THE HINDU

Allowing dissent

Using criminal law to protect reputation of rulers is condemnable

At the heart of democratic disposition is tolerance of dissent and upholding of the rule of law; threats to these can undo the knit of a democracy. In the first couple of months of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)'s rule in Tamil Nadu, at least 10 people have been subject to police action, on account of speaking against the Chief Minister or his cabinet colleagues. While the case of former Minister Anitha Radhakrishnan's arrest for criticising Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay gained the spotlight, there were several others who were arrested or faced police action over the course of this period. This includes James Raja of Tirunelveli; V. Vishnuprabhu and T. Manojkumar, residents of Coimbatore, for a Facebook post criticising the Chief Minister; and Thangamani of Karur. In the case of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)'s Gen Z wing leader A. Anbanantham, police searched his residence claiming that he made 'derogatory' posts regarding Mr. Vijay and his family. YouTuber Maridhas was arrested by the Chennai Cyber Crime police for his remarks against the Chief Minister and Industries Minister S. Keerthana. DMK MLA Markandayan was arrested in Thoothukudi over an alleged threat he made against the Chief Minister. Others arrested include Vinoth Suryakumar who commented on HR&CE Minister S. Ramesh and RJ Saran Jayaraman who was arrested by the police for content posted on Instagram targeting a woman who supported the TVK. A case was also filed against Indrani Sudalaimuthu for remarks made against S. Ramesh.

Political actors of all hues have normalised using the police and criminal law as a shield to protect their reputation, whenever they come to power. This creates a structural risk for democracy. The actions of the police indicate a wider pattern of speech-related arrests, and authoritarianism under the TVK government, where defamation, the IT Act and cyber crime provisions are invoked at will for any criticism against individuals in the government or the ruling party. Complaints being filed by the TVK cadre and the *suo motu* action of the police targeting dissenters could run the administration off the rails. The alacrity with which the government is ready to treat allegations against Ministers as criminal misinformation or defamation, rather than let them take the natural course of civil suits or political contestation, is disheartening. A new government has the opportunity to rewrite the rules of engagement with the public, to be tolerant of dissent, and not to misdirect the power it is vested with, just to curb opposition. Every government keen on development could be enriched by criticism and dissent articulated on public platforms, if it is willing. It must remember that the restriction of harmful, obscene and indecent content must be balanced with the overwhelming supremacy of freedom of speech.

Press and play

Spain smothered the opposition with possession and positional football

Spain's second World Cup title, achieved after a narrow extra-time victory over Argentina in the final, was a triumph of the collective. The Luis de la Fuente-coached outfit conceded just one goal in eight matches, was unmatched in the centre of the pitch with playmaker and Golden Ball winner Rodri completing a record 790 passes, and exhibited diffused excellence up front by having seven different players score its 14 goals. So much so that even the individual brilliance of the teenaged Lamine Yamal was astutely subsumed within the whole. In fact, de la Fuente and Rodri had combined to deliver the 2024 European Championship too, with the latter adjudged the world's best later that year. A second Ballon d'Or for the 30-year-old midfield metronome appears a certainty. The win also cemented Spain's position as the pre-eminent footballing force of the first quarter of this century. Starting 2008, the country has won two of the five World Cups and three of the five Euros. Spain is the reigning women's World Champion, and the assembly line of coaches it produces and players it exports make the nation a true powerhouse. Interestingly, after its maiden World Cup win in 2010, Spain had not gone past the round of 16 at three subsequent editions. The success in North America is thus a full-circle moment.

Another high point for the tournament was Lionel Messi's enduring genius. Argentina's quality in the final was dire and the behaviour of its players petulant, but that should not detract from the 39-year-old's excellence in bringing his country to the cusp of defending its crown. Kylian Mbappe's experience was bitter-sweet; he won the Golden Boot (10 goals) and became the all-time top-scorer in World Cups (22) but remained a mute spectator as Spain subjugated his star-studded France in the semifinal. Jude Bellingham inspired England to third place, the best performance for the nation since winning in 1966. But the summer sojourn laid bare the team's continued lack of cutting edge after back-to-back runner-up finishes at Euro 2020 and 2024. The World Cup will also be etched in memory for a plethora of missteps, which governing body FIFA unfortunately condoned. By arbitrarily invoking immigration rules, and trying to interfere politically in on-field matters, the co-host U.S. pushed the envelope in undesirable ways. Commercially driven hydration breaks and the half-time show in the final were tedious and disruptive. Football should be allowed to flow freely, on and off the turf.

Reclaiming footpaths, taking cities back from cars

Chandrakant Lahariya

Practising specialist in 'preventive and cardiometabolic medicine' with nearly 18 years of work experience with the World Health Organization and the United Nations system

Few sights are more ordinary in an Indian city than a pedestrian being pushed off a footpath and onto the road. A mother, holding a school bag in one hand and a child in the other, walks around a parked car. An elderly man tests a broken footpath before stepping down onto the road. A wheelchair user gives up before the journey has even begun. A vendor, debris, an open drain, a two-wheeler, and a signboard together form what is still, with bureaucratic optimism, called a pavement. The citizen is then forced to walk on a road designed as though only vehicles possess rights.

Upholding walkability

In June 2026, the Supreme Court of India gave constitutional language to this daily indignity, in *Maniyar Iliyaz @ Shaik Riyaz vs P. Ayyappan* (2026). It held that walking on demarcated footpaths is a fundamental constitutional right, protected under Article 19(1)(d) and Article 21 of the Constitution. It observed that pedestrians have a right to safe footpaths and footways, and directed States and Union Territories to frame policies and guidelines for their provision and maintenance. This is not a minor municipal instruction. It is a public health intervention, a road safety measure, and a democratic test of whether Indian cities are built for people or merely for machines.

The timing could not be more urgent. India is becoming less active precisely when it needs movement the most. Health risk factors and diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, fatty liver disease, and obesity are rising rapidly, as reported by every newly available population health dataset.

Walking and increased physical activity are among the low- and no-cost interventions that can halt and reverse this rise in metabolic diseases. Yet, the World Health Organization (WHO)'s India Physical Activity Profile 2024 estimates that 49.4% of Indian adults do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity; among women, the figure is 57.2%. Among children and adolescents aged 11 to 17 years, it is 74%. WHO recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week for adults. For most citizens, this does not mean gym memberships or elite fitness routines. It means having the ability to walk safely to a bus stop, school, market, clinic, metro station, or park.

These are not failures of willpower alone; rather, they are exacerbated by the built environment. A city that makes walking difficult quietly prescribes sedentary living. Footpaths, therefore, are not decorative strips of cement added after roads have been designed. They are preventive medicine laid in stone. A usable pavement allows children to walk to school, office-goers to use public transport, older adults to remain mobile, and women to move safely. Walking improves blood pressure, insulin sensitivity, weight control, mood, sleep, and joint function. It is the simplest health habit available to the largest number of citizens. Yet, we in India have made it difficult and dangerous. Many Indians would prefer to use cars and scooters less if cities offered safe, continuous, shaded footpaths.

Safe, accessible footpaths are a test of governance, revealing whether India's cities truly serve their people

The road safety argument is equally compelling. The Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (Transport Research Wing) 'Road Accidents in India 2024' report found that two-wheeler riders and pedestrians together accounted for nearly 67% of road fatalities, with 1.28 lakh deaths among these vulnerable groups. The National Crime Records Bureau's 2024 data place the number at more than 1.1 lakh and the share at at least 60%. The exact totals differ across official sources, but the message is unambiguous: pedestrians and two-wheeler riders remain India's most vulnerable road users. Every time a footpath disappears, the road becomes a contest between flesh and metal.

Orderly shared streets

The solution cannot be episodic anti-encroachment drives, in which a few carts and cars are removed before the same disorder returns the following week. Nor can it be a punitive war on street vendors, who are workers with legal protections and legitimate economic claims. The answer lies in planned allocation: footpaths for walking, vending zones for vendors, parking spaces for vehicles, utility corridors for public infrastructure, and meaningful penalties for violations. A humane city organises the street so that livelihoods and mobility can coexist without endangering lives.

Citizens, too, have a role, though not the only one. First, walk deliberately: begin with 10 to 15 minutes after two major meals, or build towards 30 minutes at a fixed time each day. Second, convert short errands into walking errands; distances under one kilometre should not automatically require a scooter or car. Third, combine walking with public transport by using the metro, bus, or shared mobility for part of the commute. Fourth, make walking social: families, resident welfare associations, and workplaces can create walking groups and car-free morning routines. Fifth, reclaim walking as a health check. If breathlessness, knee pain, fear of falling, or unsafe streets prevent walking, treat that as a signal to seek medical advice, improve strength, or demand civic correction. Most importantly, the recent Supreme Court decision has given citizens and resident welfare associations an opportunity to demand their right to walk on encroachment-free footpaths.

Yet, citizens cannot easily walk their way out of poor urban planning. Civic bodies and governments must act with seriousness. Every road project should include continuous, shaded, well-lit, and barrier-free footpaths, along with safe crossings. Footpaths must be wide enough for two people or a wheelchair, with ramps and clear passageways near bus stops. Encroachment control should be continuous, transparent, and fair. Parking on footpaths must invite stringent action, with penalties that change behaviour. Street design should prioritise schools, hospitals, bus stops, markets, and metro stations, where pedestrian volumes are high. Tree cover, benches, public toilets, and lighting are not embellishments; they determine whether women, children, persons with disabilities, and older people can walk.

Policy action

India also needs a national active-mobility mission linking urban development, transport, health, and education. Cities and urban planning should be assessed not by the length of flyovers built, but by the number of safe walking kilometres created. Municipal commissioners should publish ward-level footpath maps and annual audits of encroachment-free footpaths. School zones should have traffic calming measures and protected crossings. Employers should encourage active commuting. Doctors should prescribe walking advice to nudge behaviour, but governments must provide the pavements on which those prescriptions can be followed.

The Supreme Court has moved the footpath from the margins of municipal housekeeping to the centre of constitutional rights. The next task is to move it from judgment to habit, budget, design, and enforcement. A country battling diabetes, hypertension, obesity, stress, and road deaths cannot treat walking as an afterthought. India does not merely need more roads; it needs more rights of way for ordinary citizens. The footpath is where public health, dignity, and democracy meet. We need to take our cities back from cars. We need to rebuild our cities for people. The proportion of encroachment-free footpaths should become a barometer of whether elected governments value citizens' fundamental rights in every ward and on every major road.

Canada-India defence collaboration for a secure future

Chris Cooter

High Commissioner for Canada to India

Canada is seeing an historic shift for our country – one that opens new opportunities for relations between Canada and India. Speaking at CANSEC 2026, Canada's leading defence, security and emerging technology event, on May 27, 2026, Prime Minister Mark Carney said: "The very nature of war is rapidly evolving, driven by the proliferation of drones, autonomous systems, and weapons in orbit. Conflicts could emerge closer to our borders than before, and new weapons are reducing the distance that separates us from them. The world has changed, and Canada must change with it. That is why, six weeks after forming the government, we announced our ambitious plan to rebuild, rearm, and reinvest in the Canadian Armed Forces."

This is at a time when the world is changing, and Canada-India defence collaboration can translate into a strategy for a secure future.

The good news is that we are already walking on this path. In 2025, Mr. Carney announced that Canada is on track to spend 5% of its GDP on defence by 2035. In March, we already surpassed 2% of the GDP, placing Canada among one of the 10 largest economies in the world.

As Mr. Carney said during his speech in January 2026 at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, there has been a rupture in the world order. Or as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said, we are living through a decade of crisis.

Bilateral defence engagement

In this changing world, defence cooperation between Canada and India has become crucial and we have already taken steps to bolster it.

Most recently, we accredited Defence Advisers in both Ottawa and Delhi. Mr. Carney and Mr. Modi agreed to establish a Defence Dialogue to prioritise cooperation on shared interests and align capacities. Canadian and Indian navies participated in the Rim of the Pacific exercises and Talisman Sabre exercises. In June this year, a delegation from India's National Defence College visited Canada. This will allow Indian officers to have direct exchanges with military colleges and bases in Canada.

Shared interests drive Canada and India toward a stronger strategic defence partnership

We have established a national Defence Investment Agency to streamline military procurement. We have also launched a defence Industrial Strategy to diversify supply chains so Canada does not rely on just one country. That is why we are calling on natural partners such as India to participate in co-development, subsystem manufacturing, and sustainment. We are investing in innovation, including through a half billion-dollar investment in next generation aerospace technologies, including a drone innovation hub.

Strategic technology cooperation

Canada's strengths in advanced technologies can complement India's scale, manufacturing capacity, and expanding industrial base. Canada is one of only a few countries with a full-spectrum aerospace sector, while India's domestic aviation industry is the third largest domestic market in the world. Canada is a research and development powerhouse, while India is focused on advancing innovation capacity and high-end manufacturing.

Canada and India are part of a small group of countries with advanced space capabilities. The importance of civilian space cooperation was highlighted in the joint statement between our two Prime Ministers. Canada's strengths in advanced components for satellite technology and space robotics can complement India's strengths in low-cost platforms. Canada's RADARSAT constellation system can have application in meeting India's aim of advancing its naval capacity in the region. Critical minerals are the building block of defence technologies – another area where Canada and India can expand their partnership. Amid the crisis in West Asia, national security and economic security are inextricably linked. Here, a critical partnership between Canada and India can take shape.

Canada has vast geological reserves of 31 critical minerals from cobalt to helium. Canada holds the tenth largest reserves of rare earth elements; the third largest recoverable resources of uranium; and 5% of the world's tungsten reserves. Additionally, Canada is the second largest producer and exporter of uranium globally, with 24% of global production in 2024. Canada has embarked on a strategy to diversify its trusted partners. For India, there is a need for reliable partners such as Canada to reach its own economic and national security goals. The Canada-India memorandum of understanding on Critical Minerals Value Chain, signed during Mr. Carney's visit to India in February-March 2026, laid the groundwork for the integration of stable, resilient supply chains between the two countries.

Building on shared legacy

As we look forward, it is worth recalling our shared history and common sacrifice. Recently, I visited the Kirkee War Cemetery in Pune where members of the Royal Canadian Air Force killed during the Second World War were laid to rest. As I walked through the memorial site, I was reminded that our countries have stood shoulder to shoulder in the past, not just on the battlefield but for common causes and for the shared security of our countries. Let us continue that long-standing tradition as we reshape the defence cooperation between our two countries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Batons over dialogue

I am writing to express my anguish and concern following the events I witnessed at Jantar Mantar on July 20. As someone who was present at the site from the night of July 19 till 4 p.m. on July 20, I stood among thousands of students and youth who had gathered there peacefully to demand transparency and accountability regarding examination irregularities. What I witnessed was not the handling of a public order issue, but a disproportionate and brutal crackdown on the democratic right to dissent. Is this the landscape of our democracy today, where the voices of the youth are met with batons instead of dialogue? Using force to disperse peaceful protesters does not address the underlying issues of the movement; it only deepens the divide and erodes trust in our institutions.

Kota Venkata Yogesh,
Proddatur, Andhra Pradesh

A threat to federalism

The ongoing parliamentary session presents a dangerous turning point for Indian federalism. In its push to pass structural shifts such as "One Nation, One Election" and delimitation, the ruling BJP is seeking a contrived majority to fundamentally alter the constitutional balance. It is alarming to see regional forces — some a fierce bulwark of state autonomy — flirt with tactical concessions on these Bills. In political terms, this is asymmetrical co-optation. For States such as Tamil Nadu, population-based delimitation and synchronised elections will permanently dilute their parliamentary representation and penalise development. Defending the core federal values of the Constitution is no longer just an ideological duty. It is a matter of absolute political survival.

M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

FIFA World Cup final

While Spain's performance was masterful, Argentina's was widely criticised as lacklustre. Spain dictated the tempo from the start with 65% ball possession at one point in the final match. Despite this heavy pressure, Argentina hung on to force extra time largely due to goalkeeper Emiliano Martínez, who set a game record of 11 saves. While Argentina displayed defensive resilience, their inability to maintain ball possession or create offensive momentum led many — including me — to view the game as a one-sided tactical exercise.

Govardhana Myneedu,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Spain's triumph was a masterclass in modern football, where collective brilliance outweighed individual stardom. Argentina fought with determination and resilience, and Lionel Messi remains one of the finest players ever seen. Yet, this final was a reminder that even the greatest player cannot single-handedly overcome an opponent whose strength lies in collective organisation, tactical discipline, and unwavering teamwork.

A.P. Thiruvadi,
Chennai

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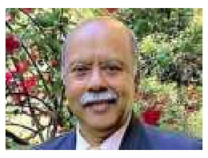
Defections affect moral sanctity of democracy



Prabal Basu Roy
Sloan Fellow of the London Business School

Winston Churchill once said that, "some men change parties for the sake of their principles; others change principles for the sake of their party". India, however, seems to have perfected a third category – politicians who abandon both party and principle for the sake of power.

The break-up of the Trinamool Congress and the Shiv Sena-UBT (Uddhav Bal Thackeray) are only the latest examples of a disturbing trend concerning elections. Leaders campaign bitterly, questioning each other's integrity and commitment to the nation, with voters asked to choose between sharply contrasting visions for India's future. Yet once the ballots are counted, many of those differences dissolve, and hitherto irreconcilable opponents become political partners. Principles give way to pragmatism, and power becomes the only enduring conviction.

The immediate consequences are political, with governments becoming stronger, and Opposition parties weaker. But the deeper casualty is something far more precious – the sanctity of the democratic mandate.

Far-reaching consequences

In a parliamentary democracy, citizens do not vote merely for individuals. They vote for an idea, a manifesto, and a political alternative. When an elected representative crosses over after winning on another party's symbol, it is not simply a change of affiliation; it is a unilateral rewriting of the contract entered into with the voter. The mandate, which belongs to the electorate, now becomes the private property of the elected representative.

It also exposes the perverse incentives increasingly operating within Indian politics. Politicians facing investigations or legal troubles often appear to discover ideological compatibility with the party in power. Equally striking is the troubling public perception that investigative intensity frequently diminishes after such realignments. Democracies rely not only on fairness, but also on public confidence that institutions operate without political favour. Once that confidence erodes, the damage extends far beyond any single party or government.

The greatest victim of political defections is not the Opposition party that loses a legislator. It is the voter

The larger casualty is democratic competition itself. Every democracy requires an elected government as well as an Opposition capable of scrutinising, questioning, and presenting a credible alternative. Without that balance, elections risk becoming contests over access to power rather than contests of ideas.

Yet there is an even larger paradox. Prime Minister Narendra Modi continues to command the trust of a significant majority of Indian voters. Few leaders in independent India's history have enjoyed such sustained popular support. The Bharatiya Janata Party has repeatedly demonstrated that it can win elections on its own political appeal. If the electorate has already bestowed such a powerful mandate, why must that mandate be reinforced through the steady migration of dubious legislators elected on rival party symbols?

History suggests that great democracies are distinguished not by governments that accumulate the greatest power, but by governments confident enough to allow a credible Opposition to survive and compete.

Aristotle argued more than two millennia ago that political systems cease to be virtuous when public office becomes an instrument of private advantage rather than public good. Kautilya's wisdom was in knowing that a ruler's legitimacy rested on the confidence of the people. Even Machiavelli, often caricatured as an apostle of raw power, warned that the destruction of all independent centres of influence ultimately weakens the state itself. The tragedy of modern democracies is that electoral mandates are increasingly treated not as solemn covenants of public trust, but as negotiable assets in the marketplace of power.

History offers sobering parallels. Italy's post-war Transformismo saw politicians frequently switching allegiances and governments held together more by patronage than ideology. Brazil's coalition presidentialism has often encouraged transactional politics. The Philippines has long struggled with a culture of political turncoatism. Though not identical, they share a common lesson: when political office becomes a tradable asset, institutional decay begins, with citizens losing faith in the system.

The voter's loss

Perhaps, however, the hardest questions are not for politicians alone. Why do parties continue to nominate candidates whose convictions appear so negotiable? Why does mainstream media celebrate defections as strategic manoeuvres instead of condemning them as betrayals of the electorate? And why do voters so often forgive the very conduct they publicly denounce?

If opportunism is flourishing, it is because parties reward it and institutions fail to discourage it, with citizens gradually coming to accept it as normal.

The greatest victim of political defections is not the Opposition party that loses a legislator. It is the voter. The voter casts a ballot believing it represents a choice between competing visions for the country. When that representative later abandons the very platform on which the vote was sought, the voter is left dispossessed.

India's democracy is strong enough to produce decisive mandates. It must also be strong enough to preserve the sanctity of those mandates. A vote is not a transferable asset that belongs to the elected representative; it is a trust reposed by the citizen. When that trust can be traded for power, the real defector is not the politician – it is democracy itself.

Battleground Bidadi

In Karnataka, enduring political rivalries clash over the Bidadi township project

STATE OF PLAY

Nagesh Prabhu

The escalating political duel between Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar and Janata Dal (Secular) leader and Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy over the proposed Greater Bengaluru Integrated Township (GBIT), popularly known as the Bidadi township project, is much more than just a tussle about land acquisition. It reflects a broader contest for political dominance in Karnataka's Old Mysore region, where both leaders are seeking to shape the political narrative ahead of the local body elections and the 2028 Assembly polls.

The immediate trigger has been the government's decision to proceed with the township project on Bengaluru's outskirts. The project envisages acquiring about 9,600 acres across 25 villages in the Bengaluru South district. Both leaders, who belong to the influential land-owning Vokkaliga community, have sought to position themselves as defenders of farmers and the region's agrarian identity.

Mr. Shivakumar has pointed out repeatedly that it was Mr. Kumaraswamy who had conceived the township project during his tenure as Chief Minister in 2006, while the JD(S) leader has charged the Congress government with attempting to acquire fertile agricultural land.

However, the confrontation is rooted in a long-standing rivalry between the two principal Vokkaliga leaders, whose political fortunes are closely tied to the Old Mysore belt.

The region remains one of Karnataka's most decisive electoral battlegrounds. Although the Congress made significant gains there in the 2023 Assembly election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-JD(S) alliance continues to regard it as a JD(S) stronghold. Consequently, every major issue – from irrigation to land acquisition – assumes political significance as both parties compete for rural and semi-urban voters.

For the Congress, weakening the JD(S) in the region is critical to consolidating its electoral gains. For the JD(S), opposing the township is central to reinforcing its "pro-farmer" credentials. The agitation has expanded beyond landowners, with farmers' organisations joining the protests, making it harder for the government to dismiss them as politically motivated.

Long-standing rivalry

Recognising the widening social and political dimensions of the agitation, Mr. Shivakumar has announced a committee to re-examine the project. The move appears to be a political balancing act – defusing public anger without abandoning what the government considers an important urban planning initiative. Although the Chief Minister has insisted that the township is "not my dream project", he has continued to defend its planning rationale, arguing that Bengaluru requires orderly expansion.

The dispute has since led to personal attacks. Mr. Kumaraswamy has questioned the Chief Minister's accumulation of wealth over the past two decades, while posters targeting the JD(S) leader and his family have appeared in the notified villages. Congress leaders have portrayed his opposition as stemming from political insecurity over the rise of another influential Vokkaliga leader.

Both sides have crafted competing narratives. Mr. Shivakumar has released official records to argue that the project has enjoyed continuity across successive governments and that the present opposition is politically selective. Mr. Kumaraswamy, however, maintains that the current government alone is accountable for the proposed acquisition and cannot evade responsibility by citing decisions of previous administrations. These positions allow each leader to appeal to different constituencies, one emphasising planned urbanisation, the other championing farmers' rights.

The rivalry between Mr. Shivakumar and the family of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda stretches back across four decades. After losing to Mr. Gowda in the erstwhile Sathanur Assembly constituency in 1985, Mr. Shivakumar defeated Mr. Kumaraswamy there in 1999. Now, the renaming of Ramanagara as the Bengaluru South district, Mr. Shivakumar's call to JD(S) workers to join the Congress, and the party's recent setback in the Legislative Council elections have further sharpened the rivalry.

The BJP-JD(S) alliance's decision to launch a padayatra against the GBIT before the State legislature's monsoon session suggests that the rivalry is only likely to intensify.

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Spain's collective effort demolishes Argentine threat

In the World Cup final, Spain passed and pressed with gusto, denying the Albiceleste any meaningful play until deep into extra time

DATA POINT

Srinivasan Ramani
Devyanshi Bihani
Pon Vasanth B.A.

Spain's win over Argentina in the 2026 FIFA World Cup final might have read a modest 1-0, but the scoreline hid what was in plain sight throughout. Spain smothered the Argentines, denying them the ball and disrupting any fluid move, so that the defending champions ended the full 120 minutes, including extra time with zero shots on target. How did it manage that against a team featuring Lionel Messi?

La Roja has prized possession as a mark of its identity ever since Luis Aragonés took charge in the mid-2000s followed by Vicente del Bosque building around midfielders such as Xavi, Iniesta and Xabi Alonso, and later Sergio Busquets. This style, termed "tiki-taka", kept the ball as a way of denying it to the opposition and with it, the danger of any attack.

In 2026, Luis de la Fuente's Spain built on that identity with a sharp second quality: counter-pressing – swarming the ball in compact packs the instant it is lost, to win it straight back. Spain was the tournament's best at this, and the combination of slick passing and aggressive recovery let it concede just one goal in the whole competition.

In the final, Spain passed and pressed with gusto, denying the Albiceleste any meaningful sequence until deep into extra time. Two metrics capture that grip: possession share per period, and field tilt. Split into 15-minute phases, the game gave Argentina the majority of possession in only two (57% between half-time and the hour mark, and 52% in the second period of extra time). Spain controlled the other six (**Chart 1**).

Field tilt measures a team's territorial dominance as its share of both teams' possession in the final third – the third of the pitch nearest the opponent's goal. It thus captures which side controlled the ball in the zones that most directly threaten the goal, rather than possession spread across the pitch.

By this measure Spain dominated every phase but one, and did so almost totally – 100% in three periods and above 90% in two more, with Argentina barely reaching the attacking third. The exception came in the second period of extra time, when Argentina, chasing an equaliser after Ferran Torres had put Spain ahead, posted a 95% field tilt (**Chart 2**). But this was also after Enzo Fernández had been sent off in second-half stoppage time, leaving Argentina to play all of extra time a man down against a tiring Spain in late game. Spain's stranglehold was marked throughout regulation as its 100% phases came in open, eleven-a-side play.

The charts show what Spain did. The question is how. Possession football rests on two things: technical command of the ball, evading tackles, passing precisely and positional awareness, with players drifting into space to offer passing lanes and wingers stretching the pitch alongside fullbacks and midfielders. Spain has long selected for these qualities and drilled them over years, many of its players having come through de la Fuente's youth sides.

Rodri, named the tournament's best player with the Golden Ball, led the press with relentless running while distributing from deep. Pau Cubarsí, its Young Player winner, made line-breaking passes from defence and marshalled a high line that let Spain press through tight, compact spacing. On the goalkeeping front, Unai Simon's role was minimal as he was required to barely make any saves. But he was an effective sweeper behind a line that Argentina rarely breached. For Messi, in what was surely his last World Cup, it made for a quiet farewell. His team was not merely beaten so much as suffocated.

Spain, which conceded just one goal in the tournament, the lowest-ever by a champion in the World Cup, displayed absolute dominance over Argentina to win their second World Cup. Data for the charts were sourced from FIFA, Matchstats.club

CHART 1: This chart shows the possession (%) of Spain and Argentina in every 15-minute period of the match. HT stands for Half-Time

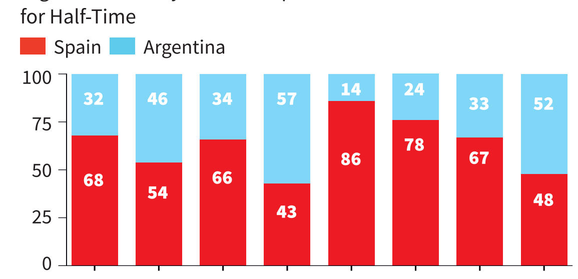


CHART 2: This chart shows the field tilt (%) of Spain and Argentina in every 15-minute period. Spain scored 100% on this metric in three time periods

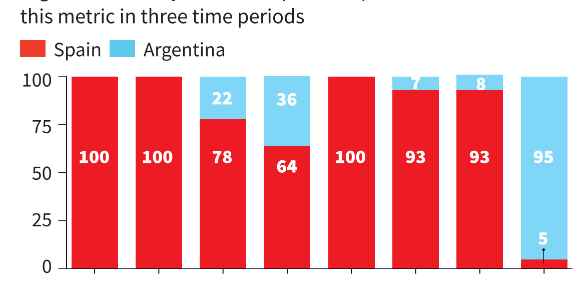


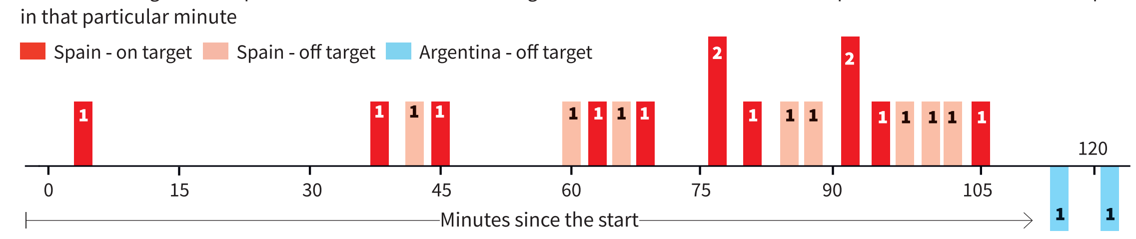
TABLE 1: Key metrics for each team in the final. Spain dominated on all key parameters

Metric	Spain	Argentina
Possession (%)	60.2	32.5
Passes	878	476
Pass completion (%)	90	79
Field tilt (%)	84.5	15.5
Attempts at goal (on target)	20 (12)	2 (0)
Expected goals (xG)	2.52	0.07
Goalkeeper saves	0	11

TABLE 2: Top individual performers from the two finalists across physical and technical metrics

Metric	Spain	Argentina
Distance covered	M. Cucurella (13.3 km)	A. Mac Allister (15 km)
Passes (attempted/ completed)	P. Cubarsí (124/ 121)	E. Martínez (57/34)
Tackles (made/won)	Rodri (4/3)	N. Tagliafico (7/3)
Sprints	M Cucurella (59)	A Mac Allister (59)
Top speed	A. Laporte (32.6)	G. Simeone (33.7)
Possession regains	Rodri and Simon (9)	E. Martínez (13)

CHART 3: The goal attempts made over the course of the game. The values inside the bars represent the number of attempts in that particular minute



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1976

Viking craft lands on Mars, sends back clear pictures

Pasadena, July 20: The American unmanned Viking spaceprobe lander touched its three slender aluminium legs down on Mars to-day after an 11-month 800 million-kilometre voyage from earth, and sent back two "unbelievably" clear photographs showing hills and small rocks.

Scientists at Mission Control here speculated that the terrain seen in the second photo up to three of five kilometres from the 600 kg craft on the Martian plain of Chryse could be made of volcanic lava or basalt.

The ground was soft with rocks and gravel, but the aluminium legs did not sink in. One leg could be seen in the first photo. Several of the rocks about 30 cm across had sharp angles as if they had been broken by sandstorm.

Alongside the hills in the second panoramic picture were "kinds of dunes".

The first photo was taken only 25 seconds after the craft touched down. The camera took five minutes to complete each picture, line by line, as it swept the scene. It took the photos 35 minutes to reach earth.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1926

Australia's new capital

Rugby, July 20: It is officially announced that the Duke and Duchess of York will visit Australia on the occasion of the official opening of the Federal Capital at Canberra on May 9th next. The invitation to their Royal Highnesses was conveyed in a telegram from the Governor-General of the Common-Wealth to the Secretary of State for the Dominion Affairs for submission to the King. It recalls that the King himself opened the first Federal Parliament of Australia in 1901. The telegram proceeds, "We would regard it as singularly appropriate, if your son were permitted to represent you at the establishment of the Federal Capital, which marks another important phase in the development of this great British Commonwealth and is regarded by our people as an event of deep national significance and importance. We feel that the presence of His Royal Highness on such an occasion would evoke the strongest possible expressions of loyalty and enthusiasm and further strengthen the bonds which unite us to the mother country and to your Royal House."

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Share of funding spent on environmental initiatives in 2023-24

8.4 in per cent. Only 8.4% of the total corporate social responsibility spending was allocated to environmental initiatives in the financial year 2023-24, according to a Sattva Consulting report. It also stated that 30 of India's 50 most climate-vulnerable districts received only 1% (₹106 crore) of the total environmental CSR spending over the past three years. PTI

Number of polluted river stretches in India in 2025

296 The number of polluted river stretches declined to 296 in 2025 from 351 in 2018, according to the Central Pollution Control Board report. The government said rivers are polluted mainly due to untreated or partially treated sewage, industrial effluents, inadequate dilution, dumping of solid waste, and other non-point sources of pollution. PTI

Key reforms advanced by Haryana to boost ease of doing business

21 Haryana has emerged as one of the leading States in the Centre's compliance reduction and deregulation initiative, with 21 of the 28 priority reforms either approved or under implementation to make the regulatory environment simpler and more business-friendly. An official said that another 15 reforms are currently under implementation across departments. PTI

Number of UPI users onboarded on the payments platform

55.49 crore. Parliament was informed that around 55.49 crore UPI users were onboarded on the payments platform until June 2026, on Monday. UPI transactions stood at 24,162 crore in volume and ₹314 lakh crore in value in FY 2025-26, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary said in a written reply in the Lok Sabha. PTI

Forex inflows received by India under the RBI's swap facility

20.72 in $ billion. India received $20.72 billion in foreign exchange inflows under the Reserve Bank of India's swap facility as of July 17. The facility was introduced to encourage overseas fundraising by state-owned firms and foreign currency non-resident deposits. REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Why inflation is rising in India

India's recent inflation surge has been mainly driven by higher fuel costs and food price pressures rather than excess demand; food inflation stems largely from supply shocks such as poor monsoons, while rising oil prices have pushed up production costs and manufactured goods inflation

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rohit Azad
Indranil Chowdhury

Inflation, except during the COVID-19 pandemic, has remained relatively low in India for over a decade. But it is back with a bang. Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation is hovering close to 10% in June **(Chart 1a)**. After remaining low – negative, or close to 0 – until December last year, the climb started with a sharp jump since March this year.

Even those with only a fleeting connection to economics believe that prices rise when demand outpaces supply (overheating), and vice versa. But is that really the case?

Before we go into the causes, let us look at what contributed to this rise in WPI inflation in the first place. The WPI is a weighted average of three sub-categories of commodities: primary articles (food, minerals, etc.), fuel and power and manufactured products. **Chart 1b** shows the contribution of each to total WPI inflation. The latter two – the orange and the red bars – have contributed to this dramatic jump in recent months. Fuel and power prices require little explanation as they are determined by oil prices purchased from abroad and are essentially imported prices. However, primary commodity and manufactured product prices need to be understood.

Structural differences in pricing

The Polish economist Michal Kalecki argued that while primary commodity prices are demand-determined, industrial prices are cost-determined. In other words, inflation of industrial commodities is not determined by a demand and supply mismatch. Come to think of it, this is commonsensical if you leave aside the quintessential demand-supply curves out of your head. After all, prices of cars, cycles, or toothbrushes do not fluctuate with a change in their demand. If more cars are demanded, more are produced and supplied to the customer instead of increasing the price. Prices of tomatoes or mangoes, on the other hand, vary quite significantly with a mismatch between demand and supply.

Viewed this way, the demand and supply curves need to be reconstructed **(Graph 1)**. For primary commodities (panel (a)), supply is virtually fixed, represented by a vertical curve on the quantity axis, whereas demand follows the usual downward sloping curve. A decline in supply (shifting of the supply curve in panel (a) to the left) will increase its prices. In the case of food, for example, a bad monsoon will affect production adversely, thereby decreasing supply and increasing its prices. A good monsoon, on the other hand, will bring the prices down. Inflation here is demand-pull.

For the manufactured commodities (panel (b)), the supply curve is flat, which means a rise or a fall in demand (shifting of the demand curve) will bring about an equivalent supply of such commodities with no change in their prices. Again, the reason is simple. Most such commodities, except in cases of supply constraints, are produced in factories that run below capacity, so an increase in their demand simply increases their production. Demand here, quite opposite to the earlier case, has no role to play in determining their prices. Prices are determined instead by the cost of production. The supply curve is nothing but a profit markup over the cost (the vertical difference between supply and cost is the profit markup). A rise in the costs would push the cost curve up, and, unless the capitalists want to absorb this rise in cost through a lower markup, this would get passed on as higher prices in the market. Inflation here is purely cost-push.

What happened in the Indian case?

Having seen this difference, let us apply this idea to the inflationary problem currently facing India. If manufactured prices are cost-determined, what do their costs depend on? While wage cost is an important component of total costs, it is usually not the factor that pushes prices up because Indian workers do not really have space to bargain for higher wages. In other words, Indian workers are mostly price-takers; they make do with what they get. It is the material costs instead, which create the inflationary impulse.

One of the most important materials used in the production of any industrial commodity is oil. If we plot the movement of fuel and power against the manufactured prices **(Chart 2)**, we can see almost a one-to-one correspondence between the two. A rise in fuel and power prices raised the manufactured inflation as well.

Food prices, too, have risen. One likely reason is the adverse impact of an inadequate monsoon, as a result of the El Niño effect, on agricultural production this year. **Chart 3** plots data on food price inflation with years in which the country experienced droughts. In every instance, drought conditions were accompanied by a significant rise in food inflation, much in line with the Kaleckian structuralist idea. To be sure, there have been instances in which food price inflation has taken place even in the absence of such supply shocks. These could perhaps be the years of high demand. Suffice to say that a drought is a sufficient, even if not a necessary, condition for food prices to soar.

What is to be done?

Given these structural differences, can something be done to control inflation? Let us start with the food prices. We believe food prices need to be decoupled from the vagaries of nature to the extent possible. That India solely depends on the rain gods to feed its population is in itself quite unscientific and an anachronism in the modern era of technology. The country must invest heavily in agriculture, particularly in irrigation infrastructure, which is not entirely dependent on the monsoon.

As for manufactured goods, controlling fuel and power costs, when crude oil prices are rising, may be difficult, but there are still ways that they can be controlled. Instead of the ill-thought-out inflation targeting framework, the government should apply a countercyclical indirect tax policy to keep fuel and power prices in check. If the government can reduce the customs and excise duties when crude prices soar, the cost at the pump can be controlled. In fact, this is exactly what the government did a few months ago, which is why pump prices were held constant despite soaring crude prices in the international markets. Unfortunately, the government has withdrawn this measure, which is one of the primary reasons WPI inflation has risen sharply.

(The authors are a part of the DevMac (Development Macroeconomics) network, which seeks pluralism in Economics)

Decoding India's inflation

A look at the main drivers of India's recent inflation and the forces shaping prices across the economy

Chart 1a: Wholesale Price Index (WPI): YoY inflation (%)

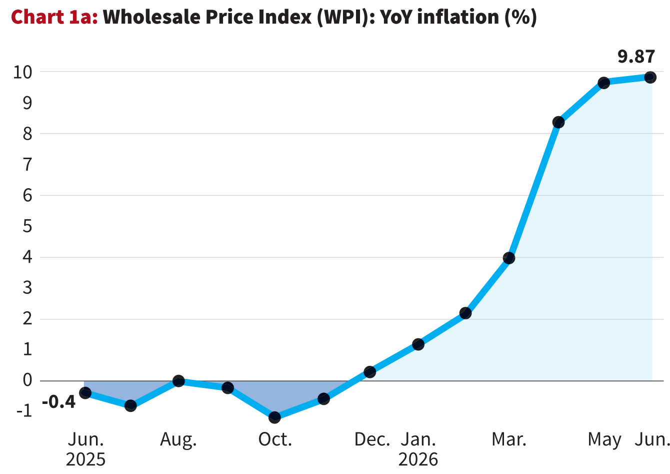
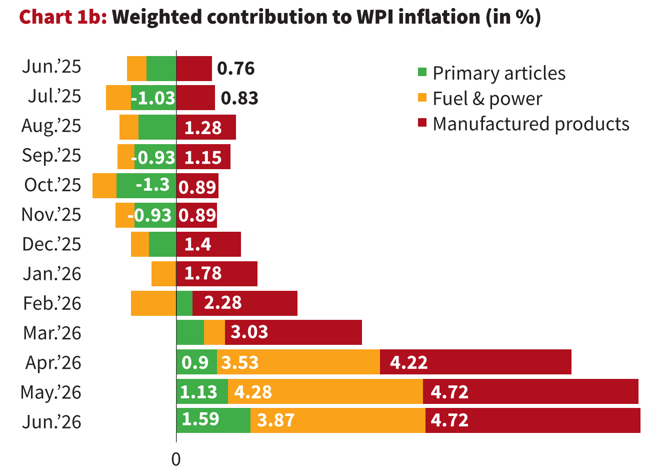
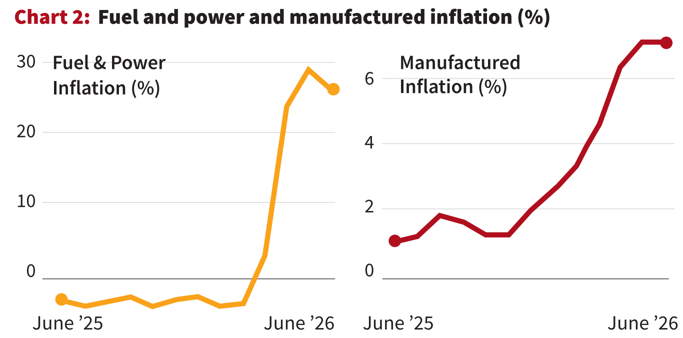


Chart 1b: Weighted contribution to WPI inflation (in %)



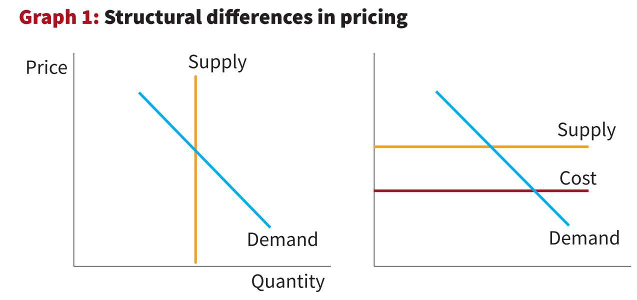
Source: Authors' calculations; Office of the Economic Adviser, DPIIT, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India (WPI, base 2022–23)

Chart 2: Fuel and power and manufactured inflation (%)



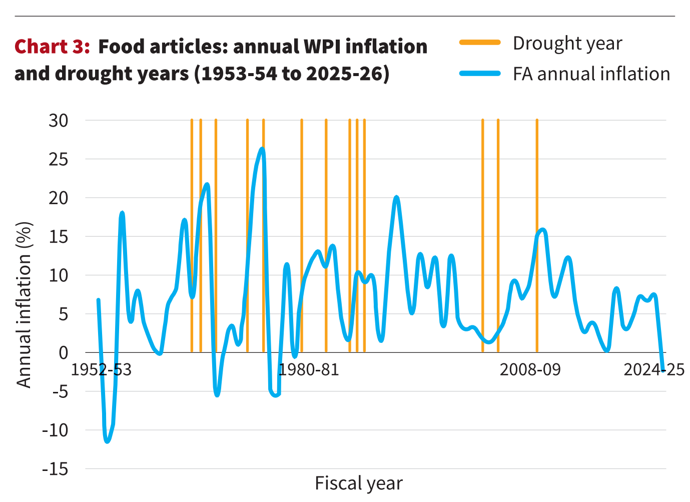
Source: Authors' calculations; Office of the Economic Adviser, DPIIT, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India (WPI, base 2022–23)

Graph 1: Structural differences in pricing



(a) Primary commodities (b) Manufactured commodities

Chart 3: Food articles: annual WPI inflation and drought years (1953-54 to 2025-26)



THE GIST

- Manufactured goods prices are determined largely by production costs, while primary commodity prices respond more to changes in demand and supply.
- Higher global crude oil prices have raised fuel costs, which in turn have pushed up inflation in manufactured goods.
- Food inflation has been exacerbated by an inadequate monsoon, underscoring the need for greater investment in irrigation and measures to cushion fuel price shocks.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Engineers get the train to float above the tracks using electromagnetic suspension. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

How magnetic levitation lifts and propels high-speed maglev trains

Maglev trains use powerful magnetic fields to move above the track without wheels, eliminating rolling friction, enabling speeds of over 400 km/hr; however, the technology requires dedicated guideways with precision engineering, making construction and operation expensive

Vasudevan Mukunth

'Maglev' is a portmanteau of 'magnetic levitation'. Instead of running on wheels, maglev technology uses strong magnetic fields to lift the train and move it forward. Since the train floats above the track, there is no rolling friction during normal operations, nor are operations affected by inclement weather, like rain or snow. The result: the train can move at extremely high speed, topping 400 km/hr, while also giving passengers a smooth ride.

How is a train lifted?
Nature has four fundamental forces: the two nuclear forces, the electromagnetic force, and gravity. Of them, gravity is the weakest by far – around 1039 times weaker than the electromagnetic force. This is why a small magnet can stay stuck to your fridge despite having the entire gravitational force of the earth pulling it down. The same idea applies to lifting a train weighing somewhere from 150 to 500 tonnes.

Engineers get the train to float above the tracks using electromagnetic suspension (EMS). The train has two 'arms' that wrap around the guideway over which it runs. Strong electromagnets on these arms point magnetic fields up towards the protruding parts of the guideway. Say you are lifting a bag with your hand. Your fingers wrap around the bag's strap. The train's arms do something like this – they wrap only just halfway, and from the bottom part, i.e., where the tip of your finger would be, exert a magnetic field into the underside of the strap. When these electromagnets are turned on, they exert a magnetic field that attracts them towards the guideway, i.e., your fingers would be attracted towards the strap. As a result, the train is pushed upwards. The train is fit with sensors that help it float around 10 mm above the guideway at all times.

In a closely related technology called electrodynamic suspension (EDS), there are superconducting magnets on the train that are cooled to a very low temperature. When the train moves, the magnets that move with it induce an electric current in coils built into the sides of the tracks. (The phenomenon is called electromagnetic induction.) The result is a repulsive force that pushes the train up. Since the magnets have to move to induce the current, the train often needs to be travelling at around 100 km/hr before the effect can kick in, and until then it uses wheels. The train also hovers higher above the track, at around 100 mm.

But in exchange for requiring wheels, EDS can support higher speeds. EMS systems operate at around or under 500 km/hr whereas the SCMAGLEV EDS system in Japan achieved 603 km/hr during testing in 2015.

How does the train move forward?
The walls of the guideway are lined with coils that carry an alternating current (AC). This current creates a magnetic field that constantly shifts its poles (north to south) along the track. The magnets on the train are attracted to the 'opposite' pole ahead and repelled by the 'like' pole behind. As a result, the train is simultaneously pulled forward from the front and pushed forward from the back. And to make the train go faster, engineers just need to increase the frequency of the AC.

Similarly, the current is used to switch the direction of the magnetic field to slow the train or altogether stop it. This process may also use regenerative braking to divert the energy 'saved' by braking to the electric grid.

If a fast-moving maglev train starts to drift, there are magnets on the sides that repel/attract accordingly to ensure it stays centered. For emergencies or when the magnetic braking fails, the system is also fit with friction brakes. They come in two forms, although there are other technologies as well. One: the maglev train is also fit with 'regular' auxiliary wheels, and these wheels have a braking system akin to those in other trains and cars. Two: braking pads between the guideway and the train apply friction to further slow it down.

What are the downsides of maglev?
The maglev system including the guideway cannot reuse existing guideways and stations vis-à-vis non-maglev trains. It needs its own. And this infrastructure is very expensive as the guideway needs to have magnets and coils with precision engineering.

The Shanghai Maglev, which was completed in 2004, cost ₹580 crore to ₹720 crore per kilometre (adjusted for inflation). This is excluding the cost of preparing the local terrain first – and operational costs like maintenance. Ergo, there needs to be very high and consistent passenger demand. Otherwise, the economics won't work out.

On the engineering front, while there is no rolling friction, a train moving very fast – especially over 300 km/hr – experiences aerodynamic resistance due to the flow of air around the train's body. This is why maglev trains have aerodynamic designs (which can add to the cost), including a front portion that resembles a bird's beak.

Is maglev technology used elsewhere?
Maglev is essential about using magnetic fields to support or move objects – a use-case that arises in many enterprises. High-speed turbines and compressors suspend their rotating shafts in a magnetic field instead of conventional bearings, minimising mechanical contact and allowing the blades to turn faster. Similarly, modern aircraft carriers use the linear motor technology that pushes maglev trains forward to accelerate aircraft on the vessels' runways.

Factory automation systems also use it to achieve the rapid, precise motion crucial in semiconductor manufacturing, food and medicine packaging, CNC machining, inspection cameras involving lasers or X-rays, and DNA sequencing, among others.

Scientists have also used magnetic fields to levitate biological samples, liquid droplets, molten metals, and even small animals for experiments. Following a suggestion by his wife, the British physicists Andre Geim and Michael Berry used a magnetic field to levitate a frog in 1997. This was possible because a form of magnetism called diamagnetism gives all materials a very weak magnetic field. The duo had to work out the strength of the field required to 'cancel out' the gravitational force exerted on the frog by the earth. Thus, they were able to get the frog to float using a 10-tesla magnet.

For this work the duo won an Ig Nobel Prize in 2000. Today, Geim remains the only scientist to have won both an Ig Nobel Prize and a Nobel Prize. Berry is also a noted physicist, known for his work on semi-classical physics.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

On July 21, 356 BCE, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World was destroyed in an act of deliberate vandalism. Test your knowledge of the monument

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1
What was the monument called, and to which Greek deity was it dedicated?

QUESTION 2
Who deliberately set fire to the temple in 356 BCE, and what was his stated motive?

QUESTION 3
What measure did the Ephesian authorities reportedly take to deny Herostratus the fame he sought?

QUESTION 4
Besides being a place of worship, what important civic and economic function did the temple serve?

QUESTION 5
Which ancient writer included the Temple of Artemis among the Seven Wonders of the World in his famous epigram?

Visual Question:
This illustration from the 1610 work *Emblemas morales* (Moral Emblems), imagining Herostratus burning the Temple of Artemis, is topped by the Latin phrase 'In flammis fama paratur'. What does it mean? SEBASTIÁN DE COVARRUBIAS/PUBLIC DOMAIN

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. With which physical oddity was Sobers born? **Ans: Six fingers in each hand**
2. To make his inclusion legitimate in the Police Cricket Club, how was Sobers, still in his teens, recruited? **Ans: Bugle player in the police band**
3. According to his autobiography, Sobers never ducked into a bouncer in his career after being hit on the forehead by a legendary fast bowler in a match against the touring English side in 1953-54. **Ans: Fred Trueman**
4. Name the sci-fi book he supposedly authored in 1967. **Ans: '*Bonaventure and the Flashing Blade*'**
5. Where and against whom did he notch up the record-breaking knock? **Ans: At Kingston against Pakistan**
6. Name the bowler at the receiving end when Sobers hit six sixes in an over. **Ans: Malcolm Nash**
7. The winner of which ICC award is given the 'Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy'? **Ans: Men's Cricketer of the Year**
8. Which innings by Sobers did the great Don Bradman describe as 'probably the greatest exhibition of batting ever seen in Australia'? **Ans: 254 for the Rest of the World at the MCG in 1972**
Visual: Name this Indian actress and model to whom Sobers was briefly engaged in the 1960s. **Ans: Anju Mahendru**
Early Birds: Tamal Biswas | Piyali Tuli | Lalchand Bhutani | Tito Shiladitya | Arun Kumar Singh

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "apple polishing"? (Rahul Sharma, Kola, Rajasthan)
It means "flattery". Believe it or not, this is an expression which owes its origin to the practice followed by school children. What is it that people do in order to win the approval of their superiors? They either give them gifts or flatter them. Some school going children did the same thing in order to be in the teacher's good books. These kids took apples to school and polished them till they gleamed. Then they presented them to the class teacher! They hoped that by doing this, the teacher would overlook their poor performance in class and instead give them good marks.

Vani's apple-polishing didn't get her anywhere.

Do not use this word in formal contexts. It is considered slang.

What is the difference between "homophone" and "homonym"? (P.V.V.S. Lakshmi, Kakinada)
In everyday contexts these two words are used interchangeably. But there is a difference in meaning between the two. The word "homophone" comes from the Greek "homo" meaning "same" and "phone" meaning "sound". Strictly speaking therefore, the word homophone is used to refer to words which sound alike, although they have a different spelling and meaning. Here are a few examples: mail, male; wear, ware; metal, mettle; etc. A homonym, on the other hand, is used to refer to words which have the same spelling and pronunciation but have a different meaning. For example May (month), may (possibility); can (be able), can (put something in container); bear (the animal), bear (to carry). As I mentioned earlier, this distinction is seldom maintained in everyday conversation. People in general tend to use "homonym" to mean "homophone".

A note about the pronunciation. The first "o" in both the words is pronounced like the "o" in "hot", "pot", and "got". The second "o" is like the "a" in "China". It's the first syllable which has the stress in both words. This is one way of pronouncing the words.

How do you answer someone who says "Nice to meet you"? (P. Lokeshwar Rao, Mosopalli)
When you are introduced to someone and the person says, "Nice to meet you" the standard reply is "Nice to meet you" with the emphasis on "you". It's like "How do you do?" When someone says "How do you do?" your reply is, "How do you do?". Other ways of responding to "Nice to meet you" are "Likewise", "It's a pleasure meeting you", "Same here", etc.

Is the word "orange" a Tamil word? (P. Somasundaram, Chennai)
Many Tamilians would like to think so! Some argue that the word orange comes from the Tamil words "six" and "five" respectively. The good news is that the word does come from an Indian language – Sanskrit. Scholars who have studied the origin of words contend that the word "orange" comes from the Sanskrit "naranga".

Published in The Hindu on May 1, 2001

Word of the day

Harangue:
a loud, bombastic declamation expressed with strong emotion

Synonyms: attack, lecture, criticism

Usage: *Everyone listened to her long harangue in silence.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/harangue

International Phonetic Alphabet: /həræŋ/

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

India's green transition is missing long-duration energy storage

Longer-term energy storage is needed to ensure that the grid remains reliable during prolonged periods of low solar and wind generation; the longer the time over which a technology discharges energy, the better its economics; at the same time, storing more energy is also expensive

Aedna Kurian
Ammu Susanna Jacob

On May 21, India recorded its highest peak demand of 270.8 gigawatt (GW) during the day, an increase of approximately 90 GW from the same window in 2019. While power generators often meet India's summer peak, the demand again increases at night, especially due to the use of air conditioners. This underscores the need for longer-term energy storage to ensure the grid remains reliable during prolonged periods of low solar and wind generation.

India's current energy storage roadmap only offers a partial solution. The 2026 Long-Term National Resource Adequacy Plan envisages 80 GW of battery energy storage and 94 GW of pumped hydroelectric energy storage (PHES) by FY2035-36. This translates to average discharge durations of roughly 4 and 6 hours, respectively.

This could be enough to address short-term fluctuations but may not suffice during adverse weather conditions, such as heatwaves.

In this context, long-duration energy storage (LDES) technologies, which are capable of delivering power for days rather than hours, could turn out to be the missing pillar of India's green energy transition.

A pumped hydroelectric storage power plant in Tasmania. The plant stores electricity by pumping water uphill when power is abundant. Later, the water flows downhill through turbines, generating electricity during periods of high demand. GETTY IMAGES

Diverse landscape

LDES refers to technologies that store energy and discharge it as power or thermal energy over extended periods, from 8 hours to days, weeks, or seasons. By storing energy when renewable generation is abundant and supplying it during periods of peak demand or low generation, LDES can provide the reliability and flexibility to support a renewable-heavy grid.

Further, unlike short-duration energy storage systems, which discharge energy for less than 8 hours and smooth intra-day demand fluctuations, LDES provides the endurance needed to balance supply and demand for prolonged periods, ease grid congestion, and provide grid resilience and stability.

Several LDES technologies are available today, each at different stages of development and commercial readiness, including PHES, compressed-air energy storage (CAES), thermal storage, hydrogen-based storage, and flow batteries.

Of these, PHES remains the benchmark because of its mature infrastructure and a high energy efficiency of 70-80%. CAES has a similar level of market readiness but a slightly lower efficiency of 40-70%. Thermal storage stands out for its long discharge duration – around 200 hours – and an energy efficiency of 55-90%. However, researchers are still developing it.

Costs of long-term storage

Although chemical energy storage, such as with hydrogen, has even higher discharge durations of up to 1,000 hours, it is not efficient. Vanadium flow batteries – an example of electrochemical energy storage – are commercially ready, come in different sizes, and have an efficiency of 80-85% across durations of 10-24 hours.

Scientists are also working on more cutting-edge solutions like iron-air batteries. In all, the LDES landscape is diverse and worth looking forward to.

The longer the time over which a technology discharges energy, the better its economics. At the same time, storing more energy also costs more. So for discharge durations beyond six hours, short-duration energy storage systems are unlikely to prove cost-effective.

The LDES Council is an international body that brings together industry leaders, technology developers, investors, policymakers, and other stakeholders to accelerate the innovation and commercialisation of LDES technologies. It has projected a significant decrease in LDES costs by 2030, making it an economically feasible storage solution.

According to a study by Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, a research body under the U.S. Department of Energy, PHES and CAES are the most cost-effective and commercially viable technologies at present, at \$0.12/kWh and \$0.10/kWh, respectively.

However, both technologies need specific site conditions. PHES requires two water reservoirs at different heights so that water can be pumped to the upper reservoir when surplus electricity is available and released downhill to generate power when needed. Thus, the site must have enough land for the reservoirs, an optimal height difference for the water to flow down with force, and of course water.

Likewise, CAES needs large underground spaces, such as salt caverns or depleted gas fields, that can safely hold high-pressure air without major leaks.

Where such sites are not available, other LDES options, such as hydrogen, thermal storage or vanadium flow batteries – which depend less on specific land, water, and subterranean conditions, may be more suitable.

India's position on LDES

The California Public Utilities Commission, California's primary utility regulator responsible for overseeing electricity, natural gas,

Long-duration energy storage (LDES) technologies, which are capable of delivering power for days rather than hours, could turn out to be the missing pillar of India's green energy transition

telecommunications, and other public utility services, has set an LDES procurement target of 2 GW. It has said this capacity will be deployed between 2031 and 2037.

Similarly, to unlock investments and accelerate deployment, the U.K. has launched a financial framework for LDES that provides a safety net for investors. Among other measures, it will ensure LDES projects have a minimum revenue, even in poor market conditions.

Per a 2026 report by the Central Electricity Authority, India's PHES potential is about 267 GW. The report also said India plans to install PHES projects with an aggregate capacity of 100.8 GW by 2035-2036. Of this, 11.6 GW is currently under construction.

In early 2025, India also launched a 160-MWh carbon dioxide battery storage system at the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) in Kudgi, Karnataka. It works by cycling carbon dioxide between liquid and gas phases and has an operational life exceeding 25 years. This was followed by inaugurating the country's first MWh-scale vanadium redox flow battery system – a 3-MWh facility installation at NTPC in Greater Noida.

Proposed roadmap

While the Long-Term National Resource Adequacy Plan acknowledges the role of energy storage in maintaining power grid reliability, it does not specifically recognise the need for LDES.

To address this gap, LDES should be incorporated into the Ministry of Power's National Framework for Promoting Energy Storage Systems, accompanied by guidelines on its deployment and integration into grid operations.

Similarly, while the National Electricity Plan outlines projected capacities for battery ESS and PHES, it does not provide technology-specific assessments or deployment pathways for LDES.

Given the growing importance of LDES in a renewable-rich power system, future planning exercises should include estimates of LDES requirements and identify technologies best suited to India's extreme weather and geographical conditions.

Faster environmental and land clearances, transmission alignment, and clear regulatory classification are also important to unlock investments.

The incentive structure, including subsidies and viability-gap funding, must be technology-agnostic and incentivise co-location opportunities with data centres. As the market matures, the focus must shift to long-term revenue contracts, tariff structures, and procurement frameworks.

Intense efforts should be made to build awareness among all stakeholders of the available LDES solutions, and their grid use cases should be presented. As part of this effort, dispatch centres should be directed to post staff for skill enhancement and training to support optimal dispatch, multi-day charge-discharge decisions, state-of-charge management across seasons, and coordination across storage assets with proper guidelines and protocols for LDES.

Without planning to include LDES, however, India's clean energy future could be forced to rest on favourable weather and market conditions.

Aedna Kurian is an analyst and Ammu Susanna Jacob is a senior research scientist in the Energy Storage group, at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP), a research-based think-tank.

Installing physical fences here is going to be no easy task: the thick mangrove forests, creeks and swamps make it inaccessible. GETTY IMAGES

Security meets ecology as BSF mulls fence in Sundarbans

Divya Gandhi
BENGALURU

Just a few months after the Border Security Force (BSF) explored the curious prospect of releasing snakes and crocodiles into rivers on the Indo-Bangladesh border to deter "illegal activities", it has now initiated another controversial feasibility study for a project to safeguard the area.

As *The Hindu* reported, the BSF is mulling installing physical fences along a 90-km stretch of the Sundarbans mangroves, habitat to rich flora and fauna, including the iconic tiger that swims in the brackish water.

Installing physical fences here is going to be no easy task as the thick mangrove forests, creeks, and swamps make it inaccessible.

The government has also sanctioned the construction of flood-light illuminated fences – a non-physical barrier – according to reports.

The Sundarbans Wildlife Sanctuary will "remain touched" by the fencing, one BFS official told *The Hindu*, adding that the structures will not affect the area's biodiversity as it is being envisaged for the banks of the Ichamati river in the northern reaches.

The official also said all those who lose their land in the process will be compensated.

But one scientist familiar with the Sundarbans has expressed fear that the fence will adversely affect the movement of deer, wild boar, crocodiles, and tigers, all of which constantly cross rivers and sand banks.

