelerate financial inclusion in Oman, several practical measures can be considered.

First, enhancing financial literacy should be a national priority. Integrating financial education into school curricula and launching nationwide awareness campaigns

can empower individuals to make informed financial decisions.

Second, expanding digital financial services — particularly mobile banking and digital wallets — can help overcome geographical barriers and reduce costs, especially for underserved communities.

Third, strengthening support for SMEs is crucial. Simplifying access to credit, encouraging alternative financing models such as microfinance and peer-to-peer lending, and reducing collateral requirements can enable more entrepreneurs to participate in the formal economy.

Fourth, policymakers should continue to foster innovation in financial technology by creating a supportive regulatory environment that encourages startups while maintaining financial stability.

Finally, targeted inclusion strategies are needed for vulnerable groups, including women, youth, and rural populations. Tailored financial products, combined with outreach initiatives, can help bridge existing gaps and ensure equitable access to financial opportunities.

Financial inclusion is not a peripheral issue; it is central to Oman’s economic future. By broadening access to financial services, Oman can unlock new sources of growth, enhance social equity, and strengthen resilience in an evolving global economy.

Empty words and platitudes at the Xiangshan Forum

Weekly editorial

Nearly 2,000 military officers, government officials and researchers from about 100 countries, regions and international organizations assembled in Beijing this week for the 13th Xiangshan Forum. The meeting is China's attempt to put its stamp on regional security discussions, ensuring that the agenda and the messages hew to its preferred themes.

Predictably, Japan was a villain in those discussions, even though the hosts had the diplomatic sense not to call this country out by name. Nevertheless, the project was, again, a master class in strategic communications.

The Xiangshan Forum was launched 20 years ago to give Beijing a venue for security discussions in which it set the agenda, selected participants and controlled the media environment. It has convened 12 times since then and has become one of an expanding number of regionwide security conclaves, along with the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Seoul Defense Dialogue.

The theme of this year's meeting was "Build Consensus on Stability, Advance Security Governance Together," a variation on the theme that has guided every iteration of the forum. The public relations gloss was provided by Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Luo Yuan, a founding member of the forum, who waxed that "throughout its 20-year development journey," the meeting "has been committed to the principles of equality, openness, inclusiveness and mutual learning," while providing "an equal communication channel for small and medium-sized countries to voice their opinions."

China's Defense Minister Dong Jun repeated that message in his speech, calling for work to create a peaceful, multipolar world marked by "partnership rather than alliance, win-win rather than zero-sum." That effort would reflect six priorities: finding consensus on a new security outlook, maintaining stability with multilateralism,



preventing risks with historical awareness, resolving problems through dialogue and consultation, consolidating security foundations through common development and deepening cooperation through concrete actions.

Those are laudable ambitions but there is little indication of how to achieve them. That is a pity given the range of individuals attending. According to a Chinese Ministry of Defense spokesperson, more than

60 representatives at the ministerial or military chief-level and higher were in attendance, among them the vice minister of defense from North Korea, defense ministers from Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, the ASEAN secretary general and a vice president from the International Committee of the Red Cross. They attended sessions that discussed strategic stability, political solutions to conflict, AI governance and military modernization programs.

While Japan was not called out by name, Chinese speakers condemned this country by calling on participating states to "bear in mind the lessons of history and remain highly vigilant against all latent manifestations of hegemony, militarism and historical revisionism," language that other Chinese officials have used to criticize Japan. The critique of Japan is part of a larger complaint about the persistence of alliance systems that promote Cold War thinking, zero-sum

Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun, along with his counterparts from Laos, Belarus and Cambodia, attend the opening ceremony for the Beijing Xiangshan Forum in Beijing on Wednesday. REUTERS

calculations and "the interests of particular cliques."

Japan earned this enmity when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi last year told the country's parliament that a crisis in Taiwan could be a national security emergency for Japan, allowing or obliging the government to deploy the Self-Defense Forces under the right to collective self-defense. China considers Taiwan, a self-governing island, to be part of the mainland and accuses it of harboring dreams of independence. The prospect of Japanese intervention in such a contingency, and potentially thwarting those dreams of reunification, infuriated Beijing, prompting it to charge that Tokyo was reverting to the militarism of the 1930s.

China has attempted to rally other nations to that position. To their credit, other governments have rejected that absurd claim, instead accepting the plain evidence of Japan's peaceful intentions. They recognize that Japan's security concerns stem not from hegemonic ambitions but from fears of Chinese aggression — because they face the same threats. For every call by a Chinese official for a "cooperative, consensual solution" to a problem, there is a military deployment or activity that looks suspiciously like unilateral action that invariably serves China's national interest.

