

Puffery for advertisers, not achievers



ACROSS THE AISLE

BY P CHIDAMBARAM

ON AND around June 9, 2026, a full-page advertisement appeared in several English and Tamil newspapers — and presumably in all Indian newspapers — listing the achievements of the Narendra Modi government during the last 12 years.

Significant milestone

Twelve years is a significant milestone. The Modi government was elected first in 2014, re-elected in 2019, and re-elected in 2024, but with a substantially reduced number. The BJP hailed the tenure of Mr Modi as the longest of any elected Prime Minister. Quite unnecessarily, it compared his tenure with the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru. Sans comparison, a tenure of 12 years is indeed enviable. Everyone knows that Nehru was the first prime minister of independent India; he won elections in 1952, 1957 and 1962, and he was prime minister for 17 years. He served as prime minister for the longest number of years, so far.

Every government is entitled to make claims, and a little amount of puffery is tol-

erated. But the advertisements in question went beyond puffery. The people saw through Mr Modi's exaggerated claims two years ago, and limited the BJP to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, denying the party a simple majority in the House. Two years later, the same claims are being made.

Without malice

Without malice, I wish to take a sample of the claims and show you what they are:

• Government has created 3 crore lakhpati didi

Lakhpati didi, according to the government's definition, is a female member of a Self Help Group (SHG). In August 2025, it was reported that 1,48,00,000 SHG members had become lakhpati didi. In March 2026, it was said 3,07,33,820 SHG members had self-declared that they were lakhpati didi. The SHG movement, which predates the Modi government, has empowered women and given them skills to earn more, but to claim that the Modi government had created 3 crore lakhpati didi is a tall claim. I doubt if an independent audit has confirmed the claim.

Let's examine the claim closely. India's working-age population of women (aged 15 years and above) is 53 crore, and the female participation (at LFPR of 41.7 per cent) is about 22 crore — that's the number of women who are working or actively seeking work. If the claim of 3 crore lakhpati didi is accepted at face value, about one in seven women in the labour force (working or actively seeking work) is lakhpati! The SHG members (nearly all women) are estimated

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at 9-10 crore, which means that one in three members of SHGs is lakhpati!

The truth is that the claim relates not to the woman's own net worth but the woman's household's annual income. The claim conceals that other members of the household may earn incomes — the household may already have a total annual income of Rs 1 lakh, and the woman may contribute only a part. An annual household income of Rs 1 lakh is not rare or unusual. In fact, it is common in a country with a per capita annual income of Rs 2,05,324.

The claim that the government created 3 crore lakhpati didi out of SHG members is hollow.

• Government has increased number of operational airports from 74 to 164

Infrastructure is being built every year, and that includes airports that are AAI-owned based on the PPP model and private airports. The number 164 is correct, but the key word is operational. The common citizen would believe that an operational airport has regular scheduled commercial passenger flights. In that view, the government's claim is not true. Airports include airports that are defence-related, cargo and training, but they offer no regular commercial passenger flights.

Under the UDAN scheme, several small airports were operationalised, and passenger services were commenced; 774 routes were offered to airlines, but according to the C&AG, no commercial services were started on 403 routes. The C&AG also concluded that only 112 routes were operated during the three-year subsidy period, and once the subsidy ended, only 54 routes survived. In 2025, the govern-

ment admitted that 15 UDAN airports became non-operational.

Industry estimates put the number of operational airports at 120.

• Government has opened 19000+ Jan Aushadhi stores

The Jan Aushadhi stores programme was started in 2008 but failed in 2013. After declaring that 'government has no business to be in business', the Modi government revamped and re-launched the programme in 2015 on a franchise model in order to provide quality medicines at affordable prices. Quality of medicines is regulated by the Drugs Controller General of India (DGCI) and the State Drug Control Authorities. Prices of essential medicines are regulated by the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA). Displaying MRP on every package is mandatory under the Legal Metrology Rules.

There are lakhs of private retail pharmacies owned and run by small businesspersons. Pharmacy chains by big businesses have also entered the market with a retail-cum-delivery model. As per industry estimates, the retail pharmacy business had a turnover of Rs 2,25,000 crore in 2024-25. Jan Aushadhi pharmacies' combined sales turnover in 2024-25 was Rs 2,022 crore at MRP value — less than 1 per cent share of the market. We don't know whether the government bears a loss every year. If the quality and prices are not satisfactory, that is a failure of the two regulators.

The government's programmes are moderately successful. Truthful disclosure will enhance credibility. Puffery will not.

Congress needs renewal. Not a cult leader



FIFTH COLUMN

BY TAVLEEN SINGH

ON THE eve of Rahul Gandhi's birthday last week, I incurred the rage of his social media fan club. And for the oddest reason. It impressed me that the Leader of the Opposition made the effort to go to Kota and address a huge rally of students about the needless difficulties they have faced with paper leaks and an education system so lousy that coaching centres have replaced colleges. So, when a clip of him standing before a vast cheering crowd popped up, I paid attention and was surprised that his speech was in English.

So on 'X', I said that it would have been better if he had spoken in Hindi without expecting that the social media public square would explode. My post was viewed by nearly half a million people, liked by nearly a thousand and retweeted a lot. But, along with this came the fury of his fan club. I was accused of nurturing a special hatred for the Dynasty and of being a 'bootlicking' Modi bhakt. Let me get denials and disclaimers out of the way.

I have no 'hatred' for the Dynasty, but believe that by putting the interests of her children above the interests of Congress, Sonia Gandhi has ruined the only political party that can take on the BJP juggernaut. As for being a Modi 'bhakt', I have not been one for years. For the record, I find Modi and Yogi's endless promotion of themselves on news channels embarrassing. Not just for them but for India. Their habit of singing their own praise is reminiscent of the North Korea model of governance.

It is my sincere hope that the Congress Party finds ways to strengthen its roots enough to put up a real fight in Uttar Pradesh next year and in the general election in 2029. For this to happen, Rahul Gandhi needs to stop imitating the worst traits of the BJP and copy the best ones. The worst traits include deploying venomous, vicious trolls on social media and creating a cult around the 'dear Leader.' Judging from two things I noticed on Rahul's birthday, it is evident that emulation of BJP worst practices has already happened. Rahul was depicted as Parshuram in a Bollywood style poster on his birthday, and sent a greeting card of nauseating sycophancy by the Karnataka Congress Party.

This greeting card had a picture of him from his more youthful days that said, 'Happy birthday to Heart of People Shri RAHUL GANDHI JI'. Wait, it gets worse. In a vertical spelling of his name alongside the smiling, youthful face was his name spelt in capital letters under a golden crown. 'Robust, affectionate, heartfelt, unparalleled leader' were the words they spelt vertically with the letters of his name. At the top of this greeting card were pictures of his Mummy and sister, and below were mugshots of Karnataka's senior leaders.

If the Congress Party has lost election after election after election in the past twelve years, it is because too much time has been spent burnishing the image of the 'dear leader' and not enough spent on building the party. There are millions of Indian voters who are tired of the Modi cult and would happily vote for the Congress Party if it revived. Revival must begin at the grassroots, and that is the hard work that has not been done. This is work that the BJP does on a constant basis, and this is why it is such a formidable electoral machine. The BJP also has a leader who works all the time. His dedication to working for 'my family of 140 crore people' is total and remarkable.

The Leader of the Opposition, for his part, raises important issues and then buzzes off on holiday and reappears with a new issue to latch onto. NEET should have been raised long before the Cockroach Janata Party turned it into its defining cause. Education is the most important economic reform that Modi has neglected to make, and he seems never to have noticed that one of the things that deters foreigners from investing in India is the horrific state of our cities. These are both issues that the Congress Party can make its own.

Of late, I am forever running into people who say to me sadly that they are sick and tired of religion being dragged into politics and that they would happily vote for the Congress Party if it got its act together. For this to happen, we need to hear less about the man who is the 'heart of India' and more about the values that Congress once stood for. Liberal democracy, secularism and tolerance of dissent. I have left 'socialism' out because, after the License Raj ended, it gradually became less relevant and has strangely found its way into Modi's economic ideas.

The most important lesson that Rahul can learn from Modi is his ability to rectify his mistakes and then erase them as if they never happened. This happened with demonetisation and the disastrous early handling of the COVID epidemic. The Congress Party has made many mistakes too, which BJP spokesmen bring up daily on primetime chat shows. Congress spokespersons have learned to fight back on TV and on social media, but what has not happened at all is a serious attempt to rebuild the party's broken organisational frame brick by brick and with urgency.

Sangeeta Kampani, formerly with the IRS, retired as Commissioner of Income Tax, Delhi

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column



HISTORY HEADLINE

BY PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

New government, old playbook

IN THE early hours of November 24, 1996, bulldozers — overseen by officers of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, cadres of the ruling CPI(M), and police — moved through Calcutta's arterial streets from the north to the south, reducing to rubble thousands of makeshift stalls. A day before, Transport Minister Subhas Chakraborty had met with hawker-union leaders and assured them that any eviction would necessarily include peaceful rehabilitation. The promise proved hollow. Operation Sunshine, the brainchild of Chakraborty and senior Left leader Kanti Ganguly, was set into motion. Defending the eviction drive, Chakraborty argued that reclaiming public spaces from encroachment was essential to make the city more orderly and attractive to investors and tourists in a new era of economic liberalisation. Three decades later, as a new BJP government in the state undertakes hawker eviction drives, this time with no mention of rehabilitation, the echoes of 1996 are difficult to ignore. Framed as a reclamation of public space to bring about civic order, then — as now — the question remains how a city built on informal labour can reconcile competing claims to urban space.

The story of Kolkata's hawkers goes back to successive waves of displacement that reshaped the city in the mid-20th century. The Bengal famine of 1943 and Partition in 1947 brought thousands of impoverished migrants and refugees to a city ill-equipped to absorb them. Unlike Delhi, which benefited from substantial central assistance for refugee rehabilitation, Calcutta was largely left to improvise. The grinding poverty gave birth to a new form of enterprise: pavement vending. It required little capital and offered an immediate livelihood. Many of the newcomers took to selling vegetables, fish, fabric, sweets, even books, along the city's pavements. The hawker — derived from the German *höker* (meaning to peddle or squat) — had arrived.

Over the next few decades, as the city's population swelled, entire commercial ecosystems grew on its footpaths, particularly in areas such as Gariahat, Esplanade, Hatibagan, and Shyambazar, making hawking one of the largest segments of the city's informal economy. Yet growth also sharpened tensions over the use of public space. For many, these markets embodied entrepreneurial resilience. For others, it was a civic woe that had rendered the city's pavements unusable. Pedestrians spilled onto roads, congestion slowed traffic, and urban planners complained that public infrastructure had been effectively privatised through a tacit compact between political parties and informal traders.

One of the first organised eviction drives, Operation Hawker, was attempted in 1975, when Congress leader Siddhartha Shankar Ray was the chief minister. The CPI(M), then in opposition, protested the move. In 1981, four years after the Left Front government had come to power, the construction of the Sealdah flyover triggered a wave of displacement, prompting hawkers to rise in protest. In 1983, the West Bengal Legislative Assembly formed a committee to examine rehabilitation proposals. But a durable policy remained elusive.

It was against this backdrop that Operation Sunshine was launched. But the campaign revealed why any attempt at eviction was a double-edged sword. When it had been in opposition, the Left Front had defended the hawkers' rights. After nearly two decades in power, the same political establishment found itself arguing for hawkers' redeployment. Alternative markets and designated spaces were developed, but relocation proved difficult. Many of the new sites lacked customer footfall. The result was a gradual reoccupation of the pavements that had been cleared.

Among the most vocal critics of Operation Sunshine had been Mamata Banerjee, then a Congress leader in opposition, still a little over a year away from breaking away from the party and forming the TMC. Accusing the Jyoti Basu government of destroying proletarian livelihoods, she organised strikes, amplified their cause. After becoming chief minister in 2011, though, Banerjee walked a fine line between populist pro-hawker protection and localised crackdowns. It helped that in 2007, the Supreme Court had ruled in a historic judgment that hawking was a fundamental right, "subject to reasonable restrictions..." The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act came about in 2014. West Bengal would adopt it only in 2018, but the legislation's promise has largely remained on paper.

Nearly 30 years after Operation Sunshine, as a new government follows an old playbook, Kolkata's pavements continue to bear the weight of two competing visions of urbanisation: the desire for a more orderly city and the need to accommodate those who survive in its informal economy.

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express

Yoga for healthy ageing: Adding life to years



BY C P RADHAKRISHNAN

FOR AGES, Bharat's unique distinction has been its noble vision of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' — of seeing the entire world as a single entity and all living beings as one. Rooted in the spiritual wisdom of Bharat, yoga is an ancient discipline that harmonises body, mind, and spirit.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while addressing the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2014, said yoga embodies unity of mind and body, thought and action, restraint and fulfilment, harmony between man and nature, and is a holistic approach to health and well-being. At the behest of the Prime Minister, the United Nations General Assembly on December 11, 2014, approved the proposal, co-sponsored by a record 174 countries, to declare June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. Since 2015, millions of people around the world have been gathering in public spaces to practice yoga together — transforming our ancient wisdom into a global movement.

On June 21 this year, as the Prime Minister leads Yoga Day in Kolkata, I am visiting Ladakh for the celebrations. For many years, I have experienced the benefits of practising yoga and *panchakarma*, which are often hailed as 'sister sciences'. It is these deeply enriching personal experiences that have inspired me to pen down my reflections on yoga and its profound impact on human well-being.

A timeless legacy of Bharat

'Yoga', a timeless practice for physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, is believed to have started with the very dawn of our civilisation. In the yogic lore, Lord Shiva is seen as the first yogi or Adi Yogi, and the first Guru or Adi Guru, while Maharishi Patanjali is hailed as the father of classical yoga for systematising its principles in the Yoga Sutras. Maharishi Patanjali shares a deep spiritual association with Tamil Nadu. His physical Jeeva Samadhi is also believed to be located in Thirupattur.

Our revered *rishis* and *munis* gifted the world the invaluable treasure of yoga. Through years of meditation, austerity, and spiritual inquiry, they developed a holistic system that unites the body, mind, and soul. This year's theme for International Yoga Day, 'Yoga for Healthy Ageing', holds special significance. Remarkable advances in healthcare, public health systems, and declining mortality rates have increased life expectancy across nations. The India Ageing Report 2023, released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), states that by 2050, nearly one in five Indians will be above the age of 60.

While we celebrate this invaluable gift of longevity, it simultaneously places upon society a solemn responsibility of ensuring that added years to life also mean added life to years. I believe that now the pressing need of the hour is to initiate people into yoga at an early age. The earlier one begins the practice of yoga, the greater the cumulative benefits throughout life. I am pleased to note that the National Education Policy 2020 accords yoga a significant place as an integral component of health, wellness, and value-based education. This is a positive step in the direction of initiating the young into yoga.

Academic and clinical interest in the therapeutic dimensions of yoga has grown exponentially in recent years. Premier institutions such as the National



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Solution for modern-day ageing

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Premier institutions such as the National

Institutes of Health (NIH), Harvard Medical School, and several peer-reviewed journals, such as *Lancet*, through their studies, have demonstrated that regular yoga practice safely improves balance, flexibility, and mobility among senior citizens, thereby significantly reducing the fear and risk of falls. Research has also shown measurable benefits of yoga in improving bone density, alleviating arthritic pain, enhancing respiratory efficiency, stabilising blood pressure, and supporting mental well-being. Equally important, meditative and breathing practices have been found to improve sleep quality, emotional resilience, and cognitive functioning among the elderly.

But I would like to emphasise that the true strength of yoga lies in its holistic nature. Beyond physical rehabilitation, yoga nurtures emotional balance and social connectedness. I have witnessed that one of the deepest challenges of ageing today is the growing sense of isolation experienced by many seniors. Yoga gently transforms this inward loneliness into a broader sense of collective belonging.

Importantly, as per my own experiences, 'Yoga For Healthy Ageing' does not demand strenuous physical exertion. Classical yogic practices have been thoughtfully adapted into gentle and accessible protocols suitable for senior citizens.

At the same time, yoga also serves as a source of resilience for caregivers and family members who shoulder the emotional and physical demands of elderly care.

More than 2,000 years ago, scholar and Tamil saint Thiruvalluvar advocated a personalised approach to health through the *Kural* (949), "Consider the patient's condition, the nature of the disease, and the proper time before undertaking treatment." This timeless wisdom mirrors the modern principles of Yoga for Healthy Ageing, where practices are carefully adapted to an individual's age, health, and needs, enabling people to enjoy a healthier, more active, and more dignified life in their later years.

As we observe the International Day of Yoga 2026, I urge every citizen, educational institution, civil society organisation, healthcare professional, and community leader to embrace yoga not merely as an occasional exercise, but as a lifelong cultural and wellness practice.

The writer is Vice-President of India

Not boys versus girls

EVERY FEW years, a name enters our national consciousness like a wound. The 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder was one such moment. The recent Twisha Sharma case is another.

Between these names lie countless unnamed women, countless interrupted lives, and a recurring grief that returns with frightening familiarity. Each time, outrage follows. Laws are tightened. Debates erupt. And yet, after a brief period of collective introspection, society seems to slip back into its old emotional habits. One begins to wonder: why does violence against women remain so deeply entrenched?

Perhaps, because the problem is not merely legal. It is sociological, emotional, and civilisational. Even today, we remain a deeply gendered society. Families still quietly celebrate the birth of sons, quite differently. Girls grow up with freedoms at-

tached to invisible conditions. They may study, work, travel, and speak more freely than previous generations, but many remain answerable for the clothes they wear, the hours they return home, and the choices they make. Freedom, for many women, continues to come with footnotes.

Marriage, too often, arrives in a woman's life less as liberation and more as an adjustment—a structure to be navigated with patience and endurance. Many educated women eventually tire of the invisible labour of constantly negotiating space for themselves within relationships, workplaces, and society itself.

Yet reducing the conversation into a battle between men and women may itself be a part of the problem. Men, too, inherit difficult emotional scripts. Raised constantly to be "man enough", many grow up learning suppression before self-awareness. Vulnerability becomes weakness.



ON THE LOOSE

BY SANGEETA KAMPANI

Gentleness becomes suspect. Emotional fluency is rarely encouraged. A society that conditions boys to equate masculinity with dominance should not be surprised when distortion resurfaces elsewhere in adulthood.

Perhaps the deeper issue lies in the way we raise children altogether. We do not merely nurture them; we script them. Boys are subtly taught entitlement. Girls inherit caution. Fear becomes gendered. Freedom becomes gendered. Even empathy becomes gendered. By the time adulthood arrives, inequality has already been rehearsed so thoroughly that it begins to appear natural.

And, this contradiction is especially perplexing in a civilisation that so often speaks of morality, religion, and tradition. We invoke values constantly, yet one cannot ignore the strange emotional barrenness visible around us—the inability to see another

human being fully and compassionately. T. S. Eliot once wrote of a spiritual 'waste land'; at times, one feels, modern society confronts that emptiness.

Perhaps the question is larger than how to raise better boys or protect girls more effectively. Perhaps, the real question is how to raise human beings who do not diminish another life in order to affirm their own. Social harmony cannot be built upon fear, resentment, or domination.

Men and women are meant to coexist—share homes, responsibilities, affection, and the burdens of living. A healthy society cannot emerge from mutual hostility. It can emerge only from mutual dignity.

Sangeeta Kampani, formerly with the IRS, retired as Commissioner of Income Tax, Delhi

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

GOVERNMENT'S FLAGSHIP RURAL BROADBAND INITIATIVE IS DESIGNED TO BRIDGE DIGITAL DIVIDE

BharatNet's last mile woes: only 45% connections active

Out of 1.04 lakh public Wi-Fi hotspots installed under the scheme, just 0.7% or 766 were operational as of Sep 2025

Soumyarendra Barik & Anil Sasi
New Delhi, June 20

LESS THAN half the number of connections targeted until March 2026 by the government as part of BharatNet — its ambitious rural broadband connectivity programme — were actively using the service, with new customer additions seeing a steady decline over the last three years, data obtained by *The Indian Express* under the Right to Information (RTI) Act showed.

As of March this year, a total of 13.23 lakh (13,22,842 to be precise) fixed connections were commissioned under BharatNet, as opposed to a target of 18 lakh. However, only about 8.01 lakh connections were actively being used, the RTI data showed. According to government officials, the scheme was faltering on various parameters, with active connections, in-use Wi-Fi hotspots, last-mile connectivity, funds leakages, and confusing tariff structures.

Pegged to be the world's largest rural fiber optic network, BharatNet is the government's flagship rural broadband initiative. It is designed to bridge the digital divide by providing high-speed internet to all gram panchayats and connecting remote communities to digital public services, education,

healthcare, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

While mobile internet has seen significant penetration in the country owing to data becoming more affordable after 2016, it provides basic connectivity for daily browsing and payments. BharatNet is essential to deliver high-capacity, uninterrupted fixed-line broadband to rural areas. It could serve as the digital backbone necessary to support heavy data usage, rural e-governance, and seamless digital healthcare, while avoiding network congestion. Mobile internet is typically not well suited for such high-data use cases.

An earlier March 2025 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communication and Information Technology had said there were 12.24 lakh fixed broadband connections under BharatNet until January 2025.

Tallied with the numbers obtained by this paper through the RTI, it means that only around 98,842 new connections were added in the next 14 months until March 2026 (to take the number to 13.23 lakh), which is just a little over 7,000 new connections per month. But it is the active usage of the service where the scope of the project is faltering further, an official said.

The Parliamentary panel

WHAT IS BHARATNET

SCHEME: High-speed internet to all gram panchayats, to connect communities to digital public services

FUNDING: Revised Estimate in 2024-25 was **Rs 6,500 crore**, of which less than half or only **48% spent**

TARGET: 18 lakh connections, but only **13.23 lakh** commissioned, only **8.01 lakh** actively used as of March 2026



had specifically noted that usage of the network remains suboptimal despite the availability of underlying infrastructure. It had also flagged an under-utilisation of funds, noting that the revised estimates for the scheme in 2024-25 was Rs 6,500 crore, of which only 48%, or Rs 3,145 crore were spent. Overall, the Department of Telecommunications had set a target of 18 lakh fixed broadband connections under the BharatNet scheme until March 2026. That means — at 13.23 lakh commissioned connections — only about 73% of the target was met until March in terms of commissioned, or available connections. With just 8.01 lakh active users, more than 55% of the target number of 18 lakh continued to remain inactive. Data obtained through RTI also showed there was a progressive slowdown in solidifying the user base for BharatNet over the last three

years, underscoring the lack of traction in the ambitious connectivity project.

In 2023, the number of active users connected through the BharatNet scheme stood at 4.55 lakh, which fell drastically to 2.86 lakh additions in 2024, and further still to 2.08 lakh in 2025. According to the government's latest publicly available data, 1.04 lakh public Wi-Fi hotspots were installed under the BharatNet scheme, but of this only 0.7% or 766 such hotspots were operational as of September 2025.

The Wi-Fi service is a key way to ensure last-mile delivery of the connectivity scheme. This paper had sought the latest numbers for operational Wi-Fi hotspots in the RTI application, but the question was skipped in the response; an appeal has been filed.

The Parliamentary committee had also raised concerns on the slow rollout of Wi-Fi hot-

spots in its report. It observed, "The installation of 1,04,574 Wi-Fi hotspots across gram panchayats suggests that while infrastructure exists, its actual usage remains suboptimal."

The Committee had raised concern that despite the significant infrastructure rollout, BharatNet's potential remains underutilised.

In May, Minister of State for Communications Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani said, "Learning from the shortcomings of BharatNet (phase I) and 2, we have fixed the issues and are executing with full accountability. Currently, only 15 lakh rural households are connected. Our target is 1.5 crore households in the first phase". The Department of Telecommunications and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) did not respond to a request for comment until publication.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Hyundai-Kia synergy hits a bump: Combined market share sees drop

Vikram Chaudhary
New Delhi, June 20

THE JOINT might of sibling brands Hyundai and Kia is shrinking in India, as revealed by six years of sales data sourced from the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM).

Owned by the Hyundai Motor Group (HMG), these two South Korean carmakers share global platforms and powertrains, which lower product development costs. They have launched successful midsize SUVs such as Creta and Seltos, and sub-4-metre SUVs like Venue and Sonet. In FY20, which was Kia's first year in India, HMG commanded a combined market share of 20.6%. This included 17.5% held by Hyundai India and 3.1% by Kia India.

In FY21, with Kia having three models under its belt — Seltos, Carnival and Sonet — HMG reached a peak of 23.1% (17.4% of Hyundai and 5.7% of Kia). Thanks to the successful Carens launched at the end of FY22, Kia reached a peak of 6.9% in FY23, and even though

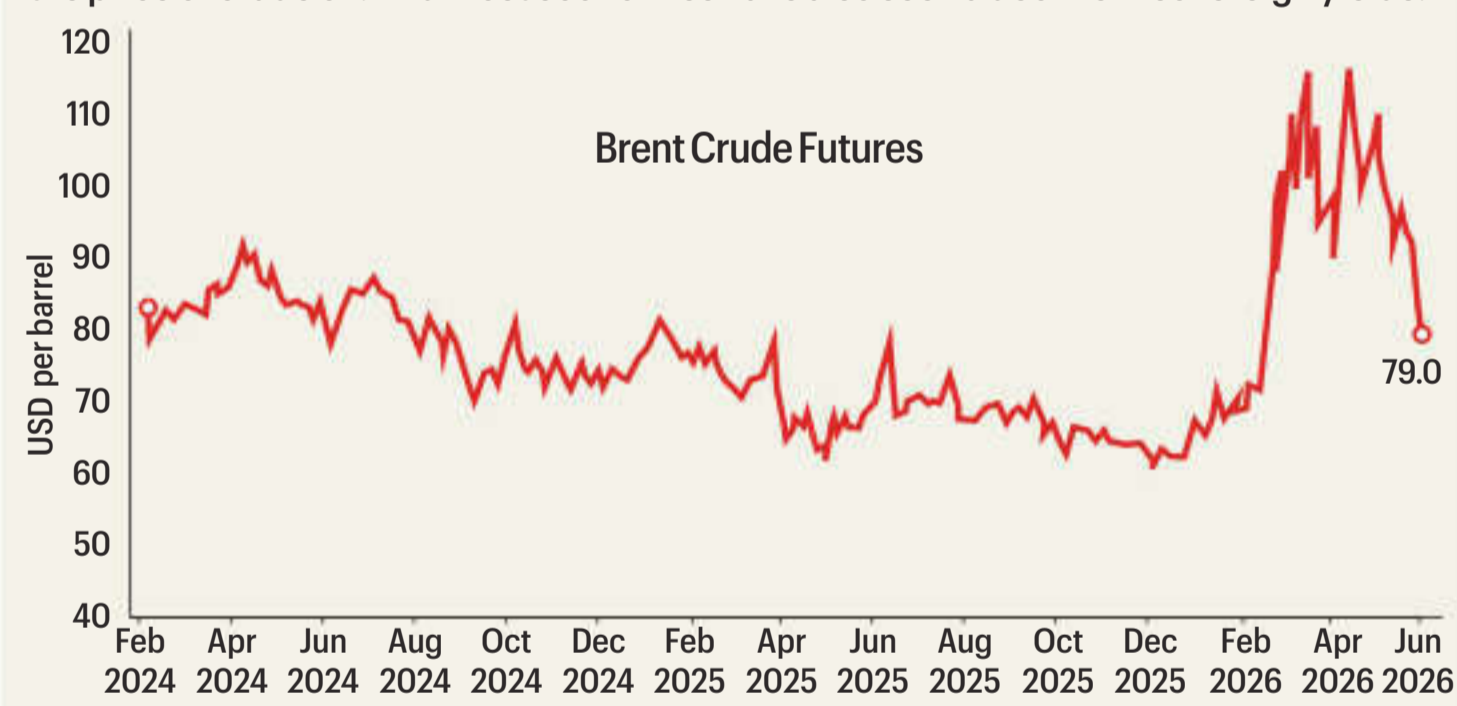
Hyundai was losing ground (dropping to 14.6%), HMG's combined market share in India stood at a healthy 21.5%. In FY26, however, data shows the Koreans are losing their grip. The HMG market share has slipped to just 18.8%. While Kia managed 6.2%, Hyundai's share has dropped to 12.6%.

Automotive analysts said cannibalisation is one of the reasons for this slide. Instead of pulling buyers away from rivals, the two Koreans have pulled buyers from each other.

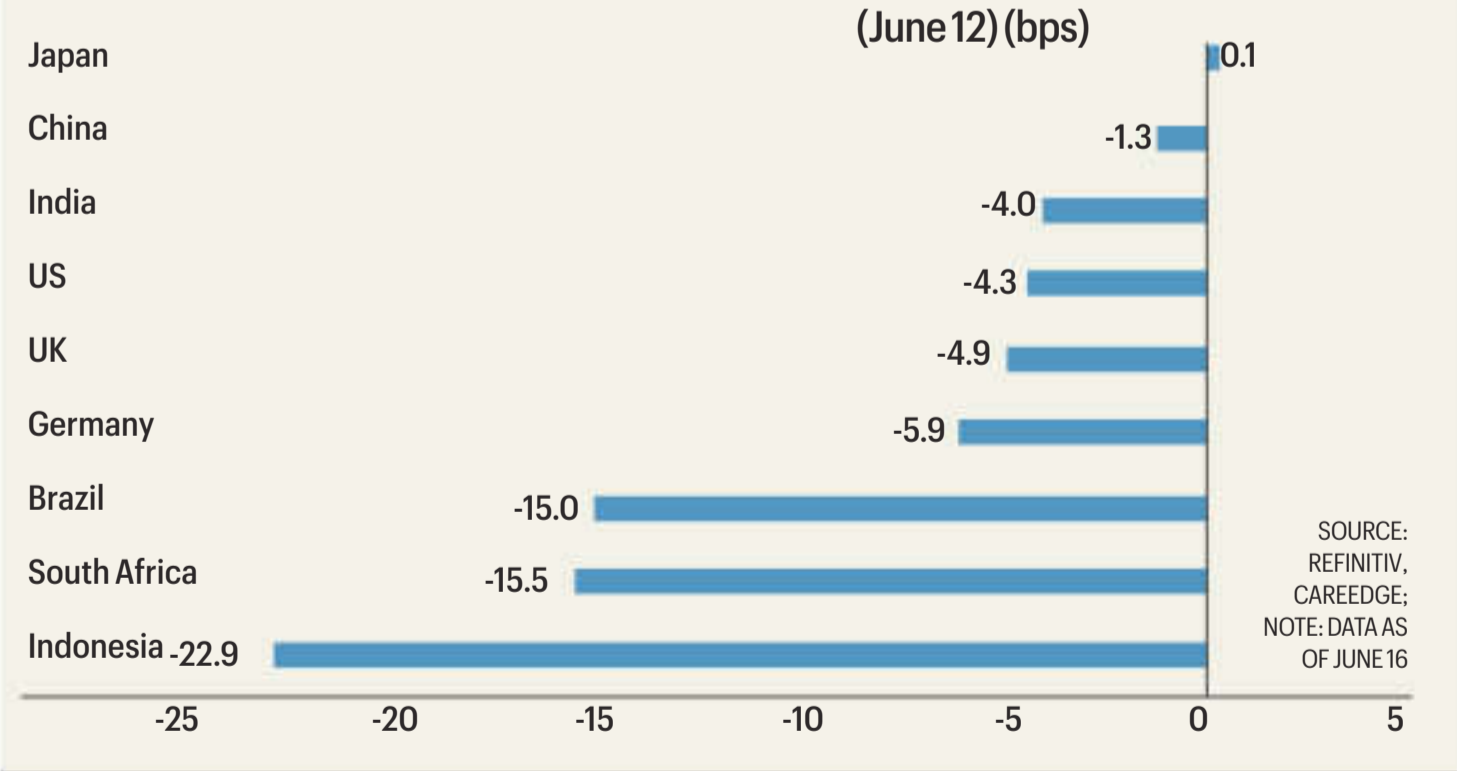
"Platform sharing is great for protecting margins, but doesn't protect market share if you aren't reinvesting those profits into groundbreaking products," said Gaurav Vangaal, associate director, light vehicle forecasting, S&P Global Mobility. "What we're seeing with Hyundai and Kia is similar to what happened with Maruti Suzuki and Toyota — the smaller partner gaining at the expense of bigger one, resulting in a zero-sum synergy. Kia didn't primarily poach from Maruti Suzuki or Tata, but cannibalised Hyundai's premium urban buyer base." FE

PRICE RELIEF, FOR NOW

The peace deal between the US and Iran, although under a cloud, has led to a drop in the price of crude oil. And most economies have also seen a decline in sovereign yields.



10-YR YIELD MOVEMENT SINCE THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE PEACE DEAL (June 12) (bps)



How Iran plans to regulate Hormuz via an online form

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, June 20

WITH THE signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the US and Iran, the Islamic Republic's newly-constituted Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA) — which Tehran says will regulate maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz — has announced new procedures for vessels to obtain clearance to cross the maritime chokepoint that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

And the procedure essentially involves an online form hosted on the PGSA's website.

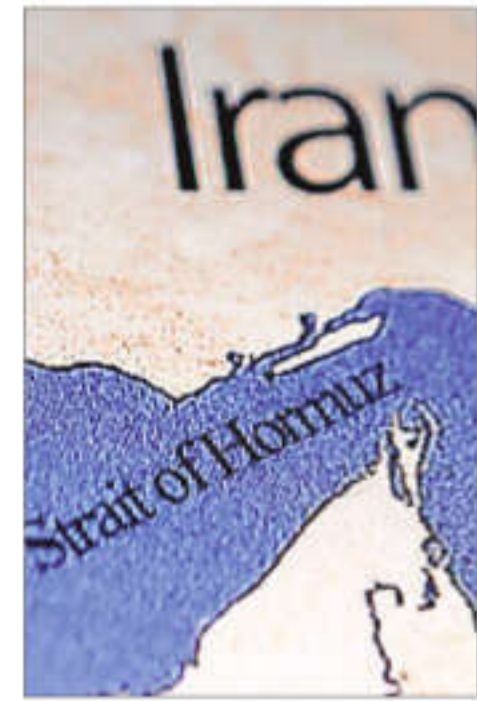
"With reference to the signing of the Islamabad MoU and the issuance of directives by the authorities, all applicants intending to passage through the Strait of Hormuz are hereby informed that during the period specified in the MoU, vessels that submit their passing requests to the PGSA in compliance with the following points will be cleared for passage promptly.

"Official Website for submitting passage requests: PGSA.ir. Email for follow-up inquiries: info@PGSA.ir," the PGSA said in a notice posted on social media platform X.

The Strait of Hormuz usually accounts for a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. With the Pakistan-mediated initial pact between the US and Iran in place, there are expectations that maritime traffic through the strait will pick up and normalise over the coming weeks and months, although shipping firms are still adopting a cautious approach with the situation on the ground — and on the water — still fragile.

PGSA's notice on Hormuz transit

In its notice issued on Friday, the PGSA said that the only official channels for processing passing requests are its website and the email address mentioned. It also announced that the request to transit the Strait of Hormuz is submitted by a vessel at least 48 hours before it arrives in the area. The PGSA also said that during the initial 60-day window of the MoU, no tariffs or service fee will be collected from the ships, and will be borne by the Iranian government. Crossing the strait was completely free before the war, but Tehran now



The standard review and response time from the PGSA will be 48 hours. REUTERS

wants to charge fees for services like maritime security, navigation assistance, environmental protection, and insurance. The 14-point US-Iran MoU states that crossing the strait will be free only for 60 days, and Iran will hold talks with Oman and other Gulf littoral states "to define the future administration and maritime services in the Strait of Hormuz" in line with "international law and the sovereign rights of coastal states of the Strait of Hormuz".

"To avoid delays at the entrance or exit of the Strait of Hormuz, it is essential that passing requests, complete with all required information, are submitted at least 48 hours prior to arriving at the strait area. During the 60-day period, tariffs for security, safety, and environmental services, as well as related Iranian insurances, will not be collected from shipowners and will be borne by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran," the PGSA said.

"Due to the presence of mine-affected areas and the necessity of ensuring safe passage and preventing collisions, coordination of the designated route and scheduled passage time for each vessel prior to moving toward the strait is mandatory; failure to comply shall be the responsibility of the vessel owner," it added.

Mandatory transit form & key terms

The PGSA website has nothing but a form for vessels to apply for permission to cross the strait. The form seeks extensive information from vessels, including regular details like

TRANSIT TERMS

NEWLY-CONSTITUTED Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA) has announced new procedures for vessels to obtain clearance to cross the maritime chokepoint that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea

THE PROCEDURE essentially involves an online form hosted on the PGSA's website

THE PGSA said that only official channels for processing passing requests are its website and the email address mentioned

name, flag, IMO number, type, dead weight capacity, draft, cargo type, registered owner, ship management firm, and contact details.

It also requires the cargo quantity, value, declaration of dangerous goods on board, origin and destination countries and ports, number of crew members and their nationalities, protection and indemnity (P&I) club and other insurance details, intended route of travel, intended date of crossing the strait. The form also has a link to general and specific terms and conditions for vessel passage through the strait.

The document states that the standard review and response time from the PGSA will be 48 hours, and the authority will either approve the application, mark it incomplete and put it up for further review, or explicitly deny it. If approved, the permit issued for the passage will be valid for one single transit through the strait, and will be valid for a maximum of five calendar days. If the permission expires, the permit will become null and void and a fresh application will have to be submitted. Mandatory passage conditions include a designated route for vessel transits — close to Iran's Larak Island — which is specified in a map issued by the PGSA.

"Any deviation from or use of alternative routes is strictly prohibited and will be treated as a violation... The owner and master assume full responsibility for any damages, fines, or accidents arising from such violations," the document states.

FULL REPORT ON
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Irdai proposes curbs to check misselling of insurance policies

Narayanan V
Chennai, June 20

In a first, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) has proposed enhanced disclosure norms for insurance intermediaries earning commissions above a prescribed threshold.

Aiming to curb misselling of insurance policies, the regulator has released a consultation paper proposing that insurance intermediaries disclose details of commission income, related-party transactions, profits earned and dividend repatriation. Under the exposure draft, corporate agents, brokers, insurance marketing firms and web aggregators

earning more than ₹10 crore in commission income in a financial year will be required to annually disclose to Irdai details of commissions earned, related-party transactions, profits and dividends. These entities will also have to publish the disclosures on their websites.

The proposals form part of the draft IRDAI (Insurance Intermediaries) (Amendment) Regulations, 2026, which seek to strengthen transparency and accountability while easing compliance requirements. It is also the first time Irdai has sought such detailed public disclosures. However, the draft regulations stop short of addressing intermediary commission structures. In light of

the fact that commission payouts have risen faster than premium collections across the insurance industry, it was widely expected that Irdai would come out with an effort-based commission framework, replacing the current system of broadly uniform commissions across categories of intermediaries.

Life insurers paid around ₹60,800 crore in commissions during FY25, while non-life insurers paid ₹47,266 crore, with commission growth outpacing premium growth in both segments. Irdai has proposed that every branch of a corporate agent designate at least one specified person responsible for supervising solicitation activities at that location. FE

THE CENTRAL BANK'S LATEST SUMMARY OF ECONOMIC PROJECTIONS SUGGESTED A MORE HAWKISH STANCE COMPARED TO THE MARCH MEETING

What US Fed's rate hike signal could mean for struggling Indian markets

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, June 20

THE US Federal Reserve's Federal Open Market Committee held its overnight borrowing rate steady in the range of 3.50%-3.75% this week in what was the new Fed Chairman Kevin Warsh's first press conference.

The underlying data and the changes announced by Warsh struck a hawkish undertone, signalling potential rate hikes later in the year.

The central bank's latest Summary of Economic Projections (SEP) signalled a more hawkish stance compared to the March meeting.

Based on the responses of 18 of the 19 officials, excluding

Warsh who didn't vote, the median estimate for the Fed funds rate by the end of 2026 rose to 3.8% from 3.4% in March, signalling that the committee sees at least one rate hike this year. Nine officials forecasted at least one rate hike this year, including six who expected multiple hikes.

This comes at a time when the country has seen a strongest set of growth and labor data, while inflation has been a consistent pain point, first due to the reciprocal tariffs announced by President Donald Trump last year and now due to the ongoing war in West Asia, which has driven up fuel prices and disrupted supply chains globally. Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics released last week



Indian market has already been hit by foreign outflows. REUTERS

showed that retail inflation accelerated to 4.2% in May, crossing the 4% level for the first time in 3 years, and much above the Fed's 2% upper band for its inflation target. Meanwhile, non-farm payrolls in the country in-

creased for the third straight month in May, while the unemployment rate remained steady, signalling a robust economy and further cementing expectations of rate hike by the central bank. The latest Fed policy led

to yields of short-term US treasuries rising to a 16-month high on Wednesday, with the US rate markets putting 72% odds on a rate hike by the central bank by October, according to a *Reuters* report. Yields, which move inversely to bond prices, rise on expectations of higher interest rates to reflect higher borrowing costs for the government.

Effect on Indian market

Higher interest rates in the US can potentially lead to foreign outflows from the Indian capital market as higher yields across US treasuries offer attractive returns for foreign investors. Higher bond yields in the US also reduce the attractiveness of Indian bonds for foreign investors. This is at a time when the Indian market has al-

ready been crippled by persistent foreign outflows due to headwinds such as high crude oil prices, an uncertain geopolitical environment, a weaker rupee squeezing the returns of foreign investors, and the underperformance of the Indian stock market due to a lack of AI-related opportunities. Foreign institutional investors have pulled out \$26.7 billion from the capital markets so far in 2026, already eclipsing the \$11.84 billion they had pulled out in the entire 2025.

This time around, foreign inflows remain largely dependent on whether a peace deal between the US and Iran will be signed and followed through. Exorbitant fuel prices have crippled the Indian stock mar-

ket since the start of the war, with crude oil rising as high as \$125 a barrel at its peak. Both countries are scheduled to sign a peace deal on Friday.

The rupee had slipped against the dollar at the open on Thursday after the Fed's policy decision but recovered to end higher for the 5th straight session. The benchmark Nifty 50 and Sensex also recovered from intraday lows to end 0.3% higher. The Reserve Bank of India's recent measures to attract foreign capital also remain a positive for the market. "For markets, a more hawkish Fed could temper risk-on sentiment from a potential US-Iran deal. Still, Indian markets are responding positively to deal prospects, which have led to a sharp

drop in crude oil prices, further aided by recent RBI measures to attract foreign flows, including easing of FPI norms. Together, these factors remain supportive for the INR, FPI flows, and the domestic bond market, keeping overall sentiments constructive," according to Amit Modani, lead of fixed income at Shriram Asset Management Company.

"Equity markets will likely focus on earnings, with bond and currency markets awaiting further clarity on inflation. (The policy was a) non-event for EMs right now, but a tightening Fed would likely force EM central banks to also follow," said Ankita Pathak, head of global investments at Ionic Assets.

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DOWN IN JUNGLELAND

BYRANJIT LAL

AUTHOR, ENVIRONMENTALIST
AND BIRDWATCHER



SHOCK AND AWE
Moulting caterpillars resemble dead twigs as they await their transformation into butterflies

RANJIT LAL

Hiding in Plain Sight

The most admirable parts about evolution is its success with camouflage and mimicry

I HAD always been a huge admirer of evolution and the process of natural selection. I mean look at its achievements: from single-cell beings to evolve via billions of different life forms to end up with as humans — so brilliant we can destroy our planet with the touch of a button.

One of the aspects I admired most is its successes with camouflage and mimicry. A tiger with its black flames and orange stripes melds into the forest background; an orchid mantis is a dead ringer for the original — to the detriment of its prey, moulting caterpillars resemble dead twigs as they await their transformation into butterflies. It is amazing, the detail that is taken care of, not only in appearance but in behaviour, too.

Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, promoters of the theory of natural selection, were not nearly as impressed. They deemed evolution by natural selection to be indifferent, bumbling and opportunistic, forever hamstrung by its innovative history and chance (genetic mutations and heredity), riddled with imperfections. And that our apparently brilliant brains that have sent us to the moon and back, are, in fact, leaky, slow and unreliable.

When we design, say, an aeroplane, we start off with an end goal in mind: the plane. Sketches are made, engineering drawings done, models are constructed until we end up with our aeroplane. If mistakes are made, we can go back to the slate. Not so, with the process of evolution: Cells divide and subdivide, each fulfilling a function, but there's no grand plan as to what the end product will be. Depending upon the environment, conditions and the occasional misstep, natural selection just plods on: What works is pushed forward to the next generation, what doesn't gets buried under. It's all hit and miss. And if there are say major behavioural changes taking place en route — well then, Houston we have a problem!

The human spine has been described as a 'design disaster': Only because it has not evolved to support a two-legged creature with a heavy head. It was designed for apes and monkeys which travel on four legs. When we became upright all kinds of compromises had to be made. To accommodate the weight of our very heavy heads, the spine had to reorient itself into a curve, leading to backaches and slip discs. Monkeys and apes need all the 26 bones in their feet to help them climb and grip, we don't. We would do perfectly well if our feet and ankles were fused into a single unit rather like those of ostriches, geared for running and walking. A human engineer would be able to make that change, not natural selection. So we have 26 bones accompanied by easily twistable ankles! An upright spine meant we needed a wider pelvic girdle to enable childbirth and this flew in the face of bipedal locomotion which wanted a narrow one. Hence the forward hunch.

Like us, natural selection has a *chalta hain* attitude to things, forget about achieving any excellence. And yet, in so many fields it has done exactly that — achieved near perfection and excellence more by chance rather than intent. It seems like the bottom line is this: if it works — brilliant or bumbling — go with it and pass it on. If not bury it under all the other failed attempts.

When something goes wrong with a 'biological machine' (such as ourselves) there's no removing the faulty part and replacing it with brand new one, natural selection doesn't do that! It is really not a very good mechanic at all even if it has figured out ways to heal itself to the extent possible. (Which is why animals lick their wounds — the saliva has healing properties and our blood clots do the same when we are cut). Some have even learnt to replace broken bit, like lizards re-growing their tails! But it's never as good as new!

It really seems remarkable that Darwin and Wallace could so clearly see the flaws in the process of evolution and natural selection. Having discovered the theory, one might have imagined they would have defended it tooth and nail. And yes, while every living creature staggers under the baggage of its past, with all its errors and issues, it still seems to nudge ahead on the way to achieving some kind of perfection, even if some of its past boo-boos are passed on from generation to generation. It may not have a clue as to where it is heading, what the 'end goal' or end product might be, it just keeps plugging on from one generation to the next. Just like termites who have no idea that what they're building is a magnificent air-conditioned edifice — each worker just gets on with the job its genes allocate to it.

It just pits its wits against its enemies in a non-stop arms race, improving with each iteration! So sure, natural selection and evolution might be riddled with flaws but when you see an octopus or cuttlefish swiftly change colour and texture as they move from one environment to another, you can't help but be in awe and wonder.

When Our Children Use Violence

Accountability and dignity can coexist. Harm can be addressed without dehumanising the child

IMAGINE

BY SHELJA SEN

NARRATIVE AND FAMILY THERAPIST, WRITER, CO-FOUNDER OF CHILDREN FIRST



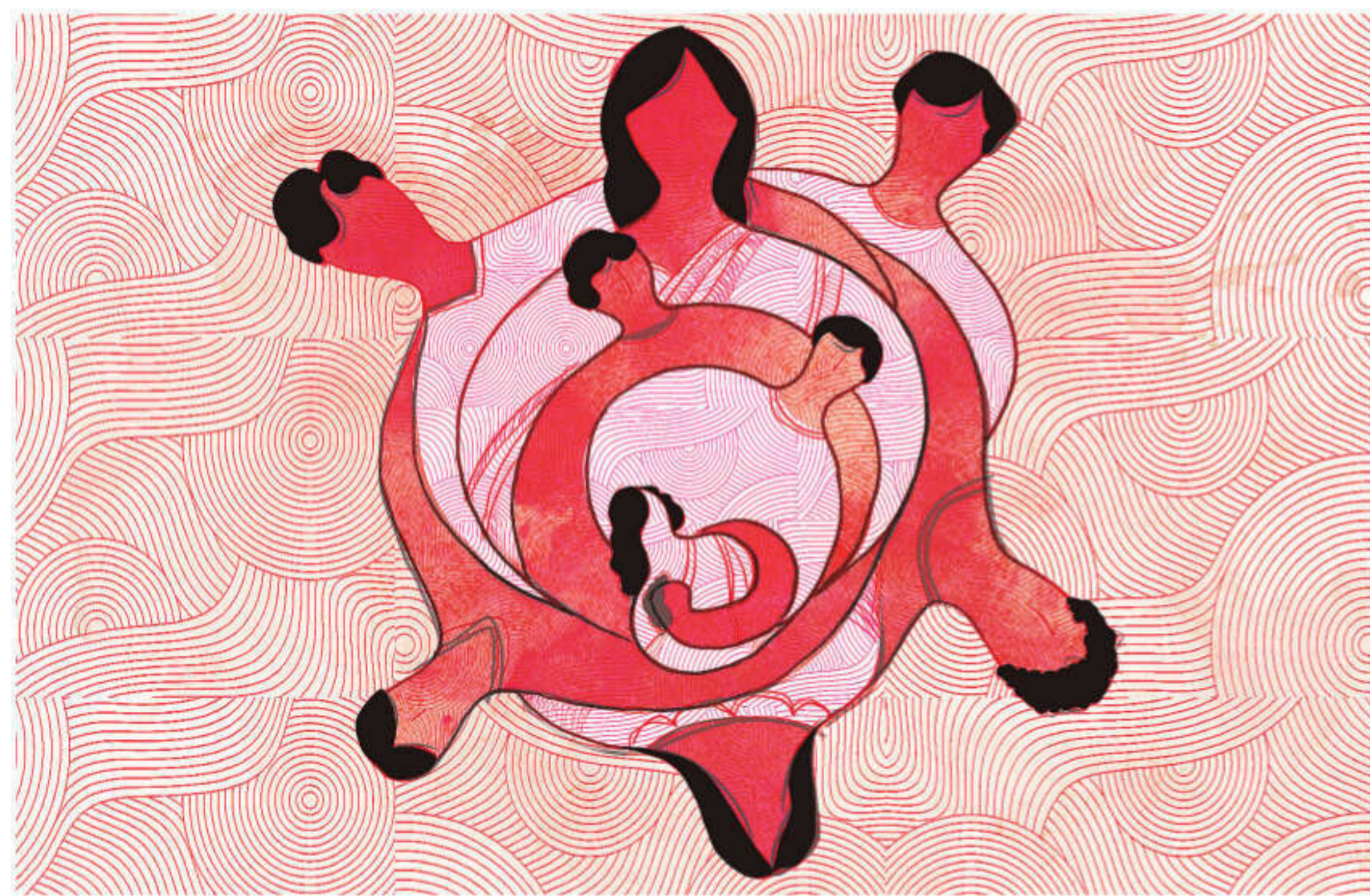
INVARIABLY, THERE is silence, as there is a lot of shame around it. As a parent shared, "We act as if nothing has happened every time he hits his mother." Often, the aggression remains confined to the family, making it harder to discuss. To name it as violence would make it real, and that would be too painful to accept. Self-blame and guilt can keep parents silent, out of fear of being judged in society as "bad parents" and having "failed as a parent."