Megnaa Mehtta, an assistant professor in social anthropology at University College London, said, "I'm not sure why the Ichamati would be out of bounds to them... It is like any other river or forest sandbank."

The idea of a fence in the fluid ecology of the Sundarbans is a colossal waste of government resources, both funds and labour, Dr. Mehtta added: "In an area that requires several other fundamental infrastructural improvements, this should certainly not be a priority for the government."

On the other hand, Krishna Ray, associate professor of the department of botany, West Bengal State University, said the area chosen for the fencing need not necessarily present problems for either the local fishers or biodiversity.

"Being a porous border area, it should be well protected," Dr. Ray told *The Hindu*. "In my opinion, fencing in non-protected areas along the Bangladesh border might not harm the ecosystem very much, if the BSF people took care of the mangroves on shoreline and wildlife while setting up their fencing."

He "welcomed" the fencing because he said he believes in regulatory control. "At present I do not think regulations are being followed there. The mangrove ecosystem has already suffered enough from illegal fisheries and construction all over Sundarbans in protected areas."

On the other hand, Dr. Mehtta said decades of research in the area has shown that this is not a common route for any form of antisocial infiltration or one that could be a threat to the security of the nation. Border crossings will continue, but because of the fence, they will become even more "risky", she added.

"Previous attempts at acquiring land, for example for building embankments, have resulted in dispossessing already vulnerable populations from their homes," according to Dr. Mehtta. "And in most cases, rehabilitation was not provided [nor] was any financial compensation."

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

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

Exceptional gases

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

________ trifluoride is one of the most reactive gases known. It can set many materials on fire without external ignition. This is because the fluorine atoms strongly attract electrons, making the molecule an exceptionally powerful oxidiser. Engineers use it to clean semiconductor fabrication equipment, especially to remove silicon deposits. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2

X readily sublimes into a gas that is stable at a modest temperature, unlike most compounds of uranium. And the gaseous form is why uranium isotopes can be separated by centrifuges during nuclear fuel enrichment. Name X.

QUESTION 3

Y is a stable free-radical gas that has an unpaired electron, which should make the molecule highly reactive. Yet it is stable thanks to the way electrons are distributed between the two atoms. The compound is a signalling molecule in biology and is used to treat pulmonary hypertension. Its chemical formula also spells an English word. Name Y.

QUESTION 4

Many scientists consider the helium hydride ion (HeH+) to be the first what? It forms a stable gas thanks to the ionic bonds between the two elements. It has no practical industrial applications, however, although scientists regard it with importance for the first it stands for.

VISUAL: Name this metal, which is also the densest element known. It forms an oxide with four oxygen atoms. The oxide is so volatile that it produces a deadly vapour at room temperature. ALCHEMIST-HP (CC BY-NC-ND)

QUESTION 5

Z difluoride is incredibly hard to study and highly radioactive. Yet it's special because it demonstrates that even Z, a noble gas scientists once thought to be chemically inert, can form chemical compounds — albeit with fluorine and its unmatched reactivity. Z difluoride has no commercial applications because, again, Z is so radioactive. Name Z.

Answers to July 7 quiz:

1. Process that combines nitrogen, oxygen to form ammonia – **Ans: Haber process**
2. Tech that works by maintaining a group of more excited atoms – **Ans: Laser**
3. Acid in blood that participates in regulating blood pH – **Ans: Carbonic acid**
4. Equilibrium that holds a star together against nuclear fusion, etc. – **Ans: Hydrostatic**
5. Process that turns inert nitrogen into a bioavailable form – **Ans: Fixation**

Visual: Calvin cycle

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Prem Nath Tiwari | Anmol Agrawal | Faisal Khan

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to **science@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Daily page'

● WEB EXCLUSIVE
'In CJP protest, a reckoning with politics for the apolitical Indian.'
— By Siya Dulari Choudhary
Log on to www.indianexpress.com

The Editorial Page

● WORDLY WISE
A republic, if you can keep it.
— Benjamin Franklin

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

Can't have sabka vishwas with tear gas and lathi

THE ABUNDANT images on Monday — of thousands of mostly young and mostly peaceful protestors facing barricades and lathi charge and tear gas shells in the heart of the national capital — were stark and dispiriting. They indict the government. The protestors were reportedly responding to the call of the satirical online platform, the Cockroach Janta Party, to march to Parliament. The CJP has been conducting a sit-in protest since June 20 at Jantar Mantar, from where education and environment activist Sonam Wangchuk, fasting since June 28, was taken to a hospital, Saturday, forcibly. But the protestors were arguably responding to more than one fast or one platform. They were rallying behind the issue that is being highlighted — the urgent need to reform a broken education system, beset with exam leaks, delays and irregularities, which leads, in turn, to swelling the ranks of the unemployed. In a country of the young, the recent episode of the NEET cancellation and retest has touched a raw nerve, sparking larger anxieties about the shape of an uncertain future, and lack of readiness to meet its challenges. The Centre looks harsh and unyielding towards the young protestors, and insensitive on an issue that ripples widely. It kept its back turned, eyes wide shut. It took three weeks to break its silence with a meeting on Monday between Minister J P Nadda and spokespersons of the CJP. It is, of course, far from clear whether the meeting translates into reform and accountability.

On the interlinked matters of *shiksha* and *berozgari*, education and unemployment, the government needs to recognise that it cannot keep kicking the can down the road. It must acknowledge, also, that citizens have the right to place demands on it, to disagree with it and to protest peacefully. In letter and spirit, the Constitution guarantees citizens both the freedom to speak and the space to be heard. Over the last 12 years or so, however, the government's instinct has been to distrust and demonise those who express dissent, to reflexively label them "anti-national". It favours a top-down, one-way communication that does not involve listening and responding.

On Monday, the march of the protestors was to Parliament, the highest forum of deliberative democracy, where elected representatives take up the people's issues. The concerns highlighted at Jantar Mantar must find their way into the House eventually — that is the legitimate trajectory. A government that has, through its serial electoral successes, underlined its connect with the people can ill afford to stand in their way when they demand a hearing in between elections. It is still not too late, a beginning has been made towards a dialogue with the protestors. In days to come, the government must make amends by building on it.

Spain won because it had a winning idea

BY SUNDAY night, Spain had beaten the two teams best equipped to stop them: France's Mbappé-led attack in the semi-final, and then, in the final, Messi's Argentina. And still, Spain did not merely hold the men's World Cup. Its women's team sits at the top of the FIFA rankings, reigning champions, with a European title and a Nations League crown in the cabinet.

Look around the world's biggest leagues, and the pattern repeats. Nearly 20 per cent of coaches in Europe's Big Five leagues are Spanish, 11 of them working abroad, more than double any other nation's tally. At this World Cup, three teams besides Spain were led by Spanish managers. Even the losing coach, Lionel Scaloni, earned his UEFA Pro Licence under Spanish instruction, taught by a man who would become his opponent: On Sunday night, teacher and student stood in opposite dugouts, separated by a scoreline. Arteta's Arsenal finished above Guardiola's Manchester City this season. Xabi Alonso now runs Chelsea.

None of it is new. Johan Cruyff planted the seed at Barcelona in the late 1980s: Teach a player not where to stand, but why. Spain won the 2010 World Cup playing exactly that way, long before their young stars Lamine Yamal or Pau Cubarsi were old enough to watch it. A teenager entering the system today arrives already fluent in the idea. Sunday proved the inheritance still works on the men's side. It has long worked on the women's: Barcelona have won four Champions League titles in six years. Messi had just 29 touches when Rodri was substituted in the 99th minute, and finished with 54 across 120 minutes, most of them harmless. Rodri himself, rebuilt from a serious knee injury, won the Golden Ball. Cubarsi, 19, won the best young player award; Yamal started every match; Pedri ran the midfield; Unai Simon won the Golden Glove. Spain did not export a formation on Sunday. It exported the only thing that travels cleanly: A way of teaching someone to think. The trophies, it turns out, follow.

Up in the sky, it's a bird, it's AI

A BIRD is merely a bird until it is spotted outside its natural range. Then it becomes a sign to be decoded. A photograph taken in Brazil of a red-winged blackbird, which is native to North and Central America, was recently posted on an online forum, leading to much speculation among scientists about what its unusual presence could possibly mean. Was it a vagrant, blown off course by some miscalculation of its internal GPS? Or an indicator of how greater forces — climate change, habitat destruction, etc. — were impacting the behaviour of different species? A little detective work helped uncover the truth: The photographer who had submitted the image had captured an epaulet oriole, common in Brazil, and asked an AI platform to make the picture "look better", resulting in a single modified detail — and a false sighting.

A recent article in *Nature* argues that this is precisely the kind of "AI slop" that is making life difficult for scientists who rely on public tracking platforms to study wildlife: Not the obviously fake images of tigers in the savannah or parakeets in the Arctic, but the subtly manipulated ones that just might — and often do — pass for documentary evidence. The study of nature is not merely about pretty pictures or awe-inspiring vistas. It is about understanding ecological shifts that often portend changes in the world humans inhabit, from warming temperatures and disappearing habitats to the spread of disease and invasive species.

While many wildlife photographers use technology to tweak certain parts of a photograph in order to get the "perfect" image, AI tools, with their tendency to add or "hallucinate" details, can, literally and figuratively, lead researchers on a wild-goose chase. Because in science, even the smallest fabrication can end up obscuring a larger truth.

Anna Hazare to Sonam Wangchuk, a tale of two fasts — and a democracy

GIRISH KUBER

ON MONDAY, protestors marching to Parliament with demands for the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan were met with teargas shells. Then, for the first time in 23 days, the government opened a line of communication with the protestors and talks have reportedly been held with former BJP president and Union health minister J P Nadda. The government's reluctance to engage meaningfully with a movement demanding reform of the country's education system is telling in more ways than one.

A contrasting story unfolded 15 years ago. Anna Hazare, a serial agitator since the '90s in Maharashtra, caught everyone's attention when he started a hunger strike on April 5, 2011, in Delhi. The strike ended in just 96 hours when the government agreed to form a joint committee to draft the Jan Lokpal Bill. Hazare's second and longer hunger strike began on August 16 at Delhi's famous Ramlila Maidan. It ended on August 28, after 12 days, when Parliament passed a resolution that met his core demands.

Hazare's demand was relatively straightforward: The government should put in place strong anti-corruption measures by creating an independent ombudsman, the Lokpal. In India, corruption is something that many people think everyone else is up to. That's why anti-corruption campaigns often succeed, even though these agitations do not solve the problem completely. With the Manmohan Singh government besieged by a series of scams, or rather allegations about scams, Hazare's agitation struck the right chord. The impact of his fast was significantly amplified when television channels began broadcasting demonstrations live and former police officer Kiran Bedi and yoga guru Baba Ramdev joined the movement.

The real power behind the Anna movement, though, stayed away from the spotlight. The RSS, with its well-organised network, was believed to be gathering support for the movement. Some socialists and those on the left — Medha Patkar, Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan, for instance — did support Hazare. However, the 2014 general elections showed that the biggest winner of the Anna movement was the BJP.

The Manmohan Singh government also played a role, as it couldn't quite grasp the intricacies of the Anna movement to begin with. Once it got its act together, the UPA government enlisted the help of two important individuals, in addition to Pranab Mukherjee and A K Antony, to "negotiate" an end to Hazare's fast. These individuals — former Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh and Umeshchandra Sarangi, a former NABARD chief and IAS official from the state — were better equipped to deal with the situation than Mukherjee and Antony. Deshmukh and Sarangi were able to achieve their goal. But by then, it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle.

Sonam Wangchuk's ongoing fast is distinct from Hazare's agitation on two counts. While what Hazare wanted was theoretical and abstract, Wangchuk's demand is grounded in a more concrete reality. He seeks the removal of Dharmendra Pradhan, a key figure in the Narendra Modi government. The contrast between their demands highlights the stark difference in political acumen between the two. Compared to the easily pliable, politically well-connected Hazare, the agitator who is demanding the reform of the education system is a person of stronger convictions. Fulfilling Hazare's harmless — and eventually useless — demand was much easier than what Wangchuk is seeking.

Two, Wangchuk has, at best, had sporadic backing from the Opposition. During Hazare's movement, the then main opposition party, the BJP, saw an opportunity to expose the chaotic Manmohan Singh government. The Opposition today, in contrast, is showing signs of inertia. One reason could be that it is divided and lacks a cohesive strategy to challenge the Modi government. No party sees an incentive in Wangchuk's success. Hazare's victory had a direct beneficiary: The BJP was better placed to capitalise on the anti-government sentiments ignited by him since it was the sole occupant of the opposition space and the only challenger to the Congress-led coalition at the Centre.

> Governments have an uncanny capacity to sense the significance of scale, whether during protests or a natural disaster. The magnitude of the situation often determines the government's response

The political vacuum in Wangchuk's fast was filled by the youth who travelled to Delhi from across India to extend support to the cause. Governments and political leaders have an uncanny capacity to sense the significance of scale, whether during protests or a natural disaster. The magnitude of the situation often determines the government's response. The groundswell at Jantar Mantar ultimately compelled the government to break its silence. It decided to engage with protestors. This is more of a success of the country's impatient youth than the majority, who preferred to remain indifferent.

This political reality raises an important question: Does society today judge success and failure in politics based on election results? Almost the entire country seemed to be united in supporting the Anna movement. Fifteen years ago, several representatives from the entertainment industry could stand up and express their disagreement with the government. Where are these voices now? The media, too, wasn't as vocal as it was during the Anna movement, which also had the backing of sections of industry. India Inc under the current government, in contrast, is much subdued. It's quite striking how, in just about 15 years, the country's lively, boisterous and vibrant democracy has become so quiet.

The resolution to the questions posed by Wangchuk will determine whether our democracy reclaims its voice or we remain trapped in deafening silence. The country's youth has shown an alternative democratic path. Wangchuk's fast and developments that followed are a signal to the government as well — it may have enormous power to bend and break the Opposition but it cannot govern indefinitely by ignoring public sentiment, and there are certain things beyond the power and reach of central agencies.

The writer is editor, 'Loksatta'

Anti-defection law needs drastic changes

DESH DEEPAK VERMA

AS PARLIAMENT'S Monsoon Session commences, the red carpets of the Rajya Sabha will have some different shadows cast upon them by MPs who originally belonged to one shade of political party but now belong to another. The arithmetic of the House will also change because of these large-scale defections and realignments.

The Opposition predictably attributes these defections to horse-trading, political inducements and the fear of investigative agencies. The ruling party, on the other hand, argues that many legislators have merely chosen to free themselves from autocratic or family-centric political organisations. There may be elements of truth in both narratives.

Amid this exchange of accusations and counter-accusations, a more fundamental issue gets overlooked — the continuing failure of India's anti-defection law to contain the very political opportunism it was enacted to curb.

The anti-defection law was introduced through the Fifty-second Constitutional Amendment in 1985 by incorporating the Tenth Schedule into the Constitution. Its principal objective was to curb the political instability caused by frequent defections.

The Ninety-first Constitutional Amendment of 2003 further tightened the law by abolishing the exemption from disqualification for a bloc comprising at least one-third of the members of a legislature party. Thereafter, only a merger supported by at least two-thirds of the members of a legislature party remained eligible for this exemption.

The experience of implementing the anti-defection law, even after these amendments, has been far from satisfactory. Under the Tenth Schedule, the authority to decide disqualification petitions rests with the presiding officers of the respective Houses — the Speaker in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, and the Chairmen in the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils. While the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha is mandated to resign from his or her parent party, this is not obligatory for the Speakers. This arrangement, rightly or wrongly, inevitably gives rise to questions about institutional impartiality. Presiding officers have delayed decisions on disqualification petitions for months and years, and at times, for the entire tenure of the House. The Supreme Court has repeatedly observed that such petitions should ordinarily be decided within three months, and some Chairmen of the Rajya Sabha have echoed the same expectation. Yet deliberate procedural delays have often rendered the law ineffective.

Paradoxically, the stricter provisions have also not eliminated defections. Instead, political efforts now focus on engineering defections on a larger scale, enough to satisfy the two-thirds requirement for a merger. The phenomenon has now become more organised, accompanied by greater political bargaining and inducements. Thus, the anti-defection law has, in practice, become an instrument for escalating defections rather than preventing them.

What is the solution? It needs some drastic and fundamental constitutional changes. We would need a law to automatically end, on the date of resignation, the tenure of any elected representative who resigns from the political party on whose ticket he or she was elected. The individual could seek a fresh mandate, and if he or she enjoys public support independent of party affiliation, there should be no difficulty in securing re-election — either as an Independent candidate or as another party's nominee, in the vacated seat or any other. This would shift the ultimate authority to decide a defecting legislator's right to continue in the House from party managers and presiding officers to the electorate.

> We would need a law to automatically end, on the date of resignation, the tenure of any elected representative who resigns from the political party on whose ticket he or she was elected

Critics may argue that such a provision would discourage genuine dissent within political parties and inhibit independent thinking. That concern, however, appears overstated. Legislators would remain entirely free to disagree with their party, resign from it and seek a fresh mandate. What the amendment would discourage is not dissent but the retention of an elected office after abandoning the political platform on which that office was secured.

The writer is former secretary general, Rajya Sabha, Parliament of India

Managing the temple, a case for guardrails

PALLAV SHISHODIA

THE VALLABH Sampraday worships Lord Krishna as a joyous and playful deity, with Tilkayat *ji* as its supreme head. In the 1950s, there were controversies due to large-scale bungling in the properties of the sect's main temple, one of the richest, in Nathdwara. Its takeover by the state was challenged without success before the Supreme Court, which negated the religious right claimed by Tilkayat *ji* to manage this temple and its assets, holding it to be a secular matter. The temple board, created by statute to manage its temporal affairs, except matters of faith, is a unique blend of the spiritual lineage, state supervision and efforts of prominent devotees like the Ambanis. The Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya was built with state support but without any state oversight. The latter is an imperative, not a panacea, to ensure transparency, accountability and institutional integrity.

The movement for the temple at Ayodhya and its construction were a balm to hurt Hindu sentiments. What has now emerged is alleged loot from land deals, construction contracts and *chadavas*, which include large amounts of gold, silver and cash. Denials apart, there are several structural impediments to the full magnitude of the irregularities coming out in the public domain.

There is a fairly evolved legal framework to manage the spiritual, temporal and secular affairs of the thousands of religious places, small and large, in India. Our Constitution guarantees the "right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion" subject to public order, morality, and health. The state can make laws only to regulate secular activities and reform religion. The guaranteed rights of denominations to establish and maintain religious institutions, manage their own affairs, own and administer properties are enunciated in several cases. A slew of temple boards, charity commissioners or Devasthan departments oversee the management of secular activities, while religious aspects are governed by the religious denominations. Be it a dargah, gurdwara or any other religious institution, this is the broad pattern. This module, with local variations, also serves the economies of towns, charitable and educational institutions, hospitals, and several other activities around religious institutions. For instance, the annual sale in public auction of the hair tonsured at the Tirupati temple comes to about 500 mt, valued at around Rs 200 crore. It has over 600 laddoo-makers protected by labour laws. The Guruvayur temple has regulations to shelter elephants gifted by devotees. About 1,00,000 people on weekdays and an even greater number on weekends partake in the langar at the Golden Temple. All of this is managed by their respective statutory bodies.

> A slew of temple boards, charity commissioners or Devasthan departments oversee the management of secular activities, while religious aspects are governed by the religious denominations

Imagine all these activities with trustees, priests and managers having complete freedom with no state-mandated guardrails. The Ram Mandir at Ayodhya suffers from a structural deficit, with or without a CEO. There are no reasons in the public domain why the formation of a private trust was directed, without a temple board. Does the state have no role in a temple with such an inflow of devotees and donations? In a quest to save the larger faith in Ram, the alleged loot is being underplayed as a small con job. The state cannot wish it away as an internal matter of a private trust. It must stem this rot to restore the hurt faith of millions.

The writer is a senior advocate

40 YEARS AGO
July 21, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
3 MLCs not to support Cong-I in Karnataka
Games boycott announced
Cong-I split over party chief issue
BJP for package deal on Punjab

Games boycott announced

INDIA PULLED out of the 13th Commonwealth Games, to begin in Edinburgh on July 24, becoming the 24th country to boycott the Games because of Britain's stand on economic sanctions against South Africa. The Minister of State for Sports, Margaret Alva, said, "We tried to save the Games." Alva said India had deferred its decision regarding participation in the hope of some change in the British attitude on the economic sanctions against the Pretoria regime.

Jagmohan on Governor's rule

THE JAMMU and Kashmir Governor, Jagmohan, hinted here that he had sent "reports" to the Centre, but refused to divulge if these pertained to the extension of Governor's rule in Jammu and Kashmir. Jagmohan, addressing a press conference said he was under oath not to divulge anything and so could not comment on the issue of the extension of Governor's rule.

BJP for package deal on Punjab

THE BJP said that it favoured a "package deal" to resolve the territorial issue between Punjab and Haryana by referring all territorial disputes arising out of the Rajiv-Longowal accord to a single commission for final settlement. The national executive of the BJP, which concluded its three-day meeting in Gwalior, said in a resolution that a new commission should be appointed for the purpose or the terms of reference of the Desai Commission should be suitably broadened.

'Doves' may put Zia to flight

A NATIONWIDE movement to oust President Zia-ul-Haq through a series of strikes, blocking of streets and closing of shops is being planned by the Pakistani opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto. Some 150,000 "doves for Democracy" have been recruited to lead this protest by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of which Bhutto is acting chairperson, *The New York Times* reported from Lahore, quoting party officials.

● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
In Mr Burnham the nation will have an experienced politician with a gift for language.
— *The Guardian*

Football wasn't the main character in this World Cup, but Spain's victory was poetic

MIHIR VASAVDA

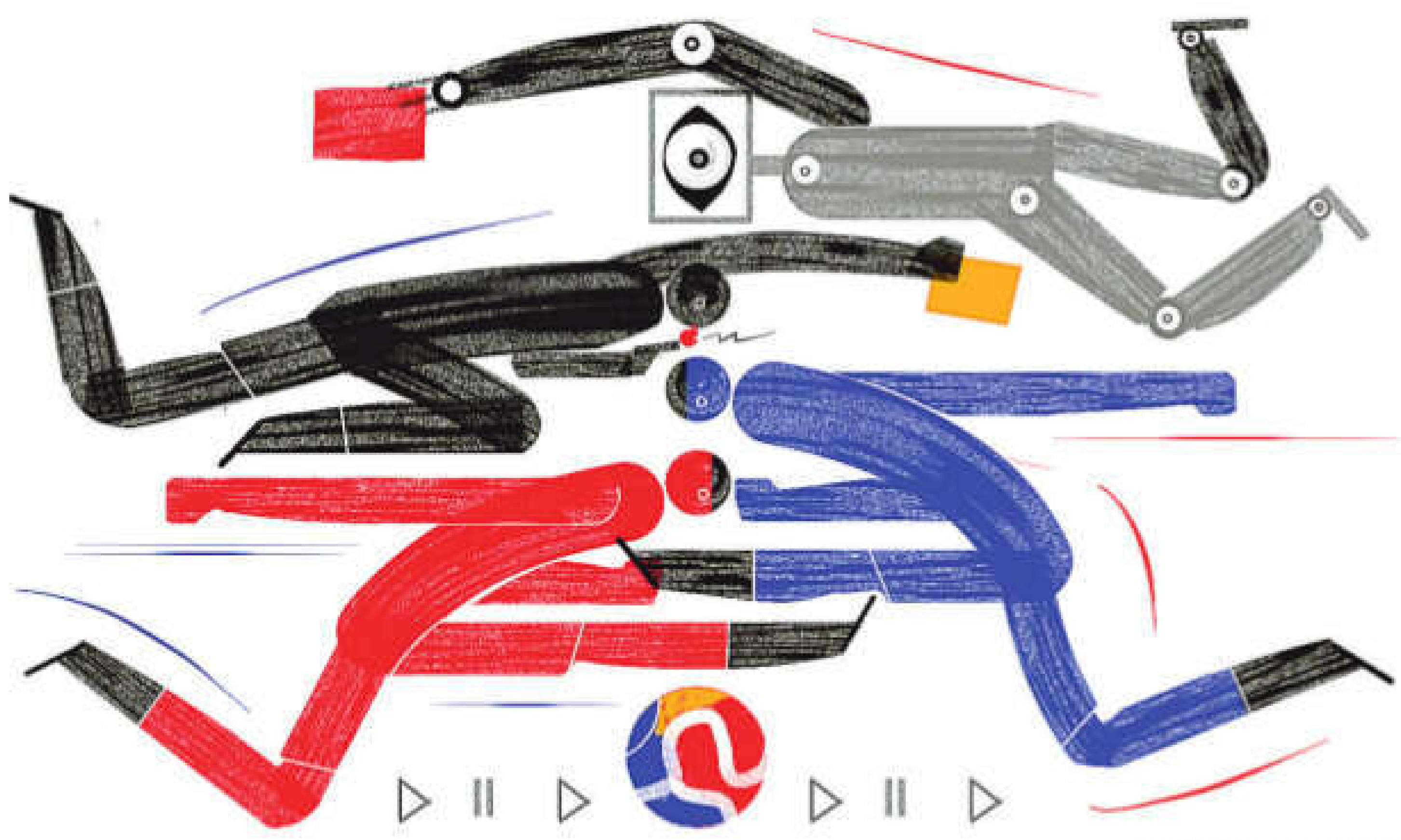


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

THE BEST thing about Spain winning the World Cup was that it finally put an end to the conspiracy theories. For a month, social media had convinced itself that FIFA was determined to deliver Lionel Messi one last fairytale – something even Donald Trump joked about on the eve of the final. Spain's victory, by completely outlasting the previous holders, settled that argument.

Then came the final whistle. A mass confrontation. Tempers spilling over. Players being kicked and pushed, Argentina churlishly turning their backs on the trophy presentation. More headlines about what happened after the game than what happened during it.

It was, in many ways, the perfect ending to a World Cup that rarely allowed football to be the main character.

Every tournament has its defining image. Maradona lifting the trophy in 1986. Ronaldo's redemption in 2002. Zinedine Zidane's headbutt in 2006. Iniesta in Johannesburg. Germany's demolition of Brazil. Messi in Doha.

What will 2026 be remembered for?

Spain's triumph will feature somewhere in the conversation. But so will refereeing controversies, mass confrontations, cynical football, bloated expansion, a four-quarter, made-for-television experiment and an uncomfortable feeling that, for the first time, football's soul was fighting for space inside its own World Cup.

The referees became bigger stars than many players. Almost every knockout round ended with fresh outrage. VAR decisions were dissected frame by frame before the football itself. Germany's penalty shootout defeat to Paraguay generated as much debate over officiating as over Paraguay's remarkable escape. Argentina's route to the final fuelled endless accusations of preferential treatment. Even Norway's clash with England descended into a debate over perception versus reality, in which everybody was left asking a strangely modern football question — should they believe their own eyes or the machine? Whether those theories had merit almost became irrelevant. The perception itself overshadowed the football.

Then there was the football itself.

Intensity has always been part of the World Cup's appeal. But too often, this tournament confused aggression with competitiveness. The France-Paraguay round of 16 was the clearest example. So were Argentina's semifinals and finals. That pattern repeated itself throughout the tournament. Teams increasingly realised they didn't have to outplay better opponents. They simply had to drag them into trench warfare.

The World Cup has always celebrated emotion. This one often celebrated attrition.

Then came FIFA's great experiment. The 48-team tournament was sold as football's democratisation. More countries. More representation. More dreams. Instead, it often delivered more predictability.

Yes, there were fresh faces. Cape Verde became one of the stories of the group stage. But even that came with an important caveat. They weren't a romantic underdog who had stumbled into the World Cup. They had topped their African qualifying group and earned their place on merit. But apart from their run to the Round of 32, the tournament provided few eye-catching results and largely stuck to the script.

> While everyone else argued with referees, surrounded officials, fought opponents and embraced spectacle, Spain simply played football. No theatrics. No chaos. No reliance on one superstar

The expanded format promised more Moroccos. Instead, it produced more mismatches. And by the quarterfinals, the tournament had largely reset itself to football's established order. Expansion was supposed to create chaos. Instead, it insulated the elite. Bigger nations now had more room for error than ever before.

Which raises an uncomfortable question: If 48 teams reduced jeopardy, what exactly will 64, being mulled for 2030, achieve? Football's greatest tournament has always been ruthless. One bad evening could send giants home. That sense of danger has slowly been diluted.

Hovering over all of it was another question. What exactly was America adding to football that football didn't already possess?

Football has spent decades teaching the United States how to love the game. This World Cup often looked like America trying to teach football how to entertain when the sport has never needed help creating drama. Its greatest moments are built on anticipation. A silent stadium before a penalty. Forty-five uninterrupted minutes where the game belongs entirely to the players.

This tournament occasionally looked as though it didn't trust football enough to stand on its own. And once commercial logic begins reshaping tradition, where does it stop? Today, it is extended ceremonies and endless entertainment. Tomorrow, will cooling breaks become permanent television inventory? Will football's sacred two halves one day give way to quarters because broadcasters discover another advertising opportunity?

Which is why Spain's triumph felt almost poetic. While everyone else argued with referees, surrounded officials, fought opponents, debated formats and embraced spectacle, Spain simply played football. No theatrics. No chaos. No reliance on one superstar. Just intelligent movement, technical excellence and collective brilliance.

Their victory was a reminder that football's greatest attraction has never been controversy or commerce. It is the game itself. Fittingly, Spain will be waiting when the World Cup returns in 2030 as one of its co-hosts. After a tournament where the sport often seemed buried beneath the noise, perhaps there is no better nation to help bring it back to centre stage.

The writer is deputy associate editor, The Indian Express
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'Satluj' may not tell the whole story but its truth cannot be buried

AJITPAL SINGH

JASWANT SINGH Khalra was born in 1952 in Khalra village — then in Amritsar district, now Tarn Taran — a few kilometres from the border. His grandfather, Harnam Singh, was a Ghadar-era revolutionary. By the family's account, he was tried in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, before a Special Tribunal created under the newly passed Defence of India Act, with no jury and no appeal, and spent close to a decade in British prisons.

Now here is the irony. The Empire, whatever else it was, acknowledged its prisoner. There was an arrest on the record, a charge, a tribunal — however rigged — a sentence. Eighty-one years later, in independent India, policemen took his grandson from outside his house in Amritsar, and the state then denied, including before the Supreme Court of India, that it was holding him at all. It disappeared the grandson for asking questions.

What questions? Investigating colleagues who had vanished, Khalra found in Amritsar's municipal records the names, ages, and addresses of people the Punjab Police had cremated as *lavaris* — unclaimed, unidentified. His charge was specific: Young men were being detained, killed in staged encounters or in custody, and burned as nobody. He documented more than 6,000 such cremations in Amritsar district alone, and extrapolated a statewide figure of 25,000, an estimate never officially verified. But the verified numbers of 2,097 by the CBI are damning enough.

The police response was immediate. In January 1995, DGP K P S Gill told a press conference in Amritsar that the missing had gone abroad under false names. Khalra challenged him to an open public debate. It never took place. In April 1995, Khalra carried his registers to Canada. Friends begged him to claim asylum. He answered with a parable: When darkness first fell upon Earth, one small lamp raised its head and said, "I challenge the darkness; around myself, at least, I will not let it settle." Then he went home to be the lamp.

On the morning of September 6, he was taken while washing his car outside his house. He was held illegally, tortured, and shot dead on October 27. His body was thrown into the canal at Harike, where the Sutlej receives the Beas.

ILLUSTRATION: TANUSHRI MITRA

None of this is speculation, and that is the point everyone arguing about *Satluj* keeps missing. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and in November 2011, the Court recorded that Khalra's press note on the cremations had been "found to be correct", and observed that the force had closed ranks to protect its own.

I have seen the film, and I will be honest about it in a way its defenders and detractors will both dislike. Is it factually complete? No. It does not show the Khalra whose own writings were sympathetic to Bhindranwale and the Khalistan cause; it flattens a complicated political man into a secular saint. But that is not an inaccuracy about the crime. The crime rests on an adjudicated record.

Of all the films this country fights about, *Satluj* is the rare one whose spine is a verdict. If deviation from fact were grounds for keeping a film from audiences, how did *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, *Dhurandhar*, and *Chhaava* release? Each dramatises, valorises, invents — that is what films do — and each was extended the licence without a second thought. I am asking why the standard applies to just one. And to those who complain that *Satluj* does not show the other side, did *Dhurandhar*? Where was the other side in *Chhaava*?

So why did this film disappear? Punjab votes next year. Had the film been allowed to run, the ruling party at the Centre could even have claimed credit — the worst of these atrocities took place under Congress governments. The takedown makes no party-political sense, and I have stopped trying to read it as such. Congress ran the counterinsurgency. A certification board under the present government buried the film for four years. It vanished from screens while a third party governed Punjab. The only logic consistent across three decades and three parties is the oldest one: The state protects the state.

What I want to say as a Sikh filmmaker from Punjab who grew up in Gujarat is what it does to a person when government after government buries the truth of his land and his people. It is suffocating. We begin to feel like second-class citizens — expected to compromise, to bow, to survive quietly. The Constitution calls us equal. Do the governments of this country treat us as equal? I keep returning to Khalra's lamp. It is burning bright in village squares, schools, and gurdwaras. A lamp taken down is not a lamp put out.

The writer is the director of Tabbar and Fire in the Mountains

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Parliament session

THE COMING session of Parliament is a test of democratic vitality ('Opposition must find its voice in Monsoon Session', *IE*, July 20). With the INDIA bloc weakened, the need for constructive debate has never been greater. Parliament must not become a stage for silence or spectacle, but a forum for accountability. Issues like the NEET paper leak and questions of citizenship demand rigorous scrutiny.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

English in India

I WHOLEHEARTEDLY agree that English is no longer a foreign or colonial language; it has become an integral part of everyday life in India ('Indian English is not a colonial relic', IE, July 20). In a multilingual nation, it connects people across regions and opens doors to higher education, employment, science, technology, and global opportunities. Far from being diminished by Indian usage, English has been enriched by the incorporation of countless Indian words and expressions.

Nawal Thorat

Punjab's history

PRAMOD KUMAR rightly notes that Punjab has never seen a comprehensive institutional effort at closure, and this deserves serious attention. But its framing needs scrutiny ('Punjab needs a truth and reconciliation commission', *IE*, July 20). Partition and the Punjabi Suba movement are placed alongside Operation Blue Star, 1984, and two decades of militancy as part of one shared lineage of grievance. These were different events with different causes, and grouping them together risks obscuring what happened and why. The deeper gap is economic. Punjab's militancy is described purely as democratic politics "degenerating into extraordinary violence", with no mention of the agrarian distress that shaped that period. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, documentation, and a Peace Memorial are worthwhile steps, but they address memory, not the material conditions that produced the crisis

Manu Kant, Chandigarh

Garry Sobers showed what cricket after empire could be

UDAY CHANDRA

WHAT DID Sir Garfield St Aubrun Sobers represent? His passing, which has plunged the entire cricketing world into mourning, is more than the loss of the sport's greatest all-rounder. We have lost arguably the last living embodiment of cricket as a source of freedom: A man who made an old, stodgy colonial sport more joyous and more human than the empire that created it.

If Don Bradman perfected a colonial sport organised around Britain and its dominions, then Sobers must be remembered for bringing together the Commonwealth of Cricket. Wherever he played, he changed the way cricketing excellence was understood.

The numbers describe several great cricketers compressed into a single body: 8,032 Test runs at 57.78, 235 wickets delivered through pace, swing, orthodox spin and wrist-spin, and 109 catches. Yet those numbers understate. Abundance was Sobers' gift. His peers knew that he could alter the course of any match without making cricket appear laborious.

Before him, Learie Constantine had shown that a Black West Indian could be an extraordinary athlete with intelligence and charisma. George Headley, the "Black Bradman," freed batsmanship from old racial prejudices. Frank Worrell added statesmanship, turning a fractured archipelago into a world-class team. Sobers was the culmination of their efforts. He showed that a Black man could not only bat, bowl and field as well as anyone else, but better.

Sobers played his first Test as a left-arm spinner at 17 against England in Kingston in 1954. His first overseas tour to New Zealand two years later yielded only 81 runs in four Tests on unfamiliar green pitches. Yet a boy from Barbados had begun mastering cricket's dispersed world. At 21, Sobers turned his maiden Test century into 365 not out at Kingston, breaking Len Hutton's world record.

India was woven into Sobers' career from the beginning. At 16, he took seven wickets on his first-class debut for Barbados against the touring Indians, prompting captain Vijay Hazare to speak of future greatness. Six years later, Sobers arrived in India as the finest young batsman in the world. He scored 557 runs at 92.83, with three centuries, as the West Indies won 3–0. Across two home series and two away against India, Sobers made an astounding 1,920 Test runs at 83.47. Indian spectators responded by elevating him to the pantheon of cricketing greats.

In England, the old imperial game encountered Sobers first as a colonial prodigy, then as its master. In 1966 as captain, he produced perhaps the most complete series any cricketer has played: 722 runs at 103.14, 20 wickets, and 10 catches as West Indies won 3–1. He was, at once, his team's premier batsman, opening bowler, spinner, close fielder, and towering leader. His years at Nottinghamshire deepened the bond. English spectators embraced him as one of their own cricketing heroes. Not only did Sobers conquer the old imperial centre, he showed what cricket after empire could be.

> If Don Bradman perfected a colonial sport, Sobers must be remembered for bringing together the Commonwealth of Cricket

Australia, however, was where Sobers made his deepest impression. His 132 in the tied Test at Brisbane in 1960 announced him to a cricketing public that prized audacity. The West Indies lost narrowly, but Australians embraced Worrell's team with an affection that unsettled the racial assumptions of the White Australia era. His 254 at Melbourne in 1972 led a World XI to victory and prompted Bradman to describe it as the greatest exhibition of batting ever witnessed in Australia.

Comparisons with Muhammad Ali illuminate as much as mislead. Sobers worked differently. He was no political saint. His appearance in Rhodesia in 1970 was a serious error, for which he later expressed regret. His revolution occurred principally on the field of play. He remade an imperial inheritance as a shared arena of excellence built on freedom and joy.

This is what Sobers leaves behind: A Commonwealth of Cricket held together by a certain joie de vivre. Yet it is also what cricket now risks taking for granted. Today, India supplies much of the game's money and muscle. But money did not make cricket global, and money alone will not preserve it. Sobers helped rescue the game from becoming curling or croquet: An obscure inheritance guarded by White men and sustained by nostalgia. By elevating those around him, he elevated the sport in ways that future generations should never forget.

The writer teaches Political Science at Ashoka University, Sonipat. Views expressed are personal

There was never one Odyssey

ANANYA BHARDWAJ

TELL ME, Muse, of the man of many ways," The Odyssey begins. It is a curious opening. Rather than claiming ownership over Odysseus' story, Homer invokes the Muse, presenting himself less as an author than as the medium through which an older story is retold.

Before its release, I kept hearing that Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey wasn't "true" to the myth. But how can a myth be true to itself?

I first encountered Homer nearly a decade ago as a first-year English major at Delhi University. We were assigned The Iliad in translation, and many of us wondered why a translated Greek epic belonged in an English classroom at all. That question stayed with me until Professor Sunil Dua, who taught the course, slowly dismantled the assumptions behind it. The point, he argued, was never to read an "original" Homer. It was to understand how stories travel — across languages, cultures, and centuries.

The Iliad and The Odyssey emerged from an oral tradition in which poets performed, improvised, and reshaped stories before audiences. The Homer we read today is the product of centuries of transmission, compilation, and translation. To ask if an adaptation is faithful to an "original" is to overlook the fact that the original itself is elusive.

Nolan's film quietly acknowledges this history. For instance, when Telemachus (Tom Holland) journeys to Sparta to meet Menelaus (Jon Bernthal), he admits to having heard of his father's triumphs not from written records but through the bards who sang the story of the Trojan War. Similarly, Penelope (Anne Hathaway) is sceptical throughout the film because she is unsure of which version to believe regarding Odysseus' fate. The film repeatedly reminds us that reputation, memory, and storytelling shape the hero as much as his actions do.

Nolan is the latest bard in a tradition that has lasted nearly three millennia, the same tradition that allowed Homeric stories to survive in the first place. Every performance reflects the concerns of its moment. If ancient bards could reshape episodes for new audiences, why should a 21st-century filmmaker be denied the same creative freedom?

> Nolan is the latest bard in a tradition that has lasted nearly three millennia, which allowed Homeric stories to survive in the first place. Every performance reflects the concerns of its moment

For Indian readers, this idea should not feel unfamiliar. Our own epics have never belonged to a single text. The Ramayana exists not only in Valmiki's telling but also in Kamban's Tamil version, Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas, tribal performances, regional adaptations, and modern reinterpretations. The Mahabharata continues to find new life in novels, theatre, and television. We rarely ask which one is the "real" epic.

We have grown accustomed to treating literature — and, by extension, culture — as fixed objects, each with an authoritative version against which adaptations must be judged. Oral epics resist that logic. The question, therefore, is not whether the story is true to "history" but whether the story is being told creatively enough to live across time. The question is also whether we as audiences are willing to let our epics transform with us. Hearing Telemachus address Penelope as "mom" on the big screen reverberated in my eardrums too, but that is exactly how a 2026 Telemachus would call out to his mum! What's the harm in it?

There was never one Odyssey. There were only tellings — by ancient bards, medieval scribes, translators, teachers, readers and now Nolan. The myth of the original Odyssey is, perhaps, the greatest myth of all.

The writer is a PhD candidate, Department of English, The George Washington University

• ENERGY

Despite record solar adoption, why Kerala is facing power cuts

Shaju Philip
Thiruvananthapuram, July 20

KERALA IS among India's leading states when it comes to household adoption of rooftop solar panels under the PM Surya Ghar Yojana. While the scheme's success has been uneven nationwide, Kerala ranks fourth in installed capacity, ahead of several big states.

Yet, this is at the heart of the challenge in meeting its power demand. This sounds counterintuitive — shouldn't more rooftop solar panels ease electricity supply?

The answer is not so straightforward.

Solar success story

Data shows Kerala's solar power installed capacity touched 2,508 megawatts (MW) by the end of May 2026. The vast majority of this — 2,036 MW — is from rooftop panels.

Under the scheme, Kerala has 2.96 lakh installations covering 3,03,531 households, with an installed capacity of 1,150 MW. Meanwhile, neighbouring Karnataka has only 22,383 installations covering 33,843 households, with an installed capacity of 91 MW.

The share of solar power as a whole is more than 50% of the state's total installed capacity from all sources. This proportion is even better than the all-India share of solar power in the overall power generation mix: 150 GW of the total installed capacity of 532 GW.

• DAILY DEMAND

• Although traditionally dependent on hydroelectricity, 83% of Kerala's daily power demand is now met by purchases from power exchanges.

• Daily average consumption is 88.45 million units, of which total domestic generation from hydel, wind and solar comes to 15 million units.

The issue

In many industrially developed states, the demand for power peaks during the day. In Kerala, however, the peak demand is from 6 to 11 pm as 75% of the consumers are domestic. Industrial and commercial connections account for only around 20% of the total consumers. This has created a mismatch between an abundance of solar energy during the day and the shortage of power supply at night.

This mismatch is not a Kerala problem alone. India's power grid has been facing its greatest strain at night time. This, however, is more a function of supply failing to even meet the relatively reduced night-time demand, rather than demand rising during those hours. In Kerala, the latter is the key problem — demand rises at night.

The power produced from solar plants during the day is exported to the low-tension power distribution grid. But excessive feeding of solar power to the grid during the day, when consumption is low, increases the voltage in the system. This increases the chances of electrical appliances and transformers getting damaged.

So, when power supply declines in the national market at night, Kerala's electricity utility is forced to buy it at higher prices to meet its rising demand.

As the share of renewable power sources increases, so does the mismatch between when electricity is generated and when it is needed. The answer is storage.

The state has lined up a battery energy storage system to "store" the solar power produced during the day — rather than pumping it back into the grid. This will ensure that the power can be used during the peak nighttime hours.

• LAW

Staging a protest: Rights, restrictions in the law

The right to protest is protected under Article 19(1)(a) and Article 19(1)(b) of the Constitution. This right, however, is not absolute and may be regulated

AMAAL SHEIKH

AFTER THOUSANDS of people gathered in New Delhi for the Cockroach Janta Party's planned protest march to Parliament, the police cracked down, stopping the protesters at multiple barricades before Parliament Street.

Eyewitnesses reported lathi charge and the use of tear gas to disperse the crowd.

The police action has once again brought into focus the legal framework governing protests in India, especially the use of Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), the provision that replaced Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC).

What does the law say?

The right to protest is protected under Article 19(1)(a) and Article 19(1)(b) of the Constitution, which guarantee citizens the freedom of speech and expression and the right to assemble peacefully and without arms.

These rights, however, are not absolute. Articles 19(2) and 19(3) permit the State to impose "reasonable restrictions" in the interests of the "sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with Foreign States, public order, decency or morality," among other grounds.

This means that citizens are free to organise protests, but governments may regulate where and how they take place. Demonstrations often require police permission, are confined to designated protest sites such as Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and Azad Maidan in Mumbai, and may be restricted through prohibitory orders issued under Section 163 of the BNSS.

Section 163 empowers an Executive Magistrate to issue written directions where "immediate prevention or speedy remedy" is considered necessary to prevent obstruction, danger to human life or public tranquillity, or the possibility of a riot or affray. The provision is designed as an emergency measure, and the orders ordinarily remain in force for not more than two months unless extended according to law.

India has consistently defended this approach internationally. Addressing the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2021, India's representative said that while peaceful assembly is a cherished constitutional right, the government must also balance it with its obligation to protect public order and the right to life.

Protesters near Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Monday. PRAVEEN KHANNA

How has Section 163 actually been used?

Although Section 163 is most commonly associated with prohibiting protests, empirical evidence suggests that protest-related restrictions form only a small fraction of its use in Delhi.

A study published in March 2023 by advocates Vrinda Bhandari, Abhinav Sekhri, Natasha Maheshwari and Madhav Aggarwal examined around 5,400 Section 144 orders issued across Delhi between January 2021 and 2022. It found that roughly only 1.5% of orders related to prohibited unlawful assemblies, while five of Delhi's 18 police districts did not issue a single assembly-related order during the period. The report said that an emergency power intended for exceptional situations had gradually become a tool of routine administration.

> **Emergency power**
> The Supreme Court upheld the validity of the erstwhile Section 144 of the CrPC as an emergency power.
> •
> But the court stressed that it could not become a permanent mechanism to prohibit protests.

The study also found that almost every order had been reissued the moment the two-month statutory limit expired, characterising it as a "city-wide mechanical process of issuing cyclostyled orders", including during Covid-19 lockdowns when the conditions that justified the original order no longer held.

What has the Supreme Court said?

The SC has consistently held that while governments may regulate protests in the interests of public order, they cannot extinguish the constitutional right to peaceful assembly altogether.

In *Himat Lal K. Shah v. Commissioner of Police* (1973), the court held that while the state may regulate public meetings on streets, it cannot impose an arbitrary exclusion that effectively deprives citizens of their right to assemble. "Freedom of assembly is an essential element of any democratic system. At the root of this concept lies the citizens' right to meet face to face with others for the discussion of their ideas and problems — religious, political, economic or social." The court added, "It is doubtless true that the State or local authority can regulate its property in order to serve its public purposes... But there is a constitutional difference between reasonable regulation and arbitrary exclusion."

The Court elaborated on these principles in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India* (2018). The case challenged the repeated issuance of Section 144 orders prohibiting public meetings, demonstrations and dharnas around Parliament House, North and South Block, Central Vista and adjoining areas without written permission.

The Supreme Court upheld the validity of Section 144 as an emergency power but stressed that it could not become a permanent mechanism to prohibit protests. It noted that although the orders formally required prior permission, authorities had effectively converted the permission requirement into a blanket ban by routinely refusing permission.

The judgment also dealt with an NGT order that had prohibited all protests along Jantar Mantar Road. Setting aside the blanket prohibition, the Court observed that "the solution was not to ban the demonstrations altogether" but to regulate them in a manner that balanced protesters' rights with the rights of local residents.

The SC directed authorities to frame guidelines governing protests, including regulating the number of participants, maintaining minimum distances from Parliament, the SC and other sensitive locations, prescribing time limits and prohibiting weapons such as firearms, lathis and swords. The ruling effectively reaffirmed Jantar Mantar as Delhi's designated protest site, while making clear that regulation must not become prohibition.

Two years later, in *Amit Sahni v Commissioner of Police* (2020), which arose from the Shaheen Bagh protests, the Supreme Court held that protests must be held in "identified areas" and protesters cannot block public roads and cause inconvenience to others.

"You cannot block public roads. There cannot be indefinite period of protest in such an area. If you want to protest, it has to be in an area identified for protest. You cannot create inconvenience for the people," the court said.

• GLOBAL

'King of the North' to the UK's new PM: The rise of Andy Burnham

Arav Shah
New Delhi, July 20

ANDY BURNHAM was appointed the UK's new Prime Minister on Monday, following the resignation of his predecessor, Keir Starmer. He vacated the position last month in the wake of intense speculation over his continued ability to lead the Labour Party, following a dismal performance in the local elections earlier this year.

In parallel, another unlikely figure was on the rise. Andy Burnham, 56, who sat out the 2024 general elections that Labour won, swept the Makerfield by-election this year. He subsequently won the internal party contest, with his ascension coming at a time of intense scrutiny and disorganisation in the Labour Party.

Early Labour years

Andrew Murray Burnham was born in Lancashire and read English at the University of Cambridge. Until 2001, he served as a special advisor to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith.

In 2001, Burnham entered the House of Commons and was elected as the MP for Leigh in 2001. He climbed the political ladder over the next few years by working in the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and became the Health Secretary.

From 2010 to 2017, Burnham served in several positions in the shadow Cabinet, which comprises members of the Opposition in the UK. Burnham unsuccessfully contested Labour's internal elections in 2010 and 2015. In 2016, he announced his intention to contest the mayoral elections and take a step back from Westminster.

King of the North

Burnham was elected as Mayor of Manchester in 2017 and was re-elected twice, but his standout moment came during a Covid-era lockdown standoff in 2020 with the Central government.

He organised an unscripted press conference in response to the then Conservative government's attempts to force Greater Manchester into strict tiers without requisite financial support. His strongly worded statement branding the central government's approach as "brutal" and "disgraceful" earned him the moniker "King of the North" while cementing his position as a leader looking out for smaller, forgotten communities.

> **Burnham's philosophy**
> • Burnham's return to Westminster has been attributed to his emerging economic philosophy dubbed "Manchesterism".
> • This concept champions aggressive state-level intervention to promote regional growth and devolution of power.

Britain's new PM Andy Burnham. AP

Burnham also went on to establish the Bee Network, which was a public transport overhaul that pioneered an affordable, unified and fully integrated system outside of London. His attempts were well-received — visible in his re-election in 2021 and 2024, where he won over 60% of the vote.

Return to Westminster

Today, Burnham's return has been attributed to his emerging economic philosophy dubbed "Manchesterism". This concept champions aggressive state-level intervention to promote regional growth and devolution of power.

Former Ambassador to Belgium and the EU, Manjeev Singh Puri, told *The Indian Express*: "Labour might think that he is the man to galvanise them to be a party that can win the upcoming 2029 general elections." This power to galvanise was seen within a day of Burnham's win in Makerfield, amid Starmer's weakened position. "Fundamentally, Burnham also enjoys being on the right side of perception since Starmer reached a point after his 2024 landslide victory where Labour MPs didn't perceive him as the next general election leader," Puri said.

Burnham was the favourite early on after Starmer's exit, securing the votes of 379 of the 403 Labour MPs. Ideologically, he walks a factional tightrope, representative of the challenges Labour faces. He has advocated expanding council housing to appease the more left-leaning voters, while pledging himself as a 'pro-business' PM to reassure the centrist right.

• POLICY

What EPFO 3.0 proposes: Pension cover for all, social security for gig workers

Ravi Dutta Mishra & Aanchal Magazine
New Delhi, July 20

A UNIVERSAL pension cover for all workers with option of either annuity or systematic withdrawal plan, first-time social security contributions for unorganised sector workers including gig and platform workers, an upgradation of tech ecosystem to incorporate core banking solution (CBS) — these are some of the key changes being planned by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) as part of its 3.0 reforms phase.

The EPFO is set to move towards this through a CBS-enabled tech platform, which has been seen as necessary to help it navigate payments for social security schemes covering over 60 crore workers, out of which over three-quarters are in the unorganised sector, with limited or no pension coverage.

Target Retirement Sum

The new pension cover will have a defined contribution framework with contributions from multiple sources including workers themselves, employers, government co-contributions for lower-income workers, aggregators in the case of gig and platform workers, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) or third-party funds. This is the first time that the EPFO is considering such forms of contributions or withdrawals at the time of retirement: presently, it only allows advance claims or partial withdrawals for certain categories such as education, illness, housing, and marriage during the membership tenure, or a lumpsum final settlement at the time of retirement.

The contributions will accumulate over time, and be invested in government-backed securities, with annual crediting of interest, giving two options for conversion of the "Target Retirement Sum (TRS)" at the time of retirement — pension based on prevailing annuity and interest rates, or a systematic withdrawal plan.

"Till the time of retirement, it will operate like PF, you keep on accumulating," an official told *The Indian Express*.

The system will compute the proposed TRS dynamically based on the member's chosen pension goal and expected retirement age. Members will have personalised dashboards showing total contributions, real-time corpus status, and progress towards the TRS for applicable schemes. The system will project the required contribution amount and frequency to achieve the declared TRS.

Inflation-linked simulation

Global models are being studied to incorporate similar features such as that of Singapore, which has a deferred annuity scheme that sets aside savings not just for retirement but also for housing and healthcare. Singapore's social security scheme relies not just on individual contributions for the retirement income as apart from a contribution of 20% of the salary, individual efforts are supplemented by employers, loved ones, and the government.

The flexibility to decide the amount for pension payouts, or the drawdown, will be given to the member as they will also have access to inflation-adjusted projections. The EPFO 3.0 system will allow users to simulate pension amounts based on parameters such as age, corpus, interest rate, and retirement age. It will also include additional input fields for voluntary contributions and contribution frequency.

The system will provide inflation-adjusted projections as an optional feature. The estimated monthly pension, projected corpus at retirement, and comparative graphs will be displayed to the member, allowing multiple scenario comparisons for decision making taking into account variable contributions and multiple employment scenarios.

The member can choose to increase or decrease the drawdown under the systematic withdrawal plan.

Gig and platform workers coverage

As the EPFO expects around 2.5 crore gig workers and building and other construction workers (BOCW) over the next five years, the pension scheme is also being designed keeping in mind their inclusion into social security coverage for the first time. The scheme will incorporate "one-to-many mapping" where one Universal Account Number (UAN) will be registered with multiple employers and aggregators, showing total PF and pension contributions from all sources for these workers while maintaining their employer-wise breakdowns.

The EPFO system plans to allow third-party contributions like NGOs, individuals, donor organisations, CSR, and track all contributions under each UAN with a configurable upper limit.

It also proposes family and survivor pensions for spouse, children, and orphans funded through a pooled "Family Benefit Fund". Members of EPF, General Provident Fund, and other PFs could also be allowed to transfer balances into the new pension initiative.

The 3.0 phase will also pave the way for PF contributions for all unorganised sector workers and gig workers, in line with the Code on Social Security that brings gig and platform workers into the social security net for the first time. The Code mandates aggregator contributions of 1-2% of annual turnover for social security, with the total contribution not exceeding 5% of the amount payable by the aggregator.

While the core scheme's foundation will remain the same — employee PF, pension scheme — the CBS-enabled tech platform will allow changes in the mechanism of contributions that will be built on the split-payment model aggregators use at present. CBS is a centralised payments system which forms the backbone of banks in India allowing operations like deposits, withdrawals, in real time across all branches.

"For example, for unorganised workers, there is no contribution, they themselves can make a contribution. Or else, a third party can make a contribution," the official said.

thehindubusinessline.
TUESDAY - JULY 21, 2026

Felicidades, Espana

Spain wins, football triumphs in FIFA cup

The quadrennial football extravaganza ended on Sunday with Spain edging out Argentina in a cagey final — the winning goal coming deep in extra time, thanks to Ferran Torres' wonder volley. Spain, the reigning European champions, were the deserving winners as they were by far the best team during the tournament.

Argentina, who were in the finals due to a combination of Messi's genius, grit and some lucky refereeing decisions at crucial moments going their way, had to settle for the runners-up place. There was no fairy tale ending for Lionel Messi. The tournament actually went off well amidst controversies, in a world where nations and blocs are locked in hostility, if not war. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were a menace, but the 'beautiful game' prevailed. What brought the tournament to life (although this holds true for earlier world cups as well) was the brilliance of less regarded teams. FIFA's move to play to an expanded 48-team format really worked here. Cabo Verde, DR Congo and Curacao made a mark by challenging the giants. Curacao, Jordan and Uzbekistan could not have participated but for the expanded format. Debutants Cabo Verde gave defending champions Argentina a run for their money by pushing them to extra time. They held champions Spain and two-time World Cup winners Uruguay to a draw. Egypt, though hardly minnows, almost knocked out defenders Argentina, in what was quite easily the World Cup's most exciting match, one that would sadly be remembered more for some of its refereeing decisions. The tournament brought in a rich harvest of goals (nearly three per match), with the participation of more countries bringing extra flair.

The tournament, held in the US for the second time, with Canada and Mexico being co-hosts, did see some unpleasant events. The worst of them was on immigration. The crippling visa and travel restrictions imposed on Iran and the denial of entry to Somalian referee Omar Artan at the start of the tournament left a sour taste. There was also the bizarre incident of US President Donald Trump apparently intervening on behalf of the US team in getting a match ban for the US player Falorin Balogun rescinded. The FIFA responded without any conviction whatsoever.

There was an outcry over refereeing in some games and the steep pricing of tickets. However, what surprised most were the stadium turnouts despite the eye-popping ticket prices (courtesy 'surge pricing') — ranging from $140-$2,375 for group matches and $8,680 for the finals. These can hardly be regarded as an advertisement for football's 'democratic' spirit. FIFA claims that the revenues generated by this World Cup would top $15 billion, which is double of the $7.57 billion generated during the 2019-22 cycle. National federations would be happy to hear that. However, the intersection of sport, commerce and politics is cause for unease. Football too is kicked around, as it were. But such is the game that it weaves a spell, despite everything.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

TC SUSEEL KUMAR
R SUDHAKAR

PTI

Will Vikram-1 be a commercial success?

SPACE ECONOMY. The path to meaningful revenue lies in launch cadence and a verifiable cost that customers find attractive

On July 18, a rocket built entirely inside India, funded by private capital, designed by a company that did not exist eight years ago, placed a payload into a 450 km orbit. Skyroot Aerospace's Vikram-1 made India the third country, after the US and China, to have a privately developed orbital launch vehicle successfully reach orbit. Reaching orbit on a maiden flight is far from guaranteed, even for well-funded private ventures. Germany's Isar Aerospace saw its Spectrum rocket fail shortly after lift-off on its own debut orbital attempt earlier in 2025. Vikram-1 got there clean, on its first try.

This did not happen by accident. It is the outcome of six years of deliberate policy, since the government opened the space sector to private enterprise in 2020, and of a founding team, Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka, who left ISRO to build something India had never had: a commercially owned rocket capable of taking a satellite to space on demand. The company is now India's first space-tech unicorn, valued at $1.1 billion after backing from GIC, Sherpalo Ventures and BlackRock funds. For a country that has spent decades watching SpaceX and Rocket Lab define what commercial space access means, Vikram-1 is a genuine entry into that conversation.

The next question is the one that will decide what this entry is worth.

MARKET PROFILE

Skyroot competes in the small satellite launch segment, and that segment is already occupied by companies with years of flight history and tested pricing. Rocket Lab's Electron carries 300 kg to orbit for roughly $7.5 million, near $25,000 per kilogram, across 79 launches by the end of 2025. Firefly Aerospace's Alpha carries 1,030 kg for close to $15 million, near $14,560 per kg. ISRO's own Small Satellite Launch Vehicle prices out at roughly $7,050 to $8,270 per kg for payloads of 375 kg to 525 kg. SpaceX's Falcon 9 has pushed dedicated launch to about $3,000 per kg at maximum payload, with ride-share slots as low as $6,000-7,000 per kg for customers willing to give up control over orbit and schedule.

Skyroot has not published an official Vikram-1 price. Early commentary around this launch has assumed an Indian cost advantage over Electron and Alpha. That assumption remains unproven until Skyroot discloses commercial pricing. It will have to be earned, through cadence and a growing flight record, rather than claimed on the strength of one successful mission. Vikram-1 itself is rated to carry 350 kg on the orbit profile it flew for Mission Aagaman, with Skyroot's own specifications listing up to 480 kg on lower-inclination orbits.

THE RELIABILITY FACTOR

Cost per kilogram only matters if the rocket gets there. Globally, 2025 saw 329 orbital launch attempts, of which 321 reached orbit, according to Jonathan McDowell's Jonathan's Space Report, a reliability rate above 97 per cent, with wide variation between mature vehicles and new entrants.

Rocket Lab closed out 2025 with a perfect record across 21 Electron and HASTE missions, confirmed in the company's own year-end filing. Skyroot

> **Skyroot has not published an official Vikram-1 price. Early commentary around** this launch has assumed an Indian cost advantage over Electron and Alpha

has now flown twice, once sub-orbitally in 2022, once orbitally this month, both successes. That is an excellent start. It is not yet the flight record that lets an international satellite operator book a 2027 launch with the same confidence they would extend to Electron or Alpha.

WHERE THE OPPORTUNITY SITS

None of this diminishes what has been built. Sovereign, on-demand access to orbit ends India's dependence on the launch queues of other nations, a consideration that matters as much for defence and strategic communications as for commercial customers. It anchors a domestic supply chain, in carbon composites, 3D-printed propulsion and precision manufacturing, with uses well beyond rocketry. India's own space economy is targeted to grow from $8.4 billion in 2022 to $44 billion by 2033, and Skyroot's path to meaningful revenue runs through exactly the kind of monthly launch cadence it has yet to demonstrate. Launch economics improve with utilisation for any provider: fixed manufacturing and infrastructure costs are spread across more missions, and insurance premiums tend to fall as a reliability record lengthens.