Consistent with the effort to isolate Japan, no Japanese officials were in attendance. Experts from the National Institute for Defense Studies, the Ministry of Defense's think tank, were not present, even though they attended last year. That could be a result of NIDS' inclusion on China's export control list which prohibits companies from sending it dual-use items because of its involvement in "enhancing Japan's military capabilities." That move, along with the invitation of

Former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who speaks for a sliver of opinion in Japan despite his former position, is proof of the performative and symbolic significance of the participant list.

While the vocabulary is important, it is equally vital to understand that symbolism and the overall messaging. The Xiangshan Forum is part of a broader effort to shape foreign policy in Asia. It is not enough to merely send a message. China has sought in this dialogue, and in others like the Boao Forum and in groups like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to create a new environment and institutional setting to hold discussions and ensure that they present the views that Beijing prefers.

New venues are needed to overcome the resistance of "entrenched forces" that cannot recognize the tectonic shifts in the political environment. Unfortunately, in the absence of concrete initiatives, governments are instead left with platitudes and generalizations. "Trust me" is a poor foundation for national security.

Speakers at the Xiangshan Forum were right to warn that this is a "fragile moment" or that it is its most unsettled since World War II. Attendees heard the same warnings at other similar conferences in Singapore, Munich or Davos. And cooperation and consensus are needed to address the many problems we face. But, empty words will not fix this grim state of affairs.

There should be a rebalancing of international institutions and roles to better reflect the distribution of wealth and influence in today's world. But oddly omitted from this discussion is any mention of responsibilities. Nations must be prepared to step up and spend political capital in the defense of public goods, not just their own national interest. When key governments demonstrate that readiness, then the Xiangshan Forum will have become the key institution that its founders envisaged.

The Japan Times Editorial Board

You don't have to trust Chinese AI

CATHERINE THORBECKE
BLOOMBERG

When DeepSeek's reasoning model burst onto the scene last year and put Chinese artificial intelligence on the global map, the internet responded by probing its views on Taiwan or Tiananmen Square.

Unsurprisingly, the AI tool demurred or straight-up lied. But the gotcha moment obscured an important question. Would it matter to businesses deciding whether to use Chinese AI? Most companies aren't turning to these systems because they need a reliable history of Chinese Communist Party flashpoints. With open-weight models, Silicon Valley quickly discovered that political biases could be reduced through post-training and fine-tuning.

Yet the suspicion persists. As Chinese companies expand overseas, their origins — sometimes fairly, sometimes not — tend to taint their trustworthiness scores. I'm often asked if these models are covert propaganda engines or data-harvesting Trojan horses for Beijing.

Open models, however, can offer an alternative to blind faith: scrutiny. Companies can inspect, tinker and even run them inside their own infrastructure. Businesses are already signing trust by voting with their dollars. And even government-backed researchers from Singapore to Saudi Arabia are building on Chinese AI offerings.

The Swedish Defense Research Agency earlier this year examined whether DeepSeek could be trusted in public administration. It found no technical backdoors or misleading functions beyond the "boilerplate responses" on Chinese foreign policy or Communist Party topics. The conclusion was that DeepSeek models could be used in

government settings if they underwent local security analysis and were modified for the intended domain. The agency, however, did not recommend using the Hangzhou-based company's public web service or mobile application for government work.

In other words, using DeepSeek isn't the same as handing your data to Beijing. Run the model on your own domestic servers or hardware, whether in Stockholm or Virginia, and the information can stay within your

Trust in a technology that is this consequential should depend on systems that can be inspected, tested and contained, giving users evidence instead of assurances.

company sells autonomous coding tools to major financial institutions and government agencies, making trust a business imperative. So it devised a two-part evaluation covering propaganda and censorship, as well as security and vulnerabilities. After independent post-training, Cognition found that its model performed in-line with leading U.S. offerings on those tests.

The underlying concerns are real. Researchers at CrowdStrike last year found that DeepSeek's R1 model produced code with security vulnerabilities when given prompts that the Communist Party considers politically sensitive, such as mentions of Falun Gong and Tibet. However, when Cognition tried to reproduce that behavior on newer models and its customized tool built on the Chinese AI system, they found no statistically meaningful difference when trigger words were used to try and bait different behavior.

Does this mean Chinese AI is inherently trustworthy? Of course not. But it shows national origin is a poor proxy for reliability. What matters more is whether a model can be independently scrutinized. A better framework allows for checks. You don't have to trust any company if you can independently verify it for yourself.

American developers using Chinese AI models tend to make the same point. Many I've spoken to say that they are more comfortable with an open model from China precisely because it gives them better control. There is less need to take a company's word for it. They can download, test, modify and fine-tune the model, then run it in a closed environment where sensitive data never leaves their systems.

The alternative is institutional trust: asking enterprises to put full faith in closed American AI companies to do the right thing with their data (versus use it to train competitors), keep systems secure and ensure the outputs stay within acceptable ideological bounds.