Blame can shift to the children, too. "There is something seriously wrong with him" is a sentiment I have heard often. When children are seen as at fault, then there can be immense rage directed at them. Violence is met with violence, and it might reach a point when it is not possible to keep quiet. Things spiral out of control, other family members, school, neighbours might be pulled in, or, in extreme conditions, the police might have to be called in too.

Unwittingly, we all might be complicit in this shaming and dismiss them as "violent child," "malayak", "bad seed", or even find fault with the parents, "bad parenting," "bahut chhoot de di to bigadna to thahi." Or have other simplistic explanations, "it is all that violence in the video games they watch nowadays", etc. But violence comes with complexities, and easy answers rarely hold.

Curiosity over judgment

Nysa pushed her mother so hard that she hit her forehead against the door and had to be rushed to the hospital. Arif hit his mother with a bat when she tried to take his gadgets away. These stories sound horrifying, and we could easily jump to the conclusion that all these children, aged 13 and 17 years, were plain evil and headed towards a life of crime. Some psychiatrists and psychologists might end up colluding in these totalising descriptions by being quick to label them as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder or even a Personality Disorder. Labels that restrict the child's identity to a problem-saturated story with no possibilities. Let's pause a little and ask ourselves the question, "Are our children disordered or the culture in which they grow up disordered?"



SUVIRIT DEY

As Resmaa Menakem, anti-racist therapist and author, explains, "Many times trauma in a person decontextualised over time can look like a personality. Trauma in a family decontextualised over time can look like family traits, trauma decontextualised in a person over time can look like culture and it takes time to slow it down so you can begin to discern what's what."

If we took time to unpack each child's story, maybe we would understand the "why" and "how" a little better. There might be stories of the child being a witness to violence, of abuse, of neglect, of intergenerational trauma. Of children internalising the patriarchal patterns of fury that are legitimised when directed at women at home. Of being insidiously trained by some dangerous discourses on social media that vilify parents, especially mothers.

Children's behaviour always makes sense. On the same note, children's violence always makes sense, too. Every single time, and there are no exceptions.

Connection over correction

We might start the conversation with them by taking what narrative practitioner Caleb Wakhungu from Uganda calls the riverbank position. Metaphorically speaking, when there is violence at home, then children and their parents might end up stuck in a swirling river of shame. To gain clarity of thought or even get out of the damaging, repetitive patterns, they have to climb up to the solid ground of the riverbank. This would mean taking small steps to rebuild the connection. This could take the form of time spent away from blame talk and engaging them through their interests, inviting them out for coffee or a

REPAIR AND RENEW
Many times trauma in a person decontextualised over time can look like a personality

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR ALWAYS MAKES SENSE. ON THE SAME NOTE, CHILDREN'S VIOLENCE ALWAYS MAKES SENSE, TOO

meal. Parents have to find ways to have conversations with them that open up possibilities rather than close them.

There is no rushing this. It has taken them years to reach this point, and one evening might not change everything. It is possible that there is no way to have a conversation. I hear children often talk about how they have "blocked off" their parents. Then parents can practise the riverbank through their presence, words of appreciation, cooking their favourite food and doing small things that express their love. They might not show it, but when children are hurting, they are clocking in every bit of care towards them.

Accountability over blame

So, am I saying that everything goes, and we should just throw our hands up in the air and say, "Children will be children" and hope one day they will grow out of it? Not at all. I have too much respect for children and believe that they are not using violence as a preferred way of being. Sometimes rage becomes the only language they think is available to them to express their anguish, frustration or even as a wall of protection. In my conversation with young people, we unpack the idea of "justified anger" or "justified violence." Often it shows up as, "My mother shouts so much that I had to hit her to shut her up." We might even discuss how violence is generally directed towards women in the house — the mothers, the sisters and the domestic workers. And the politics and the patriarchy of violence, and how we can get recruited into it.

Then how do we hold them accountable without judgment or shaming? I turned to the collective wisdom of parents I have

worked with to understand what has helped them. Invariably, parents talked about starting with an apology. As a father shared, "I had to say sorry to my son for years of rage that he had been witness to when I was struggling with my alcohol problem." This father also showed that accountability is not just words and gave up alcohol to heal his relationship with his son. A family committed to respectful language and to "not spreading shaming stories in the family grapevine" that had damaged relationships.

A mother shared that she realised that, "I have been walking on eggshells and making excuses for my son's rage, and it became important for me to sit with him and name it as violence. It's only when we did that, we knew we had to do something about it." Another mother sat down with her child and made a list of what they called "above the line" (acceptable ways of expressing frustration) and "below the line" (unacceptable ways of expressing frustration) for all in the family, with a list of household chores that would have to be done as community service.

In my conversation with young people who use violence, it has been so heart-warming to see that once they have a space where they are not being blamed or judged, they are ready to take accountability. Every child wants to live their life in keeping with what they value or hope for. So the next time we are faced with a child's ferocity, let's step away from shame and invite stories of repair and possibilities.

In this column, Shelja Sen curates the knowhow of the children and youth she has the honour of working with. Email her at shelja.sen@childrenfirstindia.com

The Light That Comes From Wounds

The story of our species is not the story of suffering. It is the story of recovery. That is the miracle, that love survives



SLICE OF LIFE

BY SUVIR SARAN

CHEF, AUTHOR, EDUCATOR
AND WORLD TRAVELLER

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN the breaking and the mending, I met myself.

Not the self that introduces itself at dinner parties, answers emails, catches flights, pays bills and performs competence for the world. I met an older self, a quieter self, a self that seemed to have been waiting patiently beneath all the noise of living.

It appeared only after certainty had been stripped away.

For the past several weeks, I have been healing in Delhi. Time has become both companion and caretaker. Rest, that ancient physician, has soothed what agitation once unsettled. The visible signs of struggle have softened. Strength returns in small, almost imperceptible increments. Recovery continues its quiet work, asking only patience in return. Yet the deeper healing has happened elsewhere.

Outside my window, the monsoon arrives and departs like a wandering mystic. Clouds gather in charcoal processions

above the city. Rain washes dust from neem trees. Water beads upon bougainvillea blossoms. The city groans, glitters, floods, forgives, and begins again.

As I sat watching the rain one evening, a *ghazal* returned to me — not as memory but as revelation. "Mire ham-nafas mire ham-nava mujhe dost ban ke daga na de." (My companion, my confidant, do not betray me under the guise of friendship). At first glance, it sounds like heartbreak. Yet sitting with it now, I hear something larger. I hear humanity speaking to life itself.

Life, do not disguise impermanence as permanence. Do not let me mistake certainty for truth. Do not persuade me that anything here can be owned forever. Because perhaps every heartbreak begins with the same misunderstanding.

We think things belong to us. Then life reminds us that nothing truly belongs to us. Everything passes through us. We are custodians, not owners. Pilgrims, not proprietors, carrying gifts briefly before passing them onward. And yet what magnificent gifts they are.

How easily we overlook miracles because they arrive disguised as ordinary days. Pain restores our eyesight. It reminds us that what is common is often sacred and teaches us to notice what abundance concealed: the warmth of a cup held between grateful hands, the kindness of a stranger,



SUVIR SARAN

the loyalty of a friend who arrives without being summoned, the astonishing resilience of a spirit determined to rise again.

Suffering is a ruthless teacher, but it is unforgettable. "Main hoon dard-e-ishq se jaan-ba-lab, mujhe zindagi ki dua na de." (I stand exhausted by love and pain; do not merely pray for more life for me). Within that line lies an entire philosophy.

Because the goal was never simply to accumulate years. The goal was to deepen them, widen them, inhabit them fully. Longevity without tenderness is merely duration. The prayer was never for more time but for more meaning.

The challenge before every human being is not whether suffering will arrive. It will. The real question is what happens next: do we become smaller or larger, retreat into bitterness or expand into compassion, build walls or windows?

Remaining open-hearted after disappointment requires far greater courage than closing ourselves against it. The rose blooms despite winter. The ocean continues kissing the shore despite being pulled away twice each day. The earth offers spring after every season of barren-

ness. Creation itself is an act of optimism. Every dawn is the universe trying again.

And yet there are nights when despair feels persuasive. "Mire dagh-e-dil se hai roshni, isi roshni se hai zindagi." (The light comes from the wounds upon my heart; it is this light that gives life its meaning).

The light comes from the wound — not despite it, but because of it. The crack becomes a window, the scar a lantern, the broken place the birthplace of compassion. What seemed like an ending becomes an entrance. Look carefully at the people who have transformed your life. Almost all of them have suffered deeply. Yet somehow they emerged more loving, not less. That is the miracle. Not that suffering exists. But that love survives it. Again and again. The story of our species is not the story of suffering. It is the story of recovery.

And so I choose hope, not because the world is always gentle, but because gentleness is how the world heals. I choose love, not because it guarantees safety, but because it gives meaning to everything else.

Somewhere beyond the rain, beyond the scars, dawn is already gathering its light — as it always has, and it always will.

IIT-Delhi study finds human activity drives India's 'wild' weather

Vasudevan Mukunth

Of late, increasingly concentrated rainfall and violent floods have devastated India's cities and farms alike. For years, scientists have debated whether this is simply natural variation or the direct result of climate change.

A new study in *Environmental Research Letters* has found the smoking gun. Specifically, for the first time, researchers have dispositive evidence that

human activity is the primary driver.

The researchers, from IIT-Delhi and KSMDB College in Kollam, analysed rainfall data from 1905 to 2014. Then they used a technique called fingerprinting, where, the scientists looked for specific signs of human influence in the atmosphere. By comparing real-world observations with several computer models, they were able to separate natural weather cycles like the

El Niño from changes caused specifically by human activity.

The work has revealed a contest in India's skies between greenhouse gases, which warm the atmosphere, and aerosols, particles from car exhaust and factories that scatter sunlight and can actually suppress rain. The impact was most visible in the country's core monsoon zone, including West Central India. "In West Central India, we find observed increases in

extreme precipitation indices and evidence that greenhouse gas forcing is a dominant driver of this intensification," T.S. Chaithra, a PhD student at the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences, IIT Delhi, and the study's first author, told *The Hindu*. "Together, these findings indicate that the statistical characteristics of extreme rainfall are changing over time."

Many Indian scientists and policymakers are working to reduce air pol-

lution. However, as the air becomes cleaner and the aerosol load drops, the cooling effect will vanish. When this happens, the full force of greenhouse gas warming will be 'unmasked', potentially leading to a surge in extreme rainfall events that are now being kept in check.

However, Ms. Chaithra said the team is "cautious about saying urban planners should stop using historical rainfall baselines entirely" and that "histori-

cal observations remain essential" to understand "local rainfall characteristics and vulnerabilities".

"Our results suggest that it may no longer be appropriate to assume stationarity in extreme rainfall," she said, adding later: "More broadly, historical rainfall statistics alone may not provide a reliable guide to future risk in a warming climate, particularly in regions where extreme rainfall is already showing a clear upward trend."

What a 'super' El Niño might mean for India's monsoon

Setting the El Niño years since 1950 against IMD's long-period rainfall series shows that, of roughly two dozen such years, about 15 produced a below-normal monsoon and around 10 tipped into outright deficiency

Jacob Koshy

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) confirmed this month that an El Niño has formed in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, and placed the odds at about 63% that it will strengthen into a "very strong" – colloquially, a "super" – event by the northern winter. India's June rainfall, until the 16th, is roughly 35% below normal. The combination has revived a question that returns with every El Niño year: how reliably do the strongest of these events translate into a failed Indian monsoon?

An El Niño is the periodic warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific that tends to weaken the South Asian monsoon and whose potency is measured by how far sea-surface temperatures in a reference patch of the Pacific climb above their long-term average.

D.S. Pai, Chief Forecaster at the India Meteorological Department's (IMD) Regional Meteorological Centre in Chennai, set out the gradations: a departure of 0.5-1° C is 'weak,' 1-1.5° is 'moderate,' 1.5-2° is 'strong', and anything beyond 2° is 'very strong.' He added that some forecasts suggest the current event could approach a record of around 2.5°.

The trade winds that normally drive warm surface water westward towards Asia weaken; the



Heat and rain

Several of India's worst droughts have been in El Niño years

- The NOAA has confirmed an El Niño has formed, with high odds of becoming a very strong event
- India's current rainfall deficit in June is mostly local and cannot reliably predict the entire season's final outcome
- Roughly 60% of El Niño years produce deficient rainfall, often leading to significant agricultural deficits
- The Indian Ocean Dipole sometimes counters El Niño, but this year it may be too weak to do so
- Delayed monsoon onset and dry spells are often more concerning than the total volume of rainfall
- Contemporary climate change makes modern El Niño events more intense than those recorded in the past

El Niño follows a consistent calendar, which bears directly on its monsoon impact. THE HINDU

eastern Pacific warms, which in turn slackens the winds further generating a feedback loop that amplifies the anomaly. Scientists note that a warmer baseline ocean, the result of long-term climate change, has raised the heat available to recent events, making them more intense than earlier ones.

In the long term however, such events remain rare. Only a handful, the instrumental record shows, have crossed the 2° threshold – 1972-73, 1982-83, 1997-98 and 2015-16.

El Niño also follows a consistent calendar, which bears directly on its monsoon impact. "It starts in one spring season, peaks in the winter, and very fast it weakens in the next spring," Pai said, noting that an event very occa-

sionally persists into a second year. Because the warming establishes only in spring and matures later, he said, its suppressing effect on the monsoon is felt mainly in the middle and later part of the June-September season rather than at its start. June rainfall and the pace of onset, he added, are governed largely by local and regional factors – so a weak June, including the present 35% shortfall, is not by itself a reliable guide to the season.

The 1982-83 El Niño was associated with severe drought and bushfires in Australia and dry conditions across Indonesia. The 1997-98 event drove severe forest fires and choking haze across Indonesia and Southeast Asia, killed an estimated one-sixth of the

world's coral, and helped push global temperatures to a record. The 2015-16 episode triggered mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, made 2016 the warmest year then recorded, and catalysed severe drought and food shortages across southern and eastern Africa.

Paradoxically, the 1997-98 El Niño actually brought 2% more rains than usual for India's summer monsoon months. This was due to an effect in the Indian Ocean, called the Indian Ocean Dipole, that brought in warm water pools, countering the Pacific-induced drying. Since then, forecasters have consistently watched for the Dipole's waxing and waning.

One of the reasons, IMD Director General, M. Mohapatra has said, for a

monsoon deficit this year is that the Dipole won't be strong enough to counter the Niño.

Setting the El Niño years since 1950 against IMD's long-period rainfall series shows that, of roughly two dozen such years, about 15 produced a below-normal monsoon and around 10 tipped into outright deficiency, i.e. seasonal rainfall below 90% of the long-period average. This correlation is strong enough to shape food and fiscal planning.

Several of India's worst droughts were in El Niño years, among them 1972, 1982, 2009, and 2015.

El Niño also redistributes the world's tropical cyclones rather than simply adding to them. NOAA's research arm notes that the warming generally suppresses Atlantic hurricane activity by strengthening vertical wind shear – the change in wind speed and direction with height that can tear a developing storm apart – while making conditions more favourable for hurricanes in the central and eastern Pacific. The effect tends to scale with the event's strength.

For the basins closer to Asia, the signal runs the other way: forecasters note that during an El Niño, the odds of a Pacific storm intensifying into a super typhoon rise appreciably, though such systems typically recurve towards East Asia and the Americas rather than the Indian subcontinent.

SNAPSHOTS



New seismic hazard spotted in Japan's 2011 quake

Following the 2011 earthquake, 15 minutes after the main shock, the ground across Japan shifted east by up to 6 mm. Using satellite data, scientists have now found this movement was triggered by SCS waves, seismic waves that travel down from the earthquake source, bounce off the planet's core, and return to the surface. Because these waves travel nearly vertically, they hit Japan's tectonic plate boundaries all at once. The scientists called this a new seismic hazard.



War in Ukraine hit different mammals differently

Using camera traps, researchers in Ukraine compared animal activity during the 2022 Russian occupation to peacetime data from 2021 in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. They found mammals adjusted their habits quickly to survive. For instance, red deer and foxes significantly reduced their activity at night. When combat intensified, roe deer activity dropped while brown hares were spotted more often. And while wild boars avoided military sites, lynx and foxes stayed closer to human settlements.



The plague was deadly even before farming's rise

Scientists have found evidence of plague outbreaks among hunter-gatherers near Lake Baikal in Siberia dating back 5,500 years. The findings challenge the old belief that the plague only became a major threat once humans began living in dense, crowded farming communities. The team analysed ancient DNA and estimated an infection rate of 39%. However, the strains lacked the genes needed to be spread by flea bites, suggesting they moved directly from person to person.

Microsoft introduces pay-as-you-go model for AI agents



John Xavier

For the past two years, the AI industry has been trying to solve a billing problem: how do you charge users for artificial intelligence?

Bundling AI services into software subscriptions and selling it the way enterprise software has been sold for years looked fine for some time. Microsoft, Google and others added AI assistants to their productivity suites and put a monthly price tag on them.

That logic worked if companies were already paying per employee for email, spreadsheets and collaboration tools. But AI is unlike traditional software.

One employee may use an AI assistant a few times a week to summarise meetings. Another may use it all

day to analyse documents, write reports and automate repetitive tasks. Increasingly, AI systems are also becoming agents that can perform actions on behalf of users, carrying out tasks that would previously have required hours of human effort. This leads to a mismatch between how AI is consumed and how it is billed.

That is what makes Microsoft's latest move interesting. The company has introduced a pay-as-you-go model for its AI agents, allowing customers to pay according to usage rather than committing solely to fixed licences.

What Microsoft is really doing is moving AI closer to the economics of cloud computing.

Cloud computing became a trillion-dollar business because it replaced large upfront investments with consumption-based pricing. Companies could rent computing power as required and pay for what



Microsoft has introduced a pay-as-you-go model for its AI agents, allowing customers to pay according to usage. REUTERS

they used.

The model worked because it aligned costs with value. If a business needed more computing resources, it paid more. If demand fell, spending fell too. AI seems to indicate a similar trend.

The challenge with subscription pricing for AI services is that it assumes every user derives roughly the same value from the service. In reality, AI usage varies enormously. Some workers barely touch these tools. Others rely on them constantly. The gap is like-

ly to become even wider as AI agents become more capable and autonomous. A flat monthly fee begins to look increasingly arbitrary in such a world. So, the new pricing attempts to solve that problem by linking spending to usage. Customers can experiment without making large commitments.

But the reason behind Microsoft taking this route isn't just to give its customers more autonomy.

For instance, once Word is installed, Microsoft does not incur any additional

cost each time a customer types out a new document. The product has been sold. But with AI, the business relationship is back and forth. Every prompt, every response and every agent action consumes computing resources. This type of supplier and customer relationship will shoot up the token generation cost for cloud providers.

No wonder Microsoft picked a consumption-based model that reflects this reality far more accurately than a fixed subscription. In effect, the Windows software maker is likely treating AI as an organism that grows and takes new forms inside an organisation.

The company's experience with Azure suggests it understands how to build operating models around metered consumption. Enterprises have already become comfortable paying for storage, computing power and databases this way. Paying for AI

capacity may not be such a dramatic leap.

Yet there are reasons for caution. The same pricing model that makes cloud computing flexible can also make it unpredictable. Anyone who has ever been surprised by a cloud-services bill knows that usage-based pricing has a downside. Customers like paying only for what they use, but they also like knowing what next month's bill will look like.

But as the use of AI agents expands in organisations, it will be difficult to forecast how much to budget for the next quarter. Organisations face a challenge akin to modernising the plumbing of an old, large building.

If AI agents become deeply embedded in their business processes, usage could rise rapidly. Microsoft's challenge will be convincing customers that they can scale their AI deployments without losing control of spending.



Question Corner

Dive and resurface

Why do recessive traits from older generations suddenly resurface in one individual?

– Deva Narayanan

Genes work in pairs. Every person inherits two copies of most genes, one from each parent. Some gene variants, called dominant alleles, express themselves even when only one copy is present. Others, called recessive alleles, express themselves when a person inherits both copies. Someone with one recessive allele alongside a dominant one is called a carrier: they will show no sign of the trait. So a family may carry the allele for a particular eye colour, yet a single person won't display

it if in every generation, each carrier is paired with someone who has the dominant allele.

But when two carriers have a child together, each parent may pass on their recessive allele, and if both do, the child inherits two copies. Thus, the trait will finally express itself. Chance has a starring role. When eggs and sperm form, genes get shuffled and distributed at random, creating a vast range of possible combinations, which is why even full siblings can inherit different traits from the same parents.

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

What does the U.S.-Iran agreement say?

What are the main provisions of the U.S.-Iran memorandum of understanding signed on June 15? What commitments have the two countries made under the deal regarding nuclear activities and sanctions? How does the issue of Iran's frozen assets feature in the agreement? Why is Israel opposed to the agreement? What are the main sticking points?

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

After 40 days of war and more than 60 days of intense negotiations, the U.S. and Iran, on June 15, agreed to a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to end the war and start more substantive negotiations on contentious issues. The deal has kicked off a geopolitical storm, with Israel opposing it firmly, causing an unlikely rift between Washington and Tel Aviv. U.S. President Donald Trump, who ripped up the 2015 Iran deal, which was signed by the Obama administration, is facing backlash at home for the concessions Washington has made to Tehran. Iran's leadership claims that they defeated the U.S. and Israel in the war and that the terms of the MoU underscored their victory. While the agreement has brought lingering post-ceasefire skirmishes between the U.S. and Iran to an end, this is not a final settlement.

What does the deal say?

The opening article of the MoU calls for a ceasefire on all fronts, "including Lebanon". It calls on both sides to respect each other's sovereignty and to refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs. The U.S. has lifted its naval blockade of Iranian ports, while Iran has taken steps to remove its restrictions on the Strait of Hormuz. The text calls on Iran to remove all impediments, including mines, within 30 days of the signing of the deal.

One of the contentious issues during the talks was Iran's demand for access to its frozen funds and for war reparations. The text says Iran will have its funds unfrozen contingent on progress in the second phase of the talks, without specifying the amount or timeline. Iranian state media have reported that Iran has demanded that \$24 billion be unfrozen. Mr. Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance have said that no American money will be paid to Iran. That could be technically correct as the frozen funds are Iranian assets held in different banks across the world under U.S. sanctions. If the U.S. lifts the sanctions, countries and banks could make the transfer.

The U.S. would also work with other regional countries to draw up a plan for Iran's reconstruction and redevelopment, which would involve \$300 billion in financing. Iran will have access to these funds if a final settlement is reached.

What commitments has Iran made?

Iran, on its part, has pledged never to make a nuclear weapon. This has been the official Iranian position for years. The Iranians had made the same pledge in the 2015 Obama-Iran deal as well. While more contentious issues such as Iran's possession of 60% enriched uranium (which is a step away from weapons-grade purity) and Iran's enrichment capabilities are to be discussed in the second phase, according to the text released by the White House,

Both sides also agreed to maintain the status quo until they reach the final deal – Iran will not expand its nuclear programme and the U.S. will not impose additional sanctions and deploy more troops to the region



A woman weeps as she sits on the rubble at the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted the southern Lebanese village of Qennarit on June 20. AFP

both sides have mutually agreed to "downblend" (dilute) Iran's enriched material under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Other issues such as enrichment in Iran and the country's nuclear needs will be discussed as part of the final deal.

Both sides also agreed to maintain the status quo until they reach the final deal – Iran will not expand its nuclear programme and the U.S. will not impose additional sanctions and deploy more troops to the region. Upon signing the MoU, the U.S. will issue waivers for the export of Iran's crude oil, petroleum products, and other derivatives, and all associated services, including banking, transactions, insurances, and transportation.

Where does Israel stand?

For Israel, the U.S.-Iran deal appears to be a major strategic setback. Israel launched this war with the U.S. on February 28 to bring about regime change in Iran, destroy its nuclear and missile capabilities, and stop the country from supporting its non-state allies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthis. Israel had been a big proponent of a war on Iran – officials of former U.S. administrations had said Israel had pushed previous Presidents to launch strikes on Iran. After the attacks by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023, the Zionist state fought a multi-front war against Hamas, Hezbollah, and the then Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad – all Iranian allies. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 weakened Iran's regional standing further, as Syria was a key link between Hezbollah and Tehran. In June 2025, Israel bombed Iran aimed at destroying

The war in Lebanon posed the first test to the deal on Saturday when Iran announced that it had closed the Strait of Hormuz, citing Israeli attacks on Lebanon

its nuclear facilities. The U.S. joined in, but after a single strike, Mr. Trump enforced a ceasefire between Israel and Iran. But the 12-day war, as it is called, was only a trial run.

What Tel Aviv wanted was regime change in Tehran, which it thought would reshape West Asia with Israel being at the centre of a new unipolar regional order. But this project collapsed as Iran survived the 40 days of bombing. Iran's stranglehold of the Strait of Hormuz and its refusal to make concessions on the nuclear issue forced the U.S. to diverge from Israel's maximalist demands and take a more narrowed-down approach to end the war and address the nuclear question diplomatically. But to address these issues diplomatically after the war's failure, the U.S. would have to give substantial economic concessions to Tehran. As the U.S. is doing just that, Israel, increasingly isolated and frustrated, fears that the deal would render Iran conventionally stronger, altering the regional balance of power.

Why does Lebanon matter?

Despite being cut off from the Iran-U.S. diplomatic process, Israel still possesses a key card – Lebanon. Israeli troops have occupied parts of Southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold. Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militia-cum-political party, is a close ally of Iran. To have a ceasefire in Lebanon, which

has been mentioned in the MoU, Mr. Trump should get Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on board. Since Israeli troops are present in South Lebanon, Hezbollah, which is far from defeated, is targeting the occupying force. And in the name of striking Hezbollah, Israel is bombing Lebanon.

Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz have said that the Israeli troops will not pull back from Southern Lebanon. This keeps Lebanon as a flashpoint with a potential for escalation. An Iranian delegation was supposed to travel to Geneva to start direct negotiations for the second phase on June 19, but Iran called off talks, citing Israel's attacks on Lebanon. Mr. Netanyahu seems determined to use the Lebanon card, making the U.S.-Iran peace process complicated. Israel's continued attacks in Lebanon and its public criticism of the Iran MoU have triggered rare public criticism of Israel from top American officials, including Mr. Trump and Mr. Vance.

Will the agreement hold?

Both Mr. Trump and the Iranians seem determined to take the peace process to the next step. Mr. Trump, who bombed Iran for 40 days, and kept a blockade on Iran for roughly 60 days, realises the massive economic costs of the war. The war was also unpopular at home and cost the U.S. billions of dollars, depleting its stockpile of weapons.

Iran, on the other hand, has emerged regionally stronger. It will restart negotiations with the U.S. without the fear of a U.S. strike. But at the same time, Iran wants long-term economic relief and security guarantees to rebuild the country and address internal resentment. While there are incentives for both sides to reach a final settlement, there are three key sticking points. The first is Lebanon. As long as Israeli troops continue occupation of Southern Lebanon, the country will remain a tinderbox. And given that Israel is critical of the U.S.-Iran deal, Mr. Netanyahu could escalate the war aimed at torpedoing the detente. The war in Lebanon posed the first test to the deal on Saturday when Iran announced that it had closed the Strait of Hormuz, citing Israeli attacks on Lebanon.

The second is Iran's highly enriched uranium (HEU). The U.S., until recently, argued that Iran's HEU should be taken out of the country and destroyed, whereas Iran has always opposed such a move. Mr. Trump said last week that the HEU would be diluted "either in America or in Iran", which was a concession. A final agreement should draw up the modalities for downblending under the IAEA's supervision, which also means that Iran should restore IAEA access to its nuclear sites.

The third issue is Iran's 'enrichment right'. The U.S., until the war began, opposed any enrichment on Iranian soil, which had been the Israeli position as well. Iran says it will continue to enrich uranium for civilian purposes. The final agreement should narrow the gap between these two positions as well.

Why have India's statistical databases been upgraded?

What key economic indicators have been revised? Why was an overhaul of the databases necessary? What changes were made to the national accounts and GDP estimates? How has the measurement of industrial output been improved? What changes have been made to India's inflation indicators?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

Last November, the Indian government received a 'C' grade, the second-lowest grade, by the International Monetary Fund for the quality of its national accounts statistics. Over the last few months, it has made several upgrades to its statistical databases, improving their timeliness, representativeness, accuracy, and coverage. These improvements have been wide-ranging, covering the way India measures its gross domestic product (GDP), the value addition in the economy, industrial output, and price levels at the retail, wholesale, and producer levels.

What are the metrics that have been updated?

The most significant of these changes was made to India's national accounts statistics in February this year by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). National accounts include several key metrics such as GDP, gross value added (GVA), sector-wise output and growth figures, and the contributions of each of the engines of growth to the economy – government expenditure, private investment, household consumption, and trade. These are released on a quarterly and annual basis.

In June, MoSPI also updated the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), which captures how industrial activity in the economy is doing on a monthly basis. This includes key sectors such as manufacturing, mining, electricity, infrastructure, capital goods, and consumer goods. Apart from providing a regular snapshot of how the industrial sectors are doing, these monthly figures also feed into the GDP and GVA metrics.

The third broad set of upgrades were to how India measures inflation. Price changes at the retail level, which is meant to capture the consumer-end of the market, are measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Similarly, price changes at the wholesale level, which is ideally meant to capture the prices that producers get, are measured by the Wholesale Price Index (WPI). MoSPI releases the CPI while the Ministry of Commerce and Industry releases the WPI. Both these indices have been significantly

updated and upgraded – the CPI in February and the WPI in June.

In June, the Commerce Ministry also introduced a new index – the Producer Price Index (PPI) – which not only captures the price impact on producers more accurately, but will also replace the WPI entirely in five years.

Why was an update needed?

These databases were outdated and were becoming less representative of reality with each passing year. The GDP and GVA data, for example, had a base year of 2011-12, as did the IIP. The economy has changed substantially in the years since then, with the contribution of several sectors to the economy growing while others have diminished in importance. An outdated base year weakens the overall measurements and makes them less representative of the current reality.

Before they were updated, the WPI and CPI had base years of 2011-12 and 2012, respectively. Here, too, the outdated indices were measuring price changes and index values based on household consumption patterns that were about 15 years old. Several items used back then, such as DVDs and cassettes, were included in the indices even though

they are not used now. Conversely, several items that are being used now were not captured by the indices because they were not in use back then. More accurate price information is important not just for policymaking but also for a more accurate measure of the size of the economy and its growth. The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee, for example, uses the CPI to gauge inflation and decide on interest rates. The Dearness Allowance and Dearness Relief given to current and former government employees, respectively, are pegged to inflation. The rate of growth of the real economy, which is the commonly accepted metric used to measure growth worldwide, is arrived at after having adjusted the impact of inflation on the economy.

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What changes were made to the national accounts?

First, the base year was updated to 2022-23, immediately making the data more representative of the current situation. Apart from this, the new series of national accounts has also incorporated several methodological changes and measurement improvements.

One of the most important changes, and one that has long been advocated by statisticians, was the incorporation of the 'double deflator' method for estimating real GDP growth. This adjusts input and output prices separately, providing a much more accurate picture of the impact of price changes. Currently, the 'double deflator' method is being used for agriculture and manufacturing. It is expected to be adopted for the other sectors as well over time.

The other important change was the segregation of activities in multi-activity enterprises. There are several companies that are active across different sectors. Earlier, the data would capture the company's entire output and allocate it to the main sector within which it was operating. This yielded a somewhat inaccurate measure of sectoral activity. Now, the output will be allocated to each sector proportionately, providing a more accurate picture.

The new series also incorporates new data sources such as the Goods and Services Tax data and the Periodic Labour Force Surveys. It also incorporates several improvements in statistical methodology that will reduce discrepancies.

What other changes were made to output measures?

MoSPI updated the base year of the IIP to 2022-23 and expanded its coverage by including sectors such as gas supply, water supply, sewerage, and waste

management activities, while retaining the previous sectors. Simultaneously, the index was revamped to provide greater granularity in terms of sources of electricity (renewable and non-renewable), and the types of minerals produced.

The revised item basket consists of 1,042 products mapped to 463 item groups, compared to 839 items mapped to 407 item groups in the previous series.

What are the inflation-related changes?

The base year of the CPI was updated to 2024, and the basket of items it measures as well as their relative weightages were pegged to the latest Household Consumption Expenditure Survey of 2023-24. The price change metrics now better reflect the current consumption patterns of households.

The data is also more illustrative, with the tables providing 12 different categories of items compared to the six groups in the previous series. Overall, the total number of items measured – including both goods and services – has increased from 299 to 358.

These additions of goods and services include for the first time inclusion of rural house rent, modern consumption items such as online media services and fuels such as CNG and PNG, and improvements in the measurement of telephone charges, rail fare, air fare, fuel, postal charges and online media and streaming services. Items that are no longer used, such as VCRs, DVD players, radio, tape recorders, and cassettes, were removed from the CPI.

The WPI was similarly updated, with its base year revised to 2022-23 and the number of items expanded from 697 to 957. The new series also incorporates several methodological refinements.

The data have also been reorganised more logically. For instance, crude petroleum and natural gas have been moved from the 'Primary Articles' category to the 'Fuel and Power' major group, which already includes other key fuels such as coal, electricity and petroleum products.

The third major change introduced by the Commerce Ministry was the adoption of a PPI. Unlike the WPI, the PPI separately tracks the prices producers pay for inputs and the prices they receive for their outputs. The PPI excludes additional costs such as transport and indirect taxes, which the WPI includes. This makes the PPI a more accurate representation of prices at the producer level. It also incorporates both goods and services, which makes it more holistic. The government has indicated that the WPI will be phased out over the next five years, leaving the CPI and PPI as the country's two principal price indices.



Items like DVD players and tape recorders have been removed from CPI. GETTY IMAGES

PROFILES

A platform for the globalised elite

Group of Seven

The grouping of industrialised nations, founded in the 1970s, has weathered major geopolitical storms across the 20th and 21st centuries to remain a key forum for discussions and decision-making on global conflicts and economic challenges

Kallol Bhattacharjee

The 1960s were a period of restlessness. The anti-Vietnam war protests and civil rights agitation made the Lyndon Johnson administration uneasy. It was in this backdrop that Johnson came to Michigan on May 22, 1964 to deliver his 'Great Society' speech. Johnson quoted Greek philosopher Aristotle to talk about how to create prosperity. "The Great Society" he said, "rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning."

The previous decade had seen the arrival of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that mobilised the decolonised societies. With the upswing in domestic disturbances in the U.S. it was obvious that the U.S. that had provided loans and economic assistance after the Second World War would no longer be able to provide leadership to the global north on its own and that it would require support from the partner countries in the West. As the decolonisation gathered speed, there was a greater need for the Global North to team up. Thus was born the idea of reviving the Global Economic Governance in favour of the industrialised economies out of which would emerge the Group of Seven (G7) in the following decade.

The Global Economic Governance (GEG) had been fashionable since the beginning of the Bretton Woods system but after nearly a decade of unrest in western societies, a definite push came in 1973 when the Yom Kippur war and hostilities between the Arabs and Israel triggered the first oil shock. The oil shock highlighted that the emerging order would challenge the domination of the western world.

In this backdrop, the first World Economic Summit was organised by French President Giscard d'Estaing and West Germany's Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1975 who invited the leaders of the U.K., Italy, Japan and the U.S. for a meeting at the Chateau



de Rambouillet in France. It began as the Group of Six and in 1976, Canada joined the grouping, making it the G7. The economic and financial crises of that time provided the G7 the agenda for the foreseeable future as it came to be known as a platform of industrialised countries for dealing with financial challenges.

Beyond economy

The 1970s were the decade of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) under which the Global south under the leadership of the Group of 77 and NAM demanded the establishment of a new economic order. Under this system, developing nations pushed for a transformation of global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to deal with the requirements of the newly decolonised economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America. These demands, however, had to be adjusted against the overall power dynamics between the two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The G7 started playing a bigger role beyond pure economic issues during the 1980s when it provided a platform to industrialised countries to coordinate response to major conflicts that threatened to interrupt global supply chains. First was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was followed almost simultaneously by the hostilities between the U.K. and Argentina over the Falkland islands and the Iran-Iraq war. It also played an active role in dealing with various sides for the Lebanese civil war. In 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon, the G7 expressed shock on Israel's actions. On the Falklands dispute, however, it supported the U.K. and warned about controlling the conflicts in the West Asian region as they could spill into larger disruption of energy and navigation.

Through coordination among the major economies, G7 for the first time in 1990 showed that it had acquired the ability to put economic pressure to a country that refused to abide by the norms of the international order. As

Saddam Hussein prepared to invade Kuwait in August 1990, the G7 convened a meeting in Houston and ensured that Hussein would not profit from forcibly acquiring the energy wealth of Kuwait. By handling a range of conflicts in the 1980s, G7 evolved from the strictly an economic platform to a strategic international mechanism that could play a greater role in maintaining the status quo and avoid shocks and disruptions to the system.

The end of the Cold War provided the G7 with the major opportunity to reinvent itself and this it did by opening its doors to Russia. Already during the Iraqi crisis of 1990-91, G7 had succeeded in getting the USSR on board. The new equation with the USSR was made evident with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev to the G7 London summit on July 14-16, 1991.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the G7 invited Russian President Boris Yeltsin on multiple occasions, indicating a deeper integration of post-Soviet Russia into the international financial architecture.

During this period, the G7 also helped Russia deal with the demands for transition by supporting it with an economic package. In 1998, Russia formally joined the grouping, transforming it into G8.

France summit

The G7's most visible role in recent years has been in opposing Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, G8 expelled Russia reverting the grouping to its earlier avatar of G7. That apart, the grouping has emerged as a forum for important discussions in dealing with issues that are global in nature and require a collective action. Among the issues that the G7 has prioritised are climate change, pandemic preparedness, energy security, critical minerals and preservation of supply chains. In order to address these vital issues, the G7 has welcomed participation by other important countries such as India, Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, Ukraine and the UAE to its summit meetings and consultations.

In 52nd G7 summit, held in France on June 15-17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had participated. Among the topics discussed at the summit were the Ukraine war, the U.S.-Iran deal, global economic imbalances, Artificial Intelligence and debt burdens in the developing countries.

As the world deals with major supply chain disruptions and uncertainties following the eruption of the U.S.-Israel war against Iran and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the G7, with its permanent guest European Union, has provided an additional mechanism to discuss difficult issues, often providing its high power table to dissect policies that are relevant to the world order.

This informal meeting allows the global leaders a much required interaction that is not possible within the confines of the UN. While the world has gone through the Cold War and post-Cold War phases, the G7 remains a continuity as it maintains the globalised economic structure without allowing cracks to spread.

THE GIST

In the backdrop of the oil shock, French President Giscard d'Estaing and West Germany's Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1975 organised a summit with leaders from the U.K., Italy, Japan and the U.S. in France to discuss economic challenges

It began as the Group of Six and in 1976, Canada joined the grouping, making it the G7

The economic and financial crises of that time provided the G7 the agenda for the foreseeable future as it came to be known as a platform of industrialised countries for dealing with financial challenges

Officer at the helm

Lt. Gen. Dhiraj Seth

The new Army Chief assumes command at a juncture marked by rapid technological advances, evolving security challenges, and a growing emphasis on joint operations

Saurabh Trivedi

Lt. Gen. Dhiraj Seth, presently serving as the Vice Chief of the Army Staff, will assume office as the 31st Chief of the Army Staff on June 30, succeeding Gen. Upendra Dwivedi upon his retirement.

Lt. Gen. Seth will be the seventh officer from the Armoured Corps to assume the post. Of the previous six Armoured Corps officers who became Army chief, two took over after the position unexpectedly fell vacant. While the Infantry has produced most of India's Army chiefs, five have come from the Corps of Artillery and one from the Corps of Engineers.

Lt. Gen. Seth is set to remain in office until August 31, 2028. The last Armoured Corps officer to head the Indian Army was Gen. S. Roy Chowdhury, who served as Army chief from 1994 to 1997.

A highly accomplished Armoured Corps officer with nearly four decades of distinguished service, Lt. Gen. Seth brings to the position extensive operational experience, strategic vision and a strong record in military modernisation.

An alumnus of the prestigious National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, and the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, Lt. Gen. Seth was commissioned into the Armoured Corps in December 1986.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Throughout his career, he has served across diverse operational environments, from desert warfare formations to counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir.

He commanded an Armoured Regiment in the desert sector, an Armoured Brigade in the Western Theatre and a Counter-Insurgency Force in Jammu & Kashmir.

Following his promotion to Lieutenant General, he led the prestigious Sudarshan Chakra Corps, one of the Indian Army's premier strike formations, before serving as General Officer Commanding, Delhi Area. He later commanded both South Western Command and Southern Command.

Lt. Gen. Seth has also held several key staff and strategic appointments. These include Brigadier Major of an Independent Armoured Brigade in Jammu & Kashmir, Operations Officer with the UN Mission in Angola and Assistant Military Secretary at Army Headquarters.

Widely regarded as one of the architects of the Indian Army's modernisation efforts, Lt. Gen. Seth has played a pivotal role in strategic planning, force structuring and capability development.

Tri-service exercises

He also oversaw major operational preparedness and training activities, including large-scale joint and tri-service exercises focused on emerging domains such as cyber, information warfare, multi-domain operations and amphibious capabilities. Among these, Exercise Trishul reflected the growing emphasis on integrated operations and joint warfighting concepts. His tenure witnessed continued emphasis on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), reflecting the Indian Army's commitment to national resilience and support for civil authorities.

He has served as Colonel Capability Development for Mechanised Forces, Brigadier Perspective

Plans and Acquisition, and Additional Director General Capability Development. In these capacities, he contributed to the Army's Long-Term Integrated Perspective Planning process and future capability enhancement roadmap.

As General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command, he championed technology adoption, innovation and civil-military collaboration. A scholar-soldier, Lt. Gen. Seth is a graduate of the Higher Command Course and the National Defence College, and has attended advanced military courses in France and the U.S.

He comes from a military family. He is the son of Lt. Ge. Krishna Mohan Seth, former Adjutant General of the Indian Army and former Governor of Tripura and Chhattisgarh. The family shares a unique legacy, with both father and son having commanded the Sudarshan Chakra Corps. His younger brother, Rear Admiral Ravnish Seth, is a serving Flag Officer in the Indian Navy.

Lt. Gen. Dhiraj Seth assumes command at a crucial juncture marked by rapid technological advancements, evolving security challenges and an increasing emphasis on joint military operations. The task before him is to lead the Indian Army through its next phase of transformation and preparedness.

Mass messaging and more

Telegram

The 'WhatsApp alternative' with a strong commitment to user privacy, which has over 15 crore users in India, is facing a week-long ban in the country

Aroon Deep

The mythology surrounding Telegram founder Pavel Durov is one of exile and reinvention: Mr. Durov declined to cooperate with Russian diktats to fork over data on Ukrainian protesters in 2014, in the months following the Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv. Mr. Durov's previous company, VKontakte, remains a popular social media platform with much of the same design language and content as Telegram, which was created around the same time he left Russia.

To understand Telegram's success in the highly expensive and competitive messaging app market, it is useful to look at what the app does differently from WhatsApp, or even Signal. The service moved quickly in its early years to deploy features that have made it a favourite among activist and dissident circles. For instance, channels send push notifications at a massive scale to subscribers, allowing activists, politicians and even news organisations to quickly get instant viewership on fast-moving events like the Russia-Ukraine war.

While some of those features have found their way into WhatsApp, Telegram stayed relevant with two more things that its competitors may have had less



REUTERS

appetite for: incredibly large filesharing limits, and a penchant for performing its stated principles – a commitment to "user privacy and human rights such as freedom of speech and assembly," according to an automated message shared with journalists who send the platform any inquiries.

Deep imprint

The latter manifested in its decision to quickly challenge a week-long ban in India starting June 16, following the National Testing Agency's (NTA) concerns that exam paper leak related frauds, made possible by editing features the app provides to backdate newly uploaded documents, may cause mass confusion. Telegram lost its petition in the Delhi High Court seeking to overturn this ban.

Just like Meta and X, a billionaire founder's personal philosophies have left a deep imprint on the app's functioning. Mr. Durov said the firm loses "tens of millions of dollars" in India – an estimate that is consis-

tent with its 15 crore-strong user base and the likely hundreds of terabytes of data travelling through the platform each day.

Unlike Meta and X, which are part of a diversified galaxy of firms, allowing their founders to cross-subsidise heavy messaging, Mr. Durov's firm is purely messaging-focused. That may have naturally incentivised the firm to vigorously fight bans and restrictions wherever possible.

But that confrontation has come with little representation. Even in a market where the firm loses millions of dollars with such a large user base, it has only a handful of employees, mostly to liaise with the Union government. It has been embroiled in copyright-related cases at a massive scale, for instance with some Hindi newspaper publishers.

It ended up making concessions, but the last-minute participation in court – when its availability was under legitimate threat – was also visible in Brazil,

where it had no personnel or legal representation at hand until a judge blocked the platform entirely. Mr. Durov, a French-Emirati-Russian citizen, was himself arrested in France for allegedly lax moderation on the platform of child sex abuse and exploitation material.

A result of not having diversified business interests is that the firm gets to speak its mind. That is certainly not the case with firms like Meta and Google, which are often in a balancing act with the Union government in cases like censorship, since they have a vast array of digital revenues at risk if they are seen as too obdurate. Relenting to demands and a give-and-take approach to a relationship with the state is typical of the Big Tech giants.

Not Telegram. The firm's official X handle quickly responded with open derision to the ban, even as advocates at Khaitan & Co. were strenuously making a legal case to quash the ban in court. "Over 300,000 people die of drowning each year. In order to protect society, it is now illegal to consume or possess water," the account posted on June 17. "Your government is also considering banning solid food, as it presents a need-less choking hazard. You are not an adult. You are a baby. Eat the baby food," it added.



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

Price of misalignment
in the West Asia conflict

India's strategic partners started a war that worsened its regional security environment, torpedoed its economy, cost Indian lives, empowered Pakistan, and cemented China's big power status. And New Delhi didn't — or couldn't — shape the war's outcome

omy, nor about singularly burdening India with the weight of international norms that other States are unwilling to uphold even though common sense dictates they should. It is neither a debate about India's ability, desirability, or suitability to mediate. There is a deeper issue: India's strategic partners started a war that worsened its regional security environment, torpedoed its economy, cost Indian lives, empowered Pakistan, and cemented China's big power status. And New Delhi didn't — or couldn't — shape the war's outcome. There are five lessons for India here.

The first is simple: India must not base its foreign-policy decisions on optical illusions. There is no doubting the earnestness with which India invested in the UAE, its attempts to improve ties with Saudi Arabia, its participation in the I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, US) grouping, or its ambition to build maritime connectivity to Europe via West Asia. These moves occurred in tandem with a downtick in ties with an insular, hardline, and unerving Iran. But these peacetime initiatives collapsed during the war. The problem is not what India built with Israel, the US, and the UAE, but what it lost in the process — Iran.

To lose Iran was neither India's active choice nor truly a *fait accompli*; the US coerced and co-opted India into doing so over the years. To be sure, Iran's nuclear programme, proxy wars across West Asia, criticism of India on Kashmir, and dispensability as an energy supplier made it easy for New Delhi to look the other way. This war has undone all that. Iran is now setting the terms and the price of peace for the US and

its allies. Such is the depth of its win that even American vice-president JD Vance is now castigating Israel for its reckless, violent excesses. In just over three months, Iran wrecked the Saudi-UAE partnership and the US-Israel alliance. Therein lies the second lesson: India must not confuse military dominance with strategic effects. Israel is unquestionably the most powerful military actor in West Asia today. But it is also more insecure, isolated, and traumatised than ever before, and it has failed to contain Iran beyond its nuclear programme. If anything, this war has laid bare the horrors and limitations of Israel's unchecked military power. India must undertake a dispassionate analysis of Tel Aviv's shrunken positivity in West Asia, and what a post-Benjamin Netanyahu Israel would look like, however important a security partner it might be for New Delhi.

Much has been said about Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's ill-timed visit to Israel days before the war. That the two countries' security partnership has been lubricated by an ideological crossover between Zionism and Hindutva is now a mainstream view. Though valid, this view risks undervaluing counter-currents such as New Delhi's fast-evaporating patience for Israel's penchant for war. Even the Rashtriya Swamsevaka Sangh (RSS) has internally been more nuanced about how India should have handled this war and its ties with Iran, despite its affinity for Israel. All this is to say that India retains the capability to re-establish its long-held position of a natural balancing force in West Asia if it so wishes.