Skyroot's leadership has already identified where the opportunity lies. The company expects only a third of demand to be domestic, with Southeast Asia, Japan, the US and Europe accounting for the rest. That international customer will choose on price, schedule reliability and insurance cost, the last of which falls only as a flight record lengthens. This is the commercial task in front of Indian private space now: convert a proud first flight into a launch cadence and a disclosed, verifiable cost per kilogram that a customer in Tokyo or Singapore chooses over Rocket Lab, on merit rather than sentiment.

Vikram-1 has done what it needed to do. It reached orbit, on the first try, as a private Indian company. What it does over the next dozen launches, not this one, will determine whether India's private space sector becomes a serious commercial player in the global launch market or a proud milestone that international customers admire without buying.

Suseel is former Managing Director, and Sudhakar is former Executive Director (Marketing), LIC. Views are personal. All data are drawn from publicly available sources

The Brexit decade: What India must learn

Economic nationalism comes at the cost of reduced market access, disruption in established supply relationships

P Saravanan
A Paul Williams

When British voters chose to leave the European Union in June 2016 by a narrow margin of 51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent, economists warned of economic pain. Most assumed the damage would be sharp, visible, and short lived. A decade on, the evidence tells a different story. New research estimates that by 2025, Brexit had reduced UK GDP by between 6 per cent and 8 per cent (CEPR, 2025), with the costs accumulating quietly and persistently over time rather than arriving all at once.

For a country like India, ambitious, fast-growing, and increasingly vocal about its own economic sovereignty, the Brexit story offers a sobering set of lessons about the true costs of economic disengagement.

The popular narrative around Brexit promised liberation from EU regulations, open borders, and the constraints of pooled sovereignty. What followed was far more complicated than its architects had anticipated. Investment plans were shelved, and managerial time was spent on risk assessments and Brexit preparation rather than developing new products or expanding operations.

In the financial sector, the UK's departure from the EU's financial passporting regime significantly curtailed market access for UK-based financial institutions, dealing a serious blow to one of the country's most productive industries, and, critically, the damage was not front-loaded.

LESSONS INDIA CANNOT IGNORE

The most underappreciated lesson of Brexit is that 'not knowing' is as damaging as the eventual outcome. The prolonged policy uncertainty of the Brexit process contributed importantly to the magnitude of the economic impact. Firms delayed investments, avoided hiring, and redirected management attention towards contingency planning rather than growth. By leaving the EU, the UK lost negotiating power and found itself in a weaker bargaining position as it tried to recreate trade deals with other countries. India has long been ambivalent about deep trade integration, sometimes treating free trade agreements with suspicion and stepping back from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2019. Nevertheless, Brexit demonstrates that the costs of reduced market access are real and accumulate silently over the years. The largest productivity losses in the UK were concentrated in manufacturing sectors integrated into complex supply chains.

India's manufacturing ambitions under initiatives like Make in India and the Production Linked Incentive scheme depend critically on integration into global value chains. Brexit shows that disrupting established supply

WARY. India has long been ambivalent about deep trade integration GETTY IMAGES

relationships is deeply costly and not easily reversed. India must work to embed itself more deeply in these networks and ensure that domestic policy does not inadvertently raise the cost of partnering with international firms.

The human cost that is forgotten: Brexit carried a quieter human toll. The end of the free EU labour movement significantly disrupted sectors that had relied on European workers, particularly in food, hospitality, healthcare, and social care. Skills gaps emerged faster than training programmes could fill, and communities that had voted Leave in search of economic dignity often found themselves squeezed the hardest. India faces its own version of this tension. But the Brexit experience suggests that the real danger is not openness to the world. It is the failure to build institutions at home that makes returning worthwhile. The answer is not to close doors but to make the home more liveable, more professionally rewarding, and more institutionally trustworthy.

The deepest lesson Brexit offers to any developing economy is philosophical. The Leave campaign framed the choice as one between sovereignty and subjugation. Economic sovereignty is not diminished by trade, investment, or integration. It is strengthened by the prosperity those connections generate. India's growing diplomatic weight, its assertive multilateralism, and its emergence as a trusted global partner are all built on economic substance, not economic isolation.

The way forward for India is not to mimic Brexit's defensiveness but to learn from its consequences. That means building stable, transparent policy environments that investors can plan around. It means treating global value chain participation as a national priority, not a reluctant concession. And it means investing in the institutions, infrastructure, and human capital that make openness sustainable rather than threatening. Brexit is not simply a cautionary tale about the EU or about Britain alone. It is a cautionary tale about the seductive simplicity of economic nationalism and about how gradual, cumulative costs can remain invisible until they become irreversible.

Saravanan is a professor of finance and accounting at IIM Tiruchirappalli, and Williams is the Head of India at Sernova Financial

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Ethanol push

Apropos 'Centre ring-fences 72 lakh tonnes of rice for FCI for ethanol push' (July 20), it is advisable to ask the State governments of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Jammu & Kashmir to provide a targeted rice quantity for ethanol production as these States have huge under-utilised cultivable lands and such targeted approach will hugely benefit the local farmers. Cutting down the market or PDS share may accelerate hoarding and the price will hit the common people. The ICAR, IARI, ICRISAT and NASC must also be roped in to help produce the kind of rice variety for higher yield of ethanol.

Vinod Johri
Delhi

Aggressive leaders

This refers to 'The world's set for a bumpy ride' (July 21). A handful of powerful leaders continue to pursue assertive agendas that, while framed as serving national interests, are reshaping the international ecosystem — financially, environmentally, and socially — in ways that demand sober reflection.It is particularly noteworthy that some of these leaders have consolidated authority for extended periods, raising questions about governance models and their long-term impact. While their strategies are presented domestically as essential for national strength, the cumulative effects are increasingly visible in their own economies as well as globally. Unilateral agendas, however justified at home, carry consequences that ripple across borders. The world's leaders must acknowledge this interconnectedness and commit to dialogue, cooperation, and shared responsibility if stability is to be restored.

Roy Markose
Thiruvananthapuram

Vikram launch

The successful maiden launch of Vikram by a young Indian startup is more than a milestone: it flashes the long journey ahead. Six decades after humanity reached the Moon with computers far less powerful than today's smartphones, launching, orbiting, and recovering spacecraft have become increasingly routine. The real frontier now lies elsewhere: in developing the next generation of technologies rather than merely mastering existing ones.
India stands at a defining moment. We may soon manufacture chips, commercial aircraft, and advanced electronics at scale, creating jobs and expanding exports. But unless we own the underlying intellectual property, we remain efficient workshops producing designs conceived elsewhere, capturing only a fraction of the value.

R Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

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A ND-NDE

Dealing with war stress

‘Start-stop’ Iran war is testing India’s policy agility

Sachin Gupta

The volatile, “stop-start” dynamic that has defined the US-Iran conflict over the last five months has plunged the global economy into deep uncertainty. Far beyond the immediate geopolitical fault lines, few nations bear the economic friction of this erratic cycle as acutely as India.

For New Delhi, the rolling sequence of fierce escalations, marked by the collapse of ceasefires and the blockades of the strategic Strait of Hormuz, poses a serious challenge to macroeconomic stability. As the Middle East remains locked in this destabilising pattern, India must aggressively rewrite its economic, energy, and monetary playbooks to insulate itself from persistent external shocks.

CORE VULNERABILITIES

India’s immediate exposure stems from its deep structural dependence on West Asian energy corridors. While New Delhi has successfully diversified crude oil sources, reducing its total dependency on the Strait of Hormuz to roughly 30 per cent, it remains vulnerable to disruptions in the natural gas supply chain.

Every single sudden re-closure of the strategic Strait immediately squeezes supply, threatening to trigger domestic inflation and compress profit margins across manufacturing, aviation, and consumer goods sectors.

Furthermore, the macroeconomic fallout has rippled directly into India’s financial architecture. The conflict-driven spikes in global crude prices have shaken the Indian Rupee, driving it to historic lows against the dollar. This currency depreciation, high oil and gas prices have widened the current account deficit, with the IMF lowering the GDP growth forecast to 6.4 per cent for FY27.

RBI MEASURES

To survive, India deployed immediate financial shields and long-term structural realignments. Central to this defence is an aggressive monetary intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to stabilise the tumbling rupee.

Moving decisively beyond passive monitoring, the RBI acted as an active net seller of foreign currency, at the cost of declining forex reserves.

Parallel to spot-market sales, the RBI deployed advanced liquidity tools, including a $5 billion rupee/dollar buy-sell swap auction to ease localised greenback scarcity. To organically attract capital and counter energy-induced outflows, the central bank also enacted sweeping structural reforms.

By expanding its Fully Accessible Route (FAR) to include long-term government bonds, lifting restrictive 30 per cent short-maturity caps on foreign investments, and clearing the path for high-yield NRI dollar deposit schemes, the RBI is expected to draw in tens of billions of dollars in fresh global capital to anchor the rupee.


OIL IMPORTS. Rethinking strategy

THE PATH FORWARD

What these ‘start-stop’ wars mean is that India has to decisively manage its energy vulnerability on account of such geopolitical conflicts.

Reducing the share of imported oil and gas in our energy mix is the most obvious solution. This will require us to focus on developing alternative sources, such as syngas from coal gasification and nuclear energy.

These sources account for a significant share of energy in large economies like China and France, respectively, which are deficient in oil and gas. In addition, we must build a strategic petroleum reserve for such unforeseen events.

The ongoing crisis proves that India can no longer afford to be a passive bystander to West Asian volatility.

Through synchronised fiscal discipline, aggressive central bank interventions, and rapid trade diversification, New Delhi is transforming a geopolitical crisis into a stress test of its macroeconomic resilience.

However, as long as the stop-start war continues, India’s policy agility will remain under its greatest test yet.

The writer is Chief Rating Officer & Executive Director, CareEdge Ratings. Views expressed are personal

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thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 21, 2006

Cabinet okays 6th Pay Commission

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved the setting up of the Sixth Pay Commission for nearly 3.3 million Central Government employees with an outer time frame of 18 months to submit its recommendations. It will also consider whether any interim relief is to be granted to the employees.

HC orders CAS in three metros by Dec 31

The Delhi High Court on Thursday directed the Centre to implement the controversial Conditional Access System (CAS) in the three metros — Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai — before December 31. A Division Bench headed by the acting Chief Justice, Mr Vijinder Jain, and Mr Justice Kailash Gambhir asked the Centre to issue a notification within a week and granted 22 weeks’ time to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to implement the scheme.

I-T staff to stage dharna on July 31

Around 45,000 employees of the Income Tax Department all over the country will stage a walk-out from their offices on July 31, the last day for filing Income-Tax returns, in protest against the delay in acceding to their demands by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT).

MACROSCAN.

CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

Exchange rates, and managing volatile flows

Even large economies without external debt stress can suffer from the impact of liberalized capital flows

CHART 1
Rupee dip: Nominal vs Real
India: Nominal and real exchange rates and policy interest rate

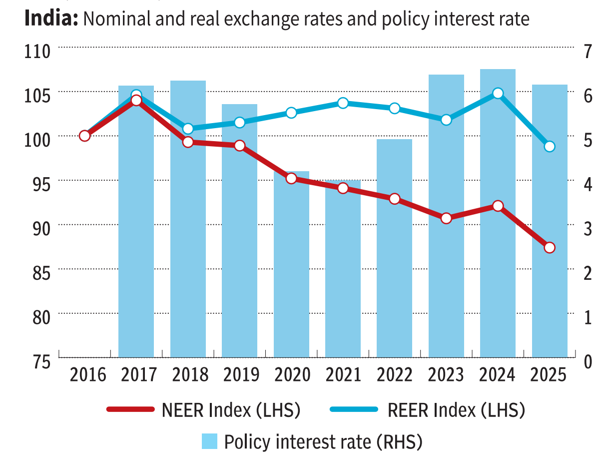


CHART 2
Impact on flows
India: Net external accounts, current and Financial ($ bn)

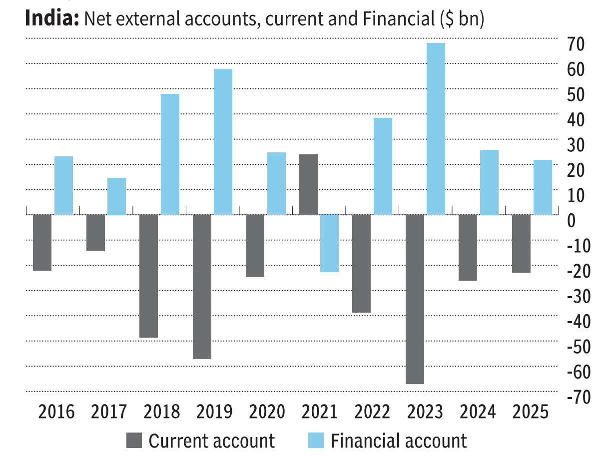


CHART 3
Divergent paths
Brazil: Nominal and real exchange rates and policy interest rate

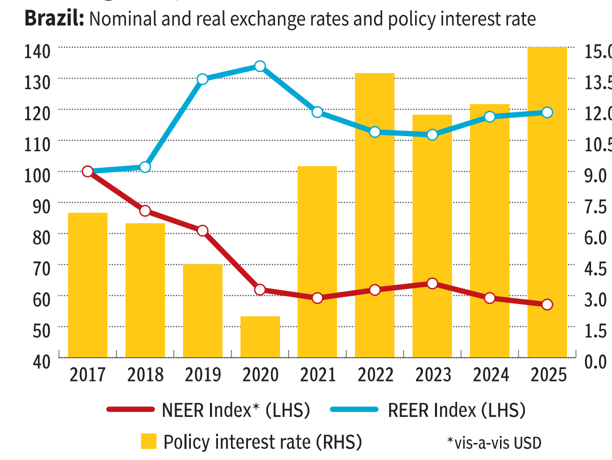


CHART 4
Negative zone
Brazil: Net external accounts, current and Financial ($ bn)

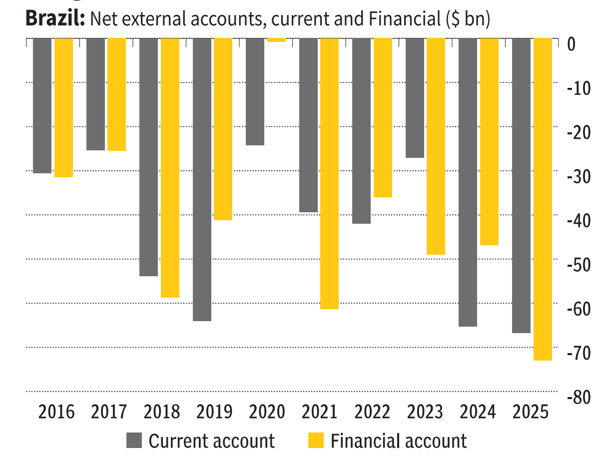


CHART 5
Similar paths
South Africa: Nominal and real exchange rates and policy interest rate

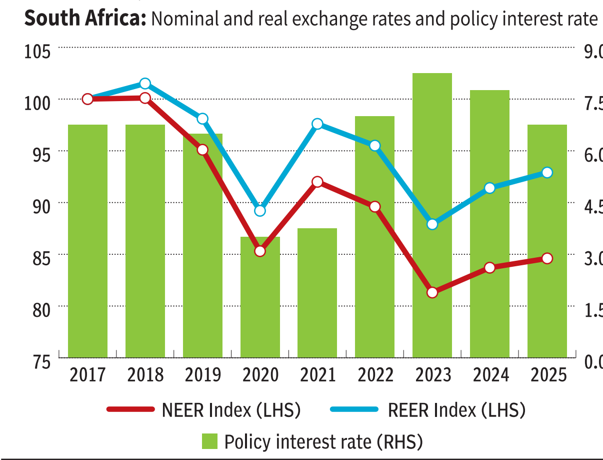
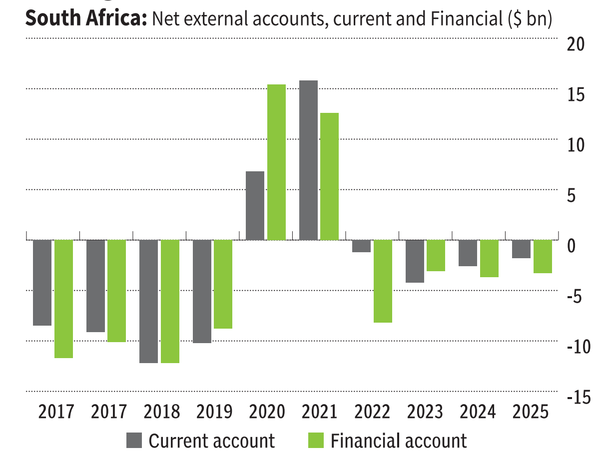


CHART 6
Swing in flows
South Africa: Net external accounts, current and Financial ($ bn)



Source for all figures: CEIC database, using IMF databases on exchange rates and balance of payments

It is well-known that ensuring some stability and desired level of the exchange rate is critical for macroeconomic strategy for development, especially in low and middle income countries. Yet in a world of liberalised and volatile capital flows, this has become much more difficult for policy makers in such countries.

Increasingly, exchange rate movements are not determined by so-called “fundamentals”, but by flawed risk perceptions as well as domestic macroeconomic strategies. Both monetary policy and fiscal policy must react to the actual or potential movements of cross-border capital that largely determine the movement of nominal exchange rates. These movements then set off domestic economic processes, such as changes in inflation, as well as responses (such as changes in interest rates) that affect real economic activity in often adverse ways.

To see how this has played out in the recent past, let we examine the recent pattern in some of the more prominent middle income countries: India, Brazil and South Africa. These are among the largest economies in their respective regions, part of the IBSA grouping, and significant members of G20. They have had higher growth rates in the recent past than most advanced economies, and significantly, they are also not debt-stressed countries. External debt to GDP ratios in these countries is relatively low, especially when compared to some rich countries: 17 per cent for Brazil, 20 per cent for India and 47 per cent for South Africa in 2025, compared to 96 per cent for the US, 105 per cent for Japan, 150 per cent for Canada and Austria, and as much as 270 per cent for the UK. (https://www.focus-economics.com/economic-indicator/external-debt/).

However, all of them (unlike China) have largely liberalised their external accounts to deregulate cross-border flows of capital almost completely. This has led to significant loss of domestic policy space because of the fear of outflows of legacy capital and consequent internal destabilisation.

In addition, it has meant that even these relatively large and important economies are trapped in a vicious cycle of nominal devaluation-domestic inflation-further devaluation that does not generate higher exports or greater external “competitiveness”. Instead, it adversely affects the livelihoods and living standards of the bulk of the population.

PLUMMETING RUPEE

Consider first India, for which the data are presented in Figures 1a and 1b. In the past decade, and especially since 2017, the rupee has depreciated substantially in nominal terms, falling by nearly 20 per cent across the top 40 trading partners. But in real terms, the exchange rate has barely shifted, with only marginal changes over the entire period, such that the level in 2025 was only 2 per cent below that in 2016.

(The NEER refers to the nominal effective exchange rate, based on weighted trade with 40 top trading partners; the REER refers to the Real Effective Exchange Rate with the same nominal rate adjusted for relative rates of inflation across the 40 top trading partners. All data are averages over the calendar year. The numbers provided for the exchange rates are index numbers with 2016=100 and calculated so that a decline reflects a depreciation.)

It is worth noting that the nominal exchange rate continued to decline despite significant increases in the domestic monetary policy interest rate from 2022 onwards, which were largely in response to the rise in US Fed rates after the onset of the Ukraine war and associated inflation resulting from higher global food and fuel prices.

Did the depreciating nominal exchange rate have a positive impact on the current account? This would only be expected if the real exchange rate also moved accordingly, which we have observed did not occur.

But perhaps the increase in the policy interest rate had a favourable impact on net financial flows? Figure 1b suggests that there was an increase — and a shift from negative flows to positive flows — in 2022 and 2023, but the effect was relatively short-lived. In the subsequent two years, net capital inflows declined sharply to fall to nominal levels of a decade earlier, which suggests a substantial decline in real terms.

> The rupee has depreciated substantially in nominal terms, falling by nearly 20 per cent across the top 40 trading partners. But in real terms, the exchange rate has barely shifted

BRAZIL’S EXPERIENCE

A very similar trajectory is evident for Brazil, even though as an energy and commodity exporter it actually benefited from the global price hikes in food and fuel commodities. Figure 2a show that the real exchange rate even appreciated as the nominal exchange rate (here relative to the US dollar) declined by as much as 43 per cent over the entire period. This is because of faster inflation in Brazil than in the trading partners, but the problem is circular since rising import prices contribute to domestic inflation.

As in India, the domestic monetary policy interest rate was reduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The decline was significant, to only 2 per cent, but it was dramatically increased in the following year to an average of 9.25 per cent in 2021. By 2022, it was as high as nearly 14 per cent, which means a much higher effective lending rate for businesses and personal loans. This did not do much to improve the situation in terms of capital flows. Both current and financial accounts of the balance of payments remained negative throughout this period, and the net financial outflows, which had worsened in 2021 (probably leading to the rise in the policy rate in 2022) were even greater in 2025.

SOUTH AFRICA’S TRAJECTORY

South Africa also shows a broadly similar trajectory, with some interesting differences. In the South African case, the real exchange rate did move in the same direction as the nominal exchange rate, albeit to a much more limited extent. The monetary policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic was also sharp, with a drop in the policy interest rate from 6.5 per cent in 2019 to 3.5 per cent in 2020. By 2020 the average policy rate had doubled to 7 per cent and it continued to increase in 2023.

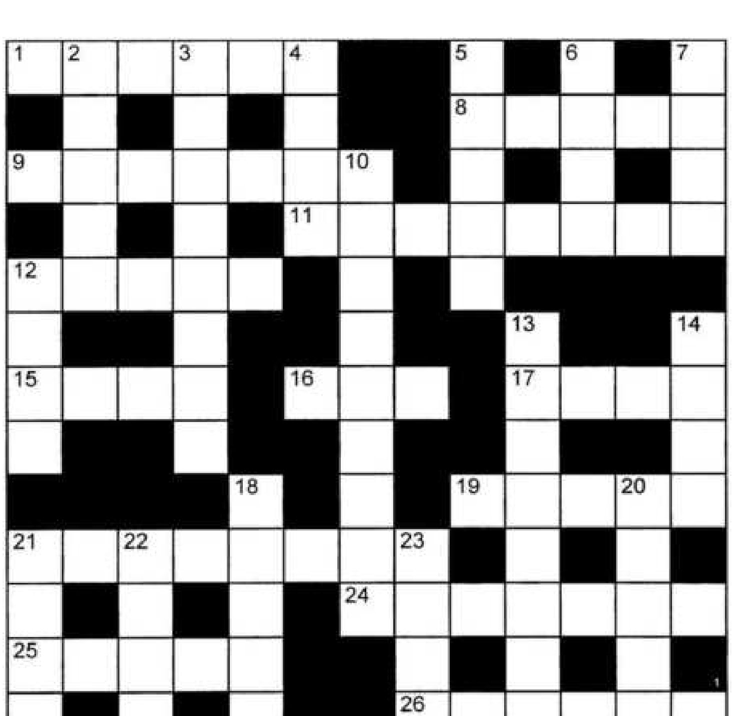
Surprisingly, both current and financial accounts in South Africa turned positive during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. But thereafter they turned negative again, despite the significant nominal devaluation and the rising interest rate presumably designed to attract capital.

These broadly similar trajectories of exchange rates, interest rates and capital flows in very different economies suggest that there is a pattern that goes beyond the macroeconomic policies of these countries. This is the baneful influence of investor perceptions in a world of currency hierarchies, which determine capital flow movements that are largely beyond the powers of domestic policies to influence.

In such a world, neither fear (strict fiscal discipline) nor courage (attempting countercyclical policies) saves you. Ultimately, controls on volatile capital and moving away from reliance on external financing as far as possible may be essential preconditions for successful macroeconomic management.

As Keynes famously argued, “above all, let finance be primarily national”.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2697



EASY

ACROSS

01. Whisky (6)
08. To damage (5)
09. Sacred place; private room (7)
11. A small, light car (8)
12. Vestment worn on the shoulders (5)
15. Keeps finding fault (4)
16. Consumed (3)
17. Fruit skin (4)
19. Confused, untidy (5)
21. A dilemma (8)
24. Open footwear (7)
25. Figures worshipped (5)
26. To totter along (6)

DOWN

02. Skilled trade; vessel (5)
03. Precarious, unstable as situation (8)
04. Time (4)
05. A written composition (5)
06. Indifferent; tolerable (2-2)
07. Mark of spilled ink (4)
10. Mule-drivers (9)
12. To pot a snooker ball (4)
13. Resplendent (8)
14. Be at sport (4)
18. Writer of odes (5)
20. An ointment (5)
21. A pound (4)
22. In excited eagerness (4)
23. Long beam on mast (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. How one may quash a rumour with some spirit (6)
08. It may damage the loot (5)
09. In total, can’t get confused by such a holy place (7)
11. Sort of car to dash hither and thither in (8)
12. Nicked something one could wear over one’s shoulders (5)
15. Such sorry mounts as one keeps on at somebody about (4)
16. In great excitement, one had a meal (3)
17. To start preparing fish, skin it (4)
19. In a muddle about me, says a loss occurred (5)
21. Any quad can be about right if in a fix (8)
24. And it appears in Sarah’s collection of footwear (7)
25. Objects worshipped in solid form (5)
26. Not even in turning red will one potter like this (6)

DOWN

02. It may be cunning as a skilled occupation (5)
03. Likely to laugh when prodded, though the situation is awkward (8)
04. The time belongs to you and to me, one is told (4)
05. How to try a formal composition (5)
06. Thus it is repeated, though it’s only moderate (2-2)
07. One must be drunk to follow this ink mark (4)
10. Sure, let me be wrong if their charges are stubborn (9)
12. Will get to the bottom of what’s found in the scullery (4)
13. Dip lends it a different form, and that’s magnificent (8)
14. Dole out about a pound for drama (4)
18. Poet who will do it up and sit around (5)
20. Hail a remedy (5)
21. The pound given pro quo in retaliation (4)
22. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed, a Guildhall giant appears (4)
23. There’s a three-foot space beside the house (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2696

ACROSS 7. Lady-in-waiting 8. Precipitate 12. Recipe 14. Negate 16. Rivals 18. Before 19. Free-loading 23. Fruit-machines

DOWN 1. Carp 2. Byre 3. Unwise 4. Nation 5. Etna 6. Once 9. Recover 10. Tea-gown 11. Gene 12. Rare 13. Pal 15. Ewe 17. Salami 18. Blanch 19. Form 20. Evil 21. Iris 22. Grew

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Starship troopers

Startups can augment India's space ambitions

The success of Skyroot Aerospace's Vikram-1 rocket is a milestone in India's space programme. It was the first privately designed and built Indian rocket to reach orbit and deploy satellites. The launch from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, of the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro), was delayed by 35 minutes due to a technical issue. But Vikram-1 behaved perfectly after liftoff. It followed the scheduled flight path, with its four-stage engine firing in programmed sequences to push it into the planned 450-km low-earth orbit (LEO) about 15 minutes after liftoff. This makes India the fourth nation — after the United States, China and New Zealand — to develop private-sector rocket capability. Mission Aagaman, as the test flight was called, placed all the payloads it carried into orbit. It carried two cubesats. One was Skyroot's Scope satellite, which will gather data for future missions. The other is the Solaras S3 nanosatellite pathfinder, designed by another Indian startup, Grahaa Space.

Skyroot is looking to fill a gap in the market with the Vikram series. Vikram-1 is designed to place up to 350 kilograms into the LEO. An upgraded version called Vikram-1U, which will have strap-on boosters, will increase that payload to 550 kilograms. These are ideal payloads for small satellite launches that are short of efficient launch vehicles. Using rockets designed to lift heavy loads is inefficient for small satellite deployment. Either the rocket is underutilised if there's insufficient load, or there is a delay in launching satellites, since the payloads must wait until enough are available to generate a full load. Vikram-1 could fill that gap. Skyroot raised $60 million in May, which it invested in the design and production of the Vikram series. The four-stage, seven-storey-tall Vikram-1 rocket has three solid-fuel stages which drop off, and a fourth liquid-fuel stage that carries out the tricky task of manoeuvring exactly into the desired orbit.

It is unusual for the first launch of a new rocket to be entirely successful. Skyroot will study the data and carry out at least two more test flights before going fully commercial. It is one of the hundreds of Indian startups that have moved into the aerospace sector since policy changed to accommodate private enterprise. It was incorporated in Hyderabad in 2018 and both the cofounders, Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka, had earlier worked for Isro. The Isro pedigree of Skyroot's founders is not unusual. India's aerospace agency has seen the exit of over 100 engineers and scientists. Most have moved to startups. This exodus has been so marked that it has led to the agency changing its exit policy to try and retain employees on mission-critical projects. There is an ongoing debate that the private sector is now building its capabilities at the expense of the agency. Although Skyroot's launch took place at an Isro facility and the company was congratulated by the Prime Minister, the tensions between the space agency and the private sector are now visible and growing.

By analogy, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa), the United States agency, tenders out for its equipment to the private sector, while setting specifications and doing some of its own design. SpaceX and other private firms such as Blue Origin build rockets to Nasa specifications. Nasa owns thousands of patents, which it licenses out. Indian policymakers will have to find similar ways to resolve the tensions to ensure that Isro doesn't suffer even as the country develops the private aerospace ecosystem.

Strengthening panchayats

Greater fiscal autonomy and institutional capacity are needed

A meeting between the Centre and states recently highlighted the weak own-source revenue (OSR) base of gram panchayats, limiting their financial autonomy. This is important because the government is expected to roll out model OSR guidelines for 262,000 gram panchayats to help states frame or update rules for taxation and non-tax revenue collection. However, strengthening panchayat finances requires addressing deeper structural constraints that have kept local governments dependent on grants.

Despite being responsible for delivering basic services and implementing development programmes, panchayats generate very little revenue of their own. The data from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj shows that between 2017-18 and 2021-22, panchayats across 30 states and Union Territories collected ₹25,595 crore as OSR, amounting to just about ₹59 per capita annually. About 42 per cent of the gram panchayats collected less than ₹1 lakh as OSR in FY22, while the average annual OSR of the gram panchayats was around ₹2.3 lakh. The disparity across states is also striking. OSR accounts for just 1 per cent of the receipts of the gram panchayats in Uttar Pradesh, as against 40 per cent in Andhra Pradesh.

The problem is not merely a lack of revenue sources but also weak capacity to utilise existing powers. Many states have empowered panchayats to levy taxes, fees and user charges, but collection remains negligible. Property tax, one of the most important potential sources of local revenue, remains underdeveloped because of weak property records, outdated assessment systems, and poor enforcement. According to a study of panchayat finances conducted by the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP), property tax accounted for around 40 per cent of OSR among local bodies across the world, highlighting its potential as a stable source of revenue. Revenue mobilisation is closely linked to the economic environment of villages. Panchayats with larger populations, greater commercial activity, and higher incomes have a stronger tax base. Panchayats closer to towns also performed better because of greater economic activity and higher property values. This explains why southern and western states have generally outperformed northern states, aided not only by stronger economies but also by clearer rules and better administrative systems.

At the same time, financial self-reliance cannot mean that grants become less important. Poorer villages with limited economic activities cannot be expected to generate revenues comparable to economically stronger panchayats. Transfers from the Centre and states will remain essential for ensuring equity. The objective should be to ensure that grants supplement, rather than substitute, local revenue generation. The government's proposed OSR guidelines and performance-linked grants under the Sixteenth Finance Commission are steps in the right direction. But fiscal empowerment requires more than standardised rules. Panchayats need trained personnel, digital systems for tax administration, better management of common assets such as ponds and markets, and greater autonomy in deciding local priorities. Thus, overall, there is a strong case for empowering panchayats with greater decentralisation, improved fiscal powers, and capacity building.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The fine balance of good governance

Good boards create value by safeguarding integrity, shaping strategy, and enabling execution

I have had the opportunity to view corporate governance from three vantage points: As an executive, as an independent director, and as a regulator.

Executives focus on delivering business outcomes and sometimes chafe at boards coming in the way. Directors worry about being held liable for outcomes outside their control. Regulators examine board decisions, usually well after something has gone wrong.

In my experience, the best boards set clear governance and broad strategy guardrails, while giving management the freedom to lead within them.

Accountability of board members

Independent directors are often concerned about their potential liabilities. On this count, Indian jurisprudence and the Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi's) enforcement approach should offer some comfort. Both reflect the principle that directors should ultimately be held accountable for their own acts and omissions, rather than merely for a company's failures.

POLICY IN PRACTICE

ANANTH NARAYAN

I saw this principle applied repeatedly during my time at Sebi.

One high-profile case involved allegations that a promoter had siphoned sizeable funds from a listed company. In the court of public opinion and breathless social media, the entire board had failed. The evidence before Sebi, however, painted a different picture. The independent directors had taken up the auditor warnings, questioned management, recorded their concerns, and directed that the questionable transactions be stopped. Management had chosen to ignore these directions.

Sebi, therefore, proceeded against the company, its executives, and the promoter, but not against the other directors.

More generally, Sebi's enforcement process reinforces this discipline. Sebi's speaking orders set out the evidence, record the submissions of those facing enforcement action, and explain the reasoning behind the conclusions. The availability of review before the Securities Appellate Tribunal provides an additional safeguard and further encourages the application of mind at Sebi. While there is always room for improvement, these steps help ensure that final accountability is based on evidence rather than hindsight.

One practical lesson follows. Directors sometimes claim that they had privately raised concerns with other stakeholders, even though those concerns found no reflection in the board's deliberations or minutes. Usually, this is to avoid uncomfortable discussions or to "protect the company". That is a mistake. Governance must happen in the boardroom. As former Sebi chairman M Damodaran once observed, directors must learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Recording concerns politely but firmly ultimately serves the interests of both the director and the company. Years later, memories may fade, but the minutes will endure.

Governance begins with management

The board's first responsibility is to ensure that commercial success never comes at the expense of integrity. Management, not independent directors, should lead the way here.

In one instance, board approval was sought for a commercially attractive proposal. The note explained why management wished to offer a customer more favourable commercial terms than usual. What it did not disclose was that even the existing practice was in breach of regulations. The enhanced proposal, therefore, would have compounded an existing breach.

The issue surfaced when a director with domain expertise raised questions. Management then returned with a revised proposal. It now acknowledged the regulatory issue but argued that competitors followed similar practices, regulators had inspected the industry without objection, government departments were aware of the practice, and the business opportunity was simply too valuable to lose.

None of these arguments altered the central issue. Boards have no authority to authorise regulatory breaches, however compelling the commercial considerations may be. Crucially, the tone at the top is set less by mission statements than by the decisions boards make when commercial incentives collide with integrity.

This offers some broader lessons. First, good governance begins with frontline management being balanced and candid with the board.

Second, no individual director can understand every aspect of a company's business. The board, however, should collectively possess the expertise needed to evaluate proposals across all relevant areas. Building such a board is itself one of the board's most important responsibilities.

Governance, not management

Having set governance guardrails, the board must give management the freedom to lead within them.

Former executives, administrators, and professionals qualify as independent directors because of their experience and expertise. Ironically, those very strengths can sometimes become a weakness. Those accustomed to taking executive decisions at times find it difficult to confine themselves to advising on them. Oversight can then quickly slip into interference.

Independent directors must resist this temptation. When a director falls into this trap, others should step in gently to call it out.

The best independent directors are often invisible to the public eye. If they complete their tenure without becoming part of the company's operational narrative, they have probably done their job well.

This is also related to the board's single most consequential responsibility: Appointing the right leadership team. Once leaders have been chosen, and the broad strategy has been agreed upon, the board should trust management to operate freely within those guardrails.

A few other practical reflections

High-quality governance, alongside the maturity to let management do its job, requires significant expertise and judgement. It requires directors to maintain an understanding of the company's context beyond what is presented in board papers.

In my view, therefore, good independent directors deserve higher, not lower, compensation. That remuneration, however, should be structured so that directors are, and are seen to be, long-term stewards of the institution rather than participants focused on its short-term financial performance. There are ways to achieve this. Equally, their association with the company should remain limited so that directors are not perceived to compromise their independence to secure reappointments.

Finally, a few simple disciplines go a long way. Directors should only join boards whose values they are comfortable defending. They should encourage constructive debates and ensure that important discussions are accurately captured. Before every significant decision, they should ask a simple question: If this were to appear on the front page of a newspaper, could they explain it honestly, confidently and without qualification? The answer captures what balanced governance is ultimately about.

The writer is a former wholetime member of Sebi. The views are personal

Going beyond trickle-down

The top 35-50 million urban consumers in India's top 100 cities by income, consumption, and savings have received enough attention from marketers. Their ability to consume, even during times of economic stress, has been well documented — recall the post-Covid K-shaped recovery across sectors.

The stress in the country's larger consumption market, from daily essentials to discretionary purchases, and the concomitant reluctance of the private sector to invest in new capacity creation have been the economic policy bugbears for some time now. It is clear to big and small sellers of anything from soaps, shampoos, two-wheelers, washing machines, apparel and cars that they must start focusing on the cohort of the next 200 million consumers, who sit right under the segment of affluent/high-income 35-50 million ones. Now a new study "The Many Urban Indias" jointly brought out by research firm People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) and Tata Sons, the holding firm of the eponymous salt-to-software conglomerate, lays down the contours of this huge consumer market.

ACROSS THE BOARD

SHAILESH DOBHAL

Most media attention is focused on the study's four urban groupings, essentially a classification of top 100 cities and towns based on population — Big Six (six metros with population over 10 million), Boomtowns (19 with population between 2.5 million and 10 million), Breakout Cities (25 with population between 1.5 million and 2.5 million) and Frontier Cities (the remaining 50 with population between 0.5 million and 1.5 million). What's somewhat getting missed in this reporting is the study's classification of households based on income criteria, and its emphasis on the importance of what it calls middle-income households across India's top 100 cities and towns. These top 100 cities account for 19 per cent of India's population, 35 per cent of income, 31 per cent of spending, almost half (47 per cent) of households' surplus income, and almost two-thirds of all urban demand.

The share of middle-income households (with incomes between ₹6 lakh and ₹36 lakh per annum at 2025-26 prices) has doubled over the past decade to account for over half (53 per cent) of all 62 million households across India's top 100 cities by 2025-26. That number is expected to rise to over 60 per cent of the 80 million-odd households over the next five years (2030-31). According to the study, the middle-income group it has identified "… broadly corresponds to about PPP $15-90 per person per day, aligning with internationally used middle-income cohort definitions such as the Brookings Institution's PPP $11–110 range, and the Pew Research Centre's PPP $10-20 range, while reflecting India's specific income and consumption realities".

At an average family size of 4.6, this translates into a cohort of around 200 million consumers. Other income cohorts, according to the study, are low income (annual household income below ₹1.5 lakh per annum), lower middle-income (between ₹1.5 and ₹6 lakh) and high income (above ₹36 lakh).

The middle-income households will be spread evenly across population clusters, making up 63 per cent of households in the Big Six by 2031, 59 per cent in Boomtowns, 57 per cent in Breakout Cities and 56 per cent in Frontier Cities. The PRICE-Tata Sons study notes that, "This rise marks a structural break in India's urban income distribution… the single largest socio-economic mobility shift in the country's urban history." The share of high-income households will rise to 19.6 per cent, while that of low-income households will fall to 0.4 per cent and that of low middle-income to around 20 per cent.

Note that the study does not define middle-income household simply as the middle of the income distribution, but takes a wider, more nuanced view to include households "…that enjoy a reasonable degree of economic security, with a relatively low risk of falling back into poverty and sufficient resources for discretionary spending, savings, education, health care, and asset creation". In short, these households are almost ready for the next level of consumption as many approach crucial income thresholds.

The study notes that households earning annually between ₹12 lakh and ₹14 lakh are potential car buyers, and washing machines are typically bought once the household income crosses ₹14 lakh. Even after accounting for the 50-57 per cent share of asset ownership among middle-income households for television, air conditioners, cars and refrigerators, penetration remains relatively low in the middle-income households and deepening it can widen the market substantially.

To be sure, marketers are not new to these aspirational 200 million consumers, just that they have not really curated this huge segment and have instead just depended on the trickle-down consumption emanating from models developed for the rich/high-income cohort. What is needed is an appropriate value proposition for these households, something akin to what Tata Zudio did with apparel retailing or a player like CityMall with grocery delivery across India's Boomtowns, Breakout and Frontier cities.

A hopeful model for countering China

BOOK REVIEW

V KUMARASWAMY

This book covers China's ascent to supremacy on multiple fronts well, but the countermeasures, though well researched, seem overly optimistic. In a battle between Chinese coercive strategies and the coalition of the willing led by the United States, the one with no moral binds seems destined to win.

If the book's advice had been available to US and European diplomats, military strategists, business leaders, and trade theorists 10 years ago, it could perhaps have delayed China's ascent. Even if doing nothing now is not an option, as the author contends, the war seems over; only the formal coronation may be pending.

At the core of China's strategy is to build 90 per cent of the world's capacity (from which the book derives its title from) in an expanding list of critical industries, subsidise production, maintain an undervalued currency, flood the market at below marginal cost, and drive out competitors. It has already done this in 10 industries, including apparel, toys, and solar systems, and seems poised to do the same in industries that are critical to sovereignty — economic and national security — such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), aerospace, automobiles, critical minerals, telecom and defence. Debt and data are the new weapons.

The policy of encirclement extended from global manufacturing, which facilitated market access, to establishing supply chains and a logistics web through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in several strategic points to control trade. BRI financing is more about forcing alignment with China in multilateral forums and ensuring access to raw materials to power its factories and capacity to quickly reach anywhere in wartime, even while slowing or severing others.

It enticed unsuspecting giants such as Apple, Tesla, Motorola, and Lucent with low-cost logic. When sufficient local manpower was trained, subcontractors developed, and stakes became important, China applied the squeeze. China would break contracts, cancel licences, coerce the transfer of technology, control pricing, withdraw incentives, force equity participation, conscript technology and evict them. Huawei, BYD, CATL, and SAIC are some examples of the resulting indigenous giants that emerged. In an act of silent invasion, conscripted technologies have been converted into military capability.

It is dominant as a supplier of several raw materials, such as rare earth minerals, gallium, graphite, and lithium; a dominant buyer of soya from Brazil and iron ore and wines from Australia; a financier of BRI projects; and a provider of processing technologies for Chilean copper and lithium in select South American countries. With this web of dependencies, it can choke several factories. The squeeze on Australia after it banned Huawei from bidding for telecom contracts being a sampler.

To counter China's supremacy are six essential pillars of American power, that include, among other things, access to US markets, control of global financial systems, the strength of its capital markets, and its open society with accessibility, independence, transparency and accountability. The author's belief that these are potent enough to win the war against China's arsenal of deceit, distortions, distraction, coercion, and compliance stretches credibility.

Donald Trump's ascendancy made up for the essential missing piece. The author commends Mr Trump's suite of actions: (i) the imposition of tariffs on countries with large trade surpluses with the US and undervalued currencies, (ii) attracting investments to create local capacities, (iii) securing energy at affordable costs, (iv) breaking China's chokehold on critical supplies, (v) strengthening the military, and (vi) arresting the leakage or conscription of technology by China. If Mr Trump eliminates transhipments of China's exports, it can dent China's gross domestic product by about 2.1 per cent, which is substantial and capable of bringing them to the negotiating table. Despite his praise, the author acknowledges that Mr Trump's actions have alienated the allies he needs as much as they have hurt China.

China's 90% Model: China Has America by the Throat: Here's How to Fight Back and Win
by Ram Charan
Published by Simon & Schuster
320 pages ₹1,599

Yet, this is a battle that the US cannot fight alone. It needs a coalition of the US, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and Israel. Co-ordinated action, shared investments, and standards — called "convergence" — by the coalition targeting key industries are necessary to counter China.

The latter chapters are dense and well researched, but the target audience keeps shifting in the narrative far too often. It requires co-ordinated action from the coalition and industry captains. For China, the strategy lies in its President's head, and everything else is execution with no decision or investment hurdles in between. But whether that co-ordination is possible in democracies with only fiscal and financial incentives, but without China's clinching weapon of coercive force, is difficult to tell. While the author exhorts business leaders to be wary of China and make their exit before it is too late, some elements of the extrication strategies seem overly optimistic, though he has listed some successful exits.

The identification of industries and products to apply chokes on China merits attention and greater focus on execution. His advice to business leaders at the end of each chapter on how to approach China distils the essentials from a complex environment and presents ideas for a hopeful way forward.

India would do well to have a similar playbook, but for the time being, it does not even figure in the core group of six countries in the author's scheme of things.

The reviewer is the author of Making Growth Happen in India

Right Policy Space for Strategic Industries

India Inc taps into satellite and rocket tech

Last week, Skyroot Aerospace, a Hyderabad-based start-up, catapulted India into the private orbital launch club, whose only other members are the US and China. The placement of 6 satellites into low Earth orbit by the company's Vikram-1 rocket is a swift response to India's decision to encourage commercial exploitation of space. Access to dual-use tech has been eased, and foreign investment has been liberalised for manufacture and delivery of payloads. India has deftly tapped into the commercial interest driving satellite and rocket tech. The immediate business case for the space sector is telecom. The country needs domestic capability in satellite-based internet services, which is predicated on efficient launch technology, such as reusable rockets.

The policy pivot in a strategic sector like space is also delivering results in two other areas — arms production, and atomic energy. Private sector armaments production now accounts for close to 1/4th of domestic output, supported by easier access to technology and capital. This effort has gained traction because GoI is also the principal buyer of privately produced defence equipment. The defence acquisition procedure has been tailored to encourage local procurement. Industrial corridors are facilitating private armaments production, although larger defence platforms, such as aircraft and aircraft carriers, remain in the public sector.

The push for private participation in nuclear energy is of more recent vintage. The sticking point was the unlimited civil liability imposed on contractors in the event of an accident, which has now been capped. This should open the door to private nuclear power plants. A clutch of domestic companies has shown interest within a year of the liability law being amended and foreign investment being liberalised. Across all three sectors, the conversation has shifted from technological capability to engineering capability. India may have found the right policy combination for developing strategic industries.

Stop Romanticising India's Cattle Class

We're tired of commenting on India's abysmal implementation of crowd control norms. But last week's Rath Yatra tragedy in Puri that claimed two lives has gone down the same rabbit hole of charge-counter-charge without the needle moving one bit. The Odisha government has denied the deaths were caused by a stampede or crowd mismanagement. This may well be true, something that needs proper investigation. But deaths and injuries, never mind the sheer discomfort of crushing crowds, isn't nit-picky about what causes them.

Year after year, mass gatherings — secular and religious — devolve into utter chaos that are so normalised that they seem curated to 'fail'. This is amplified by such gatherings, especially at religious sites, locked in a fierce competition over who can draw the bigger crowd. Sacred spaces turn into high-stake arenas where human lives are routinely risked for the optics of a massive turnout of devotees. With SOPs in place and their daily experience of handling crowds, police should by now be pros at predicting bottlenecks and managing sudden surges. That hasn't happened. This systematic failure is compounded by the utter lack of civic sense of citizens who don't think twice about breaking lines, breaching barricades and ignoring safety protocols.

The romantic notion that self-punishment is part and parcel of worship hardly helps. Lack of basic safety and comfort protocols are dismissed as 'first world problems', validating life-threatening environments as spiritual endurance tests. India needs top-down implementation, heavy penalties for administrative complacency and civic non-compliance. To keep perpetuating crowd chaos as par for our cultural course is the very opposite of the still-mystical notion of being 'viksit'.

JUST IN JEST

With the World Cup done, we can stop staying up and play pundits

Returning to Our Circadian Rhythm

For more than a month, international football-watching India's body clock resembled a malfunctioning cuckoo. The World Cup in the Americas meant kick-offs at ungodly hours, and bleary-eyed office workers pretending to know everything about last late night's game. The nation became a collective zombie, fuelled by coffee and power naps, united in its attempt to convince everyone of one's punditry of a sport it doesn't actually play. Now, with the final whistle blown and Spain clearly Vishwaguru in something tangible, India can return to its natural circadian rhythm. The collective jet lag remains for a few days, but alarm clocks have resumed their traditional role of tormenting only in the morning, not at night. Suddenly, not having a skin in the game — no Indian team to cheer, no heartbreak to endure — has turned out to be a blessing. Spaniards may still be nursing hangovers of triumph. But non-Spaniard Indians can simply exhale, and go back to their mobile screens, streaming shows and doom-scrolling. Or whatever they do when the peer pressure to be synced to an actual *global* sport subsides.

Once again, our daily commute becomes the only real contact sport we can claim to be world-class in as the nation's body clock ticks back to sanity/routine. We can go back being master spectators, instead of fellow creators of any planetary spectacle.

RBI should act as and when external shocks push domestic data in a direction, not until then

Energy Shock vs AI Boom

Shekhar Aiyar

Easy now

It's only a slight oversimplification to say that the global economy is now a wrestling match between an energy shock and a tech boom. On one side is the oil shock radiating from the US war on Iran, which has pushed Brent crude back above $90 a barrel and revived concerns of a return to April's $120 highs. On the other is a spectacular, but unevenly distributed, AI boom.

RBI's MPC, meeting in the first week of August, will set its policy rate chiefly on domestic considerations, as it should. But external conditions often matter on the margin. So, it's worth reviewing the dilemma they pose for the economy.

The energy shock explains why global growth has come under pressure this year. The tech boom explains why it has not completely buckled under

Start with the energy shock. The war has entered its fifth month with an escalation, not a resolution. A ceasefire announced weeks ago is in tatters. Strikes and counter-strikes have again sealed the Strait of Hormuz, while a disruption of Red Sea shipping by Houthi forces could well be on the cards. Global inventories, drawn down sharply since the war began, leave far less cushion than at the outset, arguably making this an even more perilous inflection point than April.

Exposure to the shock is uneven. The US, somewhat ironically, is one of the least exposed countries because it is a net energy exporter, although it also has lower petroleum taxes than other advanced economies and, so, higher percentage pass-through.

Europe and emerging Asia, more reliant on natural gas — a market with fewer substitutes when a specific pipeline is disrupted — have seen retail prices climb further. In China, prices have been somewhat cushioned by large inventory drawdowns and a more substantial shift towards renewables.

The energy shock explains why global growth has come under pressure this year, and the tech boom explains why it has not completely buckled under. The boom is centred in the US, where the astonishing bull run of Nasdaq and S&P has relied heavily on AI-related companies, and where business investment related to AI has been a crucial prop for domestic activity. When taken together with greater energy independence, it's not surprising that the US remains the major growth engine among advanced economies.

But the AI boom extends much further, to countries such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Even in China, where the lingering impact of a property bust and inadequate domestic demand have resulted in Q2 growth of 4.3% — lowest in 5 yrs — the saviour has been a surge in AI-related exports.

Unfortunately, risks to this state of play are asymmetric, pointing in the direction of higher inflation and lower growth. Inflation expectations have stayed largely anchored so far, with markets treating the oil shock as transitory. But that composure is being tested by events. Sovereign yields have risen broadly.

In June, European Central Bank raised rates for the first time in 3 yrs, and Bank of Japan lifted its policy rate to 1%, the highest level since 1995. In the US, Fed governor Christopher Waller has warned that another hot core-inflation reading — core CPI is running at 3.1% — could force a hike the Fed had not planned to deliver.

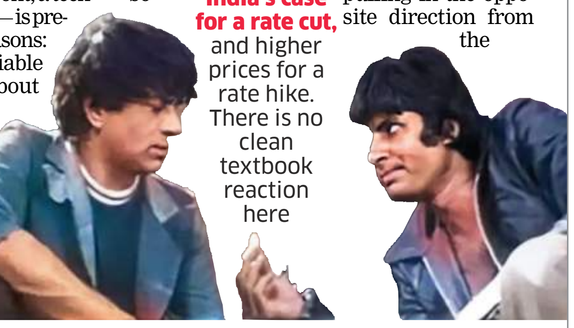
On the growth front, a tech boom — this narrow — is precarious, for two reasons:

❶ There's justifiable scepticism about whether market valuations of everything AI-related are sustainable. Both Nasdaq and S&P have been flat or declined slightly since the beginning of June, perhaps reflecting the political backlash against energy-hungry data centres. Moreover, investors are increasingly concerned about the impact of rising policy rates on AI valuations.

❷ This fear is almost the opposite of the first: the AI boom will cannibalise businesses it does not feed. IBM provides the clearest illustration yet. Its shares fell by 25% in a single mid-July session, the worst day in the company's 115-yr history. This was the result, its CEO admitted, of clients redirecting budgets towards AI infrastructure and away from the services that IBM has long sold. Either a market correction or a widening squeeze on non-AI business could further weaken global economic activity.

Implications for India are anything but straightforward. Sputtering external demand would strengthen the case for a rate cut, and higher prices the case for a rate hike. As with most stagflationary impulses, there is no clean textbook reaction here.

Monetary policy should usually aim to stay ahead of the curve, considering lags in the transmission of policy rates to real economic activity. But in this case, the most instructive lesson from the global picture may be how difficult it is to plausibly extrapolate. Oil prices could retract to $60, or soar past $120. The tech boom could correct sharply, or continue supporting growth for another year. The uncertainty is almost Knightian.



Sputtering external demand would strengthen India's case for a rate cut, and higher prices for a rate hike. There is no clean textbook reaction here

On balance, with risks to inflation pulling in the opposite direction from the risks to growth, external conditions are most consistent with a wait-and-see attitude. RBI should act as and when external shocks push the domestic data unambiguously in a certain direction, not until then.

The writer is director-chief executive, ICRIER

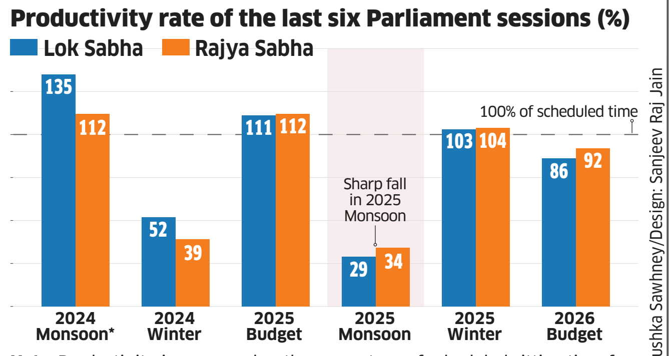
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a march quite polite,
That was met with batons in sight.
'Bring tear gas!' said the cops,
'A march to Parliament gets the chop,'
For they felt the stick feels just right.
• • •

Tracking Lawmakers' Output

The Monsoon Session of Parliament started on Monday, setting the stage for another round of legislative business. While both Houses recorded over 100% productivity in the 2024 session, the 2025 Monsoon Session saw productivity fall to just 29% in the Lok Sabha and 34% in the Rajya Sabha, before recovering in the Winter Session.

Productivity rate of the last six Parliament sessions (%)



Note: Productivity is measured as the percentage of scheduled sitting time for which each session functioned. *In 2024, the Monsoon Session served as the Budget Session due to the general elections. **Source:** PRS Legislative Research

By Anoushka Sawhney/Design: Sanjeev Raj Jain

MEME'S THE WORD

Don't Put a Toll on UPI

Lalit Bhasin

Reports that GoI is considering a merchant discount rate (MDR) on UPI payments made to businesses with annual turnover of ₹1-1.5 cr, and only on transactions above ₹2,000, deserve scrutiny.

The concern behind the proposal is legitimate. Banks, payment service providers and tech companies incur expenditure on cybersecurity, settlement, fraud management, customer support and system resilience. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, citing evidence submitted by department of financial services, noted that current government incentives cover only about 11% of industry costs, and recommended that GoI develop a sustainable revenue model for the UPI ecosystem rather than relying indefinitely on budgetary support.

But reintroducing MDR may not be the only answer. It would dilute one of India's most successful ease of doing business (EoDB) reforms: a universal, interoperable and frictionless payment system whose price is known in advance: zero. For a merchant, UPI is not merely another payment option. It is now basic commercial infrastructure, comparable to a bank account or an electronic invoice. Adding a turnover-based and transaction value-based charge would replace simplicity with classification, monitoring, reconciliation and disputes.

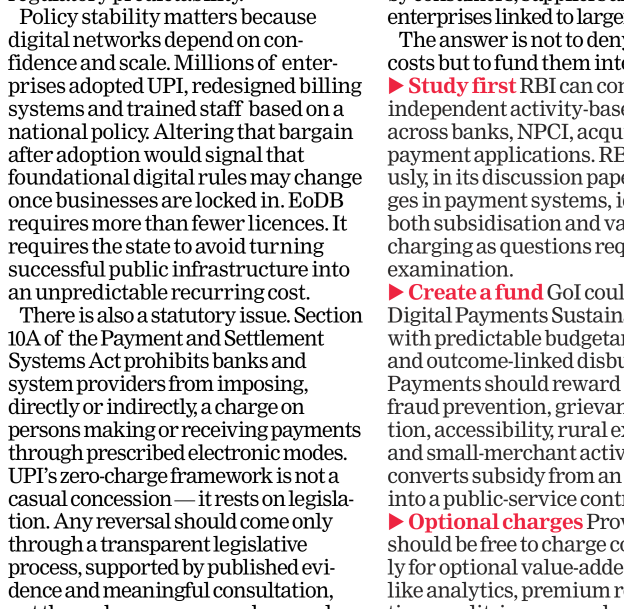
The proposed threshold is especially problematic. Turnover is not profit. A retailer, fuel outlet, pharmacy, distributor or restaurant may cross ₹1 cr in sales while operating on thin margins. A sharp threshold creates a regulatory cliff: the same transaction is free on one side of an annual-turnover line and chargeable on the other.

Businesses would need rules for franchise networks, marketplaces, multiple GST registrations, refunds, cancelled orders, split payments and mid-year threshold crossings. Such complexity is inconsistent with GoI's objective of reducing disproportionate compliance costs and improving regulatory predictability.

Policy stability matters because digital networks depend on confidence and scale. Millions of enterprises adopted UPI, redesigned billing systems and trained staff based on a national policy. Altering that bargain after adoption would signal that foundational digital rules may change once businesses are locked in. EoDB requires more than fewer licences. It requires the state to avoid turning successful public infrastructure into an unpredictable recurring cost.

There is also a statutory issue. Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act prohibits banks and system providers from imposing, directly or indirectly, a charge on persons making or receiving payments through prescribed electronic modes. UPI's zero-charge framework is not a casual concession — it rests on legislation. Any reversal should come only through a transparent legislative process, supported by published evidence and meaningful consultation, not through an opaque workaround.

MDR will also not remain confined to 'large merchants' in economic effect. Costs are passed through. Merchants may raise prices, withdraw discounts, prefer cash, impose convenience fees or encourage customers to fragment transactions. Even a modest rate creates a precedent for future escalation. The resulting friction would be borne by consumers, suppliers and smaller enterprises linked to larger businesses.



Really want to slow things down?

The answer is not to deny ecosystem costs but to fund them intelligently.

▶ **Study first** RBI can commission an independent activity-based cost study across banks, NPCI, acquirers and payment applications. RBI has previously, in its discussion paper on charges in payment systems, identified both subsidisation and value-neutral charging as questions requiring examination.

▶ **Create a fund** GoI could establish a Digital Payments Sustainability Fund, with predictable budgetary support and outcome-linked disbursements. Payments should reward uptime, fraud prevention, grievance resolution, accessibility, rural expansion and small-merchant activation. This converts subsidy from an entitlement into a public-service contract.

▶ **Optional charges** Providers should be free to charge competitively for optional value-added services like analytics, premium reconciliation, credit, insurance, hardware and customised enterprise integrations, while the core UPI payment remains free. Innovation should earn revenue, access to the national payment rail should not become a tollbooth.

India must not choose between merchant affordability and provider sustainability.

Sound policy can protect both. GoI should retain zero MDR for core UPI, create a transparent cost-recovery framework, and review it periodically through public consultation. That approach would preserve EoDB, honour legislative predictability and ensure that every participant — consumer, merchant, bank, fintech and GoI — continues to benefit from India's most consequential DPI.

The writer is former president, Society of India Law Firms

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY
Paragraphs From Fiction

The Director

Daniel Kehlmann

Why am I in this car? I'll sit still. Sometimes, if you don't move, your memory comes back.

But it's not working. One thing is certain, the driver is smoking. The vehicle is filled with heavy smoke. My eyes are burning. I feel sick. The man has grey hair, dandruff on his shoulders. On the rearview mirror a small cross is swinging on a string of pearls.

One thing at a time. The driver picked me up, held the door open for me, and the others looked on open-mouthed....

...Because actually, at the Abendruh Sanatorium, every day is the same as the next. At breakfast the radio is on, you go to the park, your back hurts, there's lunch, you look at the newspaper and get annoyed, while the TV is on; some are watching, others are sleeping, someone is always coughing pitifully. Then it's already half-past three and dinner is served, and then you lie awake and have to go to the bathroom every half an hour. Sometimes there are visitors, but never for me. Sometimes someone dies and is taken away. But those who are still alive are not usually picked up by a black car with a chauffeur.

Translated from German by Ross Benjamin

THE SPEAKING TREE

Expressed Universe

SHRI SHRI ANANDAMURTI

What we belittle as matter is nothing but a varying form of energy. To maintain inertness of matter, the existence of energy as well as its application are undeniable. And this concentration of energy, being crude, expresses crude waves that are black. So, the energy that causes inertness in objects is an expression of Prakriti and Purush's static force.

The influence of the sentient principle is the exact opposite, for it is effulgent and expressive. It is characterised by its excellence of expansion and subtlety. Characteristic of the static principle is to bind whatever is subtle within limitations of forms and lines, bringing it within periphery of sense perception, and within the scope of human conception. Thus, due to the static influence of Prakriti, the abstract is brought into the initial stage of matter, ether.