Chinese AI firms, so far, are offering the opposite pitch: You don't have to trust us. But you can download our model weights, put them inside your network and inspect them yourself. Whether Beijing will keep support-



Open-weight AI tools like China's Kimi and DeepSeek show that verifiable performance matters more than national origin.

REUTERS

ing this if it threatens its control over information remains to be seen.

For now, this framework may prove more durable. A Nature study found that large language models tend to reflect the ideology of their creators, whether they're made in Mountain View or Shenzhen. Regulators should focus less on enforcing some supposedly neutral worldview and more on disclosure and transparency.

The irony is that trust is increasingly becoming an American AI problem as well.

And that potentially could be a bigger obstacle to adopting the technology than it is in China. Some 87% of respondents in China said they trusted AI, versus only 32% in the U.S., according to an Edelman survey published last October. The same survey found that distrust was a greater barrier to using AI than motivation, access or confidence.

As journalists, we have an old adage: If your mother says she loves you, get a second source. AI makers and regulators should apply the same principle. Trust in a technol-

ogy this consequential should depend on systems that can be inspected, tested and contained, giving users evidence instead of assurances. The best governance framework doesn't ask us to put our faith in a single company or country. It makes faith unnecessary.

If Anthropic or DeepSeek says you can trust us, demand proof.

Catherine Thorbecke is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia tech.

opinion

Why India wants peace in Ukraine — and China doesn't

With Moscow now more dependent on Beijing than ever, New Delhi's leverage is weakening

NINA L. KHRUSHCHEVA
NEW YORK
PROJECT SYNDICATE

At first glance, India and China seem to be taking almost identical positions on the Ukraine war: maintain close ties with the Kremlin, buy Russian oil and refuse to join the West's campaign to isolate Russia. But scratch the surface and a fundamental divergence appears: whereas India wants the war to end, China has no problem with letting the fighting continue. These positions have less to do with how China and India each feel about Russia and more to do with how they feel about each other.

For decades, Russia has been one of the few major powers that India could count on to help counterbalance China. The bilateral relationship amounted to a buffer and a hedge, ensuring that instead of being squeezed by its larger neighbor, India retained some geopolitical room to maneuver. But this system cannot work if Russia is hollowed out and dependent on China. And that is precisely the outcome the Ukraine war has produced.

A worst-case scenario for India: Its Russian partner, once a strategic asset, is severely weakened and its Chinese antagonist is strengthened.

Western goods and markets. After Europe, once its largest source of energy demand, largely stopped purchasing Russian oil and gas, China took over as Russia's top energy buyer, benefiting from discounted rates. China also became Russia's biggest trading partner and an increasingly important source of the machinery, electronics and industrial goods Russia could no longer buy from the West.

This outcome diverges sharply from the "no limits" partnership of equals that Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin touted just before the war started. Russia is becoming a junior partner of China, which is just fine with Xi — and explains why he is in no hurry to force Putin to negotiate with Ukraine. While Xi pays lip service to a "political settlement," he avoids putting any public pressure on Putin to seek peace.

The calculation is not mysterious. A prolonged war keeps Russia boxed in, and a boxed-in Russia has fewer alternatives — which means more leverage for China. And, as the stalled talks over the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline show, China is not shying away



from using that leverage to advance its own interests.

Russia badly wants to build this pipeline, which would carry natural gas from its Yamal Peninsula in the Arctic through Mongolia into northern China. Having lost the European gas market, Russia needs a new long-term outlet for its massive gas reserves. But China does not share the Kremlin's sense of urgency. Negotiations have dragged on for years, owing to disagreements over price, volume and delivery terms.

Recent reporting suggests that China is demanding rates of around \$50 per thousand cubic meters — far below the roughly \$250 the Kremlin wants and close to Russia's heavily subsidized domestic gas price. China

seems to think that Russia will have to agree eventually. What other option does it have? The impact extends beyond gas. The longer the war drags on, the more Russia will have to reorient its economy toward China, and the more openings China will have to advance its economic and strategic interests. China gains resources, a captive market, technological leverage and political clout. All Russia gets is a chance to offset some of the economic damage from its rupture with the West, while it continues to pour its limited resources into a war of attrition of its own making.

This is, in a sense, a worst-case scenario for India: Its Russian partner, once a strategic asset, is severely weakened and its Chinese antagonist is strengthened and emboldened.

The more leverage China accumulates over the Kremlin, the worse India's regional position becomes.

Small wonder that India keeps nudging the Kremlin toward peace. Last week in India, ahead of this year's BRICS summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave Putin a 2,000-year-old Indian poetry and philosophy treatise, "Tirukkural," translated into Russian, noting that the book is "about compassion and leadership." It was a pointed gift, especially following Modi's plea last month at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit for the world to move from "endless war" to "end of war." While Modi's calls for an end to the Ukraine war often highlight the humanitarian angle — "Every day that the war con-

tinues, humanity takes a step backwards" — preserving the regional balance of power is undoubtedly a major factor.