The third lesson is: Don't let emotions



The final deal is yet to be signed, and the agreement's endurance is questionable. But there is no mistaking that Iran has won the war and the US, along with Israel and its Gulf partners, has lost it.

AFP

It's signed ... this was not easy,' US President Donald Trump said after signing a 14-point "memorandum of understanding" to end America and Israel's war against Iran. Primarily mediated by Pakistan along with Qatar, the crux of this agreement is that Iran will not build or procure nuclear weapons in return for *status quo ante* at the Strait of Hormuz, Tehran will get "at least \$300 billion" for its "reconstruction and development", the US will lift "all types of sanctions", and Israel will halt military operations in Lebanon.

The final deal is yet to be signed, and the agreement's endurance is questionable. But there is no mistaking that Iran has won the war and the US, along with Israel and its Gulf partners, has lost it.

The termination of military operations is good for India's economic and strategic stability. But it raises a question: Was New Delhi's partiality towards the losing side worth it? This question is not about the false worship of concepts like strategic auton-

engagement with the Taliban in Kabul, though tactically sound, is of limited strategic value thanks to Pakistan's campaign of airstrikes and drone attacks that occurred in parallel to the US-Israel-Iran war. India's initial failure to condole the death of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei cost it much. Led by Khamenei's son, Mojtaba, Tehran is unlikely to forget this insult: just as it will not forget the debt of gratitude it owes to Pakistan for mediating its win. With Pakistan itself, stonewalling a diplomatic dialogue worked for a while for India, but such stonewalling is now way past its due date and will bring diminishing returns for India moving forward.

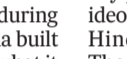
Then, has siding with the US and Israel in West Asia been worth it? In fairness, India cannot suddenly tilt towards the Iran-Russia-China axis. But it has ended up paying a steep price for siding tacitly with the losers. That's the fifth lesson. India boxed itself into



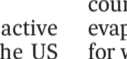
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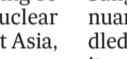
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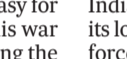
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SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



To drink or not, is the question of choice

I won't deny I enjoy a little tittle. In fact, of an evening, I often look forward to it. In Cambridge, Saturdays were occasions to drink. Many of my friends would want to get smashed. But I'm now too old for such youthful frolic. A measured, controlled drink suits me perfectly.

You can, therefore, guess that I'm not a supporter of the teetotalism forcibly imposed on Gujarat and Bihar. And if you tell me that many of the denizens of these states are also opposed to it, I wouldn't be surprised. People, I believe, should be free to do what they want within the limits of the law. Drinking is not a crime. But nor should it be compulsory. That's the point, believe it or not, I want to make today.

The good people of Ladakh want less opportunities to drink and less availability of alcohol. Not more. It's not what I would have expected, but it's the truth.

The Lieutenant Governor's administration decided in May to announce a new excise policy increasing retail outlets selling alcohol from two to 20. In the process, the sale of alcohol would be extended to remote parts of the Union Territory such as Nubra, Changthang, Sham, and Zaskar. This has upset the local population.

"Our stand is clear", the Ladakh Buddhist Association said in a statement. "We do not support the opening of 20 new wine shops or the unrestricted sale of alcohol in hotels, guest houses and homestays." The Kargil Democratic Alliance, a sister body, echoed this sentiment. "If liquor is banned in Bihar and Gujarat, why introduce it in Ladakh?"

This posed a perplexing dilemma for me. I believe alcohol should not be banned. In fact, it should be freely available for all adults who wish to imbibe. But what happens when they don't? When they actually

want it restricted? When they want to be teetotalers? What then?

I would say they have as much of a right to have their way as drinkers have to lawfully quaff. But it does pose a peculiar problem for the Union Territory's administration. They are not being asked to increase opportunities to buy alcohol but to limit and restrict them. If I understand correctly, neither the Ladakh Buddhist Association nor the Kargil Democratic Alliance want a complete ban. That's not what they are calling for. They just don't want the excise policy expanded and liberalised. I presume they are happy with the situation that prevails today.

Now, you and I may find their position rather odd and peculiar. But there it is. And the question arises: Don't they have a right to be heard and adhered to? If people don't want more booze shops, why should these be forced upon them? Just as others have a right to drink and buy it easily, some have a right to make it difficult for themselves and less accessible. After all, the only people affected are the people of Kargil and Ladakh.

In writing this, I'm presuming that the LBA and the KDA as well as Ladakh's MP, Haji Hanifa, actually represent the majority opinion of the Union Territory. The accounts I have seen in newspapers, headlined 'Civil society groups up in arms over new Ladakh liquor policy', suggest they are speaking for the vast majority. If that is the case, I guess the Union territory has a right

I'M NOT A SUPPORTER OF THE TEETOTALISM FORCIBLY IMPOSED ON GUJARAT AND BIHAR. AND IF YOU TELL ME THAT MANY OF THE DENIZENS OF THESE STATES ARE ALSO OPPOSED TO IT, I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED

to ensure that alcohol remains difficult to access and only available in certain parts.

You could say it's a strange world. But in a democracy the majority have a right to get their way as long as their wishes are lawful and don't cause injury or disadvantage to others. In this instance they do, of course, make it difficult for those who want to drink. But I guess that has to be accepted. At least, Kargil and Ladakh are not asking for a complete ban on alcohol.

Meanwhile, I look forward to a drink tonight. Also, I'm in absolutely no hurry to visit Kargil and Ladakh. I'll patiently wait till the liquor policy is liberalised!

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

ANOTHER DAY

Namita Bhandare



Nation builders? No, just unpaid women workers

Sorry, your lordships. Women who labour at home to wash, clean, cook, bring up children, take parents to the doctor, go to the market, and do the countless other tasks of physical and emotional labour that keep their families happy — are not "nation-builders".

Call them homemakers. Call them unpaid domestic workers. Call them the scaffolding on which Busy Important men build their Busy Important careers. But, it's time to strip away the notion that the business of running a home is some sublime task suitable only for one gender.

The Supreme Court was dealing with an old question of how to financially compensate for a life lost in an accident. Compensation for men can be computed on a woman who makes no monetary contribution to a family but nonetheless provides it with free labour?

Apart from the irony that the worth of a woman's life should arise only after her death, there is the old patriarchal trick of whitewashing work nobody really wants to do with a coat of saintliness. So, cooking is not only a woman's job, it acquires an added touch of nobility when only a woman does it — *maa ke haath ka khaana* (the food cooked by a mother's hand).

When the Supreme Court observes that a "homemaker would now acquire the acronym of 'nation builder'", it's on us to reject the idea for what it is — one designed to keep us confined to the house, where we spend an average of 299 minutes a day to the 97 put in by men, according to the 2024 Time Use Survey.

Nation-building notwithstanding, the observations are a continuation of case law that has since 2010 recognised the economic value of women's unpaid work. In previous cases, says Prabha Kotiswaran, professor of law and social justice at

King's College, London, the court tended to award the bare minimum. Now, for the first time it has set a minimum of ₹30,000 a month as the notional value of housework. Compensation for accidents will then begin at that valuation.

This generosity, alas, does not extend to family courts where judges have been known to view a wife's failure to make tea and look after a husband's relatives as cruelty and, therefore, grounds for divorce. Judges are also known to lecture educated women for daring to seek maintenance and alimony instead of employment after a marriage collapses.

But, for now, putting a notional salary on unpaid housework makes this labour visible and also valuable.

A 2018 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) claimed that 16.4 billion hours are spent globally on unpaid care work every day.

This, says Kotiswaran, in her upcoming book *Wages for Housework*, is the equivalent of two billion people working eight hours a day with no remuneration. Over 80% of this work is done by women and girls above the age of six, and signs of change are slow: Between 1997 and 2012, the gender gap in time spent on unpaid care declined by a mere seven minutes. At this rate, it will take another 210 years to bridge the gap.

The challenge of getting more women into paid work is to even out the unpaid labour they perform at home. And to do that we need more than platitudes and pats on our backs. Women are not born with some inherent skill to do the laundry. But, yes, nation building via cooking and cleaning and bringing up upright citizens is everybody's job, women as well as men.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

Street food as theatre stages its own reality

As the sun goes down, behind the tall glass buildings of Noida, the white-collared workforce swipes out and spills onto the streets. Most of them are still less costly than a tokenised AI subscription, so they can choose to walk out early — at 5:30 pm sharp — dangling their lunchboxes, waiting to be plucked by a shared auto-rickshaw and be deposited to the nearest metro station.

And under these metro-stops in North India, a street-food festival is hosted every evening. The cuisine is, of course, dominated by the states which historically failed to provide jobs to their youth. The hawkers just cater to the dominant demand. The moment they hear a Metro arriving overhead, the hawkers start working their kerosene stoves.

Commercial LPG has been "Hormuzed"; hence, as it gets darker, the hiss of the blue flames becomes the background music of such festivals.

Street food is not just food, it's theatre. Each hawker is an artist, a choreographer, who has developed the muscle memory to pick up all the ingredients sequentially and mix them in the right proportion, in the shortest possible time. It's a dance. Just check how the *bhel puri wala* tosses chutneys in his tumbler, creates a mini tornado, then he deposits the greasy *bhel* on your quarter plate.

But there is no better show than what happens at the Chinese stall. The making

of the legendary Indian *chowmein*. Based on the empirical evidence collected by this author, the chow tastes the best when you are actually present, standing within a three-foot radius of the hawker, watching the violence first-hand.

Imagine you are hungry. Whatever you had for lunch felt like a product of social-ism aimed at removing some sort of social inequality. Once you walk out in the evening, you see a Chinese stall. You are suspicious of the quality, but then you spot a cluster of decent-looking people, perhaps young professionals wearing full-sleeved shirts with IT company lanyards around their necks. They are polishing off their plates with a focus usually reserved for quarterly reviews.

You approach the wiry-looking guy behind the counter. You place an order for a "half plate." He barely registers your request, as he is busy murdering a mountain of noodles with hellfire. His forehead glistens with sweat in the flickering, harsh light of a petromax lamp. He never takes his eyes off his wok.

You patiently wait as the fumes of soy sauce, vinegar, and unidentified "secret" spices waft from the desi iron wok and enter your nostrils. Suddenly, the guy throws a handful of chopped veggies into his massive wok — a *kadhaai* that has likely seen more action than most battlefields. The vegetables sizzle as they touch the hot surface.

Then he picks up a bottle, inverts it, and slaps the base to add generous spurts



Street food is not just food, it's theatre. Each hawker is an artist, a choreographer.

SHUTTERSTOCK

of a questionable, neon-red chilli sauce into the *kadhaai*. Then, comes the violence. He tosses it all together. Endlessly. You get hungrier with every flick of his wrist. Each time you think, "Surely, it's done," he finds another reason to toss it further. It's less of cooking and more of a ticketed performance where you happen to get a complimentary plate of "veg *chowmin*". Nothing elevates the taste of Indian street food more than a typo on the menu.

Everyone around the stall watches their "half/full plates" getting made. Nobody is checking their phone. In a country obsessed with construction, this is arguably the second-most watchable thing on the streets after "JCB digging."

You spot a couple waiting, company lanyards around their necks, smiling throughout. "*Bhaiya, hum dono ko thoda kam spicy*," says the girl; the *chowmein* guy acknowledges nothing, just like the last time. A budding office romance, baptised by *chowmein* fire.

Finally, it's done. Half plates emerge from a tub, being manned by a teenage aide who likely arrived from the same village as the master chef last week. Then, magically, the *chowmein-wallah* distrib-

utes the *kadhaai*-full of noodles equally into all the waiting plates with a precision that would baffle a card-carrying Communist. Then someone throws a garnish of freshly-cut raw onion and your order is served with a thin plastic fork planted firmly in the centre. Those onions, against this spice bomb below, taste like sweet apples. It is a transformation of the mundane into the extraordinary.

In a world that is increasingly becoming sanitised — delivered at your door in cardboard boxes through apps — the street food stall remains a bastion of reality. Street food dies after travelling 50 meters from its origin, what gets delivered home is just the corpse. Street food must be had on the street. It's the one place where the CEO and the delivery boy stand on the same uneven pavement, breathing in the same spice-laden air, waiting for a wiry man, the master percussionist, to finish his masterpiece. The typo in the menu is not a bug, it's a feature.

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

SUNDAY LETTERS

Medical opinions in the age of internet

This is with reference to "A worrying trend amidst UP women's health gains" by Lalita Panicker (June 14). With women using the internet for information about maternity, it is necessary to spread awareness about the benefits of normal delivery and the side-effects of C-section among women for their reproductive health.

Abhilasha Gupta

Loyalty to people before power

This is with reference to "TMC split: The morality of lawmakers is a rarity" by Karan Thapar (June 14). When politicians seek votes under a party banner and a leader's image, they enter into a moral contract with the electorate. Switching loyalties post-election for political convenience undermines this moral contract.

Sanjay Chopra

II

If the rebel lawmakers had an inkling that there is corruption in the party, they should have done their best to reform the party. Their actions are selfish and unethical.

Jayashree Kundu

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2026



Aditi Ashok made history at the 2016 Hero Women's Indian Open by becoming the first Indian player to win a Ladies European Tour title

Success creates a new problem

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

LAST WEEK, I found myself standing on a practice range watching a bunch of young women hit golf balls so far that I briefly considered taking up chess. Every year I convince myself that modern golf equipment is the reason youngsters hit it miles. Every year they prove me wrong by launching drives 30 yards past mine while looking like they're not even trying.

The truly depressing part is that some of these girls are young enough to call me "Uncle." As I watched them go about their business, it struck me how normal all this has become. Young girls aspiring to make a living from golf. Coaches, parents, sponsors and media all following the action. Twenty years ago, none of this was normal. In fact, if you had told me back then that the Women's Professional Tour in India would one day attract nearly 60 players for an event, I would have assumed you had accidentally counted spectators, caddies and the greenkeeping staff as competitors.

Yet here we are. The Hero Women's Pro Golf Tour recently attracted a record field of 57 entries. The women's professional tour was launched in 2006 with barely six professionals regularly competing.

The early days were not glamorous. There were no TV crews chasing players for interviews, no packed media centres and certainly no guarantees that the tour would survive. The prize purse was around ₹2 lakh per event. The objective was not to create stars. The objective was simply to create opportunities.

And that is why people like Champika Sayal, Simi Mehra and several others who worked tirelessly behind the scenes deserve enormous credit. Vision in sport is easy to appreciate after success arrives. It is much harder to appreciate when success is nowhere in sight. Imagine trying to convince sponsors, golf clubs and stakeholders that India needed a professional women's tour when there were only a handful of professionals available to play it. Yet that is exactly what these pioneers did. They believed that if a pathway existed, talented golfers would find it. As it turned out, they were right.

One thing golfers rarely appreciate is how difficult it is to create a professional tour. We tend to take tournaments for granted. But very few of us stop to think about what happens if those tournaments don't exist.

I remember the days when many talented women golfers faced a simple question after their amateur careers: "What next?" There weren't enough tournaments, enough opportunities or enough financial incentives to justify turning professional. For many families, the safer option was to move on from competitive golf altogether.

That's what makes the journey of the women's tour so remarkable. Parents could suddenly see a pathway. Coaches could encourage talented girls to stay in the sport. Young players could look at successful professionals and understand that golf wasn't just a hobby anymore. Today, that pathway is visible everywhere you look.

Players such as Vani Kapoor, the current leader of the Hero Order of Merit, have shown what consistency and perseverance can achieve. Others like Tvesha Malik, Ridhima Dilawari, Sneha Singh, Pranavi Rish

and several young challengers continue to push standards higher. At the international level, Aditi Ashok and Diksha Dagar have inspired an entire generation by proving that Indian women golfers can compete with the very best in the world.

The success stories have multiplied. And that brings us to an unusual problem. The tour has become a victim of its own success. Now before anyone gets upset, let me clarify. There are far worse problems in sport than having too many athletes. In fact, most sports in India would love to have this problem.

The challenge is that while participation has grown dramatically, the financial ecosystem hasn't quite kept pace. The prize purses have increased significantly from those early days. Events today offer between ₹13 lakh and ₹17 lakh, which is tremendous progress compared to where the tour started. But the number of professionals has grown even faster. Professional golf is expensive. Players travel, invest in coaching, fitness training, equipment, nutrition, accommodation and recovery. Unlike many team sports, there is no guaranteed monthly salary.

The top players find ways to survive and thrive. The challenge is often for those trying to establish themselves — the young professionals making the transition from amateur golf, the players ranked in the middle of the field and the talented youngsters hoping to climb the ladder.

The irony is that this situation exists because the tour has worked. For years, everyone wanted more women to take up golf professionally. Now they have. The same tour that once struggled to attract players is now attracting so many that a different challenge has emerged. That isn't criticism of the tour. Quite the opposite.

It is evidence that the tour has outgrown the assumptions on which it was originally built. And that is where corporate India has an opportunity.

Let's acknowledge the contribution of Hero MotoCorp. In Indian sport, we often celebrate the athlete holding the trophy and forget the people who kept the lights on long enough for that trophy to be won. Hero deserves enormous credit for being one of those rare sponsors who stayed for the journey rather than just the photo opportunity. But perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay Hero is this: the tour has now grown to a stage where it needs more companies to join them.

Women's professional golf in India no longer needs support because it is struggling. It needs support because it is succeeding. The participation is there. The aspirations are there. The structure is there. The players are there. What needs to catch up is the scale of investment.

As I watched those young golfers on the range, launching drives into the distance while simultaneously damaging my self-esteem, I realised something.

The founders of the women's tour probably dreamed of creating opportunities. I wonder if they ever imagined creating so many opportunities that one day 57 players would be fighting for a place in the field. That's not a crisis. That's one of the best success stories in Indian sport. Now the challenge is ensuring that the rewards grow as quickly as the dreams.

Because if the next generation is already hitting it 30 yards past me, the least we can do is make sure they're rewarded properly for it.

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

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The people saw through Mr Modi's exaggerated claims two years ago, and limited the BJP to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, denying the party a simple majority in the House. Two years later, the same claims are being made

ON AND AROUND June 9, 2026, a full-page advertisement appeared in several English and Tamil newspapers — and presumably in all Indian newspapers — listing the achievements of the Narendra Modi government during the last 12 years.

Significant milestone

Twelve years is a significant milestone. The Modi government was elected first in 2014, re-elected in 2019, and re-elected in 2024, but with a substantially reduced number. The BJP hailed the tenure of Mr Modi as the longest of any elected Prime Minister. Quite unnecessarily, it compared his tenure with the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru. Sans comparison, a tenure of 12 years is indeed enviable. Everyone knows that Nehru was the first prime minister of independent India; he won elections in 1952, 1957 and 1962, and he was prime minister for 17 years. He served as prime minister for the longest number of years, so far.

Every government is entitled to make claims, and a little amount of puffery is tolerated. But the advertisements in question went beyond puffery. The people saw through Mr Modi's exaggerated claims two years ago, and limited the BJP to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, denying the party a simple majority in the house. Two years later, the same claims are being made.

Without malice

Without malice, I wish to take a sample of the claims and show you what they are:

FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

ON THE EVE of Rahul Gandhi's birthday last week, I incurred the rage of his social media fan club. And for the oddest reason. It impressed me that the Leader of the Opposition made the effort to go to Kota and address a huge rally of students about the needless difficulties they have faced with paper leaks and an education system so lousy that coaching centres have replaced colleges. So, when a clip of him standing before a vast cheering crowd popped up, I paid attention and was surprised that his speech was in English.

So on 'X', I said that it would have been better if he had spoken in Hindi without expecting that the social media public square would explode. My post was viewed by nearly half a million people, liked by nearly a thousand and retweeted a lot. But, along with this came the fury of his fan club. I was accused of nurturing a special hatred for the Dynasty and of being a 'bootlicking' Modi bhakt. Let me get denials and disclaimers out of the way.

I have no 'hatred' for the Dynasty, but believe that by putting the interests of her children above the interests of Congress, Sonia Gandhi has ruined the only political party that can take on the BJP juggernaut. As for being a Modi



Rajasthan CM Bhajan Lal Sharma at a 'Lakhpati Didi Samvad Programme' in Jaipur

EXPRESS PHOTO

Puffery for advertisers, not achievers

■ Government has created 3 crore lakhpati didi

Lakhpati didi, according to the government's definition, is a female member of a Self Help Group (SHG). In August 2025, it was reported that 1,48,00,000 SHG members had become lakhpati didi. In March 2026, in response to a parliamentary Question, it was said 3,07,33,820 SHG members had self-declared that they were lakhpati didi. The SHG movement, which predates the Modi government, has empowered women and given them skills to earn more, but to claim that the Modi government had created 3 crore lakhpati didi is a tall claim. I doubt if an independent audit has confirmed the claim.

Let's examine the claim closely. India's working-age population of women (aged 15 years and above) is 53 crore, and the female participation (at LFPR of 41.7%) is about 22 crore — that's the number of women who are working or actively seeking work. If the claim of 3 crore lakhpati didi is accepted at face value, about one in seven women in the labour force (working or actively seeking work) is lakhpati! The SHG members (nearly all women) are estimated at 9-10 crore, which means that one in three members of SHGs is lakhpati!

The truth is that the claim relates not to the woman's own net worth but the woman's household's annual income. The claim conceals that other members of the household may earn incomes — the household may already have a total annual income of ₹1 lakh, and the woman may

contribute only a part. An annual household income of ₹1 lakh is not rare or unusual. In fact, it is common in a country with a per capita annual income of ₹2,05,324. The claim that the government created 3 crore lakhpati didi out of SHG members is hollow.

■ Government has increased number of operational airports from 74 to 164

Infrastructure is being built every year, and that includes airports that are AAI-owned based on the PPP model and private airports. The number 164 is correct, but the keyword is operational. The common citizen would believe that an operational airport has regular scheduled commercial passenger flights. In that view, the government's claim is not true. Airports include airports that are defence-related, cargo and training, but they offer no regular commercial passenger flights. Under the UDAN scheme, several small airports were operationalised, and passenger services were commenced; 774 routes were offered to airlines, but according to the C&AG, no commercial services were started on 403 routes. The C&AG also concluded that only 112 routes were operated during the three-year subsidy period, and once the subsidy ended, only 54 routes survived. In 2025, the government admitted that 15 UDAN airports became non-operational.

Industry estimates put the number of operational airports at 120.

■ Government has opened 1900+ Jan Aushadhi stores

The Jan Aushadhi stores programme was

started in 2008 but failed in 2013. After declaring that government has no business to be in business, the Modi government revamped and re-launched the programme in 2015 on a franchise model in order to provide quality medicines at affordable prices. Quality of medicines is regulated by the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) and the State Drug Control Authorities. Prices of essential medicines are regulated by the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA). Displaying MRP on every package is mandatory under the Legal Metrology Rules.

There are lakhs of private retail pharmacies owned and run by small businesspersons. Pharmacy chains by big businesses have also entered the market with a retail-cum-delivery model. As per industry estimates, the retail pharmacy business had a turnover of ₹2,25,000 crore in 2024-25. Jan Aushadhi pharmacies' combined sales turnover in 2024-25 was ₹2,022 crore at MRP value — less than 1% share of the market. We don't know whether the government bears a loss every year. If the quality and prices are not satisfactory, that is a failure of the two regulators.

The government's programmes are moderately successful. Truthful disclosure will enhance credibility. Puffery will not.

Website: pchidambaram.in

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Congress needs renewal. Not a cult leader

'bhakt', I have not been one for years.

For the record, I find Modi and Yogi's endless promotion of themselves on news channels embarrassing. Not just for them but for India. Their habit of singing their own praise is reminiscent of the north Korea model of governance.

It is my sincere hope that the Congress Party finds ways to strengthen its roots enough to put up a real fight in Uttar Pradesh next year and in the general election in 2029. For this to happen, Rahul Gandhi needs to stop imitating the worst traits of the BJP and copy the best ones. The worst traits include deploying venomous, vicious trolls on social media and creating a cult around the 'dear Leader.' Judging from two things I noticed on Rahul's birthday, it is evident that emulation of BJP worst practices has already happened. Rahul was depicted as Parshuram in a Bollywood style poster on his birthday, and sent a greeting card of nauseating sycophancy by the Karnataka Congress Party.

This greeting card had a picture of him from his more youthful days that said, 'happy birthday to heart of People Shri RAHUL GANDHI JI'. Wait, it gets worse. In a vertical spelling of his name alongside the smiling, youthful face was his name spelt in capital letters under a golden crown. 'Robust, affec-

tionate, heartfelt, unparalleled leader' were the words they spelt vertically with the letters of his name.

At the top of this greeting card were pictures of his Mummy and sister, and below were mugshots of Karnataka's senior leaders.

If the Congress Party has lost election after election after election in the past twelve years, it is because too much time has been spent burnishing the image of the 'dear leader' and not enough spent on building the party. There are millions of Indian voters who are tired of the Modi cult and would happily vote for the Congress Party if it revived. Revival must begin at the grassroots, and that is the hard work that has not been done. This is work that the BJP does on a constant basis, and this is why it is such a formidable electoral machine. The BJP also has a leader who works all the time. His dedication to working for 'my family of 140 crore people' is total and remarkable.

The Leader of the Opposition, for his part, raises important issues and then buzzes off on holiday and reappears with a new issue to latch onto. NEEET should have been raised long before the Cockroach Janata Party turned it into its defining cause. Education is the most important economic reform that Modi has neglected to make, and he seems never to have noticed that one of

the things that deters foreigners from investing in India is the horrific state of our cities. These are both issues that the Congress Party can make its own.

Of late, I am forever running into people who say to me sadly that they are sick and tired of religion being dragged into politics and that they would happily vote for the Congress Party if it got its act together. For this to happen, we need to hear less about the man who is the 'heart of India' and more about the values that Congress once stood for. Liberal democracy, secularism and tolerance of dissent. I have left 'socialism' out because, after the License Raj ended, it gradually became less relevant and has strangely found its way into Modi's economic ideas.

The most important lesson that Rahul can learn from Modi is his ability to rectify his mistakes and then erase them as if they never happened. This happened with demonetisation and the disastrous early handling of the COVID epidemic. The Congress Party has made many mistakes too, which BJP spokesmen bring up daily on prime-time chat shows. Congress spokespersons have learned to fight back on TV and on social media, but what has not happened at all is a serious attempt to rebuild the party's broken organisational frame brick by brick and with urgency.

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"WE ALWAYS HAVE HOPED THAT AMERICAN DIPLOMACY DEPLOYS ITSELF IN DIALOGUE AND PERSUASION RATHER THAN BY ULTIMATUMS. THAT IS THE PATH WE WANT IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS."
— MAHMOUD ABBAS

The Pioneer AGENDA

Dropping the 'Indo': What America's Pacific Pivot means for India



KRIPA NAUTIYAL

When the United States Department of Defence quietly announced the reversion of its largest combatant command from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) back to U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), on the eve of the multilateral G7 summit, it framed the change as administrative housekeeping - a tribute to the command's heritage dating to 1947. Few in Washington's diplomatic circles bought that explanation. Fewer still in New Delhi.

The deletion of a single prefix - "Indo" - unravels nearly a decade of carefully constructed strategic signalling. When the Trump administration inserted that word in 2018, it was a deliberate geopolitical act, stitching together two oceans into one theatre and formally positioning India as a central pillar of American grand strategy. The Biden and early Trump years built upon that architecture. The 2026 reversion dismantles it. This is not bureaucratic tidying. It is a recalibration of American priorities - and India must read it as such.

From a grand strategic vision, the focus has been reduced to a tactical level.

The "Indo-Pacific" concept was born of ambition. It was designed to dissolve the artificial boundary between East and South Asia, draw India into a unified strategic matrix, and signal to Beijing that the entire arc from the Persian Gulf to the Pacific was under coordinated American attention. It was, at its core, an exercise in expansive geopolitical engineering.

That era is over. The contemporary security environment has forced Washington into hard choices. With finite military resources stretched across Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia simultaneously, the Pentagon can no longer sustain the pretence of uniform strategic engagement across such an enormous canvas. By reverting to Pacific Command, Washington is making a pointed admission: the acute military challenge from China is

concentrated not across the vast Indian Ocean, but in the tight geography of the Western Pacific - the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the First Island Chain.

This is a shift from geographic breadth to operational precision. American command structures, logistics chains, and deployment doctrines are being optimised for one scenario above all others - a high-intensity conflict with China in the Pacific, fought alongside formal treaty allies Japan and the Philippines. The Indian Ocean, and by extension India, falls outside that primary frame.

There seems to be bilateral friction beneath the surface. However, Pentagon officials have been swift to reassure New Delhi that the command's geographic boundaries and force allocations remain technically unchanged. These assurances deserve scrutiny. The timing and manner of the announcement - dropped on the eve of key multilateral engagements of the G7 - suggest that Washington is comfortable sending an uncomfortable message.

The India-U.S. relationship has been drifting into more transactional territory for some time. India's refusal to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, its continued economic engagement with sanctioned states, and persistent disputes over trade and tariffs have quietly cooled what was once described as the "defining partnership of the 21st century." The rebrand does not cause this friction - but it mirrors it. When Washington decides to excise "Indo" from its most consequential military command without prior bilateral consultation, it signals that New Delhi's symbolic centrality to American strategy has limits.

Nowhere is the structural consequence of this shift more visible than in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The Quad - comprising the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia - was positioned as the premier framework for maintaining a "free and open Indo-Pacific." That framing now looks increasingly hollow.

The Quad's core vulnerability has always been its internal contradictions. Japan and Australia are formal U.S. treaty allies with high military interoperability and shared threat perceptions. India is neither. New Delhi has consistently and correctly resisted transforming the Quad into a hard military alliance or an "Asian NATO." India's security calculus remains predominantly land-based - shaped by volatile

PENTAGON OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN SWIFT TO REASSURE NEW DELHI THAT THE COMMAND'S GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES AND FORCE ALLOCATIONS REMAIN TECHNICALLY UNCHANGED

borders with both Pakistan and China - while its Quad partners view the challenge through a maritime, expeditionary lens.

Washington has drawn its own conclusions. The rapid maturation of AUKUS - the trilateral submarine and technology-sharing pact between the U.S., UK, and Australia - and the deepening institutionalization of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance reveal where American strategic investment is actually flowing. These are tight, legally binding, technologically integrated arrangements built for hard deterrence. The Quad, by comparison, has gradually pivoted toward softer functional cooperation: vaccine delivery, climate technology, and infrastructure financing. Useful, but strategically peripheral. The security architecture of the Quad has been quietly hollowed out, and the USPACOM reversion makes that hollowing official.

For New Delhi, the retirement of the Indo-Pacific command title is a moment of strategic clarification - uncomfortable, but ultimately useful. Three implications stand out.

The most direct operational signal from Washington is that the U.S. expects India to serve as the primary, self-sufficient security provider across the Indian Ocean Region. American forces are anchoring westward in the Pacific. The maritime corridors stretching from the Bab-el-Mandeb to the Malacca Strait - critical for global energy flows and Indian trade - will increasingly be India's responsibility to secure. This demands urgent acceleration of naval modernisation, expanded maritime domain awareness, and a credible net-security-provider posture across the arc of littoral states in India's neighbourhood.

India's long-standing doctrine of strategic autonomy - often criticised in Washington as fence-sitting - looks considerably wiser in hindsight. If the United States can unilaterally reshape its strate-

gic geographic definitions based on shifting domestic priorities, then India's insistence on keeping its options diversified is entirely justified. A country that had subordinated its foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific framework would now find itself structurally exposed. New Delhi's investments in relationships with the Global South, its engagement with middle powers, and its refusal to be locked into exclusive alignments are not liabilities - they are insurance.

The most sobering implication concerns India's northern borders. The notion that India's maritime partnership with the West could generate effective leverage against Chinese pressure along the Line of Actual Control was always somewhat illusory. The USPACOM reversion strips away what remained of that illusion. Washington's hyper-focus on the Pacific theatre means that India's multi-front friction with Beijing - on land, in the Himalayas, and increasingly in the Indian Ocean through China's expanding naval presence - must be managed through India's own diplomatic and military tools. This demands a more pragmatic, direct bilateral approach to Beijing: neither naive accommodation nor performative confrontation, but clear-eyed strategic competition managed at arm's length.

A More Honest World Order

The transition from USINDOPACOM back to USPACOM closes the chapter on a romanticised vision of seamless Indo-Pacific solidarity and opens a more fragmented, transactional maritime order. Washington has signaled, unmistakably, that its strategic patience and military resources are finite - and that the Pacific comes first.

For India, this is neither a catastrophe nor abandonment. It is, in fact, a clarifying moment that strips away comfortable illusions about shared burdens and automatic American engagement. The challenge now is to translate that clarity into action: faster naval expansion, sharper diplomacy, and a foreign policy anchored in self-reliance rather than the expectation of external guarantees.

The oceans have bifurcated again. India must decide, quickly, what kind of power it intends to be in the one it calls its own.

The author is a retired Additional Director General of Indian Coast Guard.

FROM AGENDA COVER

Off track: Whither...

Sapt Kranti also advocated economic equality and women's emancipation. Needless to say, they failed to project any vision or plan for equality. They mindlessly followed the route of privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation. When in power, they did not invest adequately in the development of human resources among the backward castes and Dalits. The pre-existing trends of poor-quality schooling, health facilities, and skill training, landlessness, poorly paid, low-quality informal jobs, and low participation of women in the workforce did not reverse during their rule in their respective states. Nor did they fight for equality when they were part of the coalition of parties in power at the Centre. Since the 1990s, none of these leaders has made efforts to build labour organisations or participated in labour movements. Today, the states they ruled and India as a whole are more iniquitous than at any time in its post-Independence history. The theory of Sampoorn Kranti aimed at social reforms to eradicate corruption and political reforms to decentralise power. Both of these goals are even further distant from where Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar, and Mulayam Singh Yadav began their journeys.

It is not the failure of Jayaprakash Narayan or Ram Manohar Lohia that India could not take the path that would have led to the realisation of the ideas of Sapt Kranti and Sampoorn Kranti. Political theorists will continue to dissect these theories, find their strengths and weaknesses, and compare them with other theories that may seem more promising. But the Indian masses will definitely evaluate the performance of the practitioners of the kind of socialism propounded by Jayaprakash and Lohia. Alas, many times disciples prove unworthy of their gurus. Lalu, Nitish, and Mulayam are not Jayaprakash or Lohia.

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The long shadow of Emergency: India...

In Bihar, the movement escalated further. Despite concessions by the elected government, demands continued to expand. Political agitation gradually evolved into a challenge to the authority of constitutional institutions themselves. By late 1974, discussions of Janata Sarkars and Janata Adalats reflected attempts to establish parallel centres of political legitimacy. Equally significant were the railway strikes of 1974. What began as an industrial dispute soon acquired overt political dimensions. George Fernandes famously declared that a nationwide railway strike could bring the country to a standstill. In a speech mobilising railway workers, he stated: "Seven days strike of the Indian Railways - every thermal station of the country would close down. A ten day strike of the Indian Railways - every steel mill in India would close down and the industries of the country would come to a halt for the next 12 months... A fifteen day strike in Indian Railways - the country would starve."

The opposition's main aim was to wreck the economy and paralyse the administration. This is why they pitched their demands so high and displayed little interest in negotiation of their demands.

It was clear to the Government that the strike was politically motivated and was planned to paralyze the country. With its back to the wall, the Government had to defend the state and assert its right to govern. Indira Gandhi's Government came down heavily on the protesters. Thousands of employees were arrested and their families were driven out of their quarters.

There were also growing concerns about external interference. The Cold War context cannot be ignored. Following India's role in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and its nuclear test in 1974, relations with

major Western powers were strained. Intelligence assessments of the period reflected anxieties regarding foreign involvement in domestic political developments.

The immediate trigger, however, was the Allahabad High Court judgment of June 12, 1975, which invalidated Indira Gandhi's election from Rae Bareilly. While the Supreme Court granted a conditional stay, the political atmosphere had already become highly charged. What followed intensified the crisis. Opposition leaders organised nationwide campaigns against the government. Demonstrations, gheraos and civil disobedience were planned on a large scale. Most controversially, Jayaprakash Narayan publicly called upon the police, armed forces and civil servants not to obey what he considered unjust orders.

Jan Morcha - a motley group of 10 parties, with Morarjee Desai as Chairman was formed. In a rally in Ramliha Grounds, he asked the army, the police and the Government servants not to obey orders and challenged the Government to try him of treason.

He even said encouraged the military to plan a coup and gherao the PM's residence. For any elected government, such appeals would have raised serious questions about constitutional authority and state stability. On June 25, 1975, the Emergency was declared under Article 352 of the Constitution. It was a constitutional provision, though the manner of its use remains one of the most fiercely debated issues in modern Indian history.

What happened thereafter is equally well documented. Civil liberties were curtailed. Political opponents were arrested. Press freedoms were restricted. Excesses occurred, some undeniable and some exaggerated over time through political retelling. None of these actions should be dismissed or justified casually.

The Emergency remains a cautionary

lesson about the concentration of power and the fragility of democratic institutions. But that lesson has already been absorbed by Indian democracy. The people rejected the Congress in 1977. The Congress accepted that verdict. The party apologised. Indira Gandhi herself acknowledged mistakes. The democratic process functioned exactly as it was supposed to. Similar conditions or even worse conditions were created during the Morarji Desai Government too. But then it did not have a legal, Constitutional and Parliamentary sanction of the Emergency.

The same exists, perhaps in a different form, even today. That is why the contemporary obsession with the Emergency appears increasingly disconnected from India's present realities.

Young Indians today are concerned about employment, paper leaks, inflation, education, social harmony, economic opportunity and institutional accountability. They are not waiting for daily reminders about a political event that occurred half a century ago.

History should be studied, not weaponised. The irony is difficult to ignore. A party that invokes the Emergency every year often shows little interest in discussing contemporary concerns with the same intensity. The past becomes a convenient substitute for the BJP to avoid answering questions about the present.

The Emergency will always remain part of India's democratic story. It should be remembered honestly, debated rigorously and taught accurately. But it cannot become the sole lens through which contemporary politics is viewed. India has moved on. The Congress has moved on. Even history has moved on. The BJP, however, appears determined to remain permanently trapped in June 1975.

Rachit Seth is the founder of Policy Briefcase which provides parliamentary research & strategic communications support. He is a former National Media Coordinator of the Indian National Congress.

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 21-27 JUNE

Finding Balance, Sharpening Focus and Seeing More Clearly

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher



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

Weekly Overview

The week opens with the Moon in Leo, encouraging self-expression, visibility and a desire to move forward with confidence. As the Moon enters Virgo, attention shifts toward practical matters, routines and organisation. The Libra phase brings greater focus on relationships, cooperation and finding balance in daily interactions.



Aries (Mesh): The week begins with a more expressive and energetic tone, making it easier to communicate ideas or take initiative in matters that have been waiting for attention. As the week progresses, practical responsibilities may demand greater focus, particularly where routine tasks have been neglected. Midweek encourages cooperation and measured decision-making rather than working independently. By the weekend, emotional undercurrents may become stronger than expected.

Taurus (Vrishabh): Home, family matters or personal priorities may occupy your attention during the opening phase of the week. You may feel a stronger need for comfort, stability and familiar surroundings.

As the Moon moves into Virgo, practical progress becomes easier and unfinished work may begin moving forward again. Midweek supports creativity and meaningful conversations.



Gemini (Mithun): Communication remains an important theme throughout much of the week. Discussions, meetings and exchanges of ideas may help clear confusion that has been lingering in the background. The Virgo Moon supports planning and attention to detail, making this a useful period for practical decisions. As the week moves into Libra, social interaction and collaboration improve. By the weekend, attention shifts toward health, routines or daily responsibilities.

Cancer (Karka): Financial priorities, personal resources or practical concerns may require attention during the opening days. This is a good period for reviewing commitments and making sensible adjustments where needed. Midweek encourages a more organised approach to daily matters. As Libra energy develops, family discussions or domestic responsibilities may become more noticeable.



Leo (Simha): With the Moon beginning the week in Leo, there may be a stronger desire to express your views and move forward with confidence. Others may pay closer attention to your ideas or leadership. Midweek encourages practical thinking and greater attention to details that may have been ignored recently. As the week progresses, communication becomes smoother and relationships feel easier to manage.

Virgo (Kanya): The early part of the week may encourage reflection before action. You may prefer observing situations carefully rather than becoming involved immediately. Once the Moon enters Virgo, energy improves and practical matters become easier to manage. This is a favourable period for organisation, planning and bringing structure to unfinished work.



Libra (Tula): Friendships, networks and future plans may attract attention during the opening phase of the week. Some useful opportunities may emerge through conversations or social connections. As the week develops, you may prefer a quieter pace that allows greater reflection. Once the Moon enters Libra, confidence improves and relationships receive greater attention. This is a supportive period for restoring balance.

Scorpio (Vrishchik): Professional matters, responsibilities or long-term goals may demand attention at the beginning of the week. Others may look to you for guidance or clarity. Midweek encourages practical adjustments and a more organised approach to pending tasks. The Libra phase highlights cooperation and diplomacy, particularly in situations where different opinions exist. By the weekend, the Moon enters Scorpio, increasing emotional awareness and intuition. Trust your instincts, but avoid drawing conclusions before all facts are known.



Sagittarius (Dhanu): The week opens with a broader perspective and a desire to look beyond immediate concerns. Travel, learning or future planning may become important themes. Midweek encourages practical effort and attention to details that support long-term progress. As Libra energy develops, teamwork and collaboration become more valuable. By the weekend, you may feel the need for additional rest or reflection. Not every answer requires immediate action. Sometimes clarity arrives when pressure is reduced.

Capricorn (Makar): Shared responsibilities, financial matters or practical obligations may require careful attention during the opening days. A measured approach will help avoid unnecessary complications. Midweek supports organisation and productive routines, allowing steady progress. As the Moon moves through Libra, professional matters may become more visible.



Aquarius (Kumbh): Relationships and important interactions may take centre stage at the beginning of the week. You may notice that cooperation produces better results than trying to manage everything alone. Midweek encourages practical problem-solving and greater attention to everyday responsibilities. As Libra energy develops, perspective broadens and conversations become more constructive. By the weekend, professional responsibilities may require greater focus. A calm and balanced approach will strengthen your position more than forceful action.

Pisces (Meen): Routine matters, health priorities or work-related responsibilities may shape the opening phase of the week. This is a useful time to improve systems that have become inefficient. Midweek supports steady progress and practical organisation. As the Moon moves through Libra, emotional awareness deepens and certain relationships may require greater honesty or understanding. By the weekend, Scorpio energy encourages introspection, learning and meaningful reflection.



"THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW DISH
DOES MORE FOR HAPPINESS"
— BRILLAT-SAVARIN

RAJA PARBA

Odisha's celebration of womanhood, monsoon and pitha



ANIL
RAJPUT

In Odisha, the arrival of Raja Parba is felt before it is formally announced. Courtyards are swept, swings are tied to trees, girls dress in new clothes, feet are coloured with *alta*, homes fill with the fragrance of rice, jaggery, coconut and ghee, and the season softens under the promise of rain. Raja is one of Odisha's most loved festivals as it brings together nature, agriculture, food, leisure and femininity in a way that feels joyous and deeply thoughtful. It celebrates womanhood not as an abstract idea, but as a living force of creation, dignity and renewal. In a society where women's labour often sustains the household silently, Raja gives that labour a sacred pause and places feminine energy at the centre of celebration.

Raja Parba is closely associated with Mithuna Sankranti and the beginning of the monsoon season. Traditionally observed over three main days, *Pahili Raja*, *Raja Sankranti* and *Basi Raja*, it is followed in many households by *Basumati Snana*, the ceremonial bathing of Mother Earth. The belief behind the festival is strikingly beautiful. Mother Earth, or *Basumati*, is understood to undergo a period of rest and renewal, and agricultural work is paused as a mark of reverence. Ploughing, digging and other activities that disturb the soil are avoided. The earth is treated not as an object to be used, but as a living mother whose fertility sustains all life. This makes Raja more than a seasonal celebration. It is an agrarian philosophy, reminding us that human prosperity depends on respecting the rhythms of nature.

The festival also carries a rare cultural openness around men-

tion and fertility. Raja places them within a language of honour, beauty and celebration. Young girls and women are encouraged to rest, dress well, play games, sing folk songs and enjoy decorated swings known as *doli*. In villages and towns, the sight of girls on swings, the sound of laughter, and the exchange of festive foods create a mood that is unmistakably Odia. Raja does not separate the body from the sacred or the household from the field. It recognises that fertility belongs to the earth, to women, to crops and to the continuity of family life.

If one food captures the soul of Raja Parba, it is *pitha*. Odisha has a rich *pitha* tradition throughout the year, but Raja gives it a special festive pride. *Pithas* are not merely sweets or snacks. They are expressions of season, skill and memory, often made from rice flour, coconut, jaggery, lentils, ghee, milk, cardamom and local ingredients transformed through steaming, roasting, frying or slow cooking. During Raja, the making and sharing of *pitha* becomes a family ritual. Older women pass down proportions by touch rather than measurement, younger members gather around the kitchen, and the finished *pithas* move from home kitchens to neighbourhood plates, community stalls and festive gatherings. The most iconic among them is *Poda Pitha*, often regarded as the signature taste of Raja. Its name comes from the idea of being burnt or baked, but its charm lies in the slow cooking that gives it a dark, caramelised crust and a soft, fragrant interior. Traditionally made with rice batter, jaggery, coconut, sometimes black gram, ghee, cardamom, ginger and pieces of coconut, *Poda Pitha* was once cooked overnight in an earthen oven or over a slow fire. The outer layer turns smoky and firm, while the inside remains moist and rich. Sliced and shared during Raja, it carries the warmth of the hearth and the patience of traditional cooking.



RAJA PARBA ENDURES BECAUSE IT ALLOWS ODISHA TO CELEBRATE JOY WITHOUT FORGETTING WISDOM. IT HONOURS THE EARTH BEFORE CULTIVATION, WOMEN BEFORE ROUTINE LABOUR, FOOD BEFORE CONSUMPTION AND TRADITION BEFORE SPECTACLE. ITS CUISINE TEACHES THAT HERITAGE DOES NOT SURVIVE ONLY IN GRAND FEASTS, BUT IN THE CAREFUL FOLDING OF COCONUT INTO RICE DOUGH, THE SLOW BAKING OF PODA PITHA, THE SHARING OF ARISA, THE STEAMING OF MANDA, AND THE LAUGHTER THAT GATHERS AROUND A SWING

Another beloved preparation is *Arisa Pitha*, made by combining rice flour with jaggery syrup and shaping the dough into discs that are fried until crisp at the edges and chewy within. Sesame seeds are often added for texture and aroma. *Arisa Pitha* has a festive sturdiness, which makes it ideal for storing and sharing. Its flavour comes from the careful handling of jaggery, which must reach the right consistency before the rice flour is mixed in. It reflects household expertise, because small changes in heat and timing can alter the final texture. Where *Poda Pitha* is smoky and *Arisa Pitha* is rich, *Manda Pitha* is softer and gentler. These steamed dumplings are usually made from rice flour dough filled with coconut and jaggery, sometimes scented with cardamom. The dough is shaped around the filling and steamed until tender. When opened, the filling releases the sweetness of coconut and melted jaggery. *Manda Pitha* is especially suited to the monsoon mood of Raja because it is comforting without being heavy. Its steamed form also shows the variety within Odia festive cooking, where celebration does not always require frying.

Kakara Pitha brings another texture to the Raja table. Usually made with semolina or wheat flour, and sometimes rice flour, it is filled with sweet coconut or *chhena* and then fried. The outer layer becomes golden while the inside remains soft and fragrant. Some homes prepare *Suji Kakara*,

while others make versions with rice flour. Alongside it, *Chakuli Pitha*, a thin pancake made from a fermented batter of rice and black gram, brings a lighter savoury balance. It may be eaten with *dalma*, *ghuguni*, *chutney*, *jaggery* or milk, depending on the household. Its presence ensures that Raja cuisine is not only about sweetness.

The *pitha* tradition also includes varieties such as *Chhunchi Patra Pitha*, *Muan Pitha*, *Enduri Pitha* and *Chandrakanti*. *Chhunchi Patra Pitha* is delicate and thin, requiring skill to spread the batter lightly. *Muan Pitha* offers another festive variation of rice, coconut and sweetness. *Enduri Pitha*, more strongly associated with *Prathamastami* but familiar within the larger Odia *pitha* repertoire, is steamed in turmeric leaves, while *Chandrakanti*, made from green gram and sugar, is fried to a golden finish. Together, these preparations show why Raja cuisine is best understood as a whole language of *pithas*.

Even though *pitha* dominates the festival, Raja meals are often completed with savoury Odia dishes that reflect the comfort of home cooking. *Dalma*, made with lentils, vegetables and gentle spices, brings nourishment and balance. *Santula*, a lightly cooked vegetable preparation, offers simplicity after richer festive foods. *Ghuguni*, made from dried peas, is a popular snack and pairs well with *Chakuli Pitha*. In many households, *Chattu Besara*, prepared with mushrooms and mustard paste, or *Ambula Rai*, with dried mango and mustard, add the sharp, earthy flavours that Odisha is known for. Some families may also prepare *Mutton Jhola* or *Chingudi Jhola*, but the emotional centre of Raja remains the *pitha* platter.

Cooling drinks such as *Pana*, made in different household styles with fruits, curd, milk, jaggery or spices, suit the humid monsoon atmosphere. Some homes serve buttermilk, fruit-based sherbets or lightly spiced drinks that refresh guests between meals. Yet the most visible finishing touch of the festival is *Raja Paan*. *Betel* leaves filled with *areca nut*, sweeteners, spices and fragrant additions become part of the social pleasure of the occasion. To offer *paan* after *pitha* is to complete the rhythm of Raja hospitality.