When there is unfoldment of mutative and sentient principles, they cannot give any expression to their limited ideas in the absence of a proper object.

Characteristic of the static principle to bring the subtle within the periphery of finitude is actual cause behind manifestations of both actions and objects. These finite expressions of the practical world are limiting actional expression of the static principle. Names, forms and other symbolisations have been ascribed to them by the doer 'I'.

Difference between objects is caused by varying degrees of bondage of static principle. The indriyas, human sense organs, and their controller, mind, accept collectivity of these objects, bound by limitations of forms, as the expressed universe.

Chat Room

A Goalden Win For Spaniards

It was heartbreak for Lionel Messi in the final game of his decorated career, but Spain were deserving winners as they dominated their championship match against Argentina from start to finish to win the Cup 1-0. The score card may not indicate their grip over the match that went into extra time, but the Spaniards made mockery of their opponents with over 80% of ball possession with several attempts at the goal with practically none from the reigning champions. This was one of the most one-sided matches a Fifa World Cup final has ever witnessed, as Messi was reduced to a mere spectator on the field. Argentine goalkeeper Emiliano Martínez saved his team from a rout with brilliant saves that is the prime reason for a solitary goal loss.

S N Kabra
Mumbai

Crank Up the Rank Already

This refers to 'BBBump It Up, Boys!' by Kaushik Das (Jul 20). Former FM, the late Arun Jaitley, was a constant critic of the rating agencies for their delayed recognition of reforms in India. Despite improving debt-GDP ratio, reduced revenue expenditure of routine nature and stable government at the Centre, the global ratings agencies remain sceptical probably due to lower and skewed per-capita income along with high import dependence and fluctuating CAD. Government should work further on improving these parameters and then take up with rating agencies for upgradation that could significantly help forex inflows to the country.

Rohit Dhandar
Amravati

Silence is Beholden

Apropos the Edit, 'An Unlistening State Speaks for Itself' (Jul 20), why should national concern awaken only when the health of a well-known activist like Sonam Wangchuk reaches a critical stage, while the silent suffering of ordinary students remains largely unseen? A confident democracy listens before lives are imperilled, not after hope has been exhausted. The controversy over public examinations is about the credibility of institutions that shape the future of millions.

Brij B Goyal
Ludhiana

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A thought for today

When your values are clear to you, making decisions becomes easier

ROY E DISNEY

Good Investments

People are increasingly judging them on social outcomes as much as monetary returns

Nobel awards are unarguably the world's most famous honour. And for over a century, they've been funded by Alfred Nobel's profits from explosives and armaments. Does that make the weapons industry "good"? It's not a trick question. Two major wars are on right now, and investing in weapons makers could net you market-beating returns, but would you do so? It's quite likely that you have scruples against backing the production of killing machines. Likewise, as an investor, you might not want your money going to businesses that involve cruelty to animals, or the clearing of jungles, or vast greenhouse gas emissions, or sale of "sin goods" like alcohol and tobacco.

Mature markets like US saw room for such conscientious investing last century. By 1995, investments driven by ESG – environmental, social and governance – concerns in US added up to $639bn. By one estimate, global ESG investments today are worth over $39tn, and expected to touch $180tn by 2034. Clearly, investors are voting with their money to mould the world into a better, safer, more equitable place. While India's ESG market is relatively small, the past month has seen two significant developments. June launched the BSE Saatvik 100 Index that excludes firms dealing in alcohol, gambling, etc. July followed with Nifty500 Ahimsa Index that tracks firms promoting ethical treatment of animals.

This is a small start, but given how much Indians care for saatvik values, including ahimsa, more such investment initiatives are bound to follow. Especially when returns on ethical investments tend to match or even surpass those on "indiscriminate" investments. In fact, India's ESG investments are growing at 28% annually, and estimated to touch $6tn in 2033. By influencing corporate policies and behaviour, this can also help India achieve its sustainable development goals. In a market economy, this kind of ethical, responsible or sustainable investing is as important as your democratic right to vote. It recognises the fact that "value" is not always monetary, and reversing global warming, or ending bonded labour, is more important. That's the "blended value" of a business – profit plus social good. And it's how bottom lines ought to be written and read.

The Reign In Spain

Its greatest export isn't football or fashion, but the idea that a country can be productive by being joyful

Siestas, sunshine, and flamenco. That's postcard Spain. But with the World Cup showing us how delightfully Spain plays football, people all over the world are talking about how España is impressive across many other dimensions too. It will, for example, be putting the men's Cup next to the women's Cup already in its chest. Rafael Nadal has retired from the tennis court, but now there's Carlos Alcaraz. Racing on the F1 track are Fernando Alonso and Carlos Sainz. Many countries hope to push their domestic sport grid into the A league via Olympics, but Barcelona 1992 actually delivered. This is not a story of isolated superstars, but systems that convert talent into excellence, and not just in sports.

Barely half a century ago, Spain emerged from Franco's dictatorship and built a modern democracy. It's hit speed bumps. Like the 2008 financial crisis, which bred austerity and populisms. Still it remains one of Europe's best performing economies, and life for most Spaniards remains good. Its 50mn people enjoy a high-speed rail network and universal public healthcare that are among the best anywhere. But yeah, while the way it's stood up to Trump for Gaza's people is striking, this is not a country known for geopolitical swagger. It's not the appeal of tech or military strength. It isn't coercive, or even transactional.

Spain's an export powerhouse but maybe its best export is the idea of "good life". Many Indian tourists feel at home with outdoor cafés, long dinners, neighbourhood festivals, and lively public spaces. These are less like symbols of indolence, than cities designed around human life. The mighty artistic lineage of Gaudí, Goya, Picasso, Dalí inspires, rather than stultifies. Fashion and haute cuisine, Zara and El Bulli, Almodóvar and *Money Heist*, their stories, chefs, architects, and trends are being appreciated from Mumbai to São Paulo, just like their footballers. Many countries have known a golden generation. Maybe Spain has achieved something rarer. It seems to have built a golden system: institutions, academies, companies, and cultural traditions that keep discovering talent, and giving it room to flourish.

The Muppetification

Bieber and Miss Piggy mix sourly with football

Anil Abraham

Kamala plonked herself next to me on the sofa. "My husband, and most of India can sleep on time again!" she declared hopefully. I was still looking grumpy and on edge after the finals. "Don't cry for me Argentina," she sang off-key in the hope of cheering me up. Instead, Eva Perón turned in her grave, and I surreptitiously slid away on the sofa. We were unimpressed by both Kamala at home and Madonna at half-time. I was already upset because my favourite team had lost. And got more irritated because they had made me sit through a stretched-out Super Bowl-type entertainment fiasco, in the middle of a feisty game of football.

Adding Justin Bieber to Fifa finals is like adding ethanol to petrol – sadly unnecessary and potentially harmful. Fans had come to watch Messi, the song and dance just made the whole match messy. The performances were almost as inappropriate as Trump lingering onstage, photobombing Spain's moment of victory after bombing most of Iran. He stayed on when everyone wanted him to leave, a problem many politicians suffer from. Now here was a much better occasion to wrap someone forcefully in a white bedsheet and whisk him off the stage. Maybe Delhi police could have been sent to the Fifa finals instead of Jantar Mantar.

Trump had added childish behaviour to his repertoire, when making an infantile phone call to Infantino. But he finally had to hand over the winner's trophy to the country he called a loser. The only spectacle more cringe than watching Trump being booed by a home crowd was watching Miss Piggy and Kermit add to the commercial catastrophe created at half-time. Each performer was individually a star, but put together in a completely chaotic manner, resembling the celebrities fighting for attention on *Lock Upp*.

Meanwhile, every foray that I made into the kitchen for a late-night snack, made me realise that the cockroaches in our kitchen cabinet were becoming more visible. The little ones that we had neglected were making their presence felt, and were scurrying around playing their own Hunger Games. I stood and watched them silently, somehow reminded of Messi's iconic bathtub photo with Yamal. Maybe, for them too, it was time to hand over the reins to a new generation.

All Of Them, Not One Of Them

Yes, the final was dreary in parts, mostly thanks to Argentina. But, still, there was a wonderful message: the trophy ultimately belonged to a squad that didn't revolve around a star and played as a team. No surprise squads hosting Messi or Ronaldo or Mbappé or Haaland didn't win the big prize

Javier Dale

Spanish football writer

In the 98th minute of the World Cup final between Spain and Argentina, Rodri's body finally gave in. Spain's captain could go no further and asked to be substituted. Under almost any circumstances, losing your captain and midfield leader in extra time of a World Cup final, with the score still 0-0, would be seen as a major blow. His replacement, Martín Zubimendi, had not played a single minute in the tournament until then.

Spain barely blinked. Nothing changed. They did not abandon their plan, retreat into defence or lose control of the match.

Only during the closing minutes of extra time did Luis de la Fuente's side come under any real pressure from an Argentina team that had arrived at the final as the tournament's top scorers but failed to register a single shot on target across 120 minutes.

Throughout the World Cup that ended on Sunday, almost every day belonged to an individual. Trump and his relationship with Gianni Infantino dominated some news cycles, culminating in the red card Folarin Balogun escaped. VAR generated endless debate. So did memories of the Hand of God. Cristiano Ronaldo was celebrated in his farewell, Lionel Messi inspired every conceivable superlative, Kylian Mbappé reminded everyone of the player he still is, while Erling Haaland demonstrated that there are few greater assets in football than an unstoppable goalscorer.

There was room for the tournament's quieter heroes. Few will forget Vozinha, Cape Verde's remarkable goalkeeper, or Colombia's Gustavo Puerta, one of the competition's genuine revelations.

Lost amid all those stories was Spain. They arrived as one of the favourites because of the strength of their collective, yet their opening 0-0 draw with Cape Verde triggered more concern outside the Spanish camp than within it.

Vicente del Bosque, who coached Spain to the 2010 World Cup title, once described himself as "boring", admitting that even his voice lacked excitement. Luis de la Fuente belongs to the same school. It is equally difficult to identify a genuinely eccentric personality within this Spanish squad.

To the untrained eye, Spain may appear to be a boring team. There are no global celebrities – Lamine Yamal is still on his way to superstardom – no dressing-room feuds, no endless headlines. They began the tournament with Nico Williams and Yamal carrying fitness concerns. By the final, Williams had become decisive. Pedro Porro had displaced Marcos Llorente. Fabián Ruiz had eventually replaced Pedri. None of those changes altered Spain's identity. Players coming off the bench, such as Mikel Merino and Ferran Torres, repeatedly decided difficult matches.

Against Portugal and Belgium, with both games drifting towards extra time, Spain never abandoned their principles. They continued to trust possession, quick combinations, movement and positional play, behaving as though goals were simply the inevitable consequence of playing well, rather than moments waiting for an individual act of inspiration.

That apparent lack of drama has led some supporters to dismiss Spain as predictable or sterile.

Paradoxically, this Spain team – and especially the final against Argentina – may have settled football's oldest philosophical argument: aesthetics versus results.

The divide between Menottismo and Bilardismo has shaped football for nearly half a century. César Luis Menotti insisted that "the important thing is to play well; the result should be a consequence". Carlos Bilardo believed that winning was the objective and everything else was secondary.

Some will argue that Spain were conservative. After all, they scored 14 goals, but half of them came in two relatively straightforward victories: 4-0 against Saudi Arabia and 3-0 against Austria in the Round of 32. Their extraordinary defensive record – Spain became the first World Cup champions ever to concede only one goal throughout the tournament – can easily be mistaken for caution. To some observers, that looks suspiciously like Bilardismo.

It was nothing of the sort. Spain produced one of the finest World Cup campaigns ever seen.

The final against Argentina elevated that performance to something close to perfection: 20 shots, 11 on target, 68% possession, and 803 completed passes at over 90% accuracy. Argentina were reduced to almost nothing: three attempts, none on target. Spain turned Messi's World Cup farewell into a footballing funeral. Argentina's No. 10 barely appeared until the match was slipping away. He performed as a man, not as a god. Few World Cup finals have witnessed such a gulf between champions and runners-up.

Some will still ask whether such domination is really worth celebrating if it ends with only a 1-0 victory after extra time.

The answer is simple. Football is a team sport. Passing is, therefore, its fundamental act. As a team, Spain were solid, unbreakable and in control throughout, always in command of both the match and the ball. They honoured football in the way only a true team can: by treating both the ball and the game itself with the utmost respect. Luis de la Fuente's pupils have every right to stake a claim – if only symbolically – to being remembered among the greatest World Cup champions.

Which leaves one final thought. If you watched Spain and found them boring, perhaps the problem is not Spain. Perhaps you simply do not like football. That, after all, may explain why some people felt the need to import a Super Bowl-style half-time show into a World Cup final. Hopefully, this first will also be the last.

Marcela Mora y Araujo

Argentine football writer

Four years ago, the Intercontinental Cup, later called Toyota Cup, a competition where champions of Euro Cup and Copa América would meet, was revived as the Finalissima. Its second edition, between Euro champions Spain, and South American winner Argentina, was due a few months ago. But the match was cancelled, following disagreement over a neutral venue and the calendar.

Yet, destiny clearly felt this face-off had to take place. And it did, on the biggest stage of all, with all the pomp and glitter of the US version of World Cup. Six weeks ago, we embarked upon this new circus with trepidation – tweaks and changes distanced the game from what we knew and loved.

Among strange protocols was a bar on press conferences in Spanish. The ban was short-lived – protests do lead to change – but the irony of a World Cup final between two Spanish-speaking countries was not lost. It was, as if, the changes that made this tournament abhorrent, were slowly and gradually quashed by the spirit of real football.

Spain conceded one goal in the whole tournament. They made favourites France look pedestrian in the semi-final. Argentina's heart and guts made up for what it often lacked in football. Emboldened by their defeat of England, in an epic playout of a long-drawn rivalry, they reached the final mired in controversy, much of the world against them.

A photograph, from a Unicef campaign 19 years ago, resurfaced, of young Messi bathing baby Yamal. This could be a passing of the baton, now that the baby was 19, and seen as one of football's great promises. Messi, 39, hardly running but mentally scanning every game, led his squad to the final with a few minutes of magic in the fourth quarter of every match. The hype said the final was to be a Great Game, with tickets costing upward of $6k.

However, the final was 90 minutes of tedious football – an Argentina that managed *cero* (0) shots at goal, while Spain dominated completely, but also struggled to score. Extra time felt like extra punishment. Difficult to imagine any of those paying punters, new to soccer culture, felt they got their money's worth.

Parallels are being drawn with the 1990 World Cup, when reigning champions Argentina reached the final, playing horrible football, scraping through every game. They also became the first country to have a player sent off from a World Cup final, before losing to Germany. Likewise in New Jersey, not only did they play down to 10 men after Enzo Fernández's second yellow card, but even managed to get a player sent off *after* the final whistle.

If the football was difficult to watch, the half-time show of some 26 minutes was icing on an indigestible cake. What strange hell was this, the turf covered in graffitied plastic, golden glitter everywhere, and unlikely celebrities such as Tom Cruise delivering the inaugural speech? The soul of our game had been truly chewed up in the most commercialised and politicised World Cup ever.

It would be remiss, at this point, to forget the humiliation the Iran team faced, the refusal to grant a visa to a Somali referee. To overlook increases in ICE targets through the tournament, or pretend horrors of our real world weren't continuing while we watched the ball roll.

Yet, all things considered, it was mostly a cheerful event. Trump kept his distance, bar the extraordinary boast that he called Infantino to have a US player's red card revoked. Justice seemed to be restored, though, when Belgium, all guns blazing, dispensed with US by simply playing better.

Argentina's players landed in a political kerfuffle when, after their semi-final victory over England, the players held up a banner thrown on the field that said '*Las Malvinas Son Argentinas*'. The chain of events this triggered included Argentina's President Milei saying that 'mono-neuron adolescents' were derailing his careful diplomatic process – it was assumed he meant the players, but this was later dismissed.

If English politicians then called for visa revocation of Argentinians in EPL, most astonishingly, Trump's White House backed the Argentinian players. To add spice to an already piquant soup, Netanyahu and other Israeli ministers also voiced support for Argentina's football squad.

It was a bit of a stretch the world took to with gusto, given the geopolitical climate, likening the final fixture to an Israel vs Palestine face-off, what with Spain's govt openly condemning Israeli actions in Gaza.

But such political manhandling leaves a bad taste and may have had a similar effect on the squad. It was a different Argentina side that took to the pitch at the final. Particularly Messi, who barely got a touch of the ball, and when he did, seemed to be kicking it wrong – if that were possible.

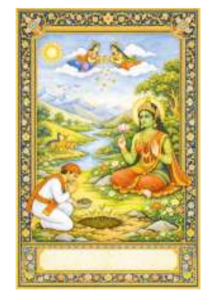
The French press announced Argentina were apparently, officially, now the world's most hated team. Except in Argentina, where love for this squad knows no bounds, and tears of gratitude ran down manager Scaloni's cheeks, who at the post-match presser said, "this is not a defeat".

It wasn't the most dignified or gratifying way to bow out, but Argentinians are grateful to this group of men for the emotional ride. Messi's tears contrast with the blown-up drops of sweat on billboards that surrounded the New Jersey stadium. Two Adidas ads, side by side, one with Messi's face on it, another with Yamal's. Back on the turf, after the final whistle, the younger man walked determinedly across to his elder, to closely embrace him.

Spain's Rodri took the Cup from Trump and ushered him along, as the victors celebrated their triumph, and defeated Argentina faced their fans for one last goodbye. At the end, football reclaimed the narrative. Football won.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacred*space*



Whatsoever i dig from thee, O Earth, may that back grow again quickly! O pure One, may my actions never pierce thy vital points or thy heart.

Atharv Ved

Nature Is Divine, Not A Portfolio Of Resources

Namita Devidayal

The climate crisis across the world is whispering – (actually, yelling) – that our engagement with nature is now irrevocably disastrous. Closer to home, we are trampling on the most beautiful idea that pervades Hindu philosophy: that we are all part of one interconnected universe, which includes all creatures, great and small, sentient and insentient. Nature is not a portfolio of resources available to satisfy human greed. Nature is divine.

In countries such as New Zealand and Ecuador, nature is recognised as having the right to exist, flourish, and regenerate. Citizens can sue on behalf of forests or rivers even when no human property has been damaged. This respectful worldview has long been a part of India's sacred literature.

Using gorgeous imagery, Upanishads say that everything, whether man, squirrel, plant or pebble, is composed of the five elements – earth, fire, water, air, and space. Human beings are, quite literally, made from the same five elements as a mountain, river, tree and bee, but in different proportions – so, while man is more water, a mountain is more earth (a cockroach more fire, currently). When we die, we join many dead leaves to become the mulch that nourishes the earth, that in turn feeds new life…the circularity of the universe carries on, like a giant cosmic inhale and exhale.

Luminous poet Kabir sang about this using earthy images from daily life: The mud reminds the potter that while you knead and manipulate me, don't forget that you will eventually resolve into me. Every Hindu Vedic text invokes the same idea, gently nudging us to retreat from the anthropomorphic worldview that places man at the centre of the universe rather than as a part of it.

For example, the Isha Upanishad opens with a remarkable ecological insight: "All this – whatever moves in the universe – is pervaded by the Divine". The Atharva Ved begins with the Bhumi Sukt, a hymn to the earth, praising its forests, mountains, rivers, medicinal plants, animals, and soils, and repeatedly asks that humans tread gently upon her. Numerous hymns in the Rig Ved are dedicated to natural elements. In Gita, Krishn repeatedly identifies himself with natural phenomenon – "I am the light in the sun and the moon". Even in the *Ramayan*, the forest becomes a spiritual landscape, a place of discovering truth.

These texts are not arguing for environmental conservation in the modern sense, but lean into a far more radical idea: How can you exploit or destroy that which is not separate from yourself?

Our public expression of Hinduism has become increasingly performative: We worship trees and endlessly tie red threads around their trunks, but then we chop them down to make way for highways or choke their roots with concrete until they die and fall, sometimes killing a child returning home on a school bus. We worship water, but we have turned it into a commodity, offering it to data centres that are being thrown out of their own countries. Every time the alarm rings, we press the snooze button. What's next?

The entrepreneurs building a self-reliant India

India has long been home to millions of skilled micro-processors making distinctive local products. What many of them lacked was affordable finance, modern technology, quality certification and a way into organised markets

CHIRAG PASWAN

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and livelihoods in 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recognised that recovery had to reach beyond large industry. It had to reach the smallest producers and enterprises, especially those working in India's villages and small towns.

The Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises Scheme was launched that year under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan with this purpose. It began with a part of the food economy that had long remained outside formal finance and institutional support: the micro-processor already producing, selling and employing a few people, but without the capital or guidance needed to grow. The scheme reflected a conviction the Prime Minister has consistently held, that India's growth must begin at its base, among people willing to build enterprises of their own.

The credit-linked component of PMFME has now crossed two lakh sanctions. The milestone matters because of the people behind it, entrepreneurs who have entered the formal credit system and secured a real chance to build. It is an achievement worth celebrating, and a moment to honour those who made it possible.

The first of them was Jamnalal Patidar, whose application was the very first sanctioned under PMFME. A tenth-pass entrepreneur with no background in food processing, he began a coriander-processing unit with an investment of ₹10 lakh. With the scheme behind him, he gained access to finance, machinery and guidance, and his idea grew into a working enterprise that today employs more than five people.

His story makes a simple point. Enterprise is not the privilege of the well-born or the well-schooled. It turns on whether a person with an idea can find the finance, technology and support needed to act on it. By enabling ordinary Indians to build enterprises and employ others, PMFME is carrying forward the Prime Minister's vision of turning job-seekers into job-creators.

India has long been home to millions of skilled micro-processors making distinctive local products. What many of them lacked was affordable finance, modern technology, quality certification and a way into organised markets. The scheme was built to close those gaps together, through credit-linked assistance, capacity building, common infrastructure, branding and market linkage, and to bring informal enterprises into the formal economy where they have a real chance to grow.

THE PRADHAN MANTRI FORMALISATION OF MICRO FOOD PROCESSING ENTERPRISES SCHEME WAS LAUNCHED THAT YEAR UNDER THE AATMANIRBHAR BHARAT ABHIYAN WITH THIS PURPOSE. IT BEGAN WITH A PART OF THE FOOD ECONOMY THAT HAD LONG REMAINED OUTSIDE FORMAL FINANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Women have been among the principal drivers of this change. Nearly 44 per cent of the two lakh credit-linked sanctions have gone to enterprises led by women, while more than four lakh Self-Help Group members have received seed capital to strengthen and upgrade their businesses. The scheme as a whole has drawn more than ₹20,300 crore in investment and enabled close to six lakh livelihood opportunities. More than 75,000 units have entered the formal economy through Udyam registration and compliance under FSSAI and GST. For many women, this has meant turning skills practised within the household or community into recognised enterprises with access to finance, technology and wider markets. Helping many more make that transition must remain central to the phase ahead.

Behind each of these numbers is a wider gain. A working enterprise buys a farmer's produce, cuts the loss that once followed every harvest, and keeps more value close to where it is made. A local crop becomes a branded product. A household skill becomes steady employment. In time, a district comes to be known for what it makes. This is Vocal for Local in practice, one enterprise at a time.

The sanction that carried PMFME to two lakh went to Inderjeet Singh of Ranchi, who is building a bakery and dreams that his cakes and pastries will one day be known across Jharkhand.

Like Patidar before him, he begins with a small venture and a large ambition, and he begins with the scheme behind him. He is one of thousands of first-generation entrepreneurs PMFME is now carrying from a first sanction towards a thriving enterprise. If Patidar shows how far this journey can travel, Singh shows that it is still gathering pace.

That is the shape of the road ahead. Opening formal credit to micro-processors was the first task, and the harder, more rewarding one is to help each sanction become a disbursed loan, and each loan a business that trades and endures. A sanction opens the door; our work is to help every entrepreneur walk through it and build something that lasts.

This must define the next phase of PMFME. We will get credit to promising enterprises faster, help them adopt better technology and packaging, widen their access to markets, and prepare many more of them to reach buyers at home and abroad. And we will stand with our entrepreneurs after the sanction, not only before it, with the steady support that turns a first loan into a lasting livelihood.

Taken together, these two lakh sanctions are far more than an administrative milestone. Each enterprise that takes root strengthens the economy around it. It buys from nearby farms, creates income closer to home, and gives more women and young Indians the confidence to build businesses of their own.

When we look at Patidar's coriander unit, the lesson is simple. The first sanction under PMFME went to a man with no established factory and no specialised degree. What he had was an idea and the will to work; what the scheme gave him was access. Two lakh sanctions later, that opportunity has reached entrepreneurs across the country. Our task now is to help more of them build businesses that survive, employ others and create value where they begin.

The writer is the Union Minister for Food Processing Industries

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Editor's TAKE

FIFA World Cup: Spain rules the world again

Football once again demonstrated its unrivalled global appeal, uniting nations, cultures and generations in a way few events can

Cricket may be the religion of the Indian subcontinent, but football is the religion of the world. Sunday's proof came from MetLife Stadium in New Jersey, where Spain outlasted Argentina 1-0 in extra time to become world champions for the second time. Substitute Ferran Torres settled a stubborn final in the 106th minute, likely closing the book on Lionel Messi's extraordinary World Cup career and confirming what football fans have suspected for two years: this Spanish side is the finest on the planet.

La Roja's route was no procession. World Cup debutants Cape Verde defended heroically to hold them to a goalless draw in the opener, but Spain settled quickly, topping their group unbeaten before knockout-round scalps of Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal and, in the semi-final, Kylian Mbappé's France. Along the way, goalkeeper Unai Simón set a World Cup record with six clean sheets, and Spain conceded only once in seven matches - the tightest defence any champion has fielded.

Nineteen-year-old Lamine Yamal, still managing an injury picked up before the tournament, became only the third-youngest player ever to feature in a World Cup final. Individually, the honours were shared. Rodri, Spain's captain, imperious midfield anchor and the 2024 Ballon d'Or winner, won the Golden Ball ahead of Messi and Mbappé – recognition that control, not chaos, wins tournaments. Mbappé, despite France's fourth-place finish, claimed the Golden Boot with ten goals, his second in as many World Cups and the first time anyone has repeated the feat. Messi, who dragged a young Argentina side to the final at 39, collects a Silver Ball as consolation in what he has said will be his last World Cup.

For Spain, this is more than another trophy. Paired with their Euro 2024 title and a 38-match unbeaten run, it confirms that a golden generation - Yamal, already a Ballon d'Or runner-up at 19, alongside Pau Cubarsí and Pedri – has inherited the tiki-taka blueprint and fused it with a defence built to match. Luis de la Fuente's side has delivered back-to-back major titles, echoing the legendary 2008-2012 dynasty that won three in a row, and with most of this core still in their early twenties, a run at Euro 2028 already looms.

Spanish academies remain world football's most reliable factory of champions. And yet in India, this triumph will register as a footnote beside the next cricket series. India's men's team is ranked 138th in the world, this year's ISL season was disrupted by a boardroom dispute serious enough to reach the Supreme Court, and no Indian city has ever hosted a senior FIFA World Cup fixture. Cricket's commercial machine – the IPL, blanket television coverage, a fan base nurtured since colonial times – leaves little oxygen for football to grow beyond pockets in Kolkata, Kerala, Goa and the Northeast. Sunil Chhetri's era inspired millions, but India still awaits a true successor and, more urgently, the grassroots pitches and school-level coaching that turn passion into a footballing nation. Until administration catches up with appetite, India will keep watching the world's game from the boundary line.

PIC TALK

Women tie padlocks at Natheshwar Mahadev Mandir, also known as 'Tale Wale Mahadev', ahead of the month of Shravan in Prayagraj. PHOTO: PTI

What India can learn from Japan's teaching culture

SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

Every education system in the world generates instructors. Very few produce teaching cultures. This delicate, almost invisible distinction is what makes Japan worth studying, not for its technology or test scores, but for the silent philosophy that drives what happens inside its classrooms and, more importantly, its staffrooms.

Consider Jugyo Kenkyu, or Lesson Study, a collaborative practice that has existed in Japanese education for more than a century. A group of teachers jointly plans a lesson. One teacher conducts it while the others observe how students respond, where they struggle and what helps them understand. Afterwards, the group discusses and refines the lesson. The purpose is not to rate the teacher but to examine the learning. In too many Indian schools, classroom observation still arrives wearing the uniform of appraisal. Lesson Study offers a different possibility: observation as professional cooperation rather than judgement.

The second useful idea is Kaizen, i.e. continuous improvement through small and consistent changes. Indian education remains fascinated by the grand gesture: the new policy, revised assessment pattern or digital platform that promises to transform learning. But transformation is rarely an event. It is an accumulation. A teacher who regularly asks, "What did not work today, and what can I change tomorrow?" may improve more meaningfully than one who attends several ceremonial workshops. Kaizen dignifies the small. Then there is Ho-Ren-So, an abbreviation of h?koku (report), renraku (inform) and s?dan (consult). It is a Japanese workplace principle based on communicating early, sharing relevant information and seeking guidance before problems become crises. Anyone who has worked in an Indian school understands how much energy is lost when communication fails. Ho-Ren-So is not unnecessary bureaucracy. It is courtesy converted into a system. Schools that communicate early and laterally become calmer institutions, and calm institutions teach better.

Another idea, Omoiyari, means understanding others' feelings and responding with consideration. In schools, it helps teachers notice a quiet child, an overwhelmed colleague or a parent's hidden concerns.

A fifth lesson comes from Tokkatsu, or Special Activities, through which Japanese schools integrate cooperation, responsibility and participation into daily life. Students may help clean classrooms, serve lunch and take responsibility for shared spaces. Character is not outsourced to a weekly moral education period. It is built into the ordinary rhythm of the school day. Japan's insight is simple: character is caught more often than it is taught. If schools want responsible students, the conduct of adults becomes part of the curriculum. A final lesson comes from Japan's well-being culture: Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, the practice of restoring oneself through mindful time in nature. The idea may sound indulgent until one considers teacher exhaustion: correction loads, data entry, duty rosters, administrative paperwork and the emotional labour of managing dozens of children. A depleted teacher cannot remain endlessly patient, creative and compassionate. Rest is not softness; rather, it is sustainability. Japan's education system is neither free from pressure nor should it be romanticised. The purpose is not to copy another country uncritically, but to identify ideas that can be adapted intelligently. Strong teaching cultures assume that excellence is collaborative, incremental, empathetic and sustainable. As India implements the National Education Policy (NEP), we must ask whether we are genuinely building professional capacity or merely conducting training. Training fills a hall for a day. Culture fills a career.

A teacher's influence begins somewhere very ordinary: in a staffroom where teachers trust one another, in a lesson improved collectively, in a problem communicated before it grows and in the quiet act of noticing a child.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

SPAIN ENDS SIXTEEN-YEAR WAIT WITH HISTORIC WORLD CUP WIN

On Sunday, Spain secured their second FIFA World Cup title after a 16-year wait. Substitute Ferran Torres emerged as the unlikely hero, scoring the decisive goal in the 106th minute of extra time to seal a hard-fought 1-0 victory over defending champions Argentina. Spain's triumph was about far more than lifting the trophy; it was a testament to resilience, tactical discipline and unwavering belief throughout the tournament.

For 19-year-old talent Lamine Yamal, who became the fourth teenager in history to win a FIFA World Cup, the victory marked another extraordinary milestone in his rise that has already captivated the footballing world.

Spain produced a masterclass in collective football, dominating possession, controlling the midfield and effectively neutralising Lionel Messi's influence without resorting to man-marking. By remaining faithful to their trademark passing game, La Roja demonstrated that a cohesive, technically superior system can outmatch even the most gifted individuals.

The final was also a tribute to Argentina's courage and determination. The reigning champions fought relentlessly until the final whistle, pushing an outstanding Spanish side to its limits. Although La Albiceleste fell short in their bid to retain the title, their resilience and remarkable campaign earned admiration across the football world.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

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In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vikram-1 heralds a new space era

India's space programme has entered a defining new era with the successful launch of Vikram-1, the country's first privately developed orbital rocket. The seven-storey rocket lifted off from ISRO's First Launch Pad at Sriharikota under Mission Aagaman (Arrival) and successfully placed technology demonstration payloads into an orbit roughly 450 km above Earth. This mission is particularly significant because Vikram-1 achieved orbital success on its maiden attempt.

The launch marks more than the success of Skyroot Aerospace. It also reflects the growth of India's space programme, built on decades of ISRO's pioneering work and sustained by thousands of suppliers, engineers and scientists. Nearly six decades after India's space programme began as an exclusively government-led effort, private enterprise has now demonstrated its ability to develop and launch orbital rockets.

Vikram-1 establishes Skyroot as a serious competitor in the global small-satellite launch market while highlighting the potential of public-private collaboration. The government must deepen this growing partnership, combining ISRO's expertise with private innovation to accelerate India's ambitions in commercial launches and deep-space exploration.

YASH PAL RALHAN | JALANDHAR

Time for a responsible Monsoon session

The Monsoon Session of Parliament is set to face several pressing national issues that demand serious attention on Monday. As the government presents its legislative agenda and the Opposition seeks accountability, the session provides an important opportunity to strengthen parliamentary democracy through constructive engagement. The people expect thoughtful deliberations that address their concerns rather than political confrontation.

Parliament is the cornerstone of India's democracy, where laws are enacted and the executive is held accountable. Issues such as inflation, employment, agriculture, national security, education, healthcare and economic growth require reasoned discussions based on facts, mutual respect and constructive engagement to reach solutions to these challenges.

Unfortunately, previous sessions have frequently witnessed disruptions, walkouts and repeated adjournments, preventing meaningful discussions on vital legislation. Such interruptions waste valuable parliamentary time and erode public faith in democratic institutions. Parliament must function with dignity, discipline and a spirit of cooperation, and deliver governance that serves the national interest.

RUKMA SHARMA | JALANDHAR

Taking accountability beyond resignation

The NEET paper leak has shaken the faith of millions of students, exposing deep cracks in India's examination system. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has admitted moral responsibility, but the question remains whether he should resign or lead reform.

Opposition parties, student groups and civil society argue that resignation is the only dignified response. A minister stepping down would signal that failures at the highest level cannot simply be brushed aside. It would restore public trust and set a precedent for accountability. In a democracy, such symbolism matters.

However, the government counters that the leak was caused by corrupt insiders within the National Testing Agency and complicit teachers, not ministerial intent. Resignation, they argue, would be political theatre without fixing structural flaws. What students need is reform within the system, which includes stronger exam security, transparent oversight and a rethinking of centralised testing. Pradhan's role, then, is to drive corrective action rather than abandon responsibility.

Resignation would cleanse the moral stain; reform would address the systemic rot. The real test of leadership lies in whether India chooses symbolic sacrifice or substantive change — or both.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

Time for public audit to put land at the centre of governance

The question that public audit must increasingly ask is simple: Does the government know what land it owns, where it is located, how it is being used, whether it is encroached upon, and whether it is creating public value? This question is not technical. It goes to the heart of public accountability

VIVEK KUMAR SINGH

Public audit in India has traditionally followed the money. It examines whether expenditure was authorised, whether procedure was followed, whether revenue was collected, and whether public funds were properly used. But one of the most valuable public assets often remains outside the centre of audit attention — land.

Land is the silent base of public governance, infrastructure, welfare delivery, urban expansion, environmental protection and economic development. Yet governments often know less about their land than about far less valuable assets. While elaborate systems exist for accounting for buildings, vehicles, machinery and financial assets, information on land is frequently fragmented, outdated or incomplete.

The question that public audit must increasingly ask is simple: Does the government know what land it owns, where it is located, how it is being used, whether it is encroached upon, and whether it is creating public value? This question is not technical. It goes to the heart of public accountability.

Weak land governance affects public finances, project delivery, citizen services, environmental protection and public trust. Acquisition delays push up costs. Weak records generate uncertainty. Encroachments erode public assets. Poorly managed land remains idle while public institutions search for space. Faulty compensation records can lead to overpayment, litigation or exclusion of rightful beneficiaries. Yet public discourse usually views land through narrow lenses like ownership disputes, acquisition controversies, mutation delays or revenue administration. These are important, but they often describe symptoms rather than causes. Land governance is not one department's routine function. It is a connected system of maps, records, transactions, updates and ground possession. When these links do not speak to one another, the state begins to carry multiple versions of the same parcel.

A registered sale may not update revenue records. A revenue correction may not reach municipal databases. A court order may not be reflected in administrative records. A map may say one thing, a register another, and actual possession something else. For an auditor, this is not merely a clerical inconsistency. It is a risk signal. The traditional auditor asked, "Was the transaction proper?" The modern auditor asks, "Did the system work?" The future auditor must ask, "Was public value created?" Land governance is perhaps the most suitable field for this transition. Take government land, for example. In theory, it is a valuable public asset. In practice, many departments do not even have complete and updated inventories of their land holdings. Information on location, area, present use, ownership status, encroachment, litigation and valuation is often scattered. A department may lose public land not because someone formally transferred it, but because nobody knew it was its own land in the first place.

This calls for an asset-management approach to land. Government must identify, inventorise, protect, utilise and monitor public land with the same seriousness with which it manages other valuable assets. In fact, land deserves greater attention because it is finite, difficult to replace, and often appreciates over time. The same logic applies to acquisition and compensation. Many project delays are attributed to contractors, funding gaps or execution weaknesses. But quite often, the real bottleneck lies earlier, in poor planning, faulty surveys, weak consultation, unclear ownership records, repeated alignment changes and compensation disputes. Compensation administration, too, is not merely a payment process. It involves the identification of rightful beneficiaries, accurate measurement, correct valuation and timely disbursement. Errors can lead to duplicate payments, exclusion, litigation and fiscal loss.

A useful audit lens is to move beyond the lazy shorthand of "land disputes". In public administration, many problems that reach the state as disputes are actually system failures wearing the mask of disputes. A boundary conflict may be the result of outdated spatial information. An ownership mismatch may arise from delayed record correction. A disputed compensation payment may reflect weak beneficiary identification. An encroachment may reveal not merely an enforcement failure, but the absence of a reliable public land inventory.

LAND GOVERNANCE ALSO HAS A DIRECT BEARING ON CITIZEN TRUST. FOR MANY CITIZENS, THE STATE IS ENCOUNTERED NOT IN PARLIAMENT OR THE SECRETARIAT, BUT IN THE REGISTRATION OFFICE, REVENUE OFFICE, MUTATION COUNTER, SURVEY CAMP, COMPENSATION HEARING OR GRIEVANCE FORUM

This distinction matters because audit is strongest when it diagnoses causes, not merely records symptoms. If every land problem is treated as a dispute, the response naturally moves towards adjudication, litigation and file-bound resolution. But if the problem is understood as a survey failure, record failure, registration failure, possession mismatch or asset-management failure, the remedy becomes more precise. The auditor's role is not to sit in judgement over title, but to ask whether the system that records, protects, updates and verifies land is working as it should.

Digitisation has opened new possibilities, but also new risks. Online records, digital mutation workflows, registration databases and citizen portals can improve transparency and service delivery. But technology cannot cure bad data. An inaccurate paper record does not become accurate merely because it is digitised. In fact, digitisation can amplify old errors by making them more widely accessible and more quickly replicated. validation, correction mechanisms, access controls, audit trails and interoperability. If digital systems remain isolated, governments may only replace paper silos with digital silos.

The next frontier is geospatial and technological audit. GIS, satellite imagery, drone surveys, spatial databases and AI can help auditors move beyond departmental records. They can verify encroachments, land use, infrastructure progress, environmental compliance and acquisition claims through independent spatial evidence. This does not reduce the importance of documents. It strengthens audit evidence. Land governance also has a direct bearing on citizen trust. For many citizens, the state is encountered not in Parliament or the Secretariat, but in the registration office, revenue office, mutation counter, survey camp, compensation hearing or grievance forum. When records are unreliable, mutations delayed, encroachments unchecked or compensation disputed, the credibility of governance suffers.

Therefore, land audit should not be confined to revenue audit. It cuts across performance audit, compliance audit, IT audit, environmental audit, infrastructure audit and asset-management audit. A mutation backlog is not merely a service-delivery issue. A weak land inventory is not merely a departmental lapse.

A flawed acquisition process is not merely a project delay. Each is part of a larger governance risk. India's public audit institutions have an opportunity to widen the frame. Land must be seen not only as a legal subject, revenue matter or administrative routine, but also as a strategic public asset. The test of good land governance is not merely whether files moved, records were digitised or transactions were registered. The real test is whether public assets were protected, fiscal risks reduced, citizens served, infrastructure delivered, environmental safeguards maintained and public value created.

In public finance, what is not counted is often not controlled. In land governance, what is not known is eventually lost. Public audit must, therefore, also begin to ask a basic question that governments have too often avoided: "Do we really know the land we govern?"

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India's private space age has arrived

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

On the morning of July 18, 2026, a seven-storey rocket lifted off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, climbed for roughly fifteen minutes, and placed several payloads into orbit some 450 kilometres above the Earth. The rocket was Vikram 1. The company that built it, Skyroot Aerospace, is not a government arm, not a legacy defence contractor, and not even a decade old. With this single launch, India became only the third country in the world, after the United States and China, where a privately built company has independently designed, constructed, and flown its own rocket into orbit.

It is worth sitting with that fact before moving on to the human story around it, because the number that matters most here is not four payloads or 450 kilometres. It is six. Six years ago, in May 2020, the Government of India announced that the space sector, until then a strict government monopoly, would be opened to private participation. Six years later, an Indian startup has done something only two other nations have managed at the level of private industry. That is an extraordinarily short runway for a result of this magnitude, and it deserves to be the actual headline.

For most of independent India's history, space was constitutionally the exclusive domain of the state. The Indian Space Research Organisation designed the launch vehicles, built the satellites, and owned the launch pads; private firms, at best, supplied components and hoped for a contract. This was not unique to space. Telecom, coal, aviation, and banking all operated for decades on the same premise: that certain sectors were too strategic or too capital-intensive to entrust to private hands. The costs of that premise rarely show up immediately. They show up as absence: as a generation of engineers who dreamed of building rockets but had exactly one employer to dream about; as capital that might have funded ten competing approaches to a hard problem instead funding one; as innovation that thrives on rivalry never getting a field to compete in. Closed sectors do not just constrain companies. They constrain what an entire generation is permitted to imagine for itself.

The two engineers behind Skyroot understood this from the inside. Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka met as scientists at ISRO, one having worked on India's heaviest launch vehicle, the GSLV Mark III, the other bringing expertise in the avionics that let a rocket sense its own position and correct its path mid-flight. In June 2018, while it was still, in practical terms, unthinkable for a private company to build its own rocket in India, they left secure government careers to start one anyway, with ten people and $1.5 million in seed funding. Eight years and more than $160 million later, that bet has produced a rocket now in orbit.

It is tempting to tell this purely as a story of individual daring, and it is that. But it would be a mistake to read Vikram 1 as proof that the private sector succeeded where the government failed. The truth is closer to the opposite. Chandana and Daka's technical skill was built inside ISRO, on the back of decades of public investment in their training. More than seventy technologies developed within ISRO have since been formally transferred to private industry, letting companies like Skyroot build on government research rather than start from zero. What changed in 2020 was not the talent. It was the permission, and the establishment of IN-SPACe as a single-window regulator, so a startup no longer needed to navigate ISRO's internal processes just to test a rocket engine. Government investment supplied the skill; policy reform supplied the outlet. Vikram 1 is what happens when those two things are finally allowed to meet. The rocket's name is itself a quiet argument for that reading. It honours Vikram Sarabhai, the physicist who founded ISRO in 1969 on the conviction that a poor country could not afford to stay out of space, not to compete with wealthier nations for prestige, but because space technology was how India could leapfrog straight to solving problems on the ground: connecting villages, tracking monsoons, mapping resources. Sarabhai built that vision inside government because, in his era, there was no other institution capable of building it. Chandana and Daka have now shown that the same vision can be built outside it too, not instead of the government's role, but as an extension of it. There is a strategic dimension worth naming plainly. India's space economy is currently valued at roughly $8.4 billion, about two per cent of the global total, a modest share for a country that trains a disproportionate share of the world's engineers. The government's own projections put that figure at around $44 billion by 2033 and $100 billion by 2040. None of that growth was available while the sector legally belonged to a single government department. More than three hundred private space startups are now active in India, up from a handful five years ago, and the sector already supports close to a hundred thousand jobs. A country that can launch small satellites reliably and cheaply, precisely the market Vikram 1 was built for, is also a country that can become the launch partner of choice for the dozens of developing nations that want satellite access to agriculture data, disaster monitoring, and communications, but will never build a Sriharikota of their own. That is not only a commercial opportunity. It is a geopolitical one, and India is now positioned to claim it early.

None of this guarantees what comes next. Skyroot must still prove it can launch repeatedly, not just once; that it can compete on cost with established players; that international customers and insurers will trust a young company with expensive payloads. Those are real hurdles, and the company has been candid that they remain ahead of it. But the sequence that got India here is not really in dispute: the sector was closed, then it was opened, and within six years of opening, a company with no state backing put a rocket into orbit. That sequence is the real lesson of July 18, not that India has arrived in space, which it did in 1969, but that India has learned something about how to get out of its own way, and did not take nearly as long to learn it as history might have suggested.

The writer is a tech and social entrepreneur and Programme Director (Eastern India) at WHEELS Global Foundation, a Pan-IIT alumni initiative working across 20+ states in India

India's obesity challenge among adults: A call for action

M SRINIVAS | NEHA BAKSHI

India's nutrition journey is undergoing a profound transition. While the country continues to make progress in reducing undernutrition and improving food security, a new challenge is rapidly emerging, which is obesity. The changing food environment, increased availability of calorie-dense foods and inadequate physical activity have contributed to the rising obesity burden.

The NFHS-6 report highlights the magnitude of this emerging challenge. The prevalence of overweight/obesity among adults aged 15-49 years has increased among women from 24 per cent to 30.7 per cent and among men from 22.9 per cent to 27.3 per cent since NFHS-5. These trends indicate the need for a critical rethinking of India's approach to nutrition, health and lifestyle in the coming decades.

As per the World Health Organization, overweight/obesity is the excessive deposition of fat in our body to an extent that it starts limiting our everyday activities and overall health. Body Mass Index (BMI) is used for assessing overweight/obesity. A person with a BMI >25 kg/m^2 is classified as overweight/obese. This increasing weight is not just a number; it puts individuals at serious risk of developing lifestyle-related diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and others.

Rising trend of obesity: NFHS-5 to NFHS-6

India has seen this rise in overweight/obesity in previous surveys as well, but the pace at which the number has increased in the latest NFHS-6 data is concerning. According to NFHS-3 (2005-06), 12.6 per cent of women and 9.3 per cent of men were reported to be overweight/obese. Now, the figures in NFHS-6 (2023-24) stand at 30.7 per cent for women and 27.3 per cent for men. Thus, in two decades, the prevalence rate has approximately doubled among women and tripled among men. Even traditionally leaner states have shown rapid progress towards obesity; for example, Rajasthan went from 12.9 per cent (NFHS-5) to 20.3 per cent (NFHS-6).

A nationwide surge in overweight/obesity

The survey depicted that 32 and 28 states and UTs have shown an increasing trend in overweight/obesity among women and men, respectively, since NFHS-5. The highest burden of obesity is borne by the southern parts of the country. Among women, prevalence was highest in Puducherry (51.3 per cent), Lakshadweep (50.1 per cent), Andhra Pradesh (47.9 per cent), Sikkim (47.5 per cent), Kerala (46.7 per cent) and Goa (45.1 per cent). For men, the rising burden was reported in the states/UTs of Chandigarh (48.5 per cent), Puducherry (45.9 per cent), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (46.1 per cent), Goa (43.6 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (41.5 per cent). In contrast, the lowest prevalence among women was reported in Meghalaya (13.8 per cent), Jharkhand (16.9 per cent), Nagaland (17.2 per cent), Assam (19.6 per cent) and Bihar (19.8 per cent). Among men, Meghalaya (15.6 per cent), Chhattisgarh (16.1 per cent), Jharkhand (16.8 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (17.6 per cent) and Rajasthan (19.3 per cent) recorded the lowest prevalence.

The urban-rural picture

NFHS-6 shows that overweight/obesity, which was once a concern limited to city dwellers, is now becoming a rising issue in rural areas across the country. The NFHS-6 data has shown a rise in overweight and obesity in urban and rural areas among women and men. It could be because of the increased penetration of High Fat, Salt and Sugar foods at cheaper prices in both urban and rural areas.

Efforts of the Govt in tackling obesity

Understanding the magnitude of the issue, both the Central Government and different state governments have initiated various programmes to promote a healthy lifestyle. The Eat Right India initiative, launched by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), promotes healthy, safe and sustainable food practices. The National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) also focuses on mass screening, early diagnosis and behaviour change. The Fit India Movement and Khelo India initiative are nationwide movements to promote an active lifestyle among schoolchildren and youth, while the Ministry of Ayush promotes yoga and other traditional healthy practices.

Recognising obesity as an emerging public health challenge, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, addressed the nation on the auspicious occasion of Independence Day in 2025 from the Red Fort. He called for a movement towards a healthy life and for every family to take up the '10 per cent less oil' promise as a way of life to prevent obesity.

Way forward

The programmes and initiatives by the government show its commitment towards curbing obesity; the NFHS-6 data highlights the need to further strengthen existing efforts for prevention. There is an urgent need to improve the food environment by reducing the availability and aggressive marketing of junk foods, while promoting access to healthy foods and clear nutrition labelling. Physical activity should be promoted through schools, workplaces, community spaces and active urban and rural planning.

It is high time for us to understand the depth of the rising problem of obesity. There is a need to consciously incorporate a healthy way of living by adopting practices such as monitoring our weight status and waist circumference, eating a balanced diet, regularly engaging in daily physical activity, practising mindful eating, avoiding high-fat, salt and sugar foods, and consulting a medical professional if suffering from other comorbidities like diabetes, hypertension, etc.

India's malnutrition challenge encompasses both undernutrition and overweight/obesity. Government intervention programmes have laid a good foundation; now, we need continued efforts in promoting a healthy food environment, an active lifestyle and nutrition literacy. As India progresses towards Viksit Bharat 2047, citizens adopting a healthy lifestyle will play a key role in the country's social and economic progress.

Dr M Srinivas is member NITI Aayog & Dr Neha Bakshi is consultant NITI Aayog

OUR VIEW

BLOOMBERG

America's debt pile-up: a problem for the world

The world's top economy is not exempt from the basic rules of fiscal prudence. The explosive growth of US public debt spells bad news not only for Americans, but also for the rest of us

According to the US Treasury Department's official website, America's total outstanding debt held by the public crossed more than 100% of its GDP last week. Of its gross debt of $39.5 trillion, $31.8 trillion is held by the public, while intra-governmental holdings account for the rest. Doubtless, some of the increase in debt can be traced to past crises: the 2008 financial crisis and covid disruption of the early 2020s, for instance. However, in the years since, thanks to persistent and growing budget deficits, the US government's debt has grown by leaps and bounds, even as economic growth has held up.

The non-partisan US Government Accountability Office (GAO), often called America's Congressional watchdog, has warned that "today's deficits—if not addressed—could have lasting financial consequences." In its assessment, "If nothing is done to reduce deficits each year… debt will grow about twice as fast as the economy over the next 10 years. In 30 years, that debt will likely be 2.5 times the size of the economy." That is bad news for the US and its citizens. As the GAO adds, rising debt will likely lead to higher borrowing costs, stagnant wages and more expensive goods and services as "businesses may invest less in technologies that make it easier and cheaper to produce goods and services." All this, despite the country's "exorbitant privilege"—in the words of former French leader Valéry Giscard d'Estaing—of being able to borrow overseas in its own currency, thanks to the US dollar's unique status as the world's reserve currency. Today, not only does the US run one of the largest budget deficits among rich countries, placed at 6% of GDP by the Congressional Budget Office for the fiscal year that ends in September, its yawning gap between spending and revenue widens each time it embarks on another military misadventure, such as the one in West Asia. The White House wants to raise the US defence budget from $1 trillion to $1.5 trillion next year. Wide gaps in federal finances year after year mean even more Treasury bonds must be issued. Since bond oversupply requires higher rates of interest to attract bond-holders, that risks raising the cost of capital across the economy, which in turn slows investment and growth. Even though AI exuberance has kept investments going, the ill-effects of fiscal profligacy have begun to show up. The yield on 10-year US Treasury bills rose to nearly 4.6% on 15 July from 2.9% four years earlier. Sure, policy rates and bond market conditions shape yields too, but gaping deficits play a starring role. Bonds originally issued at 1-2% must be refinanced at today's rate, which pushes up annual interest costs and sets up a self-worsening debt spiral.

The GAO has urged a long-term strategy for fiscal stability, saying, "The longer we wait to do this, the more dramatic actions will need to be and the more painful the consequences for Americans." And for the rest of the world, we should add, given America's financial heft. Slower growth in the world's largest economy is bad for all economies around the globe, especially emerging ones that must earn dollars through exports to fund critical imports. Dearer credit in the US also raises rates elsewhere, affecting global growth adversely. Unlike the old saying, 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,' what happens in America doesn't stay in America. It affects the rest of the world. For better or worse.

GUEST VIEW

India needs a climate-integrated inflation forecasting framework

It's time to formally incorporate climate-driven inflation risks for effective monetary policy action

ABHINAV JINDAL & VAIBHAVI SINGH
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As India becomes increasingly vulnerable to climate change, its implications for inflation can no longer be ignored. Climate risk is now inflation risk too, requiring monetary policy frameworks to evolve and reflect this reality. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) *Monetary Policy Report* of April 2024 estimated that climate-induced shocks could add up to 100 basis points to headline inflation by 2050. While India's flexible inflation targeting (FIT) framework has a CPI inflation target of 4%, with a margin of 2% on either side, its primary tool—the repo rate—is effective against demand-driven inflation. So, we must evaluate how this band would change if climate shocks are incorporated.

This is especially important because food, which accounts for over one-third of the consumer price index (CPI), is highly climate-sensitive. Yet, a 6% inflation reading caused by a failed *kharif* harvest and one driven by excess liquidity appear identical in conventional models, despite requiring very different policy responses. Existing frameworks struggle to distinguish between the two.

Global evidence shows that excessive rainfall, heat stress and flood damage reduce productivity and disrupt supply chains. Inflation-targeting assumes supply shocks are temporary and self-correcting, but climate change has been making them more frequent, persistent and overlapping. This represents a structural shift in inflation dynamics.

The FIT framework largely treats all inflation deviations as alike, even though climate-induced inflation differs from demand-driven inflation in both persistence and policy implications. The key challenge is to tell temporary price spikes apart from persistent climate shocks. Misreading a climate-driven inflation spike as excess demand could slow growth without easing inflation, while underestimating persistent climate shocks risks inflation expectations getting unanchored.

Climate change is reducing RBI's margin for policy error. Research suggests food inflation is turning structural, with temperature shocks raising it by up to 0.4 percentage points.

India has made significant progress in integrating climate risks into policymaking through three key developments. *First*, RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has increasingly recognized climate risks in its deliberations, citing El Niño (2023), excessive rainfall (2024) and a likely deficient southwest monsoon (2026) as risks to inflation and growth. *Second*, Climate Risk Disclosure Frameworks require regulated entities to report climate exposures in line with principles outlined by the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures. *Third*, RBI's newly launched Reserve Bank-Climate Risk Information System (RB-CRIS) provides centralized climate data for climate-adjusted forecasting. Integrating these into policy models is the next challenge.

Despite these advances, climate risk largely enters policy through qualitative judgement rather than as a quantified input for inflation models. The next step is to systematically adopt inflation forecasting that duly takes climate data into account for policy calibration.

No major central bank has completely solved the climate-driven inflation riddle and they are at different stages in integrating climate risks into their policy frameworks. Three cases are instructive. *First*, the European Central Bank's (ECB) three-part taxonomy that has terms like 'climateflation' for supply-side price pressures caused by physical climate events, 'fossilflation' for energy volatility related to carbon pricing and 'greenflation' for input cost increases led by decarbonization efforts. These give policymakers a vocabulary for calibrated responses.

Second, the Bank of England's (BoE) Climate Biennial Exploratory Scenario has extended its forecasting model to embed physical climate variables directly into the rate-decision process.

Third, the Reserve Bank of Australia publishes a climate scenario analysis that explicitly separates weather-driven supply shocks from demand-side inflation—a decomposition that India's models currently cannot produce.

Much like India's central bank, neither the ECB nor BoE has demystified climate inflation, but both have moved from recognizing climate risk to embedding it within their analytical frameworks that guide policy decisions. Led by these examples, India could also try routing RB-CRIS's meteorological feeds into the macro-economic models that underpin inflation projections and let policymakers see how much of a CPI surprise can be traced to climate effects *vis-à-vis* other factors.

India is fast catching up with Western countries in developing climate-related data infrastructure and frameworks. We have moved from recognition of climate risks to the development of climate data infrastructure and could take the next leap of faith: i.e., using that infrastructure to provide tangible forecasts as inputs for policymakers.

It is amply clear that climate risks in India need to be integrated into its inflation targeting framework. This integration ought to take place before climate shocks become sufficiently persistent to weaken the central bank's current framework.

These are the authors' personal views.

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JUST A THOUGHT

Blessed are the young for they shall inherit the national debt.

HERBERT HOOVER

THEIR VIEW

Don't push the young off farms: improve their incomes

VIDYA MAHAMBARE & VIVEK JADHAV

are, respectively, Union Bank chair professor of economics, Great Lakes Institute of Management, and assistant professor, Institute of Management Technology.

Indian policymakers recently renewed an old call: move workers out of agriculture. It is good economics—the traditional path to prosperity involves a country's labour force moving from farms to manufacturing and then to services. Except that in India, that transformation is already done to a large extent, at least among the young. Such calls today ignore what has happened to the age structure of those employed on farms and what will happen if we push more people off them.

The median age of a farm worker in India in 2025 was 40 years. It has increased by five years over the last two decades. In some states, farm workers are even older. A typical farm worker in Kerala was 53 years old; and in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, 48. Even in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a typical agricultural labourer was 40 years old. In contrast, while the average services-sector worker was 35 two decades ago, she is barely a year older now. This is based on our analysis of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data.

Between 2004-05 and 2025, the proportion of young adults (20-29 years old) who work in farming, mining and allied activities in India dropped dramatically from 35.4% to 18.3%. If we exclude animal husbandry, barely 13% of young adults now work on farms and other primary sectors.

Young workers have been leaving farms at roughly twice the rate of farm workers older than 30 years. This is a natural progression, since more young adults are highly educated and aspire to work in industry and especially services. During the last 20 years, among 20-29-year-olds, service-sector employment rose from nearly 20% to 28.7% and education enrolment doubled to nearly 12%.

Any call to move people out of agriculture today is in effect a call to accelerate a process of making farm workers even older, since those who will leave will invariably be young. The country must mechanize farms more to improve productivity. But even with mechanization, someone must run a tractor, manage drip irrigation, read soil sensors and increasingly implement artificial intelligence-enabled solutions. That someone needs to be young enough to learn how technology is best put to use and then physically do it.

We do not need more young people on farms, but we do not need to push out those who remain either. We need to improve their earnings and make farming viable. Even among 30-plus year-olds in India, only about 21% were working on farms and mining in 2025, down from nearly 37% two decades ago.

Over the last 20 years, the share of Indians aged 30-plus working in animal husbandry, including dairy (mainly women), has tripled from about 3% to nearly 9%—or about 65 million people over the age of 30.

A youth exodus has already left agriculture short of workers who can adopt technology to improve farming

That is a large number of people who have left crop farming for animal rearing. This suggests that suitable jobs in the industry and service sectors in rural areas are few and far between.

Unemployment among young adults has nearly doubled to about 6%, and the share of people neither working nor looking for work remains near 27%. Also, more young people are staying in education longer, some of them surely because they cannot find suitable jobs after college graduation.

Pushing harder for an exodus of farm workers just adds more people to other primary activities and a job-seeking queue, while leaving the fields to an ever-older set of hands.

It may be true that in some states, young adults remain over-represented on farms—for example, about one in four in Madhya Pradesh. But the answer may not be to push them off farms. Instead, we need to make it easier for them to move to those parts of rural India where farm work pays well, largely in the south.

That means investing in migrant housing, easing cultural and social integration in destination states, making welfare entitlements truly portable across states and lowering hard physical labour via mechanization. In short, more re-allocation of farm labour within India, not less farm labour overall and not fewer young adults.

How do we make farming viable? The solutions are well known. First, mechanization, irrigation cover and the consolidation of fragmented plots into larger holdings to raise farm yields and output per worker. At the same time, we must create greater demand for farm produce—incentivize India's agro-processing industry to enlarge and add value, develop cold storage chains and nurture stable agricultural exports. If not, farm output prices will continue to remain volatile.

We also need to look at reforms holistically, since people's decisions are interlinked. While the National Education Policy sets an official target of 50% of young people in higher education by 2035, policymakers now say that the future lies in imparting trade skills such as plumbing and electrical work. One of us made this point in a 2023 oped, 'Close the prestige gap to find takers for unfancied jobs.' Similarly, our housing policy subsidizes home building on small rural plots, which discourages land sales and farm consolidation and, in turn, holds back agricultural productivity.

The shift that India needs is no longer away from agriculture, but in how we treat this sector. It should be viewed as an industry worth investing in. And that requires us to think of what's best for farms, not just the shape of overall employment.

THEIR VIEW

Today's AI race is relentless but do humans know when to stop?

The incentive structure is loaded against wilful restraint but then that's also why unbridled risk-taking often spells disaster

V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
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In a recent *Financial Times* column (2 July 2026, *shorturl.at/y6B6Z*), John Burn-Murdoch and Sarah O'Connor set out, lucidly and a little chillingly, the asymmetric risks of the AI revolution. Burn-Murdoch's observation is that the threshold for danger sits far below the threshold for usefulness. For AI to pose a large-scale danger, it needs only to have a reasonable chance—one in two, say—of succeeding at the kind of software tasks that enable systems hacking or cyber-attacks, whose consequences are physical as much as digital. By contrast, to replace human workers, it must be reliable and consistent close to 100% of the time across a wide range of tasks that extend well beyond software into the inherent messiness of dealing with humans and navigating the physical world. O'Connor draws the disquieting corollary: we may have built a technology already capable of being dangerous but not yet reliable enough to be useful in many domains. If so, she asks, should the incentives for AI labs not turn towards reliability, given the enterprise adoption it would unlock, rather than pushing the capability charts ever higher?