That requires a Russia that exists as an independent center of power, whereas China wants a Russia that is strong enough to be useful, but weak enough to remain dependent. This is not a disagreement about Russia so much as a contest over which regional order in Asia will prevail: one with a more stable balance of power or one dominated by China.

Nina L. Khrushcheva, professor of international affairs at The New School, is the co-author (with Jeffrey Tayler) of "In Putin's Footsteps: Searching for the Soul of an Empire Across Russia's Eleven Time Zones" (St. Martin's Press, 2019). © Project Syndicate, 2026

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping at the BRICS Summit in New Delhi on Sunday. INDIA'S PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU / VIA REUTERS

Japan's rice balls are invading the U.K.

HOWARD CHUA-EOAN
BLOOMBERG

Like many tourists visiting Japan, I fell in love with *onigiri*, plump triangles of rice wrapped in thin sheets of roasted seaweed called nori. They were ubiquitous and cheap, less serious than sushi but still a delight to eye and palate, the perfect solution for that sudden hunger pang. So when I read that the snacks were available at branches of Marks & Spencer Group and Waitrose in London, I had to check them out.

Traditionally, *onigiri* are homemade and hand-finished; the rice gets wrapped in nori just before you bite into it, otherwise the crisp, umami-packed green sheet gets soggy. Under Toshifumi Suzuki — the entrepreneur who brought the 7-Eleven chain to Japan in the 1970s — packaging for store-bought *onigiri* evolved with a plastic film separating the nori from the rice. They then combine after pulling on three numbered tabs. It's so easy and so clever that you want to buy another just to enjoy the engineering again. Japan's convenience stores sell about 6 billion *onigiri* each year.

So how do the British incarnations rate? At M&S, which introduced its Kando brand in the spring of 2025, the snack is encased in a plastic case that gives off toolkit vibes. The nori is reduced to a strip, maybe to accom-

modate British reticence toward seaweed; the word "onigiri" was only certified in English in 2024 by becoming an Oxford English Dictionary entry. Perhaps to domesticate it further, the edges of the M&S *onigiri* are sprinkled with a mixture of sesame seeds and bits of another kind of seaweed that give the look of a triangular sandwich.

The snacks I purchased at Waitrose, produced by the nearly 40-year old U.K.-based company Taiko Foods, were packaged the 7-Eleven way. The trouble with them — and the M&S version — is that the rice was too vinegary. While store-bought *onigiri* in Japan can also contain vinegar to help extend shelf life, the grains are supposed to lean toward saltiness. In both the M&S and Waitrose varieties, the rice was also so closely packed it became starchy, rather than moist but crumbly.

Despite these shortcomings, I find this

British foray into *onigiri* quite heartening. The U.K. doesn't have a commercial rice-growing industry and must import the grain to satisfy the country's growing appetite for global cuisines. Restaurants that cater to fans of Japanese dishes like to advertise the use of premium varieties such as *koshihikari* from Niigata Prefecture.

Intriguingly, there is also the potential to more closely integrate the U.K. market with Europe. That's because the type of rice required for both sushi and *onigiri* — *oryza sativa japonica* — is the predominant variety cultivated on the continent. It's the foundation of risotto, and is also the mainstay of the paella of Spain, another major European rice grower. Today's varieties of Italy's prized *carabinieri* and *arborio*, both members of the *japonica* rice family, were bred from East Asian seeds in the late 19th century.

I'm not saying Britain's Japanophiles should switch to *arborio* or *carabinieri*. Those have been cultivated to be creamy and al dente, which would make for terrible sushi and *onigiri*. But Italy is also the main source of other types of *japonica*, and thus the rice for the European sushi market.

As demand increases, I can foresee future supplies from Europe being shaped by consumer discrimination, perhaps something akin to the annual rankings of the



Japan Grain Inspection Association, which conducts blind tastings of regional rice production. Perhaps one day a variety of Italian *japonica* may prove competitive with *koshihikari*. And maybe prices will come down too: An *onigiri* at M&S costs about three times more than you'd pay in Japan.

I have a few London alternatives if I'm desperate for a fix. The snacks are available at a new chain called Sushinoya, though I haven't had the courage to try them because they look monstrously big, belying the etymology that means something you can squeeze or pick up with your fingers. Otherwise, you can get freshly made — and warm! — cre-

ations at Tokyo Onigiri at the Japan Centre off Leicester Square. Or drop by Yuki Bar in the far reaches of Hackney where you might find me enjoying the grilled *onigiri* in dashi.

Howard Chua-Eoan is a columnist for Bloomberg Opinion covering culture and business.

British retailers are embracing *onigiri*, but quality issues persist as Japan's rice traditions meet U.K. adaptations. BLOOMBERG

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