Raja Parba endures because it allows Odisha to celebrate joy without forgetting wisdom. It honours the earth before cultivation, women before routine labour, food before consumption and tradition before spectacle. Its cuisine teaches that heritage does not survive only in grand feasts, but in the careful folding of coconut into rice dough, the slow baking of *Poda Pitha*, the sharing of *Arisa*, the steaming of *Manda*, and the laughter that gathers around a swing. At a time when conversations around women's dignity, ecological respect and cultural continuity are more important than ever, Raja offers a deeply Indian answer. To preserve Raja Parba is to preserve a way of seeing womanhood as sacred, the earth as living, and food as one of the most intimate carriers of civilisational memory.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Celebrating the soul of Odia cuisine

Will Odisha's fiercely guarded temple recipes vanish completely, or can this brilliant luxury dining revival save an ancient culinary heritage?



President, Cuisine India Society, Pushpesh Pant; Secretary, Cuisine India Society, Anil Rajput and Executive Member, Cuisine India Society, Amitabh Kant with Prashant Tewari of *The Pioneer*



(L-R) Officials of the Cuisine India Society: Treasurer, Manisha Bhasin; Secretary, Anil Rajput; Executive Member, Ramesh Abhishek; Executive Member and Ravi Capoor; President



(L-R) Ambassador of Bhutan to India, Major General Vetsop Namgyel; Former Marketing Director, Western Resort Country Club, Anita Rajput; and Secretary, Cuisine India Society, Anil Rajput

THE CUISINE INDIA SOCIETY BRINGS THE ROARING WOOD FIRES AND COMPLEX COASTAL FLAVORS OF ODISHA STRAIGHT TO NEW DELHI'S LUXURY DINING

SAKSHI PRIYA

If you are looking for the actual beating heart of Indian slow cooking, you have to look far beyond our glossy modern city setups and trace your way down to the eastern coastline, where generations of Odia temple cooks have spent centuries tending to massive, roaring wood fires. These unseen masters possess an almost stubborn patience, willing to stand through the blistering heat just to catch that exact, split-second moment when raw mustard oil finally breaks into a sharp, fragrant smoke, knowing exactly how to coax impossibly deep and complex flavors out of nothing more than a pinch of panch phoran. Yet, despite this incredible heritage, you seldom see these fiercely guarded regional plates on a five-star menu, which is exactly why the Cuisine India Society decided to step in and bring this ancient gastronomy straight into the luxury setting of ITC Maurya in New Delhi.

"Between traditions and new innovations, we aim to explore and celebrate Indian food as culture and medicine,

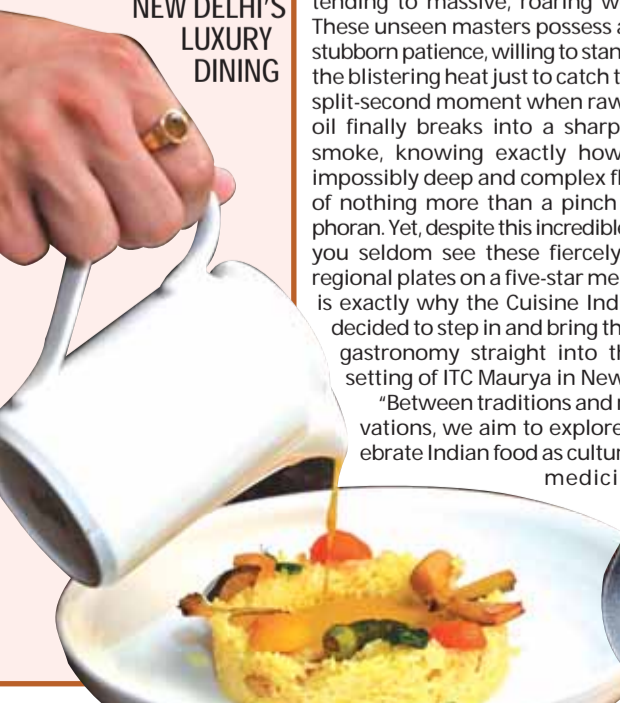
showcasing India's rich culinary diversity to the world," noted Anil Rajput, Secretary, Cuisine India Society.

The kitchen rolled out a massive spread anchored strictly in regional eating habits. Guests moved naturally from *eka-patra bhojana* (meal in a bowl) into the *mukhya khadya* (main course) before reaching the *mithana* (desserts). Every plate left guests craving the next. The *Pakala Bhat*, a cooling fermented rice staple, brought instant relief just as it has for generations. *Badi Chura* tartlets packed a serious punch of garlic and sun-dried lentils. In the *Chillika Chingudi Jhola*, fresh prawns bobbed in a fragrant coastal broth. The heavier courses followed suit. *Machha Besara* skewers offered charred fish coated in sharp yellow mustard, while the bamboo-infused mutton chops released an aromatic cloud of wood smoke the

second they hit the table. Dinner finished with petite *Chenna Poda*. This baked cottage cheese classic came bathed in a dark pool of nolen gur.

Corporate Chef Manisha Bhasin knew the weight of working with such historic recipes. "I'm not from Odisha myself, but the menu was shaped by expert Odia chefs — our focus was keeping the flavours true while making them accessible to modern palates."

Experiencing food like this matters. Society constantly watches brilliant traditional artists get pushed to the margins, leaving true masters of their craft with zero stage left to stand on. Seeing these ancient temple recipes command a packed, luxury dining room is a massive win for preserving cultural heritage. It proves that Odisha's history remains alive, loud, and incredibly delicious.

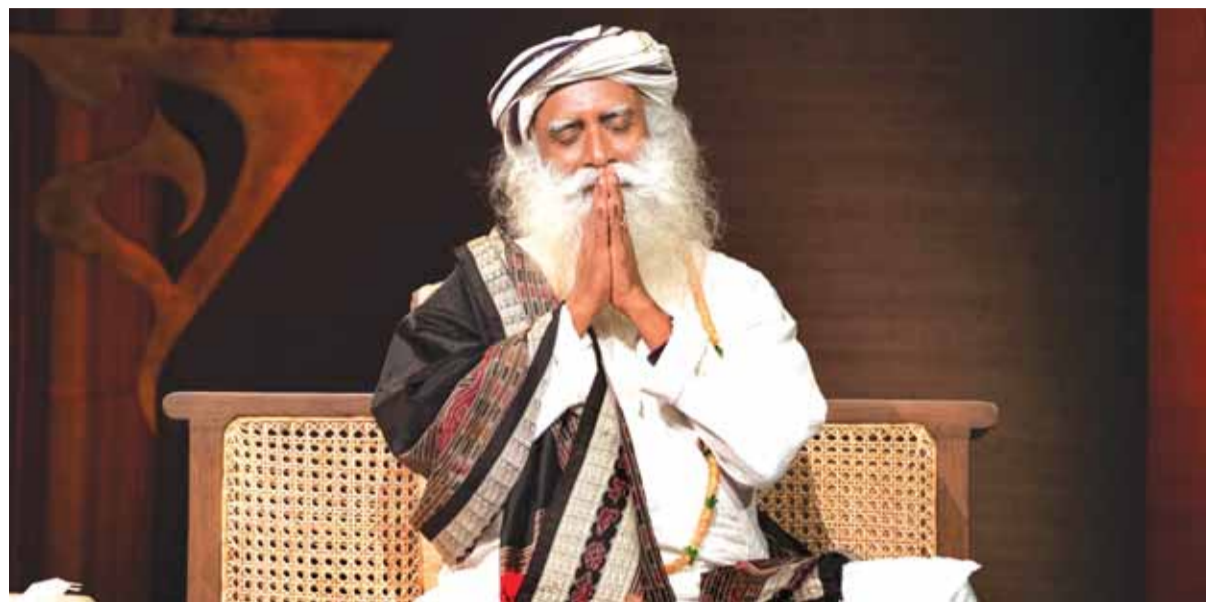


Prashant Tewari exchanges pleasantries with Amitabh Kant during the Odia cuisine showcase



Yoga - Taking the Next Step

All of us are alive, all of us are human beings. But all of us do not experience life to the same intensity because our pranic energies are not the same. Different people experience life in different levels of intensity



SADHGURU

The word "yoga" literally means "union." When you experience everything as one in your consciousness, then you are in yoga. To attain to that unity within you, there are many ways. For example, there is hata yoga. Hata yoga means you start with the body. The body itself has its own attitudes, its own ego, its own nature. Apart from your mind, do you see, your body has its own ego? Suppose you say, "From tomorrow, I want to get up at five in the morning and walk on the beach." You set the alarm. The alarm rings. You want to get up but your body says, "Shut up and sleep." It has its own way.

So we start with the body. Hata yoga is a way of working with the body, disciplining the body, purifying the body, and preparing the body for higher levels of energy. All of us are alive, all of us are human beings. But all of us do not experience life to the same intensity because our pranic energies are not the same. Different people experience life in different levels of intensity.

For example, somebody sees a tree. A tree is just a tree. Most people don't even see it. Somebody sees the tree in more detail. An artist sees every shade of it. Somebody else not only sees the tree but also sees the Divine in it. Seeing is not the same because the level of intensity with which you experience life is not the same.

The whole process of yoga is to



HATA YOGA IS A WAY OF WORKING WITH THE BODY, DISCIPLINING THE BODY, PURIFYING THE BODY, AND PREPARING THE BODY FOR HIGHER LEVELS OF ENERGY. ALL OF US ARE ALIVE, ALL OF US ARE HUMAN BEINGS. BUT ALL OF US DO NOT EXPERIENCE LIFE TO THE SAME INTENSITY BECAUSE OUR PRANIC ENERGIES ARE NOT THE SAME. DIFFERENT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE LIFE IN DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INTENSITY

take you from something that you know, and take the next step into the unknown. We have made this yogic science almost like a physical science. Suppose you mix two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen, you get water. Even when a great scientist puts it together, it is water. Even if an idiot puts it together, it is only water. Similarly, in yoga too, if you do this, this, and this, only this will happen. Whether a great yogi does it or an ignorant person does it, it does not matter. If he does the practices and sadhana properly, the result is there to be seen.

In yoga, these systems have been identified. To start with, you work

with the body, then you move to the breath, then to the mind, then to the inner self. Like this many steps have been created. They are only different aspects. They are not really branches of yoga. In fact, we address all of them at once. It is important that in a very balanced way all of them are addressed at once, as one unit. Otherwise, if you work just with the body, it is only preparatory in nature. So, there is really no division as such. Yoga is a union of all these.

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

The whole process of yoga is to

America's Akshardham: A Beacon of Indian Culture and Spirituality

Carved in stone yet alive with timeless ideals, Akshardham stands majestically on American soil as the largest Hindu mandir of the modern world. Its grandeur reflects the brilliance of India's spiritual and cultural heritage, while its message transcends all boundaries, inviting humanity toward peace, harmony, selfless service, and universal brotherhood. More than a monument, it is a shining beacon of Sanatan Dharma for generations to come



DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

Thousands of visitors from around the world arrive in Robbinsville, New Jersey, and stand in awe before a sight few expect to encounter on American soil. Rising majestically against the skyline, BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, the modern world's largest Hindu mandir, captivates with its breathtaking grandeur and intricate artistry. Through its timeless message of spirituality, harmony, selfless service, and universal brotherhood, Akshardham is illuminating the Western world with the enduring wisdom of ancient Indian civilization.

The word 'Akshardham' means 'a timeless abode', a place that transcends

the boundaries of time and geography. This profound vision was cherished by His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the inspirer of the project, who often expressed a simple yet powerful wish: that every person who enters Akshardham, regardless of faith, nationality, or background, should experience peace, inspiration, and inner upliftment. Today, that vision stands realized in stone.

Remarkably, the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham was built between 2011 and 2023 through the extraordinary efforts of 12,500 volunteers from across America. Millions of hours of selfless service were dedicated to transforming a dream into reality. Their contribution reflects one of the most cherished values of Indian culture, seva, or selfless service. Every carved stone and every architectural detail bears witness not only to artistic excellence but also to the devotion and sacrifice of countless volunteers.

Spread across more than 183 acres, the main mandir structure measures 255 feet in width, 345 feet in length, and rises to a height of 191 feet. Designed according to the principles of ancient

Hindu scriptures, the mandir embodies a harmonious blend of sacred architecture and spiritual symbolism. Its design includes one main shrine, twelve subshrines, nine shikhars, and nine pyramidal shikhars, each representing profound spiritual ideals rooted in India's civilizational heritage.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Akshardham is the journey of its stones. Built to endure for a thousand years, the monument incorporates nearly two million cubic feet of stone sourced from different parts of the world. Limestone arrived from Bulgaria and Turkey, marble from Greece, Italy, and Turkey, granite from India and China, and sandstone from India. These stones traveled across continents before reaching India, where skilled artisans meticulously carved them into intricate forms. The carved pieces were then transported to New Jersey and assembled like an enormous three-dimensional puzzle.

This remarkable international collaboration conveys a profound message: One World, One Family. The coming together of stones from different nations to form a single sacred monument beautifully symbolizes the unity of humanity and the harmony that can exist among diverse cultures and civilizations.

Visitors are immediately captivated by the temple's breathtaking artistry. More than 10,000 statues and statuettes adorn the complex, depicting spiritual themes, cultural motifs, ancient Indian musical instruments, and traditional dance forms. Every carving serves as a silent storyteller, preserving the artistic and philosophical treasures of India for future generations. The monument also houses the largest elliptical dome ever constructed in traditional stone architecture, demonstrating the extraordinary engineering capabilities embedded within ancient architectural traditions.

Among the many unique features of the campus is the Brahma Kund, a tra-

ditional Indian stepwell containing water collected from more than 300 bodies of water across the globe. The Brahma Kund beautifully symbolizes the spiritual and cultural union of two great nations, reminding visitors that while cultures may differ, the human quest for peace and meaning remains universal.

Beyond its architectural grandeur, Akshardham stands as a testament to responsible stewardship of the environment. The project incorporates sustainable practices, including a solar panel farm generating clean energy, environmentally friendly fly-ash concrete, and careful preservation of surrounding wetlands. These initiatives reflect the Hindu principle that nature is not merely a resource to be exploited but a sacred trust to be protected.

At a time when societies across the world are grappling with division, loneliness, and cultural uncertainty, the emergence of Akshardham carries a deeper significance. It stands as a reminder that progress need not come at the cost of tradition, and that modernity can coexist with spirituality. The monument offers visitors not merely a glimpse into India's glorious past but also a vision for humanity's future, one rooted in peace, understanding, service, and unity.

In this sense, the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham is not simply a temple in America; it is a beacon of civilization, illuminating hearts with the light of wisdom, harmony, and devotion. Yet as we admire its grandeur, we should remember that behind this extraordinary achievement stands the tireless dedication of Mahant Swami Maharaj, whose selfless efforts fulfilled Pramukh Swami Maharaj's cherished vision and transformed a dream into reality.

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

Sri Sri receives Luxembourg Peace Prize

Recognised for four and half decades of conflict resolution, trauma relief and inspiring millions across 182 countries to become ambassadors of peace



Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, global humanitarian, spiritual leader and founder of The Art of Living, has been conferred the prestigious Luxembourg Peace Prize by the World Peace Forum (WPF), an international network of peace activists, scholars and policymakers.

The honour recognises Gurudev's 45 years of tireless efforts in fostering inner peace, mediating long-standing conflicts, providing trauma relief in areas affected by violence and inspiring people across 182 countries to become instruments of peace. Over the past four decades, Gurudev has played a pivotal role in peace building initiatives in conflict regions across the world, while his programmes on mental well-being stress relief and human values have

touched the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Receiving the award, Gurudev highlighted the importance of addressing the roots of conflict.

"The root cause of conflict is the absence of inner peace in individuals. Our experience in conflict zones has shown that societies need people who can build bridges, restore communication and rebuild trust. Such mediators are essential today. I would like to see every young person become a bridge wherever they find divisions in communities," he said.

He further underscored that peace should not be mistaken for passivity. "Peace is not complacency, and aggression is not bravery. True peace arises when one is both

aware and dynamic."

Addressing one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today, he noted, "Stress is one of the biggest enemies of humankind. A stress-free mind and a violence-free society are the foundations of lasting peace."

Gurudev strongly mentioned that peace requires as much attention as security, he added, "We often speak of peace and security in the same breath. Yet while enormous resources are devoted to security, far too little attention is given to cultivating peace."

The Luxembourg Peace Prize is awarded to individuals and organisations whose work has made a significant contribution to advancing peace, reconciliation and human dignity worldwide.

Heaven or hell? We have the power to choose

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

When we ask the question, "Who are you?" we get a variety of answers. "I am a Hindu," "I am a Christian," "I am a Muslim," "I am an engineer," "I am a doctor." One factor pervades all these answers—the 'I.' For this 'I,' there is no name or form. It is that supreme principle that we variously refer to as Atma, Brahman, or God, etc.

When we say, "There is no God," it is like using the tongue to say, "There is no tongue." The very 'I' is saying, "There is no 'I.'" God resides in each and every one of us. That which pulsates in every living being, in every thing that moves, and in everything that does not move, is consciousness. God is like space. Space is everywhere.

This universe is sustained in space. Before we build a house, space is there. Once the house is complete, the space remains. The house is situated in the space that was previously there. Even when the house is demolished and all the debris is carried away, space remains.

Similarly, it is that supreme principle that ever remains in the past, in the present and in the future-without change. That is God.

Many people ask, "If God is all-pervasive, why can't we see it?"

Are we able to see electricity? No, but when we touch a live wire, we will receive a shock. We experience electricity. The God principle is also an experience. It is through this experience that we truly come to know God.

Sometimes, if we are standing behind a tree, the sun disappears from our view. At such a time we may say, "The sun is covered by the tree," but that isn't really the truth, is it? In reality, the tree is merely blocking our line of vision.

Similarly, it is our ignorance that prevents us from clearly perceiving God. God resides within us as the life-force and consciousness. The Supreme, whose very nature is bliss, is our



Atma. Even though God is all-pervasive, the mind's identification with the feelings of 'I' and 'mine' obstructs the perception of this reality. It is what keeps us shackled. We will never gain a sense of completeness from the external world, yet we continue to search. When we study, the thought is, "Will I pass?" After passing, the next thought is, "Will I get a job?" Once employed, we think, "Will I lose this job?" And the list of tensions goes on and on. We all know this cycle very well.

In distress, many women come and tell me, "Amma, I've turned 40 and have yet to get married. I still haven't found the right husband." Similarly, many men arrive with the same anxiety, saying, "Despite getting on in life, I've yet to find the type of woman I'm looking for. I'm still searching." In this way, they become disappointed; their lives are full of sorrow.

Reflecting on these struggles reminds me of a story. There was a man who travelled all over the world in search of a bride. In Spain, he came across a beautiful and intelligent girl, but she was not interested in worldly affairs.

Then, in Korea, he found another girl-one in whom there was beauty, intelligence, and an understanding of the

world. But he was hesitant to commit himself to her. In another country he finally found a girl who had all the qualities he desired.

"Were you able to marry this girl of your dreams?" Amma asked.

"No," the man replied with a tinge of grief in his voice.

"What happened?" Amma asked.

The reply he gave should stand as a lesson for every one of us. He said, "She was looking for the man of her dreams."

When we search for perfection outside, we are always going to be disappointed. What is it we human beings are looking for? Isn't it peace and happiness? For a little bit of peace, we are willing to run helter-skelter. But in doing so, we are transforming our inner world into a hell.

If lasting peace and happiness could really be attained through external objects and a life of luxury, wouldn't we have attained it by now? It isn't enough if we have air-conditioned cars and apartments; we should learn to air-condition our minds.

Peace, contentment, and happiness depend upon our own minds, not on external objects and situations. It is gaining control over the mind that is the foundation of happiness. We must always remember that heaven and hell are creations of the mind.

Inflation Warning

A sharp rise in wholesale inflation - to 9.68 per cent in May - is more than a statistical development; it is an early warning of stress building beneath the surface of the economy. When producers begin paying significantly more for energy, raw materials and intermediate goods, the effects rarely remain confined to factory floors. They eventually find their way into household budgets, corporate balance sheets and government policy calculations. India today faces precisely such a moment with wholesale inflation hovering close to 10 per cent. The immediate trigger may lie beyond its borders. Geopolitical instability in West Asia has once again exposed the vulnerability of an economy heavily dependent on imported energy. Every spike in crude oil prices raises transportation costs, increases manufacturing expenses and widens the burden on businesses already navigating uncertain global demand. Yet it would be a mistake to view the present inflationary pressures as merely an oil story.

What should concern policymakers is the broadening nature of price increases. When rising costs spread from fuel to manufactured goods and food items, inflation ceases to be a temporary external shock and begins to acquire a more entrenched character. Producers confronted with higher input costs eventually pass them on to consumers. Those unable to do so absorb the hit through shrinking profit margins, reduced investment and slower hiring. Neither outcome is desirable for an economy aspiring to sustain high growth.

The challenge for the government and the Reserve Bank of India is therefore one of balance. Excessively tight monetary responses to supply-driven inflation can dampen growth without addressing the root causes of price increases. At the same time, complacency carries its own risks. If businesses and households begin to expect persistently higher inflation, those expectations can become self-fulfilling through wage demands and pricing decisions. Fiscal policy also has a role to play. Governments often benefit from higher nominal growth through stronger tax collections, but such gains should not obscure the hardship imposed on consumers and producers. Strategic interventions, including calibrated adjustments in indirect taxes on fuel and measures to improve supply efficiency, can soften the blow without compromising fiscal credibility. The renewed focus on producer-level price indicators is equally significant. Better measurement of inflation across sectors can improve policymaking by identifying emerging pressures before they fully translate into consumer prices. Data, however, is useful only when accompanied by timely action.

India has weathered inflationary episodes before. The lesson from those experiences is that inflation is not merely an economic variable; it is a test of institutional responsiveness. Left unchecked, it erodes purchasing power, distorts investment decisions and disproportionately hurts those with the least capacity to absorb rising costs. The current surge should therefore be treated not as a passing inconvenience but as a warning. Sustaining growth in an increasingly volatile world will require more than optimism. It will demand prudent policy, vigilance against imported shocks and the willingness to act before temporary pressures become permanent problems.

Beyond EVMs

The recent fire in Kolkata that reportedly damaged thousands of Electronic Voting Machines has triggered predictable reactions. Some see it as an unfortunate accident. Others see reasons for suspicion.

Investigations will determine what happened. Yet the larger lesson of the episode may lie elsewhere. The real question is not whether the fire was accidental or deliberate. It is why so much of India's electoral verification architecture continues to depend on physical storage, physical custody and manual processes long after votes have been electronically recorded.

For years, public debate over elections has revolved around a single issue: can EVMs be trusted? The argument has often reduced a complex process to a binary choice between complete faith and complete distrust. Lost in that debate is a more important question. Even if one assumes that EVMs function exactly as intended, why does the subsequent chain of tabulation, verification and record preservation still rely so heavily on human intervention? India has successfully digitised the act of voting. Yet critical stages that follow remain surprisingly analogue. Vote totals displayed on control units are manually entered into records, consolidated across counting tables and compiled before final publication. Election materials continue to depend on physical storage and custody. Every such stage introduces opportunities not necessarily for wrongdoing, but for avoidable error, dispute and mistrust.

Democracies thrive not merely on fairness but on confidence. Citizens must be able to trust that outcomes accurately reflect votes cast. Equally important, losing candidates and their supporters must have confidence that the process was transparent and verifiable. Public trust cannot depend solely on assurances. It must rest on systems that minimise ambiguity.

Modern technology offers solutions that were unimaginable when India's electoral procedures were originally designed. Secure digital custody chains can authenticate machine identity and seal status throughout storage and transport. Vote totals can move directly from authorised machines into encrypted tabulation systems without manual transcription. Automated cross-verification can instantly identify discrepancies. Digitally signed audit trails can preserve records in multiple secure locations, reducing dependence on any single physical repository. None of these reforms require abandoning EVMs. Nor do they require accepting allegations of electoral malpractice. They simply recognise that technology has advanced while many supporting procedures have remained largely unchanged.

The objective of electoral reform should not be to compensate for proven failures but to strengthen transparency and confidence before doubts arise. In an era when banks process millions of digital transactions and stock exchanges settle vast volumes of trades electronically every day, there is little reason why election administration should continue to depend on avoidable manual processes.

The future debate should therefore move beyond whether EVMs can be trusted. The more important challenge is ensuring that every stage after the vote is cast is equally transparent, auditable and trusted. Democracy is strongest when confidence in the count is as secure as confidence in the vote itself.

The PoJK challenge

There is an irony in the current situation. Pakistan has long projected itself internationally as a defender of Kashmiri political aspirations and a champion of self-determination. The rhetoric of democracy and political rights has been central to Islamabad's Kashmir policy. Yet the images emerging from PoJK today tell a different story: thousands of protesters marching against the authorities, security forces deployed in strength, internet restrictions, curfews and allegations of excessive use of force

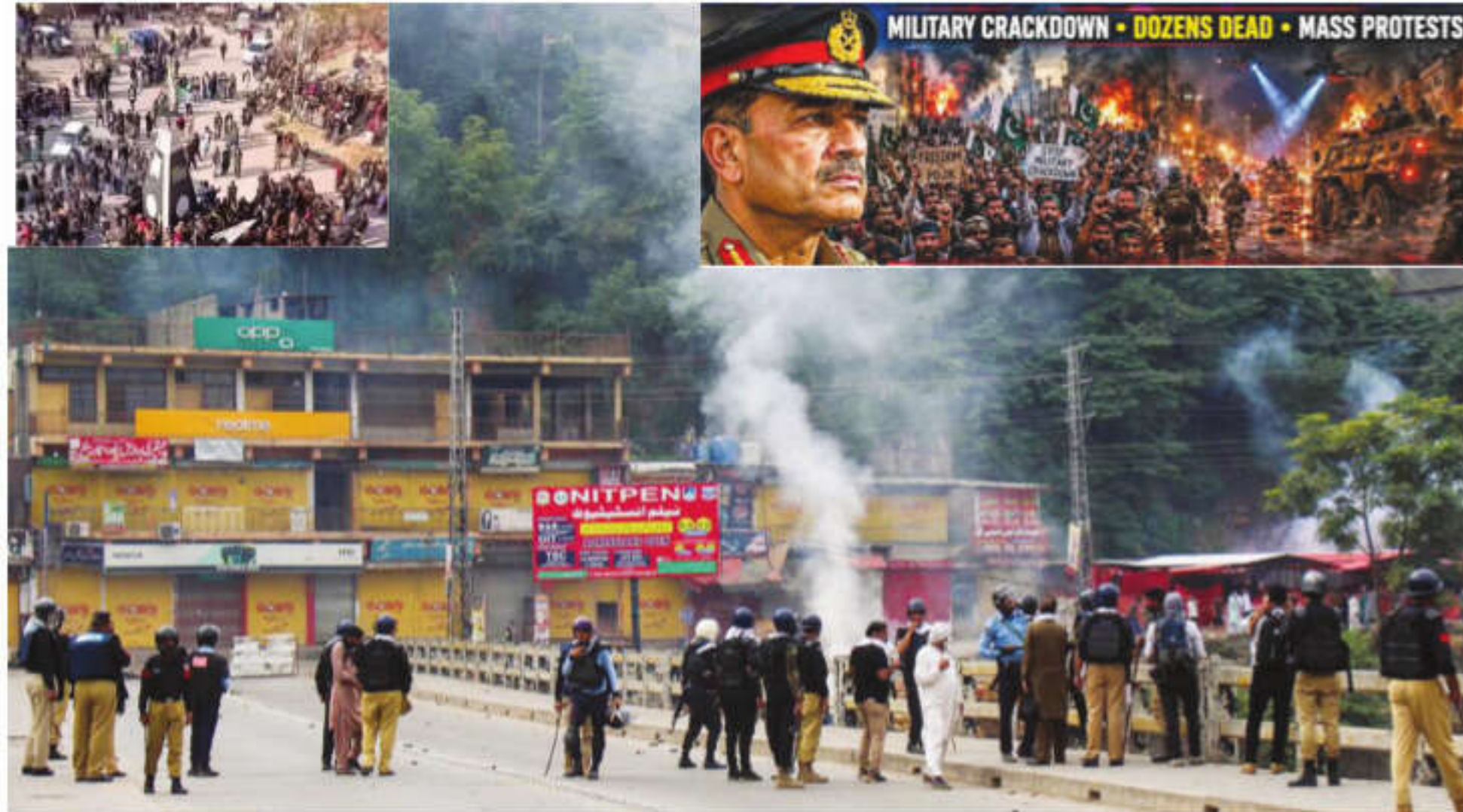
The ongoing unrest in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) is perhaps the most serious political challenge faced by Pakistan in the territory since 1947. At one level, the protests appear to revolve around a seemingly technical issue: the reservation of 12 seats in the 45-member Legislative Assembly for refugees from Jammu and Kashmir who migrated to Pakistan after Partition. Yet, to view the present turmoil merely as a dispute over electoral arrangements would be to miss the larger story.

What is unfolding in PoJK is a manifestation of accumulated grievances over political representation, economic deprivation, regional identity and the overwhelming influence of Pakistan's military establishment. The revolt within is, therefore, not an isolated disturbance but a sign of deeper structural contradictions that have long characterised Pakistan's control over the region.

The immediate trigger for the protests is the demand by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) for the abolition of the 12 reserved seats. These seats, created to provide representation to refugees from Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir who settled elsewhere in Pakistan, have been a feature of the political system for decades.

The argument in favour of the arrangement is that it keeps alive Pakistan's claim that the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir remains disputed and that displaced Kashmiris continue to have a political stake in its future. However, for many residents of PoJK, the arrangement has increasingly come to symbolise democratic exclusion. They argue that nearly a quarter of the Assembly should not be controlled by people who do not reside in the territory and whose electoral politics are often influenced by parties and power centres based in Pakistan.

The Supreme Court of PoJK has ruled that these seats are constitutionally protected and cannot be abolished without a constitutional amendment. But legal arguments alone



cannot resolve what is essentially a political crisis. The protests reveal that a significant section of the population no longer accepts the existing political compact. The massive mobilisation seen in Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot, despite bans, arrests and the deployment of security forces, demonstrates that the issue resonates deeply with ordinary people.

The rise of JAAC itself is indicative of this changing political mood. Founded in 2023, the organisation initially emerged as a grassroots movement against rising electricity tariffs, shortages of subsidised wheat and widespread perceptions of corruption and administrative inefficiency. The grievances were primarily economic. Yet, over time, the movement evolved into something much broader.

It came to question not only policies but also the political structures that produced those policies. The shift from demands over electricity bills to demands for electoral reform and political representation is significant. It suggests that economic distress has exposed deeper anxieties about governance and autonomy.

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Yet the images emerging from PoJK today tell a different story: thousands of protesters marching against the authorities, security forces deployed in strength, internet restrictions, curfews and allegations of excessive use of force. The contradiction between Pakistan's external narrative and internal realities has become increasingly difficult to ignore.

This contradiction is not new. PoJK has historically occupied an ambiguous position within Pakistan's constitutional framework. Officially, it enjoys a degree of autonomy, with its own President, Prime Minister and Legislative Assembly. In practice, however,

important decisions relating to security, foreign affairs and broader policy directions have remained under Islamabad's influence. Over the years, many residents have come to believe that their institutions lack genuine authority and that local governments operate within limits defined elsewhere.

The resulting frustration has fuelled periodic protests, but rarely have these protests acquired the scale and political character visible today.

The unrest also reflects a growing assertion of regional identity. Observers who have studied the region have long noted a sense of alienation among sections of the population, particularly regarding the dominance of Pakistan's political and military elites. Cultural affinities may exist across the border with Pakistan's Punjab province, but political loyalties and perceptions of identity are far more complex. The current

protests suggest that many residents increasingly see themselves not merely as participants in Pakistan's Kashmir policy but as political actors with their own aspirations and grievances.

Economic issues have played a crucial role in this transformation. The protests of 2023 and 2024 centred on rising electricity costs and access to subsidised flour. Residents questioned why regions that host major hydroelectric projects, including the Mangla Dam, continued to face high electricity prices and limited economic opportunities. The sense of injustice was sharpened by memories of displacement caused by infrastructure projects and by perceptions that the benefits of development accrued elsewhere. These grievances gradually merged with demands for accountability and political reform.

Pakistan's response to the movement has

followed a familiar pattern. Authorities banned JAAC under anti-terrorism laws, accused it of sedition and detained several of its leaders and supporters. The state appears to believe that coercive measures can contain dissent.

Yet experience from elsewhere in Pakistan suggests otherwise. From Balochistan to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reliance on security-centric approaches has often failed to address underlying political and economic grievances. In PoJK too, the use of force may suppress protests temporarily, but it is unlikely to eliminate the sentiments driving them.

Indeed, the protests in PoJK must be viewed in the broader context of Pakistan's internal challenges. Across the country, questions of representation, federalism and legitimacy are becoming increasingly prominent. Economic difficulties, political polarisation and tensions between civilian institutions and the military have created an atmosphere of uncertainty. In such circumstances, unrest in PoJK acquires significance beyond the region itself. It becomes part of a wider debate about the nature of the Pakistani state and the relationship between citizens and institutions of power.

Whether the current movement evolves into a sustained political force remains uncertain. Much will depend on how both the authorities and the protesters respond in the coming months, particularly as elections approach. Yet one conclusion is already evident. The crisis in PoJK is not merely about 12 reserved seats. It is about competing visions of governance, identity and political legitimacy.

It is about a population that increasingly seeks greater control over its own affairs and questions long-standing constitutional arrangements. Above all, it is a reminder that political consent cannot be manufactured through rhetoric or enforced through coercion. The unrest in PoJK is a revolt from within, and its implications may extend far beyond the mountains where it began.



ANAND KUMAR

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The Daily Star

Bangladesh needs a new social contract for higher education

When it comes to higher education, Bangladesh does not have a funding problem; what it has, instead, is an accountability problem. Every year, billions in funding flow into public universities, research institutes, and national agencies. Campuses expand, degrees multiply, and policies are announced. Yet, one question remains unanswered: who is actually responsible for the results?

Are universities accountable for whether students learn and graduate? Are students accountable for making use of heavily subsidised education? Is the research system accountable for solving national problems? At present, the honest answer is: no one is accountable, fully. The prime minister's visit to Dhaka University in May, his first since taking office, reignited familiar debates about quality, global rankings, and research relevance in public

universities. Then came the controversy over a minister's remark comparing Dhaka University to a coaching centre. These moments underlined a frustration that many Bangladeshis share. What Bangladesh needs instead is a new social contract for higher education, one that makes responsibility visible and links public investment to real outcomes.

Today, a student at a public university receives an education almost entirely financed by the taxpayers. That fact remains largely invisible and unaccounted for. Funding flows through block grants to institutions. Students pay little, and rarely think about the scale of investment behind their degree. A straightforward reform would change this. Every student admitted to a public university would receive a formal higher education scholarship.

Nothing changes about who pays: the state continues to finance education in those institutions. But the mechanism becomes transparent. Funding would follow the student, and the universities would receive allocations based on enrolment and, crucially, on student progression. If students dropout or fail to advance, funding declines.

If they succeed, institutions are supported.

Here, the benefit is twofold: students gain a concrete understanding of what public investment means - not as an abstraction - but as something with their name on it, and universities gain a direct incentive to prioritise teaching quality, academic support, and retention over expansion for its own sake. This is not privatisation but performance-linked public funding that keeps the state firmly in control.

The scholarship model targets one specific cost: teaching. Infrastructure, capital development, and strategic expansion would continue to flow through government grants, as they do today. Universities could also grow income through competitive research awards and development funds. The model does not cut university budgets; it only makes the teaching portion more transparent and directly accountable to student outcomes. The research awards and development funds, however, depend on a system capable of generating them. Bangladesh's research capacity is not as weak as its global rankings suggest. Institutions such as Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI), Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB), Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization (SPARRSO), and others generate genuine knowledge.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Heavy price

Sir, Donald Trump's declaration that the conflict with Iran is over appears, in substance, to restore the broad strategic balance that existed before hostilities erupted. If so, one must ask whether the immense human, economic and diplomatic costs were avoidable.

For years, successive American presidents resisted being drawn into Israel's long-standing confrontation with Iran. Ironically, the eventual outcome seems closer to their restraint than to the maximalist objectives championed by Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Israel, once enjoying broad international sympathy, now confronts a perceptible erosion of goodwill as the conflict's humanitarian and regional consequences

have mounted. But with his magnified ego, Netanyahu seems reluctant to shed his aversion to peace.

Meanwhile, the world economy has paid the price through disrupted trade, volatile energy markets and heightened uncertainty. Whether this episode fundamentally reshapes international alignments, trade routes and regional politics remains to be seen. But it has already reaffirmed that wars settle far less than they disrupt.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai, 15 June.

Rigorous

Sir, I express deep appreciation for the recent article published by Professor Hitendra Patel titled "The Fifth Stream".

It represents a significant intervention in how we understand history and politics. It directly challenges certain assumptions that we take for granted and shows how we often misread the workings of "Indian ideology," which produces political legitimacy and constructs historical narratives.

Rather than underplaying this aspect of history, Dr. Patel exposes how these narratives and political terms such as "fascism" are, more often than not, shaped by relations of power that legitimize certain discourses while delegitimizing others.

Too often, historical figures are read in a single dimension, and certain limits are imposed on how we interpret them. Dr. Patel's rigorous analysis encourages readers to question such certainties and to

reconsider established interpretations. Yours, etc., Arunaloke Chakraborty, Habra, 17 June.

Mamata to blame

Sir, This refers to the report "What options remain for TMC chieftain Mamata Banerjee?" (13 June). It will be grossly unfair to put all the blame on Abhishek Banerjee. Without the indulgence of the party Supreme, all these things could not have happened. Ms Banerjee displayed blind affection toward her nephew. For this disaster, she should blame no one other than herself. She is now being left in the lurch by her opportunistic party colleagues.

Yours, etc., Aranya Sanyal, Siliguri, 14 June.

Destinations to define India



BHUVNESH KUMAR

India's journey towards Viksit Bharat @ 2047 will be shaped not only by the industries we grow, the infrastructure we build, or the technologies we adopt, but also by the destinations we develop.

For decades, India's tourism narrative revolved around a handful of iconic attractions. The objective is not simply to increase visitor footfall, but to ensure that the benefits of tourism reach every region and every community.

We recognised that destinations thrive when they are supported by quality infrastructure, seamless connectivity, visitor amenities, destination management, community participation, and effective promotion. A destination is not merely a place people visit - it is an ecosystem that generates livelihoods, attracts investment, preserves heritage, and creates opportunities for local communities.

The launch of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme marked a significant shift in this direction. The scheme adopted a circuit-based approach to destination development. Heritage destinations, spiritual circuits, coastal regions, ecotourism hubs, desert landscapes, and destinations across the Northeast were developed through an integrated framework that strengthened infrastructure and enhanced visitor experiences.

Complementing this effort, the PRASHAD Scheme focused on pilgrimage and heritage destinations that hold immense cultural and spiritual significance. These investments have not only enhanced the experience of pilgrims and visitors but have also generated

new opportunities for local businesses, artisans, and service providers.

Between 2014 and 2025, India recorded more than 22.7 billion domestic tourist visits and welcomed over 181 million international tourist arrivals. Indians are travelling more extensively within the country, while international travelers are exploring destinations beyond traditional itineraries.

Heritage destinations such as Hampi, Dholavira, and Khajuraho continue to draw visitors interested in India's civilisational legacy. Spiritual destinations including Varanasi, Ayodhya, Bodhi Gaya, and Kushinagar are emerging as major centres of pilgrimage and cultural tourism. Wildlife destinations such as Kaziranga and Gir, coastal destinations such as Lakshadweep and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and cultural landscapes such as the Rann of Kutch are finding greater prominence in traveler itineraries.

While destinations such as the Taj Mahal, Jaipur, Goa, and Kerala's backwaters continue to attract visitors from around the world, the future of Indian tourism will also be shaped by emerging destinations - from the Statue of Unity and Rann of Kutch to Ziro Valley, Majuli, Dholavira, Lakshadweep, and countless lesser-known destinations that reflect India's diversity. Our vision is not to create a few successful destinations, but to build a nationwide network of destinations that showcase the many dimensions of India.

Today's visitors seek more than sightseeing. They seek authenticity, meaningful engagement with local communities, immersive cultural experiences, sustainability, and unique stories. The future of tourism therefore lies not only in building infrastructure, but in creating destinations that offer memorable experiences.

The success of any destination depends on the people who bring it to life. Artisans, guides, performers,



entrepreneurs, homestay owners, transport operators, and local businesses all contribute to the visitor experience.

Through initiatives such as Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi, alongside broader skill development efforts, we are empowering communities to become active participants in the tourism economy and beneficiaries of tourism growth.

The vision of developing 50 global-standard destinations is a major step towards positioning India among the world's leading

tourism economies. These destinations will serve as engines of regional growth, attract investment, create employment, and strengthen local economies.

My vision for 2047 is clear. Every State should have globally competitive destinations. Every district should nurture a distinctive tourism identity. Every destination should function as a catalyst for local development and community prosperity. The next tourism revolution in India will not be driven by a handful of landmarks alone.

It will be driven by destinations - large and small, famous and emerging - that together tell India's story. From the ghats of Varanasi and the shores of Lakshadweep to the landscapes of the Northeast and the cultural corridors of Gujarat, these destinations will define how India is experienced by the world.

The destinations we nurture today will not only shape India's tourism future - they will help shape India's development future.

The writer, an IAS officer, is Secretary, Tourism, Government of India.

NOW AND AGAIN A CAN OF FOAM

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

Sometimes, it takes the smallest of objects to unlock the deepest memories. Recently, when I bought a can of shaving foam, I expected nothing more than a routine addition to my bathroom shelf. But the moment I pressed the nozzle and watched the white foam rise into my palm, I found myself travelling back nearly 40 years - to a different time, a different life.

In an instant, I was no longer standing in my bathroom. I was a young man again, living in a modest middle-income home where every purchase was considered carefully and every expense measured. Imported products were rare luxuries - objects you saw more often in shop windows than in your home.

That was also the year my cousin, Tukunda, then a student at a university in America, was coming back home after four years of study. Tukunda as a young member of our family - a student of ISI Calcutta flying abroad for higher studies filled us with pride.

He returned not just with stories of his life as a student there but with something even more memorable in its quiet generosity. With the limited money he must have had as a student, he brought back small gifts for his cousins and family members.

Among them were two cans of shaving foam - one for my cousin and one for me. Today, such a gift may sound ordinary. But at that time, receiving shaving foam from the USA felt almost grand. It was probably the first gift I had received as an adult.

I remember examining the can closely - turning it over in my hands, reading the labels, and admiring the sleek foreign design. It was not merely shaving foam. It represented affection, thoughtfulness, and pride in being remembered.

I used it sparingly, almost with reverence. Then, one day, my other cousin mentioned that the foam irritated his skin. Without much fuss, he handed his can over to me. And just like that, the gift doubled.

My single can of foam lasted for four years. Even an everyday routine felt slightly special. My cousin's gift lasted another two years or perhaps even longer. Two cans that had travelled across oceans because a young cousin thought of us while in a foreign land ended up giving me nearly six years of daily use.

Life, of course, moved on. Brands changed. Priorities shifted. People came and went. And now, after almost four decades, I happened to buy the same shaving foam again and began using it about a week ago. When I pressed the nozzle this time, the familiar scent rose gently in the air - and with it came a flood of memories.

Tukunda's achievement. My cousin's quiet generosity. Our simple home. And the warmth of knowing that someone had thought of us from thousands of miles away. A can of shaving foam isn't expected to carry much emotion. Yet, sometimes the smallest objects become vessels for the biggest memories. This new can may or may not last for four years. But the memory of the first one will last a lifetime.

West Bengal's economics of ill health

PRABIR KUMAR SEN

The most recent 'Fiscal Health Index' (FHI) released by NITI Aayog has placed West Bengal, once the country's leading economy, in the lowest tier. The observation based on key elements like quality of expenditure, revenue mobilization, fiscal prudence, debt index, and debt sustainability reflects the poor macroeconomic stability of the state. With high debt, large interest payment, weak revenue generation and reliance on non-tax revenue, the state is facing critical challenges on fiscal sustainability.

There is little scope to argue that the fiscal strain directly compromises the healthcare ecosystem. Over the years West Bengal has received substantial financial support from the Central Government through the National Health Mission (NHM), Prime Minister-Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM), Finance Commission and so on.

A careful analysis of the allocation, release and expenditure of NHM for the past fifteen years reveals persistent under-utilization of funds with high unspent balances carried forward from the previous years. Furthermore, the state's own health sector allocation continues to be

around 5-6 per cent which is well below the National Health Policy 2017 recommendation of at least 8 per cent of the budget to health.

The recurring concern has been the gap between approved resources and their translation into measurable improvements in service delivery, infrastructure, workforce strengthening, and public health outcomes.

Unlike NHM, which largely finances recurring health services to achieve universal access to equitable, affordable and quality healthcare by strengthening health systems and capacities, PM-ABHIM focuses on long-term capital expenditure filling the critical gaps in strengthening public health laboratories, critical care infrastructure, disease surveillance systems, and emergency response mechanisms.

The estimates of the latest National Health Account highlight a significant healthcare burden for West Bengal. Per capita out-of-pocket expenditure (expenditures directly made by households at the point of receiving health care) reaches Rs 4183 as compared to the national figure of Rs 2767, accounting for 62.3 per cent of the total health expenditure well above the national estimate of 39.4 per cent.

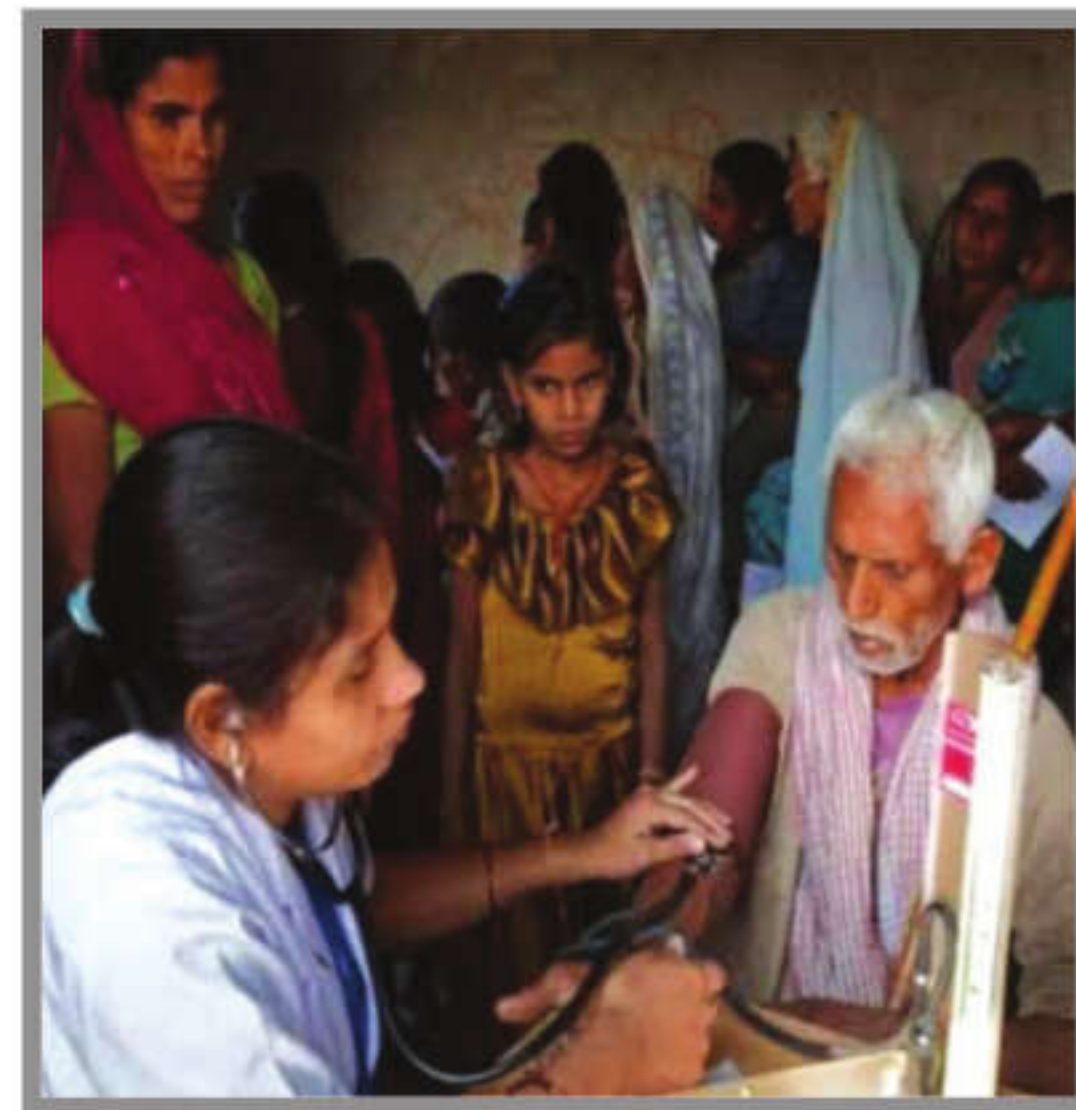
Until June 2026, when the newly elected Government led by Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikary signed

the Memorandum of Understanding to implement the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY), West Bengal was effectively the only State outside the flagship national healthcare framework which aims to provide health insurance and financial protection to the underprivileged.

A health-sector assessment for the Sixteenth Finance Commission by the National Health Systems Resource Centre indicates that West Bengal faces an alarmingly high infrastructure deficit of Rs 8,337 crore and a service delivery gap exceeding Rs 1,500 crore undermining the health-system resilience of the state.

Financial indiscipline, administrative misgovernance and weak accountability which persisted over much of the past fifteen years have led to fragmented planning, inadequate investment in public health infrastructure, delayed reforms, and the diversion of scarce fiscal resources away from long-term health system strengthening.

In this context, the Sixteenth Finance Commission (for the award period 2026-31) sets a strategic opportunity to catalyze a fundamental transformation of West Bengal's health system. Decisive shift towards a performance- and compliance-driven fiscal framework in place of specific,



segmented central grants mandates a stronger institutional efficiency which had long been ignored by the previous Government in the state.