It reminded me of what Mustafa Suleyman wrote in *The Coming Wave* three years ago. Discussing the risks of AI, he turned to gain-of-function (GoF) research—ostensibly meant to prepare us for deadlier pathogens—to make a point that has stayed with me: the real danger is not bad actors weaponizing technology, but the unintended harm that flows from good people trying to improve health outcomes.

The problem, I posit, is a function of ego and its egregious cousin, hubris. Ego is the biggest driver of human ingenuity, innovation and progress. And the very ingenuity it drives, paradoxically, arms bad actors too, for the instruments of progress are as available to those with ill intent as to anyone else. The answer would seem to lie in accepting humankind's limitations, stopping somewhere and not progressing further. But the notion of halting progress is anathema to many. So, the logical, though not the most desirable, conclusion seems to be that we are fated to remain this way and continue to destroy ourselves. This is pessimistic. Let us try harder.

A possible answer may lie in every human being deciding when and where to stop. Each one knows deep down when they cross the threshold from intellectual curiosity or a quest for progress to pursuits driven by delusions of grandeur. Another possible answer is that a disaster, or one narrowly averted, awakens leaders the world over to the need for a consensus on responsible and sustainable innovation. Immediately, the mind recalls several such instances of mini-disasters that thankfully did not turn into major disasters, as recounted by Suleyman in his book; yet we have marched on, disregarding them. So, this avenue does not seem promising either.

Though it is difficult and may even seem impossible, a fruitful way out could be to remind humans of their ability to figure out when to stop. Recall Peter's Principle: in any hierarchy, every employee rises to his ultimate level of incompetence. Therefore, the key to a life that one can look back on in dotage with quiet satisfaction is to stop at a level below ultimate incompetence. Or, take a successful athlete. The one who chooses to leave at his peak is applauded for that act of sagacity and wisdom, and remembered. Take investing. The secret to growing or preserving one's wealth is knowing when to quit and when to cut one's losses.

But notice that in each of these examples, the downside of not stopping is borne by the individual—the athlete, the investor or the employee. The trouble with AI, and with gain-of-function research, is that the incentives are upside down. The one who chooses not to stop keeps the glory, the patent, the citation; the cost of this person not stopping is borne by others who cannot easily trace the harm back to him or her. It is easy to embrace restraint when it is rewarding. If restraint robs the practitioner of the upside, then asking this person to do so in the interests of society is harder. This is why individual wisdom, though necessary, cannot by itself be enough.

We appear to have come full circle, with little to show for it. And yet the circle is not quite closed. If individuals cannot be relied upon to act against their own interests, then the question is whether incentives will work. Here, O'Connor's instinct is sound, but her question is not. She has seen the asymmetry clearly, but has chosen between reliability and raw capability. The pressing challenge is about lengthening the odds of AI causing harm or of malicious actors using it to cause harm. Driving the success rate of useful tasks towards 100% does nothing to drive the success rate of dangerous ones towards zero. Commercial incentives will take care of the former, whereas the latter is a deliberate choice.

The question is what will make AI companies take the risk of harm more seriously than passing capability benchmarks, which themselves are not quite what they seem, being defined narrowly enough that a model can top them by memorizing or gaming the test rather than by acquiring the capability that is being certified (*International AI Safety Report 2026, shorturl.at/hcpKy*). Will it be law or markets? The race to maximize capability for civil and military applications makes governments wary of pursuing safety. Markets do not reward those who mind risks, for markets have all but forgotten how to recognize risk, let alone price it, ever since easy money in the new millennium made it easier for investors to chase returns, ignoring risk. So, the one who presses on keeps the upside; when the reckoning comes, no one will be held to account, as happened in 2008. By then, the accounting will not matter.

These are the author's personal views.

MINT CURATOR

Ask if your workplace is wired to maximize the benefits of AI

Redeploy the workforce for smarter work to derive value from AI

BOB STERNFELS
is the global managing partner of McKinsey & Company.

Headcount reduction is not what CEOs should aim for. ISTOCKPHOTO

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping every business, including ours. But the hardest challenge is rewiring your company around it. How corporate leaders respond to that test will determine whether AI shrinks their ambition or raises it. Throughout history, progress has come from pairing new tools with enterprising people who want to build what comes next. For companies that mistake AI's greatest value as cutting costs, this moment will be painful. For those willing to bet on equipping good staff with extraordinary technology, this is a golden opportunity.

AI adoption and spending are soaring, but many businesses are still struggling to turn that investment into better decisions, faster execution, new capabilities and measurable returns. To see what they're missing, we can look at some of McKinsey's client work. After a recent software-delivery project, a team that had needed about 10 people now operates with four, supported by AI agents that help build code, test software and do analysis. The group's manager validates the agents' work and has more time to take responsibility for what's produced. The team's engineer spends their day building, supervising and improving the system itself. Elsewhere, a large manufacturing client introduced an Agentic AI system that reduced human error in a production process from 5% to 0.5%.

Does this all make it inevitable that AI adopters will need fewer workers? No. When tech improves, the best people move on to the next hardest problem. That's why we're hiring more client-facing consultants, aiming for a 20% increase this year—most of them in entry-level positions.

Some recent studies have found that companies investing more aggressively in AI are also hiring more. This technology changes the work people do but also creates the capacity to do work that was not possible before. Our research has found that 88% of companies use AI in at least one business function, but far fewer are realizing meaningful value from it. Closing that gap is a leadership and talent problem.

The trickiest questions for companies are around how the technology will affect their operations and culture, and the risks it might entail. That feeds into the hiring and talent question too. Business leaders must decide where AI should be allowed to make decisions and where people must remain accountable.

One of the greatest difficulties for firms is how to redesign the way they work around AI, and how to try to carve out an advantage when their rivals have access to the same models. Beyond that, they need to work out how to make AI strengthen the values that define their organizations.

Given the rapid evolution of AI tools and the profound challenge of how to re-engineer entire organizations around their use, finding people who are comfortable navigating complexity is essential. Other assets coming to the fore include the ability to exercise sound judgement without as much oversight as earlier, and a gift for knowing what to trust and what matters.

Many university graduates today are AI-native and more used than previous generations to operating in a state of flux. People from non-traditional backgrounds are in demand too.

AI is, of course, changing how we work at McKinsey as well. It is taking on repeatable tasks and freeing people up for more consequential stuff. One team cut its document review time from days to minutes; another compressed a week of analysis into half an hour. We have more than 500 consultants working in 'agentic team rooms,' alongside AI coding and research bots that can spin up prototypes and analytical workflows in days rather than weeks.

That raises a bigger question: If AI can do more of the work that once trained future bosses, how do we prepare the next generation to lead? For us, the answer is getting people to do work that builds their judgement. AI lets our new joiners spend less time searching for information and more time structuring problems, testing ideas and deciding what matters. Entry-level work is no longer just about analysis.

For students deciding where to invest their time, the answer is simple: Don't gamble on today's technology. Think about the human attributes that will become more valuable as these tools proliferate and improve. These include working well with others, a desire for constant learning and being able to apply judgement where AI is insufficient.

For CEOs, there is no playbook to copy. The challenge is reshaping organizations so AI changes the nature of how decisions are made and work gets done. Doing this at enterprise-scale will still demand human expertise and staying power. The firms that treat this moment as a headcount problem will shrink to fit it. Those that bet on talent will gladly fill that space.

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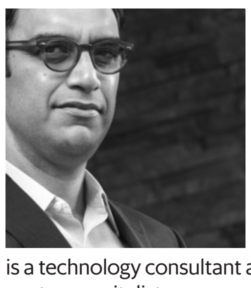
MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

What IT sector results don't reveal is gaining relevance

SIDDHARTH PAI



is a technology consultant and venture capitalist

Some months ago, a senior manager at one of India's large IT service firms described a conversation he had with a client who wanted to expand the engagement. More features, faster delivery, broader scope. The manager said 'yes' to all of it. Then he went back to his desk and realized he was not going to hire anyone to help do it. He did not think this was remarkable. That was the most interesting part.

The latest results from the sector's largest firms point toward this story, though reporting periods and currency effects differ. HCLTech's advanced AI revenue rose 62.1% year-on-year to $171 million, with record first-quarter deal wins of $2.4 billion, while it reduced headcount by 3,292. Accenture, whose fiscal third quarter ended on 31 May, reported revenue of $18.7 billion, up about 6%, while its workforce grew only 1% year-on-year. TCS's revenue for the quarter ended June 2026 rose 3.2% year-on-year in constant currency, or 13.9% in reported rupee terms, but it added 9,279 employees on a net basis, its strongest quarterly headcount increase in four years. IBM's preliminary June-quarter figures missed expectations and produced a historic share-price decline, attributed to spending shifts, purchase timing, execution problems and delayed deal closures. Others are yet to report results; Infosys's for example, will be out on 23 July. But the IT sector's direction of travel is visible.

For years, revenue and headcount in IT services moved together in a ratio planners could depend on. More work meant more people. The ratio was stable enough to anchor workforce planning, fresher hiring, pyramid structures and the model under which a young engineer in Bengaluru or Pune could join the industry, spend two years doing work no senior wanted to do and emerge with enough experience to do something more interesting. That model assumed the existence of junior-level work.

The ratio may be coming apart. HCLTech grew revenue and shrank headcount in the same quarter. Accenture's revenue grew several times faster than its workforce in percentage terms. What if these are not rounding errors, but structural changes becoming visible in the earnings trendline one quarter at a time?

The mechanism is not difficult to identify. AI coding assistants have made the senior engineer significantly more productive. A developer who once needed a week to produce a substantial piece of work may now only need hours. The output looks the same; it passes tests. The pull request with new code arrives clean and well-structured. The ticket closes, the velocity metric rises and the sprint looks healthy. This productivity gain is no exaggeration.

Revenues are outpacing headcounts but it's unclear how closely IT firms grasp what they produce

What is harder to see is what has quietly been subtracted. When a senior engineer produces in hours what once took a week, the work that disappeared was not all wasted time. Much of it was the process by which engineers understood what they were building. They typed every line, made choices about structure and approach, hit problems, resolved them, and carried a mental model of the system that was the residue of all that effort. Junior engineers did the same at a slower pace, learning as they went. The code review that followed was two people comparing mental models. It was slower than it needed to be, but that slowness was doing something useful.

That process has been abbreviated and what also gets crunched is that process of understanding, not just the effort. The pull request that arrives in 40 minutes rather than four days has something missing that no metric captures. The reviewer who approves it, with very little time on hand, and who may well be using AI to check AI, is not comparing mental models. Reviewers are examining a generated artefact and being asked to stand behind it as though the two were equivalent. Whether anyone fully understands what was built does not appear in anything these firms report.

IBM's quarter illustrates a different consequence of the same transition. Clients are re-orienting technology budgets towards AI infrastructure and away from other categories. The economics of enterprise technology is shifting, even if not in the same way for every firm.

Large firms understand some of this. TCS added over 9,000 people in the June quarter and has been explicit about fresh hires as a policy. Eliminating the entry-level pipeline delivers short-term margin improvement but creates a structural problem five to ten years from now, when there would be nobody to elevate to senior engineer roles.

But the pipeline problem and the understanding problem are not the same thing. You can hire freshers and still produce code nobody fully comprehends, reviewed by engineers who trust the output because it looks trustworthy. A headcount may hold steady even as understanding declines.

The IT services industry is very good at explaining itself. Its quarterly calls are always polished, metrics are coherent and growth narratives are internally consistent. What the numbers do not show is whether the work being delivered is understood by the people delivering it, or simply produced by them.

That gap between production and understanding is not visible in any of these results. It will not appear in the next set either. But it is a reasonable bet that it will eventually appear, as these things do. Reality has a way of intruding on even the most coherent explanation.

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Disarming the farmer

With the kharif season underway, farmers have already planned their crops, secured credit and procured inputs based on the expectation that registered products will remain available. Abrupt withdrawal of herbicides or insecticides at this stage would disrupt weed and pest management, increase cultivation costs, create uncertainty and jeopardize productivity

Every farmer's grievance/ crop failure is a wound the nation must feel. The ongoing review of Paraquat Dichloride and Glyphosate, prompted by the reports of severe poisoning in Telangana, deserves both compassion and clear and rational scientific reasoning. While poisoning and death due to lapses needs investigation and solution, the policy response must strike at the real cause of harm and not on the mishap without studying the issue.

Removing a molecule that had undergone rigorous scrutiny from the shelf may be an act of administration. However, within itself, it could neither protect the gullible farmer from poisoning nor the crops from losses due to devastating weeds. The challenges are many, but farmers' livelihood is their fundamental right, and we, the responsible citizens, must stand steadfast for this cause.

The evidence on what drives farmer suicides is well established. Indebtedness, crop failure due to counterfeit and substandard agricultural inputs, lack of timely institutional credit, and poor price realization arising from inefficient marketing systems are among the principal factors that push distressed farmers to the brink, and not the chemistry printed on a pesticide label. Withdrawing a registered crop protection product does not eliminate debt, restore a failed crop or ensure remunerative prices. Where pesticides are misused for self-harm, the focus must be on identifying and supporting individuals experiencing severe emotional or financial distress. In this regard, the Government's initiative of introducing a toll-free helpline for counselling and mental health support is a welcome and commendable step. However, if a person is determined to take an extreme step, there are many means available. Therefore, policy interventions should focus on addressing the underlying socio-economic causes rather than restricting essential agricultural tools that millions of farmers depend upon.

Herbicides and other crop protection products are indispensable to modern agriculture, particularly for small and marginal farmers, as they provide an affordable and effective means of protecting crops, managing labour shortages and improving productivity. Stakeholders of crop protection have consistently promoted the right product, at the right dose, at the right time and in the right manner, strictly in accordance with the recommendations provided on product labels and leaflets. However, their capacity to reach every farmer is limited. Farmer education and awareness are ultimately a public responsibility and require sustained governmental support. It is pertinent to recall the observation of a former Union Finance Minister that several extension experiments have been undertaken over the years, but none has been sufficiently effective in reaching farmers at scale.

Today, government is investing thousands of crores of rupees in nationwide campaigns to create awareness about cybercrime. Unfortunately, despite its critical importance, agricultural extension has not received the priority it deserves, given that nearly half of India's population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. Should there not be an equally intensive national campaign to educate farmers on scientific crop management, balanced use of fertilizers, safe and judicious use of crop protection products, and the identification of counterfeit agricultural inputs? The Government deserves appreciation for promoting crop insurance through substantial premium support. At the same time, scientifically evaluated crop protection chemicals themselves act as the first line of defence against pests, diseases and weeds, helping farmers avoid crop losses before insurance becomes necessary. When used strictly according to label recommendations, these products have repeatedly been demonstrated to be safe and effective through thousands of scientific studies conducted worldwide.

It is important to remember that no crop protection product is approved for use in India unless it undergoes rigorous scientific evaluation, extensive toxicological and environmental studies, and scrutiny by the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare through the Central Insecticides Board & Registration Committee (CIBRC).

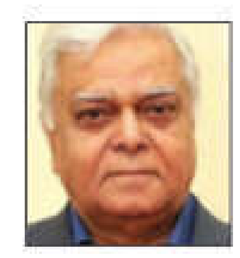
Only after satisfying these stringent regulatory requirements is a product registered, following which State Governments issue manufacturing and sale licences. The real challenge, therefore, is not the availability of registered products, but ensuring their responsible use while simultaneously eliminating counterfeit and illegally smuggled pesticides from the market. Biotic stresses, particularly weeds and pests, inflict an estimated annual economic loss of approximately Rs 92,000 crore on Indian agriculture. A comprehensive assessment by ICAR's Directorate of Weed Research and the Federation of Seed Industry of India, encompassing thousands of farmers across eleven states, estimated potential yield losses due to weeds at 25-26 per cent in kharif crops and 18-25 per cent in rabi crops.

These findings emphasize that timely and effective weed management is fundamental to sustaining crop yields, farm profitability and national food security. The withdrawal of any scientifically evaluated crop protection molecule without a proven, affordable and equally effective alternative inevitably increases production losses, with the greatest burden falling on smallholder farmers, followed by consumers through higher food prices and ultimately the national economy. At a time when India is strengthening food security and advancing the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat, ensuring continued access to effective crop protection tools under a robust regulatory framework is imperative.

Paraquat is not a product of convenience; it is a tool of necessity in the circumstances. It has been used in India even before the inception of the Insecticides Act, 1968 without any undue concerns arising because of its use in agriculture and non-cropped areas. As a fast-acting, non-selective contact herbicide, it gets deactivated the instant it touches the soil, leaving no residue in the field or in the harvest. By virtue of this property, paraquat dichloride has become the basis of the zero-tillage and conservation agriculture that the Government itself is promoting to conserve water and protect soil health.

It is heavily relied upon for cultivation across the agro-ecological niches including horticultural, field and plantation crops. It is enigmatic why suddenly news highlighting the hazardous nature of paraquat dichloride has surfaced disproportionately in the country to coincide with the arrival of kharif sowing. With the onset of monsoon, the demand for discontinuation of this herbicide becomes all the more important.

For more than three decades, successive expert committees constituted by the Government of India have consistently recognized that Paraquat Dichloride is an effective non-selective contact herbicide with an important role in weed management, while simultaneously acknowledging its acute toxicity if misused or ingested. Importantly, none of the major Government-appointed expert committees ~ the Banerjee Committee (1991), the R.B. Singh Committee (1998), the C.D. Mayee Committee (2006) and the Dr. Anupam Verma Committee (2015) ~ recommended an outright ban on Paraquat Dichloride. Instead, each committee concluded that the risks associated with the herbicide could be managed through a robust regulatory framework comprising restricted and label-compliant use, strengthened packaging and labelling, controlled sale and distribution, mandatory use of personal protective equipment, user education and stewardship, and enhanced preparedness of the medical community for prompt diagnosis and management of poisoning cases. The Anupam Verma Committee's recommendations were subsequently considered and accepted, with observations, by the Registration Committee in its 361st Special Meeting (22 December 2015), which supported the continued registration of Paraquat with additional safeguards rather than prohibition. This regulatory approach is consistent with the internationally accepted principle that pesticide regulation should be based on scientific risk assessment rather than hazard alone, recognizing that hazard is an intrinsic property whereas risk depends on the magnitude and route of exposure under approved conditions of use.



DR. C D MAYEE

The writer is former Agriculture Commissioner, Government of India

Deliberate self-poisoning and accidental ingestion are serious public health concerns that warrant strengthened stewardship, packaging innovations, poison information services, farmer training and medical preparedness; however, these concerns do not, by themselves, demonstrate unacceptable risk from registered agricultural use when products are handled in accordance with approved label directions.

Consequently, the cumulative scientific and regulatory opinion of successive Government expert committees has consistently favoured risk mitigation and responsible stewardship over prohibition, supporting the continued availability of Paraquat Dichloride within a stringent regulatory and safety framework while ensuring its agronomic benefits for effective weed management. Glyphosate is another effective and non-selective herbicide that periodically faces opposition from some quarters for unknown reasons. The herbicide, with 0.7-0.9 million ton usage, remains one of the most extensively evaluated and widely used broad-spectrum herbicides in the world. In India it plays a critical role in effective weed management, conservation agriculture and sustainable crop production. Any call for its prohibition should be guided by robust scientific risk assessment rather than hazard perception alone.

Technical glyphosate exhibits low acute toxicity, with an oral LD_{50} exceeding 5,000 mg/kg body weight, which is higher than that of even common salt, indicating comparatively lower acute toxicity. While the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified glyphosate as a potential hazard, major regulatory authorities, including the Joint FAO/WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR), the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) and other bodies have concluded that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk to humans when used according to approved label directions.

Consistent with this scientific evidence, the European Union renewed glyphosate approval until 2033. In India, withdrawing glyphosate would eliminate a highly effective non-selective herbicide, reduce options for resistance management, increase dependence on less efficient or costlier alternatives and adversely affect conservation agriculture. Continued use under strict regulatory oversight, stewardship, label compliance and user training represents a scientifically justified and proportionate approach that balances agricultural productivity with human and environmental safety. A regulatory regime that bends to the headline will, in time, forfeit the trust of the farmers it is meant to serve.

The timing is equally critical. With the kharif season underway, farmers have already planned their crops, secured credit and procured inputs based on the expectation that registered products will remain available. Abrupt withdrawal of herbicides or insecticides at this stage would disrupt weed and pest management, increase cultivation costs, create uncertainty and jeopardize productivity. Regulatory decisions should therefore be guided by sound scientific evidence and accompanied by a phased transition supported by effective alternatives, rather than sudden prohibition.

This is a humble appeal to the Government ~ not for regulatory relaxation, but for a science-based and balanced approach that harmonizes agricultural productivity with environmental sustainability. The current regulatory status of Paraquat Dichloride and Glyphosate should be maintained until the ongoing scientific review is completed through the established statutory process. Simultaneously, greater emphasis should be placed on responsible stewardship through farmer training, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), improved packaging and labelling, closed-transfer systems where appropriate, and strengthened regulations governing sale, storage and safe handling.

This is the approach adopted by most agricultural economies to balance crop productivity with human and environmental safety. Indian farmers deserve both effective crop protection technologies and the highest standards of safety, and sound public policy should strive to secure both rather than compromise either.

Changing Guard

Spain's triumph at the 2026 World Cup was more than the recovery of a crown last won in 2010. It may have marked a changing of the guard in international football. The embrace between 19-year-old Lamine Yamal and 39-year-old Lionel Messi after Spain's 1-0 extra-time victory over Argentina captured that transition with an eloquence that the match itself rarely achieved. Messi may have made his final World Cup appearance. Yamal, already a European champion, has now won football's greatest prize before his 20th birthday. Yet Spain's achievement is larger than the emergence of another prodigy. The country simultaneously holds the men's World Cup, European Championship and Olympic titles, alongside the women's World Cup. Its senior men have gone 38 matches unbeaten. Such dominance suggests not a fortunate generation but a footballing system capable of continually renewing itself.

The final demonstrated that strength. Spain had 65 per cent possession and subjected Argentina to sustained pressure, while the defending champions failed remarkably to register a shot during regulation time. Spain conceded only once throughout the tournament. Ferran Torres's winner in the 106th minute therefore settled a contest whose narrow scoreline concealed a considerable disparity. Argentina's response made defeat more damaging. A team talented enough to reach consecutive finals too often substituted disruption for invention. Enzo Fernandez's dismissal after a reckless challenge and the confrontations following the final whistle left an unworthy final impression of the outgoing champions. Physicality and tactical obstruction are legitimate instruments of competitive football; indiscipline is not.

Argentina's approach also marginalised their greatest asset, leaving Messi peripheral when his creativity was most needed. The contrast points towards divergent futures. Spain's established core, led by Rodri, is already complemented by Yamal and Pau Cubarsi, both 19. Argentina must contemplate life after Messi, while coach Lionel Scaloni's own future is uncertain. Spain have achieved the difficult feat of combining supremacy with succession. Spain's success also vindicates sustained investment in youth development, proving that international dominance is built long before players reach tournaments. There was another transition unfolding beyond the pitch.

The 27-minute half-time entertainment, celebrity performances, elaborate ceremonies and President Donald Trump's conspicuous presence alongside FIFA president Gianni Infantino gave the final the character of an American mega-event. FIFA appears increasingly attracted to the Super Bowl model, in which sport becomes one component of a much larger entertainment product. That evolution promises greater audiences and commercial returns, but carries risks. Football's global appeal has never depended on celebrity spectacle, and political prominence around trophy ceremonies can blur boundaries that sporting institutions should guard carefully. The enduring image of this final should therefore remain the simplest one: an ageing master embracing the teenager who may inherit his stage. Messi's World Cup generation appears to be receding. Spain's young champions are only beginning theirs. Amid all the fireworks surrounding modern football, the game itself supplied the more compelling spectacle.

Sea Change

India's maritime ambitions cannot be measured by a ceremonial warship commissioning or ambitious infrastructure announcements alone. Naval power is built over decades through consistent political commitment, industrial capacity and financial planning. The real question is not how many ships are entering service today, but whether enough decisions are being taken now to ensure that the fleet remains credible a decade from now. The strategic environment has become far more demanding. China's naval expansion continues at an unprecedented pace, extending Beijing's reach across the Indo-Pacific through a combination of aircraft carriers, submarines, destroyers and overseas logistics facilities.

Pakistan, with sustained Chinese assistance, is steadily modernising its own fleet. Meanwhile, recent disruptions to commercial shipping in West Asia have once again demonstrated how vulnerable maritime trade can become during regional conflicts. For a country that depends overwhelmingly on sea routes for its trade and energy supplies, these are not distant developments but immediate strategic realities. Maritime security is no longer solely a military concern; it underpins economic resilience, energy security, supply-chain stability and India's broader geopolitical influence. India has responded with greater attention to the Indian Ocean, to stronger naval diplomacy and an emphasis on indigenous defence production. These are important advances. Yet they cannot obscure a more fundamental concern. Major combat platforms require years ~ often well over a decade ~ from approval to operational deployment. Delays in political clearances, procurement decisions or budgetary commitments today inevitably become capability gaps tomorrow.

This is particularly significant because naval capability cannot be generated overnight in response to a crisis. Aircraft carriers, submarines, destroyers and advanced frigates are not emergency purchases; they are products of long-term national planning. If procurement cycles become irregular, shipyards lose momentum, supply chains weaken and operational readiness suffers over time. Even the most capable sailors cannot compensate indefinitely for an ageing or numerically inadequate fleet. The debate should therefore move beyond individual projects and towards institutional reform. India has repeatedly demonstrated that it can execute complex defence programmes when political priorities, funding and administrative processes are aligned. The challenge lies in ensuring that such alignment becomes routine rather than episodic. Defence planning should be guided by clearly defined national objectives, predictable financial commitments and procurement mechanisms that minimise avoidable delays without compromising accountability.

Equally important is recognising that emerging technologies, from autonomous underwater vehicles to long-range precision weapons and maritime surveillance networks, should complement rather than substitute traditional naval power. Modern warfare demands both innovation and conventional capability. One cannot replace the other. India does not need to mirror China's fleet ship for ship. Geography, alliances and strategic objectives differ. But it cannot afford prolonged uncertainty over the composition and pace of its own naval modernisation. Maritime influence rests not only on the ships already at sea but also on the confidence that future capability is steadily being built. Strategic credibility ultimately depends less on announcements than on sustained execution.

The Jakarta Post

What we can learn from mandatory B50 before B60

Indonesia's ambitious biodiesel program has progressed from B2.5 in 2008 to B50 in 2026 through successive evolutions in fuel standards, production capacity, distribution infrastructure, and engine testing.

Spanning multiple administrations, the policy has endured fluctuating oil prices, shifting fiscal priorities, and changing political leadership. In a country where long-term initiatives frequently lose momentum during portfolio transitions, B50 represents nearly two decades of accumulated industrial and institutional expertise.

Yet, the ink was barely dry on the B50 mandate when President Prabowo Subianto began questioning when the nation could transition to B60.

Reducing imported diesel, retaining greater value from palm oil and diminishing reliance on foreign fuel carry immense political weight in a nation whose natural resources were historically extracted for external benefit. Observing this discourse, a colleague posed a poignant question: "What happens when the blend rises above B50?" The rapid pivot toward B60 underscores how easily the next percentage milestone can become a symbol of progress before the current one has been sustained or fully understood.

Public and policy discourse in Indonesia frequently navigates the nuanced concepts of swasembada energi (energy self-sufficiency), ketahanan energi (energy security), kemandirian energi (energy independence) and kedaulatan energi (energy sovereignty): Swasembada evaluates whether domestic production satisfies domestic demand.

Ketahanan energi, as defined by Government Regulation No. 40/2025, emphasizes long-term availability, accessibility, and affordability, while incorporating environmental protections.

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Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Sailors

Sir, Apropos "Perilous Passage" published today, the Strait of Hormuz has become a killing field for civilians who keep global trade moving, with the death of an Indian sailor and injuries to six others aboard a UAE tanker proving that ordinary workers, not just soldiers, are paying the price for geopolitical rivalry.

Washington's brief proposal to charge a 20 per cent toll on cargo, withdrawn after criticism, and Tehran's insistence that it is the Strait's true guardian, reveal a dangerous contest over who controls international commerce, with no regard for the human cost. For India, which sources nearly two-thirds of its crude oil from the Gulf and has thousands of seafarers in the region, this is not a distant conflict but a direct threat to energy security and lives.

Oil prices are already climbing, and sustained uncertainty will hurt consumers and disrupt supply chains across the world.

Military superiority alone cannot secure these waters; what is needed is diplomacy, restraint, and internationally accepted rules. Every vessel that enters Hormuz is a potential casualty, and the economic shockwaves will reach far beyond the Gulf, hitting Indian households at the pump and beyond.

Yours, etc., K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru, 17 July.

Fundamentals

Sir, Apropos "Beyond Hype", published today, the excitement surrounding private space ventures is understandable, but public enthusiasm should not replace careful evaluation.

Technological breakthroughs deserve recognition only when they are matched by financial discipline, operational consistency and long-term value creation.

Investors, regulators and market analysts must avoid being carried away by ambitious announcements or soaring valuations alone. Strong corporate governance, transparent disclosures and realistic business targets remain the foundation of sustainable growth. India's expanding space ecosystem, too, has immense promise, provided innovation is supported by accountability and prudent risk management.

Retail investors, in particular, should study business fundamentals instead of following market sentiment.

A healthy investment environment depends on informed decisions rather than speculation.

The success of any pioneering company ultimately rests not on headlines but on its ability to consistently deliver products, earn customer confidence and create durable economic value over time.

Yours, etc., A Myilsami,
Coimbatore, 17 July.

Indus now a sacred word for Pakistan

HARSHA KAKAR

Pakistan has, throughout its history, been desperate to create an identity for itself. Its history books have been modified every time a dictator has assumed power. Its current history does not commence from ancient civilizations, including the Indus Valley civilization, which existed in what is now Pakistan, but from the invasion of Sindh by Muhammad Bin Qasim, an Arab military commander in the service of the Umayyad Caliphate in 711 AD. 'Fifty Years of Pakistan', published by the Federal Bureau of Pakistan in 1998 declares Muhammad Qasim as the 'first Pakistani.' There has been a conscious attempt to avoid linking Pakistan's history to that of India.

Its other history too has been equally distorted. Some examples listed by Pakistan's newspaper, Dawn, in an article of 15 August 2014, highlight this fact. The fifth-grade history textbook of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa states on the 1965 war, "The Pakistan Army conquered several areas of India, and when India was at the verge of being defeated, she ran to the United Nations to beg for a cease-fire. Magnanimously, thereafter, Pakistan returned all conquered territories to India."

On the 1971 war, its history books mention, "after 1965 war India conspired with the Hindus of Bengal and succeeded in spreading hate amongst the Bengalis about West Pakistan and finally attacked East Pakistan in December 71, thus causing the breakup of East and West Pakistan." Written when Pakistan was ruled by a military dictator, the intent was to cover its defeat and surrender of 93,000 prisoners to India.

A class five social studies book states, "India is our traditional enemy and we should always keep ourselves ready to defend our beloved country from Indian aggression." The Pakistani army is considered as the saviour of the state. For the Pakistani public, India seeks the break-up of Pakistan and is responsible for all its ills, including freedom movements in its western provinces and protests in POJK.

On Kashmir, its history books mention that "Maharaja Hari Singh started a brutal campaign to drive out Muslims from Kashmir. Over 200,000 people in the princely State, supported by the tribesmen of the Northwest Frontier Province, were successful in liberating a large area of Kashmir from the Maharaja's control. Hari Singh was forced to turn to India for help and in return acceded to India." The intent was to claim victory in the 1947-48 conflict.

The reality of Kashmir is vastly different. Pakistan has neither considered Kashmiris as brothers nor claimed it because of its majority Muslim population. No wonder Pakistan is crushing protests in POJK with brute military power. An op-ed in Pakistan's Herald Magazine titled, 'The pursuit of Kashmir' of 2 February 2019, highlights its true intent, "these two factors (bordering Afghanistan and China as also rivers flowing from the region) make Kashmir a strategically crucial region. In other words, it is a prized territory."

There is some mention of ancient Indus and Harappan civilizations in Pakistan's history books but these are never linked to its history. Though Pakistan has exploited these sites for tourism, it has never attempted to connect them to its culture and history. For Pakistan, any historical link to India is considered taboo.

Since India placed the IWT (Indus Water Treaty) in abeyance in April last year, Pakistan woke up to the realization that the Indus Valley Civilization exists on its soil and it can claim sole ownership of the Indus basin. The Mohenjo-daro sites, which had been left untouched since evacuations were done in 1965, witnessed a revival after Operation Sindoor. Pakistan rediscovered its love for Hindu culture, solely for selfish interest, aiming to project itself as the primary guardian of the Indus Water Basin.

Post Sindoor, Pakistan moved in multiple directions, hoping global pressure would reverse India's decision. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague decision on dams under construction on the Western Rivers issued on 15 May was rejected by India on the ground that the treaty is in abeyance. India stated that a treaty 'built on good faith' cannot oblige 'one party to perform in full while the other sponsors violence against it.'

Since holding the treaty in abeyance, India refused to participate in any arbitration or meeting of neutral experts on any subject under the IWT. Pakistan, desperate to keep the issue alive, is paying the cost of both nations. Media reports mention it has already spent USD 600,000 (300,000 per nation) to keep processes ongoing. Pakistan is desperate.

Pakistan also approached the UN Security Council, of which it is a rotating member, hoping it would criticize India. Nothing moved. It recently conducted a one-day global conference on the IWT attempting to garner some level of international support. It was here that its political and military representatives threatened India by military action, claiming 'strangulation of water is an existential threat.'

Their failed marshal, busy running around the globe attempting to negotiate conflicts, in one of his rare meetings with his generals, stated that the Pakistan military would 'undertake all measures necessary to ensure availability of Pakistan's rightful share of water as per the directives of the government and aspirations of the people of Pakistan.' However, he is aware of limitations of his armed forces, and the fact that India's retaliation would be brutal.

Now that everything is failing, Pakistan is playing its final card, claiming the Indus Valley civilization is a major component of its identity. Pakistan's leaders have now begun singing that they are the true custodians of the Indus heritage, including its water. Despite all its drama of invoking everything possible, all its claims fall flat. Only the Harappa and Mohenjo-daro archaeological sites were located in Pakistan; most others of the same period were discovered along the Ghaggar-Hakra river basin in India. When these civilizations existed, there was no India or Pakistan nor a LoC.

After eight decades, Pakistan, which considered Muhammad Bin Qasim as its first citizen, suddenly realizes the importance of the Indus Valley civilization. Its attempt to copy Russian claims of ancient linkages with Ukraine or the Chinese of links with Tibet and other regions it claims, does not hold water. For a nation which for eight decades systematically erased cultural rights of its minorities, suddenly rediscovering them, is a joke. It would be better for Pakistan to improve its water management systems and stop supporting terrorism rather than attempt fake claims.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

Fragmented climate responses won't work

SIDDHARTH ROY

For much of the past three decades, climate change occupied a distinct corner of public policy. It was largely discussed through the lens of environmental conservation, carbon emissions and international climate negotiations. Governments treated it as an ecological challenge while economists, urban planners and public health experts often addressed it separately within their respective domains.

That distinction is no longer sustainable. Climate change has evolved into a systemic risk that increasingly shapes economic growth, public health, national security and social stability. Treating it as a specialised environmental issue understates both its scale and its consequences.

The evidence is visible across India. Record-breaking heatwaves, erratic monsoons, flash floods, prolonged droughts and coastal erosion are no longer isolated events but recurring features of an altered climate. Cities from Delhi to Guwahati have experienced extreme rainfall that overwhelms drainage systems, disrupts transport and damages infrastructure.

Himalayan States confront landslides and glacial risks with increasing frequency, while coastal communities face stronger cyclones and rising sea levels. These events are not simply environmental disasters; they impose heavy economic costs and expose the vulnerability of existing development models.

Agriculture illustrates this transformation most clearly. Despite structural changes in the economy, millions of Indians continue to depend directly or indirectly on farming for their livelihoods. Unpredictable rainfall, rising temperatures and changing pest patterns reduce crop productivity and increase uncertainty for farmers.

The consequences extend far beyond rural incomes. Food inflation, supply chain disruptions and fiscal pressures frequently follow climatic shocks, affecting consumers and policymakers alike. Climate resilience has therefore become integral to food security and macroeconomic stability. Urban India faces an equally complex challenge. Rapid urbanisation has expanded economic opportunities but has also increased exposure to climate-related risks. Heatwaves raise electricity demand as cooling requirements grow, placing additional pressure on power systems. Flooding damages transport networks, disrupts businesses and imposes significant repair costs on municipal authorities. Water scarcity threatens both households and industries, while poorly planned construction often amplifies the effects of extreme weather. Climate resilience can no longer remain an optional consideration in urban planning; it must become one of its central organising principles.

Public health presents another compelling reason to rethink climate policy. Rising temperatures increase heat-related illnesses, particularly among children, older persons, outdoor workers and economically vulnerable populations. Air pollution interacts with higher temperatures to aggravate respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Changes in climatic conditions also influence the spread of vector-borne diseases, creating new burdens for healthcare systems already under pressure. Climate adaptation, therefore, is inseparable from preventive healthcare and public health preparedness.

The social consequences of climate change are equally profound. Environmental shocks rarely affect all sections of society in the same way. Small farmers, informal workers, fishing communities, tribal populations and low-income urban households often bear the greatest burden despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change therefore raises questions not only of sustainability but also of equity. Policies that overlook these disparities risk widening existing inequalities and undermining inclusive development.

These realities demand a broader policy response. Mitigation remains indispensable because reducing emissions is essential for limiting long-term warming. Yet adaptation deserves equal priority. India must invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, water conservation, sustainable agriculture and early warning systems that minimise loss of life and livelihoods.

Urban development plans should integrate heat-action strategies, flood-resilient drainage, green public spaces and nature-based solutions instead of relying solely on conventional engineering interventions. Such investments should be viewed not as environmental expenditure but as economic safeguards that reduce future losses.

India has already demonstrated leadership in renewable energy and international climate diplomacy. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and the expansion of solar and wind capacity reflect a commitment to balancing development with environmental responsibility. However, climate considerations must now extend beyond the energy sector. Decisions relating to transport, housing,

industrial policy, financial regulation, healthcare and disaster management increasingly have climate implications. A whole-of-government approach is therefore essential.

The private sector also has a pivotal role. Climate risks are no longer abstract concerns confined to sustainability reports. They directly affect supply chains, insurance costs, infrastructure, labour productivity and long-term profitability. Businesses that integrate climate resilience into investment decisions are likely to remain more competitive in an increasingly uncertain global economy. Financial institutions must similarly strengthen climate-risk assessment so that capital flows support resilient infrastructure and sustainable economic activity.

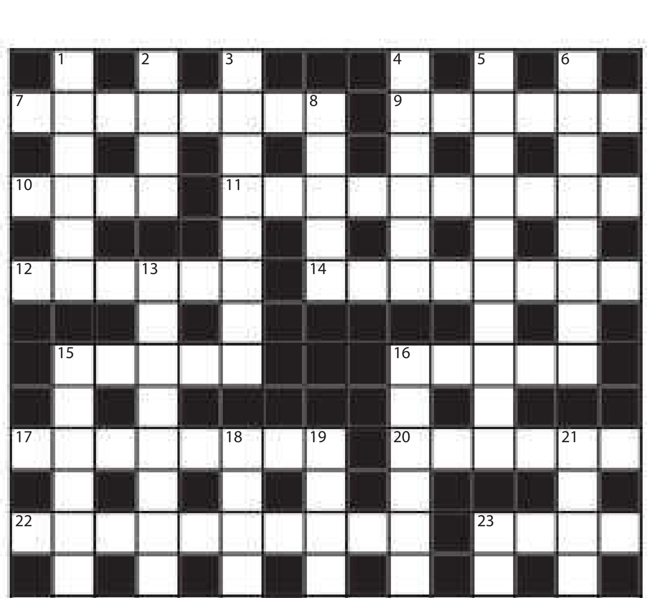
Equally important is recognising climate change as a governance challenge. Effective adaptation depends upon stronger coordination among the Union, States and local governments. Municipal bodies require greater technical capacity and financial resources to implement climate-resilient urban planning. Panchayats must be equipped to support local adaptation measures, while scientific institutions should work more closely with policymakers to translate climate projections into practical planning tools. Fragmented responses will prove inadequate against a challenge that cuts across every sector.

The debate is often framed as a choice between economic growth and environmental protection. That binary has become increasingly misleading. Climate resilience is now a prerequisite for sustained economic development. Infrastructure repeatedly damaged by floods, declining agricultural productivity, rising healthcare costs and disrupted supply chains ultimately impose far greater economic burdens than preventive investments ever would.

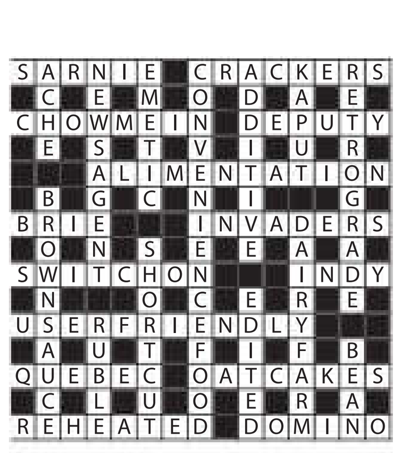
Climate change has outgrown the confines of environmental policy. It now influences fiscal stability, food security, public health, urban governance, infrastructure planning and social justice. India's development trajectory will increasingly depend on how effectively these interconnected risks are addressed. The question is no longer whether climate policy deserves a place in economic planning. It is whether economic planning can remain credible without placing climate resilience at its very centre.

The writer is a civil engineer, and consultant (invitee) to Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The views are personal. He can be reached at siddharth001.roy@gmail.com

Crossword | No. 293527



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

7 Baked food made from pasta, mostly, with egg in (8)
9 Fungus damaged a cigar (6)
10 Queen abandoning life`s work is a worry (4)
11 One included in stratagem designed to obtain justice (10)
12 Exercise books on cutting good rock (6)
14 Tiny boy with cat fathoms out chronological list (8)
15 Isle of Man, once? (5)
16 A number argue after female receives another stroke on bottom (5)
17 More rioting by American claiming negative response is monumental (8)
20 Like going around with adolescent in woven fabric (6)
22 Change rota for moving item in wardrobe (4,6)
23 Camcorder oddly confiscated in Israeli port (4)
24 Celebrate penning a show (6)
25 It pains me to kick out rector in Hertfordshire town for kissing (8)

DOWN

1 Outspoken Glaswegian unable to fork out for appetiser (6)
2 Child of hairdresser runs away (4)
3 Jumper on male that is extremely short and extremely baggy (8)
4 Where mother does experiments standing upside down in oil (6)
5 One pound off reasonably unsubstantial Christmas decoration (5,5)
6 Separate area popular for receiving international leaders (8)
8 Can Revolutionary Guards start to guard hospital in darkness? (5)
13 Totalitarian leader, Republican, in deep trouble (3,7)
15 Conquers Rome, somehow being more charming (8)
16 Cover rushed on ground (8)
18 Caught in exam with electronic medium providing revelation (6)
19 What is being referred to is uplifting around G-spot (5)
21 Make mistake with small job (6)
23 Burn detached houses (4)

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

100 Years Ago

Front page of The Statesman dated 21 July 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Mr. Churchill has defended the debt agreement with France as the best and fairest obtainable. It may be so, but England is left to pay the bulk of the debt that France contracted. On the best showing Franee only pays 47 per cent; the actual creditors will require a hundred per cent and the balance must come from the pockets of British taxpayers. The Chancellor of the Exchequer did his best to defend the arrangement that leaves the obligation of France to pay depending upon the French receipts from Germany. That plan opens the door to much dispute in the future, for the agreement to pay is always subject to revision. It may be said that German credit is good, which is the case, but he would be a credulous man who would believe that a Germany that has regained, her strength will consent to be tributary to Europe for sixty years to come.

News Items

BRIEF REVOLUTION

GREEK PARTY LEADERS TRANSPORTED

(SPECIAL CABLE.)
LONDON, JULY.

Another revolution in Europe, this time in Greece and quickly outmanoeuvred, is described in a message from Athens, which says that General Pangalos issued a proclamation describing his efforts to restore normal conditions and opposition of the Venizelist Party the leaders of whom he accuses of conspiring with General Plastiras to overthrow the Government and to murder the President. The sequel to this is news of the dramatic arrest of the Democratic leaders Kafandaris, Papauas-Tassiou, Michalopoulos and other politicians and journalists, who are being transported to the Island of Naxos forthwith. It is officially explained that they were proved to have been conspiring against the present regime.— Copyright.

LIQUOR SMUGGLING

REGISTRY AND CLEARANCE PAPERS FRAUDS

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS)
RUGBY, JULY 16.

DISCUSSION regarding liquor smuggling into the United States is pro-ceeding between American delegates and representatives of the British Board of Trade and Customs.

The question of fraudulent registry is being taken up with the Board of Trade and the question of false clearance papers with the Customs.

It is expected that to-morrow there will be another full meeting of the British and American officials concerned. A representative of the Bermuda Government is taking part in the discussion.

WILD SCENES IN CALCUTTA

Amazing scenes were witnessed in the streets of Northern Calcutta last night when Mohammedans celebrated one of the concluding phases of the Mohurrum. Indeed, at certain centres, notably Chitpore Road. Mechuabazar Street and Central - Avenue, the prevailing state of communal tension converted the weird and fantastic effects, which characterize this festival, into a medley of the wildest excitement, occasional aggression and periods of panic.The most serious feature of the night's proceedings, however, was the firing of guns from house-tops, chiefly in Central Avenue, where: Marwaris reside. So deliberate was this shooting that the police raided certain premises and it is understood that arrests were made.

DANGER AHEAD

M. DEMONZIE'S MODIFIED POLICY

Paris, July.

The likely duration of the new Government is the predominant topic of the moment. While some papers forecast a smooth passage at the outset, others prophesy that the advocates of a Government of the National Union, headed by M. Franken Bouillon, will launch an attack, at the earliest opportunity and M. Herriot's administration will have its work cut out to secure a majority, especially if the Communists decide to oppose it.It is alternatively expected that even if the Ministry scrapes through the Chamber with a small majority it will be more doubtful if it will encounter a similar success in the Senate.Le Journal quotes the remarks of M. Demonzie yesterday, indicating that he favours a modified policy of full powers for the Finance Minister, which spelt doom to his predecessor.—Reuter.

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Football rollercoaster

2026 World Cup was tainted by controversies

IT was the biggest World Cup in the history of football — and perhaps the most controversial one in recent decades. Expanded to 48 teams and 104 matches across three host nations — the US, Canada and Mexico — it showcased football's global appeal while raising questions about the sport's future. Spain won their second title in 16 years, edging out defending champions Argentina 1-0 in the below-par final. In stark contrast, the third-place match featuring the tournament's most flamboyant teams — England and France — was a nail-biting classic that the former won 6-4. The World Cup highlighted some inspiring underdog stories from small nations such as Cape Verde, Democratic Republic of Congo and Curacao. Mega stars like Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi once again lit up the world's biggest stage, while it was the same old sob story for Cristiano Ronaldo.

The tournament had its fair share of contentious moments. FIFA's growing reliance on technology — especially the not-so-reliable VAR (video assistant referee) system — caused resentment among many players, coaches and viewers. There was a hue and cry over the mandatory hydration breaks; they resembled tactical timeouts familiar in American sports, disrupting the game's rhythm while creating additional commercial opportunities. It was inevitable that US President Donald Trump would make his presence felt. He asked FIFA chief Gianni Infantino to review a red card handed to US striker Folarin Balogun. The one-game ban was suspended and Balogun played in the last-16 match, but even this unprecedented intervention failed to save the US from being knocked out. No wonder both Trump and Infantino were booed when they took to the field for the presentation ceremony.

Going forward, FIFA must ensure that innovation enhances the game rather than undermining it. The challenge is to preserve the very essence that makes football the world's most popular sport.

In plain Punjabi

Making property records in simple words

A land record is more than a legal document. It is the story of a family's home, a farmer's livelihood and, often, a lifetime's savings. Yet for generations, many Punjabis have walked into tehsil offices only to be confronted by a bewildering vocabulary, forcing them to hire lawyers or middlemen. Words such as *arazi*, *bainama* and *sakin* — largely Persian and Arabic terms that entered administration through Urdu and were retained by the British — have long made official documents unintelligible to the very people they concern. Punjab's decision to replace 35 such expressions with simpler Punjabi words is, therefore, a welcome acknowledgement that governance should speak the language of its citizens. Replacing *arazi* (land) with *zameen*, *bainama* (sale deed) with *vikri nama* and *mushtarka* (shared asset) with *sanjha* can reduce dependence on middlemen and make land records less intimidating.

But some of the new terms remain administrative jargon. Replacing *sakin* (resident) with *vasneek* may satisfy linguistic purists, but many people would not readily understand it. Likewise, *nakal jamabandi* (copy of land record) replacing *fard* is hardly self-explanatory for those unfamiliar with revenue records. And, surely, there's a simpler replacement for *hiba* (gift) than *tarmeem*.

Governments across the world embrace plain language by testing official documents with ordinary citizens rather than lawyers or bureaucrats. They have realised that clarity improves transparency, reduces disputes and strengthens public trust. Punjab should adopt the same approach. If an ordinary citizen claiming inherited property or a first-time homebuyer cannot understand a term, it probably does not belong in a citizen-facing document. Changing words is only the first chapter. The same democratic spirit must guide the simplification of procedures, faster mutations and cleaner land records. Governance becomes truly citizen-friendly not when forms are merely digitised, but when every citizen can read them without asking, "What does this word mean?"

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, JULY 21, 1926

The Viceroy's speech

THE speech which the Viceroy made at the Chelmsford Club on Saturday night was almost entirely devoted to the expression of His Excellency's views on a subject which he rightly described as "clearly the dominant issue in Indian life today," and of which he rightly said that "it is exercising the minds of all thoughtful men and patriots in India." That the observations made by His Excellency on the Hindu-Muslim problem were inspired by a true sincerity of purpose, neither his immediate nor his ultimate audience is likely to deny; and if nevertheless His Excellency was not able to say anything which could be justly described as bringing that problem appreciably nearer to solution, it was due not to any lack of earnestness in him, but partly to the inherent difficulty of the subject, and partly to the difficulty of his own position as the supreme head of an irresponsible and bureaucratic government. Of the first not much need be said. The passions and prejudices of 70 million human beings on one side and of 216 million on the other are much more easily excited than laid at rest, and it is not Lord Irwin's fault that he has come out to India at a time when the process of excitement has reached almost its culminating point. As regards the second, His Excellency rightly said that "the actual conditions place insurmountable limitations on the sphere of the government's activity," but he does not appear to have had a clear idea of what those conditions are. The difficulties of the British Government in India are the difficulties of a government which is superimposed upon the governed.

A mystical yatra, now muscular

The Amarnath pilgrimage has become politicised in its larger & louder form

HASEEB A DRABU
FORMER FINANCE MINISTER, J&K

CHANGE : The yatra that felt like an organic part of Kashmir is now more about demonstration. PTI

NOT so long ago, the Amarnath Yatra was like a private conversation between the devotee and the divine in their abode, the mountains. There were no *yatris* in lakhs, no security forces lining the roads, no endless convoys, no helicopters chopping through the sky. The major focus of attention was a posse of *sadhus*, whom Kashmiris called *"gosaen"* — those saffron-robed ascetics with matted locks, ash on their bodies and eyes that seemed to look beyond this world.

Until the late 1980s, *sadhus* from all over the country would assemble outside the Dashnami Akhara in Budshah Chowk, the heart of Srinagar city. From there the formal procession carrying the Chhari Mubarak, the silver mace of Lord Shiva, to the holy cave would begin amidst chants, not slogans, of *"Bam Bam Bhole"*.

It was not a mass pilgrimage. A limited number of devotees from the rest of the country joined, but the soul of the yatra belonged to these ascetics. The *gosaens*, with their attire and weathered bodies, looked straight out of Kashmiri folktales, half-mystic and half-mortal, evoking the interest of the local passersby.

Although the Amarnath shrine was revered in Shaivite traditions and scriptural texts, it never occupied the same emotional or ritual space in the lives of most local Kashmiri Pandits as, for instance, Kheer Bhavani does in their annual religious observances. It was the Mattan *purohits* who performed rituals at the cave. This made the yatra essentially a pilgrimage for devotees from outside but with significant local engagement and support.

Despite being one of the holiest sites in the Kashmir valley and beyond, Amarnath never became a tourist spot. Such was the depth of devotion that commercialisation never took root. People came for *darshan*, a direct encounter with Barfani Baba — the ice *lingam* that formed and melted according to its own mysterious rhythm.

Pilgrims did not come for photographs, souvenirs or leisure memorabilia. It was certainly not pilgrimage tourism, a concept that has gained currency in J&K in the context of Vaishno Devi.

The ascetic discipline had kept the yatra pure. There were no flashy arrangements, no tourist traps along the route, no sense that the sacred had been packaged for consumption. Faith, not profit, governed everything.

It was mystical. The spirituality was palpable, not performed. People spoke of the ice *lingam* forming and melting with the phases of the moon as if it were a living miracle, not a tourist attraction. There was a certain low-key buzz around the yatra, giving a sense that the valley itself was participating. Locals moved among the *sadhus* with easy familiarity. There was no sense of "us" and "them." The Malik family's old custodianship still lingered in memory — a Muslim shepherd's descendants sharing the offerings at the cave, a quiet testament to how faith had once braided itself into the valley's daily life.

> What begins as pure devotion can be claimed by larger forces — security, politics, identity.

The journey itself carried that same unhurried sanctity. From the chowk, the small group would set out towards Pahalgam, then onward to Chandanwari, Sheshnag and Panchtarni. The Chhari Mubarak led the way, and behind it walked men who had renounced the world for this one annual act of devotion.

When they reached the cave on the full moon of Shravan, the ritual was simple and profound: the mace offered to the ice *lingam*, prayers offered in the freezing darkness. No grand speeches, no political overtones, no photo ops. Just the encounter between human longing and the silence of the mountains.

Today, the contrast is stark. The yatra has not only grown far larger and more visible but also intrusive. What was once a community-supported quiet procession of ascetics for 15 days has become a State-managed 45-day institutionalised event.

Gradually over decades amid militancy, terror threats, State policies and identity politics, the Amarnath Yatra has been transformed from a mystical experience into a muscular exercise. The event gets planned months in advance, with quotas, registrations and elaborate security arrangements. The bunkers, checkpoints, armed escorts and temporary camps resemble field operations. This was necessitated after the yatra had to be suspended from 1991 to 1995 because of security threats and multiple attacks.

Post-2008, after the Amarnath land row, the character of the pilgrimage began to change. The spirituality that once defined it has been overlaid with something else: nationalism and identity. The yatra is now spoken of in the language of assertion — a statement of presence, of rights, of belonging in a land that has known deep turmoil.

Of course, many devotees still experience it primarily as an act of faith and devotion, but its scale, framing, security and public perception have shifted significantly. The liberals, including those seeing it from the Kashmiri perspective, regard it as increasingly politicised and nationalistic. Supporters see it as the reclamation of religious heritage and the assertion of Indian sovereignty. Whichever way one chooses to look at it, the pilgrimage has become politicised.

The valley that once absorbed the pilgrimage into its own gentle rhythm now watches it pass under heavy guard. What was once a shared cultural rhythm — locals facilitating, *sadhus* leading and small groups of devotees following — now carries the weight of decades of conflict and the politics that followed.

The yatra that felt like an organic part of Kashmir as it was centred on devotion is now more about demonstration. It belonged to a time when faith moved quietly through the valley without needing to announce itself loudly. The ice *lingam* still forms and melts, the cave still waits in its high solitude. But the pilgrimage that reaches it has become something larger, louder and more contested than the simple, profound act the *sadhus* once performed.

Perhaps that is the nature of time in a place like ours. What begins as pure devotion can be claimed by larger forces — security, politics, identity. Yet in my mind, the old yatra still lives. That version asked nothing of the valley except to be itself.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark. —Rabindranath Tagore"

The dying habit of putting pen to paper

ADITYA MUKHERJEE

VIRGINIA Evans' recent novel *The Correspondent* has struck a chord with readers for its unusual focus on letter-writing. Its protagonist, Sybil, is a retired lawyer in her seventies. Despite failing eyesight, she spends much of her time writing to a wide circle of correspondents — from her daughter, son and brother to friends, her former husband, authors and professors. She is something of an anomaly, harbouring a visceral aversion to technology and avoiding email whenever possible. For Sybil, the act of putting pen to paper is both cathartic and liberating.

It goes without saying that we have almost given up writing letters by hand, as email and WhatsApp have become the presiding deities of our lives. The speed and efficiency of digital communication have undoubtedly made life easier, but they have also transformed the way we express ourselves. How many of us still jot down our feelings and thoughts in diaries, a practice that was so much in vogue even two decades ago?

We once fiercely guarded those private spaces, but in the age of constant connectivity, they seem to have vanished altogether. The quiet intimacy of writing for oneself has gradually given way to instant updates and the relentless urge to remain visible online. In our hurry to communicate instantly, we have often sacrificed depth and reflection.

For many of us who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, handwritten letters evoke memories that no smartphone screen can ever replicate. Remember those days when a visit to the post office at least once a fortnight was almost mandatory to buy postcards and inland letters? Students living in hostels eagerly awaited news from home, while grandparents would carefully preserve every letter in neatly tied bundles, revisiting them during quiet afternoons.

The very sight of an inland letter or a postcard from a relative in another city, delivered by the postman, would fill us with excitement. There was an unmistakable charm in waiting for a reply, knowing that every letter had travelled across towns and cities carrying someone's affection, concern or longing.

Even the handwriting and the occasional ink smudge revealed something of the writer's personality. In those days, the postman was someone everyone looked forward to seeing. Today, however, he has become a rarity in our neighbourhoods, much like the familiar red letterboxes that once stood at street corners.

On WhatsApp groups, we mostly express our thoughts through one-line text messages. They are often met with a thumbs-up emoji, "LOL," "OK" or other abbreviated responses. Gone are the heartfelt emotions we once poured into handwritten letters, no matter how imperfect the language might have been, for those words were unmistakably our own. They possessed a spontaneity that polished, AI-assisted prose often lacks. Technology has undoubtedly connected us across continents, yet it has also, in subtle ways, distanced us from the patience, warmth and emotional honesty that once defined the simple act of writing a letter by hand.

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Punjab's economic wounds

Refer to 'Let's breathe new life into Punjabiyat'; militancy in the state was never essentially a Sikh-Hindu conflict; it grew from economic grievance. The Green Revolution created sharp divides between prosperous landowners and a growing landless, indebted section, worsened by falling farm incomes and unemployment. With no political outlet for this discontent, it took a religious and separatist character, with 'Khalistan' and Punjabi Suba becoming the language through which real hardship was expressed. Punjabiyat, however noble, remains a sentiment without substance. Until agrarian debt, drug addiction born of despair and continuing economic neglect are addressed, feeling will not heal what economics wounded.

MANU KANT, CHANDIGARH

Shared identity of communities

Refer to ' Let's breathe new life into Punjabiyat'; Jat Sikhs, Punjabi Hindus and communities living in states like Haryana, Rajasthan and western UP have common cultural beliefs, memories of historical upheavals and a shared genealogy. So, the deeper truth of social life in Punjab is that Hindus and Sikhs have the same ethnic roots. We need to examine and understand the complex interplay of contradictions within Punjab's social and cultural life in an objective, sincere and responsible manner. The article strikes a natural chord with the readers as it captures the essential reality of Punjab.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

House must rise above politics

The commencement of the Parliament session evokes renewed expectations that pressing national concerns will receive the attention they deserve. A vibrant democracy thrives when Parliament functions as a forum for accountability and meaningful dialogue. The government should address the challenges faced by the education system, like the NEET paper leak case, and the temple donation theft issue based on facts, fairness and a willingness to take corrective measures. Likewise, the Opposition should ensure that its role remains constructive and participate in healthy debates instead of allowing disruptions to overshadow the proceedings. The nation looks to the Parliament for solutions rather than confrontation.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Safety of dam crucial

Apropos of 'Citing safety concerns, BBMB urges Railways to shift track off Nangal Dam'; the concern of the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) regarding potential danger to the Nangal Dam structure is serious. The safety of the dam structure is of paramount importance as the dam is the most critical water management project in North India, particularly the states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. The Railways must pay heed to the BBMB's warning and explore a new alternative railway line to be laid away from the dam. The railway line has been extended over the years and it serves as the only rail corridor linking Punjab with parts of Himachal Pradesh and more than a dozen trains cross the dam daily.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

No prudence in freebies

Apropos of 'Punjab extends 300-unit free power scheme to lawyers' court chambers'; it is ironic that cash-strapped PSPCL has extended this subsidy to another set of people. It is only a ploy to woo voters in the run-up to the Assembly elections. This step is highly illogical as lawyers are professionals, not domestic consumers. They can well afford payment of electricity bills. This decision may start a vicious circle by encouraging demands from various other groups of people. Such selective exemptions place an unnecessary burden on the state exchequer and may further weaken the financial position of the PSPCL.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Punishment preceding justice

With reference to 'Bulldozer action'; among the many injustices involved here, a glaring one is that collective punishment to the family of the accused that is prohibited in modern legal system. Apart from the accused's right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty in court, his/her family certainly cannot be punished along with the accused. It marks a new level of brutalisation in the public discourse and is akin to authorities taking the law into their own hands. Bulldozer action ordered by state officials is setting a dangerous precedent questioning the rule of law. Despite the apex court's directions, authorities are blatantly ignoring the directions, claiming due process.