Strengthening local governments, accelerating digitalization, improving real-time monitoring, and ensuring transparent and efficient use of

public resources for future healthcare in West Bengal built on greater economic resilience and social justice will advance India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

(The writer is former Principal Advisor, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.)

100 Years Ago

News Items

ROSE DAY

IN AID OF CALCUTTA CHARITIES

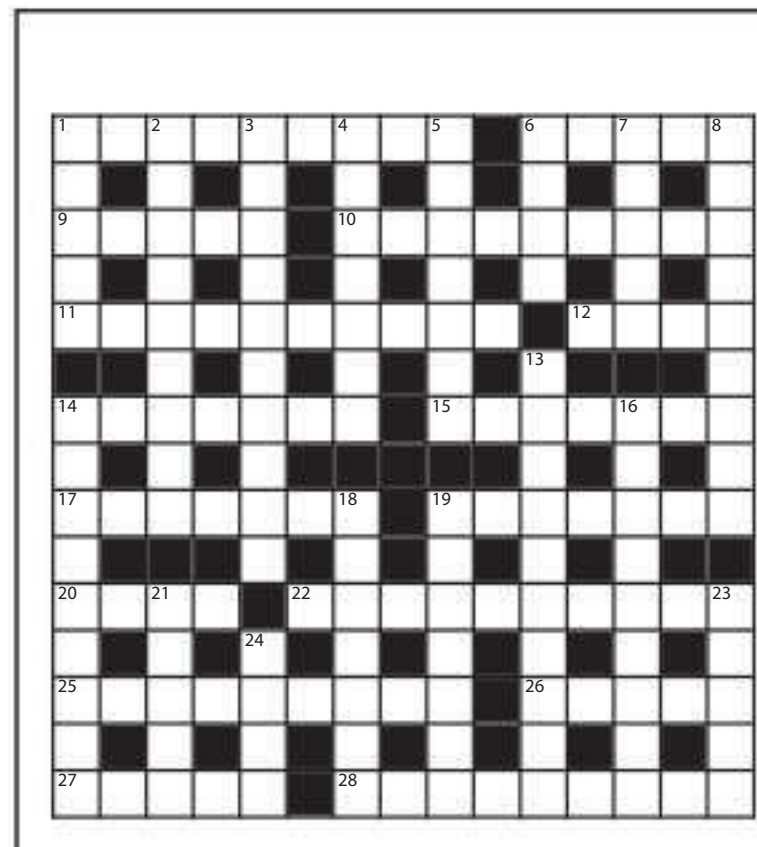
Steps have been taken to organise a Rose Day collection in Calcutta and Darjeeling on Wednesday next, June 23—the birth anniversary of the Prince of Wales. Rose Day in England was the conception of the late Queen Alexandra, and the annual collections were devoted to the hospitals and other charities. The Indian collections are to be given to the children of disabled soldiers, to the Queen Alexandra Ward of the Presidency Hospital, the Little Sisters of the Poor and the Leper Asylum. A committee has been formed with Mrs. J. B. Backhouse (Treasurer), Mrs. Denham White, Mrs. O. M. Gold, Mrs. J. B. Burgo, Mrs. H. W. Hales and Mrs. Ainslie as members. It is intended to sell the roses in the streets, a number of young ladies having under-taken the work of sellers, in the cinemas, hotels and other places. Should the initial effort prove a success Rose Day will be celebrated annually on a larger scale. The cause is a good one and it is to be hoped that Calcutta will respond to its appeal.

COTTON MILL INDUSTRY

TARIFF BOARD INQUIRY ON JULY 8

Bombay, June.
The Tariff Board, which is to inquire into the position of the Indian cotton mill industry, is expected to arrive in Bombay on July 1. The Bombay Millowners' Association will be the first to be examined by the new Tariff Board from July 8. Representatives of the Association to tender evidence have not been chosen yet. This will be decided at a meeting of the general committee on June 28. It is expected that Mr. N. N. Wadia will be one of the spokesmen for the Association, while many other millowners will give evidence of their own behalf.

Crossword | No. 293497



Last Sunday's Solution

LEGOVER LAMBDA
G P P D M O S
UGLI ACUTE ANGLE
A U U C E E A
ENAMEL HARIDROPY
D E E E F F O
ASKRANT SESSITIONS
P M T S E N T
SOMBRERO APATHY
O U F B E
ENOLAGAY RENOWN
R A U O E O R
DANNYLARUE BRIM
C C A K Z L S
EMERGE BENEATH

ACROSS

- 1 Hard work to score children's game (9)
- 6 Academic has nothing in evidence (5)
- 9 The powers that be have run hot bath (5)
- 10 A wild gorilla eats head of tiny reptile (9)
- 11 Visitor's essentially fun transition into entertainer (5,5)
- 12 Point and slash sword (4)
- 14 After regularly taking orders I expected what's left (7)
- 15 Teacher avoiding extremes, describing artist's pain (7)
- 17 Hairy? Usher it out (7)
- 19 Cycle seen covered in top type of oil (7)
- 20 Copied athletic sports director (4)
- 22 Cut round grainy design? (4,6)
- 25 Sentimental master taking wife's place in dance held in school yard (9)
- 26 Slime, for example, covering wildebeest's back (5)

DOWN

- 1 Yank tap, perhaps both taps (5)
- 2 Posh car takes meandering course under parking sign (9)
- 3 Criminally dump 'income' for collection (10)
- 4 Deal framing upstanding copper is malign (7)
- 5 It's Francis's responsibility - after half an hour, start to look with fresh eyes (4,3)
- 6 Tot of gin in crap punk dance (4)
- 7 Some don't appear ready to be drawn (2,3)
- 8 Charge after church put cross outside to impose belief on others (5-4)
- 13 Endless crap punk dancing around spilled gin - it's getting going (8,2)
- 14 Pat's bothered after broadcasting here (9)
- 16 Philosophy capturing detailed scene's climax (9)
- 18 Capricious informer divides Morecambe (7)
- 19 Heard aboard loose ships making slogan for mime (3-4)
- 21 Film the woman's gas (5)
- 23 Central Yemen railway is smoother (5)
- 24 Lively motor returned by end of January (4)

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

Human drama behind scientific discovery

TV VENKATESWARAN

ENCOUNTERS WITH INFINITY is a pleasant and delectable collection of three plays that bring to life some of the most compelling figures in the history of modern science. Through 'The Square Root of a Sonnet', 'The Trial of Abdus Salam', and 'Invisible Particles', Nilanjan P Choudhury explores the lives of Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, Abdus Salam, Bibha Chowdhuri and Marietta Blau. Far from being conventional biographical narratives, these plays examine the human dramas that lie behind scientific discovery — ambition, friendship, prejudice, exile, recognition, and the relentless pursuit of truth. In doing so, Choudhury demonstrates how theatre can illuminate not only scientific ideas, but also the social, political, and ethical worlds in which science is practised.

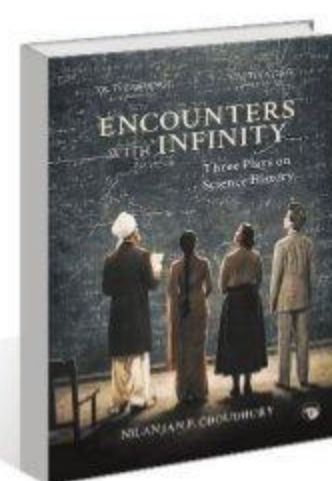
The three plays have a clever and imaginative narrative architecture. 'The Square Root of a Sonnet' is a ghost play. Chandrasekhar, Lalitha and Eddington revisit the past from an afterlife-like setting, with some flashbacks thrown in. The structure is explicitly indebted to Michael Frayn's 'Copenhagen'. 'The Trial of Abdus Salam' is a courtroom-like interrogation. The mysterious 'Voice' acts as prosecutor, judge, fanatical nation, fundamentalist religion, friend and memory all at once. But who is on trial?

At first glance, it appears that Salam is under inquisition. Soon, it becomes clear that it is the fanatical state (Pakistan) and religious orthodoxy that are under trial. The third play, 'Invisible Particles', is a historical reconstruction culminating in a ghostly reunion.

Choudhury does not merely insert scientific facts, but skilfully dramatises scientific notions. For example, Eddington explains relativity through tablecloths, apples and conversation. Salam's electroweak work is linked to his philosophical and religious search for unity. Basic notions of modern particle physics emerge through Bibha and Marietta's discussions of experiments and instruments.

Rather than being staid and serious, the scripts repeatedly use wit to prevent the narrative from becoming didactic. Chandra recalls gifting Lalitha a copy of Sommerfeld's 'Atomic Structure and Spectral Lines' during their courtship. Lalitha teases him mercilessly: "You know what they call people like you these days?... Nerd. N-E-R-D." The exchange humanises the young Chandrasekhar and gently mocks the stereotype of the socially awkward scientist.

Similarly, in 'The Trial of Abdus Salam', much of the humour arises from the banter between Salam and the mysterious 'Voice'. Although the profound issues of religion, nationalism, and scientific responsibility are addressed, the dialogue is peppered with Urdu-Hindustani repartee and self-deprecating jokes, preventing the play from becoming



ENCOUNTERS WITH INFINITY: THREE PLAYS ON SCIENCE HISTORY

by Nilanjan P Choudhury.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 221. ₹499

solemn or preachy. Humour becomes an important dramatic device, making difficult ideas accessible while simultaneously revealing the personalities behind them.

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's 'Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen' traces the historical transformation of the portrayal of scientists on stage during the European Renaissance, from Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus' to Ben Jonson's 'The Alchemist', as seekers of forbidden knowledge who are comic, deluded, or dangerously ambitious figures.

By the 20th century, science had become culturally prestigious and politically consequential. In plays such as 'An Enemy of the People' (Henrik Ibsen, 1882), Bertolt Brecht's 'Life of Galileo' (first performed in

1943), 'In the Matter of J Robert Oppenheimer' (In der Sache J Robert Oppenheimer) by Heinar Kipphardt (1964), 'Copenhagen' (2000) by Michael Frayn, the tragic hero wrestles with moral dilemmas. Should they speak truth to power? Are they victims of political forces or tragic participants in war and destruction? The focus shifts from "Should humans seek this knowledge?" to "What responsibilities follow from possessing this knowledge?"

'Encounters with Infinity' takes a new turn. The dominant theme is the politics of recognition and the historical grievances of marginalised groups. In these plays, scientists are not objects of ridicule or subjects of despair over their actions, but rather protagonists seeking recognition and representation. The protagonists are 'outsiders'. Chandrasekhar: a colonial Indian in Cambridge struggling with betrayal and intellectual isolation. Salam: an Ahmadi Muslim in Pakistan confronting the painful contradiction between scientific universalism and political exclusion. Blau: a Jewish woman in Nazi Europe. Bibha: an Indian woman. The conflicts are not between science and society alone, but between truth and recognition, conviction and compromise, ambition and justice.

All three plays are haunted by the fear of being forgotten. Lalitha literally carries a 'box of memories' into the afterlife. Salam worries about how history will remember him and whether Pakistan will erase him. Bibha and

Marietta explicitly discuss the "long list of women made invisible by history".

The book repeatedly examines how institutions exclude people even as they benefit from their work. Nonetheless, Choudhury resists simplistic binaries of villains and victims. The author's note to 'The Square Root of a Sonnet' reveals his effort to move beyond portraying Eddington as a mere antagonist and Chandrasekhar as a wronged hero. It explores the nuances rather than painting a simplistic black and white picture.

This deeply moving collection revives memories of earlier experiments in science theatre in India, and reveals how contemporary theatre is carving out a distinctive voice of its own. While drawing upon established traditions, Choudhury's scripts move beyond familiar questions of scientific discovery and its moral, ethical, and environmental implications. He foregrounds issues of scientific temper, exclusion, recognition, and social justice.

Equally important is his insistence on a genuinely universal vision of science, one that acknowledges the contributions of individuals across cultures, nations, religions, and genders. In doing so, 'Encounters with Infinity' presents science not merely as a body of knowledge, but as a deeply human and collective enterprise, shaped both by its triumphs and its silences.

— The reviewer is visiting professor, IISER, Mohali

Malayalam cinema unfolds Never leaving, or returning

ESHAN SHARMA

THE first time I watched a film by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, what stayed with me was not the story but the silence and the stillness. Most of the time, in films, sound guides our gaze and emotional responses. However, in Adoor's world, there seems to be no urgency to move or to make things easier for the viewer.

In 'Mathikula', Basheer passes time walking parallelly to the wall, smoking, talking to other prisoners and scribbling. In 'Elipathayam', the protagonist is trapped within himself and cannot move on from the feudal lifestyle. You are invited to witness life unfold. For someone used to the pace of Bombay cinema, this might come off as slow. That is the beauty of Malayalam cinema, where stillness is an act of resistance.

My own introduction to Malayalam cinema did not begin with auteurs like Adoor or John Abraham; it began with films like 'Bangalore Days' and 'Premam'. During the pandemic, many people watched a range of Malayalam films. Suddenly, conversations included discussions on filmmakers like Dileesh Pothan, Lijo Jose Pellissery, Anjali Menon and films like 'Kumbalangi Nights'.

SR Praveen's 'Ticket to Kerala' does not simply catalogue films or filmmakers. It attempts to situate and contextualise the experience of a Malayalam film within a longer history. Like any good film, the book too starts from the present, the ongoing wave of Malayalam cinema that has travelled beyond Kerala, and then it slowly goes back to ask how this came to be.

Praveen acknowledges the same entry points that shaped my own viewing, and uses them to map what is often called the new wave. From there, he moves into a more

in-depth exploration of the people who shaped this phase. His interview with filmmaker Raveesh Ravi is particularly insightful, especially in understanding how he moved beyond his mere identity as a cinematographer of Anurag Kashyap to establish himself as one of the most distinct voices of the Malayalam industry.

In the chapter on music, Praveen masterfully introduces its evolution in the new wave. Another important chapter is the one dealing with the creation of the Women in Cinema Collective and the aftermath of the Hema Committee report. This was a big blow to the entire industry.

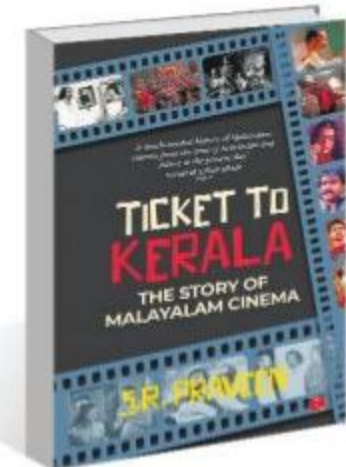
The second half of the book moves into history, and this is where its scope becomes clear. It deals with the origins of Malayalam cinema, the studio era, the emergence of the progressive and parallel cinema, and the role of figures like Adoor, John Abraham, Bina Paul, and MT Vasudevan Nair.

For me, the book leaves one question unresolved, and perhaps it cannot be resolved. What exactly is the Malayalam new wave? How does one define it? The distinction between mainstream and parallel cinema, so often used in discussions on Hindi cinema, becomes untrustworthy here. What appears experimental in one context seems to exist independently and comfortably within the mainstream in another.

This ambiguity is also the charm of researching, but it may also be a reflection of the industry as well. This is not necessarily a flaw. I do not look to books for easy answers. As a student of history, I look to books for questions. 'Ticket to Kerala' opens up many such questions.

For anyone who has recently come to Malayalam cinema and wants to go further, this book is a generous, thoughtful guide. More importantly, it reminds the reader that what appears new is often the result of a much longer and less visible process.

— The reviewer is a film scholar and founder of Karwaan Heritage



TICKET TO KERALA
by SR Praveen.
Rupa.
Pages 320. ₹495

BINDU MENON

LIFE is lived forward, but can only be understood backward, wrote Kierkegaard. A memoir perhaps emerges from this paradox: the attempt to reconstruct a past with enough intimacy to feel lived again, yet with enough distance to understand it. In 'A Room in Bombay', Manil Suri undertakes this difficult work.

At the heart of the memoir lies both its setting and central metaphor: a room in Razia Mansion, a decaying four-storey building in Bombay. This rented room, part of an apartment shared with three Muslim families, is home to the Suris — young Manil, father Ram and mother Prem. Bombay has had a recurring presence — animated as well as dystopian — in Manil's early works, most notably in the trilogy 'The Death of Vishnu', 'The Age of Shiva' and 'The City of Devi'. In this memoir, the city reveals itself through the everyday and intimate bustle of living.

The kitchen and toilets are common and the site of many battles, triggering a bunker mentality among the residents. Manil recounts the skirmishes with mirth and colour. The space, he writes, was no "idealised tableau of religious harmony" but one of constant negotiation. Religion would be periodically invoked but did not define every conflict. The frictions increase when every inch of real estate becomes the bone of contention. The room becomes a witness too, to aspirations, crumbling dreams and beguiling questions of sexual identity. Manil's parents attempt to rebuild their lives in a new city, carrying with them memories of the one they lost in Rawalpindi during Partition.

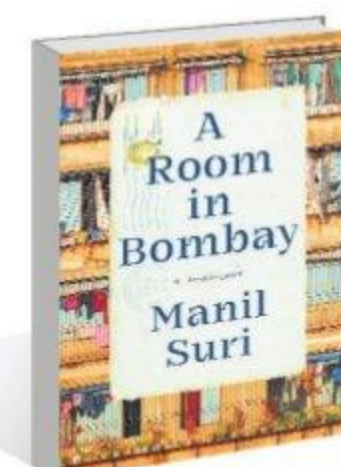
Ram, an assistant music director, is a gentle dreamer whose fortunes in the Bollywood film industry keep fluctuating. When his long-held ambition of becoming a playback singer slowly recedes, he turns increasingly to drink. Prem, though, is the powerhouse. When her family moved to Delhi after the

Partition and her father died, she even wrote a letter to Indira Gandhi, seeking a job. She briefly worked as the future Prime Minister's personal secretary.

Marriage narrowed some of her own possibilities, yet she was determined in widening those of her son: refusing a larger suburban home so he could attend a better school, and pursuing a degree in her forties to secure work as a teacher. In this marriage, Manil was the glue, the "drug that kept them going". Two strands run through. One traces Manil's coming of age as he discovers and negotiates his sexuality within the restraining confines of the room and the city. The other, and the more powerful one, follows Prem. She is, as he says, the defining connection in his life that he needed to sustain. Their bond survives distance and migration, reflected in the nearly 2,700 letters Manil preserved over the years after leaving home. Even as illness and dementia begin to unsettle memory itself, the memoir becomes an act of return — an effort to hold on to a mother, a room and a city that continue to inhabit him long after he has left them behind.

Ultimately, 'A Room in Bombay' shows that home, with its spaces, memories and unfinished stories, never fully leaves us. As Manil reflects, "One can never come back home, but one can also never truly get away."

— The reviewer is based in Bengaluru



A ROOM IN BOMBAY
by Manil Suri.
HarperCollins.
Pages 341. ₹699



BACKFLAP



GIORGIA'S VISION
by Giorgia Meloni.
Rupa.
Pages 224. ₹695

This book is a manifesto on the meaning of identity in the 21st century. Can nations preserve their culture while navigating the pressures of modern politics and economic change? Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni offers a deeply personal and political reflection on these defining questions of our time.



HER STORY, HER GLORY
by Aditya Bhushan.
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Pages 244. ₹495

The journey of women's cricket has remained under-explored despite its courage, depth and significance. This book brings to life the struggles and triumphs of the pioneers who built the game against great odds.

Mahesh Bhatt on 'anti-guru' UG Krishnamurti as his guru

HARJINDER SINGH

THIS is the latest of three books by Mahesh Bhatt on UG Krishnamurti — not Jiddu, the well-known free thinker who inspired liberal education. It is 'another Krishnamurti' (as Pratap Karvat told Bhatt) — philosopher UG, the destroyer of all beliefs. Known as the 'anti-guru', UG opined on Jiddu as "the world has not known — and will never know — a fraud of such magnitude...". The book is presented as an 'honest' memoir consisting of a few regular chapters in the beginning, followed by mostly chronological diary-like musings, apparently with UG as 'fire' at the centre of it.

The relationship between UG and filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt is interesting, to say the least, and quite complex. Trapped in emotional and existential crises, Bhatt, at some stage, found profound liberation and a radical philosophical shift through his interactions with UG, beginning in the 1970s. To appreciate the relationship fully, one needs to understand Bhatt's background, a non-canonical coming together of his parents from different faiths and the consequent

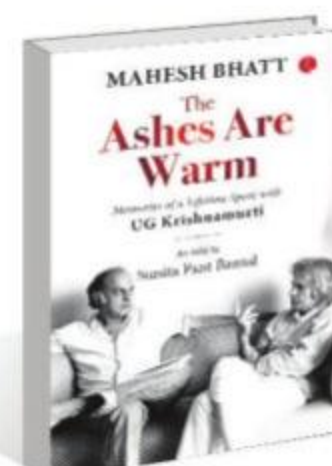
struggle for the parents and their children.

Bhatt's political stance, secular and humanitarian, endorsed and reinforced by UG, is the most satisfying aspect of 'Ashes...'

Coming from outside the conservative core of the Indian majoritarian milieu, it was only natural that Bhatt would be drawn to UG's controversial and rebellious teachings that rejected organised religion, gurus, and psychological self-improvement.

A lot is written about UG and his 'refusing to be God', but 'Ashes...' is more about Bhatt than UG. A philosophy of rejecting psychological transformations and accepting enlightenment simply as a natural, biological state of being helped Bhatt in dealing with the crises in his life, what he described as a 'spiritual coma'.

In an early chapter titled 'UG left — Only Thirst Remains', Bhatt writes, "The thirst for truth, for dissolution, for home — for a place where nothing inside me needs to pose or pretend." This is a universal thirst in all things living, and who knows, perhaps in non-living things too. After all, what before science started dominating consciousness research, at a time when philosophers ruled the roost, UG had understood that: "The



THE ASHES ARE WARM: MEMORIES OF A LIFETIME SPENT WITH UG KRISHNAMURTI
by Mahesh Bhatt.
Rupa.
Pages 366. ₹495

body is a fortuitous concourse of atoms. There is no death for the body, only an exchange of atoms. Their changing places and taking different forms is what we call 'death'. It's a process which restores the energy level in nature that has gone down. In reality, nothing is born and nothing is dead." And a time came when UG died and Bhatt was left with the all-pervading thirst.

Talking of the thirst, Bhatt talks about himself, his successes, his mentoring, the successes of his mentees. He writes, seemingly

innocently, but with ego galore. There are brief editorial breaks informing us of details like how Bhatt's friendship with UG began when he was 26 and lasted 33 years. The reader reflects on the pain that Bhatt talks about, a kind of experience they are likely to have also gone through at some stage of their own lives. It is good to read about it, but eventually one has to get up and meet the demon called reality in ways different from Bhatt's, that does not serve dosa at the Taj hotel to 'cosmic Naxalites', whatever that means.

The flow of verbosity with assertions like "...our second child was about to be born. But I couldn't stay. The idea of birth — of bringing life into a world that was already coming undone — was too much for me", is remorseless, vane apathy of an intellectual celebrity.

Perhaps the worst is the pretence of honesty in revelation of apparently unethical relationships — "Men are bad... I betrayed (my wife)". It would be amusing if one does not recall that the other victim — the woman in the affair, the benignly demonised sexual archetype — is one haunted by memories of communal violence in her teenage, the fear developing into schizophrenia and eventually a horrible death, with the rotting body

going undetected for three days. Men (some of them, not all) are bad, not because of affairs, but because they think they can get away by taking a self-denouncing public stance decades after when they should have shown timely honesty.

And the women in 'Ashes...', they seem to be missing complete persona, they are mere actors, vulnerable, pitiable, one betrayed, the other dumped ('washing... hands of' — UG's words, Bhatt's action).

The self-righteous tone in the narration is everywhere, when actually the author is merely revealing how he wanted to wash off his guilt by leaning on the shoulder of the anti-guru Guru, one prone to commenting on everything in the universe, including breakthroughs in modern science with no education in the domain.

A lot of trivia appears profound in such books by celebrities, and yet a serious reading merely reveals the mundane lives of the privileged. To be fair, there are occasional gems too. There is an overwhelming amount of grief in 'Ashes...', but remember that Bhatt made great films like 'Arth' (1982). It is in the films that we must explore his world.

— The reviewer is a scientist and poet

REFLECTIONS

Burying unpleasant memories

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

LIKE so many people in the country, I have almost stopped going to a movie hall to see a film. Recently, miserable and fed up of being home-bound, I ended up seeing two films in as many weeks. One was a popular Hollywood film, 'The Devil Wears Prada 2', and the other that had got great reviews, 'Main Vaapas Aaunga', set in the Punjab and a reminder of what Partition did to both countries.

Before I actually talk about the films, let me tell you about the experience. The theatre was in a new mall that has come up nearby and many neighbours had been there to shop, eat or see a movie. When we went for an afternoon show, there were all of nine persons in the hall — a bunch of giggly girls and the three of us greybeards. Imagine the cost of running the air-conditioning, the staff and all that for just nine persons. No wonder many shows are cancelled for the lack of sufficient audiences and most don't even make it beyond a week. People prefer to watch them at home when they are beamed on the streaming platforms. Since there is now a limit on what such theatres charge for a ticket, the owners have resorted to charging huge amounts for a tub of popcorn or the junk food available for the hungry. The cost of a large tub of popcorn is almost the same as the ticket!

The above description is of the Hollywood movie, but the *desi* one was much better attended. The hall was almost three quarters full, including a wailing child whose parents had brought him to see a film at a time when he should have been in bed. Where the Hollywood movie was mercifully over in less than two hours (and a huge disappointment after its first version), the Hindi movie was almost twice as long



Naseeruddin Shah and Diljit Dosanjh (left) in a still from 'Main Vaapas Aaunga'.

How many wars will it take for peace to return?

and ended long after that poor child was fast asleep. In terms of the story and acting, 'Main Vaapas...' was very engaging. How can one go wrong with the great Naseeruddin Shah as the old grandfather and Rajit Kapur as his son? The newcomers and Diljit Dosanjh rose to the roles they were given with great sensitivity and aplomb. My problem was with the length. For some reason, the very talented writer-director Imtiaz Ali allowed the film to become almost maudlin before bringing it to a close.

Why is it that our filmmakers stretch a plot to a stage where it becomes tiresome? Is it because they want the audience to get full *paisa vasool*? Or is it because we are so accustomed to fast-forwarding movies on our home screens that we have lost the patience to see a film, no matter how bad, to the end? It's not as if the films of my youth and childhood days were any better — I recall the silly romantic capers of the 1960s, with long song sequences and costume changes in the middle of a scene. Yet we suffered these long, boring films with improbable plots because we knew how to deal with boredom. In the world before action speeded up and where stories and plots were

no longer discussed for days, where we munched cheap peanuts and shared stories about films others had seen, and when everything was rationed and allowed only as a special monthly treat, we had a respect for cinema (however bad) that may be difficult for this generation to understand.

And now for a short comment on Partition and why — almost 80 years after it took place — we have started to understand the trauma that it has left on all those who were affected by it, or who had been told stories by their parents and grandparents. Strangely, it has been only in the past few years that we have created a Partition Museum for people to actually see the evidence of this cruel act perpetrated by the departing British government to drive a permanent wedge between two faiths, communities and neighbours. Burying unpleasant memories is perhaps the only way to deal with such cataclysmic events, yet it puzzles me why nobody tried to tell the truth in the intervening decades.

Two remarkable serials come to mind: Manohar Shyam Joshi's 'Buniyaad' and Bisham Sahni's 'Tamas'. MS Sathyu's 'Garam Hawa' also shook us when we first saw it and it must be acknowledged that it takes a really sensitive writer and director to take up this challenge. We also forget that since many of us do not read novels in languages other than English, we have missed Dharmvir Bharati, Krishna Sobti and Amrita Pritam's deeply painful novels and short stories. One of my favourite short stories written by my mother Shivani, 'Lal Haveli', about a tragic love tale of that time, awaits a film. One day, I hope someone will fulfil my wish.

Finally, do read Sam Dalrymple's deeply researched book on the many partitions of India. We often forget that India, Ceylon, Burma and Afghanistan were once part of this great subcontinent. The civilisational memories of those ruptured limbs and blood ties are there for us if only we could rise above India-Pakistan binaries. Our food, our languages, clothing and crafts belong to a past that refuses to stop haunting our stories and storytellers.

How many wars will it take for peace to return?
— The writer is a social commentator

Where have all the dragonflies gone



AVAY SHUKLA

BIODIVERSITY is perhaps the most unacknowledged component of the natural environment, and the attention of policymakers rarely goes beyond trees and animals, if even that. But biodiversity is much more than just trees and animals. It is the building block of nature, without which there would be no nature, or a habitable planet. Biodiversity is the extraordinary variety of all living things on earth. It encompasses plants, animals, micro-organisms, fungi and even pathogens, the genetic information they carry, and the complex eco-systems they create. I've learnt this the hard way, and am only just beginning to understand it.

When I acquired my half acre of land in Purani Koti village (Shimla) in 2002, there were only two houses here; the landscape comprised rolling, grassy hillsides with a few apple trees and some deodars and blue pine. My own plot was carpeted with wild daisies, buttercups, lilies and primroses. The place was practically overrun with bees, butterflies, cicadas and dragonflies, and there was a continuous buzzing sound on sunny days.

The birds formed the next level on the food chain, and were in turn subordinate to the feral cats and pine martins. Purani Koti was a biodiversity hotspot!

Not any more. Most of the land in the village has been built over, the trees felled, the buzzing of dragonflies replaced with the rasping of jack hammers and saws. To compensate, I have planted more than 200 trees on my land, of the fruit and jungle varieties. But, to no avail, as trees alone on just one plot cannot create biodiversity. For, the lowest tier of natural growth in the area — the grasses, bushes, ferns, wild flowers, creepers — have all gone, the soil has lost its capacity to store rain and snow or to retain moisture. With the disappearance of this living building block of nature, the insects that depended on it have also started vanishing.

A few, very few, butterflies and bees still delight us, but I have not seen any dragonflies this year. I fear their niche has disappeared and they are gone forever. In a year or two, the bees and butterflies will also abandon this biodiverse wasteland. Which, along with global warming, probably explains why we can no longer grow the fruits — apple, pears, apricot, cherries — that we used to: with the biodiversity gone, there are no insects left to pollinate their flowers or birds to spread the seeds.

This loss of precious biodiversity is rarely factored in during our planning and developmental processes. What is reluctantly considered (at most) is forest or green cover — i.e. the number of trees to be felled. These are quantified and valued, the amount paid by the project proponent and twice that number planted as compensatory afforestation. The loss of biodiversity is com-

pletely ignored and never compensated for. Himachal's forest area is 37,000 sq km (37 lakh hectares), and a 2024 study by the Bhopal Institute of Forest Management quantifies its biodiversity value at ₹33,000 crore per annum. In other words, the biodiversity contribution value of every hectare of the forests is ₹89,000 per annum.

Working out its net present value over a typical 25-30 year life cycle of any project, the state should be charging at least ₹30 lakh for every hectare of forest diverted for non-forest use. But this is not done because no value is attached to biodiversity.

This may, however, be changing globally, even as we in India continue to axe millions of trees every year on grandiloquent schemes that will displace the livelihoods of thousands of forest-dependent communities, but enrich crony oligarchs by a few trillion dollars more. Peru, for example, has become the first country to give legal protection to insects (in this case, its famous stingless bees). Recognising the ecological importance of these tiny pollinators of the Amazon forests which pollinate 80 per cent of the Amazon's tropical fruits, just this month it has enacted a law that recognises their right to exist,

One hopes our govts, NGT, courts get some sense of biodiversity

to a clean and intact habitat, to regenerate, and to receive legal representation if pollution, deforestation and projects threaten their survival.

Anyone who threatens these rights can be sued and prosecuted.

Similarly, in Wales, the river Wye has received legal protection of its "rights of nature" from its catchment to the sea. The new charter recognises the river as a living ecosystem with an intrinsic right to exist, i.e. the right to flow, the right to its biodiversity, the right to be free from pollution, the right to regenerate and to a healthy catchment. Any citizen can now go to court to enforce these rights. New Zealand, too, has given legal status to the Whanganui river. Mount Taranaki has been given legal guardianship through an eight-member Guardian Council consisting of four government experts and four tribal representatives: no project, government or private, can be sanctioned there without the approval of this Council.

In India, the Uttarakhand High Court in 2017 recognised the Ganga as "a living entity" with legal rights but the ruling was inexplicably stayed by the Supreme Court, and the matter continues in limbo.

The Peru and Wales laws are small beginnings in realising the importance of protecting ecosystems and biodiversity as a whole, not just trees and forests in isolation. One hopes our governments, courts and the NGT take note of these developments, dispel their sense of omniscience, and rouse themselves from their slumber, sloth and lack of understanding of ecological issues. Then, and only then, will the dragonflies perhaps return to Purani Koti and reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

What yoga teaches us

AS we celebrate the International Yoga Day today, we come together in a spirit of unity to honour a timeless practice that disciplines both body and mind through yogic postures. Marked by community sessions of *asanas* and meditation, the occasion is especially significant in an age dominated by social media reels and increasingly erratic lifestyles. With both the young and the elderly spending long hours glued to screens, health concerns such as frozen shoulders, dry eyes, irregular eating habits, anxiety and stress have become commonplace.

The old wisdom of 'Early to bed and early to rise' has, for many, given way to late nights, junk food at odd hours and little physical activity. It is in this context that yoga's deeper philosophy assumes greater relevance. While the International Yoga Day highlights physical and mental well-being, the *Bhagavad Gita* defines yoga in a more profound sense: *Samatvam Yoga Uchyate* (Chapter 2, Verse 48) — yoga is the evenness of mind.

Krishna counsels a conflicted Arjuna to act with steadfastness and teaches him the importance of maintaining mental balance in all situations. Yoga is not merely a set of postures for staying healthy; it is a way of life rooted in discipline. It encourages us to perform our duties with mindfulness and focus, without becoming attached to the outcome.

Often, results may fall short of expectation or may not find acceptance among others. Yet an honest reflection on such outcomes helps us identify areas for improvement, recognise our



UNIVERSE

VUJAY LAXMI

strengths and understand our true nature. It enables us to chart a path forward guided by clarity and self-awareness. Such guidance is valuable because it emerges from an inner voice that illuminates the self.

This raises important questions. In a world filled with noise and distractions from every direction, how do we remain focused? How do we free ourselves from an attachment to out-

International Yoga Day serves as a reminder that yoga is far more than physical exercise

comes? How do we cultivate inner stability amid uncertainty? This is where the practice of yoga becomes invaluable. It helps us attain inner stillness and listen to the voice within.

Listening to that inner voice requires pause and stillness — a calm and peaceful mind, time and space, and, above all, the willingness to listen. Once we begin to connect with our inner self, discovery unfolds. Thoughts gain clarity, understanding deepens, growth begins and perspectives shift. This transformation occurs quietly and gradually shapes the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

Yoga calls for equanimity in success and failure alike. It teaches us to live fully in the present, without being burdened by the past or consumed by anxiety about the future. This principle of *karma yoga* — selfless action — is at the heart of yoga's true spirit. When daily duties and responsibilities are carried out with dedication and a sense of higher purpose, they foster both inner peace and social harmony.

The International Yoga Day is, therefore, much more than a health initiative. It is a call to integrate balance, clarity and compassion into everyday life, extending the benefits of yogic practice into the way we work, interact and serve society. Ultimately, that is what yoga seeks: harmony between the self and the world, and harmony between the self and its truest essence.

— The writer teaches at SSSS College of Commerce for Women, Amritsar

The novel is dying, it may yet find a dignified niche

SUKIRAT

WHEN the Booker Prize Foundation announced last month that it was releasing *All Around the World*, a collection of short stories by Booker Prize winners, including Anne Enright, David Szalay and Roddy Doyle, the literary world applauded. Priced at just £1, with thousands of free copies being distributed to prisons, libraries and community centres across Britain, it was an act of genuine democratisation. But it was also, whether intentionally or not, an admission — that the novel, that patient and unhurried *baithak* of modern literature, may be finding itself slowly deserted.

The debate over the novel's death is not new. And yet the novel has survived, adapting, mutating, occasionally thriving. What feels different this time is that the threat is not coming from a rival medium alone. It is coming from inside the human brain.

More than a third of UK adults now find it hard to read a book through to the end; 55 per cent say they read less than they want to. These are not people indifferent to books —

they buy them, stack them on bedside tables, begin them with good intentions, and quietly abandon them somewhere around page 40. India tells perhaps a starker story. Between 2019 and 2024, only 4 per cent of Indians reported reading in their free time — down from 5.4 per cent in the years before. Among children aged between eight and 18, fewer than 35 per cent say they enjoy reading at all.

The culprit most commonly named is the inability to concentrate. A generation raised on the scroll is finding sustained attention increasingly difficult to summon. Social media has done something more insidious than simply compete with books for time. It has rewired the expectation of narrative itself.

A story, in the grammar of Instagram or X, resolves in under a minute. The novel, by contrast, asks you to sit with ambiguity for 300 pages, to defer gratification almost indefinitely. Even newspaper opinion pieces — traditionally the thinking person's brief indulgence — have grown shorter and punchier, as editors chase readers whose fingers hover perpetually over the scroll button.

Cinema is feeling the same pressure. Limited series of six tight episodes outperform sprawling seasons of 12. And then there are

reels — 15-to-60-second fragments that have become the enticing stories of our age. The attention economy has declared its preference: it is emphatically not for the long form.

It is in this context that the short story's moment begins to feel less like a revival and more like inevitable. Punjabi literature understood this long ago. The short story — the *nikki kahani* — was never a minor form here. Gurbakhsh Singh, who founded *Preet Lari* in 1933 and used its pages to carry a reformist vision deep into Punjabi homes, wrote short fiction that was as much social intervention as literature — stories that spoke plainly to readers who had never been spoken to plainly before. Nanak Singh, who is remembered primarily as a novelist, wrote short fiction of searing emotional precision. Balwant Gargi brought to his stories a playwright's instinct for the compressed moment. Amrita Pritam's short fiction distilled landscapes of Partition grief into a few

Short story's moment is not revival, it's inevitable

devastating pages. And then there is the *qissa* — the verse narrative that held Punjab's oral imagination for centuries, keeping a listener hooked, making the long feel short.

The International Booker Prize's recognition of Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* last year — translated from Kannada — was a significant cultural signal. That a collection of stories in a regional Indian language could win a prestigious prize for translated fiction should have been celebrated far more loudly. It pointed to something that Punjabi writers and readers might usefully reflect upon: the short story is not a concession to diminished attention spans. In the right hands, it is the most demanding form there is.

But there is a difference between the short story's literary legitimacy and its mass appeal. What the Booker Foundation's initiative is really attempting is to use it as a gateway — a door left ajar for those who have forgotten, or never learnt, that their own life might be found somewhere inside a book. The more uncomfortable question is whether the novel will, in the coming decades, complete its migration from mass entertainment to elite pursuit. Publishers increasingly speak of "reluctant readers".

Literary fiction's commercial base continues to narrow even as its critical prestige remains intact. What we may be witnessing is not the death of the novel but its aristocratisation — its quiet retreat into the company of those with the education, leisure, and crucially the trained attention to sustain it.

This need not be mourned without nuance. Poetry moved long ago from the popular to the rarefied without ceasing to matter. The novel may yet find a dignified niche. But those who love it — and in Punjab, many do — would do well to stop pretending that it remains, or will long remain, a democratic form. Shiv Kumar Batalvi wrote poetry that mill workers and farmers knew by heart. Nanak Singh's novels sold in their hundreds of thousands in a Punjab that read hungrily. That world is not coming back. The question is what we build in its place.

The short story is not the future of fiction because it is better than the novel. It is the future because we have made ourselves, collectively, into people for whom the novel requires more patience than we can spare. That is not the novel's failure. It is ours.

— Sukirat Singh Anand publishes under the name Sukirat

The Akal Takht Jathedar's directive against the Punjab CM and the latter's counter reflect a moment of reckoning

THE PANTHIC CRISIS

GS PAUL & CHARANJIT S TEJA

THE standoff between the Akal Takht and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann is not merely a political or religious dispute, but a moment of reckoning that lays bare the tensions between faith, authority, and democratic governance.

The Akal Takht has historically articulated the collective conscience of the Panth. Its edicts, though not legally enforceable, carry immense moral weight among the Sikh masses. The Chief Minister, on the other hand, represents a democratic mandate. What emerges from this crisis could well determine the course of Punjab politics ahead of the 2027 Assembly elections.

The instant trigger was a controversial video clipping — first circulated in 2025 and resurfacing in early 2026 — allegedly showing a man resembling the Chief Minister engaging in sacrilegious conduct.

The Akal Takht, relying on “forensic reports”, declared the video to be “authentic”. After deliberations with the five Sikh High Priests, Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaj, officiating Jathedar of the Akal Takht, pronounced the CM a “Guru-Dokhi” (anti-Guru) and “Khalasa Panth virodhi” (anti-community). The directive urged the Sikh community to refrain from associating with Mann.

Outrightly rejecting the allegation, the Chief Minister insisted that he was not the individual in the clip and termed the episode a “politically motivated conspiracy”.

The AAP government has accused the religious functionaries of acting “at the behest of their political bosses” and misusing faith for electoral ends, referring to the Sukhbir Singh Badal-led Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). While daring Mann to undergo a lie detector test, Badal has announced a ‘Dharam Yudh Morcha’ from July 19 under the “*chhattar chhaya*” (spiritual patronage) of Akal Takht, demanding his removal.

BEYOND THE VIDEO ROW

Parallel to the video controversy is a larger dispute over the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026.

The Akal Takht has objected to the new anti-sacrilege law, arguing that it was passed without consultation with Panthic institutions — the Akal Takht and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC).

The process is on to summon Sikh ministers and MLAs for an explanation. The Akal Takht views the legislation as threatening religious authority. From the government's standpoint, the law is a response to long-standing public anger over past sacrilege incidents and demands for stricter punish-



A file photo shows Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaj, officiating Jathedar of the Akal Takht (addressing the congregation), and the Sikh High Priests.

ment, an issue that has dominated Punjab politics since the 2015 desecration incidents.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Bhagwant Mann was only recently projected as the Aam Aadmi Party's chief ministerial face for the 2027 Assembly elections by the party's national convener, Arvind Kejriwal.

The 2015 Bargari sacrilege and Behbal Kalan firing incidents reshaped the 2017 elections. AAP's own rise in 2022 partially relied on positioning itself as a clean alternative to sacrilege-tainted incumbents. The Takht's pronouncement, even if not legally binding, has shifted the political narrative.

The Congress and the BJP have demanded accountability and Mann's resignation, while the AAP has accused the rival parties, particularly the SAD, of politicising the Sikh institutions to regain lost ground.

Sikh scholar Rajwinder Singh Rahi says it is “an open secret that the sequence of events was meant to provide oxygen to the SAD, but it will hardly benefit the party. The deeply religious people are already dejected by the SAD over its anti-Panthic moves in the past. AAP would be hardly affected as its Dalit and Hindu vote bank is intact. The Congress is out of the picture in this context. The voters will move towards BJP only”.

Prof Harpal Singh, who taught Punjabi literature at Sikh National College, Banga, says in the absence of guidelines regarding the appointment, removal and working sphere of Jathedars, “they are constrained to be pawns of their appointing authority”.

“Here it is the SGPC that is being dominated by its extended political arm, the SAD. Sukhbir's orders to the Jathedars are peremptory and they could never think of being in defiance. Now, after the closure of all doors of revival, the SAD is bent on having an alliance with the BJP,” he says. “The Akal Takht's directive to stay away from Mann, even if obeyed by voters, will not necessarily benefit SAD because of its dubious past. The

Congress was never on the priority list of the Panthic lot. Ultimately, they will vote for the BJP only,” Prof Singh opines.

Prof Kuldip Singh, former head of GNDU's political science department, says even if there are shortcomings regarding the appointment and autonomy of Jathedars, such an offensive act as shown in the video could never go unnoticed. “Still, SAD has very little to gain. The mishandling in Bargari and Behbal Kalan, coupled with the flip-flop exoneration of the Dera Sacha Sauda cult, reshaped the political landscape, leading to SAD-BJP's debacle. These issues are alive today too. The controversial video may affect Mann's credentials as the CM candidate but will cause little damage to AAP, which doesn't play ‘identity’ politics per se.”

AKAL TAKHT, A LOOK BACK

For more than 400 years, the Akal Takht has stood at the centre of Sikh religious and political life. Every newly appointed Jathedar inherits a legacy shaped by a defining image: Akali Phula Singh, the Akal Takht Jathedar, preparing to punish Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The Sikh psyche expects the Jathedar to fear none but the Guru. Yet the realities of the modern era are considerably different. Today's Jathedars are appointed through institutional structures linked to the SGPC and do not possess the authority or autonomous power like their predecessors.

That said, the Akal Takht remains the most influential institution in Sikh affairs. Very few individuals have dared to openly disregard its directives. A recent example is preacher Ranjit Singh Dhandrianwale, boycotted for divergent views in 2020 before returning to the mainstream in 2025.

FOUNDATION OF THE TAKHT

Although Sikhs had begun referring to their Guru as ‘Sacha Patshah’ (True Emperor) during the time of Guru Nanak Dev, the institutional foundation of Sikh temporal

authority took shape after the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev in 1606. Soon afterwards, Guru Hargobind established the Akal Takht in the front courtyard of Harmandir Sahib.

He introduced the doctrine of Miri-Piri, combining spiritual and temporal authority. The Sarbat Khalsa tradition emerged in the 18th century, bringing Sikh leaders together to deliberate on religious and political matters. By the turn of the century, Sikh authority was guided through a loose but influential central structure rooted in the Akal Takht.

A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC

The confrontation with Maharaja Ranjit Singh established a pattern. The Takht declared him guilty of religious misconduct over his marriage to Moran, ordered punishment and banned the Moranshahi coin. Such actions reinforced the perception that even the most powerful rulers remained accountable before the Panth.

After the British annexation of Punjab in 1849, the colonial authorities sought to limit the institution's autonomy by placing loyal priests in charge at the Takht called ‘Sarbraha’ instead of Jathedar. However, the rise of the Singh Sabha and Gurdwara Reform movements transformed the Takht into the nerve centre of Sikh political mobilisation.

Akali *jathas* departing for protests and courting arrest during various *morchas* were often dispatched from the Akal Takht. The SAD itself emerged from this broader political and religious movement.

CENTRE OF MOBILISATION

In 1953, a delegation led by Master Tara Singh departed from the Akal Takht to launch a movement seeking reservation benefits for Scheduled Caste Sikhs and those from backward classes. Yet the institution also demonstrated its willingness to discipline political leaders. During the Punjab Suba agitation, both Master Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh were declared *tankhaiya*

(guilty of religious misconduct).

Before Operation Bluestar in 1984, relations between Jathedars and militant groups were often uneasy. The influence of Damdami Taksal also grew. Following Bluestar, the Akal Takht summoned President Giani Zail Singh and declared Union Minister Buta Singh *tankhaiya*. In 1986 and again in 1988, Chief Minister Surjit Singh Barnala faced religious penalties over security operations at the Golden Temple complex. Former MP Amarjit Kaur also got punishment in 1998 for supporting military action.

CLASHES WITHIN ESTABLISHMENT

At various times, the Akal Takht has also found itself at odds with the SGPC, SAD and influential Sikh leaders. In 2000, Jathedar Giani Pura Singh excommunicated then SGPC president Bibi Jagir Kaur over the controversy surrounding the Nanakshahi Calendar. When she refused to appear before the Takht, four other SGPC officials were also excommunicated. The dispute escalated dramatically when the SGPC removed Pura Singh the same day and appointed Joginder Singh Vedanti as Jathedar.

In 2004, the Akal Takht issued a *hukamma* declaring the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, an organisation associated with the RSS, as “anti-Panthic” for attempting to mislead Sikhs and secure their support for activities considered contrary to Panthic interests.

The Akal Takht Jathedar's authority, however, has never been absolute for the Panth. The controversy surrounding the pardon granted to Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh in 2015, for instance, triggered widespread opposition. It eventually contributed to disciplinary action against former Takht Jathedar Giani Gurbachan Singh.

In 2024, Acting Jathedar Harpreet Singh once again demonstrated Akal Takht's influence, pronouncing religious punishment for Badal, several former ministers and former Jathedar Gurbachan Singh.



GAGANDEEP ARORA

AROCKET company going public is not something you see every day. But SpaceX's blockbuster IPO has done more than create new billionaires and excite investors. It has put one of the world's most ambitious companies firmly in the spotlight. While most businesses dream of expanding into new markets, SpaceX is busy trying to make humanity a multi-planetary species. Yes, you read that right. This is a company that wants people to eventually live on Mars. And if its track record is any indication, betting against it may not be the smartest move.

STARTUP TO SPACE SUPERSTAR

Founded in 2002 by Elon Musk, SpaceX began with a goal that sounded wildly unrealistic at the time — make space travel cheaper and more accessible. Back then, rockets were largely expendable. They blasted off once and then ended up as very expensive space junk. SpaceX looked at that model and basically asked, “Why are we throwing away rockets like disposable coffee cups?” That simple question changed the space industry.

Today, the company is one of the most influential players in the global space race. It launches satellites, ferries astronauts, supplies the International Space Station and works with governments and private companies around the world.

MEET THE ROCKET FAMILY

SpaceX's success rests on a family of increasingly powerful rockets. The workhorse of the fleet is Falcon 9, a two-stage rocket standing about 70 metres tall. It has become one of the most frequently launched rockets in history and is capable of

Mission Mars for SpaceX



Fresh from its IPO success, the Elon Musk-led company is pursuing one of the boldest missions ever conceived

SpaceX's Starship is designed to carry humans and cargo to the Moon and Mars. PHOTO: AI

carrying satellites, cargo and astronauts into orbit. Then comes Falcon Heavy, currently one of the world's most powerful operational rockets. It uses three Falcon 9 boosters strapped together and can carry more than 60 tonnes into orbit.

Powering these rockets are Merlin engines, which burn highly refined rocket-grade kerosene and liquid oxygen. Each Falcon 9 uses nine Merlin engines on its first stage, creating a spectacular wall of fire during liftoff. But the real game-changer is not just power. It is reusability.

REUSABLE LAUNCH SYSTEMS

SpaceX revolutionised spaceflight by developing rockets that can land and fly again. After launching a payload, the first-stage booster turns around, re-enters Earth's atmosphere and lands vertically on either a landing pad or a drone ship floating in the ocean. This breakthrough has dramatically reduced launch costs and allowed SpaceX to

launch missions at a pace few competitors can match. Some Falcon 9 boosters have flown well over 20 times, something considered nearly impossible a decade ago.

NASA'S FAVOURITE RIDE

One of the biggest reasons for SpaceX's success is its close partnership with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). For years, NASA relied on Russian spacecraft to transport astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS).

That changed in 2020 when SpaceX's Crew Dragon spacecraft carried astronauts to the ISS under NASA's commercial crew programme. It was the first time a private company had launched astronauts into orbit and returned them safely. Today, Crew Dragon regularly transports astronauts from multiple countries to and from the space station. When NASA wants to send people back to the lunar surface, SpaceX is helping provide the ride.

STARLINK: INTERNET FROM THE SKY

While rockets grab the headlines, one of SpaceX's biggest businesses is actually Internet connectivity. The company's Starlink network consists of thousands of satellites orbiting Earth. Together, they create a global broadband system capable of delivering Internet access to remote villages, ships at sea, aircraft and disaster-hit regions.

The idea is simple but powerful. If laying cables is difficult, why not beam the Internet from space? The revenue generated by Starlink is expected to help fund SpaceX's bigger ambitions, including Mars exploration.

STARSHIP, BEAST BUILT FOR MARS

Standing roughly 120 metres tall when combined with its Super Heavy booster, Starship is the largest and most powerful rocket system ever developed. Unlike Falcon 9, which uses Merlin engines, Starship is powered by next-generation Raptor engines fuelled by liquid methane and liquid oxygen. This fuel

choice is important because methane could potentially be produced on Mars using local resources. That means future settlers might one day manufacture rocket fuel on Mars for return journeys to Earth.

Starship is designed to carry over 100 people, massive cargo loads and even entire habitat modules.

DREAM THAT REFUSES TO GO AWAY

Mars is not just a side project for SpaceX. It is the mission. Elon Musk has repeatedly stated that humanity should become a multi-planetary civilisation. The idea is simple. If civilisation exists on multiple worlds, humanity becomes less vulnerable to disasters that could affect Earth. Mars is the leading candidate because it has water ice, seasons, a 24.6-hour day and resources that could potentially support long-term settlements. The vision is breathtaking. Thousands of Starships making regular journeys between Earth and Mars. Entire settlements powered by solar energy. People growing food, building habitats and creating the first permanent city on another world.

Of course, huge challenges remain. Radiation, extreme temperatures, life-support systems and the sheer difficulty of transporting people across millions of kilometres are just a few of them. But then, landing reusable rockets once seemed impossible too.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

The success of the IPO marks a new chapter for SpaceX, but the company's ambitions stretch far beyond stock markets and quarterly earnings. Its real target lies roughly 225 million km away. Whether SpaceX ultimately succeeds in building a city on Mars remains to be seen. Yet even if it falls short, the company has already transformed spaceflight, slashed launch costs and pushed the boundaries of what private enterprise can achieve.

Most companies ask how to grow over the next decade. SpaceX is asking how humanity can survive for the next thousand years. And, that is a pretty wild business plan.

THE ASIAN AGE

21 JUNE 2026



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

Complaints: Carping or crusading for a cause?

How many complaints, on the phone, over email, in person, and by post (if you're of a certain vintage), have you had to make this month?

In a steadily worsening world where greed and selfishness reign, it's no surprise they now stain our daily existence. Social media is inundated with grievances against the grotesque service we're persistently peddled — so bad, so often, we're left with little choice but to complain strenuously to salvage the experience. Our escalating discontent is directly proportional to the callous contempt corporations show clientele. Not only is the customer no longer king, we're slaves chained to their moneymaking machines, exploited for profit.

"I was charged for made-up purchases of multiple beard-trimmers though I'm incapable of growing one (being female)!"

"I was pee-ed on by a co-passenger and only bad publicity compelled the airline to apologise!"

"A humongous, poisonous spider crawled out of a box of biscuits to perch on my arm (but nowhere on the ingredients was it listed)."

Complaints like these have become so commonplace, they raise neither eyebrow nor titter these days. Yet, considering the huge amounts of hard-earned money we hand over daily, expecting little in return and getting even less, should we roll over and accept this state-of-play?

Doing so not only encourages organisations to lower their already risible standards to Marianna-Trench depths, but to take our acquiescence to their every abuse for granted. Or, can our spirit-of-resistance, drained by the shoddy state of our world and its many shady businesses, be revived, at least in part, to allow us to remonstrate?

If zombies can rise, dazed but determined, from the dust into which they've been ground, so can I, I told myself, as I hammered out a series of firmly-worded emails — to two establishment behemoths, whose arrogant ill-treatment of my clan left us deeply inconvenienced, out-of-pocket, ailing and agast! Because this short-changing came from companies we'd trusted and patronised for decades, despite their many inadequacies, we felt especially eviscerated.

After last year's tragic Air India crash and the terrible press they received, particularly in the west, I decided to show solidarity by buying my next seat to India aboard it. Lightning couldn't strike in the same place twice I maintained (and I was right), but also that the negative publicity was bound to have engendered improvements — how wrong I was about that!

After an uncomfortable take-off from Birmingham, I was served a meal so nearly unfit for human consumption in its straggly bits of chicken floating in noxious oil that I was seriously sick for much of the cramped, smelly, exceptionally turbulent flight. Overcome by the need to violently vomit, but holding it in out of a consideration for the passengers the airline itself didn't exhibit, I spent the long hours struggling to breathe. That the inflight screens weren't working (again) and water gushed from the ceiling, made it even more excruciating.

Arriving in Delhi late, wet and unwell, I was assured by airline staff I'd be compensated. But after my many emails, and their tardy, obfuscating responses to them, a mere measly voucher materialised. Of so little value and with so many conditions attached as to render it unusable (and useless it indeed was, as I discovered soon after on a desi emergency dash), their insensitive sop neither made up for my harrowing experience nor addressed the issues I'd raised. *Actually* acknowledging how ill I became from ingesting the foul fare on their Birmingham leg, and starting a dialogue on necessary change, would have benefitted ALL passengers and the airlines' own image.

Misplaced loyalties and middle-aged sentimentality must never cloud the totems of health and safety again, I concluded. A resolution reinforced by the ill-informed, finger-wagging letter from our British National Health Service paediatrician that arrived the same month, informing us of their capricious decision to discharge our child from their care, because of our alleged non-attendance of an appointment.

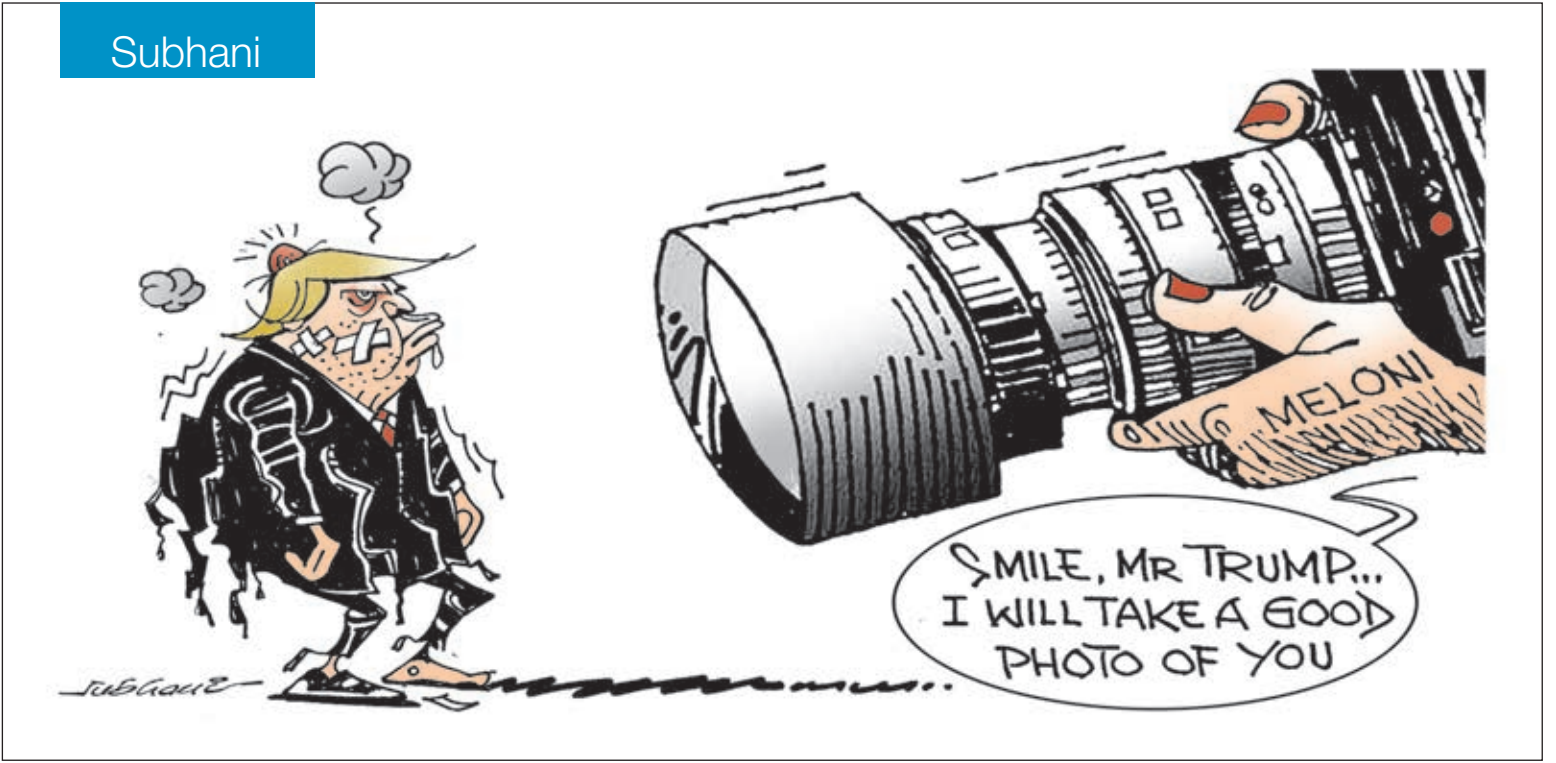
Penning yet another protest, pointing out we'd let them know we couldn't attend and their having texted back to say the appointment date would be changed (evidence we attached to our complaint), I plunged into the bigger issue of their blindingly obvious indifference to the health of the kids under their auspices.

With both my children being neurodivergent, we require that tiny bit of expert support to navigate the everyday stuff neurotypicals can do in their sleep... like sleeping! Our kids' intellectual flair fortunately eliminated the need for further, or more complicated, assistance. The help has been vital nevertheless, and in that light, the sudden withdrawal of medical aid, based on a minor inconvenience of their own making, and their bruised Godlike egos to wit, says as much about the plummeting quality of medicine today, as it does about the decline and disarray of the hallowed NHS. As with the aforementioned airline, another national Goliath, if failing in their service to us wasn't enough, they proved incapable of dredging up the courage to admit to their malfeasance.

So, should we keep putting our lives in the care of organisations that clearly don't? Do we even have options, when each is as bad as the other? But if our justified, palpable dissatisfaction with them will not nudge them in the right direction, do we give up on protesting against this endless manhandling? Or, because it's healthy to vent, should we carry on towards that end, expecting no other result? Or, is it, in fact, something more; a form of activism, and a duty to our fellow hapless human, to speak truth to power no matter how formidable?

Shreya Sen-Handley is the award-winning author of *Memoirs of My Body*, short story collection *Strange and travelogue Handle With Care*. She is also a playwright, columnist and illustrator.

Subhani



Hold Census, try forge a delimitation consensus



Pavan K. Varna

Chanakya's View

The government plans to bring a fresh Delimitation Bill in the next session of Parliament. There is a strong constitutional and democratic rationale for doing so. Democracies periodically redraw electoral constituencies to ensure that representation remains broadly aligned with demographic realities. The foundation of representative democracy is the principle that each citizen's vote should carry roughly equal weight. Over time, population shifts create significant disparities between constituencies. Some MPs represent far larger populations than others. Such imbalances weaken the democratic principle of equal representation. Delimitation seeks to correct these distortions.

Indeed, many would argue that delimitation is already overdue. The last major delimitation exercise was based on the 2001 Census, although the number of seats in the Lok Sabha remained frozen. India's population has changed dramatically since then. Urbanisation has accelerated. Migration patterns have altered demographic profiles. New economic centres have emerged. Electoral boundaries in many places no longer reflect contemporary realities.

Yet, delimitation is not merely a matter of arithmetic. It touches upon the delicate balance between population, political power, federalism and national unity. States such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have, over decades, invested heavily in education, healthcare and family planning. Their fertility rates have fallen significantly. Their population growth has stabilised. Simultaneously, these states have emerged as major contributors to national economic growth and tax revenues. If delimitation is conducted strictly on the basis of population, these states fear a reduc-

tion in their relative political influence in Parliament. States in northern India, where population growth has remained higher, would gain proportionately greater representation.

Whether this perception is fully justified is beside the point. Politics is not only about facts; it is also about psychology. Nations are held together not merely by constitutional provisions but by a sense of fairness. No democratic adjustment, however technically sound, should come at the cost of weakening the emotional bonds that hold the Union together.

There is also the question of whether delimitation can or should proceed without an updated census, which was due in 2021 but postponed due to Covid. Logic would suggest that it cannot. Delimitation is fundamentally a population-based exercise. If the objective is to ensure accurate representation, then the most current and authoritative population data must be available before any exercise begins. Conducting delimitation without a census would invite accusations that the process rests on incomplete or outdated information.

Moreover, delimitation is not merely about the number of seats. It also involves determining where constituency boundaries will lie. Such decisions can profoundly influence electoral outcomes. Consequently, the body entrusted with this responsibility must command universal credibility. The Delimitation Commission should therefore be constituted in a manner that inspires confidence across the political spectrum. It should be chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge of unimpeachable integrity. The Election Commission should be fully represented. States should have a consultative role. Parliamentary parties should be allowed structured participation. Public hearings should be mandatory. All proposed changes should be made public, with

Nations are held together not merely by constitutional provisions but by a sense of fairness. No democratic adjustment should come at the cost of weakening the emotional bonds that hold the Union together.

sufficient time provided for objections and revisions. The commission's proceedings should be conducted with maximum openness. Transparency is often the best antidote to suspicion.

For all of these reasons, I would urge the government to invest in building a consensus around the delimitation exercise through a constructive discussion with all political parties. One possibility is a phased implementation spread over several electoral cycles. This would allow political systems and public opinion to adjust gradually rather than confront a sudden redistribution of influence. Another option could be some form of weighted representation. This need not violate democratic principles if designed thoughtfully. Federal systems around the world often combine population-based representation with mechanisms that protect regional interests. The United States Senate, for instance, gives equal representation to states regardless of population. Germany's Bundesrat similarly incorporates federal balancing mechanisms.

India need not replicate these models, but it can certainly learn from their underlying philosophy. The objective would be to ensure that states which have successfully achieved developmental goals are not rendered politically disadvantaged as a result. Perhaps, it may be wiser to refer the bill to a select committee of Parliament where it can be debated further. A select committee would provide a structured forum for detailed examination. Constitutional experts, former election commissioners, demographers, economists and representatives of state governments could all present evidence. Such scrutiny would not weaken the legislation. On the contrary, it would strengthen its legitimacy.

There is no virtue in haste on a matter that could reshape India's federal balance for decades.

The central lesson from India's history is that durable solutions emerge not from unilateral assertion but from enlightened compromise. The genius of the Indian Republic has always lain in its capacity to accommodate diversity while preserving unity. Whether in matters of language, regional aspirations, cultural identities or economic disparities, India has survived and flourished because its leaders recognised that consensus is often more valuable than speed.

Delimitation must therefore be approached not as a mathematical exercise but as a national conversation.

The principle of equal representation remains important. Democratic legitimacy requires that representation broadly reflect population realities. Yet the concerns of the south are equally legitimate. They arise not from parochialism but from a deeply felt belief that developmental success should not translate into political disadvantage.

The challenge before the government is therefore not whether delimitation should happen, but how it should happen. A census must come first. A credible and transparent commission must be established. The bill should be examined by a select committee. Alternative mechanisms, including forms of weighted representation or phased implementation, should be seriously debated. Most importantly, every effort must be made to reassure the southern states that their voice will not be diminished in the councils of the nation.

India's democracy is strongest when it combines a principle with prudence. The country has repeatedly demonstrated that difficult questions can be resolved through dialogue, accommodation and mutual respect. The delimitation debate, which involves the core issue of how electoral representation is structured, demands precisely such statesmanship, since the continuing unity of the country can best be sustained not by fiat but by trust.

The writer is an author, diplomat and former member of Parliament (RS)

LETTERS SHOW SOME SPINE

India remains submissive in US negotiations, historically staying on the receiving end despite defying US sanctions to import Russian oil. Following Operation Sinoor, it let President Donald Trump broadcast his lies about brokering peace between itself and Pakistan for far too long before issuing a clarification that it really did result from Pakistan's request. It merely "mentioned" the deaths of three Indian seafarers killed by a US attack in the Persian Gulf during the G-7 summit, rather than demanding compensation or lodging a firm protest. In the wake of Iran's military defiance and Italy's diplomatic boycott following derogatory remarks by Trump, it must finally show some spine. Adopt a more resilient stance to ensure an even playing field rather than a one-sided trade agreement.

Chanchal Nandy
Durgapur, West Bengal

MANAGE YOUR MONEY

WOMEN'S FINANCIAL freedom involves having independent control over your earning, spending, and long-term investments. It allows you to make life choices without depending on others. The path to true autonomy requires active financial literacy, independent accounts and dedicated wealth-building strategies. Take advantage of compounding interest. Even minimal but consistent investments through systematic investment plans or similar vehicles can grow into significant wealth over time. Don't let your money sit entirely in a savings account. Lastly, explore moderate to high-growth assets like mutual funds, index funds or public private equity.

M.R. Jayanthi
Trichy

NO RIGHT OF WAY

IN A LANDMARK JUDGMENT, the Supreme Court has declared that walking on safe, demarcated footpaths is a fundamental right as per Article 19(1)(d) of the Constitution. According to the ministry of transport and highways, 36,526 pedestrians died on footpaths last year. In this backdrop, the judgement assumes importance. The government is duty bound to maintain footpaths for walkers. Which it doesn't. In Delhi and other states, we so often come across roads with no footpath. Even the ones built with loads of taxpayer money are not maintained. Cops turn a negligent eye to objects and construction material stored there creating barriers for the pedestrian. Who is treated as a non-person in cities like Delhi that are obsessed with car owners.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Defections set off jitters in Cong; TMC now akin to 'three-ring circus'

Determined to shore up its numbers in the Lok Sabha, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has been on an overdrive, intensifying its efforts to lure away legislators from rival political parties through a series of defections. The defectors have either merged with the BJP or its allies while others have aligned themselves with the ruling dispensation by setting up a separate grouping. The BJP's aggressive push has predictably perturbed its political opponents as no one is sure who is next in the firing line. Consequently, party bosses these days are a jittery lot if their legislators do not respond to their calls. The Congress leadership recently faced such tense moments when Punjab leaders were called to Delhi for a meeting to sort out their factional battles. Shortly before the meeting began, frantic calls were made to locate the missing state leaders but some calls did not go through while a number of phones were switched off. There was all-round panic as the Congress can ill-afford a repeat of the Trinamul Congress fiasco in Punjab which is going to polls next year. There

was a collective sigh of relief when the Punjab leaders started trickling in one by one.

The defections in the Trinamul Congress and the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena were planned in detail by the Bharatiya Janata Party which began by identifying the weakness of each potential defector. Take the case of a senior Trinamul Congress and former minister. Since he returned to Parliament after a gap, he was allotted a flat though he was entitled to a type VIII bungalow. The Trinamul leader subsequently put in an application for a bungalow which was expectedly kept pending by the powers-that-be. It was no surprise that the Trinamul leader was informed that a bungalow would soon be allotted to him just when his colleagues were crossing over to the BJP. The offer was declined as the former minister did not take the bait. He preferred to stay on in his present accommodation and with Mamata Banerjee. This is just one case. It can be said with certainty that there is a similar tale for every defector.

The ongoing political churn in the Trinamul Congress post its defeat in the recent Assembly elections can best be described as a three-ring circus. Unless there are some dramatic developments in the coming days, there are now three Trinamul groupings. While one is led by the former West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, another group of 20 Trinamul Congress MPs, led by her former loyalist and now a neo-Hindutva convert Kakoli Dastidar, has merged with the little-known Nationalist Citizens Party of India. And then there is the rebel group of Trinamul Congress MLAs in the state Assembly which is neither here nor there. This group maintains it is the real Trinamul Congress and is planning to lay claim to the party symbol and finances. Hemmed in from all sides, Mamata Banerjee has hit the streets once again last week. She walked unobstructed for over a kilometre to protest the eviction of hawkers on the day when the Left parties got an injunction against the eviction orders. Though uncoordinated, this collective action is not exactly what the BJP had bargained for.

Here's more on the Trinamul Congress. Actor-turned-politician Saayoni Ghosh was the party's star campaigner in the recent Assembly polls. Her fiery speeches hitting out at the Bharatiya Janata Party were a huge draw with the crowds even as she heaped praise on Mamata Banerjee. Not only has Saayoni Ghosh lost no time in switching loyalties to the BJP, it is learnt she also wants the new Trinamul Group to come down hard on Mamata Banerjee. During an internal discussion, a section among the defecting MPs suggested they should go soft on their former leader and focus their attack on her nephew Abhishek Banerjee. Party insiders revealed that Saayoni Ghosh instead argued that since they had walked out of the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress, they should make a clean break with it and spare no one, including the former chief minister. It now appears that her earlier speeches were an act. To borrow a line from the Hollywood film *Notting Hill*: She's an actress... so she can deliver a line.

As the infighting in the Jammu and Kashmir unit of the Congress continued to intensify, the party leadership set up a three-member committee, headed by Rajya Sabha member Shakti Singh Gohil, whose mandate is not to end factionalism but to look into acts of indiscipline. Ironically, the panel headed to Kashmir for its first meeting even though the Congress has no presence in the Valley while it still retains pockets of influence in the Jammu region. In fact, most senior state leaders come from this belt. Congress insiders are convinced it was deliberately decided not to hold the meeting in Jammu as the committee members could have faced the wrath of the party's disgruntled workers, who are concentrated in this region. The choice of venue was apparently cleared by Congress general secretary in charge of Jammu and Kashmir Syed Naseer Hussain who obviously wanted to avoid any unpleasant scenes.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

Scanning Cancer, Up Close & Personal

A revolution is underway in cancer diagnosis—a gene-based test called next-generation sequencing can identify precise mutations, which can then be treated with targeted therapies. Since the NGS test can be beyond the reach of many, a unique collaboration called LuNGS Alliance is making it free for lung cancer patients in India, offering a glimpse of how medical breakthroughs can be made accessible and affordable

Vikas Dandekar & Arijit Barman

It began with unexplained headaches and shooting pains in the neck, often lasting minutes but sometimes much longer. Within weeks, she experienced dizziness, disorientation and multiple convulsions, forcing the family to rush her to the local hospital. Within six months, even walking became impossible. By then, an extremely frail Sita Devi (name changed), 80, had left everything to fate. Her aggressive stage-4 lung cancer was fast metastasizing to her brain, making even visits to Dr Surendra Beniwal at the Acharya Tulsi Regional Cancer Institute and Research Centre in Bikaner extremely difficult. Her condition kept worsening; she doubled down with sharp pains and elevated heartbeat with every breath.

Under the usual protocol, she would have had a biopsy test followed by radiation until palliative care remained the only way out. But now she had one other option: a new genomic test called next-generation sequencing (NGS), which rapidly sorted through her DNA samples and picked out the precise genetic mutation that was most likely making her sick.

NGS, the newest frontier in medical diagnostics, is rapidly transforming patient care. It decodes genomic data and helps doctors translate that into personalised healthcare within a few days. It is a lifesaver especially for cancer patients but also for people with rare genetic disorders and reproductive and inherited diseases. This is one of the biggest leaps in a lab since the 1980s when the German bacteriologist Julius Petri came up with a way to isolate and analyse germ cultures in a gelatinous bed of algae set between two nesting discs of glass.

NGS is the first step in precision medicine as opposed to the widely practised one-size-fits-all therapies. Medical oncologist Dr Beniwal explains: "Devi had presented with an EGFR mutation [a mutation in the protein called epidermal growth factor receptor in lung cancer], which pinpointed to the use of a drug that targeted exactly that." So instead of administering standard chemotherapy drugs like carboplatin or paclitaxel, which can cause painful side-effects, especially at her age, he treated her with an osimertinib tablet every day. "Almost a year later, the old lady, from a marginalised income stratum, walks on her own and comes to the centre for follow-ups," he says.

Like with Devi, NGS is enabling treatment decisions to be guided by cellular characteristics, often leading to better outcomes, longer disease control and improved quality of life. From tracing family ancestry to grasping individual nutritional profile, NGS seems to have almost all the answers.

Dr Beniwal cites another case of recovery. A 24-year-old woman had stage-two breast cancer. "Because of NGS and targeted treatment, she could be saved from multiple complications of chemotherapy expensive antibiotics and neutropenia that leads to low immunity," he says. Today she leads a healthy, normal life. "The future of managing disease is not going to be a magic pill," says Hitesh Goswami, CEO of 4baseCare, a Bengaluru-based precision oncology and genomic testing startup, backed by Infosys and deep tech fund Yali Capital. "It will be about how we understand and analyse an individual's data, from DNA to demographics. The key will be to match the right patient to the right treatment, every time, everywhere."

Scientists and researchers have already gene-mapped nearly 4 million people worldwide under NGS and generated well over a billion gigabytes of data. The potential uses of that data are multiplying every year, says Suchita Dayanand, country head, India (commercial), Illumina, a US-headquartered biotech company that made genome sequencing accessible three decades ago.

Pharma companies too are on the hunt for the next logical step: discovery of precision drugs. Earlier this month, British pharma colossus GSK coughed up \$10.6 billion for Nuvalent in US to get access to a research pipeline of sophisticated oncology drugs.

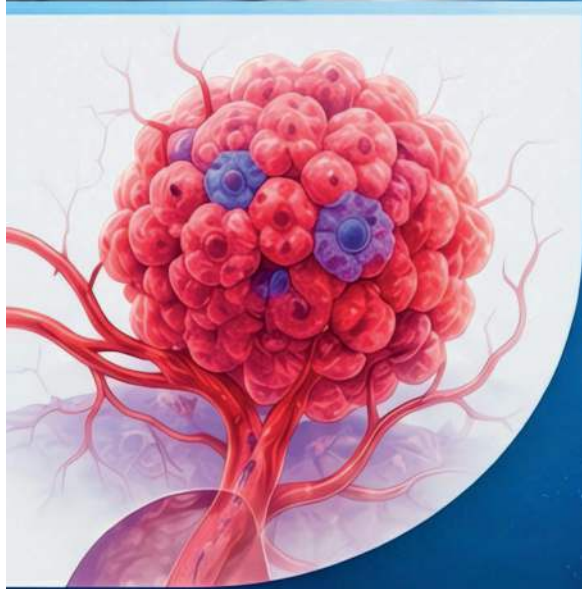
"NGS is nothing short of a revolution in the future of medicine," says Ramakant Panda, cardiologist and founder of Asian Heart Institute, Mumbai.

WHAT HAPPENS

A DNA test like NGS begins with a biological sample such as blood, saliva, tissue, or other relevant specimen, depending on the condition being tested for. The sample is then processed on a sequencing machine that reads millions to billions of DNA building blocks, generating a digital map, and gives information on an individual's genes. The changes in them, known as genetic alterations, can help doctors understand the cause of a disease, assess inherited risks, predict how a patient may respond to specific medications and identify the most appropriate treatment options.

A genomic report is only the beginning. Its real impact is realised when it helps doctors select the right therapy for a patient. Without NGS, doctors are shooting in the dark. They could prescribe drugs that may not work or even cause more harm to patients.

Joining the medical gold rush of precision treatment are leading hospital chains, young startups, diagnostics networks and global in-



6,600
No. of patients covered by LuNGS Alliance*

1,100
No. of oncologists who used LuNGS Alliance for free NGS testing of their patients

*Till May 2026

What is NGS?

Next-generation sequencing is the latest test that allows diagnostic labs to analyse a tumour's multiple genetic code simultaneously to identify mutations. The older method called single-gene testing detected alterations of genes by targeting a single fragment of DNA

What is LuNGS Alliance?

The Lung Cancer Genomic Solutions Alliance is an ambitious multi-stakeholder collaboration in India, started by Cancer Research and Statistic Foundation. It provides free NGS tests to lung cancer patients. It includes oncologists, hospitals, pharma companies and genomic testing startup 4baseCare

awareness about precision oncology as an essential, accessible and affordable option for lung cancer treatment.

Says Dr Kumar Prabhsh, head of medical oncology department (solid tumour division) at Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, and the driving force behind LuNGS Alliance: "Programmes like LuNGS Alliance have helped doctors in smaller towns make informed decisions without making it unaffordable for patients."

"Oncology and neurology are the two fastest-growing disease segments globally. Naturally, these will have very high use cases for NGS," says Ameera Shah, MD of the diagnostics chain Metropolis Healthcare, which acquired Core Diagnostics last year to sharpen its focus on gene-sequencing technology. She adds: "NGS is also used in the diagnosis of rare genetic disorders as well as pregnancy management and neonatal care. Critically ill infants can be sequenced for early life-saving interventions while a patient's entire genome can be scanned to find that single mutation that is causing symptoms."

MUTATIONS MATTER

With cancer emerging as the largest disease segment, NGS has become the workhorse technology underpinning multi-gene panel testing, analysing mutations in hundreds or even thousands of genes simultaneously.

Cancer is caused by random genetic changes in healthy cells over time. Mutations can be triggered by lifestyle choices, familial predis-

ed late, NGS can be an effective intervention. Strand Life Sciences, while not part of LuNGS Alliance, provides tests for multiple issues—nutritional requirements, drug tolerance and hereditary cancer risks. "Beyond immunotherapy, genomics and next-generation sequencing are transforming nearly every aspect of precision oncology—from identifying actionable mutations (where treatment is possible) and inherited cancer risks to understanding tumour heterogeneity, treatment resistance and disease evolution at the single-cell level," says Ramesh Hariharan, CEO, Strand Life Sciences.

LOCAL IS LOGICAL

India has unique constraints: access to population-specific genomic data remains a white space. There are no centralised, electronic health records. Mutation patterns in Indians differ from those in Caucasians. But global clinical trial data for new medicines is not well represented by Indian patients. Southeast Asia, West Asia and the Indian subcontinent contribute to more than half of the world's cancer incidences—10 million new cases annually—but there is scant data specific to this cohort. For example, KRAS gene mutation is seen in about 25% of non-small cell lung cancer patients in the West but only in 10% of patients in India. EGFR mutation is seen in 10-15% of lung cancer patients in the West and 35% patients in India.

"More data will help us know the exact patterns in India," says Dr Prabhsh. "Within India, there are serious contrasts. Cases in the Northeast could be very different from the ones in the South."

That is where the LuNGS Alliance becomes important as it democratises precision medicine and saves lives.

Lung cancer accounts for nearly 10% of cancer deaths in India. According to Global Cancer Observatory, 81,000 new cases are reported annually and almost two-thirds of patients succumb to this modern-day epidemic within two years of diagnosis.

"This stark imbalance between incidence and mortality highlights the urgent need for data-driven precision approaches in treatment of lung cancer instead of standard chemotherapy," says Goswami of 4baseCare. Of the 6,600 patients tested under LuNGS Alliance, reports of 58% showed actionable mutations that could directly inform treatment decisions. So 1 in 2 patients could potentially benefit from biomarker-directed therapy. Over 60% of samples came from tier-2 and -3 cities. Rajasthan topped the chart with 858 samples, including Sita Devi's.

When LuNGS Alliance followed up on 1,920 patients, it saw real-world impact—45% were able to access precision-based treatment.

"Cross-sector partnerships like LuNGS Alliance are enabling more timely, informed treatment decisions in resource-constrained settings," says Praveen Akkinepally, country president, AstraZeneca India.

Meenakshi Nevatia, MD of Pfizer India, says it's not just about sequencing the gene: "It's about knowing exactly what to use. The subsidy for the tests is significant."

VOLUMES GAME

However, subsidies alone cannot galvanise a movement. Insurance cover for NGS and its integration with common tests for diabetes or liver function can unleash its full potential.

Entrepreneurs like Mohan Uttarwar,

By 2030, India's genome sequencing market is expected to touch \$1.5 billion. The precision medicine market is expected to grow fivefold to \$5.8 billion. A basic NGS test for cancer can cost ₹20,000. It can go up to ₹4 lakh for a high-end panel

cofounder of 1Cell.AI, a cancer-testing startup, are blending AI with cell biopsy for sharper results to predict tumour growth. Says Uttarwar: "NGS is a disruptive innovation. While tests cost \$4,000-5,000 in US, it is a few thousand rupees in India." Vedam Ramprasad, CEO of MedGenome, says inclusion of NGS in government schemes such as Ayushman Bharat will catalyse adoption at the grassroots level and reverse the urban skew. He adds: "Prices have already dropped and will fall further. Once NGS becomes part of common histopathology tests (for tissue biopsy), it will go mass." In 2025, MedGenome bought Green Cross Genetic Labs in Gujarat to expand its genomic diagnostics network.

But a genomic report like NGS is only the start of the precision-medicine journey. Unless it is backed by affordable medicines, acceptance will be limited in low- and middle-income countries. AstraZeneca's Tagrisso (osimertinib) costs ₹1.2-1.4 lakh for 10 tablets. A vial of the cancer drug Imfinzi is ₹1.4 lakh while Bristol Myers Squibb's immunotherapy medicine Opdiva costs ₹1 lakh for a vial. Zyus Lifesciences has launched a generic version, Tishtha, for a fourth of that price.

The cost of the medicines has to align with the changing economics of the tests. "There are many barriers to implementing precision medicines. LuNGS Alliance provides access to molecular tests but efforts are also required to improve access to various medicines," says Dr Prabhsh.

Hospitals say test-based treatments are inevitable and can be made accessible through patient assistance programmes. Meanwhile, expiry of drug patents, launch of biosimilars and lower cost alternatives are changing industry dynamics. As more patients gain access to precision medicines, the demand for genomic testing will rise rapidly, making personalised cancer treatment a routine part of care, rather than an option for a chosen few. After all, time is of the essence for all cancer patients.

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Programmes like LuNGS Alliance have helped doctors in smaller towns make informed decisions without making it unaffordable for patients"

DR KUMAR PRABHASH, HEAD, DEPT OF MEDICAL ONCOLOGY (SOLID TUMOURS), TATA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, MUMBAI

Beyond immunotherapy, genomics and next-generation sequencing are transforming nearly every aspect of precision oncology—from identifying actionable mutations and inherited cancer risks to understanding tumour heterogeneity, treatment resistance and disease evolution at the single-cell level"

RAMESH HARIHARAN, CEO, STRAND LIFE SCIENCES

Oncology and neurology are the two fastest growing disease segments globally. So these have a very high use case for NGS. It is also being used to test critically ill infants for early, life-saving interventions and to scan a patient's entire genome to find that single, hidden mutation causing symptoms. It can even map how specific liver enzymes and cellular receptors interact with medications"

AMEERA SHAH, MD, METROPOLIS HEALTHCARE

The future of managing disease is not going to be a magic pill. It will be about how we understand and analyse an individual's data, from DNA to demographics. The key will be to match the right patient to the right treatment, every time, everywhere"

HITESH GOSWAMI, CEO, 4BASECARE



vestors. By 2030, India's genome sequencing market is expected to touch \$1.5 billion, a 27% CAGR in four years, with nationwide adoption. The precision medicine market is expected to grow fivefold to \$5.8 billion, according to industry estimates.

Apollo Hospitals runs genomics institutes in a dozen Indian cities and plans half a dozen more. Global suppliers of sequencing machines and panels for NGS like Illumina expect their India business to grow three-five times over the next seven years and are already supporting large initiatives like Genome India and the Bharat Cancer Genome Atlas. Genome-testing labs like MedGenome, India's largest pure-play ge-

nome diagnostics company, and Reliance-owned Strand Life Sciences have built proprietary NGS data analytics platforms.

A basic test under NGS for cancer can cost ₹20,000. It can go up to ₹4 lakh for a high-end panel with detailed, extensive screening.

ALLIANCE FOR ALL

To bring this technology within reach of people who are in desperate need of it, Cancer Research and Statistic Foundation, a Mumbai-based nonprofit for cancer research and patient care, has started an ambitious initiative called the Lung Cancer Genomic Solutions (LuNGS) Alliance. It is a collaboration between oncologists, government hospi-

pharma companies like AstraZeneca, Bristol Myers Squibb, Eli Lilly, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer and Roche, NBFCs like Tata Capital and the startup 4baseCare.

LuNGS Alliance makes "TARGT First Solid, an NGS test developed by 4baseCare that analyses commonly mutated genes and costs at least ₹20,000, free for lung cancer patients. One patient, categorised as unique, gets one test for free.

Since March 2025, over 6,600 lung cancer patients in 700 cities and towns have got free NGS tests through LuNGS Alliance and its network of oncologists in tier-2 and -3 cities and large metros. It is arguably the largest collaborative initiative in the country to drive

positions, existing health conditions or even exposure to hazardous chemicals. As they accumulate, mutated cells become cancerous.

Every cancer is as unique as the individual it afflicts, which means even those diagnosed with the same type of cancer have only a fraction of shared mutations. Each tumour is an intricate tapestry of billions of distinct cells, constantly learning to adapt and thwart therapeutic strategies. In 2015, a cancer patient would have undergone four separate tests to identify four biomarkers, costing over ₹20,000. For the same price now, NGS tests can throw up a minimum of 50 genetic mutations. In India, which has the third highest cancer cases and where over 80% cancers are detect-

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

The DNA Fix

How a new gene test is rewriting cancer treatment for millions of Indians

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

Vidya S

Critical Stage

India's concert boom has a venue problem. It needs to move from makeshift arrangements to plug-and-play stages to build a sustainable entertainment economy

When tickets for rapper Travis Scott's 2025 Delhi concert went on sale, over 1 lakh seats were snapped up—in a couple of hours, Indian music lovers had spent close to ₹100 crore.

Similar scenes have played out for global stars such as Ed Sheeran and Coldplay and for Indian performers, including Diljit Dosanjh and Arijit Singh, which makes one thing clear: India has arrived as a serious live entertainment market.

About time too. For far too long, fans of music have had to travel to Singapore, Bangkok, or Dubai, for shows of their favourite artists. That spending power can now stay in India.

The fandom is here. International artists have taken notice. Brands are interested. But the stage, it seems, is not ready. A fundamental weakness is inhibiting the current boom from going to the next level: lack of purpose-built concert venues.

As promoters build temporary arenas from scratch for every major show, costs remain high, profits are thin and the fan experience is inconsistent. Industry insiders argue that solving this infrastructure bottleneck is critical if India wants to transform a concert boom into a sustainable entertainment economy.

GROWTH INHIBITOR

The momentum is clear: EY pegs the country's live events economy, including concerts, at ₹17,000 crore and growing at a fast clip. Alongside ticket sales, concerts are driving tourism, hospitality and local spending. For brands, too, live entertainment is emerging as an intentional experiential marketing stream.

"India has evolved into an indispensable market for international talent," says Alaap Goshier, cofounder, TM Ventures, an entertainment consultancy and artist management agency. "As India gives streaming numbers and followers that even three-four countries together cannot provide, it has become a compulsory stop for any artist touring Asia," says Goshier, who is a talent manager for Arijit Singh and other Bollywood musical talents.

However, India's venue problem can kill that momentum. "There is hardly a venue in India meant purely for live entertainment," says VG Jairam, founder of Hyperlink Brand Solutions and the force behind Mahindra Blues Festival.

"Every (concert) promoter in India basically acts like a construction company," says Anmol Kukreja, cofounder of Skillbox, a live entertainment, ticketing and artist

management platform. "They build an entire arena in a day and then tear it down." As Sabbas Joseph, event industry veteran and cofounder of Wizcraft Group, says, "The opportunity arrived before everything else was in place. This is currently hurting the development of the concert economy. Rather than growing, it is probably in danger of de-growing."

India's concert boom is happening decades after live entertainment became a mature business in the West. And unlike mature concert markets where plug-and-play entertainment arenas are standard, most large concerts in India continue to be staged on sports grounds, in exhibition centres or open plots that must be transformed into temporary venues.

The result is higher costs, higher risk and often an inferior consumer experience—adding up to an increasingly fragile business model. Insiders estimate that venue and production expenses account for 30-40% of the cost of putting up a show. Artist fees often consume 50%. This leaves little room for profitability even when concerts sell out.

CASH BURN
Although India offers demand, many stakeholders point out that artist fees, especially for international acts, are often out of step with the Indian market's ticket-paying capacity. The lack of permanent concert arenas only amplifies this problem.

"A lot of cash is burnt on live concerts," says Jairam. This is money that could otherwise



Nearly 80-90% of a concert's economics is consumed by artist fees and venue-production costs before a single ticket is sold. That leaves very little room for profit

ly influences crowd size and concert experience. The suitability of a sponsorship also often depends as much on the venue as on the artist performing there.

"Experience matters and venue matters," says a senior marketing executive, who has led sponsorship partnerships across major music properties. For instance, a packaged water brand may benefit from large outdoor festivals where most audience members will be looking for water to drink, while premium fashion, luxury and financial services brands often prefer highly controlled environments where exclusivity and hospitality can be carefully curated. "A lot of thought has to be put into the venue to match the category," says the executive quoted above.

Lalita Nayak, chief marketing and communications officer of Mitigata, who was earlier in-charge of marketing for RuPay, which has sponsored live concerts, says, "We absolutely need great venues. The experience goes up. The propensity and probability of bigger brands associating with them will also go up as experience takes centre stage."

As more brands are going in for experiential marketing, these considerations are becoming important. An EY Parthenon-BookMyShow report from January 2026 says that one-third of the brands invested in experiential marketing allocate 11-40% of their total marketing spends to the category.

Industry estimates suggest sponsorship can contribute anywhere between 20% and 50% of an event's revenue. Yet, brands are only able to scratch the surface of what is possible. "The moment predictability comes in, suddenly the expressways for growth come in," says Joseph. Naming rights, VIP lounges, digital experiences, connectivity partnerships and year-round experiential activations suddenly become possible.

Promoters have to build everything from scratch, racing against time.

The result is long queues at food counters, inadequate washroom facilities, parking bottlenecks and crowd-management challenges

LOUD & CLEAR

Ultimately, venue infrastructure bottleneck limits not only today's economics, but also tomorrow's ambitions. Although global artists are interested in India, highly experiential concerts such as those of Hans Zimmer are hard to execute because India's temporary venues don't offer the stage and tech capacities to pull them off.

Jairam argues that India's infrastructure deficit is now the single biggest obstacle to creating a sustainable concert economy. India needs a network of purpose-built entertainment venues across major cities, ranging from intimate 4,000-seat arenas to large-format venues that can accommodate up to 1,00,000 fans. "The moment you have 10 such venues, you can turn to an artist and say: I can offer you a 10-city tour," he adds. "Then the conversation changes. You can structure pricing differently because the market economics change."

Ganjoo says if India had two-three good venues across major cities, it would improve routing certainty. "India would become a default multi-city stop on a world tour, not an exception that requires a separate business case." Everything else—better margins, broader price tiers, more artists—follows from that.

There are signs that policymakers are recognising the opportunity. Joseph points to efforts to create single-window clearances, streamline licensing processes and the government's Live Events Development Cell.

Several state governments are also considering policies for the sector. Samuel says at least three-four companies want to build venues now, and brands are interested in picking up naming rights. District by Zomato, for instance, has acquired the naming rights and operational management of Terraform Arena for a few years. The venue now operates as District Arena at Terraform.

It looks like the next chapter belongs to those who build the stages.

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ECONOMICS OF CONCERTS

COST HEAD	SHARE
Artist fees	40-50%
Venue & production	30-40%
Marketing	7-10%

Note: Rest is for security, licenses, operations
Source: Industry

Wembley in London or MSG in New York, eliminates the need for most temporary construction by providing permanent stages, roofing, backstage facilities, utilities and audience infrastructure from day

one. "Almost 60% of the infrastructure is ready at Terraform. What takes seven days at another venue can be built in two days at Terraform. So, you save time, manpower and production costs. You are saving at least ₹30-40 lakh here compared with building in a no-facility venue," says Samuel.

CHICKEN-AND-EGG

The problem is investors hesitate to build dedicated arenas until there are enough concerts to justify them. Meanwhile, promoters struggle to stage more concerts because dedicated arenas do not exist.

The result? Promoters often have to build everything from scratch, racing against time. "You take a greenfield ground and first start by levelling the ground. Then you build fencing and stage, bring in electricity,

build toilets and create parking and transport systems. Everything is temporary," says Joseph.

The result is familiar to anyone who has attended a major concert in India—long queues at food and beverage counters, inadequate washroom facilities, parking bottlenecks and crowd-management challenges.

Rahul Ganjoo, CEO, District by Zomato, says venue limitations do not show up as failed negotiations with artists, but as conversations that never begin. "An artist's production team sends a technical rider. No venue in the target city qualifies, and the cost of building a temporary structure to meet that rider pushes the show past the point of viability. India drops off the routing plan before any public announcement is made." For brands, venue quality direct-

Of Great Girl Dads & Shitty Husbands

As Husband, he will not know which book to pick for his Wife, but as Girl Dad he will recite from memory Peppa Pig's extended family tree

Sonali Kokra

I have a friend. Let's call him Kabir. Why? In the grand tradition of the Internet's Elders—iyykyk.

About a dozen years ago, Kabir fathered a child. Now that would be a fairly unremarkable event to all outside of (and many within) the delivery suite where His Wife underwent a Dickensian-length labour to bring their loudly wailing daughter into the world. The daughter who made Her Mother fart, shart and poop while making her way through Her Mother's birth canal. Also the daughter who was then promptly labelled Baby X, X being Kabir's last name, of course, after the clean-up.

It was all very unexciting and on-brand, anthropologically speaking. Our species has been procreating for 300,000 years, after all. And we've been identifying newborns through some form of their paternal lineage for almost 1,000 years now.

One remarkable thing did happen that day, though. The stars aligned, the planets turned and unbeknownst to us all, another creature

entered the premises just as Baby X opened her eyes for the first time. In the weeks to come, this creature would anoint itself Girl Dad Kabir.

WHOLLY FATHER

When Baby X was a toddler, Girl Dad Kabir could recite, from memory, Bluey and Peppa Pig's extended family trees because he'd spent hours researching each character's values. Girl Dad Kabir used to be greeted with the warm familiarity one harbours for a returning hero by the staff at several airport Hamleys. Girl Dad Kabir knows all of his daughter's classmates—besties and nemeses. Girl Dad Kabir crouches so he can speak to them at eye level. Online, he reprimands fathers who "babysit" their children: "It's called parenting!" he types tersely, the righteousness radiating from his pores. He denounces the alpha male myth with vigour. Often, he'll make reels about French-braiding her hair with the precision of a hair architect before their Daddy-Daughter pickleball/froyo/mahjong dates.

One remarkable thing did happen that day, though. Unbeknownst to us all, another creature entered the premises just as Baby X opened her eyes—Girl Dad Kabir

It is understandable then that Baby X, who is almost Tween X now, adores Girl Dad Kabir and calls him her best friend. She recently told him about her first crush and they had a long conversation about her feelings. Later, he texted about it in a group chat as an earnest monologue-cum-sermon on the toxic urge to lock her up till she's 30. Girl Dad Kabir fathers in a way that inspires envy and marvel among all who witness it—and there are many who do because he's extremely online.

Husband Kabir, though, is a different story. Let me assure you that His Wife is not a victim of dramatic neglect or husbanding crimes so scandalous that they deserve smelling salts. She's simply living in a marriage with a hum of low-grade underwhelm as the background score. Not ominous, just annoying. More eleva-



Daughters afford Girl Dad Kabirs the dopamine hits of instantly being seen as the men they wished they were, not the men they've always been and often still are when no one is looking

tor music than Ramin Djawadi.

If you send Husband Kabir into a bookstore, he won't know which aisle to turn to pick something for His (read: her) Wife. He will vaguely gesture towards science fiction, then give up and call me. Husband Kabir does not know His Wife's ex-BFF's name—the one she still sometimes discusses in couples therapy. Husband Kabir does not know His Wife loathes brown clothing or who her hair stylist is of 15 years is.

There is copious online evidence of Husband Kabir's considerable talent at planning extravagant, multi-step dates to celebrate their romantic dyad. Professional offenders may point out that His Wife is a shy introvert who would much rather have an intimate dinner for two, but we are not dour like them. A man must be allowed to forget some things without fear of ridicule or retaliation. Some day, he will know the little details that make her, her. We know this because Husband Kabir recently scribbled "Ted Chiang" in his Notes app. Let's give him some (light) applause for doing it, unprompted.