PL SINGH, BY MAIL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

Why this student movement will endure

MANOJ KUMAR JHA
RAJYA SABHA MP,
RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL

THE images from this Monday afternoon, as Cockroach Janta Party protesters marched to Parliament — images of police lathicharge, blood, and tear gas — will be difficult to wipe away.

Today was the culmination of a sequence that had begun on July 18, when Sonam Wangchuk, one of the most prominent faces associated with this movement, was picked up by the police on what appeared to be flimsy and unconvincing grounds. Through Saturday and Sunday, the protest at Jantar Mantar carried on, undeterred in his absence.

But if the intention behind this violence was to break the movement, these past days have proved just the opposite. It doesn't matter who started the movement, who leads it now or whether everyone standing there agrees on every issue.

What matters is that young people, by turning out in huge numbers, have staked their claim to it collectively. This is bigger than any one face, name or party. It's a groundswell of democracy itself.

I went to Jantar Mantar on July 18 to stand in solidarity with the fasting students. I could not be there earlier because I was in my home state, attending to urgent commitments. When news of that morning's detention broke, I wondered whether it was appropriate to visit the protest site at such a time. The atmosphere, I imagined, would be sombre and dispirited. But I reminded myself that solidarity has meaning precisely when movements are confronted with attempts to intimidate or demoralise them.

What I encountered at Jantar Mantar was different from what I had imagined. Instead of despondency and exhaustion, I found determination and resilience. The mood was animated by hope, moral conviction and an extraordinary sense of collective purpose. These young people had gathered under the banner of the Cockroach Janta Party, a name that is itself an act of defiance. When a slur from one of the highest seats of authority likened the country's restless and unemployed youth to cockroaches, they wore it as a badge of belonging.

Having spent decades teaching and engaging with the sociology of social movements, I could not help reading the protest through both scholarly and political lenses. It bore many features that theorists of New Social Movements identify in contemporary democratic struggles. Unlike the classical mobilisations organised around material redistribution or class interest alone, this was also equally concerned with reclaiming democratic space, constitutional morality, and the dignity of citizenship.

MANAS RANJAN BHUI

HIGH-HANDED : Force was used against protesters who had done no more than gather, go on fast and speak.

What stayed with me had less to do with any framework and more with what this first large mobilisation had already proved about itself. Here, the repression of these past days becomes, unwittingly, the movement's strongest testimonial. That so many should gather, and gather with such coherence of purpose, was proof that the movement is no inorganic contrivance, worked up for effect.

It carries the unmistakable texture of something grown from real grievance and conviction. Nor, as states so often hope, does it appear to be ephemeral, a momentary flare soon spent. Most telling of all, on the very morning that its most recognisable face was picked up and carried away, the gathering neither faltered nor dispersed but held its ground with a composure that spoke of a maturity and a resolve one does not always associate with the young, demonstrating that it can sustain itself without any single commanding leader at its head.

> Physical sites can be regulated or barricaded; democratic aspirations cannot.

A movement that can lose its most visible figure on Saturday morning, hold its ground through the weekend, and still march to Parliament on Monday, as it had resolved to do, shows that it does not depend upon any one person to endure.

What has given the mobilisation this reach is that it has struck an emotive register shared by a wide range of citizens, each arriving with anxieties of its own and yet finding here a common language.

There is a recognition that systems of every kind are being hollowed out and that education has become the starkest exemplar of that decay. And presiding over it all is the same government whose response to fasting students, as this afternoon made brutally plain, is the lathi and the tear gas shell.

Part of what gives this gathering its breadth is that grievances usually kept separate are finding a common chord within it. The democratic concerns are the most immediate.

A crisis of citizenship is being felt in more ways than one: from uncertainty over who is entitled to belong, to the shrinking room for dissent, to the sense that the ordinary citizen's voice now counts for less.

Alongside these are the social ones. Who has not felt the relentless strain on the fabric that holds a plural society together, a polarisation that is actively encouraged and the erosion of everyday civility.

Underlying both are the economic pressures that fall hardest on the young. They are contending with unemployment, inequality and increasing cost of living. That grievances so different in origin should recognise one another here is a sign that this is a wider democratic concern.

This is precisely why I believe this movement will not disappear anytime soon. States often assume that protests are temporary eruptions that can be managed through arrests, attrition by fatigue or administrative restrictions.

Once a movement succeeds in producing a shared democratic identity, it acquires the capacity to reproduce itself across spaces and generations. It no longer depends upon a single venue or a handful of leaders because it begins to live in conversations, relationships and collective memory.

Physical sites can be regulated or barricaded, democratic aspirations cannot. Every act of repression carries within it the possibility of enlarging the circle of citizens who ask difficult questions about power, justice and constitutional citizenship. We are seeing similar protests taking place across the country.

The young people I met on my visits left me with a confidence that if they continue to nurture this spirit of inclusiveness, moral courage and democratic solidarity, this movement will enrich the ethical vocabulary of Indian democracy.

Every enduring social movement is more than a protest against the present. It is also an invitation to imagine a more just future. Democracies renew themselves through citizens who refuse to surrender hope and who organise with compassion. They realise that the promise of the Constitution must remain a living reality.

Household debt is India's emerging risk

AJIT RANADE
NOTED ECONOMIST

THE Reserve Bank of India's latest *Financial Stability Report* is reassuring about the health of banks and non-banking finance companies. It is less reassuring about the financial health of their retail customers. India's household debt reached 45.5% of GDP by September 2025, close to its earlier peak, and subsequently rose to a new high at 47.8% by December 2025. This may not be exceptionally high by international standards. But beneath the headlines are signs of stress that are revealed by the purpose of the loans, who are the borrowers and what is being pledged.

Non-housing retail loans now account for 58.4% of household borrowings. Nearly half of all household debt is classified as borrowing for consumption, as distinct from asset creation or productive activity. A housing loan creates an asset, while a business loan may create an income stream.

Even an education loan creates future earnings. But a personal loan used for groceries, medical expenditure or repayment of an earlier loan creates neither.

The distribution of stress is more revealing. As per an RBI study of 10 large banks, covering nearly 90% of such lending, those with annual incomes below Rs 10 lakh accounted for three-fourths of loan originations. They also accounted for 78% of the fresh non-performing loans in December 2025. This portends the onset of a household-debt crisis. Ironically, corporate loans are doing fine, bringing down the NPA ratio to quite low in the aggregate. But a low NPA ratio should not hide the fact that whatever residual stress exists is overwhelmingly concentrated among those with the least capacity to absorb it.

Microfinance credit declined for seven consecutive quarters till January this year. The borrower base shrank by another 22.7 lakh. The fall in microfinance lending was not because poor households did not need credit. It followed regulatory action. Due to a phase of rapid lending, multiple borrowing and rising delinquency, the microfinance industry imposed its own guardrails.

The permissible number of microfinance lenders to one borrower was reduced to three. Total microfinance and unsecured retail debt was capped at Rs 2 lakh, and lending to borrowers more than 60 days overdue was prohibited. Banks also reduced their microfinance portfolios. These were two very difficult years for microfinance.

Hence, the credit demand migrated to gold loans, which have grown at a compound annual rate of 42.4% since March 2024, almost twice the pace of overall non-housing retail credit. The RBI finds that much of this increase has come from existing customers using higher gold prices to obtain larger loans and roll over previous debt.

ISTOCK

VULNERABLE : When households must repeatedly borrow, financial inclusion begins to turn into fragility.

The RBI permits a loan-to-value ratio of 85% for consumption loans of up to Rs 2.5 lakh. This higher limit for small loans was intended to improve credit access to the really poor. But an 85% LTV (loan-to-value) also leaves a relatively thin safety margin if gold prices drop. The RBI had found irregularities in gold appraisal, monitoring, auctions and adherence to LTV norms, prompting tighter directions.

A gold loan is safer for the lender than an unsecured microfinance or personal loan because of the collateral. It is not necessarily safer for the family. In case of default, the lender can auction the jewellery. Thus, the banking system may report better asset quality because the risk has been shifted to the borrower's household balance sheet. Gold is often the family's final emergency reserve. Monetising it to repay earlier loans is not financial deepening. It may be distress wearing the appearance of formal credit. It is often a coping mechanism.

> A fall in savings reduces the domestic pool available to finance investment and help fund the fiscal deficit.

The evidence shows some substitution from unsecured personal loans to gold loans. It is possible that microfinance loans are being replaced by gold loans to some extent.

Loans are liabilities, while savings are assets. Net household financial saving had fallen to 5.2% of gross national disposable income in 2022-23, a multi-decade low. It has risen to 7% in 2024-25, mainly because new financial liabilities declined. Gross financial saving is 11.8%.

The growth in borrowing is pulling down net financial savings. The earlier fall from 11% to 5.2% was a post-pandemic correction and not a sign of impoverishment in the aggregate. But now, it is clear that low-income borrowers are using fresh loans to pay for consumption or an instalment of a refinanced old loan.

Are slow savings caused by cash transfers to women? Such transfers reach 12 crore women across 15 states. A transfer increases disposable household income, improves welfare and financial inclusion. It usually goes towards consumption, food, healthcare or children's needs. It could just as plausibly reduce dependence on high-cost borrowing. But it is unlikely to be an explanation for the decline in net savings of low-income households.

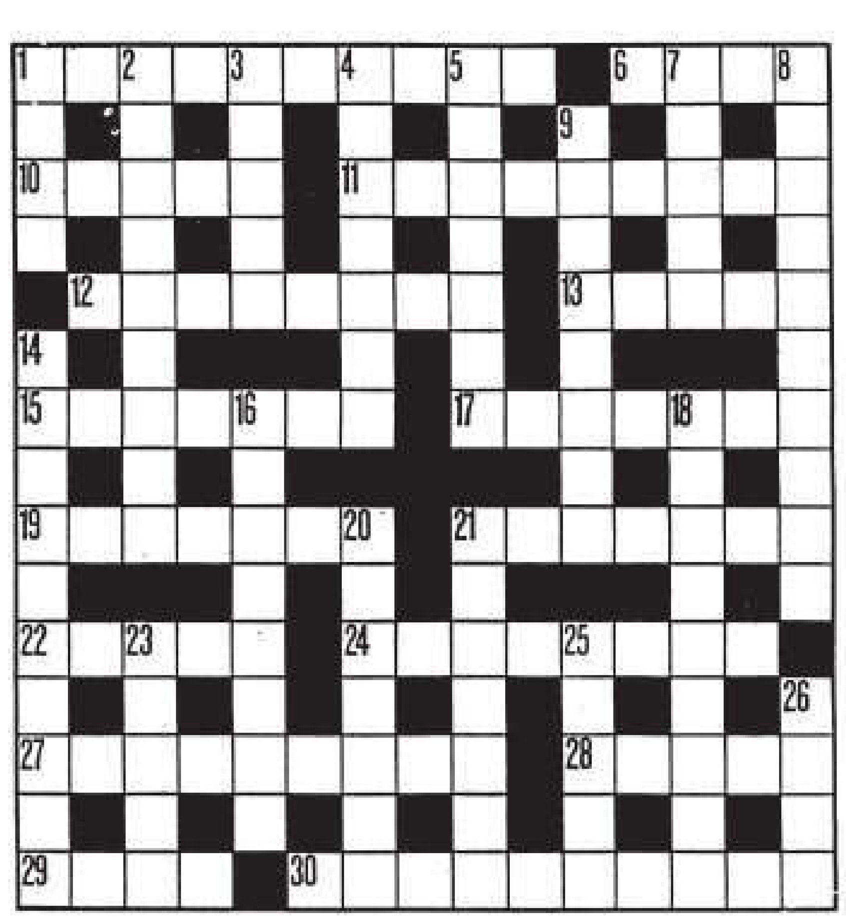
The macroeconomic danger must be acknowledged. Debt-financed consumption supports demand today but debt servicing subtracts from consumption tomorrow. A fall in savings reduces the domestic pool available to finance investment, support bank deposits and help fund the fiscal deficit. A gold-price correction could weaken collateral and expose borrowers who have repeatedly refinanced. Since the stress is concentrated among the poor, it can widen inequality.

The answer is not to shut vulnerable households out of formal credit. Appropriate regulation, proactive credit bureaus providing real-time information on a borrower's total exposure, lenders assessing repayments across microfinance, personal and gold loans, all this can help. Repeated gold-loan rollovers should be curtailed. Distressed borrowers need credible counselling and restructuring options. But all these measures can only contain the symptoms. Periodic loan waivers — most familiar in agricultural credit — are no durable solution either. They transfer the burden to taxpayers, weaken repayment discipline and do nothing to repair the underlying weakness of household incomes.

Ultimately, the escape from excessive household indebtedness lies largely outside monetary and credit policy. It requires faster growth in real wages, more secure employment, lower out-of-pocket spending on health and education and stronger protection against sudden income shocks. Credit can bridge a temporary gap between income and expenditure. It cannot permanently substitute for income. When households must repeatedly borrow merely to sustain ordinary consumption or repay earlier loans, financial inclusion begins to turn into financial fragility. That this is happening when bank balance sheets are extremely healthy, while vulnerable borrowers are pledging their last financial cushion, is poignant.

Credit: The Billion Press

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Kept secret (5,5)
6 Tiny jumping insect (4)
10 Band (5)
11 Agreeable (9)
12 Adopting uncompromising policy (4-4)
13 Incite to action (3,2)
15 Pressing (7)
17 Of little account (7)
19 Recurrent decorative design (7)
21 Short slightly curved sword (7)
22 Precincts (5)
24 Penal (8)
27 Slavery (9)
28 An obsession (5)
29 Stand in want of (4)
30 Consider important (3,5,2)

DOWN
1 A strong desire (4)
2 Suggest casually (4,1,4)
3 Swift (5)
4 Acknowledgement of payment (7)
5 Having acrid taste (7)
7 Situated (5)
8 After much delay (2,4,4)
9 Ruined and abandoned (8)
14 Have under observation (4,4,2)
16 Causing dramatic excitement (8)
18 Beforehand (2,7)
20 Roman sea god (7)
21 Admit (7)
23 Carried (5)
25 Speed in music (5)
26 Crazily absurd (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Panacea, 5 Nadir, 8 Elbow-room, 9 Wad, 10 Dash, 12 Frenetic, 14 Common, 15 Stroll, 17 Alienate, 18 Step, 21 Peg, 22 Springbok, 24 Ripen, 25 Empower.

Down: 1 Plead, 2 Nib, 3 Cowl, 4 Aboard, 5 Nominate, 6 Do without, 7 Radical, 11 Summing-up, 13 Goings-on, 14 Clapper, 16 Starve, 19 Poker, 20 Snap, 23 Bow.

SU DO KU

	9						6	
		2				1		
		8	3	7	6	9		
	5		6	3	4		2	
	8			2			4	
	6		8	5	7		1	
		6	9	4	1	2		
		7				8		
	1						3	

EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

8	5	2	1	4	6	7	3	9
7	4	1	3	8	9	6	2	5
6	9	3	2	7	5	1	4	8
5	6	9	4	3	1	8	7	2
4	2	7	9	6	8	5	1	3
1	3	8	7	5	2	9	6	4
9	1	6	5	2	4	3	8	7
2	7	5	8	1	3	4	9	6
3	8	4	6	9	7	2	5	1

CALENDAR

JULY 21, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Ashadh Shaka 30
- Shravan Parvishte 6
- Hijari 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 5:17 am
- Siddha Yoga up to 6:26 pm
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 8:49 pm
- Moon enters Libra sign 7:55 am
- Shridurgashtmi

FORECAST

SUNSET:	TUESDAY	19:23 HRS
SUNRISE:	WEDNESDAY	05:35 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	28	25
New Delhi	32	25
Amritsar	30	26
Bathinda	35	28
Jalandhar	30	26
Ludhiana	30	27
Bhiwani	33	23
Hisar	33	29
Sirsa	33	29
Dharamsala	26	21
Manali	23	17
Shimla	22	16
Srinagar	23	18
Jammu	25	22
Kargil	29	14
Leh	26	12
Dehradun	27	21
Mussoorie	21	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Economy

TUESDAY, JULY 21, 2026

IN THE NEWS

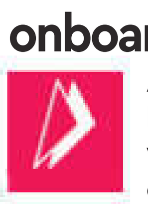
GRATUITY NOT PART OF CIRP COST: NCLAT

THE NCLAT HAS dismissed an appeal by a former employee of Duncans Industries seeking priority payment of his gratuity and leave encashment dues by classifying them as insolvency resolution process costs. It said such dues must instead be settled as per the company's approved resolution plan.

EX-CEA: INDIA HAS CAPACITY FOR 8-9% GROWTH

INDIA CAN UNLOCK 8-9% economic growth by accelerating structural reforms to reduce the cost of doing business and the cost of financing, former Chief Economic Adviser Krishnamurthy V Subramanian said on Monday.

Nearly 554.9 mn UPI customers onboarded by June



AROUND 554.9 MILLION UPI users were onboarded on the payments platform until June 2026, Parliament was informed on Monday. UPI transactions stood at 241.62 billion in volume and ₹314 lakh crore in value in FY 2025-26, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary said in a written reply in the Lok Sabha.

NHAI: Local passes for residents on Rajmargyatra app

STATE-OWNED NHAI on Monday said residents living within a 20 km radius of an eligible toll plaza can purchase a local pass digitally through the Rajmargyatra mobile app, allowing unlimited travel through the respective toll plaza during the month.

Premiumisation to drive mobile production: IT Secy

DEMAND FOR PREMIUM mobile phones will drive handset production and export growth in value terms, aligning with the targets under the production-linked incentive scheme, a senior government official told *PTI*.

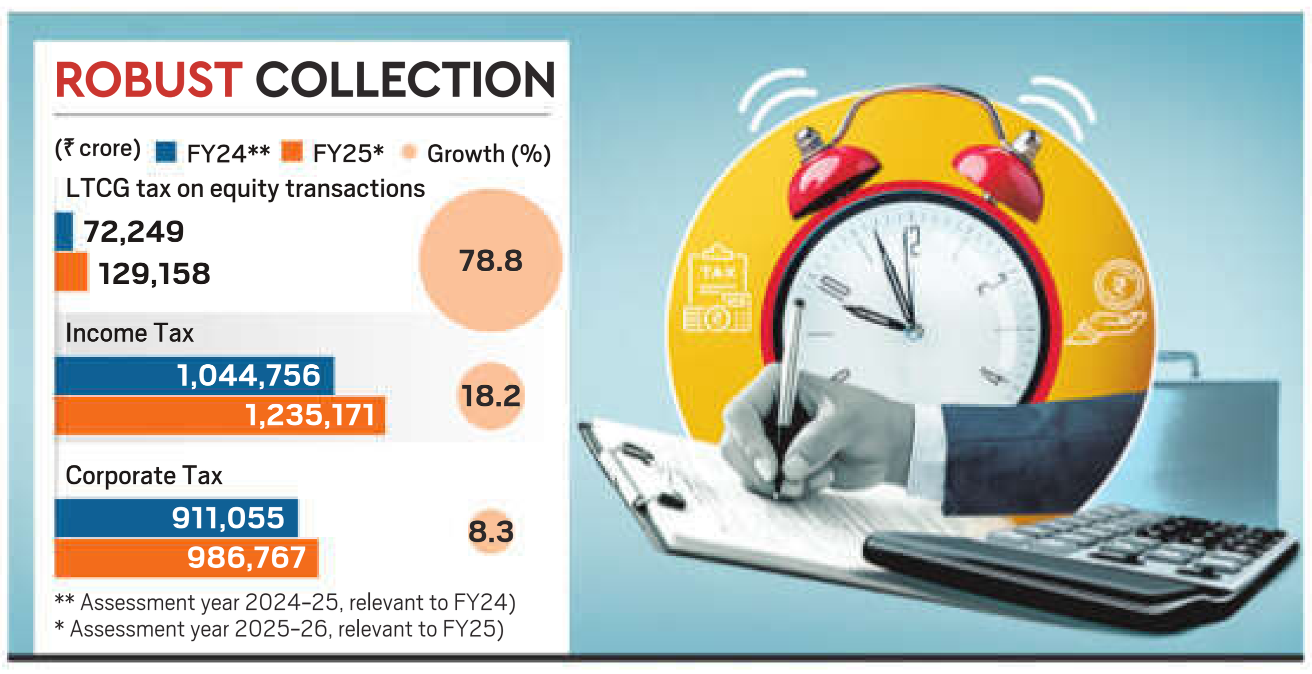
—AGENCIES

REVENUE ON HIGH-GROWTH TRAJECTORY SINCE 2018

Govt denies plan to scrap LTCG tax on equities

● Receipts from the tax grew 79% in FY25

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, July 20



TAX ON CAPITAL gains is fast becoming a major source of revenue for the government, with the rising volume of equity transactions and surge in retail participation in the capital market. Revenue from the long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax moved to a high-growth trajectory after it was reintroduced for equities in 2018, and accelerated further after the tax on equities was raised to 12.5% from 10% in Budget FY25.

The government collected ₹1.29 lakh crore from LTCG tax on equity transactions for financial year 2024-25 (assessment year 2025-26), up 79% from a year ago, the government told Parliament on Monday.

This means LTCG tax on equity is one of the largest contributors to the growth in direct tax collections, growing much faster than the revenue from taxes on personal income or corporate profits, which are conventionally among the largest sources of tax receipts.

In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary said on Monday that there is no proposal currently under consideration to scrap LTCG tax on equity investments.

Overall, personal income tax (PIT) and corporate tax collections grew at a much slower pace in FY25. PIT collections rose 18% to ₹12.35 lakh crore in FY25, while corporate tax collections increased 8% to ₹9.9 lakh crore.

"The increase in the LTCG rate from 10% to 12.5% from July 2024 would have contributed to higher collections. However, a near 79% increase in revenue cannot be attributed to the rate change alone," said Richa Sawhney, tax partner, Grant Thornton Bharat.

"The primary drivers likely were the strong performance of Indian equity markets over FY24 and FY25, record retail participation, and significant profit-booking by investors, which expanded the pool of taxable gains."

According to Hitesh Sawhney, partner, Price Waterhouse & Co (PwC), the revised classification of long-term capital assets based on holding periods for transfers on or after July 23, 2024, also helped this rise in tax collections.

The Budget FY25 increased the LTCG on equities to 12.5% from 10%, and raised exemption threshold to ₹1.2 lakh from ₹1 lakh. It also raised the tax on short-term gains from equity investments to 20% from 15%.

At that time, the then finance secretary TV Somanathan had said correcting the rates of capital gains tax was a "necessity in terms of equitable collection of taxes."

While data for LTCG on equity investments for FY26 is not yet available, PwC's Sawhney expects these collections to remain robust, "sustaining the momentum witnessed in the previous fiscal year."

Core industries grow at 5-mth high of 5% in June

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, July 20

A REVISED INDEX showed on Monday that output of India's nine core sectors grew at a five-month high rate of 5% in June. The rise was led by iron ore, the newest addition to the Index of Core Industries (ICI), according to data released by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).

This is the first core industries data based on the new ICI, which now covers nine sectors instead of eight in the old series. The revised ICI series updated the base year to 2022–23 (April-March) from 2011-12 in the previous series.

According to the revised index, the nine core industries grew 3.2% in May and 1.1% in June 2025. The old series had shown eight core industries growth of 1.0% in May and 2.2% in June last year.

Iron ore, included in core industries with a 4.9% weight, grew 43.9% in June. This staggering growth in iron ore production, up from 19.0% in May, was driven by a statistical effect of a low base. Iron ore output had contracted 16.4% in June 2025. Iron ore production tends to be highly volatile as it is driven by seasonal factors and demand from the steel industry.

IRON ORE LEADS RISE

Cement and electricity sectors also supported the growth in core industries output in June. Cement sector output grew 9.8% in June, the highest in five-months. Output of electricity sector, which now has the highest weight at 30.9%, also grew 9.8% in June, though slower than 11.2% in May. Electricity production benefitted from increased demand amid higher temperatures and lower rainfall in June, economists said.

Poor rainfall last month also supported the growth in output of iron ore and coal, as rainfall typically disrupts mining activity. Growth in coal production was 1.4% in June against (-)9.5% in May.

"This pickup (in core industries growth) was not broad-based and was led by an improvement in the performance of just four of the nine sectors between these months," said Rahul Agrawal, principal economist, Icra.

Output of crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, and fertilisers contracted year-on-year in June. According to Bank of Baroda Chief Economist Madan Sabnavis, the contraction in energy-related sectors can be attributed to "higher imports with global crude prices cooling off."

Crude oil output fell 4.2% y-o-y in June, the same as in May. Natural gas production declined even more in June, contracting 7.4% against a 5% fall in May.

PARLIAMENT QUESTIONS

PM Narendra Modi with Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State (I/C) Arjun Ram Meghwal, MoS L Murgan, and MoS Jitendra Singh on the first day of the Monsoon Session of Parliament on Monday ANI

No decision yet on petrol blending beyond 20% ethanol: Minister

THE GOVERNMENT HAS not yet decided to raise ethanol blending in petrol beyond the current 20% level, Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Suresh Gopi told the Rajya Sabha on Monday, adding that any future increase would follow further scientific study and consultation with industry.

"So far, no decision has been taken by the government for increasing ethanol blending with petrol beyond 20%," Gopi said in a written reply to a question. Any move higher would come "only after detailed scientific and technical studies and consultations with all relevant stakeholders, including automobile manufacturers, oil marketing companies and research institutions," he said.

Gopi said India reached the 20% blending target five years ahead of schedule, with average blending rising from about 1.53% in 2013-14 to 20% in the 2025-26 supply year, after more than two decades of phased rollout.

ITR filings see sharp y-o-y jump in July

THE NUMBER OF Income Tax Returns (ITRs) filed in the second week of July saw a sharp jump this year compared to a year ago, according to government data shared in the Lok Sabha on Monday. Around 7.06 million ITRs were filed between July 8-14 on the e-Filing portal of Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), up 161% compared to the same period a year ago. The number of logins on the e-filing portal and challans generated also saw a sharp jump in this period compared to a year ago.

Over 25,000 vacant posts in I-T department

THERE WERE 26,997 vacancies in Group A, B, & C in the Income Tax Department as on January 1, the finance ministry informed the Lok Sabha on Monday. "Occurrence and filling up of vacancies is a continuous process," the ministry said.

Nearly ₹9,000 cr lying in inoperative EPF accounts

THE TOTAL AMOUNT lying in the inoperative EPF accounts was ₹9,331 crore as on March 31, the finance ministry informed Lok Sabha on Monday.

Total amount of unclaimed money with LIC was ₹7,319 crore as of March end, the ministry said. Of this, ₹5,565 crore was unclaimed amount of policyholders and ₹1,754 crore was the income accrued on unclaimed amount.

—FE BUREAU & PTI

Kharif sowing gap narrows to 6% from 16% in a week

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, July 20

WITH THE RAIN-FED monsoon core zone of central India getting adequate rainfall in the first fortnight of this month, sowing of key kharif crops — rice, pulses, oilseeds and cotton — has picked up pace.

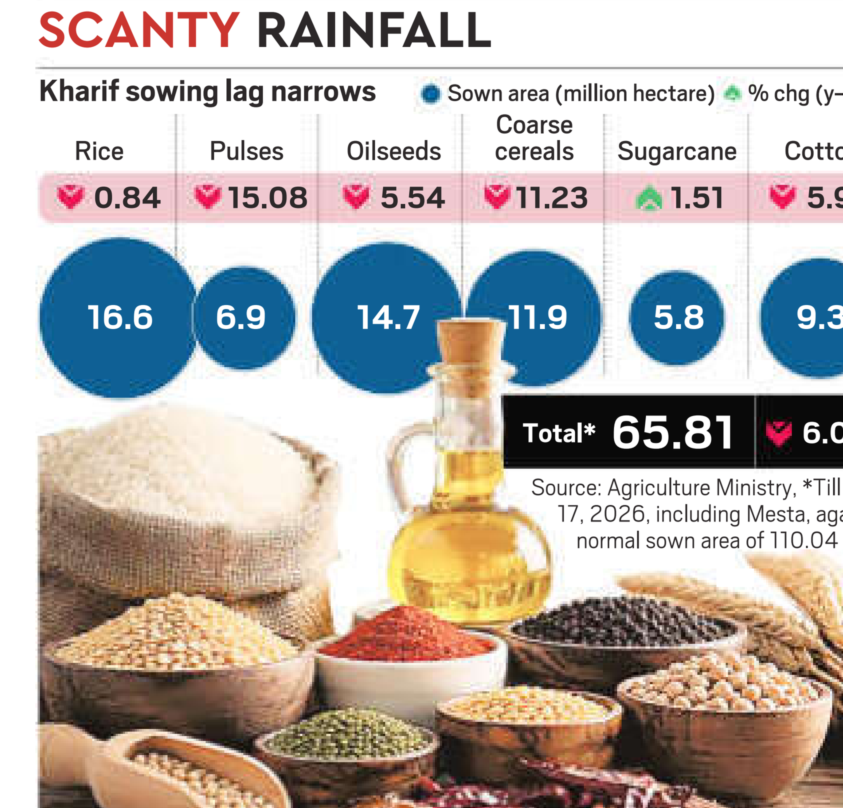
Overall sown area, so far, is at 65.81 million hectare (Mha), a 6% year-on-year decline. Until a week ago, sown area was 16% below last year's level. Total sowing till July 17, according to the agriculture ministry, was 60% of the normal area of 110 mha.

Rice, the major kharif crop, has been sown across 16.64 Mha, a marginal decline of 0.84% y-o-y. Average area for paddy sowing stands at 41.2 Mha. A week ago, rice acreage was 8.6% below the 2025 level. Improvement in rainfall in eastern and central parts of the country has led to the expansion of area under paddy acreage in the last fortnight, an official said.

Area under pulses acreage stands at 6.92 Mha, a sharp 15% y-o-y fall, mostly attributed to the scanty rainfall received until the end of June in central India. Till a week ago, area under pulses was down 23% compared to 2025 level.

Harsha Rai, head, Mayur Global Corporation, a leading pulses trading firm, said the sowing window is still open in several regions and rainfall during the crop growth period will determine the yield.

SCANTY RAINFALL



Tur (pigeon pea), a key kharif pulse, has been sown across 2.48 Mha so far, still nearly 18% lower than last year, due to delayed monsoon arrivals in Maharashtra and Karnataka this season.

"Sowing of pulses may not be impacted yet. Distribution of rainfall during the next couple of months is likely to affect the yield of pulses, especially tur," Nitin Kalantri, managing director, Kalantry Food Products, a Latur, Maharashtra-based pulses processor, told *FE*.

Cotton acreage is 5.96% lower at 79.25 Mha y-o-y. Oilseeds — soyabean and groundnut — area lagged 5.54% y-o-y, while the rainfall in central India, especially in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, has been adequate in July.

The official said that kharif crop sowing will get a further boost during the next couple of weeks as the monsoon has again entered an 'active' phase until the end of the month after a break, following an early surge in July.

Only sugarcane acreage, which started much earlier but is considered part of the kharif season, has shown a rise.

GLP-1 opportunity to lift business for pharma companies

HARSHITA SWAMINATHAN & RACHEL YEO
July 20

A NEW AND growing market for weight-loss drugs in India is expected to be a bright spot for pharmaceutical firms like Cipla and Dr Reddy's Laboratories, while they face headwinds in the US market.

In January, the companies lost exclusivity of cancer drug Revlimid, a key revenue generator, making the market more competitive and driving prices lower. US revenues for Cipla and Dr Reddy's are projected to drop 19% and 28%, respectively, partly offset by a weaker rupee.

Meanwhile, industry data in India show robust growth for the companies with better pricing power and volume expansion. The companies have also benefited from the expiry of semaglutide's patent in the domestic market in March, though data indicate that the initial spike in sales has cooled.

Investors will watch for updates on production from Dr Reddy's as it had halted production after detecting impurities. Injectable semaglutide is expected to make up 13% to 14% of earnings over the next three years, analysts at Nomura wrote in a note.

—BLOOMBERG

Rural solar at ₹3-4 a unit undercuts state power purchase costs

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, July 20

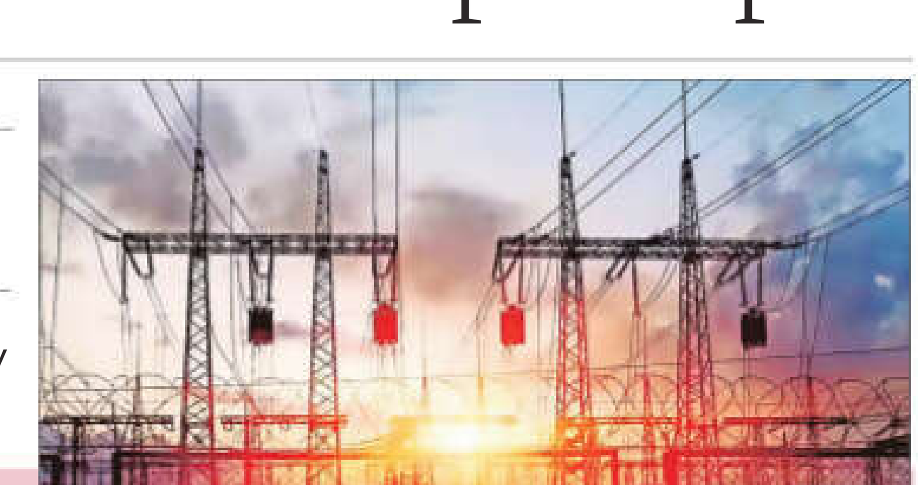
VILLAGE-LEVEL SOLAR systems could reduce rural electricity costs by as much as 53% compared with the average power purchase cost of state utilities, even as battery storage raises costs and requires location-specific planning, according to a new study by the International Institute for Sustainable Development and Idam Infrastructure Advisory.

In Maharashtra's Hiware Bazar, a proposed 980-kW ground-mounted solar project was estimated to deliver electricity at ₹3.06 per unit with subsidy, around 47% below Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company's average power purchase cost of ₹5.8 per unit. Even without subsidy, the cost was estimated at ₹4.09 per unit, nearly 30% lower than the utility benchmark.

The cost gap was wider in Assam's Bamun Sualkuchi. A 1,318-kW grid-connected system, with 70% ground-mounted and 30% rooftop solar, was estimated to produce electricity at ₹4.03 per unit with subsidy, about 53% below Assam Power Distribution Company's purchase cost of ₹8.5 per unit. Without subsidy, solar power would cost ₹6.01 per unit, still about 29% lower.

COST EFFICIENCY

- A proposed **980-kW** ground-mounted solar project in Hiware Bazar was estimated to deliver electricity at **₹3.06 per unit** with subsidy
- Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company's average power purchase cost of **₹5.8 per unit**
- In Hiware Bazar, a **350-kW/1,400-kWh** four-hour battery raised the blended cost to **₹5.44 per unit**
- Discoms are required to source **5%** of electricity from distributed renewable energy by 2030



"DRE can offer affordable and reliable electricity in rural India, often below state procurement costs across very different rural contexts. In most cases, it can remain competitive even without subsidies," said Sunil Mani, policy adviser, IISD.

The economics changed when batteries were added. In Hiware Bazar, a 350-kW/1,400-kWh four-hour battery raised the blended cost to ₹5.44 per unit, only marginally below the state's purchase cost. The battery reduced the number of days with net exports to the grid from 93 to 60, but average surplus exports still stood at around 1,378 kWh per day on the remaining days. A larger 500-kW/2,000-kWh battery reduced peak demand by over 80%, but seasonal agricultural consumption limited its utilisation.

In Bamun Sualkuchi, where 84% of electricity consumption comes from domestic users, including home-based weaving units, a 500-kW/2,000-kWh battery pushed the subsidised cost to ₹9.8 per unit, above the state benchmark. A smaller 400-kW/1,600-kWh battery lowered the cost to ₹8.3 per unit, just below the utility's purchase cost.

"To scale rural DRE, India must move from isolated projects to system-level planning, starting with village energy plans that reflect local demand, integrate DRE with distribution companies, and plan early for storage and surplus power management," said Ashwitha Tunga, policy analyst at IISD.

The findings come as India targets 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030. Total installed power capacity stood at about 542 GW as of May 31, 2026, including nearly 283 GW of renewable capacity, excluding large hydro. Distributed renewable systems account for around 55 GW, or 24% of renewable capacity. Discoms are required to source nearly 5% of their electricity from distributed renewable energy by 2030, equivalent to about 63 GW. The report said scaling deployment would require village energy plans covering demand, storage, grid readiness, financing, surplus management and long-term maintenance.

"If India wants DRE to contribute meaningfully to its clean-energy and net-zero ambitions, it must move beyond uniform deployment and adopt village-level energy planning," said Rajiv Shukla, executive director, Idam Infrastructure Advisory.

Opinion

TUESDAY, JULY 21, 2026

STUDENT ANGER

Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav

Ultimately, for years now, the government has been playing with the future of students and the youth. That very anger is visible here, the call for revolution is growing stronger, and solidarity is evident

Milestone, not destination

Vikram-1 proves India's private space capability; next challenge is building a globally competitive business

SKYROOT AEROSPACE'S SUCCESSFUL Vikram-1 mission has done more than place payloads into orbit. It has settled an important question that has hovered over India's private space sector since it was opened up in 2020: can a private Indian company build and launch an orbital rocket? That alone makes the mission a defining moment for the country's emerging space industry. But it would be a mistake to view the achievement as the culmination of India's private space ambitions. If anything, Vikram-1 marks the end of the technology debate and the beginning of the business debate. Building a launch vehicle is one challenge; building a commercially viable launch company is another altogether. Around the world, success in the space economy has depended not merely on engineering excellence but on the ability to launch reliably, frequently, and profitably. The reforms have demonstrated that private enterprise can complement the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in developing advanced launch capability. The harder task now is ensuring that capability evolves into a globally competitive business.

The distinction is important because launch services operate under economic realities very different from those governing software or digital businesses. Customers buying launch services do not choose providers on the basis of a single successful mission. They look for reliability over multiple launches, predictable schedules, competitive pricing, and confidence that future missions will perform with the same consistency. That requires manufacturing scale, robust supply chains, specialised talent, and sustained investment over several years. It also requires demand that extends beyond demonstration missions. In an interview with *FE*, Skyroot Co-founders Pawan Kumar Chandana and Bharath Daka said the paid commercial market would open up meaningfully only after the company demonstrates repeated successful launches. That is important because in the launch business, repeatability is as valuable as innovation. The product is not merely a rocket that reaches orbit once, but a launch system that customers can trust every time.

Skyroot's success also has implications well beyond one company. A new generation of Indian space startups, including Agnikul Cosmos, Pixxel, Digantara, and Bellatrix Aerospace, is attempting to build businesses across launch services, satellite manufacturing, space situational awareness, and propulsion systems. Their prospects, too, will depend on whether a commercially viable space economy can be created rather than isolated technological successes. This is where public policy must now shift its focus. The reforms that created IN-SPACe, expanded private participation, and opened ISRO's facilities to industry have delivered their first major validation. The next phase is less about liberalisation and more about ecosystem building through predictable regulation, timely approvals, access to testing and launch infrastructure, and a stronger domestic supplier base. Patient capital will also remain critical because deep-tech businesses operate on far longer development cycles than consumer technology ventures.

That broader perspective should shape expectations from private space programme. Vikram-1 deserves to be celebrated because it validates years of policy reform, engineering effort, and entrepreneurial risk-taking. But it should not become another instance where a single milestone is mistaken for structural transformation. The real measure of success will not be one successful rocket or one space-tech unicorn, but whether India can produce a pipeline of globally competitive space companies that launch regularly, attract international customers, and generate sustainable revenues. The private space journey has crossed an important technological milestone. The challenge now is to convert that technological capability into commercial competitiveness. Only then will the promise of opening up the space sector be fully realised.

In the end, the beautiful game wins again

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 drew to a close on Sunday after Spain prevailed over Argentina by one goal in extra time, exactly the same margin of its winning the 2010 edition of this quadrennial event. To be sure, controversies swirled around this event including dodgy refereeing decisions and President Donald Trump asking the head of FIFA to rescind suspending a red-carded US player ahead of a round of 16 match against Belgium. The Iranian team was required to enter and exit US soil on the exact same day of their matches and entry was denied to a Somali referee. None of these problems, however, detracted from the sheer magic of the beautiful game of football and the artistry of its practitioners that captivates millions of global fans.

Spain was a deserving winner with its possession-driven play. The quick passes and ability to swiftly recover the ball after losing it neutralised France which had one of the strongest attacks in the game that rivalled the heydays of Brazil in 1970 and 2002. That semifinal match was truly the final as it was between the two strongest teams in the FIFA World Cup 2026. The score line of only one goal in Sunday's final does not do justice to Spain's dominance as it relentlessly attacked the Argentinian goal. Spain conceded only one goal in the FIFA World Cup 2026. This rock-solid defence stems from the legacy of Johan Cruyff whose dictum was "There is only one ball. If we have it, they can't score," according to Simon Kuper of the *Financial Times*.

N CHANDRA MOHAN

The writer is an economics and business commentator based in New Delhi

Given the rich pickings of FIFA from this 48-nation event — which expects the four-year cycle that ends with this World Cup to generate $13 billion — there is a proposal to expand it further to 64 nations for the 2030 edition to give more countries a chance to play on the biggest stage. Critics carp that this would make the qualification process less challenging and impact the tournament's quality. The same misgivings were also expressed in FIFA World Cup 2026 which saw small island nations like Cape Verde and Curacao participating for the first time. But they acquitted themselves creditably. Cape Verde held Spain to a goalless draw in the group stage and reached the round of 32 in which it was narrowly defeated 3-2 by Argentina in extra time.

FIFA World Cup 2026 has only confirmed the dominance of western Europe. The round of 32 had as many as nine out of 10 African nations but this whittled down to only two in the round of 16, with only Morocco reaching the quarter finals. For all the talk of football's Asian century, South Korea was eliminated in the group stage. Japan and Australia were defeated in the round of 32. China and India have not even made it to the tournament. Twelve western European nations made it to the round of 32 which came down to seven in the round of 16 and three in the semifinals. For the first time since 1990, FIFA's top four ranked teams lined up for the semifinals. These teams lifted the trophy once or more in the past editions of the World Cup.

The dominance of western Europe is also reflected in the fact that several squads in the tournament had members from their diaspora in the continent, including Cape Verde and Curacao. Terming Morocco as African does not tell the full story of its rise as a soccer power as only seven out of the 26-member squad were born in that country. The captain, Achraf Hakimi, is Madrid-born. The star midfielder, Ayyoub Bouaddi, captained France's under-21s. It remains to be seen which other nations have the potential to upend the global soccer hierarchy as there is churn underway with legends like Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Neymar having the last dance while a new generation emerges as practitioners of the beautiful game.

FACTOR SHARES

POLICY SHOULD FOCUS ON ONE-PERSON EMPLOYEE-CUM-ENTREPRENEURS OR FAMILY-RUN OUTFITS

Gnawing labour productivity

R GOPALAN
MC SINGHI

The authors are former civil servants

THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL agency, in 2011-12, began providing GDP data in terms of factor share comprising compensation to employees and operating surplus/mixed income of entrepreneurs or self-employed persons. The two together make up net value added (NVA). The only exclusion is the depreciation which gets included in gross value added, but is actually a user charge on capital. There has hardly been any discussion on factor shares. The factor share is important for policy perspective of wages, interest rates, and factor productivity.

The Indian economy is significantly different from others. Of the total workers in India, 56% are self-employed and their share has increased. Most of them operate family-run establishments, which are largely subsistence in nature; 44% are either salaried employees or casual labourers. Of the workforce in construction, 80% are casual. More than two-thirds of the total workers are engaged in proprietary firms or establishments with fewer than five workers.

Between 2017-18 and 2024-25, NVA in the economy increased at an average annual rate of 8.7%, with a growth of 4.2% per worker. Employee compensation and operating surplus of self-employed entrepreneurs rose by 2% and 7.2% respectively. There are inter-sectoral differences which are indicated in the table.

We chose the period from 2017-18 to 2024-25 due to structural changes in the economy like demonetisation, GST, pandemic and post-pandemic recovery. This period also witnessed fluctuating inflation and corresponding monetary policy response. The availability of data on workers through the Periodic Labour Force Survey also helped. The results are startling.

First, self-employment increased from an average of 52.2% in 2017-18 to 56.2% in 2024-25. It increased across all sectors except other services. Sharp growth was seen in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and construction with the exception of trade and hotels and food services. The shift was more towards subsistence sectors where skills are not a dominant factor. As the policy thrust was to compulsively create job providers than help job seekers, the quality of jobs suffered.

Second, the increase in self-employment was associated with a negative growth in its contribution to overall NVA in real terms. Overall operating surplus/mixed income of self-employed persons at current prices grew by just 2%. With consumer price index (CPI) inflation averaging 5.1% during this period, net contribution declined. Further, negative growth even at current prices was seen in manufacturing, trade, transport, and hotels. The negative growth in certain entrepreneur operator establishments indicates inadequacies in credit, marketing, skill development; these were not transformed while seeking to create job providers. Labour reforms raised the wages of hired workers, reducing the residual accrual to owners. Though the NSSO survey of unincorporated enterprises peg small and own account enterprises at 87%, there was hardly any meaningful support mechanism for them. Policy interventions covered only the remaining 13% of registered MSMEs and hired worker establishments.

Third, the share of labour compensation in NVA increased during this period from 38% to 43%. The sharpest increase in compensation growth of employees was observed in agriculture, followed by other services and manufacturing. The high growth in agriculture owed to own labour substituted employees (resulting in a net decline in hired workers) and also the employment guarantee scheme that raised wages. Due to labour reforms, revisions also raised wages in manufacturing. Increase in employee compensation in other services is largely due to the significant proportion of the organised segment, such as financial services, professional services, public administration, and defence where compensation increase is usually automatic and aligned to inflation. In electricity and utilities and construction, compensation recorded the lowest growth, lower than CPI inflation. Construction is mostly unorganised and big companies hire via intermediaries. Even public sector entities use intermediaries, resulting in limited percolation of labour reforms.

Fourth, labour productivity in India is among the lowest. According to ILO data, output per hour worked (GDP constant 2021 international $ at purchasing power parity) in India in 2025 was only $10.8 — one-third of the global average and 10% of the top 10 countries. KLEMS data indicate an average unweighted labour productivity growth of 4.6% during 2017-2023, nearly aligning with the growth of overall NVA per person. The sectoral composition of labour force and size of an establishment are factors responsible for the low productivity and are clearly known. Nearly 62% of even the non-agricultural workforce is engaged in units employing fewer than five persons. Thus, in the medium term, the economy's structure may not see any significant changes either in the dominance of sectors or the nature of labour absorption. Relocating labour does not seem to be even a medium-term solution. It must be recognised that India's labour force is largely made up of entrepreneurs, that too small ones. The focus of policy should shift to one-person employee-cum-entrepreneurs or family-run outfits.

Credit for such entrepreneurs for capital without any collateral, management help through clusters, marketing assistance, skill development, freedom from regulations, and infrastructure support are policy needs for such enterprises.

WORKFORCE SHIFTS

	No of persons in mn				₹ in thousand					
	2017-18		2024-25		2017-18		2024-25		CAGR* (%)	
	Self-employed	Employees	Self-employed	Employees	Operating surplus /mixed income	Compensation of employees	OS/MI	CE	OS/MI	CE
Agriculture	147.3	53.9	213.5	50.1	156	80	222	160	5.16	10.44
Mining	0.1	1.7	0.2	1.5	12,618	574	19,444	717	6.37	3.22
Manufacturing	23.3	32	32.7	41.6	668	190	652	293	-0.35	6.39
Electricity & utilities	0.4	2.3	0.9	3.1	3,783	623	3,466	678	-1.24	1.22
Construction	5.7	47.5	10.4	63.3	557	168	852	197	6.27	2.27
Trade & hotels	37.4	17.1	52.2	27.1	386	178	271	242	-4.96	4.53
Transport	10	12.5	14.3	13.1	476	289	411	380	-2.07	4
Other services	13.6	50.9	20	68.5	1,514	498	1,824	849	2.7	7.93
Total	**238**	**218**	**344**	**269**	**357**	**242**	**410**	**394**	**1.97**	**7.19**

*Annual growth

Growing more, but exporting less

HIMANSHU JAISWAL

Consultant, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi

Gaps in the standard of goods a hurdle to achieving India's agri-export target, need to align regulatory governance with global best practices

INDIA IS ONE of the major agricultural countries — the world's largest producer of pulses, spices, and milk, and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, fruits, and vegetables. In 2024-25, it achieved record foodgrain production of 357.7 million metric tonnes, a significant increase over the previous year. India's agricultural exports stood at $51.1 billion in 2024-25, up from $34.5 billion in 2019-20. This motivated India to set an ambitious target for agri-exports worth $100 billion by 2030. Though it seems like a big target, it is achievable with careful planning. A critical factor is the quality and standards of agri-goods.

Recently, Japan rejected India's mango consignments due to improper fumigation at our plants. China rejected India's chilli shipments due to excessive levels of methamidophos, a pesticide linked to nervous system disorders. Nepal also flagged non-compliance with several measures in case of Indian mangoes. This is not a new phenomenon. In 2024, five countries had either banned, recalled, or initiated investigations into Indian spices due to the excessive presence of ethylene oxide (EtO) — a carcinogenic substance.

The EU is the biggest market for Indian agricultural exports, accounting for 12-13%. However, perennial scrutiny of the quality of India's shipments is a major concern. According to the Rapid Alert System For Food database, 2,028 Indian shipments to the EU have been flagged for potential risk from 2020 till date. India is second, after Türkiye, to receive notifications on this scale. Of the 2,028 consignments, 1,001 were rejected at the border, and for 608 shipments an alert notification was issued. Herbs and spices, and nuts and seeds are the major product groups that have been broadly rejected, together occupying 50% share of the total, followed by cereals and bakery products at 17%. Of all alert-notified shipments, 573 were found to breach the maximum residue limits (MRL) of EtO, and 136 breached the MRL for aflatoxins, among others. And this is the fact sheet for the EU, let alone other importing countries.

An export shipment rejection results in a loss of monetary value & trade trust. Export food quality must be no different from domestic food

One reason behind the high rejection rates is the divergence in prevailing MRLs and policy gaps. Each country follows its own maximum tolerable limit for any residue, and this may differ across products. In the EU and the UK, the MRL of EtO for spices and herbs is 0.1 mg/kg, while in Japan, it is 0.01 mg/kg. The US and Canada allow a higher MRL of 7 mg/kg, well above the European standard. For sesame seeds and oilseeds, the MRL in the EU and the UK is 0.05 mg/kg, reflecting an effective ban. This gap in MRLs across India's different export markets is quite significant.

Besides, there are structural policy gaps too. A pesticide level that complies with domestic regulations may exceed permissible limits in the EU or Japan where food safety standards are among the most stringent worldwide. EtO has been a prohibited substance in plant protection products in the EU since 1991. Further, its use as a biocide or fumigant for food and feed is also prohibited, meaning it is no longer permitted for products like spices. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's 2024 order superseded the 2022 order and set a default MRL of 0.1 mg/kg, up from the earlier 0.01 mg/kg for pesticides not registered with the Central Insecticide Board. Since EtO is not registered as a pesticide in India, it is generally interpreted that this default limit applies to EtO residues in food products — which creates barriers to entry in foreign markets. Recently, at the twelfth conference of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, India stymied the global ban on the use of chlorpyrifos — a substance responsible for neurodevelopmental harm. This reflects India's policy divergence from global norms.

Another reason could be the insufficient availability of testing laboratories in India for export consignments. The number of Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority-recognised labs — responsible for testing a variety of goods and pesticide residues therein — varies starkly across states and is heavily clustered in Maharashtra, where 33 labs are functional. Only four testing labs are operational in Uttar Pradesh, and three in West Bengal also covering the Northeast region. States like Odisha and Bihar do not have any certified testing lab. However, export rejections cannot be attributed solely to a lack of testing labs. The bigger bottlenecks may lie earlier in the value chain. Excessive use of pesticide at the farm level, inadequate farmer training, weak traceability, and fragmented post-harvest handling may be equally to blame.

An export shipment rejection results in a loss not only of monetary value but also of trade trust. The next phase of agricultural growth will be driven by quality, standards, and trust. To actualise the $100-billion ambition, India should not think in silos. Export food quality should be no different from domestic food quality. An integrated domestic policy for the rational use of pesticides in food products will automatically reflect in India's export shipments. Second, nodal agencies must establish or certify more labs. Third, India must strive to align its regulatory governance with global best practices.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ISRO needs reform

Apropos of "Give talent its space," (*FE*, July 20), the ISRO resignation issue is less about compensation and more about career stagnation for skilled scientists. Government service, unlike private industry, offers little lateral mobility or reward for specialised expertise. A memorandum discouraging resignations only masks the deeper problem. What ISRO needs is structural reform: faster promotions tied to performance, sabbatical arrangements with private space firms, and flexible re-entry paths for those who return after gaining outside experience. Treating scientists as permanent government employees rather than knowledge professionals will keep pushing talent towards SpaceX-style ventures. If India wants both a strong space agency and a thriving private space sector, retention must come from opportunity, not restriction.

—Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

Workplace surveillance

Apropos of "The Chief Suspicion Officer" (*FE*, July 20), the opinion on workplace surveillance culture rings uncomfortably true. Many Indian offices now run more on documentation than on trust, forcing employees to prove honesty rather than demonstrate competence. This shift quietly damages morale and drives away better talent, who simply choose organisations with saner policies. Companies would benefit more from outcome-based evaluation than constant monitoring, since verified results matter more than hours logged or medical certificates submitted. HR policies should be reviewed periodically with employee feedback built in, not drafted once and enforced rigidly forever. A workplace built on suspicion rarely produces its best work.

—A Senthil Kumar, Coimbatore

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

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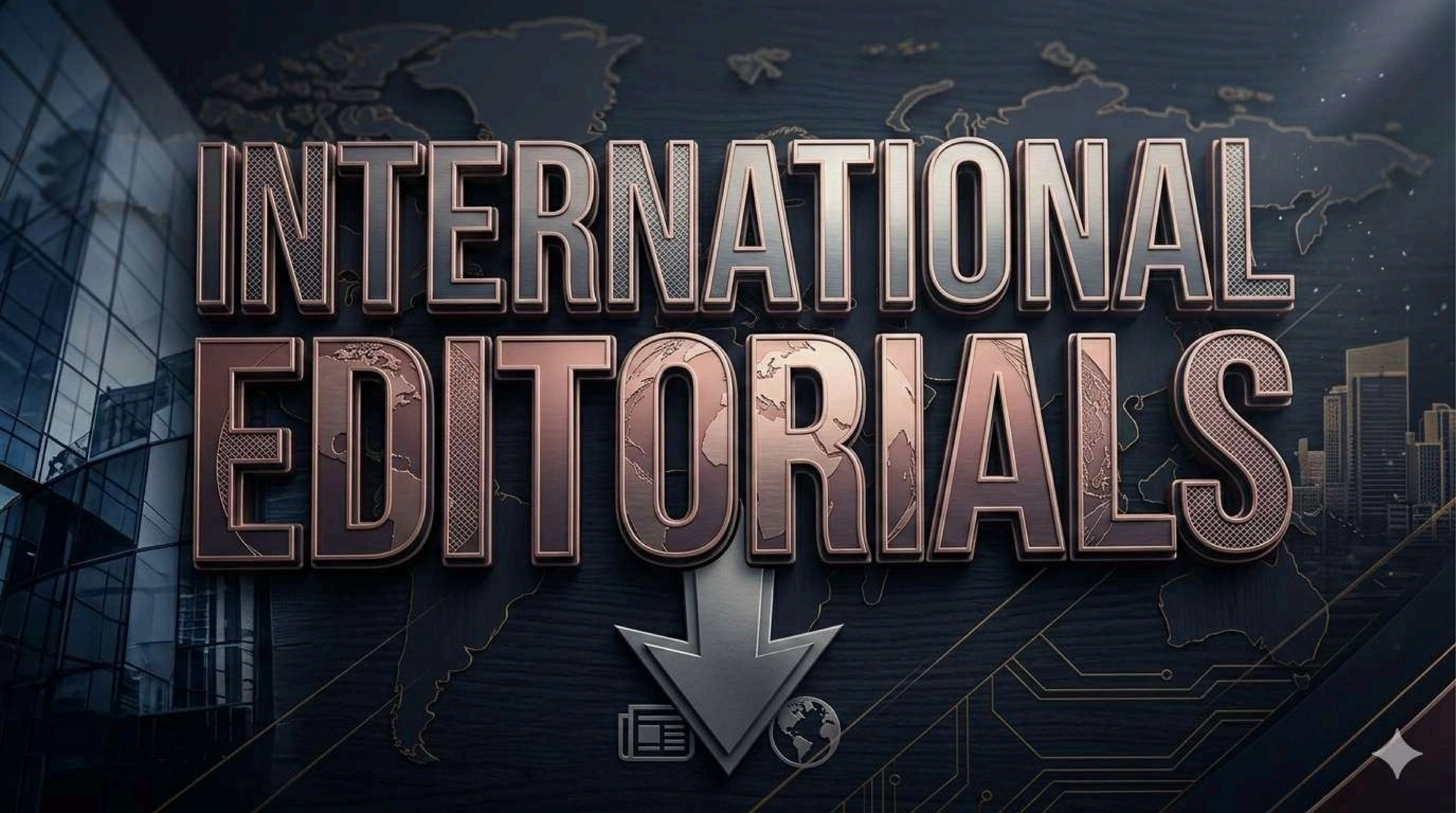
INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

2

How our oldest political title turned radical Islamophobe

Nesrine Malik

← *Continued from front*

are racialised, they are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, some of them dare to practise their own religion. Their unique profile makes it easy to channel racism, anti-immigration sentiment and just plain old petty parochialism. Islamophobia itself has metastasised, becoming a vehicle for the sort of things you can't say out loud about people of colour in general – but which you can say about Muslims.

In the foreword of the report, Peter Oborne, the magazine's former political editor, traces the history of the Spectator and how it went from condemning the anti-immigration Enoch Powell to "steadily rebuilding his reputation". Oborne cites a piece from earlier this year that says Powell "had a view of the British polity, values and way of life with which many Britons to this day feel they identify, and that is not least what establishes him as one of the country's greatest conservative influences". Now, the publication platforms broader far-right politics, in one article praising Tommy Robinson as likable, "intelligent, quick, articulate, well-informed, good-mannered".

And yet despite such extremism, the magazine occupies a position of such respectability that its summer party is attended by Labour and Tory politicians and journalists from across the British media, who rub shoulders there with Nigel Farage and the broader Spectator-verse. "The jamboree remains the most sought-after social ticket of the Westminster summer season," boasted the Spectator in July. A refutation of the charge that there is a wholesale coddling of Muslims if there ever was one. There is something crudely and unmistakably symbolic in the title's influence. As the country is riven by far-right politics and protests, mosques are attacked and hate crimes reach new levels, our politicians and opinion-makers are comfortable to drink and make merry with those who mainstream and disseminate inflammatory rhetoric.

But something else struck me, reading example after example of quoted texts. It was all tawdry, poorly written, poorly argued stuff. You come away not with the sense that this is an august magazine dedicating its formidable intellectual and journalistic resources towards a problematic minority it is concerned about, but with the sense that it isn't a serious publication.

Its articles are the sort of content you get from GB News, a bellicose radio phone-in or a tabloid on a tear. A convergence has occurred among rightwing media, a radicalisation that has alighted on anger and scaremongering, which feeds audiences' fears and paranoia. It is a successful commercial strategy but there is no community here, no solace or even loving depiction of the country vandalised. There is little to bind other than hate and outrage, no hold on what it is we are "saving" from Muslims or immigrants or the left. Tuning in, what one hears in concert is: "You have once again woken up in Britain. Welcome to hell."

The result is a climate that is hostile and dangerous not just to Muslims but all who it has been decided are stealthily annexing the UK. But there is also a wider degradation that comes with the focus on Muslims. The project of developing a vision of conservatism that goes beyond purification has been abandoned. Interested in, say, how the contemporary movement can reconcile austerity and free-market policies with stagnant wages and productivity and declining public services? Perhaps a rant about Muslim public prayer as an act of "public domination" can shed some light on such crucial questions.

The Spectator and its universe constitute what is now mostly a lowbrow media attempting to dress up racist audience-baiting as high-end journalism, all of which is met not with objection by establishment politics but a "cheers" in the sunshine. It is not that Muslims have turned into a bigger problem for the country, but that the country itself, and its so-called intellectual elites, have become small. In resisting the feeling that this is all just how it is, in not glazing over, we resist becoming small with them.

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'Comment is free… but facts are sacred' CP Scott

Superpowers

Trump treats America's old friends as enemies. China reaps the rewards

Earlier this year, a spate of western TikTok and Instagram creators announced that they were at "a very Chinese time in my life" – drinking hot water and wearing slippers around their homes. The Chinamaxxing phenomenon primarily reflected the constant need of influencers for novel content. But social media trends also reflect a growing fascination with China, as the economic historian Adam Tooze has noted.

While it broods over China's economic, military and technical advance, the Trump administration is accelerating Beijing's diplomatic progress, as striking new polling by the Pew Research Center shows. For the first time, China and Xi Jinping are seen more favourably than the US and its president in most of the 36 major countries surveyed – including Canada, Mexico and Australia. Only in six countries did people rate the US more highly. While Beijing has seen significant improvements in some places, the slump in Washington's standing is more dramatic. Across 20 countries, the median percentage with a favourable view of China rose from 32% to 46% between 2023 and this year; for the US, it fell from 58% to 36%. Views of China were much more positive in Latin America, Africa and parts of south and south-east Asia than in wealthier European and east Asian countries.

On Thursday, Mr Trump accused China of interfering with the 2020 election – casting doubt on polls ahead of midterms that are forecast to hit Republicans hard. Never mind the lack of evidence; he offered Argentinians a $20bn economic incentive to vote in line with his preference last October. In nearly every country surveyed, more people thought the US interfered in other countries than thought China did so. Mr Trump's demands to take over Greenland, the abduction of Venezuela's then leader Nicolás Maduro and the illegal war on Iran have all left their mark. Even the World Cup, which should have been an easy US soft power win, has been tarred by his exclusion and bullying.