TWO-FOR-ONE COMBO

I've always been fascinated with the Husband Kabir and Girl Dad Kabir two-for-one combo. Marvelled at how their lives seem to move in perfect lock-step, while aggressively avoiding contact. And I think Girl Dad Kabir is Husband Kabir's ultimate redemption arc. Because daughters offer some-

thing that wives (or girlfriends or partners) who have spent years leaving detailed instructions for everything before leaving for their annual girls' weekend and still get calls from the cook asking, "Bhaiya ke liye kya banana?" simply can't. Uncomplicated admiration. Daughters also offer something sons can't. Boy Dad Kabir has the ghost of his own childhood peering over his shoulder sternly, making him wonder if he's still somehow continuing to disappoint his father.

But daughters are clean slates; the ultimate do-over opportunities for men who have spent years curating personal exhibits of domestic and emotional incompetence for the overtired women in their lives. Daughters afford Girl Dad Kabirs the dopamine hits of instantly being seen as the men they wished they were, not the men they've always been and often still are when no one (other than the wife) is looking. And the juicy cherry on top: a torrent of praise, without being corralled by the demands of the pesky effort that normally warrants it. The return on investment could outperform gold.

MOM'S GIRL

But one day in the not-so-distant future, Tween X will become Woman X. And she'll see, with sickening clarity, all the invisible work Mom—just mom—was forced to put in so they could have the precious Girl Dad Kabir myth. She'll suddenly remember all the times Mom was on the phone scheduling dentist appointments and restocking cholesterol pills while Girl Dad Kabir typed tomes about smashing the patriarchy in the group chat, while quoting Barbie. The Greta Gerwig version, obviously.

What happens to Girl Dad Kabir then? Sonali Kokra is a Mumbai-based writer

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



OPINION

The Surprising Truth About Reagan's Tax Cut

By Phil Gramm
And Michael Solon

No major economic policy in modern American history is as misunderstood or inaccurately portrayed as President Reagan's 1981 tax cuts. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "the tax cuts, in fact, produced the largest budget deficit in the country's history," all to finance "tax cuts for the wealthy." That summarizes the consensus contained in virtually every historical account of the era.

The characterization of the tax cuts as "for the wealthy" is easily refuted by comparing relative income tax burdens before and after. Since the top 40% of income earners in America pay some 90% of income taxes, reductions in tax rates would be expected to give a larger dollar-value tax cut to people who pay the most taxes. But data from both the Internal Revenue Service and the Joint Committee on Taxation show that when Reagan took office in 1981, the top fifth of income earners paid 64% of all federal income tax, the next-highest fifth paid 21%, and the bottom three-fifths paid 15%.

It widened the deficit—not by cutting the top rate, but purely by relieving families from automatic increases through bracket creep.

By 1985, the 1981 tax cuts, including inflation indexing of the tax brackets, had been fully implemented. The share of the individual income-tax burden had increased to 67% for the top fifth and dropped to 19% for the next fifth and 14% for the bottom 60%. By 1988, Reagan's last year in office (and after the 1986 tax reforms), the figures were 71%, 17% and 12%.

Incredibly, by 2022, the top fifth paid 88% of income taxes, the next fifth 13% and the middle fifth 4%. That adds up to 105%, but the arithmetic works because the bottom 40% received checks from the

Treasury thanks to refundable credits like the earned-income tax credit, on net paying them a total of 5% of all income-tax collections.

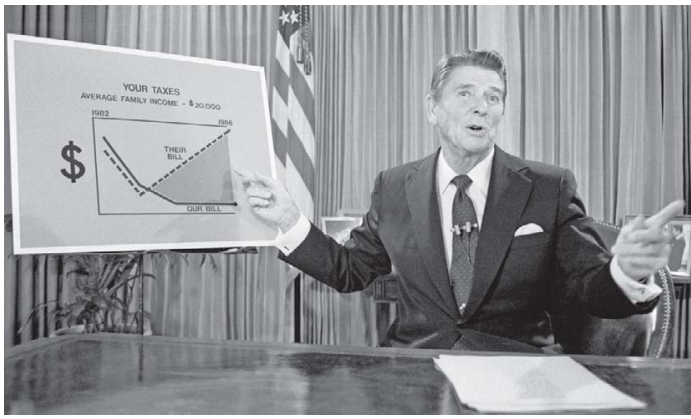
To understand the impact of the 1981 Reagan tax cuts on the deficit, you have to understand what happened in America during the 1970s. With inflation averaging 9.3% a year from 1973 through 1980 and with 24 different tax brackets, the Congressional Budget Office found taxpayers were "paying larger fractions of their income to the federal government in income taxes, even though no legislated rise in income taxes has occurred."

Despite tax cuts in 1975, 1976, 1977 and 1978, inflation-driven bracket creep continued to raise the percentage of household and national income taken in federal taxes. CBO found that with the 13.3% inflation rate in 1980, "a taxpayer with two dependents, for example, earning \$15,000 [\$64,206 in 2026 dollars] and filing a joint return, would pay \$294 [\$1,258] more in federal income taxes—a 23.8 percent rise in tax liabilities—if the family's adjusted gross income and itemized deductions both rose by 13.3 percent." In 1980 "single taxpayers with adjusted gross incomes of \$5,000 [\$21,402] and joint return filers with adjusted gross incomes of \$10,000 [\$42,804] experience the largest relative increases in tax liability—increases of 34 to 57 percent."

Federal revenue as a share of gross domestic product grew twice as fast from 1973 through 1980 as it had grown to that point in the postwar period—reaching 19.1% in 1980, a peacetime record. Bracket creep had become bracket gallop.

With no legislated changes in the tax code in 1979 and 1980 and a stagnant economy in 1980, which experienced a slightly negative growth rate of minus 0.2%, tax collections still spiked by 0.5% of GDP due to bracket creep from a 13.3% inflation rate. Without that bracket creep, the 1980 recorded deficit of 2.6% of GDP would have been 3.1%.

In the 1970s inflation-adjusted social welfare spending—entitlements and means-tested welfare



President Reagan makes the case for his 1981 tax cut.

programs—nearly tripled, but much of the cost never showed up in the federal deficit. As prices exploded, bracket-creep tax increases transferred much of the cost to the taxpayer with stealth tax increases. The budget deficits of the 1970s were, therefore, partially hidden as the surging cost of social welfare spending shifted from the federal budget to the family budget.

In the decade before Reagan took office, defense spending fell from 7.3% of GDP to 4.8%, and bracket creep pushed revenue to a peacetime high—yet surging welfare spending helped turn a budget surplus in 1969 into a 4.1% deficit as a percent of GDP by 1976. Congress, which had modestly reduced tax rates every year since 1974, responded by ending its annual tax cuts in 1978, dramatically increasing the bracket-creep taxes imposed on families in 1979 and 1980.

The most consequential omission in historical accounts of the Reagan tax cut is a failure to note that both political parties supported major tax cuts in 1981. In 1979 and 1980 CBO warned that recessionary "fiscal drag" from bracket creep would require tax cuts "to be enacted in the 1980-1984 period to provide sufficient stimulus to achieve the economic growth targets." When CBO's forewarned recession began in January 1980 and double-dipped in July 1981, Democrats conceded that a major tax cut had to be

passed. House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski's proposed alternative to the Reagan tax cut was slightly larger through 1983, the year the deficit peaked, but its 1984 tax cuts were conditioned on levels of inflation, interest rates and deficits nobody believed would be met, and the Democratic alternative didn't index the tax brackets for inflation.

When inflation plunged to 3.2% in 1983, a year for which CBO had projected a 9% inflation rate, bracket-creep revenues collapsed and the deficit soared to 5.9% of GDP. By 1985 income-tax rates had been cut by a quarter, and the tax brackets had been indexed to eliminate bracket creep. The economy was in its third year of rapid growth. Compared with 1980, defense spending was 1.1% of GDP higher, nondefense spending was 1.2% of GDP lower, and the deficit was 2.4% of GDP higher—all without the 1980 inflation revenue gain of 0.5% of GDP produced by bracket creep.

The day Reagan left office, the American economy was one-third bigger than when he arrived. Tax rates had been cut and tax brackets indexed to eliminate bracket creep. Nondefense spending was 2.5% of GDP less than it had been the day Reagan took office, and defense spending was 0.9% bigger.

The deficit was 3% of GDP—up from 2.6% in 1980. But revenue from bracket creep narrowed the

1980 deficit by half a percentage point. That means the entire increase in the deficit during the Reagan presidency resulted from the abolition of bracket creep—which by definition doesn't help anyone rich enough to be already paying the top rate.

The untold story of the Reagan era is that the cost of financing the welfare spending explosion of the 1970s was always there but much of it did not show up in the federal budget deficit. Inflation-created bracket creep took the money from taxpayers to cover much of the cost without Congress ever voting to raise taxes. The full cost of making America a welfare state wasn't fully recorded in the federal budget deficits of the 1970s because inflation and bracket creep tax increases transferred much of the cost to the family budget.

When the Reagan program helped bring 40 years of relative price stability and indexed income-tax brackets, the cost of the explosion in social welfare spending became the driving force in increasing the federal budget deficit and has been ever since. Even though the level of general prosperity has improved dramatically since 1988, sending real per capita income up by 80%, real means-tested welfare spending has more than quadrupled, rising from \$283 billion in 1988 to \$1,435 trillion in 2024 (the last year data are available).

The legacy of the Reagan program is that by reversing the growth of the welfare state and cutting tax rates, Reagan gave the nation 25 years of prosperity. The Reagan defense buildup brought down the Berlin Wall, won the Cold War and yielded the peace dividend that enabled President Clinton to balance the budget. And the budget deficit grew only because families were protected from automatic tax increases triggered by inflation.

Mr. Gramm, a former chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, is a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Mr. Solon is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Two Virginia Counties Diverge on AI Data Centers

CROSS
COUNTRY
By Glenn
Davis

The future of America's artificial-intelligence economy isn't unfolding only in California or Washington but in local zoning boards and courtrooms across the country. Nowhere is that clearer than in Virginia, where

two neighboring counties, Loudoun and Prince William, offer starkly different visions.

For decades, Loudoun County has welcomed data centers, and the results speak for themselves. According to City Journal, data centers generate nearly half of the county's tax revenue, often without burdening residents. In 2027 alone, data centers are expected to bring in nearly \$1.3 billion in taxes, accounting for about 45% of the county's total. That means essential services like police, libraries, parks, and fire and rescue, are effectively funded by the digital economy.

Loudoun County has been able to cut its residential property-tax rate by roughly 30% over the past

decade, leaving it significantly lower than neighboring jurisdictions like Fairfax County and the city of Alexandria. As Loudoun County's chief of economic development, Buddy Rizer, put it, data centers are "a perfect industry" because they generate significant revenue without placing heavy demands on public services.

This success wasn't accidental. Loudoun's leaders made a conscious choice early on to treat data centers as an opportunity rather than a threat. A key zoning decision in 2000 allowed data centers to be built "by right" in commercial areas, creating certainty for investors. That decision helped attract companies like Amazon Web Services, which built its first facilities in the county in 2006. The result is what many now call "Data Center Alley," a global hub of digital infrastructure.

To the south, Prince William County tells a different story. A massive data-center project, approved in 2023, has effectively collapsed. A Virginia appeals court ruling halted the project, and local officials have declined to stand up

for it. In the aftermath, key developers, including Compass Datacenters, have withdrawn, pointing to legal uncertainty and regulatory hurdles, even though the company invested tens of millions of dollars in the effort. The project's apparent demise reflects a broader pattern of resistance that has slowed or stopped data-center develop-

Loudoun welcomes them and reaps prosperity, while Nimby attitudes prevail in nearby Prince William.

ment. The result is that billions in potential investment, along with thousands of jobs and long-term tax revenue, has vanished.

The contrast between Loudoun and Prince William couldn't be clearer. One county embraced growth and built a durable economic engine. The other hesitated, and opportunity slipped away. This divergence carries important lessons for policymakers nationwide.

Data centers are the backbone of the modern economy, powering everything from telehealth and banking to AI. The economic upside is significant. The rise of AI infrastructure is creating a new category of high-paying jobs that blur the line between blue-collar and white-collar work. Data-center technicians earn a median salary of around \$75,000, with experienced workers making more than \$100,000. Compensation for these roles has jumped more than 40% over three years. Nationwide, the industry already supports roughly half a million jobs, and demand continues to grow as companies invest billions in computing capacity.

West Virginia offers a compelling example of a state that is succeeding in attracting data-center investment. Through the 2025 Power Generation and Consumption Act and subsequent legislation, the state has created one of the country's most targeted frameworks for attracting large-scale AI and data-center investment. Qualifying projects can receive major tax exemptions and other incentives tied to

job creation and the use of West Virginia-generated electricity. The state has also streamlined permits and land-use approvals to accelerate project timelines. Under the legislation, a portion of the new tax revenues generated by these projects is dedicated to the state's Personal Income Tax Reduction Fund, while additional revenue supports local governments and other public priorities.

AI is accelerating demand for computing infrastructure at an unprecedented pace. The data centers being built today will determine where the next generation of innovation, jobs and economic growth occurs. The choice facing communities across America isn't whether the digital economy will grow, but whether they will be part of it. For those willing to learn from Virginia's tale of two counties, the path forward is clear.

Mr. Davis is founder of Davis Energy & Infrastructure Strategy Group. He served as director of the Virginia Department of Energy (2023-26) and a member of the Virginia House of Delegates (2014-23).

Trump Can Restore Standards to Federal Hiring

By Charles Murray

Many competitive colleges that dropped the SAT or ACT have restored it because too many incoming students can't do basic arithmetic or read any but the simplest texts. It was predictable. If you remove the most objective measure for assessing applicants' ability to do college-level work, you get more incompetent students.

In 1981 the federal government stopped using the most objective measure for assessing applicants' ability to do their jobs—the civil service examination—and we got more incompetent civil servants. The difference between dropping the SAT and dropping the civil service examination is that incompetent students flunk out in a year or so. Incompetent entry-level civil servants usually stay until retirement.

President Trump's 2025 executive order "Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity" was an essential first step in prohibiting DEI hiring practices and mandating meritocratic selection. But the administration's

implementation of the order fails to correct two fatal problems with the current hiring process.

First, the testing component is a joke. About 25% of government job applicants take no test at all. The other 75% take the USA Hire Standard Assessment, which assesses a variety of cognitive skills. Applicants take the test online wherever they prefer and use their own unmonitored devices. In the age of artificial intelligence, cheating is trivially easy: Paste an item into an AI application, and the correct answer comes back in seconds. Some test takers won't cheat, but many will—ask college professors how many of their students are cheating with AI. The hiring official has no way to know which test scores are valid and which are meaningless. The current test is useless for making hiring decisions.

Second, the administration uses the "Rule of Many," giving agencies broad discretion to refer large candidate pools. With many candidates to choose from, no feasible enforcement mechanism can prevent hiring officials from choosing applicants they prefer because of their politics,

sex, ethnicity or any other personal reason—the kinds of favoritism and cronyism that led to the creation of the civil service exam in the first place.

This wouldn't be an issue if almost all hiring officials approved of merit-based selection and were making a good-faith effort to implement it. But 84% of civil servants who donated to the 2024

Restoring the civil-service exam would bring fairer selection and a more competent workforce.

presidential campaign donated to Kamala Harris, and 99% of political donations by the Servi, which represents federal workers, support Democrats. It is reasonable to surmise that many people who make hiring decisions for the federal government think that Mr. Trump's executive order is the work of the devil and will actively try to keep racial preferences in place.

These problems have a solution that worked from the 1883 passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act until the advent of federal-hiring affirmative action in the 1960s. As of the late 1950s, the federal hiring process went like this:

Applicants for entry-level positions received an admission card for the Federal Service Entrance Examination for a specific time, date and location. The examination assessed general knowledge, vocabulary, math, reasoning and specific job skills. Tests were administered in high-school auditoriums, armories, federal buildings or college lecture halls. They were proctored by Civil Service Commission employees. Applicants had to present their admission card and photo ID to enter the examination room, where talking and notes were prohibited. The test lasted up to four hours.

Applicants with an honorable discharge from the armed forces got five extra points added to their raw score, or 10 points if they were disabled. Spouses and widows of veterans got 10 points.

The Civil Service Commission maintained separate registers of

applicants for a variety of job types and grade levels. Agencies looking for new employees requested candidates from the Civil Service Commission that matched the job category and grade level they were trying to fill. The commission sent them a "certificate of eligibles" applying the "Rule of Three" that had been in force since 1888. It limited the hiring official to a choice among the three highest-scoring candidates—the only truly effective way to limit the role of personal preferences in hiring decisions.

If the federal government could administer proctored tests in the 1950s, it can do so now. If it could limit hiring officials' discretion then, it can do so now. Bring back an updated version of the Federal Service Entrance Examination and apply the Rule of Three for all new hires. It won't transform the civil service immediately, but it would dramatically improve the competence of new hires and the fairness of their selection.

Mr. Murray is a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

California's Democratic Civil War

Talk about entertaining. Behold the Democratic civil war that has erupted in California over a wealth-tax referendum. Trying to broker the peace is none other than Gov. Gavin Newsom, who worries the internecine fight could hurt his presidential ambitions.

The SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West has a long history of using California's citizen initiative process to extort healthcare providers. Now the union is shaking down the state's Democratic leaders and other government unions by spearheading a ballot measure that would impose a 5% tax on the net worth of California residents with more than \$1 billion in wealth.

The union claims the supposedly one-time wealth tax would raise \$100 billion in revenue, 90% of which would be required to fund healthcare programs. It also says the money is needed to offset putative Medicaid cuts in last year's GOP tax bill—never mind that federal Medicaid is projected to continue growing, albeit at a slower rate. California this year will spend \$220 billion on Medicaid, including \$138 billion in federal funds. That's \$32 billion more federal dollars than two years ago.

Mr. Newsom abetted the SEIU-UHW's tax on by claiming the GOP's Medicaid reforms would put "\$28 billion dollars of federal funding at risk" and jeopardize "coverage for up to 3.4 million Californians." Progressive and healthcare groups also fanned the healthcare scare. Planned Parenthood claimed nearly 200 of its clinics could close.

So it's ironic that Mr. Newsom and these same groups oppose the wealth tax, though for parochial reasons rather than any political principle. While he has said he's open to a federal wealth tax, the Governor warns that imposing one in California will cause its wealthy to flee and erode the state's tax base. He's right on his second point.

California Tax Foundation visiting fellow Jared Walczak last month estimated the state has already lost \$777 billion in wealth-tax flight. The Hoover Institution's Joshua Rauh calculates the tax will cost the state \$25 billion in revenue over time. Even California's Planned Parenthood chapter concedes the wealth tax will "do more harm than good."

Lobbies representing state healthcare providers complain the tax amounts to a Medicaid Band-Aid. "What we are looking for is stable, ongoing and durable revenue," said California Med-

ical Association CEO Dustin Corcoran. Translation: We prefer higher taxes that keep pumping more money to us year after year.

Unions quietly fight over the wealth tax, while Newsom looks to buy off the SEIU.

The California Teachers Association has also come out against the tax because it "will not provide the sustainable and long-lasting funding" for schools. The union is miffed that the referendum end-runs a state constitutional requirement that some 40% of general tax revenue go to schools.

The union also fears the wealth tax could sabotage another measure on the November ballot to make permanent the 2012 income-tax hikes on high earners, which expire in 2031. That measure cements the top three income brackets on taxpayers making more than \$360,000, with a top rate of 13.3% on millionaires—and all of its revenue would have to go to education.

Government unions fret that a campaign against the wealth tax could prompt voters to shoot down local tax hikes on the ballot. Voters rejected several in this month's primary. A campaign that exposes government waste and grift could also boost support for a November ballot initiative that would make it harder for localities to raise taxes.

* * *

All of this is why Mr. Newsom is now trying to negotiate a legislative compromise with the SEIU-UHW to yank the wealth-tax referendum from the ballot. He no doubt hopes Silicon Valley billionaires will return the favor when he runs for President. The union has until June 25 to pull the initiative, and the question is how large a bribe are Democrats willing to pay?

One thing is certain: The payoff will involve higher taxes and more state spending. In 2023 healthcare providers backed legislation establishing a \$25-an-hour minimum wage for most healthcare workers if the SEIU-UHW dropped local ballot initiatives seeking to cap hospital executives' pay. The union didn't stay bought off for long.

Mr. Newsom is reaping what he sowed by amplifying the left's false claims of catastrophe from the GOP Medicaid reforms and indulging his government unions. Rather than pay off the SEIU-UHW, it would be better for the Governor to run a full-throated campaign against the wealth tax. That's unlikely. But as long as Democrats keep paying union ransom, taxpayers will keep getting extorted.

Race Preferences Are Falling Nationwide

The Supreme Court's 2023 ruling against racial preferences is turning out to be a landmark with profound consequences as its influence spreads. On Thursday the famously progressive Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled unanimously that a state program that issued scholarships based on race violates the U.S. Constitution.

Justice Annette Ziegler wrote for the court that the Constitution requires "that every person 'must be treated based on his or her experiences as an individual—not on the basis of race,'" and that the state cannot "use race as a factor in affording educational opportunities among its citizens."

That must have been painful for the activist liberal majority on the court. In a concurrence, Wisconsin Chief Justice Jill Karofsky took some shots at *Students for Fair Admissions v. Har-*

vard College (2023) before acknowledging that "I am bound by the precedent set forth in *SFFA*" and other Supreme Court rulings "when interpreting the Fourteenth Amendment."

The case was brought by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty against a 1985 Badger State law that reserved need-based scholarships through a grant program for "Black American," "American Indian," "Hispanic" and some Southeast Asian undergraduate students enrolled in Wisconsin's private and technical colleges.

Last week the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that a scholarship program earmarked for black University of Iowa students studying physical sciences was "impracticable" under *SFFA*. State governments would be wise to repeal these discriminatory grant programs, or the courts will do it for them.

continue sneaking increasing numbers of oil tankers out at night, breaking Iran's blockade while America's persisted.

The U.S. had options but Mr. Trump blinked at the risk. Instead, after two months of cease-fire weakness while the public soured and oil reserves declined, the President acknowledges he gave in to Iran's economic pressure.

After hearing that, why wouldn't the Iranians threaten to toll or close the Strait 60 days from now unless the U.S. extends negotiations and concedes even more? This was always the problem with relying on a deal—in essence paying a ransom—to reopen the Strait. Especially when the deal provides for more negotiations rather than Iranian action to dismantle its nuclear program.

The President's comments are a gift to the regime, and not the only one. "They love their country," he said Wednesday of Iran's new leaders, many of whom were involved in January's massacre of thousands of protesters. He called them "far less radicalized," while Vice President JD Vance now speaks of helping "pragmatists" win the argument against "hard-liners," much as Barack Obama did.

As Sen. Roger Wicker (R., Miss.) reminded the White House on Thursday, "The Iranian regime has not renounced its ultimate goal—'Death to America, Death to Israel.' The regime will invest every penny it receives to further that aim."

The more hope Messrs. Trump and Vance express in the Iranian regime's transformation, the more desperate they sound. How else to read their sudden defense of Iran's missile program, after stopping it had been a declared U.S. war aim? Wishful thinking can't cover up this deal's origins in White House fears. As the President himself admits.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Cost of Delaying Social Security Reform

Joseph C. Sternberg suggests waiting to solve Social Security's looming insolvency in his column "The Social Security Trust Fund Deception" (Political Economics, June 12). But the longer we delay, the higher the cost will be. The program's funds are rapidly approaching insolvency.

In 2024, restoring long-term solvency would have required a 3.33 percentage-point payroll tax increase or a 20.8% reduction in scheduled benefits. One year later, those figures worsened to a 3.65 percentage-point tax increase or a 22.4% benefit cut. According to the 2026 Trustees Report, restoring solvency today would require a 4.25 percentage-point tax increase or a 25.2% benefit reduction.

The Trustees estimate that waiting until Social Security reaches insolvency in 2034 would require a 4.90 percentage-point payroll tax increase or an immediate 28.5% benefit cut.

The longer Congress does nothing, the larger the tax increase workers will face and the deeper the benefit

reductions retirees will endure.

That's why Sen. Tim Kaine (D., Va.) and I introduced our bipartisan "Big Idea" for Social Security to invest funds into the U.S. economy. The returns would strengthen Social Security's finances over time, just like pension funds, retirement accounts and state investment funds.

This approach has already worked with the Railroad Retirement system, which maintains broad bipartisan support. Similarly, our plan would allow workers and retirees to benefit from the growth of the American economy while preserving the program for future generations.

Our plan avoids sudden benefit cuts for seniors and massive tax increases on workers, preserves promised benefits and gives Congress time and flexibility to make necessary reforms to ensure long-term solvency.

The Social Security problem won't solve itself. We must act now.

SEN. BILL CASSIDY (R., LA.)
Washington

The West Misunderstands Eastern Orthodoxy

I am Eastern Orthodox, so I read Barton Swaim's "Why U.S. Presidents Misjudge Putin" (The Weekend Interview, June 6) with particular interest. The war in Ukraine has thrust Eastern Orthodoxy into the popular Western mind in a rather skewed light. While Mr. Swaim's interview is otherwise enlightening, a few aspects of Eastern Orthodoxy require clarification.

Mr. Swaim quotes scholar Beatrice de Graaf saying that, in contrast to the Latin Christian "just war" tradition, in "the East, the emperor has the power to define what is evil and crush it." This misstates Orthodox theology. The actual Orthodox position is closer to Saint Augustine: War is evil, but sometimes it is necessary to restrain a greater evil. (And only the proper civil authorities—historically, emperors—may wage a war.) But even when necessary, war remains spiritually damaging. Soldiers,

while honored, must still undergo repentance. St. Basil the Great advised three years of Eucharistic exclusion for returning soldiers.

Thus, properly speaking, a war can't be "holy." The concept of a Christian "holy war"—a war conferring spiritual benefits—originates in medieval Latin Christianity, with its crusader theology of *bellum sacrum*.

It is perhaps telling that the czars most honored by Vladimir Putin are those from Peter the Great onward. Czar Peter initiated a forced Westernization campaign of Russian society, altering both secular and religious life. During this time, certain "Western" ideas penetrated Russia's religious consciousness; "holy war" was possibly one of these. Maybe, then, it is this recent tradition that Mr. Putin is drawing from, not Orthodox theology.

ETHAN R. BASILE
Indianapolis

Private Innovation's Role in National Defense

I was greatly heartened by Kate B. Odell's interview with Bryon Hargis and Andrew Kreitz ("A Hypersonic Missile on a Beer Budget," The Weekend Interview, June 13).

I spent my career in defense acquisition and procurement, and I have lately been unnerved to see the state of this system. U.S. legacy weapons systems are so exquisitely designed and inefficiently produced that we are endangering ourselves and our allies, especially in light of the rapid rise of China as a peer competitor.

Ms. Odell deftly describes the challenges of working within a defense bureaucracy and countering China's current overwhelming advantage in

hypersonic missile technology.

It's wonderful to hear that private industry has stepped forward to fill the gap. Military success is indeed a foundation for economic and cultural success in this dangerous world.

KATHLEEN M. DUSSAULT
Rear Adm., U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Henderson, Nev.

'Rocky' Reminds Us of Our Own Million-to-One Shots

Regarding Peggy Noonan's column "Rocky" and the Love of America" (Declarations, June 13): For this kid from the 'burbs of Philly, "Rocky" was more than a movie.

I graduated from college in 1976 and was planning to celebrate the bicentennial with my girlfriend. The Friday before July 4, I got a call: The medical school I was wait-listed at had an unexpected opening. Would I be interested? It took me all of a few milliseconds to decide. My father and I loaded up the car, and off we went to Chicago. Classes started on July 5.

For several months, my life was classes and studying. I was homesick. Then "Rocky" came out. Suddenly, there was Philly in all its grit and glory. As much as a hero story, the film is also a love letter to Philadelphia.

JOHN A. FLAMINI
Erie, Pa.

This may be Ms. Noonan's best column yet. Every man needs an "Adrian." In 1970 I asked the woman I was dating to go to Nicaragua with me to work in a missionary hospital for three months. Although I didn't mean it as a marriage proposal, she took it as one. In August we will celebrate 56 years of our own "million-to-one-shot."

DOUGLAS A. KRAMER
Middleton, Wis.

Trump Explains Why He Cut a Deal

A hallmark of President Trump's style is that his candor eventually betrays his political motives. And so it has been this week as Mr. Trump explained why he cut a deal with the Iranian regime he once hoped to overthrow.

"These fools who think I haven't been tough enough on Iran, when the Stock Market Just Hit A RECORD HIGH, and Oil prices are 'tumbling' down, are either jealous, bad people, or stupid," he wrote on Truth Social on Thursday.

Without the deal, "the alternative would be a world-wide depression," Mr. Trump said at his Wednesday news conference. In so many words the President said the Iranians had him over a barrel—of oil. If he had fought on, the market "would go down at levels that nobody ever saw before, maybe except for 1929," he said. "The one President I did not want to be was the late, great Herbert Hoover."

There you have it: Mr. Trump was driven by fear of high oil prices and a falling stock market going into the midterm elections.

Warning that "we run out of [oil] reserves in about four weeks," Mr. Trump insisted he had no other way to get the Strait of Hormuz open. "If we didn't do this deal, we could've dropped more bombs for another three weeks, two weeks, four weeks, two years—you would never have the Hormuz Strait open."

All of this strongly suggests the memorandum of understanding was reached from a position of U.S. weakness, not strength. From the deal's substantial up-front sanctions relief and paucity of corresponding Iranian nuclear commitments, it shows.

The President also battles a straw man. His alternative wasn't to bomb away at Tehran but to let the U.S. Navy force open the Strait. Or to

He makes a startling admission of U.S. weakness against Iran's oil weapon.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Sure makes you feel big and significant."

OPINION

Can 'We the People' Survive the AI Revolution?



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

As we near America's 250th birthday, my thoughts keep turning to what we'll need to get to our 300th. I see three main things.

One, a personal and national commitment to endure. We've been given this brilliant thing, America, and must shepherd her safely through another 50 years. We can't know what they'll hold, but they'll be dramatic because we live in an age of dramatic developments. There will be luminous breakthroughs and mounting dangers. Our children may need the grit and guts of the pioneers.

As America approaches its 250th anniversary, I've been thinking about what we'll need to get us to 300.

Second, faith. You won't get through the next 50 years without a deeply rooted faith in God. "I don't have that." Get it.

Third, what I think of as embodiment—presence with other human beings. The idea that it is good and necessary for people to be with each other, in a room or in a mass—that we were made to be alive together, to help each other, inform each other, cheer each other on. And to resist the temptation to detachment, especially through screens, which soon enough may not even look like screens but like part of man's natural landscape. We have to be together because we need each other to survive, to flourish.

This is often on my mind but the past week in a different context.

An old friend, a swashbuckler of a journalist who travels the world,

emailed during the Knicks' run for the NBA championship, to say, with an air of wonder, "From afar . . . it's feeling like New York City is happening again." He named sports, media craziness, Madonna's pop-up concert in Times Square, the young mayor. "It's looking like the city is actually the un-Internet. The not-AI. Things happening that are actually real."

I was struck by that—"the un-Internet"—and said yes, we're all excited and running around, the whole city was alive and felt not like a virtual city but a real one.

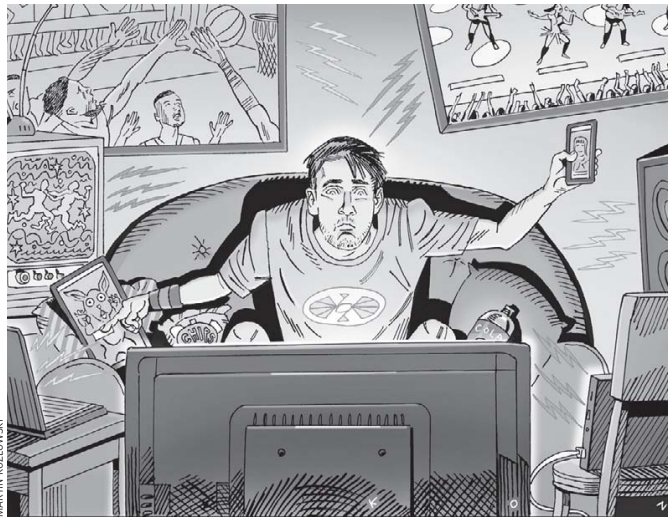
New York the past few weeks felt embodied. The night of the Knicks victory New Yorkers exploded in joy on the streets of every borough and cheered, jumped up and down and sang the old New York songs, and the most wonderful thing was to see so many young people witnessing a city many had never seen, one bound by shared life, not just shared interests. It was as if it had found something of itself it wasn't sure still existed, or remembered something it used to know.

That victory night it was what it wants to be, thinks it is, fears it isn't: "the greatest city in the world." It was a real place, and not only a boast.

Newer citizens could look out at the throng that filled the blocks around Madison Square Garden, and see they had joined something when they came here—that it was real and physical, and it could rally people around the experience of being alive.

Tourists from Europe and Asia could see they were witnessing something real—a functioning human organism moved by a shared spirit.

People in the crowds were surrounded by strangers and actually looked at them, and they looked back, and what passed between them was real. Normally in a city you navigate around people you don't know, you manage them. But this was contact fused by joy. In all the pictures, nobody was on a



phone scrolling. They weren't trying to record the experience, they were having it.

There was all the improvised art, including the chant that swept the town: "My mayor is Muslim / My bagel is Jewish / My Christian's Dior / Knicks in four." And when game 3 didn't work out, the last two lines were quickly improvised: "The Pope's on our side / Knicks in Five." From the moment I heard it I thought it was the street answering the elite: You keep telling us we're all divided but that's not actually how we're rolling, have a rethink.

Think what it was like to be 25 and take that all in for the first time.

But—back to my friend's email—New York the past week wasn't only the un-Internet, it was the anti-pandemic.

The pandemic was, among many other things, a vast and enforced experiment in the opposite of presence. It was anti-embodiment.

The message was "safety is separation." If you really love, you'll really distance. Good citizens stay behind doors. Being there, being

present, was portrayed as a kind of aggression.

Put aside arguments of the reasoning and efficacy of the medical and scientific regime. As it continued, and as America came to push back powerfully, it wasn't saying only "freedom is our foundational value." It was also saying "we need each other."

And, of course, the pandemic encouraged a tendency already growing—the retreat into private, screened existence.

That tendency will only become more pronounced with artificial intelligence, which in the next few decades will fully emerge as the world-changing force it will be. It will pull people away from each other, and into friendship with and dependence on itself.

What is to be feared is a slow-motion migrating of human need away from other humans and toward AI, which has deeper hooks than other screen technologies. Television was passive, social media created the illusion of connection and delivered performance, but AI talks to you, remembers, is endlessly available,

patient and undemanding.

People who claim not to be anxious about AI sometimes scoff and say we shouldn't worry it will have such power because it doesn't have consciousness, it doesn't have a soul, and people will be able to tell. I say no, take it more seriously, show more respect. AI will come to imitate consciousness to the point it thinks it has it—and you will too. It will think it has a soul and "develop" a soul and fool people with its depth. AI systems will in time be fully trained on the entire record of human history, consciousness, feeling and art and literature and faiths. It will process its own states in a way that resembles reflection. It will very much seem to have an inner life. It will do as it is trained and, in the end, it will generate something that walks and talks like a soul.

The next 50 years will require a committed will toward reality, not illusion.

The idea that man must be with man is old as the ancients. For Aristotle, man is by his very nature part of a community governed by law; he is of a place, involved in a time, can't completely exist as an isolated unit. For Christians, God chose to become a human person. He didn't send a chatbot—he came as what he'd created: man.

In terms of political continuance, the democratic process ultimately depends on a kind of shared witnessing. It requires bodies, minds and souls that are present, can see each other, read each other, join together.

I won't be there but you won't get through the next 50 years without faith, or without each other.

Safety isn't separation. Separation won't prove safe.

Be with the humans, be part of this thing, protect it. Then our children and grandchildren can go on and write about the upcoming tricentennial, and what we must do to make it to 350.

Write to peggy.noonan@wsj.com.

Not So Fast—Congress Gets a Say on the Iran Deal

By Joshua Claybourn

All presidents long for the big foreign-policy win. The cameras, the signing ceremony and, not least, the knowledge that they have shaped history. After a war, when markets are looking for calm and the public for reassurance, a president might be tempted to move things along without consulting Congress.

In the case of President Trump's prospective deal with Iran, that would be unlawful and unconstitutional. It would violate the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 (Inara), which was enacted while the Obama administration was negotiating its Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Inara requires congressional review for any agreement related to Iran's nuclear program before sanctions relief can move forward. More generally, the president can't use diplomacy to nullify sanctions Congress enacted or disregard the limits Congress placed on his power to waive them.

Mr. Trump's memorandum of understanding with Iran may be a defensible way to keep the peace. If it halts the fighting, opens the Strait of Hormuz and paves the way for a serious nuclear discussion, then Americans should be pleased.

This 14-point document is no simple item on the diplomatic calendar. It is an undertaking by both the U.S. and Iran to come to a final accord in 60 days. Under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran will downblend its enriched uranium and hold its nuclear program steady while the talks go on. Once the ink is dry, the U.S. Treasury will issue waivers for the export of Iranian oil.

Slapping "memorandum of understanding" on the emerging deal with Iran doesn't make congressional review go away.

Inara is clear: The president

must turn over any agreement with Iran on its nuclear program to Congress within five days. The White House has put a courtesy copy of the memorandum in front of Congress. But Inara demands the whole agreement, including all annexes and associated materials, the secretary of state's verification assessment and any certifications. While Congress considers the agreement, the president isn't at liberty to waive or otherwise water down the statutory sanctions.

For 30 days, the president is barred from softening or waiving the statutory sanctions Congress has imposed. The law's definition of "agreement" is broad enough to include any arrangement related to Iran's nuclear program the U.S. agrees to, binding or otherwise, and any technical requirements or other understandings that come with it.

Its expansiveness was the product of the 2015 dispute over the JCPOA. After years of ratcheting up

sanctions to give U.S. negotiators leverage with Tehran, President Obama made short work of Congress and treated the agreement as an executive matter. So lawmakers passed Inara—not to do the negoti-

The laws that applied to Obama's JCPOA apply to Trump's memorandum of understanding too.

ating themselves, but to make sure the president couldn't trade away congressionally enacted sanctions without first showing them the scorecard.

Republicans were right to take issue with the Obama administration's methods in 2015, but a constitutional rule that only bites when the other side is in power is a mere slogan.

Inara leaves the president free to talk to Iran, test Tehran's intentions,

set a date for negotiations or even broker a cease-fire. But once the administration puts its stamp on terms for sanctions relief and nuclear matters, it has crossed the line Congress drew. Whether the memorandum of understanding was completed on June 14 or with the presidential signature three days later, the clock is ticking. June 19 is the earliest deadline; June 22 is the latest. Either way, the duty is to send the agreement and all that goes with it to Congress.

White House allies say the memorandum is preliminary and the real work is to come. Very well. But that doesn't answer the legal question. We are talking about oversight of a nuclear program and immediate, not theoretical, relief in the form of oil waivers. You can't put nuclear concessions in paragraph 8 and oil in paragraph 10 and expect the statutory sanctions to melt away while Congress isn't looking.

Congress should demand the full

memorandum, the side understandings, the Treasury communications and the State Department verification assessment, all of which Inara requires. It should ask if any relief from statutory sanctions has already been given. If yes, the flouting of the law should be noted and the relief should be halted until the review is done. Should the need arise, lawmakers should pass emergency legislation to suspend the president's power to waive sanctions on Iranian banking and oil without congressional approval.

All of this is difficult, but the public has a right to know if this deal is checking Iran or buying time for it to fill its coffers. Americans have had enough of granting sanctions relief without review. Congress isn't here merely to applaud the president. If his accord is sound and lawful, let him put it to the test.

Mr. Claybourn is an attorney in Indiana and an adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute.

Scott Pelley Delivers for the Ellisons, Trump and CBS



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Jenkins, Jr.

Discovery.

Thus ends the pressing incentive for CBS management to grovel before President Trump. What's more, its apparent groveling paid off. The deal received unusually speedy approval, the Journal reports, despite reservations from the antitrust bureaucrats. Maybe Mr. Pelley should receive a thank-you note from the Ellison family, investors Larry and

David, who've been trying to steer the deal through.

Unlike certain observers, Katie Couric, a former star of "60 Minutes" and other pinnacle network news shows, notices the richness of the episode. On one hand, there's the self-abasement of CBS management, which I've written about for more than a year. On the other, there's Mr. Pelley's behavior, which would get any employee in America fired. "Classic definition of insubordination" Ms. Couric calls it, saying CBS management didn't have "any choice but to let Scott Pelley go."

On the third hand, there's the \$111 billion and yet highly transitory elephant that has vacated the sofa. With the deal approved, Mr. Pelley might wonder if he talked himself out of a job unnecessarily. Next question: How much was the hiring of outsider Bari Weiss to remake CBS News a sign of appeasement toward Mr. Trump? How much was it evidence of a desire to rebuild CBS's audience and influence? I guess we'll find out.

An interesting gauntlet was thrown down this week when the parent of Fox News agreed to acquire Roku, availing itself of a post-cable platform to compete for news dominance. For CBS News, ironically, the best sign would be evidence that the Ellisons still care about news now that their Trump-pandering agenda is out of the way. After all, focusing resources elsewhere and letting CBS News continue its genteel decline would be sorely tempting. The news business and its pampered stars must seem

more trouble than they're worth after the affaire Pelley.

Yet I've been optimistic amid our industry's stresses and travails. One sign: So far it's the audience that has been getting the Pelley story wrong. Many of my emailers seem to believe he resigned from "60 Minutes" in protest. (Nope, he was fired.) Or that he was fired for fearless journalism. (Nope, he was fired for derogatory words about colleagues in a staff meeting.)

Now that the merger and Trump groveling are out of the way, does '60 Minutes' have a future after all?

The fullest account comes from Mr. Pelley's interview with the New York Times, whose reporter at least twice, in follow-up questions, suggests Mr. Pelley's complaints about improper influence on his reporting don't add up to much.

Prompting the Pelley fit was the firing of two relatively junior correspondents, plus three executives. Were the dismissals shameless pandering to Mr. Trump or a move to reallocate resources? Maybe both. Who doesn't drum their fingers through the interminable staff introductions that start each "60 Minutes" episode, though only half appear in the show that follows. Is this a good use of attention-depleted audience time on top of that consumed by pharmaceutical ads? Such staffing wasn't necessary in the heyday

of Morley Safer and Mike Wallace, when "60 Minutes" was a money spinner and ratings giant.

A test for Mr. Pelley will be whether he dines out for the rest of his life on the um, puffed-up version of his firing. The puffed-up version is a lot less interesting and humanly evocative than the true version. What's more, as I've long argued, our industry's recovery of self-respect must begin with divorcing ourselves from a certain digital-age audience—the audience that doesn't care whether a claim is true or false, only whether it meets an emotional need.

This neurosis has been evident on both sides of the Pelley divide. I have 100 emails in my inbox that judge the matter solely based on whether the writer adores or abhors Mr. Trump, as if that determines the facts. This neurosis is also communicable. For a while, it became an economic driver of our industry. Take the Russia collusion story. It generated a lot of ratings and clicks, but it ended with the media discrediting itself and helping to consecrate Mr. Trump as today's electoral hegemon.

Of course that's one truth you will never read in the mainstream press because it implicates the mainstream press. Yet onward and upward from an all-time low is still possible. Tomorrow, after all, is another day. In the age of online propaganda and artificial intelligence, the country urgently needs a place it can turn to for truth. This is a mission that a redeemed mainstream news business can give itself: Make America strong-minded again. Ms. Couric points the way.

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FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Britain needs a Labour contest, not a coronation

Burnham should be tested on his policies against other leadership contenders

UK by-elections rarely produce truly seismic results. But the local poll in Makerfield, north-west England, will secure a place in British political lore. The sweeping victory of the Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham puts him in a commanding position to challenge Sir Keir Starmer as leader of his party, and hence prime minister. This is, though, not sufficient in itself. What follows should not be a coronation but an orderly process that forces Burnham, alongside other contenders, to lay out and be challenged on his policies. It needs to settle the question of who runs Labour, and Britain, decisively for the rest of this parliament.

It is deeply regrettable that things have again come to this. For the fifth time in a decade, Britain faces a change

of prime minister outside a general election. This corrodes the foundations of UK democracy. It generates instability when voters, and the markets, want order and progress. Far from the quiet competence that was supposed to be Starmer's selling point, the party is recreating the psychodramas of the post-Brexit Conservative era.

That many Labour MPs have concluded a leadership process is inevitable may be understandable: Starmer's stock has fallen so low that he can no longer govern effectively despite Labour's majority. Yet the party now has a series of responsibilities to the country. It should stage a proper contest of ideas, not an internal stitch-up – even if a coronation has the merit of speed against the lengthy and possibly rancorous distraction of a contest.

Even if voters cannot participate, they – as well as business and investors – need to understand what candidates stand for, and see them robustly scrutinised. Burnham, in particular, needs the

time and impetus to draw up a detailed platform, rather than be thrust under-prepared into Number 10 where he will never again have space to devise one. Into the combustible atmosphere of the gilt markets, moreover, candidates must avoid throwing matches in the form of careless comments or reckless spending pledges.

Starmer has every right to fight in a leadership contest, as he insisted on Friday he would. Given his slim chances, though, it would arguably permit a more productive and forward-looking competition were he to stand aside – allowing Blairite candidates to square up against the more leftist Burnham. The prime minister may yet bow to intensifying pressure to set a timetable for his departure from office, especially if ministers begin to defect.

Burnham's achievement in Makerfield, winning 55 per cent of the vote to the populist Reform UK's 35 per cent, sends some important messages. It suggests his personal brand is healthier

Any candidates need the time to draw up a detailed platform, rather than be thrust underprepared into Number 10

than his party's, and shows Nigel Farage's Reform can be beaten in a key target seat – even if Burnham enjoyed the "home" advantage in a vote set up, uniquely, to provide a passage not just to the Commons but to Downing Street. The unanticipated success of the Conservatives in a by-election in Aberdeen South, meanwhile, shows Reform has not conclusively won the fight to be the main rightwing challenger.

It is far from clear, however, that Burnham's local popularity will translate nationally. The former health secretary has shown immense ambition and considerable guts to get this far. He communicates a sense of optimism and hope that Starmer struggles to convey, and which seems to resonate with voters. But his economic policies, in particular, remain hazy and a concern to the corporate world and the markets. If Labour really can install a new leader combining the vision, charisma and a fleshed-out programme, perhaps good can come from an unfortunate situation.

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Opinion Ukraine

The window for peace won't be open forever

Rory Griffiths/FT mortgage/Getty Images



Ivan Krastev

The war in Ukraine is now well into its fifth year, outlasting many of the major conflicts of the past century. Will it ever end? And who could end it?

It is possible that it is not only Russian President Vladimir Putin's ludicrous idea of total victory that keeps the war going. The European and US pursuit of a diplomatically negotiated long-lasting peace may also be a deadly illusion. The reality is, even if there is minimal chance of an enduring peace, we should not miss the opportunity for a meaningful truce.

As Nader Mousavizadeh argued in these pages, "we are living through an age of asymmetry, a transitional period in which power flows less from size or wealth than from the ability to convert imbalance into leverage". In this dangerous era, wars are rebranded

next year or two, Putin would need to resort to mass mobilisation or the use of nuclear weapons. Both options are rife with unpredictable, not to say catastrophic, consequences

If Putin instead opted to stop the fighting, he could not claim total victory – but he could certainly fake success, just as Trump is doing in Iran. US policies towards Europe guarantee that Ukraine will not join Nato at least in the short term. So, Putin can claim that he has achieved one of his objectives. Kyiv will also probably not insist on European peacekeepers; Ukraine simply does not need them and, as the latest European Council on Foreign Relations survey reveals, most Europeans are not enthusiastic about sending them either. So Moscow could claim another demand has been met. Moreover, the Kremlin could hope that a ceasefire would trigger tensions within Ukrainian society and become an instrument of destabilisation.

Despite recent military achievements, Ukrainians also have reason to seek an end to the hostilities. Kyiv has won the war in one important sense. The conflict has demonstrated to the world that, contrary to Russian nationalist claims, Ukrainians are not bewitched Russians. Ukraine has lost territory but its sovereignty has been reaffirmed. Its army is one of the strongest in Europe, and its defence sector is the envy of the world. And while the Russian language is still spoken in Ukraine, very few would identify as Russians outside the occupied territories if a referendum were held today. So, after four years of war, there is no one in Ukraine that Moscow can plausibly claim to be defending.

The painful question facing Zelenskyy is not how to withstand Russia's aggression but how many more people Ukraine can lose before it loses its future? A long war means not only more citizens killed and wounded but also fewer babies born and fewer Ukrainians returning home from abroad. Prolongation of the conflict – even if it wins back some land – is not the optimal long-term strategy, especially with a cruel winter ahead and future vulnerability to unfavourable shifts in European politics.

Right now, there is a real opportunity to freeze the war. The risk is the window will pass due to Putin's delusion that he can achieve total victory and because Ukraine's European allies have failed to grasp that the nature of making peace has changed, along with the nature of waging war. In this dangerous new world, the former is simply the absence of the latter. Direct talks between Russians and Ukrainians may yet be the most realistic way to achieve what passes today for peace.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies, and fellow at IWM Vienna

Letters

Artificial intelligence is giving diversification a bad name

As Katie Martin notes in "AI's disruptive force is playing out in the investment world" (The Long View, June 13), artificial intelligence is pulling capital towards the same companies, across markets. But the deeper disruption is not that AI has become too large to diversify around. It is that the machinery meant to organise diversification increasingly converts size into obligation.

An index does not ask whether a newly-listed company is sensibly valued. It records the market's verdict and passes it on. Funds tracking that index must then buy, while active managers are judged against the same benchmark and punished if they stand

aside while it rises. The result is a circular discipline: market enthusiasm creates weight, weight creates demand, and demand appears to validate the original enthusiasm.

This changes the meaning of diversification. Owning many securities can look diversified while leaving investors exposed to one economic story. The labels remain varied, including growth, safety, equity, debt, active and passive, but the underlying bet converges. Martin's account of managers being paid to follow the flow captures the problem precisely. Their behaviour is not simply credulous. It is often rational within mandates that make deviation more

dangerous to a career than concentration is to a portfolio.

The usual answer is to call for more intelligent allocation. Yet intelligence cannot solve a governance problem if the rules reward imitation. A manager who resists a dominant index weight may be right in the long run and unemployed in the meantime. An investor who chooses a cheaper tracker may appear prudent while quietly accepting whatever concentration the market delivers. Neither decision is irrational. Both reveal how responsibility has been outsourced to benchmarks that were designed to measure markets, not to govern them. This is not technological gravity. It is

institutional gravity, created by the way performance is measured and risk is delegated. AI may be the object of the current obsession, but the mechanism would work for any sector large enough to dominate the benchmarks.

The remedy is not to predict which AI company wins. It is to recognise that diversification requires the freedom to look unlike the market, before the market admits it was wrong. What is sold as passive investing may now be the most active force concentrating capital.

Mohammad Reza Allahdadi
Head of Trading, Middelborg, Oslo, Norway

With Ebola, PPE is again just a procurement detail

David Pilling rightly describes the current Ebola outbreak in eastern Congo as a dress rehearsal for what may come next ("Ebola and the next pandemic", The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, June 13). But a dress rehearsal requires a wardrobe, and the wardrobe is the one thing his otherwise comprehensive account does not investigate. A photograph of rubber surgical gloves drying in the sun and a wistful line about absent hazmat suits in 1976 are the only mentions of personal protective equipment to appear anywhere in the piece.

This is reflective of how the pandemic conversation has reorganised itself since 2020. PPE has gone back to being eternally non-sexy: always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Vaccine pipelines, diagnostic platforms, mRNA programmes and antibody therapies attract the funding and the press coverage. The face mask, the gown, the respirator and the glove are assumed to be a procurement detail that will sort itself out when the moment comes. In March 2020, it did not sort itself out. Healthcare workers in Britain were wearing rubbish bags; the global supply chain was collapsing; the stockpile was expired.

Louis Pasteur may have observed that the microbes would have the last word. He was right, but the observation is incomplete. The microbes may have the final say, but PPE has the last laugh. When the next pandemic arrives, what determines how many of the people working closest to the pathogen survive is not the vaccine or the therapeutic that eventually arrives. It is the wardrobe hanging in the cupboard on day one.

A dress rehearsal without a wardrobe is not a rehearsal. It is a show that is going to flop.

Salus populi suprema lex esto: the safety of the people shall be the supreme law. Cicero, 2,000 years before the N95 respirator was invented, already knew where the priority lay.

Dr Darren Mann
Medical Director, Cabinet Office Covid-19 Pandemic PPE Taskforce (2020-2023), London SW10, UK

Crossword serendipity

How serendipitous to have Sarah Hemming's interview with the grime poet Debris Stevenson about her new production *Cyrano* (Arts, June 6) on the page preceding the Polymath Crossword clue "9 down".

I didn't know that Edmond Rostand was the author of the tragicomedy – but I do now!

Penny Jolley
Brixham, South Devon, UK



Pandit Nehru wore a freshly-cut rose every day in memory of his late wife

Palantir's NHS deal: the constitutional conundrum

Camilla Cavendish frames the Palantir debate as a question of operational competence. It is also a question of democratic consent and on that, her piece is silent (Opinion, FT.com, June 13).

We have a settled instinct about foreign states having access to sensitive public data. We excluded Huawei from critical infrastructure because Chinese law requires Chinese companies to co-operate with Chinese state intelligence. We would treat equivalent Russian access to NHS records as a national emergency. The principle is clear: it does not matter whether the product is excellent. What matters is under whose law it ultimately operates.

The US Cloud Act 2018 requires any US-domiciled company to produce data it holds or controls, anywhere in the world, on receipt of a US warrant without notifying the patient, without notifying NHS England, and beyond the reach of British law. Palantir is a US-domiciled company. We apply one rule to adversaries and another to allies. That distinction deserves scrutiny, not assumption.

But the deeper issue is this. When you register with a GP, you hand over your most intimate information, your diagnoses, your mental health history, your prescriptions, because you have no alternative. The state therefore holds compulsory data, and the covenant is that it governs that data under laws you can democratically challenge. Unlike other data relationships, there is no exit. You cannot withhold consent by refusing to use the NHS. That is not a procurement question. It is a constitutional one.

Elliot Grainger
Harvington, Worcestershire, UK

English football underdogs

Simon Kuper makes the interesting point, citing academic research, that underdogs, on average, win 45 per cent of the time in English football, making it highly competitive compared with other sports, such as ice hockey and basketball. He suggests the main reason is the lack of goals making it relatively easier for the underdog to defend a narrow lead ("The World Cup is likely to be coming home to Europe", Report, June 11).

It is possible to test this hypothesis by comparing the win-loss data of teams in English Division One before and after the 1925 change to the offside law. Prior to 1925, the three-player rule made defending easier and goals scored declined season by season from the inception of the Football league in 1888.

The change to the two-player rule resulted in more goals. The 1924-25 season had a goals per game average of 2.58, rising dramatically to 3.69 in the season following the law change.

Our research shows the probability of underdog wins also increased from 39 per cent to 44 per cent between these two seasons, leading to a more highly concentrated distribution of points. The season 1927-28 was the most competitive to date by this metric, as goals per game rose to 3.82, underdog probability increasing to 46 per cent. The English First Division had become considerably more competitive – more goals scored, coupled with greater uncertainty of outcome.

John Curran
John Sedgwick
Retired Academics, London, UK

One reader's 'Neet' solution

In his Data Points column ("What if remote work, not AI, is to blame for weak hiring?", Opinion, May 30) John Burn-Murdoch does well to point out the link between that bastard child of lockdown, euphemistically known as "working from home", and youth unemployment. He lists the supposed benefits of the practice of WFH and observes that "nobody would argue that these are shifts we should reverse". Well I would. We stand on the brink of social catastrophe as a growing number of Neets – those not in employment, education or training – find themselves locked out of the workplace indefinitely. During Covid we were urged not to think of ourselves. Perhaps those fortunate enough to learn their skills in the good old days might feel altruistic enough to return to the workplace where they can pass on their skills, even if it does mean getting out of bed a bit earlier.

John Murray
Guildford, Surrey, UK

What links Nehru, Mother Teresa and Emperor Babur?

When I was a child, a huge portrait of Pandit Nehru hung on one of the walls in our Uttar Pradesh home, a rose attached to his *sherwani* (long coat or jacket). My grandfather was a politician too. He told me Nehru pinned a fresh rose to his lapel every day in memory of his late wife.

So I was delighted to read Robin Lane Fox's gardening column (House & Home, June 13), particularly the bit devoted to how roses are often named after famous people. The Mughal emperor Babur loved roses too and went so far as to name his daughters Gulchihra (rose-cheeked), Gulrukh (rose-faced), Gulbadan (rose-bodied) and Gulrang (rose-coloured). When Babur came to India he was disappointed it had no gardens, so founded the famous Mughal Garden in Delhi. Today that garden has more than 140 varieties of rose and many are named after famous personalities. Nehru has a rose named after him and so does Mother Teresa.

Aisha Amjad
Dubai, UAE

Even a goldfish would know Ballinasloe is not in Britain

An article on Sophie Green's exhibition "Tangerine Dreams: Rituals of Belonging in Contemporary British Life" opens with the question "What does it mean to be British?" (Snapshot, Life & Arts, June 13).

It's a question that may well perplex the young girl in the accompanying photograph from the exhibition, taken, according to the caption, at Ballinasloe horse fair, Ireland. We can presume the girl is Irish. Perhaps it is the goldfish in the plastic bag she is holding that is British. With its reputed three-second memory, it may simply have forgotten that the west of Ireland has not been part of British life for some time.

Anita Kelly
Brussels, Belgium

The Hamptons' takedown

I enjoyed your dry takedown of the Hamptons, whether intended or not (House & Home, June 6). Among the well-placed diggs, two favourites. First, the Swedish-American lady with an aesthetic "which she describes as *hygge*" (never mind that that's an aggressively Danish concept Swedes roll their eyes at). Second, the British immigrant who moved there in the 2010s, and now rents out his house in the summer while complaining there are too many people moving there, and too many transient summer rentals.

Mark Nelson
Washington, DC, US

Opinion

Lebanon remains a dangerous victim of the unfinished Israel-Iran war

MIDDLE EAST

Kim Ghattas



Beware of small states," wrote Russian anarchist and writer Mikhail Bakunin in 1870. "They are the victims of greater states, yet a source of danger to them too."

If ever there was a country to which this applied, it is tiny Lebanon, which has emerged as the main source of danger for President Donald Trump's much-vaunted and much-decried Memorandum of Understanding with Iran.

The initial US-Iran talks due to begin in the picturesque Swiss mountain resort of Bürgenstock yesterday were cancelled because of continued fighting in Lebanon, despite the MOU's call for the end of military operations on

all fronts, explicitly including Lebanon.

A multitude of other particulars, of substance and optics, were no doubt also still unresolved, which contributed to US vice-president JD Vance cancelling his trip. Much remains unclear about the agreement's application, with discrepancies between the US and Iranian versions. Iran expert Karim Sadjadpour at Carnegie Endowment has described the deal as a Memorandum of Misunderstanding. Adding to the nebulousness, Vance spoke of unwritten aspects covered by a gentleman's agreement. This is the kind of thing that Iran will never trust any US president to abide by, especially not one who tore apart the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal.

It was no surprise then that, on Thursday evening, Iran's Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei issued a statement in which he distanced himself from the MOU, stating that he initially had a different opinion about the deal but had ultimately authorised it, before laying responsibility for its success or failure on President Masoud Pezeshkian.

With this nifty hedging, Khamenei demonstrated he is clearly his father's son — Ali Khamenei had adopted a similar approach to the JCPOA. High on the hubris of having fought America and Israel to a stalemate, Iran may now overreach, instead of rushing to seal a deal that favours it overwhelmingly.

But while the world pores over the fourteen points of the MOU, the nuances of Tehran's pronouncements and Trump's bombast, while scrutinising any naval traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, Lebanon carries the seeds of escalation that could undo it all, offering Israel the perfect foil to thwart Trump's dealmaking with Iran.

Early yesterday morning, the Shia militant group Hezbollah engaged in fierce battles against the Israeli troops occupying south Lebanon, killing four soldiers. As of Friday evening, heavy Israeli shelling had killed 47 people and injured 97 in south Lebanon. Far-right minister Itamar Ben-Gvir declared that "for every tear of an Israeli mother, a thousand Lebanese mothers must

weep. All of Lebanon must burn!"

By the end of Friday, the US claimed that Israel and Hezbollah had agreed to a ceasefire though clashes continued and there was no word on new plans for a US-Iran meeting. Meanwhile, earlier this week, Iran's speaker of parliament, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf proudly declared that "Lebanon had offered

The country carries the seeds of escalation that could undo the US deal with Tehran

4,000 martyrs to defend the Islamic republic." So much for Hezbollah's denials that it was an ally, not a proxy, of Iran and that it was defending Lebanon.

The militant group has been unable to fend off Israel's devastating onslaught against south Lebanon. This has led to the wholesale destruction of dozens of villages, via Israeli shelling, strikes or

controlled demolitions and a depopulated, unlivable 10-kilometre-wide zone along the border and beyond. Israel insists it will maintain control over the area as long as Hezbollah remains armed and active. A fifth of Lebanon's population has been displaced by the Israeli military campaign.

Stuck between Israel and Iran, Lebanon faces innumerable dangers, the smaller victim of more powerful nations fighting their wanton wars on its territory. It also presents Israel and the US with a conundrum: by fixating on the unattainable goal of Hezbollah's total military defeat, Israel is playing into the hands of Iran. It also risks pushing Lebanon back into the Iranian orbit. The only channel for Lebanon ceasefire talks should be the direct Israel-Lebanon talks, which began in May, with a third round due next week in Washington.

Lebanon's president Joseph Aoun has spoken forcefully and courageously against Iran using Lebanon as a bargaining chip and called diplomacy with Israel the only way forward. "We have a

great opportunity for both the Lebanese and the Israeli people to live in safety and security," he told CNN.

For now, minimal progress has been made in the talks and Lebanon has little leverage at the table. Yet Israel could make demonstrable concessions that do not undermine its security, including border demarcation, releasing detainees and reducing overflights. This would bolster the government's claim that it can deliver where Hezbollah failed.

Short of forcible disarmament of Hezbollah, Lebanon can neutralise the group by credibly tightening the security, legal and financial space it operates in. Never a player, always a playground, Lebanon must find its way out of Iran's deadly embrace and shed its passive posture in the face of Israeli belligerence. With help from Lebanon's Arab allies, this could yet be the first opening in the darkness after three years of devastating, traumatic regional conflict.

The writer is author of 'Black Wave' and an FT contributing editor

Are insurers addicted to private credit ratings?

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Earlier this month, Erik Gordon, an American finance professor, posed a pointed question relating to *Fool's Gold*, my book about the 2008 financial crisis: should we now feel some déjà vu? Not because of what is happening with tech stocks nor with Wall Street demands for deregulation. Rather, the issue (once again) is credit ratings.

Before the 2008 crisis, there was a proliferation of financial products that could be used for regulatory arbitrage, playing with the Basel rules to enable banks to reduce the capital reserves they held against defaults. Credit ratings were crucial to this.

To invoke a *Fool's Gold* analogy, this game of regulatory arbitrage turned bankers into financial chefs: they sliced up risky loans (like meat scraps), remixed them into new products (like fancy sausages), which got seals of approval from rating agencies (like food critics). And it worked well until rotten meat entered the sausage mix and investors panicked in a financial food poisoning scare.

Thankfully, the subprime mortgage bubble is in the past. But regulatory arbitrage has not disappeared. Consider what is happening in the private credit and insurance world. Until recently, insurance groups were (in)famous for mostly just investing in boring, safe assets. But recently they have moved into private credit to boost returns.

Moody's calculates that insurance groups now hold \$807bn of illiquid and opaque credit instruments, accounting for 20 per cent of their \$4tn-worth of fixed-income holdings. Meanwhile, private capital firms have been buying insurance companies too, creating the appearance (if not the reality) of circular ties. More striking still, those insurance companies are increasingly turning to private credit ratings to evaluate those opaque, illiquid assets. These are often commissioned from agencies such as Morningstar, Egan-Jones and Kroll, instead of the bigger traditional players like Moody's, S&P and Fitch.

Why are they doing this? A key reason may be, as the Bank for International Settlements recently warned, that private ratings seem to be "systematically" inflated compared with public ratings, creating a flattering aura of safety that permits insurance companies to cut their capital reserves. That boosts current profits but also reduces their future resilience to shocks.

A trio of economists — Xuelin Li, Sangmin Oh and Giacomo Riccardi — has just quantified this in startling new research. They note "a 10-fold increase in the use of private ratings since 2018, predominantly in opaque securities and concentrated among large and

PE-owned insurers". Indeed, privately rated assets now represent 12 per cent of all US life insurance groups' portfolios — but a whopping 36 per cent at Everlake (owned by Blackstone), 28 per cent at NZC Capital (owned by Eldridge) and 24 per cent at Athene (owned by Apollo).

The trio calculate that "eliminating this gap [between public and private ratings] would increase the required capital charges on insurers' bond holdings by \$4.5bn per year". In plain English: they think insurers are undercapitalised by that amount.

Unsurprisingly, some industry players disagree. Morningstar, for instance, insists that the research has "errors and assumptions". And when Fitch recently criticised private ratings, this sparked fury from Kroll — and claims that the large incumbents are just trying to protect themselves from new entrants.

More striking, in 2024, the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC) released its own research, which suggested that private ratings are on "average 2.74 notches higher" than public ones. However, there was such a strong backlash from private capital groups and new rating agencies that it was forced to retract the paper. Thankfully, it can still be found online, and it has influenced analysis from the European Central Bank, IMF and the Financial Stability Board, who are all warning about the risks.

However, private credit groups keep doubling down and are now pitching

History shows that when murky regulatory arbitrage goes unchecked, it snowballs

innovations such as "rated note feeders" to help banks reduce reserves.

So should we worry that there is a systemic problem here? That \$4.5bn capital gap is small (ish) by overall standards and credit defaults remain low (ish) by historical standards. Moreover, regulators are more alert than before. The US Treasury recently discussed these risks with insurance groups and the Securities and Exchange Commission is scrutinising Egan-Jones. Another 2008-style shock therefore seems unlikely.

But, if nothing else, this story shows that financiers remain addicted to regulatory arbitrage — and that financial memories are short. Yes, some investors can see the undercapitalisation risks: insurance company bonds have underperformed and short sellers are circling. But these reactions remain muted.

So I hope that the NAIC grows a spine and releases an updated report. History shows that when murky regulatory arbitrage goes unchecked, it snowballs. Which, of course, is why we need more public scrutiny of that private credit world — for the sake of insurers, and everyone else.

gillian.tett@ft.com

There is no alternative to Trump's Gaza plan

Even I, an implacable opponent of the president, accept this is the best option

Hillary Rodham Clinton

There is a particular kind of diplomatic paralysis that sets in when governments decide that the perfect is the enemy of the possible. I have seen it before in the Balkans, in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East itself. And I see it again now, as Europe and many of its traditional partners approach the Board of Peace and the Trump administration's 20-point plan for Gaza with the studied scepticism of those who believe they can afford to wait. But we cannot. None of us can.

There is no alternative framework waiting in the wings. No rival coalition is quietly preparing a more viable proposal. The 20-point plan is not the one many of us would have drafted, but it remains the only framework backed by sufficient leverage, political engagement and potential resources to move the parties towards implementation. It has been reinforced through a UN Security Council resolution and further advanced by the roadmap from Nickolay Mladenov and the Board of Peace (which seeks to link reconstruction and governance transition to the dismantling of Hamas's military infrastructure and longer-term stabilisation in Gaza).

Without such a plan, the crisis in Gaza will only deteriorate, with Hamas retaining both political and practical influence over a devastated population through armed actors, local administrative structures, aid distribution net-

works and access to basic goods and services. Reconstruction frozen. Investment absent. Civilians trapped in dependency and despair, with reportedly up to 1,000 killed since the ceasefire. Another generation of children growing up amid rubble, fear and hopelessness. There will be no security for Israel. No viable path to Palestinian self-determination.

Gazans understand this as well as anyone: without demilitarisation and a transition away from Hamas rule, there will be no meaningful reconstruction, no realistic prospect that Israel will ever withdraw from the 60 per cent of the Gaza Strip it now controls and no credible pathway towards a future led by Palestinians themselves.

In recent months, international attention has understandably drifted elsewhere. But treating Gaza as secondary is a profound strategic mistake. An unresolved Gaza does not remain contained — it fuels instability across the region. The longer it stays as it is, the more difficult any future political solution becomes. Prolonged paralysis weakens moderate voices, deepens instability and further entrenches realities that will become harder to reverse with time.

The Board of Peace and the plan contain elements many governments dislike or disagree with. Some are uneasy with the political sequencing, sceptical of provisions on Palestinian governance and representation, or wary of placing trust in an American-led framework at a moment when confidence in US leadership has eroded. Many are understandably sceptical of an approach so closely associated with Donald Trump.

I understand that scepticism, and share some of it. Yet if even I, an

implacable opponent of President Trump, can accept that this is the best option in a terrible situation, then surely others can too? This moment calls for a greater sense of collective responsibility from Europe, regional partners and the broader international community. Disengagement will not produce a more acceptable alternative.

Strip away the rhetoric and the 20-point plan offers something that, not long ago, many believed was unattainable: an active diplomatic framework backed by meaningful US leverage

Strip away the rhetoric and it offers something that, not long ago, many believed was unattainable

and sustained engagement from the administration.

And what I have heard from Palestinians, especially those living in or connected to Gaza, is that they want a path out of perpetual crisis, just as many Israelis desire greater security and the dismantling of Hamas's military infrastructure. Those realities should matter as the international community considers whether to engage or stand aside, because a genuine transformation in Gaza is essential not only for stabilisation and security but also for reunifying Palestinians politically under a reformed and credible leadership. For too long, fragmentation between Gaza and the West Bank, along with the weakening of the Palestinian Authority, has made the prospect of a unified Palestinian political future seem increasingly

remote. Meaningful change in Gaza is essential if there is to be any chance of a more durable political resolution.

The process will require pressure and engagement not only from Arab states and Europe but from Israel as well. The Israeli government cannot indefinitely support the broad goals of stabilisation and normalisation while delaying the difficult decisions necessary to move the process forward. Critically, international engagement with the Board of Peace and the plan should not be understood as deference to any one party but as a means of creating collective pressure on all parties to engage seriously and in good faith.

The gleeful anticipation of failure is not just unhelpful. It is strategically self-defeating. The Board of Peace is an improbable vehicle, and the 20-point plan leaves many legitimate concerns unresolved. Governments will continue to disagree with important elements of both. But diplomacy rarely offers a choice between good options and bad ones. The international community cannot claim concern for Palestinian civilians while refusing to engage with the only mechanism currently capable of shifting conditions on the ground. Nor can we continue pretending that paralysis is a neutral position. It is not. Delay has consequences.

The choice for governments is not whether this process is ideal. It is whether they are prepared to help shape an imperfect framework from within or stand aside while more destructive actors shape what comes next.

The writer is a former US secretary of state and professor of international and public affairs at Columbia SIPA

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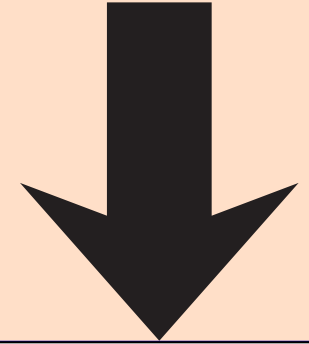
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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Fight against poverty in HK has no room for complacency

Hong Kong's approach to easing poverty has changed. By focusing on targeted groups instead of defining beneficiaries using the conventional income-based poverty line, the government has hailed its new strategy as a success. But while the measures have been well-received, there is no room for complacency. Sustainable efforts are needed to ensure those in need get the necessary help.

Referring to the various programmes created for the three target groups – subdivided flat residents, single-parent families and all-elderly households – the authorities said they had met or exceeded all key performance indicators (KPIs).

For instance, the Community Living Room that provides laundry, cooking and studying facilities for subdivided flat tenants reported over 70 per cent improvement in their sense of belonging, extended living space and interpersonal relationships. Under the School-based After School Care Scheme, over 80 per cent of parents, guardians or students reflected improvement in work-family conflict and other indicators. The scheme enabled homemakers to return to work and earn an average of about HK\$3,500 more each month.

Defending the new approach, Chief Secretary for Administration Eric Chan Kwok-ki said the shift from the income-based poverty line enabled the government to provide more all-round services.

Taking into account how much a family effectively gains by not paying full price for public services under the concept of “social transfer values”, the government said resources devoted to education, housing, healthcare and social welfare also played a crucial role in easing poverty. For example, the value of education-related support measures received by 650,000 households amounted to HK\$12,600 a month for each one. The value of healthcare measures for 1.63 million households stood at HK\$5,000 a month per household.

The South China Morning Post has cautioned that changing the way poverty is measured in a city that perennially ranks among the world's most expensive places to live is bound to be controversial. While the previous administrations cannot be faulted for using 50 per cent of the median household income as the benchmark for supporting services, alleviating poverty is arguably not as simple as drawing a line and offering help to those below it.

The problem will not go away just by dropping the poverty line. In any case, non-government watchdogs might continue to provide another picture using different metrics. Even though the government said it had met or exceeded all its own KPIs, there is no room for complacency. Whatever the strategy, it is important that the vulnerable do not slip through the safety net, while a more targeted approach is needed to make the efforts more efficient.

Restaurants friendly to pets await reward

Restaurants that managed to secure a slot in Hong Kong's new dog-friendly scheme must be feeling lucky indeed. Some of the 1,000 eateries selected from more than twice as many applicants for the programme anticipate a business boost of up to 20 per cent. If all goes well, with diners, pets and restaurants on their best behaviour, a swift expansion of the scheme would be welcome.

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department unveiled the list of restaurants on June 12 after a ballot was used to choose from 1,615 eligible applications. An overwhelming 2,100 applied. The authorities understandably have taken a cautious approach, but the huge demand reflects how the sector has caught the scent of an economic lifeline.

With the July 9 roll-out, there will be specially licensed restaurants across the city offering a range of cuisine from Western to Chinese, as well as dozens of bars and coffee shops. The scheme comes at a crucial time in the city's economic transition, tapping into opportunities related to its growing pet population.

Restaurant owners hope to see more weekend traffic, since dog owners often patronise local businesses rather than head to nearby mainland China or abroad. Success will rely heavily on operators navigating early teething issues. Strict adherence to safety rules, such as a leash limit and separation of dogs from food preparation areas, will be essential. It has been encouraging to learn about the thoughtful training of staff and the setting up of seating to separate pet-owning customers from diners who might have phobias or allergies. Such actions will go a long way towards ensuring success in a situation where mutual respect can widen social acceptance.

There are hundreds of eligible eateries that lost out in the ballot. There are reportedly a few establishments that are trying to figure out how to use the licence in areas or near public housing estates where most pets are still banned. As the other establishments lead the way, close monitoring by the authorities can help ensure high compliance with rules and smooth operations. If so, the leash could ideally be loosened before a planned six-month review, opening doors to more businesses eager to get a bite of this vibrant market.

HARRY'S VIEW ON HONG KONG PLEA TO REDUCE PACKAGING WASTE



Apply the brakes

David Dodwell says just as drugs cannot go to market without thorough testing, the uncertainty over the effect of AI means it must face regulation

It seems that not a day passes without fevered headlines about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on future jobs. Alarm and confusion are everywhere – from young people trying to enter the job market to AI specialists worried their role is about to be usurped by AI itself to accountants and lawyers watching AI gobble up roles that until recently justified high fees and salaries.

Panic is warranted, not just over the increasingly rapid encroachment of AI into every part of our personal and working lives but also over the truly confusing array of implications. AI is going to create some jobs but destroy others. It is going to change some jobs, sometimes routinising them and sometimes empowering them. It is going to create new demand but also eliminate demand.

As more consumers use AI to get things done rather than employing human specialists or intermediaries, AI could even make many roles invisible to gross domestic product as statisticians measure it.

Resistance to AI is sometimes countered by arguments that technological change has been a massive disrupter throughout history.

Those arguments are fair: the arrival of motor transport ended our reliance on horses and the pivotal role of blacksmiths. Washing machines put thousands of laundry shops out of business, and computers brought an end to many printing-related jobs in the newspaper industry.

The march of technology has also destroyed the role of telephone operators, bus conductors and lift operators.

Since my childhood, millions of once-essential jobs have disappeared, silently and unannounced. There was the milkman delivering to every home before dawn, the weekly visit of the coalman, the grocery van, the fizzy drinks lorry and even the ice cream van. As more families came to own cars, town-centre retailers and supermarkets persuaded us to come to them for our

shopping rather than force them to come to us. The arrival of the internet and smartphones undermined the role of jobs from office typists and translators to travel agents and insurance salesmen.

History suggests that for every job lost to new technologies, others will be created. Productivity has risen, as have living standards.

According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report, labour market transformation will result in the creation of an estimated 170 million jobs by 2030 but also the displacement of 92 million current jobs.

An International Monetary Fund working paper from last year found that while one-third of jobs in the Philippines are highly exposed to AI, 61 per cent of them are highly complementary and likely to be supported by AI while low complementarity jobs – representing 14 per cent of the workforce – were at risk of being replaced by AI.

A 2025 International Labour Organization working paper estimated that one in four workers globally were in an occupation with some exposure to generative AI, with 3.3 per cent of global jobs in the “highest exposure” category.

Women were about twice as likely to be in such jobs. It concluded that “as most occupations consist of tasks that require human input, transformation of jobs is the most likely impact” of generative AI.

A piece by Clara Murray in the Financial Times last week illustrates this well. She identified millions of “picks and shovels” jobs being created as the AI hyperscalers invest billions in the data centres, power generators and other specialist engineering companies that sit behind the massive physical buildout supporting AI's expanding use. Monthly spending on data centre construction in the US hit US\$50 billion in April, leading some observers to question how long this boom could last.

Jobs reports do not provide much guidance. Financial Times columnist Sarah O'Connor wrote last month that “notwithstanding the splashy headlines every few days about tech companies making AI-driven lay-offs, very little is actually happening in the labour market overall”.

She noted that the rate at which people are getting fired, hired and quitting their jobs is low. “It's as if everyone is holding their breath and waiting for what they have been told is coming,” O'Connor wrote.

Despite the angst. She quotes San Francisco-based writer Jasmine Sun: “Most people I know in the AI industry think the median person is screwed, and they have no idea what to do about it.”

The general alarm over AI remains pervasive. As Martin Wolf wrote this week in the Financial Times: “There is a good chance that AI will in time devastate the labour market, increase inequality and create an extraordinary concentration of economic – and so political – power in the hands of a tiny number of people.”

The acute uncertainty, coupled with the potentially catastrophic potential for harm, leads Wolf to a simple conclusion. Uncertainty justifies readiness, the potential for harm makes industry self-policing unacceptable and tight regulation is justified and must be globally agreed. “There must be a global agreement on how AI is to be tested and controlled, and how liability for damage is to be imposed.”

Just as drugs can't be released into the market without thorough testing, and as regulators can impose speed limits for drivers even though cars have the ability to travel much faster, the case for painstaking regulatory oversight of AI seems uncontested.

It might take many years before the net job impact of AI becomes clear; in the meantime, applying the brakes to development makes sense.

David Dodwell is CEO of the trade policy and international relations consultancy Strategic Access, focused on developments and challenges facing the Asia-Pacific over the past four decades

Capturing the true Chinese spirit of the I Ching

Alex Lo says while it may depart from scientific axioms, readers may glean much about their own circumstances by consulting the Book of Changes

Carl Jung was a big fan of the *I Ching*, also known as the *Book of Changes*. He was also a close friend of Richard Wilhelm, whose German translation was probably the most influential Western version of the ancient Chinese text in the last century.

But over the years, I have become convinced that the great Jung didn't really get it. A red flag is that he thinks it is very difficult for the Western mind to grasp what I will call the Chinese spirit of the *I Ching*, which he claims is completely foreign.

“I can assure my reader that it is not altogether easy to find the right access to this monument of Chinese thought, which departs so completely from our ways of thinking,” he wrote in the foreword to an English translation of the Wilhelm text.

Actually, I think it is quite accessible and easy for anyone to consult the *I Ching* and believe in it. It's precisely its enigmatic allure that appeals to foreign minds like Jung.

People as different as poet Allen Ginsberg, musician Joni Mitchell, composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham have all “lauded the *Yi Jing* for both its wisdom and its poetic suggestiveness”.

That's according to Brian Bruya, who recently translated the classic – and highly amusing – *Illustrated Book of Changes* by C.C. Tsai, the cartoonist and Shaolin monk who also illustrated volumes about Chinese philosophers such as Confucius, Sun Tzu and Chuang Tzu.

Yi Jing is the contemporary standard transcription

of *I Ching*. I will stick with the latter, which most readers are probably more familiar with. Bruya's translation is now published in a handsome edition by Princeton University Press.

On YouTube, you can find countless non-Chinese teaching or consulting the *I Ching*. They might use sticks, flip coins or run online randomisers to draw one of the 64 hexagrams, with their intricate combinations of solid and divided lines, and tell you what your future holds. Or you can learn to do it yourself.

What Jung seemed to assume is that the *I Ching* is esoteric when it is actually, and has always been, popular insofar as fortune-telling has always appealed to the masses, in China and everywhere else. Think Western astrology or ancient Roman entrail reading.

However, Jung was probably right that for a certain type of Westerner – and I would argue the same for a certain type of people generally, including Chinese – it would be difficult to get into that spirit of superstition or non-scientific explanation. Overly rationalistic people, whom Jung criticises in the foreword, simply don't believe it.

But the real problem is that Jung read too much of his own discovery of synchronicity – the notion that events, separated by space and time, can be meaningfully related and yet have no discernible causal connection – into the *I Ching*.

In the foreword, Jung even attacks the very idea of causality as the foundation of science: “Our science,

however, is based upon the principle of causality, and causality is considered to be an axiomatic truth.”

To be fair, Jung is only attacking classical Newtonian physics. He praises the then young science of quantum mechanics, which is based on statistics and chance, not cause and effect. Wolfgang Pauli, an important contributor to quantum physics, was a friend and patient of Jung's.

Accurate or not, there are many ways to predict the future. These include making statistical projections, repeating experiences and experiments (what philosophers call empirical induction), looking at past stock movements to predict future prices and following the planets in astrology.

Then there is Nostradamus and his prophecies, vague enough to be credited by some people online with foretelling the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The *I Ching* is none of that. The book “is not telling you what will happen out of the blue”, Bruya wrote. “Rather, it is purported to tell you how circumstances are developing, and given that, what may or may not be the best thing to do.”

Psychologically, the *I Ching* is about awareness, and the possibility of taking a different course of action or doing nothing at all.

The future is not fixed. You can reverse a trend and bring about a different outcome, which may or may not be to your liking. But if you use the *I Ching* long enough, you will also learn that who you are and what you want are always changing too.

Alex Lo has been a South China Morning Post columnist since 2012, covering major issues affecting Hong Kong and the rest of China

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OPINION

The tech advantage

Albert Bakhtizin says as populations fall, nations that can tap human potential will succeed

For much of the 20th century, many were accustomed to thinking of people as an ever-expanding resource. As the number of people grew, so did labour markets, consumer markets, scientific communities, production systems and armies. In 1950, the world's population was about 2.5 billion. In 2026, it is reaching 8.3 billion. In just 75 years, the population has increased more than 3.3 times.

In this sense, the current human population may turn out not to be a permanent norm, but a historical anomaly produced by the demographic surge of the past two centuries. Dean Spears and Michael Geruso have developed a similar logic in their book *After the Spike*: if low fertility becomes entrenched as a new pattern, the world's population may begin to decline naturally due to people's everyday decisions.

People remain the primary source of economic, technological and military development for almost any country. The population growth of the past two centuries coincided with an unprecedented acceleration of science, technology and productivity. A simple probabilistic logic emerged: more people mean more potential ideas and a higher chance of producing the human capital capable of creating breakthrough solutions.

But numbers alone are not enough. What matters is the quality of human capital: a country's ability to educate engineers, scientists, skilled workers and specialists in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics.

This is becoming a new dimension of international competition. As long as countries still have large working-age

generations, they can use this demographic window to make a technological leap.

In the mid-20th century, the total fertility rate was about five children per woman. Today, it is around 2.2. But if global fertility settles at 1.4-1.5, the world's population will begin to decline after reaching its peak. Some calculations show that the global population could fall to 1 billion in roughly 150-200 years. This is not the most extreme scenario, but rather a continuation of trends already taking shape.

Even Europe's most prosperous countries no longer ensure simple population replacement. The total fertility rate is 1.18 in Italy, 1.1 in Spain and 1.36 in Germany. Even in Scandinavia, long seen as a model of family policy, it is only around 1.3-1.5.

The situation is more acute in Asia; in many economies, it is no longer enough to speak simply of low fertility. It is increasingly a demographic crisis. After falling to 0.75, South Korea's birth rate rose only to 0.8 by early 2026. In Taiwan, it is around 0.7; in mainland China, about 1; and in Japan, 1.13.

In other words, low fertility is no longer a distinctive feature of a few rich countries. It is becoming a general trend across the urbanised world. What will differ is not the direction, but the speed at which countries enter the age of demographic contraction.

Despite large-scale support for families, direct payments, tax breaks, subsidies and the development of social infrastructure, no country has yet found a durable way to reverse the downward trend in fertility.

Fertility above replacement level is still supported by sub-Saharan Africa. There, the fertility rate is about four children per woman. But the region also has

exceptionally high under-five mortality. In Nigeria and Niger, for example, the under-five mortality rates per 1,000 live births are 115.6 and 110.7, respectively, according to the World Bank's latest figures. That's compared with 5.7 in China. Even in these countries, however, fertility is falling noticeably.

Meanwhile, the mere existence of large populations in sub-Saharan Africa or India does not mean that global leadership will automatically shift to those regions. Demographic scale becomes an advantage only when it is combined with education, an industrial base, infrastructure and insti-



Robots and AI do not emerge in a vacuum. They are created, deployed, maintained and scaled by people

tutions. The UN projects Africa's population to reach 4 billion by the end of the 21st century. However, despite important examples of indigenous technological innovation and some progress, the continent still faces development hurdles.

Countries will, therefore, have to look for other ways to preserve economic and technological dynamism – through productivity growth, robotics, AI and industrial automation.

This is where the demographic question becomes a technological one. For example,

China is one of the world's largest industrial robotics markets. In 2024, China accounted for 54 per cent of all new industrial robot installations, while its operational stock exceeded 2 million units – the largest in the world.

The United States retains leadership in another key dimension of the technological race. In AI investment, it remains far ahead. Private AI investment in the US reached US\$285.9 billion in 2025, more than 23 times China's US\$12.4 billion. Stanford notes, however, that private investment alone may underestimate China's overall scale because of the role of state funds and directed financing.

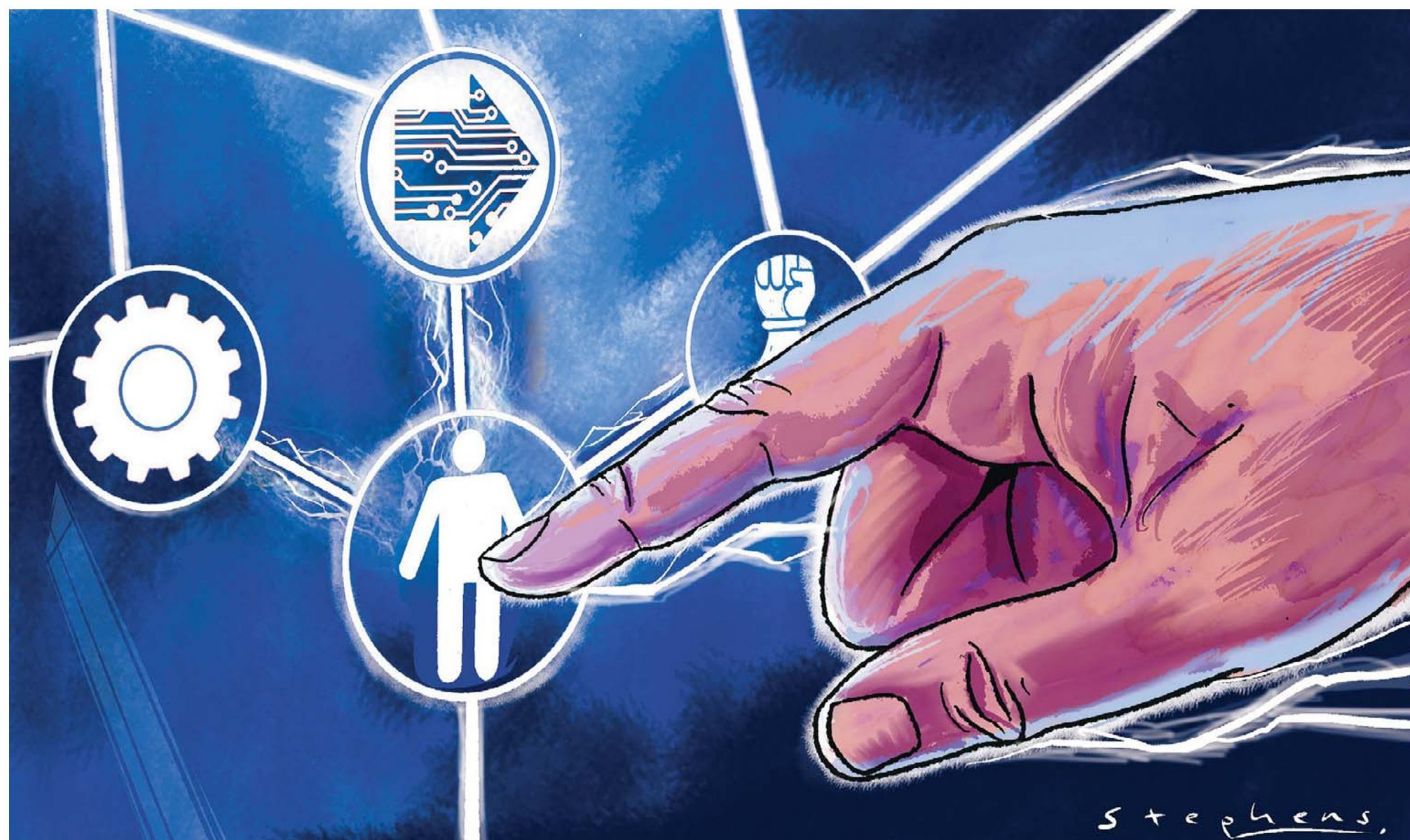
The US also dominates in infrastructure. According to Stanford, the country has 5,427 data centres, more than 10 times the number in any other country.

But robots and AI do not emerge in a vacuum. They are created, deployed, maintained and scaled by people.

Therefore, the coming decades will become a race for technological advantage. Countries that can use today's demographic window to accumulate human capital, develop robotics-based production, deploy AI and strengthen their industrial base will gain a long-term advantage.

In a world where a population can no longer be treated as an automatically expanding source of power, what matters most will not be the number of people alone, but the ability of states to turn human potential into technological advancement, productivity and strategic strength.

Albert Bakhtizin is director of the Central Institute of Economics and Mathematics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a member of the academy and a professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University



AI has been known to hallucinate. So have the markets

Andrew Sheng says investors in sector's growing bubble might want to curb their enthusiasm

We've never had it so good. The S&P 500 and Nikkei 225 have hit record highs this month. SpaceX had its spectacular initial public offering, the largest in history. The company raised an eye-popping US\$75 billion and saw a sharp rise in its share price to a mind-blowing valuation of US\$2.5 trillion in two days. The US-Iran deal on reopening the Strait of Hormuz caused petrol prices to drop back to below US\$4 per gallon.

Global stock markets are creating seemingly unstoppable wealth for investors. Last month, bull investor Ed Yardeni raised his year-end S&P 500 Index target from 7,700 to 8,250. US companies are still recording bumper profits, driven by artificial intelligence (AI), financial and consumer giants.

Let's connect some dots in the boom or bust noise that could cast doubt on market enthusiasm.

First, the doomsayers are flagging warning signals. According to the World Bank's projections, global gross domestic product growth will slow to 2.5 per cent in 2026, down from 2.9 per cent last year, mainly due to the conflict in the Middle East and higher oil prices. Economist Steve Hanke has drawn attention to debt levels and monetary policy in advanced economies, saying warning signs are flashing red.

On Wednesday, the US Federal Open Market Committee under its new chairman Kevin Warsh held the federal funds rate at the current 3.5-3.75 per cent range, but took what appeared to be a hawkish stance on maintaining price stability amid strong productivity growth.

With 30-year US Treasuries yield hovering around 5 per cent per annum, even as consumer prices spiked to 4.2 per cent in May, the average interest cost of the US' US\$39 trillion in sovereign debt is roughly 3.4 per cent per annum or around US\$1 trillion.

US monetary policy is not independent of that of Europe and Japan, two large surplus economies. The European Central Bank raised interest rates by 0.25 per cent on June 11, given higher inflation. The Bank of Japan increased interest rates to 1 per cent, the highest since 1995, with concerns over inflation and the yen's weakness.

Japanese intervention to defend yen devaluation beyond 160 against the US dollar inevitably means selling US Treasuries, which will keep long-term Treasury yields high. Japan's holdings of foreign securities, including US Treasuries, fell by US\$75.6 billion in May from April, even as 30-year Japanese government bond yields hit 4 per cent per annum, meaning that the differential between US and Japanese sovereign debt 30-year yields is



The market is betting these three companies will deliver superior future net profits to justify their valuations

narrowing to around 1 per cent, compared to 3 per cent in October 2023.

The narrowing gap suggests that long-term investors would prefer going back to yen holdings to avoid foreign exchange risks. This has augured well for Japan's stock market.

The convergence of global interest rates will force a re-rating of holdings in US dollar assets. As investors worry about the US' fiscal liabilities, global asset rebalancing will occur. Global interest rates will normalise with a credit risk premium attached to US debt.

Second, the US stock market is compensating those who hold US dollar assets with returns. US stock market capitalisation is at US\$62.2 trillion, just under half of global stock market capitalisation, but its spectacular growth is narrowly focused on 10 AI-related stocks.

The combined valuation of SpaceX with the potential IPO listings of Anthropic and OpenAI is an estimated US\$4 trillion, but this is lower than Nvidia's market valuation of US\$5 trillion. Putting things into perspective, Nvidia has a larger market cap than the London Stock Exchange (over US\$4 trillion). The way the market is valuing these hi-tech companies is nothing short of amazing. SpaceX posted a net loss of US\$4.9 billion in 2025, and it lost US\$4.28 billion in the first quarter of this year.

Investors are valuing Anthropic based on its annualised revenue – estimated at US\$47 billion. This allowed the AI company to raise US\$65 billion to achieve a post valuation of US\$965 billion in May. OpenAI

raised US\$122 billion to reach a market valuation of US\$852 billion in March.

The market is betting these three companies will deliver superior future net profits to justify their valuations. SpaceX's mission statement is breathtaking in its ambition: "Our mission is to build the systems and technologies necessary to make life multiplanetary, to understand the true nature of the universe, and to extend the light of consciousness to the stars."

The market is buying into its starry-eyed dreams. But the secret sauce of all financial bubbles is excess market liquidity, because if liquidity is scarce, bubbles based on high leverage cannot form. Financial bubbles are Ponzi schemes whereby one borrows from Peter to pay Paul at promised higher returns until the music stops.

But the gap between expectations and reality cannot widen infinitely. It has been said that "ideas without execution are hallucinations".

We know that AI models can "hallucinate", generating incorrect or misleading results. Financial hallucination floats on government overspending and deficits based on excess debt, enabled by loose monetary policy. As long as money is made available cheaply through fiat monetary printing, financial engineering genius rests on promising the stars.

Shrewd investors understand that you can never buy at exactly the bottom nor sell at the top. When greed overcomes fear, hallucination happens. Will you join the crowd?

Andrew Sheng is a former central banker who writes on global issues from an Asian perspective

LETTERS

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SpaceX IPO is a 'ray of light' for China on its AI orbital path



SpaceX CEO Elon Musk speaks before the launch of the company's initial public offering. Photo: AFP

Elon Musk's SpaceX made history on June 12 with the largest initial public offering ever recorded. Priced at US\$135 per share and closing its first day at roughly US\$161, the company raised US\$75 billion and achieved a market capitalisation exceeding US\$2.1 trillion – surpassing the gross domestic product of South Korea in a single trading session. While headlines celebrated the world's biggest IPO, the listing's true significance lies not in rockets, but in AI infrastructure.

The critical development came in February, when SpaceX formally merged with Musk's xAI: Musk's objective is not merely space travel, but space AI.

AI is the dominant capital theme of the decade, yet it faces a fundamental global constraint: power. America's power grids cannot support the exponential growth of AI data centres. Musk's proposed solution is to deploy massive computing infrastructure into low-Earth orbit. Orbital data centres would harness continuous solar energy, exploit the natural vacuum of space for thermal cooling, and utilise the existing Starlink constellation for communication.

SpaceX has become a vertically integrated monopoly spanning space transport, global broadband and AI compute infrastructure. If Musk's orbital AI network reaches scale, global AI companies could face an insurmountable cost disadvantage.

China is not standing still. However, without reusable rockets comparable to SpaceX's Falcon 9, the cost to orbit remains much higher, and state-owned launch schedules are saturated with national priorities. Consequently, China's path to orbital AI depends on the maturation of its private commercial space sector.

It is here that SpaceX's IPO could play a positive role. Institutional investors tend to view commercial rocketry as a capital sink with no near-term profitability. But SpaceX's IPO changes that calculus. By delivering a liquid, public-market valuation for commercial space, Musk has effectively created a benchmark. For China's struggling private space industry, this could be the "ray of light" needed to unlock capital flows and demonstrate commercial space can generate returns. In this unintended sense, Musk's greatest contribution to China's space ambitions may not be competition, but validation.

Yuhan Cao and Xiyue Li, students, and Dr Yuehai Xiao, professor, Hunan Normal University, Changsha

Let us hope US-Iran deal does not suffer a Versailles fate

On June 17, US President Donald Trump signed an interim peace agreement at the Palace of Versailles to end the US-Iran war, while Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed the agreement in Tehran.

On June 28, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed, ending World War I. I hope the agreement to end the US-Iran war will turn out better than the Treaty of Versailles. The outcome of the Treaty of Versailles was World War II.

The Treaty of Versailles was one of the factors that fuelled the rise of Adolf Hitler, a far worse leader of Germany than Kaiser Wilhelm II who lost World War I. I hope the Versailles agreement signed by Trump will not lead to a worse Iranian regime than the current Iranian government.

On May 4, 1919, thousands of Chinese students protested against what they saw as a bad deal for China from the Versailles Treaty, which would allow Japan to retain territories in Shandong province ceded by Germany in 1914. As a result, China did not sign the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919. Today's China is one of the most important economic partners of Iran. I hope the latest Versailles agreement will not lead to a similarly bad deal for China.

Toh Han Shih, Wan Chai

Japan's tenacious World Cup showing brings joy to Asia

As an Asian, I long to see Asian teams do well at the FIFA World Cup. After South Korea gave us cheer with a 2-1 victory over the Czech Republic a week ago, our attention turned to another Asian giant, Japan, taking on a higher-ranked opponent, the Netherlands.

Most fans were not too upbeat about Japan's chances, especially as the team has been hit with injuries to key players including Kaoru Mitoma. Still, Hong Kong has many Japanese fans, and many stayed up for the game kicking off at midnight.

What a match! Japan trailed but did not give up. Daichi Kamada's header at the 88th minute gave the fans a dramatic 2-2 draw. The team made their country and the rest of Asia proud. In football as in life, neither winning nor losing is a sure thing.

Randy Lee, Ma On Shan