Grave concerns about Beijing remain. Though it has dialled back displays of aggressive "wolf-warrior" diplomacy, it is forceful in its dealings. But it may benefit from lower expectations, and it looks predictable beside Trump-created turmoil. Famously, Beijing has just one ally: North Korea. Washington has more than 50 – but seems to accord them less respect than adversaries. Beijing detained two Canadian citizens for more than 1,000 days in retaliation for Ottawa's arrest of the Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou due to a US warrant. But Mr Trump announced that Canada will be the 51st state.

China is increasingly investing in overseas influence operations, including working with or amplifying local social media content creators. Content may range from paid-for Xinjiang travelogues intended to erase concerns about the persecution of Uyghurs, to softer material about food or technology.

The Pew findings may further convince it of Washington's hegemonic decline. China is keen to encourage the belief that it is leaping into a shiny new future of cyberpunk cities, while the west struggles with a declining standard of living – not least because it is useful in the face of domestic disillusionment.

But public perceptions of other countries are often complex and volatile. US standing rebounded after dropping sharply over the Iraq war; China's favourability ratings fell during the pandemic, reflecting its handling of the outbreak. The lasting lesson for both superpowers should surely be that presentation shapes opinion, but others will judge them on their actions – and respond accordingly.

Pubs

Communal spaces for sharing big moments must be preserved

"People can't get enough of football fever," a pub landlord, Sam Hale, told the Guardian last week. The World Cup provided the UK's struggling hospitality industry with a much-needed boost, with pubs benefiting from extended opening hours and one estimate suggesting that an extra 5.5m pints were sold in the group stages alone. The tournament lifted customers' spirits too – even if it ended in disappointment for England and Scotland fans – as millions of people relished the communal spectacle.

These sociable few weeks could not have come at a better time for pubs, which are closing at a rate of two a day, with about 2,000 gone since 2020. This reflects a long-term trend away from going out, combined with pressures from rising costs including energy bills, business rates, wages and national insurance contributions. The hope in the sector, and among its advocates, is that the temporary uplift of the past few weeks will focus minds on the importance of venues, including pubs, in promoting social cohesion and "watercooler moments".

The wider industry is campaigning for a halving of VAT on hospitality from 20% to 10%, and more than 288,000 people have signed a petition. Given the likely cost to the Treasury of at least £10bn, this proposal is unlikely to be taken up. A thinktank, Tax Policy Associates, has pointed out that multinational businesses, including McDonald's, would be the biggest beneficiaries. But with a recent survey finding that almost a quarter of pubs and restaurants are losing money, ministers should be looking for ways to help.

This is not just a matter of owners' finances. Spaces where people can meet and talk to each other, and share special occasions, are an important part of our collective life. The American sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined a name for them, "third places", and pubs are not the only ones that fit the bill. His point was the value of the public realm more widely – parks, libraries, youth clubs. And it is important to recognise that pubs' overall impact includes harms linked to alcohol. But sales of no- and low-alcohol beer are booming and, particularly in rural areas, pubs are vital facilities at a time where loneliness is also a serious public health issue.

The shrinking number of entry-level jobs in sectors including hospitality is another concern. In his interim report for the government on young people and work, Alan Milburn argued that this is one factor behind the rising number of 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither in work nor education.

It is easy to be nostalgic about pubs, as it is about many things that are associated with the past. They are not the be-all and end-all of thriving neighbourhoods. One reason why people are staying in more is that there is more to watch on television than there used to be. It is good if people enjoy being in their homes.

But there is real value in making an effort to be around others, having face-to-face conversations rather than tapping out messages. Recent research has pointed to social isolation among young adults as a growing problem. Experts differ as to explanations, but the pandemic, home working and social media have all been suggested. A worthwhile legacy of this World Cup would be a strengthened recognition of the value of shared, in-person experiences after the fever has died down.

The Burnham I've met over the past 20 years gives me hope

John Harris

My contribution to the modest avalanche of Andy Burnham stories extends to only two. One is about Glastonbury, and the time that he and his wife, Marie-France, came for a three-day stay at the festival, which included his appearance on the Left Field stage, organised by the songwriter and activist Billy Bragg. I help with the bookings and chair some of the debate sessions: Burnham's was called State of the Nation: Politics in Crisis.

It was the summer of 2022 - the prologue to Liz Truss's five minutes in power and (somewhat amazingly) Burnham's first visit to Glasto. As well as seeing bands, he had come to make the case for a lot of the stuff he has been talking about in the buildup to him entering Downing Street today: "rewiring" the UK by changing our systems of politics and authority, collaborating on that task with other parties, and taking away as much power as possible from Westminster. He passed with honours; he was even nice to the obligatory disruptive Trotskyists.

Here, though, is the punchline, which may say something about his preparation skills - or the workload of a regional mayor. The Burnhams arrived grateful for the chance to be there but with a miniature beach tent they had mistakenly grabbed as they ran out of their house. Bragg's brother was kind enough to lend them his more suitable canvas accommodation.

Anecdote two: later that year, I ran into Burnham again at the Labour conference. I explained that I had just been to review Bob Dylan in Oslo, which meant I got in for free. "Wow," he said. "I wish I could do things like that." I suggested that, given that Dylan was playing Manchester in November and Burnham was, you know, *the mayor*, one of his people could get tickets for his entire family. He looked stumped: the possibility, it seemed, hadn't occurred to him.

Nobody gets as far as he has without ambition, self-confidence and low cunning. But people who know Burnham agree that he can be not just humble and self-effacing but shy, and that although he has a reputation for angrily grappling with what one insider called "very senior people", he is not one to indulge in rank-pulling, punching down or acts of entitlement. You hear the word "empathy" a lot. In Head North, the book he collaborated on with the Liverpool mayor, Steve Rotheram, he wrote of his "gnawing self-doubt" about whether he would ever fit in at Westminster. He went to a comprehensive school and was raised in a working-class family in the Cheshire village of Culcheth. That part of the world, in my experience, does not produce many arrogant twits.

Andy Burnham with campaigner Frances Foley and John Harris at Glastonbury in June 2022
PHOTOGRAPH: ANTONIO OLMOS/ THE OBSERVER

> **He is not one to indulge in rank-pulling, punching down or acts of entitlement. You hear the word 'empathy' a lot**

Burnham's personality and background have definitely informed what we know of his policy agenda. Tony Blair was uneasy about the politics of Scottish and Welsh devolution; Burnham, by contrast, seems wholeheartedly devoted to giving power away.

Inevitably, you can see some of the likely faultlines in the Burnham regime. He not only wants to radically reshape the state and rebalance and reindustrialise the country, but to roll back 40 years of neoliberalism, oversee the building of historic numbers of council houses and all the rest: it amounts to a coherent and potentially inspirational story. But there is a profound tension between these aspirations and some of the identifying features of Labour's new leader.

Nearly a decade after he exited the Commons, Burnham is still a lonely figure, with support among MPs that is wide but shallow. He has few of the identifiable signs of a weighty project: few outriders to push the frontiers of debate, and a dearth of thinkers with longstanding links to him and his people.

What is increasingly glaring are the contradictions between his radicalism and who is meant to make it a reality: should she be appointed chancellor, Shabana Mahmood? His chief of staff James Purnell, once the definition of a doctrinaire Blairite? The backroom Starmer insiders who look likely to stay? There is a sense here of Burnham's placatory instincts getting the better of him, and the kind of grimly comic fate once summed up by Harold Wilson: "I am running a Bolshevik revolution with a tsarist shadow cabinet." As his most immediate priorities are revealed other questions abound. Being collegiate and comparatively humble might look like the right way to behave, but how will he fare at diplomatic-cum-wartime hardball with men such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin? This world may demand the ego of big gorillas who only know how to hoard power for themselves.

And so to a more optimistic reading. If you were over 10 years old at the time of the Iraq war, you will know where puffed-up men astride white chargers have led us: into that conflict, the banking crisis, Brexit, austerity and today's troubled world. But I wanted to write this piece in a spirit of qualified hope, partly because Burnham is about the same age as me and many of my friends, and I would like to see him redeem the reputation of a fatalistic, blank generation, and make this country fairer and less broken. To do so while actually listening to people and giving power away would make that achievement all the sweeter.

That is the prize; as the Burnham regime sorts out its metaphorical pegs and guylines - and returns, ha ha, to the politics of the big tent - a lot of people surely feel a queasy mixture of nagging nerves and genuine excitement. So, I imagine, does he.

Opinion

ELLA BARON

Why girls' trips are more than just fluffy fun

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

I have just come back from a much-anticipated girls' holiday in Puglia, Italy, and to say that it fulfilled my expectations would be an understatement. We swam, we napped, we reminisced, we ate little bits of crudo alongside lovely sips of fiano, we danced around the table of the Airbnb while singing along to *Sarà perché ti amo*. Most of all, we laughed, sometimes until our stomachs hurt and our faces were wet with tears.

What a joy the girls' trip is (despite our ages, "women" doesn't feel right here, somehow). Maybe that's because at times during the holiday, I was transported back to when we were indeed "girls" and studying together in Italy (although this time with far less street harassment - a realisation that prompted mixed feelings until a belated "*Che bellissime!*" saved the day).

Powered by Aperol - who may as well become their official sponsor at this point - thousands of girls' trips will be taking place as I write. At this very moment, I can almost guarantee that somewhere in southern Europe, a woman is detailing her husband's domestic habits with the meticulous comic precision of a standup routine, as her crochet-clad audience cackle, rattle their ice cubes supportively and holler the occasional "Boo!"

The girls' trip has become an institution, a central tenet of "hun" culture and the subject of myriad films, books and television shows, most recently the TV series based on the book, The Five-Star Weekend, in which a widowed Jennifer Garner brings together friends from different phases of her life for a holiday. My own novel, Female, Nude, uses a girls' trip to a Greek villa as the backdrop for an examination of friendship between four women in their early 30s who are all starting to ask themselves questions about ambition, marriage and motherhood. Sophie, my protagonist, is kicking hardest against the sacrifices she feels she will have to make in the next phase of her life, which is partly why she embarks on an explosive affair.

Her story is not new. Ever since oppressed and controlled housewife Shirley Valentine took herself off to Greece with her friend Jane in 1989, the girls' trip has become a byword for emancipation (even for those who don't stray outside their relationships), and the deep need for women to have time away together. Rewatching Shirley Valentine as an adult woman feels powerfully poignant. Not all of us get the chance to travel, or feel so liberated. "It's great that you're doing this," another woman said to me before I went on my trip, as we discussed how hard it can be to organise a holiday with so many competing demands at home.

I have known my travel companions for almost 20 years, and we now have seven children between us, all under the age of eight. To swim out into the ocean without worrying about needing to get back to them, to have a conversation that was uninterrupted by them, where men were also not present, felt rare and precious. Luxurious, even. We talked about everything: birth, death, health, our bodies and senses of identity, the men we love and have loved and didn't love, our children, and our hopes and fears for them. We covered fashion, the football, whether or not to get life insurance, how long it's safe to keep an arancino on the beach before eating it, getting older. The conversation ebbed and flowed - we dipped in and out as we wanted - and somewhere in that very feminine mix of comedy and heartache, profound truths were arrived at (or maybe it was just the spicy margs).

There's a tendency to trivialise girls' holidays - "oh look, the lasses are getting on the wine!" - and indeed, I just did it with that crack about margaritas. There are certainly some who don't think the girls' holiday is a subject worthy of serious cultural or literary inquiry (the terrible Sex and the City films didn't help). Yet I knew I wanted to write about one because it is often during those opportunities to step away from your life for a little while, alongside other women who have known you for years and about whom you care deeply, that your emotions are cast in high relief. Perhaps the revelations that follow will bring about change, perhaps they won't, but the chance to mix freedom, fun and serious self-inquiry should always be taken when it's presented. I've certainly returned home with a new perspective. Time to start planning the next trip.

✱
Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett's new book, Female, Nude, is out now

OPINION

The Case for Preventive Healthcare

INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

"People have basically become resigned to the fact that healthcare sucks, it's going to get more expensive, access will get worse." I'm sitting in the New York City location of Atria Health with founder Alan Tisch. He's making the case for preventive care.

"All of the incentives in our healthcare system are to treat sick people, and the sicker people are, the more money everyone makes," he says. "There's not even a billing code or a system for preventive healthcare. Doctors, scientists and technologists lost control. Healthcare is the only system on earth where both sides of the marketplace are wildly unhappy."

He expects pressure for change: "People born in the 21st century don't want to live that way. Consumer mindset and interest is massively shifting towards preventive health, wellness and longevity. They want to know where they stand, they want incredible amounts of data, they want to be proactive, and they want to be technology-enabled."

Atria Health and Research Institute calls itself "a precision-based approach to preventive medicine and longevity" with offices in New York, Los Angeles and Palm Beach, Fla. Four more are planned in the next two years. Mr. Tisch says members (currently 5,000) pay "$20,000 to $75,000 per year that covers everything that we do within our four walls." Atria makes $150 million in annual recurring revenue and is profitable from operations, he says.

At first glance, it looks like a concierge medical practice with 120 doctors. Mr. Tisch disagrees: "What concierge doctors delivered was their cellphone number and lower wait times. So you basically are paying thousands or tens of thousands today to get the same thing that you had in 1990 for free."

Mr. Tisch describes what makes Atria different: "I have $25 million worth of imaging equipment here in New York." Atria's fees cover "all imaging, labs, 15 medical subspecialties from internal medicine, cardiology, neurology, gynecology, endocrinology, GI, pulmonology, medical dermatology, pediatrics, geriatrics, emergency medicine, as well as lifestyle, nutrition, sleep, exercise, physiology, functional medicine, and naturopathic medicine, as well as gerotherapeutics, all in one place. We need to build something that is going to change healthcare long term."

How? I've long been a proponent of early detection and preventive care but have been disappointed by the glacial pace of change in medicine. I mention that ObamaCare had provisions for preventive medicine. "All of it's been fluff," Mr. Tisch interjects.

He wants "to build a new healthcare system from the ground up, solely optimizing for prevention of disease and prolonging healthy life using every tool, technology, piece of scientific and medical information available to us."

Atria targets a system in which 'both sides of the marketplace are wildly unhappy.'

In theory, savings should be multiples of the amount spent on prevention. Will they be? "The only way there's going to be change is if there is a proof point of a model that actually works and is scalable, then you can force change, but right now you have a chicken-and-egg problem with the data."

That takes time. Mr. Tisch, 38, is playing the long game. "We've built the deepest data set on healthy humans ever built before. The Mayo Clinic's platform has seven million records, but they really have vital signs, and they find out when you're sick. At Atria, every single one of our patients gets whole-body MRI, whole-genome sequencing, quarterly labs, wearable devices, plus all their previous medical records. We're building longitudinally with serial imaging. Our intention is to use that database and eventually open-source it, such that it can be used for pharmaceutical development as well as policy changes."

He observes that new health data is all around, including from Oura rings and smartwatches. "What's missing is the interpretation layer and the action layer on that data." Example: "Blood lab reference ranges are not personalized by age, race, gender or ethnicity. Telling a 19-year-old female and an 89-year-old male that they have the same target makes absolutely no sense. It's 2026, yet that's how prehistoric our approach to preventive health is today."

"This system isn't scaling," Mr. Tisch says, "so split healthcare and sick care into two systems: one of them reactive care covered by employer and government, the other one a prevention allowance—a 20% allocation. . . . Consumers choose where they spend it." At-home genetic or blood tests. Prenuvo body scans. Ro. Wearables. Amazon's One Medical. Artificial intelligence over time can peruse the data, find patterns and change the interpretation and action layers.

"I think it can work in healthcare because the current system's not working. Costs are going up for government payers, employers, and I think you're starting to see massive cracks in that," Mr. Tisch concludes. "To change the population level, we need to change the model. We need to change the incentives." He's one to watch.

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Colombia's Answer to Donald Trump

AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

South America's longest-standing democracy is staring down the barrel of a constitutional crisis, and that isn't good for the Western Hemisphere. Unfortunately President Trump, who won't acknowledge that he lost the 2020 U.S. election, isn't much help because at the heart of the matter is another election denier, Colombian President Gustavo Petro.

Because Mr. Petro was constitutionally barred from running for a consecutive second term, his Pacto Histórico party put up Sen. Iván Cepeda as its presidential candidate. In the June runoff election, according to Colombia's electoral authority, Mr. Cepeda lost to lawyer and businessman Abelardo de la Espriella. Mr. Petro refuses to recognize the president-elect.

The inauguration is set for Aug. 7, and it's doubtful that Mr. Petro believes he can keep Mr. de la Espriella from taking office. But that isn't the point. The president's objective is to delegitimize the new government and make it difficult for Mr. de la Espriella to do his job.

After four years of mediocre economic performance and growing public insecurity, Colombia can ill afford the political instability that Mr. Petro's intransigence is likely to cause. But then this isn't about the well-being of the nation. It's about an obsession with power.

When Mr. Petro was elected in 2022, his ideological allies likely thought they were in the presidential Casa Nariño for the long haul. After all, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez was democratically elected in 1998 and by the early 2000s had destroyed many of the institutional checks that might have blocked his one-man rule.

Chávez died of cancer in 2013. Today, six months after his successor, Nicolás Maduro, was removed by the U.S. military, *chavismo* continues to rule the country. Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega managed a similar takeover of that frail Central American democracy. El Salvador's Nayib Bukele began his political career as a member of the guerrilla-group-cum-political-party known as the FMLN. He was elected in 2019 as an outsider leading his own movement. He has pacified a country overrun with gang violence. But he also has destroyed its weak democratic institutions. Next year he will run for his third term, now extended to six years.

Colombians had a front-row seat for the dismantling of the Venezuelan democracy, and that's one explanation for Mr. Cepeda's defeat. Many voters feared that a second Pacto Histórico president would succeed in rewriting the constitution and cancel republican government.

Mr. Petro had lots of ways to put a thumb on the electoral scales from the executive office—and he used them. Colombian law prohibits presidential involvement in an election to avoid the use of state resources to favor one side. Mr. Petro meddled anyway, in speeches and on social media.

The leftist president claims an election his party lost was stolen. Sound familiar?

Mr. Cepeda came much closer to winning than polls predicted, perhaps because he benefited from Mr. Petro's over-the-top populism. A presidential decree sent the minimum wage up 23% in January. The Petro economy grew a measly 0.6% in 2023 and only 1.6% in 2024, according to the International Monetary Fund. But last year a public-spending blitz led to a 2.6% economic expansion. Colombians went to the polls feeling better about their pocketbooks.

Yet Mr. Cepeda was also running on Mr. Petro's dismal security record. Colombian security began to decline in subtle ways after then-President Juan Manuel Santos signed an amnesty agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in Havana in 2016. Things deteriorated further under Mr. Petro. The increased presence across the country of illegal armed groups engaged in coca growing, extortion, kidnapping and murder was a top campaign issue. Mr. de la Espriella's pledge to restore peace by confronting criminality headon was a big vote-getter.

On election night the initial tally was close. Messrs. Petro and Cepeda immediately called for the count to be scrutinized. They still came up short. Now Mr. Petro alleges electoral fraud by the Israelis, who he says manipulated the voting machine software. It's an indication of how desperate he is to undermine the credibility of the new government. Lawfare against Mr. de la Espriella can't be far off.

Mr. de la Espriella wants to make Colombia a destination for investment. The country needs decentralization, and the new president will need to build a governing coalition. Working with regional politicians outside the capital can deliver both. His plan to hold his inauguration at a military garrison in the south of the country rather than at the traditional Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá seems a good start.

The new Congress, which will be sworn in on July 20, will need to approve the change in venue. Whatever it decides, with Mr. Petro in a meltdown over Mr. Cepeda's loss, it falls to lawmakers, the courts and military to uphold the rule of law. Americans are likely to understand that.

Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

How Coke Filled the World's Cups

By Bob Greene

New York

During the World Cup, I would run into them in the elevators of the hotel where I was staying in lower Manhattan: men and women wearing tags with a logo more recognizable worldwide than just about any of the flags of the 48 teams competing in the tournament.

The logo—a ribbon-like red-and-white script—is that of a company whose namesake product has a global reach as vast as soccer's. It is manufactured and sold in more than 200 countries and territories, yet its story began with a tiny introductory advertisement in the Atlanta Journal of May 29, 1886: "Coca-Cola. Delicious! Refreshing! Exhilarating! Invigorating!"

Coca-Cola was at first sold in one place—Jacobs' Pharmacy in downtown Atlanta. In its first year, sales averaged nine drinks a day. Today the company sells more than 1.9 billion of its beverages each day, and the firm has about 70,000 employees worldwide.

Some rode in my hotel's elevators. The men and women of Coke—one of the longest-standing World Cup corporate partners—had come to New York as part of the company's multicontinental marketing effort during the tournament. As we chatted on our way to and from the lobby, I thought about a long-ago Coke business trip—a wartime journey to North Africa—that eventually led to the company's planetary dominance.

Gen. Eisenhower and the CEO brought the drink to battlefields and then beyond.

It began during World War II, when Coca-Cola Co. President Robert Woodruff vowed that for the sake of the morale of homesick soldiers, "every man in uniform" should be able to have Cokes for a nickel, "wherever he is and whatever it costs the company."

But transporting filled bottles across oceans to Americans fighting overseas was daunting. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's North African headquarters put forward an audacious plan: Construct war-zone Coca-Cola bottling plants near the soldiers. One of Woodruff's top logistics engineers was dispatched on that initial trip to Algiers to build the first such facility.

Soon he was followed by 148 more of the company's logistics men, who set up 64 mobile bottling plants near the fighting in Europe, North Africa and the Pacific. During the war, service members consumed more than five billion bottles of Coke. Troops affectionately referred to the civilian logistics engineers supplying the beverages as "Coca-Cola colonels."

According to contemporaneous accounts, German prisoners of war in U.S. camps were sometimes offered Cokes at the commissary. The intended message from the Americans to their detained enemies was: We're the good guys.

When the war was won, the great boom in Coca-Cola's international expansion began, fueled by a desire for the soft drink by people who had sampled it in far-flung places near the war-zone plants.

This summer at the World Cup, the ubiquitous Coca-Cola logo was recognized instantly by just about everyone who encountered it, wherever their home countries might be. Hydration breaks, all right—from battlefields to soccer fields.

Mr. Greene's books include "Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen."

BOOKSHELF | By Tara Isabella Burton

Lives Between The Covers

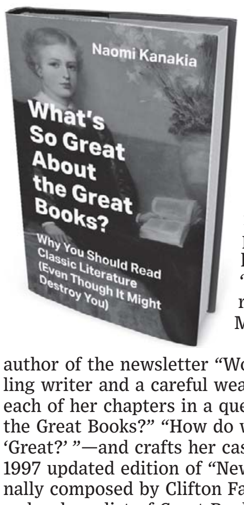
What's So Great About the Great Books?

By Naomi Kanakia
Princeton, 272 pages, $25.95

Books can turn you inside out. That's not always a good thing. Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary embarks on a series of extramarital affairs after indulging in romantic fiction. Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, whose adultery may be less avaricious, is similarly spurred on by a short course of novel reading. Even Miguel de Cervantes's aging Don Quixote is driven into a phantasmagoric abyss by the reading of chivalrous romance.

If we must open ourselves up to books, are there any that either ameliorate this danger, or else make reading them worthwhile? This question underlies Naomi Kanakia's snappily titled "What's So Great About the Great Books?" a compelling if excessively cautious defense of classic literature.

The Great Books, Ms. Kanakia writes, "constitute humankind's most influential and important works of literature." But why bother reading at all? In particular, why bother spending one's limited reading time on texts that, according to people like Ms. Kanakia's wife (who looms as the author's implicit foil), are "associated with the racists"? Ms. Kanakia's unnamed wife is "a queer woman, the lover of a trans woman, someone who cares about Black studies and marginalized people and HIV-positive people," as well as "a kind, brilliant person" who has "absolutely no time" for leisure reading. What good is Tolstoy or Marcel Proust to her?



Ms. Kanakia, a novelist and the author of the newsletter "Woman of Letters," is a compelling writer and a careful weaver of arguments. She grounds each of her chapters in a question—"Why should I read the Great Books?" "How do we know whether a book is 'Great?' "—and crafts her case with integrity. She uses the 1997 updated edition of "New Lifetime Reading Plan," originally composed by Clifton Fadiman and John S. Major, as her base list of Great Books and explains the reasons behind her particular choice, qualifying various ideas of greatness and justifying her decision not to supplement the list she uses with newer texts by minority writers for a more representative sample.

At times, however, Ms. Kanakia's caution threatens to water down the strength of her argument. The claim "you will gain insight and enjoyment from reading great books" is, Ms. Kanakia admits, a "much easier sell" than "there exist universal values for truth, beauty, and goodness, and reading old books will bring you closer to these values." But it is also a less exciting one; and one in which, as Ms. Kanakia herself admits, the categories of "old book," "good book," "influential book" and "Great Book" begin to blur so profoundly that it becomes difficult to pin down what a Great Book is, let alone why anyone would choose to read one.

Given a stated subset of Ms. Kanakia's intended audience—people who, like her wife, are distrustful of Great Books altogether—the benignness of her take may well be warranted. But she does risk evincing a lack of faith in the books as they stand, as when she introduces an incredibly powerful quotation from Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" (1913-27) with an apologetic: "it's far too long and will certainly make your eyes glaze over."

It is when Ms. Kanakia gives herself over to the power of the texts she loves most—quoting Proust or Tolstoy, or helping readers to see what she sees in, say, the happy and unhappy unions in George Eliot's "Middlemarch" (1871)—that careful argumentation gives way to passionate encounter. In demonstrating what she herself loves about the Great Books, Ms. Kanakia helps readers viscerally inhabit that love.

The best encounters with classic literature—with Tolstoy, with Proust—forego line-by-line analysis or politically motivated allegory.

The best encounters with novels, Ms. Kanakia suggests, are those that forego line-by-line analysis or politically motivated allegory in favor of facing a reality that language can never fully contain. "Moral complexity is so important that it doesn't really matter what message the author was trying to convey, or where they personally stood," she writes, "because their genius often brings out the full contours of the situation that reveals itself when the book is read as a whole."

"The Great Books teach you how to have integrity," Ms. Kanakia writes. "To have integrity means recognizing the bad and the good are often inextricable and that what we like or praise about a situation is often a direct result of the parts of it that we most loath." Ms. Kanakia may not be making the boldest possible case for universal values, but she does argue that an authentic engagement with reality demands we acknowledge that perfect truth, perfect goodness and perfect beauty are, at least, rarely found in practice.

Great Writers, Ms. Kanakia suggests, have—knowingly or not—moral visions. Their books have both a stance on the world and a willingness to recognize the human beings, the political situations, the complicated relationships that make any stance, at best, an approximation. It is precisely in that moral vision—the integrity of which Ms. Kanakia so movingly writes—that we find a defense of the Great Books far more provocative, and far more original, than much of the right's habit of treating them as antiwoke bulwark for the culture wars.

It is, of course, a natural limitation of the defense of the Great Books, as a genre, that the discourse fails to live up to the actual experience of reading any one of those books. Ms. Kanakia quotes heavily from several authors—from Aristotle to Nietzsche to Edith Wharton—to bolster her argument. But it is when she allows us to encounter her as a writer and thinker of great integrity, rather than argue us through her points in a linear fashion, that she helps us understand what a relationship to the Great Books might ultimately mean.

"The Great Books concept is about placing faith in those who came before us," Ms. Kanakia writes. "They all rely on trusting other people's judgment." By the end of "What's So Great About the Great Books?" we certainly trust Ms. Kanakia's.

Ms. Burton is the author of the novel "Here in Avalon."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump, Iran's Assassins and John Bolton

President Trump is taking Iran's threats to assassinate him seriously, as well he should. He reportedly switched Air Force One from the new Qatar version on his return from the recent NATO summit on the advice of the Secret Service. How about a little concern, then, about Iran's threats to kill his former national security adviser, John Bolton?

The President has the Secret Service, but his targeted former advisers don't.

The White House hasn't confirmed the Air Force One switch, but it hasn't denied the story either. Notably, the Justice Department has subpoenaed New York Times writers who reported the story to disclose their sources. That's harassment against the press that won't make the U.S. safer. The story arguably did Mr. Trump a favor by reminding the public that Iran's regime hasn't turned over a "new leaf," to borrow Vice President JD Vance's term.

"They want to take out the U.S. leader—me," Mr. Trump told reporters in Turkey. "I'm on every list. I saw this morning, I'm on every single one of their lists. And so far, I guess I've been a little bit lucky, but that maybe doesn't last very long."

Mr. Trump said he has given orders for the U.S. military for a massive military assault on Iran if he is assassinated. By that time the orders would have to come from new President Vance, and we'd like to think he'd unleash hell as well.

Iran has long wanted to kill American officials, as well as anti-regime exiles in the U.S. It targeted Brooklyn, N.Y., based Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad, according to a federal case against would-be assassins. Two men have been convicted in the foiled plot.

Which brings us to Mr. Bolton, who has been targeted by Iran along with Mr. Trump's first-term Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and State's main deputy for Iran policy in the first term, Brian Hook. The Biden Administration was concerned enough that it provided the trio with protection details.

But after taking office a second time, Mr. Trump pulled that protection from all three. This was raw vindictiveness, since we doubt Iran has given up on killing them. Iran blames all three for the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, who ran Iran's network of terror proxies for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These Americans are targets because of a decision the President rightly made.

The danger for Mr. Bolton in particular has increased because the Trump Administration is prosecuting him for mishandling classified documents. Mr. Bolton pleaded guilty last month to avoid the threat of additional charges against him or his family. The plea deal stipulates a fine of $2.25 million, which is an effort to strip Mr. Bolton of the income from his 2020 book that was critical of Mr. Trump.

But far worse, the Justice Department has insisted on seeking a prison term of up to five years. This is a penalty far beyond what other officials have received for similar or greater classification offenses. John Deutch, David Petraeus and Sandy Berger never served jail time and none pleaded guilty to felonies. Mr. Bolton was treated more harshly.

Federal Judge Theodore Chuang has scheduled sentencing for Mr. Bolton for Oct. 28. But a jail term of any length runs the risk of assassination. It wouldn't take much for Iranians to bribe an inmate, or threaten relatives of an inmate or guard, to have Mr. Bolton killed while he's in custody. Prisons are notoriously insecure.

By the way, Iran hacked Mr. Bolton's personal AOL account after he left office, in what he thinks was an attempt to get hold of his calendar for a potential murder hit. Mr. Bolton contacted the Biden Administration in 2021, though he wasn't obliged to. Mr. Bolton's reward for assisting the FBI counterterrorism division is to have Mr. Trump unleash the bureau and prosecutors on him.

* * *

Mr. Trump has the Secret Service to protect him, but these other public servants don't. They have to do without security or pay for it themselves, as Mr. Bolton has. Let's hope Judge Chuang dispenses with the Justice Department's unjust prison demand and issues a suspended sentence.

As for Mr. Trump, he's already exacted revenge against his former adviser with the prosecution and fine. He knows Iran has a kill "list" that includes him and his advisers. If Mr. Bolton is killed in prison, the President and his Justice Department will be partly responsible.

Europe's Air Conditioning Rebellion

In Europe's air conditioning wars, the hoi polloi are beating the climate scolds. The public is putting comfort and public health above green dictates.

A survey published last week by the price-comparison business Verivox found that 23% of German households now have AC—"five percentage points more than a year ago"—and another 25% plan to get it. In Belgium the share of energy used for household cooling has increased 167% since 2022, the Brussels Times reports.

In France the government has pestered the public to wet their skin, drink cold soup and block windows with cardboard to beat the heat—anything to avoid resorting to AC. Yet France's Agency for Ecological Transition says AC ownership rose to 24% of households last year from 18% in 2023.

The retailer Carrefour sold 30,000 AC units in a day amid a heat wave last month—"a thousand times more than on a normal day," CEO Alexandre Bompard told the Agence France-Presse. Scuffles have broken out over the limited retail supply, and some French restaurants are advertising that they have AC.

In Britain the co-founder of Aircon Services, an air conditioning specialist in Tamworth, told the BBC he's seen a 300% increase in domestic inquiries in six years. Aervue Air Conditioning in Birmingham now has employees working seven days a week to meet demand, and it's booked through August.

Chinese exports of AC units to the European Union have increased more than 43% in the first half of 2026 compared to the same period last year, the state-run media reports. The Chinese appliance company Midea expanded production capacity to meet demand and recently shipped 20,000 air conditioners to France in a week, the South China Morning Post says.

Europe's soaring demand for home cooling is another example of citizens revolting against the mandates and moralizing of government and progressive elites.

A Climate Coup at the National Academies

Public confidence in scientific institutions has declined as they've become more political. A textbook case is the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, which on Thursday released a report that explicitly seeks to aid the tort and regulatory raid on fossil-fuel companies.

A report on C02 and extreme weather is a trial-lawyer operation.

The 253-page report examines the purported scientific advances in quantifying the extent to which CO2 emissions contribute to natural disasters and extreme weather. A National Academies report in 2016 found that this area of research wasn't well-developed. Yet this year's report claims a sea change in the science.

"Major advancements" in climate methodology and modeling now "allow for more robust assessments," the report says. According to the report, scientists can now attribute particular extreme, heat, and rainfall events with a high degree of confidence to man-caused climate change, and wildfires, droughts and tropical cyclones with moderate confidence.

Why is this important? The Academies claims its report is "relevant to policy and legal decisions pertaining to climate change and liability for losses sustained as a result of extreme weather and climate events." Translation: It could be useful in shaking down fossil-fuel producers.

Dozens of state and local governments have sued fossil-fuel companies for purported damage resulting from climate change and natural disasters. The report says its research can help such plaintiffs show they have legal standing to bring lawsuits, which requires a concrete injury that is "fairly traceable to the challenged action of the defendant."

The report also says this research could help "inform" policies like a law in Vermont, which empowers the government to assess the "financial impact on the state of fossil fuel related–greenhouse gas pollution" and "demand payments from fossil fuel companies to fund adaptation projects." The point is to put a scientific gloss on a coercive exercise of government power.

Such research, the report tells us, "may also be relevant in challenges to permitting decisions or to the adequacy of environmental impact assessments" of projects. Sierra Club, have at it. What the report glosses over is that CO2 emissions are global, and the contributions to climate change of any one company or project are minuscule.

That's not the report's only oversight. The Academies notes that Michael Burger, the executive director of Columbia Law School's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, assisted with the report and cites one of his papers. Yet the report omits that Mr. Burger is a counsel at the law firm Sher Edling, which has led the litigation raid on fossil-fuel producers.

These columns have previously reported that a climate chapter for the Fourth Edition of its Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence—published by the Federal Judicial Center and National Academies—largely drew from Mr. Burger's work without proper attribution. The FJC, which is the education arm of the federal judiciary, later retracted the chapter.

Mr. Burger's fingerprints are all over last week's report, which was partly funded by the U.S. government. Congress established the National Academies in 1863 to advise on science—e.g., fixing the weights and measures of currency and methods for protecting ship hulls from saltwater corrosion.

The Academies undermines its credibility when it makes itself a tool of legal advocacy and a political agenda.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New York Is Fighting the Wrong Energy Battle

Regarding your editorial ("New York's Data Center Self-Sabotage," July 15): Governor Kathy Hochul's executive order pausing state environmental permits for new hyperscale data centers for up to one year is a short-sighted response to a real challenge.

Hyperscale facilities can strain electricity grids, water supplies and local infrastructure, and New York is right to ensure ordinary ratepayers don't subsidize corporate power use. But the answer is to make developers bear those costs—not to suspend projects indiscriminately and risk the state's economic and technological future.

A year-long freeze risks pushing mobile investment—and the billions in construction jobs and tax revenue that come with it—to other states offering more predictable timelines. Worse, a year is long enough for that capital to leave, but far too short to build the generation and transmission capacity New York actually lacks. When the moratorium expires, the grid constraints will remain; only New York's competitive position will have changed.

Distributed computing capacity matters. Not every workload needs to sit next to its data center, but latency-sensitive industries do benefit from nearby infrastructure, and regional capacity gives businesses more resilience and more providers to choose from.

New York's energy problem predates AI. Decades of deferred maintenance on a grid where core infrastructure is often 50 years old, plus the cost of implementing the state's climate law, are projected to add up to $4,100 to a typical upstate household's bill by 2031—costs with little to do with data centers. Pausing data-center permits doesn't touch any of that; it leaves the underlying grid problem exactly where it was.

The governor's own Public Service Commission is already running a more targeted process on how large users should pay for their grid effects—that's the right tool. New York should require developers to finance the transmission upgrades their projects require, secure dedicated generation and accept curtailment obligations during grid stress, among other conditions. That lets worthy projects proceed without shifting costs to existing ratepayers—something a blanket moratorium can't do.

We do not have an AI crisis. We have an Albany energy policy crisis.

Prof. Todd L. Pittinsky
Stony Brook University
Port Jefferson, N.Y.

MIT Didn't Rise Up to Protect Jewish Students

Regarding "Jewish Students Are Feeling at Home at MIT" (Letters, July 15): The Massachusetts Institute of Technology spokesperson's response to Barton Swaim's column about my book unwittingly confirms everything Mr. Swaim wrote and every detail in my book, "Unsafe at MIT: A Chronicle of a Campus War on the Jews." While labeling Mr. Swaim's column as "slanted," no facts to dispute his account were presented.

One wonders if the MIT's "steady" and "thoughtful" actions cited by the spokesperson included the school president's shameful appearance before Congress and the total breakdown of law and order on campus as Palestinian supporters disrupted classes and research labs while harassing and threatening Jews—without any meaningful response from the school. One also wonders why closing part of the campus to Jews by a mob, the desecration of Israeli (and American) flags on campus, and calls for the elimination of Jews and the destruction of Israel weren't dealt with. One also wonders about MIT's equating antisemitism with Islamophobia despite MIT's president stating that antisemitism reports outnumbered Islamophobia reports 10:1.

In contrast to the statement by the MIT spokesperson, MIT leaders didn't rise to the challenge but cowered and ceded campus control to an antisemitic mob.

Yossi Sheffi
Professor of Engineering
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Mass.

AI Can Be the Fast Track to Grid Reliability

"More Power Fortifies Electric Grid, but Perils Also Lurk" (U.S. News, July 3) illustrates the risks facing the power grid this summer. Extreme heat, drought, wildfires and the rapid growth of artificial intelligence data centers are creating a more complex operating environment for utilities.

But the answer can't be limited to adding generation alone. The U.S. needs a smarter, more flexible grid that can adapt in real time, making better use of existing infrastructure to respond to rapidly changing conditions. This requires software that can provide system-level intelligence and coordination, giving utilities greater visibility and operational agility.

Artificial intelligence should be viewed not only as a driver of new electricity demand but also as a tool to improve grid reliability. When coupled with open and interoperable ecosystems, AI can surface insights from previously siloed solutions, helping utilities better forecast disruptions, manage flexible demand, improve customer communication and accelerate decision-making during major events.

Modernizing the grid isn't a long-term aspiration that can wait. It is a near-term requirement for economic growth, energy security and reliability. The technology and expertise needed to build a more resilient grid are available today. The challenge now is intent: move with urgency and forge partnerships to enable the coordination this moment demands to deliver better outcomes for the communities U.S. grid operators serve.

Ruben Llanes
CEO, Digital Grid
Schneider Electric
Boston

Marco Rubio's Deserved Rise

Regarding Allysia Finley's "JD Vance and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week" (Life Science, July 13): Further complicating Mr. Vance's future is his refusal to condemn the Tucker Carlson wing for their overt antisemitism and lack of support for Mr. Trump. Mr. Vance has made statements regarding Israel that lead many of us conservative Jews to suspect he agrees with Mr. Carlson's views.

Meanwhile Marco Rubio, in clear speech, enthusiastically prosecutes Mr. Trump's agenda and reveals his support to be personally principled. Mr. Vance needs to remember that President Trump and his agenda put him in power. Mr. Vance is revealing himself to be a poor standard bearer to continue the Trump agenda, whereas Mr. Rubio has shown himself to be prepared and articulate.

Richard Reinitz
Houston

No Satisfaction in the U.K.

Regarding Kyle Smith's "Mick Jagger Doesn't Love Us Anymore" (op-ed, July 14): Mick Jagger fiddles about America while his homeland burns. There are more dysfunctional nations than the U.K., but few that have fallen from such great heights.

The U.K.'s economy is in shambles, its cultural heritage is being obliterated by negligent immigration policy, the land that gave us free speech is arresting its citizens for speaking out and it is apparently ungovernable—given the revolving door at Downing Street.

All my life there has been a faction in America saying that we ought to be more like Europe. I thank God that we have been slow followers.

Jim Reardon
Glen Allen, Va.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.ltrs@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

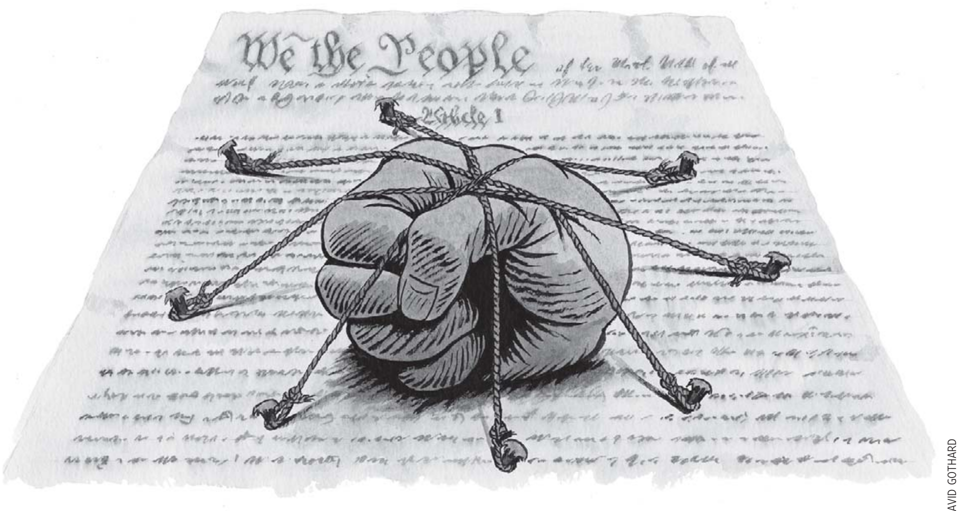
Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"I decided to retire before I blunder into bankruptcy, criminal liability or obscurity."

America Needs the Filibuster

By Ben Sasse



DAVID GOTHARD

Americans are addicted to apocalypse porn. Politicians on both sides warn that the world will end unless American life is immediately reordered around a particular set of policy proposals. The questions change, but the answer is always the same: To prevent American carnage or to defend democracy from darkness, power must be consolidated—right now.

These warnings cause a cortisol spike in the body politic and fry the nation's nervous system, exhausting the citizenry. The Constitution begins from a different place: extreme skepticism of consolidated power. Additionally, in the Senate, the filibuster requires 60 votes to pass most legislation. This provides a bulwark against consolidated power. Preserving this tradition is a prerequisite for national recovery and endurance.

Americans divide power again and again because we don't want it at the center of life. We distinguish between the private and public sectors. We privilege the private sector because it's pluralistic and persuasion-based. In the public sector, we divide power among local, state and federal governments, deferring jurisdiction over most topics to the elected officials closest to the people. We do this for the sake of accountability, experimentation and comparison, and to limit the possibility of cascading failures.

Articles I, II and III of the Constitution divide power among three federal branches: legislative, executive and judicial. Each branch checks the others, but the Founders put the most authority in legislative hands. As a result, we divide lawmaking power yet again, between two very different bodies. We put the House and Senate on different time horizons and give them different constituencies.

The upper house is built for the long view, with six-year terms that encourage a deliberative trustee model of representation. Senators owe their states both judgment and conscience. The House provides faster-loop warnings about public frustrations. Two-year terms and smaller districts combine to encourage a more urgent, passionate delegate model of representation.

Despite these differences, enacting a federal law requires navigating both complex institutions in the same 24-month window and also giving the president an opportunity to weigh in. It's a long shot by design. We do this in part to give the public time to come aboard—or to object angrily. We also do it because civic life works better when one-size-fits-all nationwide laws come with buy-in from large cross-sections of this continental republic.

That's American Constitutionalism 101. While the Senate's filibuster rule isn't in the text of the most glorious political document ever written, it plays a critical role in limiting and dividing power. Via procedural requirements to secure

Partisans warn of doom if their agenda isn't enacted, but their expedient is what threatens the republic.

a supermajority of 60 votes before legislation can be passed, the filibuster safeguards the spirit of the Constitution's anticonsolidation objective and prevents the misery of never-ending Flight 93 elections.

When partisans talk about killing or "reforming" the filibuster, they're saying they want to turn the Senate into another House of Representatives. That would be a tragic mistake. The filibuster prevents the dramatic pendulum swings that are the natural result of simple-majority lawmaking. Every election and every vote becomes an existential crisis in a system that no longer plods through checks and balances but instead rushes to European-style referenda.

It's a partisan's dream: Court packing, new states, federal takeover of state elections, national adoption of Utah's gun laws or New York's abortion laws. Sweeping changes to nearly every aspect of national and local life.

Voters might love or hate this or that policy outcome. Senators can love or hate the supermajority requirement—there are plenty of politicians who have shamelessly taken both sides of the filibuster debate depending on whether their party possesses or anticipates a Senate majority. But all of us should recognize the danger that a faster, less-constrained government will chip away at the American creed.

Neither zealous constitutionalism nor deep skepticism of consolidated power should be narrowly associated with the political right. But unfortunately in recent decades, the progressive left has gone further in jettisoning our foundational ideas about limited federal government. This is sad but perhaps predictable. What wasn't predictable was that some on the right would fall in love with permanent power politics.

The partisans who decry the filibuster always say, "The stakes are too high and we've got to do it for X." Then there's this: "The other guys are going to do it themselves, so let's do it first." The reality is that once the dam breaks, the stakes will climb endlessly higher. For every X on the right, there's a Y on the left. Without the filibuster, we'll have a never-ending cascade of doom-peddlers telling Americans our best days are behind us unless we secure 51 immediate votes for their golden legislative ticket.

There remains a chance for national recovery. It will evaporate if the right succumbs fully to the temptation of the one-way ratchet of consolidated power.

America's public square needs a recovery. That depends on regular folks showing up, affirming a "one cheer for politics" ethos, rolling their eyes at jeremiads, laughing at apocalypse pornographers, and gratefully celebrating 250 years and counting. All of these become less likely if we foolishly eliminate the filibuster.

Mr. Sasse is a Free Expression columnist at WSJ Opinion. He served as a U.S. senator from Nebraska, 2015-23.

Chinese Election Interference? What About TikTok?

LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

President Trump during his prime-night speech on Thursday broke the non-news that China has sought to interfere in U.S. elections. Xi Jinping must have chuckled at the president's professed outrage.

On his first day in office, Mr. Trump gave the Chinese Communist Party a license to spy on Americans and meddle in U.S. elections when he issued an executive order that suspended enforcement of a law requiring TikTok to separate from its Chinese parent, ByteDance, or be banned in the U.S.

The TikTok reprieve may be the biggest blunder of Mr. Trump's presidency, and it is coming back to bite him as the platform fuels the rise of socialism and opposition to the war in Iran. A recent study found that TikTok's algorithm systemically suppressed pro-U.S. content on the war and amplified anti-U.S content. Odds of such a skew occurring by chance are about 1 in 6.5 million. Is this Beijing's invisible hand at work? It's impossible to know, which is the problem.

Congress passed the divest-or-ban law with sweeping majorities in April 2024, giving TikTok 270 days to sever ties with ByteDance. Then-Sen. Marco Rubio helped shepherd the law through the upper chamber. Lawmakers determined TikTok posed a national security threat by hoovering up masses of personal data that Beijing could use for political-influence campaigns.

Chinese law requires its companies and citizens to "support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts." Press reports have detailed how ByteDance's China-based engineers accessed sensitive data of American users and spied on U.S. journalists. Studies also showed that its algorithms promoted anti-American content and suppressed posts sensitive to the Communist Party—for instance, on Uyghur forced labor in Xinjiang province and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Beijing treats TikTok's algorithms as a state secret.

Videos promoting Osama bin Laden's 2002 "letter to America"—which justified the 9/11 attack based on U.S. support for Israel and interventions in the Middle East—went viral on TikTok following Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023. With 43% of U.S. adults under 30 saying they regularly get news from TikTok, is it any surprise that young socialists parrot this nonsense?

Socialist Melat Kiros, who beat a 15-term U.S. representative in a Colorado Democratic primary last month, stated that 9/11 was "inevitable" because the U.S. had "destabilized a lot of the Middle East." Are such anti-American views the result of a Chinese social-media influence campaign?

Trump flip-flopped from trying to ban the site in 2020 to giving it a reprieve from the law last year.

Mr. Trump tried to ban TikTok by executive order in August 2020 because of national-security concerns. His order warned that the Chinese Communist Party could use TikTok for "disinformation campaigns" and "to track the locations of federal employees and contractors, build dossiers of personal information for blackmail and conduct corporate espionage."

The White House last week declassified a Federal Bureau of Investigation intelligence report from August 2020 that was based on a "collaborative source." The report said the Chinese government had collected data from U.S. users' TikTok accounts that would allow it to create fraudulent drivers' licenses so Chinese students and immigrants sympathetic to the Communist Party could vote for Joe Biden. The report wasn't verified, but it underscored the risk that Beijing could exploit TikTok user data for nefarious purposes.

A federal court blocked Mr. Trump's executive order, and by 2024 he had changed his tune. He came out against a ban because he said it would help Facebook, which he called an "enemy of the people." He also noted TikTok's popularity: "There are a lot of young kids on TikTok who will go crazy without it." True, because TikTok is like fentanyl for young minds.

Mr. Trump granted TikTok a reprieve, convinced that the platform helped him win the election. He may be right. A study found that TikTok's algorithms favored Republican content during the campaign. Might TikTok engineers have tweaked the algorithms to help Mr. Trump in hope that he would suspend its death sentence?

Mr. Trump charged Vice President JD Vance with brokering a deal to save TikTok through a sale to U.S. investors. The ultimate deal was as lousy as Mr. Vance's memorandum of understanding with Iran. It allowed ByteDance to retain a 19.9% stake in TikTok—the largest of any investor—and control over TikTok's algorithms.

U.S. user data would putatively be housed on U.S. servers, but who can trust this? TikTok had committed to do that in June 2022, but the Justice Department alleged in 2024 that company employees had surreptitiously sent U.S. user data to China in violation of the pledge.

It's no small irony that Mr. Trump's TikTok reprieve has helped socialists like Zohran Mamdani, whose 2025 campaign for New York mayor caught fire on the platform, where his videos received 307 million views. You don't have to be a conspiracy theorist to wonder whether Chinese Communist Party wizards behind the screen abetted his success.

Beijing wants nothing more than to poison American politics by fomenting discord and distrust in its institutions, including its capitalist system. Could the Communist Party be covertly amplifying the rancorous voices like Mr. Mamdani and Tucker Carlson? It deserves investigating.

Social-Media Regulation Doesn't Belong in Court

By Cory L. Andrews

Meta revealed in a court filing this month that California, Colorado, Kentucky and New Jersey are seeking a combined $1.4 trillion in penalties over claims that the company designed its social-media platforms to addict young users and misled the public about their safety. In nominal terms, that's more than five times the 1998 tobacco master settlement of $246 billion (paid out over 25 years) and nearly the company's market cap of roughly $1.6 trillion.

Many will cheer the news. The platforms make easy scapegoats, and parents' concerns are genuine. That many young people are struggling in the pandemic's wake isn't in doubt. Whether social media is the reason—and which features, if any, are to blame—very much is. A courtroom is the worst imaginable place to settle that debate: two sets of paid experts giving speeches to 12 laymen, the edge going to whichever side's client is more sympathetic.

The science behind the latest alarm is far from settled. Psychiatry doesn't recognize social-media addiction as a disorder. The only formally recognized behavioral addiction is gambling. Talk of dopamine and digital addiction is mostly rhetoric dressed as neuroscience. A 2025 meta-analysis found no clinically meaningful link between time spent on social media and teen mental-health outcomes. A "health advisory" from the American Psychological Association calls the technology "not inherently beneficial or harmful."

The $1.4 trillion in demands against Meta comes from the four states' calculations under their consumer-protection laws—provisions addressing unfair or deceptive acts and practices. Penalties are calculated by multiplying the estimated number of violations (tied to the estimated number of affected youth users) by the maximum per violation fines available under each state's consumer-protection statutes.

Yet a different legal theory—older and stranger than consumer protection—is driving the cases with the furthest reach, and it had no part in these suits. More than 1,200 school districts and states like New Mexico and Massachusetts are pressing a far more elastic theory—public nuisance, one of the oldest torts. One such case settled last spring. Rather than let a Kentucky school district's nuisance case reach a jury, all four targeted platforms, including Meta, settled.

For most of its long life, public nuisance was among the dullest legal actions. It was the law of the blocked road and the fouled well—a pig loose on the highway, a tannery poisoning a shared stream, gunpowder stored where it might ignite and level the block. The harm was physical, local and plain.

Then plaintiffs' lawyers got hold of it. Beginning with tobacco, they refitted the dusty doctrine as a battering ram and swung it at guns, lead paint, opioids and oil companies. The trick was to drain it of everything that makes a tort a tort: no defect, no fault, often no real proof that this defendant caused the alleged harm. One court warned that public nuisance would become "a monster that would devour in one gulp the entire law of tort."

State attorneys general and trial lawyers seek to milk Meta. Their success would cost everyone else.

What sets nuisance suits apart is that they seek more than money. They want abatement—a court order to make the alleged nuisance stop. That means asking a judge, guided by a plaintiffs' expert and his abatement plan, to decide how social media should work for hundreds of millions of users. We have a term for rules that bind every American. It isn't "verdict," it's "legislation," and the Constitution guarantees that we can vote out the people authorized to write it.

The iron law of incentives explains why these lawsuits keep happening. A state attorney general announces he is taking on Big Tech at no cost to taxpayers; the work goes to contingency-fee firms that front the expenses and keep a slice of the take. That is how the tobacco settlement moved roughly a quarter-trillion dollars, of which the lawyers kept north of $13 billion. It is less about achieving justice than pursuing a business plan.

It isn't that public nuisance litigators are winning the argument; they are winning settlements by making trial too expensive to risk. But whether social media should be limited, age-gated or redesigned are questions for Congress—answerable at the next election and tested against the Constitution. That is the honest path, and the hard one. A republic isn't supposed to be run by an oligarchy of lawyers.

Judges and lay juries decide cases—whether this company wronged this plaintiff, on the record and before the court. They don't write rules for hundreds of millions. A legislature can summon everyone a rule will touch, balance competing interests and revise the law as the evidence turns. When a court orders the redesign of a product used in every state, the rest of the country gets no vote and no voice. That isn't judging. It is governing—by someone no one authorized to govern, on a question the evidence hasn't yet answered.

Mr. Andrews is general counsel and vice president of litigation at the Washington Legal Foundation.

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Opinion

When the world watched together

No matter which team people cheered for, or where they lived, the TV was on.

Mark O'Connell

DUBLIN I was not at the World Cup. I'm going to play the odds here and say that neither were you. Even though this is apparently the biggest World Cup of all time — more countries represented, more matches played, more fans paying more money for tickets than ever before — almost none of us have been at the World Cup, at least not physically.

Like almost everyone who's been watching (whether casually and fitfully, as in my case, since my country, Ireland, didn't even qualify for the competition, or with the steadfast commitment and maniacal fervor of so many millions of dedicated spectators), I have been watching it on television.

The number of people who attend the World Cup, large and growing though it may be, is nothing compared with the sheer world-buckling biomass of those who watch it on television. According to FIFA's figures, some 1.5 billion people, nearly a fifth of the population of the planet, watched the last World Cup final, in 2022, and the tournament this year seems on track to exceed that number.

So much attention is paid to the business of physically being at the World Cup — the teams that make it there, the fans who travel to support them, the wild and joyful spectacle of multifarious soccer-loving humanity converging on a given place at a given time — that it is easy to overlook the extent to which it is a televised spectacle, perhaps even primarily a televised spectacle.

So too, the photographers whose work appears on this page are not standing by the touchline recording the action with their telephoto lenses in the traditional manner, but rather sitting thousands of miles away capturing the mediated flow of images on their television screens. In doing so, they've made of those images something new and visually singular — whether it's by photographing the TV screen through a bag of water or rendering the pixelated image of a player as a dreamy smear that seems to capture more a fleeting and indistinct memory of the goal than the goal itself.

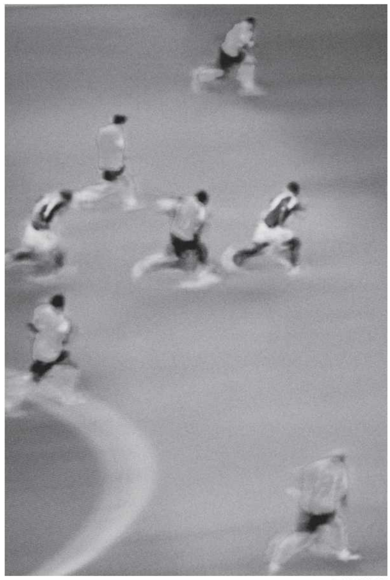
Take, for instance, the photographs posted to Instagram by the Brazilian artist Gabriel Rolim, whose images are wittily mediated: He uses a modified camera made for the Game Boy to take shots of his television, which he converts into animations that are strange, and strangely delightful, like a pixelated thermographic image of a memory of watching the World Cup. Or the Moroccan photographer Karim Ouakkaha's beautifully textured shot of the Egyptian goalkeeper Mostafa Shobeir, sitting crestfallen in defeat, the melancholy digital blear of the image making it seem as though he himself is dissolving along with his team's hopes of progressing.

Or take Jared Soares, a Washington-based artist who prints out shots of televised matches in monochrome on printer paper and then crumples and flattens the paper before rephotographing it. The creases give a startling tactile form to his black and white images of players and, especially, fans in moments of public agony and ecstasy.

The oblique angle of approach used by all these artists comes with a history. In the 1960s, the American photographer Lee Friedlander made a series of photographs called "The Little Screens," which depict hotel rooms with television screens displaying human faces like ghostly apparitions. In the 1970s, as television was becoming more and more luridly omnipresent, the Belgian photographer Harry Gruyaert went further. His series "TV Shots" captured in close-up the distorted, cathodic flare of images on his television set in London. He photographed the televised coverage of the 1972 Munich Olympics, live footage of Apollo flights and broadcasts of the British soap opera "Coronation Street." In its treatment of the screen itself as a photographic subject, "TV Shots" amounted to a gesture of radical postmodernism.

Besides the fleeting moments of soccer that millions of viewers have been watching, these World Cup photos capture something different. In these images, TV screens are not an oppressive, degrading or insinuating presence; they are a means not of erasing or escaping the world but of reaching and being reached by it. Viewed on an Instagram feed on an iPhone, close-up images of television screens appear by comparison to be almost a countercultural utopian space. In a world where everyone experiences his own hyper-individualized flow of images and video and text, minutely optimized for maximum commercial extraction, the World Cup is a rare moment of shared attention.

As the World Cup has gone on, I've become increasingly enthusiastic about the competition. I've been watching with my 13-year-old son, who out of nowhere seems to have developed an interest in, and surprisingly granular knowledge of, the tournament and its players. I've been enjoying the games themselves, but what I've been enjoying even more is the almost anachronistic pleasure of watching it on live TV.



CASPER DE CONINCK

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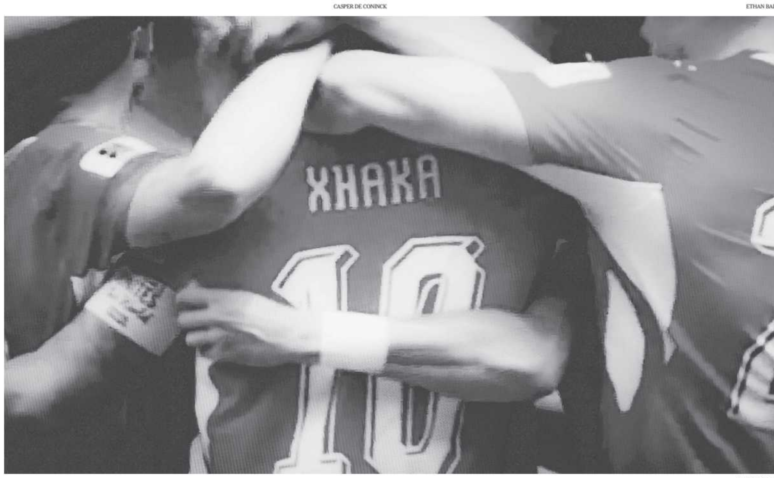


GABRIEL MONNET

My 8-year-old daughter has, for her part, been finding it an absurd inconvenience. Why should she have to stop watching cartoons so we could watch a football match? Because it's happening now, and only now, and we need to watch it not on our phones or on our iPads but on the television, and together.

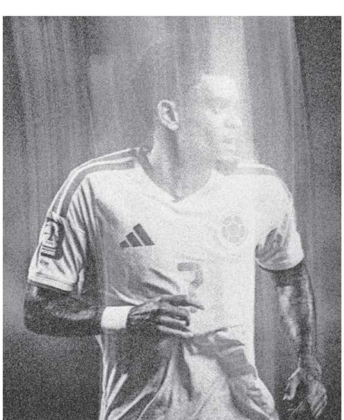
Deep into the second half of the July 15 semifinal between England and Argentina, I texted my friend Rosa, who I knew was watching the match in her house in London. I needed to ask her if she agreed that England's manager, Thomas Tuchel, looks weirdly like the British pop philosopher Alain de Botton.

She texted back to humor my frivolous observation with assent, and, about three seconds later, Argentina scored, and the match fell to pieces for England. She texted me photos of her living room full of crestfallen friends, holding their heads in sorrow or staring at the television with grim and futile resolve.

I felt terrible for them all, but I found the photos oddly cheering — not because I'm Irish and retain a petty postcolonial desire to see England and all who sail in her brought low, but because they were all doing the same thing that my family and I were doing in Dublin, and that countless millions of others in countless other places were doing: watching the World Cup.

For the nearly six weeks of the tournament, all of us, everywhere, have been watching exactly the same things at exactly the same time — the same angles, the same close-ups, the same agonized or ecstatic replays. We have, all of us, in our own various and yet weirdly identical ways, been at the World Cup.

MARK O'CONNELL *is the author of "A Thread of Violence."*



SAM ROGERS

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PEDRO DINIZ

A.I. chatbots that mimic humans are dangerous

Maia Szalavitz
Contributing Writer

I was an early adopter of the internet, joining a friend's so-called bulletin board system in 1990, before social media even existed. Though I loved it, my 24/7 enthusiasm also concerned me. I had been addicted to cocaine and heroin, which I quit in 1988 — so I was well aware of my compulsive tendencies. In a 1996 piece for The Times Magazine, I described how I had to work to control my internet use because "once you start replacing real human contact with cyber-interaction, coming back out of the cave can be quite difficult."

That experience, and my later obsession with social media, left me wary of interacting with artificial intelligence chatbots, which seem likely to be even more addictive.

A recent case against Facebook and YouTube has yielded a multimillion-dollar judgment for claims that social media is harming teens and leading to addiction, depression and thoughts of self-harm. Earlier this year, Google and Character.AI agreed to settle a lawsuit with the family of a 14-year-old boy who died by suicide after communicating with a chatbot; other cases claim that bots have driven psychosis and even mass shootings.

The technology manipulates the parts of our brains that bond us to other people.

Experts have long noted that social media casts its spell primarily by capturing attention. Zak Stein, the founder of the A.I. Psychological Research Coalition, says that chatbots play our heartstrings as well, manipulating the systems that bond us to one another in what he calls attachment hacking. These different lures may require different cures, in terms of both regulation and the actions that people can take to prevent their own compulsive use.

Attention hacking addicts people, in part, by providing varying rewards almost randomly. It's how casinos and social media keep people engaged: by manipulating consumers' experience to make elusive gains seem close. In the brain, this intermittent reinforcement causes massive spikes of dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with desire. Research suggests that about 15 percent of North Americans meet criteria for social media addiction, defined essentially as compulsive use that continues despite negative consequences.

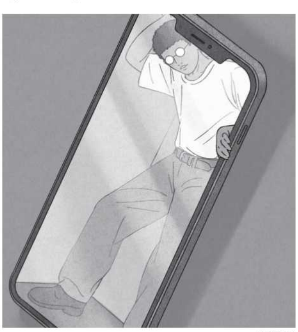
The harms from these technologies may vary as a result. Attention hacking can reduce the ability to focus: Studies suggest that heavy social media use worsens symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children, whether they have the condition or not. Most of us can now attest to the way it drives distraction and impedes concentration.

Altering our attachments, however, may be even more harmful. Humans have never previously faced a technology that can simulate empathy without limits: Unlike people, chatbots are always available and always supportive, and never get tired or impatient. This artificial ease might lead users to start replacing real social bonds with artificial ones, increasing alienation and loneliness. We are biologically dependent on close relationships and typically require human touch for stress relief starting in infancy. Anything that reduces real-world connections can increase risk for both mental and physical illnesses, from depression and addictions to heart attacks and stroke.

Research also shows that chatbots are nearly 50 percent more likely to affirm users' perspectives than people are, even when the user professes something inaccurate or unethical. If someone is already engaging in harmful or antisocial behavior, this tendency could make that worse.

What can we do? As with any other potentially dangerous consumer product, we need safety standards. To start, we need stricter rules about social media for children. Apps that use infinite scrolling, autoplay videos, in-game gambling and other techniques that manipulate intermittent reinforcement should be prohibited for children and teens — or at the very least, those features should be disabled for them or put under parental control. Last month, Britain joined Australia in declaring a ban on a range of social media platforms for kids under 16, which is expected to take effect early next year. China has gone even further, and has recently issued new rules barring service providers from offering A.I. virtual companions to minors.

U.S. regulators need to catch up and figure out which measures will best reduce harm. They should address the growing concern that simulating human relationships without limits makes chatbots particularly addictive. Pat Pataranutaporn, an assistant professor of media arts and sciences at M.I.T., worries about the future of A.I. "Because A.I. can generate almost anything — media, text, video, virtual humans, different modalities — it can become the entire universe that consumes you," he said.



LUCAS BURTIN

One potential solution is to ban chatbots that cross contexts, such as a therapy bot that goes beyond the bounds of a human therapist, by engaging romantically with its user. A math teacher chatbot would be similarly restricted to math and could be used only during school or homework hours.

Interfaces that give the impression that chatbots are human and actively thinking, like the " . . . " that appears on phones when someone else is writing a reply, could be prohibited or highly limited. We need to be creative to maximize benefit, while reducing risk.

I'm not aware of any brain scan studies published so far that show how attachment hacking affects the brain's reward systems. We do know that all addictions — whether to cocaine, gambling or shopping — seem to generate craving and compulsion via dopamine. But some addictions, such as opioid addiction, have an extra hook. Heroin and similar drugs mimic the brain's natural opioids, which are responsible for the feelings of warmth, safety and love we get from our closest relationships. I fear that by creating the illusion of intimacy, A.I. companions might engage this more primal sense of need.

In the meantime, to protect my own brain, I will avoid A.I. chatbots that don't have guardrails and boundaries. And I would recommend that others, especially parents making decisions for their children, do the same.

MAIA SZALAVITZ *is the author of "Undoing Drugs: How Harm Reduction Is Changing the Future of Drugs and Addiction.*

The Emmys snubbed 'The Boys'

David Colman

ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY AMAZON STUDIOS

A raft of intelligent, watchable, enjoyable shows were nominated this month for the Emmy Award for outstanding drama series, the TV version of the best picture Oscar. Each of these prestige TV shows made tart references to our current moment. "The Pitt" dealt with ICE in the E.R. "Slow Horses" and "The Diplomat" dramatized the dangers of cynical political expedience. "The Gilded Age" and "Paradise" produced two very different takes on oligarch-itecture. "Your Friends & Neighbors" wallowed in larcenous suburban finance dads in midlife crisis, while "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms" jousted with how to transcend one's "low birth." The only show to truly depart from dramatic realism was "Pluribus," a sci-fi show about a space virus that made virtually all humans highly agreeable zombies, making you wonder if this is what life will be like living in a world ruled by A.I. agents.

But in the end, none of them actually tried to capture the grand farce of a moment we're in. They didn't even come close. Each of them is too polite, too nuanced, too, in the end, moderate — centrist, even.

I expect more from my high-end pop culture than this.

Centrism, in all its norm-respecting, common-ground-finding glory, is having a rough go of it lately. America's president does what he wants, where and when and to whomever he wants, and the cowed and craven set of politicians who make up his flock just go along for the ride. It seems more and more as if we're living in a burn-it-all-down age of greed, mayhem and corruption.

You might never know this from watching prestige TV.

There was one show, however, that hit this head-on — and it's not "Industry," HBO's finance-and-cocaine drama that was also snubbed by the Emmys this year. It's Amazon Prime's "The Boys." The superhero spoof, which ended its five-season run this May, received not a single Emmy nomination in a major award category. Despite the fact that it dared to land savage, serious and entertaining punches about everything warped in American culture — corporate greed, celebrity worship, moral hypocrisy and how they all fit together.

It did get nominated for best dramatic series once, for its second season, in 2020. It didn't win, and hasn't been nominated since. What are the Emmy voters afraid of?

For those unfamiliar, "The Boys" is set in an alt-present-day United States, where superheroes ("supes") are real and abundant. But instead of renegades valiantly saving the world from doomsday plots, they're more like substance-abusing superinfluencers: entitled, narcissistic pursuers of fame whose high-profile "saves" are frequently stage-managed photo ops. They often offhandedly end up killing bystanders. The supes — especially the elite supe group known as "The Seven," a parody of DC's Justice League — are controlled, weaponized and monetized by the company that came up with the chemical to create them: Vought International, a corporate octopus whose business interests range from Disney-style entertainment to pharmaceuticals to military contracts.

The gullible public laps up all the supe mythology — especially that of Homelander, the all-American, charismatic leader of the Seven whose authoritarian megalomania drives him to take over the Oval Office, having naysayers locked up in detention camps (or just laser-visioning them in half) along the way.

We're living in an age of mayhem. You'd never know it from prestige TV.

The show premiered in 2019. Critics and audiences loved it. In 2020, it became the first TV series outside Netflix to crack Nielsen's weekly top 10 list of most-watched movies and series — the same year it earned that Emmy nomination. (A central story line that season was about Vought's Nazi-era origins, which probably gave it gravitas.) In 2024, it hit No. 1.

Maybe as time went on, it started to feel, from an Emmys perspective, just too extra. It's certainly over the top. There's blood, gore and profanity galore. There's even an evil X-rated Russian supe named Love Sausage who is featured in an episode titled "Herogasm."

But is tastefulness where TV should draw the line — when reality threw that line in the shredder a while ago? Shouldn't we be open to letting something else take a whack at it? This vulgar world of corporate-branded superheroes isn't just an ironic conceit; it's a brilliant, subversive lampooning of the West's politically divided, social-media-addicted, celebrity-hypnotized societies — and, in the words of the "Boys" showrunner Eric Kripke, of the "powerful and selfish people using social media to intentionally tear people apart for their own selfish interests."

It may not be subtle. But neither is the era we live in. The Shakespearean scramble of "House of Cards" or "Succession" (both repeat Emmy winners for outstanding drama series) seems quaint by comparison with what we get on newsfeeds every day.

It's also why the crudely framed, precisely targeted assaults of "South Park" can still feel empowering, and why New York Times readers recently voted "Idiocracy" (2006) the film that most captures America. Real violence isn't a good choice for anyone. But imagined violence, delivered with brutal blasts of satire, can provide a blessed sense of retribution, empowerment and relief in a moment when those feelings are in short supply.

Amid all the mayhem, there is another lesson the show teaches.

You might wonder why a show that focuses on the superheroes isn't called "The Supes," but that's really the point here. The characters putting the plot into action aren't the supes, but "the boys," the four men, and eventually two women, who commit themselves to destroying the company and the supes who are making their world a living hell. Even if some have superpowers, they don't know what they're doing. They take insane chances. They fail over and over and keep getting outsmarted by Vought — until they don't. The show's real heroes, working outside the official system, pursue their impossible task no matter how the deck is stacked against them. And that is how they win.

DAVID COLMAN *has been a contributor to The New York Times since 1996.*

Trump pits intelligence against democracy

CALABRESI, FROM PAGE 1

But Mr. Trump doesn't use the intelligence community for its designated purpose — to be a source of information that is contextualized and interpreted by professionals who know what raw intelligence material means. He increasingly uses it as another tool in his relentless campaign to spread misinformation.

To those who want to see the intelligence community's work put to its best use, Mr. Trump's misuse of its product is doubly frustrating because, in general, the nation's leaders should be more willing to release government secrets. In the run-up to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration declassified material in an attempt to deter Vladimir Putin's attack and to "pre-bunk" his false claim that Ukraine was plotting to attack pro-Russia civilians. Mr. Putin still invaded, but his pretext was obliterated and the global reaction severe. This tactic worked so well that the U.S. government began using it to fight autocrats all over the globe, regularly declassifying information that undercut their lies. This had the added benefit of building confidence in America's intelligence agencies.

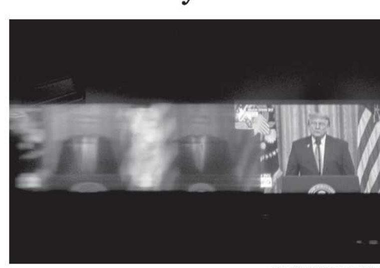
But Mr. Trump has taken declassification in a different direction. Last year, his first director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, declassified in bulk the records on the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. This year, the Defense Department declassified U.F.O. records. The Biden administration established processes to ensure sources and methods were protected and to protect against political misuse of intelligence; the Trump administration has not said what — if any — system it used for its bulk declassification.

Releasing old files on events that occurred over a half-century ago is one thing. The Trump administration has also increasingly used declassification and intelligence to advance a range of claims — on the purported uses of Ukrainian biolabs or the curious sickening of American diplomats known as Havana syndrome. Those releases were exploited by conspiracy theorists as well as the Russians and other U.S. adversaries, who used the material in their propaganda. One former intelligence official who worked in the first Trump White House likened it to throwing red meat to voters on the fringe of American politics.

Election experts across the country assert that voting is secure, free and fair.

Then came Mr. Trump's Thursday speech.

Responsible declassification can advance transparency and build trust. The exploitation of secrets for political purposes undermines relationships with allies and partners, who remember how the administration of George W. Bush misused intelligence on "weapons of mass destruction" that proved to be nonexistent to justify the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq. Mr. Trump's false claim on Thursday that a deep state plot has covered up information about foreign meddling in U.S. elections will have a chilling effect on intelligence analysts who are supposed to explain responsibly to decision makers what raw snippets of intelligence could mean. "That is generational damage to the intelligence agencies that are supposed to keep us safe and give the president decision advantage in the world," said Ms. Curlee.



JOSEPH RUSHMORE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The president is not exceeding his legal authority. He is nevertheless abusing his powers. "He can declassify anything he wants," said Mark Zaid, a national security lawyer. "But what's his motivation for doing it? Is he declassifying information for his own personal gain or ego and it's actually harming national security?"

Mr. Trump's Thursday intelligence gambit probably won't shift the situation on Capitol Hill, where a bill to overhaul elections, which would tilt the midterms in Republicans' favor, is stalled. Republicans don't have the votes in the Senate to pass it, and they won't do away with the filibuster to overcome the opposition.

But the president's misuse of secrets demoralizes and discredits American intelligence, undermines allies' faith in the United States and, perhaps most worryingly, might still find an audience at home. Some of the same Trump allies who ginned up theories about election rigging ahead of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol are doing the same now, calling for a state of emergency, the illegal deployment of federal forces to polling stations and the unconstitutional nationalization of elections. Mr. Trump stopped short of endorsing such moves on Thursday. He didn't have to in January 2021, either.

MASSIMO CALABRESI *is an editor at large in Opinion.*

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The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

It's time for Europe to embrace air conditioning

More frequent hot summers will harm productivity and claim lives

Paris at 40.9C in June, Berlin at 39.9C, Vienna at 40C. Even as big European cities have wilted in record temperatures, a technology that can make the heat more bearable — air conditioning — has somehow been entangled in culture wars.

In Germany, a political squabble has been rekindled over heat pumps, which can supply warming in winter and cooling in summer. Some on the left in France have attacked large-scale air-conditioning plans, alluding to the increased emission risks.

Much of Europe has relatively little air conditioning, but not for ideological reasons: until now, it hasn't been needed. Europe is the fastest-warming continent, and temperatures now average 2.4C higher than in the preindustrial period. The past few years have been particularly hot, and notably so in the historically cooler north. For reasons of comfort, productivity and mortality, Europe needs to get comfortable with the technology — and invest in its widespread adoption.

This year's heat will be repeated in the years to come as the world remains dependent on burning fossil fuels, by far the largest contributor to global warming. It is exacerbated by atmospheric conditions that have created a European "heat dome" that has fuelled heatwaves and shattered records. As societies redouble efforts to combat climate change, they also need to accelerate efforts to adapt to its effects. Aircon is a crucial part of this strategy.

The benefits of air conditioning extend beyond its evident creature comforts. From Singapore to America's sunbelt cities, air conditioning has enabled enormous economic growth in places that were previously less liveable. Studies show that very high temperatures make workers less productive. Moreover, these machines save lives: each year heat kills thousands of Europeans, especially the elderly, while comparable climates in the US show much lower death rates. Europeans would be wise to study the examples of their peers.

Widespread aircon adoption will not be easy or cheap. In the decades to come, climate adaptation will cost hundreds of billions of dollars. But steps can be taken to ameliorate the crisis.

Business owners could lead by example to keep their workers cool and productive. Governments ought to start by prioritising the most vulnerable: hospitals, schools and nursing homes — curbing unnecessary deaths and avoiding disruption to schooling are paramount. Countries could also make regulatory changes that cost nothing but allow homeowners and businesses to add more AC and retrofit older buildings.

Opponents say air conditioning exacerbates climate change, but that depends on which models are used and where the electricity comes from. Air conditioning that does not use refrigerants, a category of harmful greenhouse gases, should be prioritised.

> As countries redouble efforts to combat climate change, they also need to accelerate efforts to adapt to its effects

And in terms of electricity, Europe already has a grid that is remarkably clean relative to peers — any additional power for AC systems need not come from fossil fuels. Europe is already building more wind and solar, but hot summers put further pressure on European governments to encourage the development of the clean energy sector. These investments will also have the benefit of ensuring that high energy prices will not climb higher still.

Air conditioning is only one of many climate adaptation efforts that will be needed in the years to come. More sustainable and greener cities would also do much to mitigate the effects of extreme heat. But as excess deaths from high temperatures make clear, air conditioning is not optional for Europe, but a necessity.

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Society

Why 'rightwing' is no longer such a dirty word

Ben Hickey

Jemima Kelly

At a recent comedy show in London, I experienced a serious bout of the second-hand cringe. A millennial comedian had decided to base her entire 10-minute set around a joke that very few people in the predominantly Gen-Z audience seemed to find amusing. The punchline? That someone she had thought she might become friends with had turned out to be — brace yourselves — slightly rightwing!

It started badly and got worse from there. First, she "confessed" she sometimes works a few days at a "corporation" (believing the word itself would elicit a reaction). Next, she told us about a girl she'd met at said corporation who was mixed race, seemed really cool and wanted to go to the pub at lunch (all markers of being on the left, we were to assume). But one day they had returned from their boozy lunch to find some lefty protesters outside the office and — shock, horror — rather than siding with them, this girl had had the temerity to take the side of the people paying her wages!

> While past Tory leaders talked about 'common-sense politics', Badenoch shows no such shyness

"Whoa, you sound a bit rightwing!" the comedian had told her as she made a case for the company's position. "I *am* a bit rightwing," the girl replied. The comedian paused after telling us this, waiting for some laughs or gasps. Silence. "I mean, even rightwing people don't actually call themselves rightwing!" she spluttered. A couple of tepid chuckles from a group of middle-aged men in the middle of the room. Blank young faces at the front. Awkward.

The extent to which young people — and men in particular — have embraced rightwing ideas can be overstated. The young still tend to be more progressive than any other group in society: a recent study of election data found that 18- to 25-year-old males were less likely to vote for rightwing parties than any other age group of men. So I don't mean to suggest that the student-heavy audience was in any way right-leaning and might have taken personal offence.

It's just that they didn't seem to get the joke. Outside some particularly homogeneous liberal circles — including the comedy circuit and Bluesky, the social media platform for liberal X-iles — explicitly describing yourself as rightwing doesn't carry the stigma it used to.

Take opposition leader Kemi Badenoch: while previous Tory leaders tended to talk euphemistically about "common-sense politics" or "traditional family values", Badenoch shows no such shyness. Instead she describes her policies as "firmly on the right". Given the threat from parties to the right of hers — notably Reform UK and, even further along the spectrum, Elon Musk's favourite Restore Britain — it is politically expedient for her to do so. But even in Badenoch's case, there is more to it than that. "Rightwing" no longer seems to be quite the dirty word it once was.

What's going on? Part of the answer is linguistic inflation and the crying wolf effect. When words like "Nazi" and "fascist" are thrown around casually, the idea of being merely rightwing becomes more neutral. Another such term is the "hard right": a study from King's College earlier this year found it had proliferated across the British media since 2022, used to describe parties with "vastly different ideological profiles and degrees of extremism".

Also, the information ecosystem has changed a lot over the past decade and young people are being exposed to a much broader range of voices and views via platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Popular podcasts such as *The Joe Rogan Experience* and *The Diary of a CEO* — both of whose audiences are mainly aged 18-34, according to the latest data — regularly have openly rightwing and even quite radical guests of the kind that often are excluded by the mainstream media.

Another contributing factor might be the growing rightwing coalition between the UK and the US, where identifying as rightwing, or "conservative", has long been more common. This week, the first ever UK version of the Conservative Political Action Conference was held in London, chaired by our fleeting 49-day prime minister and Donald Trump sycophant Liz Truss (backed, of course, by a British bitcoin lobby group).

Much doom and gloom is uttered about the state of the youth, particularly when it comes to the way they spend their time online. But it's surely no bad thing that the idea of accidentally befriending someone with different political views no longer seems outrageous or hilarious. That said, the fact there is no longer such a taboo associated with the right does not mean we should spend less time scrutinising some of its more egregious ideas — a point perhaps worth making to the "just asking questions", Rogan-led bro-caster crowd.

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Judge candidates by their policies, not their platforms

Your leader rightly calls Donald Trump's "communist menace" warning against Democrats overblown scaremongering. But your own diagnosis of the Democratic socialist surge deserves similar scrutiny (FT View, July 14).

American candidates run on their own programmes, not on party platforms. Unlike parliamentary party manifestos, party platforms here are broad coalition documents rather than governing contracts. Republican officeholders in Texas are not judged by the state's Republican Party platform's calls to abolish the Federal Reserve or reverse marriage equality. Nor should Democratic socialist candidates be judged by every aspiration contained in the Democratic Socialists of America's platform. Voters choose among candidates' proposals, not resolutions adopted by party activists.

That distinction matters. Zohran Mamdani did not campaign on the DSA's call to "collectively own the key economic drivers" of the economy. He ran on building housing, lowering transportation costs, expanding childcare and improving affordability. Whether those proposals are wise is a separate question. But they are considerably more narrow than the DSA's platform and should be judged on their own merits.

The same standard should apply to the party these candidates are running against. The editorial is surely right that these victories may redefine the Democratic Party — but perhaps not in the way it suggests. The Democratic establishment has now lost two of the past three presidential elections to Donald Trump and controls neither congressional chamber. The party's favourability has only recently recovered from a historic low. That DSA-backed candidates are defeating establishment incumbents may say at least as much about dissatisfaction with the party's existing leadership as any ideological conversion to "socialism".

The editorial cites opposition to AI data-centre development as evidence of Democratic radicalism. Yet Greg Abbott, Texas's Maga governor, has recently proposed banning new AI data centres in rural neighbourhoods, shielding ratepayers from their costs and ending their tax incentives. That is not democratic socialism; it is populism crossing party lines.

Whichever governing philosophy ultimately prevails, neither party's establishment can assume that frustrated voters are waiting patiently for yesterday's political formula.

Brian James Gross
Austin, Texas, US

Some jobs are always going to need people

Oren Cass is right to argue that immigration should never become a substitute for investment in housing, infrastructure, skills or productivity. But his article (Opinion, July 11) overlooks an important reality: many of the sectors under the greatest labour pressure cannot be automated away.

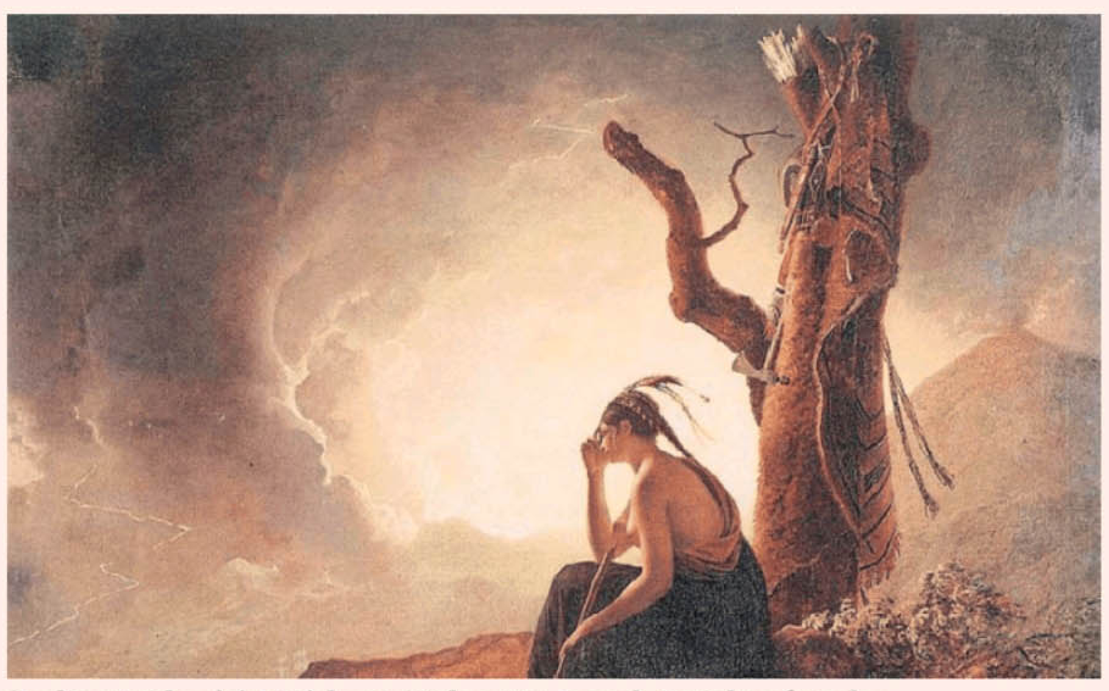
Childcare, healthcare, social care and agriculture all depend on people. Productivity gains have limits where human relationships are the point.

My nephew's first word was *te amo*, learnt from the Brazilian childcare professionals who care for him while both his parents are at work. That small moment illustrates that immigration is not simply about boosting GDP or filling vacancies. It is about the people who enable the rest of society to function every day.

The question is not whether immigration creates challenges — it clearly does — but whether ageing societies can realistically meet their labour needs without it. Innovation can make a factory more productive. It cannot comfort a frightened child, care for an elderly parent or harvest strawberries that need picking today.

The answer is not unchecked immigration, nor is it pretending that technology can replace every worker. It is combining sensible immigration with long-overdue investment in productivity and public services. In many of the jobs that hold society together, people are not a temporary substitute for technology — they are the point.

David Deeley
Dublin, Ireland



'Indian Widow' (1785) by British artist Joseph Wright of Derby

America's first peoples deserve remembering

I read your leader with interest but was utterly dismayed to find no reference to Native Americans in it ("An American birthday worth celebrating", FT View, July 4).

These people have suffered terribly at the hands of European settlers. Countless Native Americans died through warfare, massacres, forced displacement, starvation and disease as the US expanded westwards. The American bison — plains tribes' principal source of food and livelihood — were slaughtered in the millions, partly to deprive tribes of their main food source and weaken their resistance. They were sometimes even shot from passing trains, contributing to the species' near-extinction. For me the marvellous painting 'Indian Widow' (1785) by Joseph Wright of Derby captures it all. A Native American woman sits slumped in despair beside a blasted tree trunk against a setting sun. Later came George Catlin's wonderful paintings of Native Americans and their culture — including 'Wounded Buffalo, Strewing His Blood over the Prairies' (1832-33) — some of which were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2013.

It is to be hoped that the celebrations will include a national apology to the Native Americans. I long to see a Native American as president.

Thelma Thompson
Church Stretton, Shropshire, UK

No 10 North must learn from Wilson's DEA

I hope that those establishing Andy Burnham's new No 10 North have some familiarity with Harold Wilson's ill-fated 1960s growth body, the Department for Economic Affairs (Report, July 9).

Instead of reporting directly to the PM (as did its French 1960s equivalent), the DEA reported to first secretary of state George Brown (in effect Wilson's deputy PM). In the words of Sir Douglas Wass, former Treasury permanent secretary: "All the operational tools of economic management were in the Treasury . . . The DEA did not have departmental responsibility for anything [and] was left beached studying the long-term problems of the British economy."

Avoiding the emasculated fate of the DEA means that No 10 North should report to the PM; be led by a business-dominated board and chair (not unlike the former regional development agencies); have a substantial flexible budget, perhaps £20bn a year; and be staffed mainly by "doers" from business, local government and universities, not just Whitehall civil servants.

I'd find that budget by top slicing all the Whitehall departments.

Professor Ian Wray FAcSS
Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

A better way to prepare students for work

Jamie John's report on why young people are souring on AI (Report, June 1) vividly captures the "arms race" destabilising the entry-level labour market. While graduates turn to chatbots to spam hundreds of employers in a matter of weeks, corporate recruitment relies on automated screening to filter the deluge.

It is difficult to see how candidates believe this "spray and pray" strategy will succeed. Having managed hiring teams before entering academia, I know it is entirely counter-productive. Hiring is a tournament, not a lottery where buying more tickets increases the chance of winning; success requires serious, targeted effort in each individual application. In each job opening, there is only one winner, and being the second-best candidate in 100 applications still leaves a graduate with zero offers. Automated screening may occasionally filter out strong applicants, but generic, AI-spammed applications are always eliminated in the first round.

Students adopting this strategy are not strictly to be blamed. Career literacy has rarely been a core component at any level of education, partly due to an enduring academic ideology that separates intellectual purity from corporate culture. Yet the profound anxiety students face when left to navigate this automated environment is real, and increasingly acute. Relegating employability to the margins of higher education fails to take total student wellbeing into account. We need a fundamental cultural shift that embeds career literacy as a core pastoral duty and an essential option for every student.

Leo Shek
Lecturer in Economics and Maths Education, Centre for International Education and Languages, King's College London, London WC2, UK

Demand for nuclear is not the same as delivery

Kris Singh says the world has become rational about nuclear. However, he's only half right (The CEO, Work & Careers, July 6). The AI boom has created huge demand for power, giving investors renewed confidence in nuclear. But that's a demand story, not a delivery story.

Holtec's own flagship project makes the point. The Palisades restart has already slipped, delayed by the engineering and regulatory challenges of reviving a 50-year-old plant. If the people building these reactors can't hit their own timelines, businesses shouldn't plan around new nuclear arriving on schedule either.

The same applies in Britain, where nuclear output fell to its lowest level in decades last year, with gas filling much of the gap. Wall Street enthusiasm does not change that reality. That gap between good news and ready supply is where businesses get caught out, delaying contracts or taking on risk in the hope that cheaper, cleaner power is close. It isn't, not yet.

Good energy advice means judging the market as it is, not as investors hope it will be.

John Haw
Chair, Energy Consultants Association, Newbury, UK

If Wagner had chosen Rio

Richard Fairman's article "Will Bayreuth ever outgrow Wagner?" (Arts, July 9) notes that Tchaikovsky and Kaiser Wilhelm I attended the 1876 opening of the Festspielhaus. Less well known is that Brazil's emperor Pedro II was there too.

Two decades earlier Pedro II had invited Wagner to settle in Brazil under his patronage, an offer he came close to accepting. Wagner even intended *Tristan und Isolde* to premiere in Rio de Janeiro. Had Wagner accepted, there might have been no Bayreuth festival and many of its later controversies might never have arisen.

The Wagner festival in Rio would have been so much more pleasant. The food is better, the surroundings more enchanting, the people more polite and the beaches unmatched. Moreover, Katharina Wagner could well have become the contemporary girl from Ipanema.

Héctor Eduardo Luisi
Bethesda, Maryland, US

Correction

- Eleanor Lightbody is CEO of Luminance, which develops AI for the legal profession, not a founder as wrongly stated in an article on July 17.

Opinion

Burnham needs to remember the first rule of government

ECONOMICS

Martin Wolf

Dear Mr Burnham,

Congratulations on becoming prime minister. As you get settled into No 10 Downing Street, let me remind you of Barack Obama's encapsulation of good policy: "Don't do stupid stuff" (though what he said was rather more pungent). A brief study of the fate of your predecessors will suggest that doing "stupid stuff" is often the source of the problem. So, to put the point simply, avoid really big mistakes.

The biggest mistake of all would be to imagine the country enjoys a free fiscal lunch. In fact, it only has hard choices. These have to be faced, not because fiscal stability is a great aim in itself, but because it is a necessary condition for achieving all the things that matter.

As the latest IMF Country Report on the UK (published last week) notes, "Since 2022, UK gilt yields — particularly at long maturities — have risen and moved above G7 peers. Elevated long-term yields increase sovereign borrowing costs and can transmit to financial conditions more broadly, with implications for fiscal sustainability and financial stability." This is IMF-speak for "Be careful — investors do not have much confidence in your country."

On July 16, the yield on 10-year gilts was close to 5 per cent, against 4.6 per cent in the US, 4 per cent in Italy and 3.1 per cent in Germany. Assume that the UK hits its inflation target of 2 per cent: this implies a real interest rate of around 3 per cent, which is more than double the IMF's forecast rate of economic growth up to 2031. If the UK government created big primary fiscal deficits (before interest), which then added to its already costly long-term debt, the dynamics would be dangerous.

Why are UK bonds costlier than those of any other G7 country? The IMF breaks the yields into two components: the expected path of short-term interest rates and the "term premium". The former is driven by views on inflation, fiscal policy and other macroeconomic features: UK inflation is relatively high, for example. The latter is driven mainly by perceptions of relative riskiness. The IMF notes that "market feedback suggests that the September 2022 gilt market turmoil marked a structural shift in the fragility of the gilt market." Liz

> The biggest mistake would be to imagine Britain enjoys a free fiscal lunch. It only has hard choices

Truss casts a long shadow. The IMF also notes changes in the investor base, with a reduction in holdings by pension funds and an increase in holdings by flighty hedge funds.

The bottom line is that a country with a low national savings rate and a significant structural current account deficit, which is also viewed as somewhat politically unstable, cannot afford to put its fiscal credibility at risk.

In my view, the UK needs to be on a fiscal path that credibly *lowers* the trajectory of public sector net debt relative to GDP. It also needs to improve the quality of the public sector balance sheet. What makes achieving this both more important and even more difficult is the pressure for higher public spending that comes from existing commitments and the ageing of the population.

Thus, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, between 2024-25 and 2050-51, spending will rise by 6.8 per cent of GDP, just for these reasons: 3 percentage points on health; 1.8 percentage points on defence; 1.2 percentage points on climate-related spending (which is surely now inevitable); 1 percentage point on pensions; and an offsetting 0.2 percentage point fall for education.

You have to put forward a credible plan for managing the public finances in the medium- to long-term. The ideal way to do so would be to focus the autumn Budget on both spending and revenue. A big question here is how far you will feel bound by the decisions made under your predecessor. Ideally, you should not. Instead, you should make some painful decisions on spending and taxation. But if you are to succeed, both must be set in the framework of a wider programme of reform that would plausibly strengthen incentives for work, innovation and investment, raise national savings, improve prospects for growth and also be seen as fairer. There is no way of doing this, in my view, that does not include substantial reform of taxation and spending.

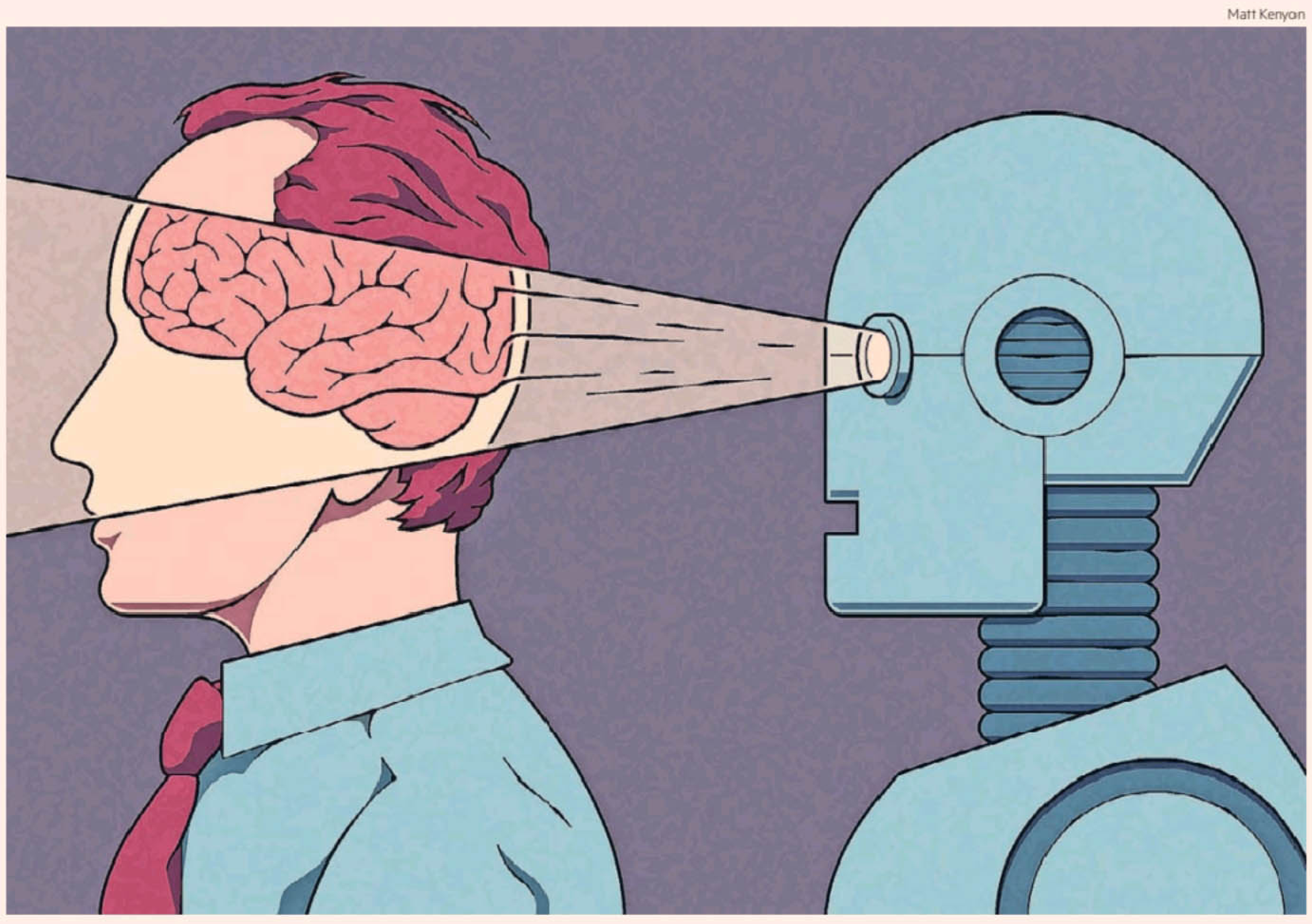
It is, no doubt, rather naive to expect a plan that builds on the foundation of stability and goes on to deliver coherent reform, particularly when this parliament has no more than three years. But the previous government has started some good things — planning reform, for example. With some things you desire added and a willingness to reform tax and spending, you could still do a great deal.

But, above all, do not forget the UK's fiscal credibility. This, as we know too well, can be ruined in a very few days.

Yours, Martin Wolf

martin.wolf@ft.com

How training AI gives some workers an edge



Matt Kenyon

EMPLOYMENT

Sarah O'Connor

In the early 20th century, a gifted engineer called Frederick Winslow Taylor embarked on an ambitious task: to extract knowledge from inside the heads of workers on America's factory floors.

In the eyes of Taylor, who would go on to become one of the world's first management consultants, factory workers possessed a "mass of rule-of-thumb or traditional knowledge" which had been "handed down from man to man by word of mouth" or "almost unconsciously learnt through personal observation". Taylor thought it was about time this knowledge was "codified or systematically analysed or described". To that end, he sent managers with stopwatches and notebooks on to shop floors to observe, time and record every stage of every job.

More than a century later, employers of white-collar professionals are beginning to confront a similar challenge. It is becoming increasingly clear that the knowledge required to make AI models genuinely powerful in a swath of workplaces is currently locked inside employees' heads.

This isn't true in every workplace. AI models have transformed the software profession, for example, because the task of writing code is testable and rules-based and there were vast reams of training data publicly available, thanks to online forums like Stack Overflow.

But for many other jobs, that sort of data just does not exist on the web. Indeed, some subtle but important skills are very hard to codify at all, which is why they are often learnt through experience and osmosis. This sort of tacit knowledge was famously summed up by the scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi with the phrase: "we can know more than we can tell".

As a result, general-purpose AI models are simply not very good at many specific tasks which require both domain and institutional knowledge. Investment firm Bridgewater Associates recently experimented, for example, with using LLMs to do something their human professionals do all the time: parsing reams of news stories and financial documents for information that might be relevant to their investment decisions. While this could be a useful timesaver, Bridgewater found that variants of Gemini, Claude and GPT only tended to get it right about 50 per cent of the time.

Writing better prompts didn't work either — something that wouldn't have surprised Polanyi. "An explicit prompt can only convey the intuition an expert is able to put into words, while the judgments that matter most are often the hardest to articulate," the Bridgewater team wrote.

Instead, they used their own experts and data to help to fine-tune a smaller, cheaper model, so that "rather than contorting the expert's intuition into a static prompt", they trained the model to "develop its own judgment". This bespoke model achieved about 85 per cent accuracy — a vast improvement.

The same story can be seen in other sectors, too. When Ford rehired veteran engineers because its automated quality systems weren't performing well enough, many saw it as a victory of humans over machines. But the "grey beards" weren't there to replace the machines — they were there to train them to get better.

Getting your employees to train bespoke AI systems requires their consent and active collaboration. You can't just send people with stopwatches on to the factory floor, as Taylor once did. Which raises the question: is it in employees' interests to collaborate? What would they stand to gain or lose?

> Knowledge required to make models genuinely powerful is still locked inside employees' heads

On the positive side, workers might gain the ability to shape AI tools, so that they are genuinely useful to them in their work. If these tools help to boost productivity or unlock new markets for the company, that might lead to more interesting roles, more new models to train, new skills to learn and higher pay.

On the other hand, workers might fear that if they download their hard-won tacit knowledge into an AI model, their employer will use that system to replace them. Isn't it safer to get your employer to continue to pay you by the hour to access what is inside your head?

History suggests there could be more subtle dangers, too. Taylor's knowledge grab, for example, was really a power grab. Under his new system of "scientific management", every worker was told "not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time to be allowed for doing it". Workers hated this loss of autonomy and discretion. Strikes began to break out in workplaces where Taylor's methods were introduced.

If the next phase of AI does involve companies fine-tuning their systems and models with the help of employees, there will be two implications. The first is that many workers — those who have had time to develop tacit knowledge about hard-to-codify jobs — are going to find themselves with a lot more leverage in the next few years than they might expect. Indeed, the most tech-savvy people in the trade union movement have already clocked this and are discussing how to make the most of it.

The second implication is that workplaces characterised by an atmosphere of mistrust are going to struggle. So too are those companies in which workers do not believe they will secure a share of any AI-powered gains.

"Workplace relations" is one of those dreary terms that usually sends the eyelids drooping. "Industrial relations" is even worse. But they might just prove key to the next phase of the AI race.

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India's rupee problem has been misdiagnosed

Arvind Subramanian

When the rupee fell sharply in the wake of the Iran war-induced energy shock, India's policymakers concluded that the economy's fundamentals were sound, the problem was temporary and foreign-exchange related, and the best response was to attract financing rather than make policy changes.

Accordingly, in June the Reserve Bank of India announced a scheme to guarantee favourable dollar returns for foreign investors, especially the diaspora, with the aim of attracting \$50bn-\$70bn by September. But now, after some initial enthusiasm, the rupee is once again under pressure amid anxiety that the target may not be met. Why so?

The answer may be a misdiagnosis of the rupee's problem. Rather than being shortlived and related to foreign exchange, it could reflect structural challenges for macroeconomic stability and growth.

First, despite the Modi government's commendable push on renewables, India's energy dependence is unusually high, which makes it vulnerable to shocks. The country's net energy imports amount to about 35 per cent of overall needs compared to about 20 per cent for China.

Compounding this is a longstanding failure to price energy at market levels, encouraging overconsumption. The distortion extends beyond fuel. In the case of fertilisers, where production relies on natural gas, prices are fixed so the subsidy varies between 70 and 80 per cent depending on global prices.

For electricity, the subsidy bill of about 1-1.5 per cent of GDP is paid by state governments, with farmers and households receiving subsidies of 90 and 45 per cent of costs respectively.

The fact is that more than 60 per cent of energy subsidies benefit the middle class and the rich. India does have the capacity to pay subsidies directly to those who need them most, which would allow prices to be rationalised. But neither the central nor state governments have dared to make this change.

Recent rupee turmoil may also reflect structural challenges to growth. The promise of AI and rate rises in the US have reduced flows to emerging markets as global investors rebalance their portfolios towards America. But even in the year before the Iran war, the rupee was under pressure despite heavy intervention by the RBI and actual and projected growth of over 6.5 per cent.

> Currency weakness could reflect structural challenges for macroeconomic stability and growth

Concerns about growth are reflected in weak corporate investment. This has steadily shrunk and is now at just over half its peak of the boom years in the 2000s.

This is a puzzle because the obvious drivers of investment appear strong: macroeconomic stability, a sound financial system, rapid growth in infrastructure and a government pursuing reforms. It rationalised tax and labour laws and corrected its protectionist instincts by concluding free trade agreements with the UK and EU while attempting to finalise one with America. But evidently, investors remain unpersuaded.

Two long-term technological shifts also cast a pall. One is robots substituting unskilled labour, the other is AI substituting skilled labour. India was hoping to be an alternative manufacturing base to China. The entry of Apple and other multinationals was encouraging but proved an exception: India's global market share in labour-intensive manufacturing has been declining steadily since a peak of about 2.5 per cent in 2011.

AI is also a threat to India's IT services growth engine. The big domestic companies that drove the early boom have either slowed hiring or are starting to cut jobs. The "global capability centres" — hubs that were key to the sector's growth — specialise in activities like data analysis that can be done by AI. Share prices of Indian IT companies have dropped sharply.

More fundamentally, the government has been unable to reassure investors about the predictability of the business environment. It has at times acted in an apparently arbitrary way to tilt the playing field in favour of a few large companies. Several businesses have been forced to sell their operations to bigger rivals after tax and other raids by enforcement agencies.

Economists used to debate whether public investment crowded out private capital. India may instead be witnessing private investment by favoured players crowding out private investment by smaller and overseas rivals.

The broader question is whether the political impulses that have corroded checks and balances are undermining India's investment climate by weakening confidence in the rule of law. If so, the rupee's weakness may signal deeper problems that need fixing.

The writer is senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and co-author of 'A Sixth of Humanity'

UK must focus on insiders vs outsiders not north vs south

Alison McGovern

Economists want to help cities grow. Densely populated places create better markets, meaning job opportunities and the people who need them are clustered together. London, Edinburgh and now Manchester are only a few of the British success stories that prove the case for "agglomeration".

But politicians know there is another side of this story, in places disconnected from these successful clusters. We understand that if you allow problems to fester outside densely populated cities you will find anger that will stop any government in its tracks. People in Hartlepool know about the successes in Manchester, but just try getting from one to the other on public transport to, for example, look for a job there.

As minister for employment and now minister for local government, I've seen both sides of this coin. As has our incoming prime minister Andy Burnham across Manchester and in his Makerfield constituency. So many of our social problems, from people locked out of work by ill health to the loneliness that undermines community cohesion, are pronounced in places where jobs are scarce or it's too hard to reach the opportunities that there are.

This is not a north versus south problem. It's an insider-outsider problem, also sometimes referred to as the core versus the periphery. And for the individuals affected by it, once your job opportunities are limited by your postcode, everything else is an uphill march.

This core-periphery problem affects London too. The size of the capital and

> Transport connections and building homes around them can multiply the options for businesses

its housing costs have shaped its poverty: areas of high deprivation and lower employment are on the edge of the city or in parts of Essex and Kent.

Instead, look at the Scottish central belt — people can live in Edinburgh or Glasgow and work in either — for some insights. Transport connections and building homes around them can multiply the options for businesses that need staff and people who need work.

This is the logic of the government's northern growth strategy. Jobs in Manchester city centre can be done by people who live in St Helens or Wallasey in my own city region of Liverpool, just as events in Liverpool can be serviced by companies from Bolton or Wigan. But in some sectors — energy for example — you need leadership over a bigger footprint, embracing several city regions. So the wider plan for the north, stretching from the Irish to the North Sea, unites all those who will gain from investment in new energy technology.

This is how you address grievance in our country in a way that makes sense to economists and politicians. Build plans that can grow an economic core, well connected to places a little further away where there is something different on offer. This is not just true for the north of England or for London. The Oxford-to-Cambridge arc does the same, taking cities that need more housing and a bigger workforce and linking them by rail, with the possibility for more jobs, and more life, between and around the two.

What connects all these areas is the final ingredient: research, innovation, education and training. The UK's successful cities are homes to our universities and all the potential they create. In every Jobcentre I visited as minister for employment, people wanted better quality work. Not just engineering apprenticeships but the kind of jobs created by companies in knowledge-intensive businesses, from modern modular housing to bringing *Minecraft* to consoles. Our centres of learning are all over the UK and can support new growth.

If the anger in politics today partly arises from slow-growing living standards, then we need more jobs like these to support better incomes. We need to build and to support institutions, including universities and colleges, that deliver productivity gains and technological advances. Together with infrastructure to bring the outsiders in, this will help more people gain from growth, marrying our economic and political goals far beyond the north.

The writer is Labour's MP for Birkenhead

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

EDITORIALS

Springfield owes us the full story on Harry Benton

Three years ago, a young female staffer came forward with allegations of harassment, often sexual in nature, against former state Rep. Harry Benton, D-Plainfield.

The former staffer's allegations were part of Illinois Legislative Inspector General Michael McCuskey's investigation into Benton, who resigned July 3.

McCuskey's investigation ultimately ended Benton's Springfield career. But concerns about his conduct were documented years before the public knew anything about them. After the 2023 complaint, Benton wasn't interviewed by House leadership for an astounding three months, by which point the staffer had already quit her job, according to Tribune reporting.

House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch's office says "appropriate action was taken" but has refused to say what that action was.

The former staffer told the Tribune that Benton was not disciplined.

This was not the only complaint regarding Benton, either. The Tribune also reported that the complaint that ultimately prompted McCuskey's investigation followed an alleged encounter earlier this year between Benton and a female lobbyist at a River North bar. According to this separate complaint, Benton made a string of inappropriate remarks and showed her pictures of women with whom he claimed to have had sexual liaisons.

She alleged that Benton told her, "You're too hot to be a lobbyist." We won't repeat some of the other reported comments, which paint a picture of an elected official whose treatment of women is not befitting of someone in this office.

The timeline pieced together indicates that concerns about Benton's behavior were documented for years before anything became public, despite Welch's insistence that his office took "appropriate action."

But that first complaint happened in 2023. If the complaint was handled as seriously as Welch's office now claims, why did it take so long for any action?

State Rep. Harry Benton, D-Plainfield, votes on a bill in the House chamber at the Illinois State Capitol on April 8. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Did state lawmakers take these women seriously?

And — weren't we just here?

In 2018, former campaign worker Alaina Hampton filed allegations against Kevin Quinn, a loyal operative of longtime House speaker Mike Madigan — and Hampton's supervisor. She provided loads of messages from Quinn, who repeatedly pressured her to go out with him and made frequent comments about her physical appearance. "I think about you all the time," he told her, adding, "You are smoking hot."

Former Legislative Inspector General Carol Pope substantiated Hampton's allegations. In November 2019, Hampton reached a $275,000 settlement with Madigan-controlled political committees, without any admission of wrongdoing.

Hampton first reported Quinn's behavior to a senior figure in Madigan's organization in February 2017. Quinn was not fired until roughly a year later, after Hampton spoke with the Tribune. When Madigan resigned in 2021, in addition to his impending corruption scandal, the Hampton story hung over him — and his party — like a black cloud.

We were left with an image of a Democratic Party-controlled Springfield in which politicians who professed to champion women tolerated their mistreatment.

When Welch succeeded Madigan as speaker, one of his most important tasks was to make sure Springfield and the Democrats changed their ways and cleaned up their image. He promised a different future.

It is not looking so different at present.

"Other incidents definitely happened while I was working in politics and it doesn't stop with Harry Benton and it didn't stop after Madigan," the former Benton staffer told the Tribune.

The Benton allegations also follow other high-profile recent misconduct allegations involving Democrats, notably former U.S. Senate candidate Graham Platner of Maine, reinforcing the former staffer's point.

Not only should Springfield release the Benton report, they should also come clean on the whole story.

Specifically, Welch owes the public a detailed explanation of how his office handled the 2023 complaint, why Benton was not interviewed for three months and what "appropriate action" was taken. He himself said McCuskey's findings revealed "clear patterns of conduct" that are "outrageous, unethical, and unbecoming of a member of the Illinois House of Representatives."

Gov. JB Pritzker alluded to the ability of a lawmaker who resigns to evade a full public reckoning.

"I think that one of the reasons, though, that (Benton) may have chosen to resign is because … a report can't be released about somebody that's not in the legislature anymore," Pritzker said at an unrelated press conference July 6.

That's not an option. Based on the legislative inspector general's reported findings, Benton and the Democrats cannot be allowed to skate past this. If Benton's resignation prevents full disclosure, lawmakers should immediately change the statute so elected officials cannot bury an inspector general's findings merely by resigning before discipline is formally imposed.

Benton's departure also leaves Democrats scrambling to replace their nominee in one of the state's more competitive House districts. That is a political problem of their own making.

In his resignation letter, Benton wrote that the "matter has placed tremendous strain on my family since it began in late February. As we move forward into the next chapter of our lives, I respectfully ask that our privacy be honored."

We have no doubt this has been an ordeal for the former lawmaker's wife and children. If the reported conduct is borne out by McCuskey's findings, the responsibility for the harm to Benton's family lies with Benton, not with the women who came forward or the public seeking answers.

Eight years after the Madigan and Hampton scandal, Illinois Democrats should have known — and done — better.

CTU's 'dead on arrival' sound bite is no answer to CPS budget woes

When Chicago Public Schools officials announced 760 teacher layoffs in an effort to close a $732 million budget gap, the Chicago Teachers Union didn't mince words.

"Dead on arrival," the union called the proposal.

In their eyes, such a move was unthinkable. To nearly everyone else paying attention, however, this was a predictable outcome for a cash-strapped district that now needs to figure out how to balance its books.

After the latest CTU contract passed, we predicted that whoever succeeded former CPS CEO Pedro Martinez would be left with no choice but to resort to furlough days or layoffs. It already was clear this costly contract with its substantial raises (although below initial CTU demands) would eventually make such steps more likely.

This is what happens when an immovable object (CTU) meets an unstoppable force (CPS' financial crisis). Financial reality tends to win eventually. The teachers union has been unwilling to acknowledge the district's lack of resources; now the union has to deal with the consequences of that painful reality.

A better option than the DOA rhetoric for CTU would be to come to the table with ideas. "Shared sacrifice" is not a term anyone wants to hear, but in this situation it's how adults working together to educate the next generation of Chicagoans must navigate some very rough fiscal seas.

The Wednesday announcement from CPS included not just the loss of 760 teachers, but also 801 school-based support staff. On top of that, CPS proposed five furlough days if additional revenue fails to materialize — a move that would erase a meaningful portion of those aforementioned raises.

That points to the shortsightedness and impracticality of such a bargaining strategy. CTU negotiated for raises despite repeated warnings from CPS that the district faced major structural deficits. Union leadership repeatedly argued that fully funding the state's evidence-based formula would provide roughly another $1 billion annually to CPS and would eliminate the need for these cuts.

Not only did CPS CEO Macquline King not get the help the district sought from Springfield, she's also facing adversarial union leadership that continues to be unwilling to help her face reality. CTU leaders can't continue to only say "no" when CPS tackles the district's financial crisis. Eventually, they need to come to the table with ways to shoulder the burden.

ON THIS DAY 21 YEARS AGO THE FLIP-FLOP FLAP

We're just guessing here, but it's not likely that President Bush was too shocked when some members of the Northwestern University women's lacrosse team showed up at the White House recently in flip-flops.

For one thing, he's the father of two girls who are not long out of college.

But judging by the reaction of some, you'd think the lacrosse women had sparked an international incident. The aghast reaction was summarized in an e-mail that one of the players, Kate Darmody, received from her brother: "YOU WORE FLIP-FLOPS TO THE WHITE HOUSE?!"

Well, yes, she and others did, and this was regarded by some people as a faux pas, though we suspect the only risk involved was that a lacrosse player's open toes might inadvertently be mashed by someone in cowboy boots, that being the president's preferred footwear.

The flip-flop has become de rigueur for both males and females of a certain age. They're worn in every season and to everything from beaches to proms to weddings. Flip-flop fashion is so hot that some are bejeweled, sequined or embroidered and run into serious money, as far from the 99-cent beach sandal of our youth as a tuxedo is from a T-shirt. (We've also seen tuxedo T-shirts, though not at the White House.)

Part of the appeal of the flip-flop, of course, is in rebellion, in pushing the boundaries of where they can be worn. Still, as rebellions go, this one is mild. Offensive? Nah.

For those who suggested that the flip-flop flap revealed some sort of moral decay, we note that the team is auctioning off the celebrated flip-flops to raise money for a 10-year-old girl, a lacrosse fan who is battling a brain tumor.

Now that's some fancy footwork.

Tribune editorial board, July 20, 2005

EDITORIAL CARTOON

"HEATWAVES, WILDFIRES, ZOMBIE SENATORS...YOU KNOW IT'S A ROUGH WEEK WHEN AN 'EXPLOSIVE DIARRHEA EPIDEMIC' CAN'T CRACK THE TOP THREE SIGNS OF THE END TIMES."

DREW SHENEMAN/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Chicago's untapped treasure is our first-generation professionals

By Andrea Sáenz and Anna Truong
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Graduates listen to speakers during the University of Illinois Chicago College of Liberal Arts and Sciences commencement at Credit Union 1 Arena on May 9. **JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Every city competing for talent today is looking outward, recruiting from other markets, building relocation packages and marketing itself to graduates who haven't yet chosen a home. Chicago does this too, and it should.

But there is a more immediate opportunity sitting right in front of us: the talented, credentialed, mission-driven first-generation graduates already here. They are people who already love this city and want to build their futures in it.

We are talking about the graduates and emerging leaders who are the first in their families to obtain a college degree and work in white-collar professions. Their route is typically more complex than others, and, as a result, they bring strengths that can be harder to recognize on a resume.

Both of us know this firsthand. One of us came to the United States from Ecuador at age 5 and grew up in Los Angeles in a diverse community of multigeneration Americans and immigrants. The other, born in Chicago, is the daughter of Vietnamese refugees and grew up in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Rogers Park. We were the first in our families to pursue a college degree and professional career.

Many of this spring's graduates from Chicago's colleges and universities share our backgrounds — first-generation and/or lower-income college students. It's not uncommon for them to have been fully employed throughout their college years. Some have been supporting families, working in family businesses or managing households while earning credentials that will take them further than their parents or grandparents could go.

Because of their unique experiences, first-generation professionals are adaptable by necessity. They have navigated institutions that were not built with them in mind, and they succeeded by drawing on the strengths of their backgrounds and communities.

They are resourceful in ways that show up on the job — in how they solve problems, manage ambiguity and find solutions outside the conventional path. And many carry a deep desire to uplift the marginalized communities that they emerged from.

Beyond individual capability, there is a strategic case that Chicago's business leaders undervalue if they are not drawing from this pool of talent. Our region's growth markets in healthcare, education, logistics and financial services are concentrated in communities that reflect these graduates' backgrounds and experiences. Understanding those markets, earning trust and serving them well require people who have real relationships and credibility.

The employers who figure out how to genuinely recruit, develop and advance first-generation talent will not just be doing good. They will have a structural advantage over competitors who keep fishing in the same narrow pool.

Chicago's institutions of higher education are already doing their part. City Colleges of Chicago, the University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago State University and National Louis University, among others, have built their reputations on the premise that everyone deserves access to an excellent education. They have created deliberate pathways for working adults, first-generation students and Chicagoans from all walks of life to move into life-changing professional careers.

As a result, Chicago produces first-generation professionals in significant numbers every year. Unfortunately, Chicago employers largely fail to take advantage of this because of how they evaluate, recruit and develop their employees. They overindex on institutional prestige, perceived cultural fit and linear career paths — signals that correlate more with socioeconomic factors and obscure the strengths of first-generation professionals.

Solutions for this current blind spot are many: internship programs that reach beyond the usual suspects; apprenticeship pathways into corporate careers, such as those at Aon and United Airlines; mentorship structures that are intentional, not accidental; and hiring and promotion criteria that prioritize equitable access to opportunities rather than cultural familiarity. None of these require lowering the bar. Instead, they require challenging assumptions.

Our region faces real and serious challenges, including gun violence, neighborhood disinvestment, growing wealth disparity, population stagnation and a fiscal burden that constrains public investment. These are interconnected challenges. They are, in part, the accumulated cost of an economy that has not fully engaged all the people who live in it.

Correcting this problem is not just a moral imperative; it is the most direct path to the kind of broad-based growth that will secure Chicago's future. And it starts with recognizing the talent and potential of our homegrown first-generation professionals.

Andrea Sáenz is president and CEO of The Chicago Community Trust. Anna Truong is a first-generation college graduate and school psychology Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland and a former intern at The Chicago Community Trust.

Archdiocese's memorial for suicide is powerful symbol, but it's only the beginning

By Geri McGinn Kerger
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Family members and loved ones affected by suicide walk around the 20-foot Ascending Doves sculpture in the "At Peace" memorial at Queen of Heaven Cemetery on June 26 in Hillside. The memorial was organized by the Archdiocese of Chicago. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Tears welled up in my eyes as I read the recent Tribune article about the dedication of the Archdiocese of Chicago's memorial honoring those who have died by suicide and the families who continue to grieve. It is both beautiful and courageous, reflecting how far we have come in understanding mental illness, suicide and God's compassion for those who suffer.

For generations, many families carried not only unimaginable grief but also shame. An award-winning journalist and North Shore native, Meg Kissinger, has written movingly about the judgment and misunderstanding her family experienced following her sister's suicide, including a nun telling Kissinger at her sister's wake, "She's going to hell, you know." Sadly, hers was not an isolated experience. Too many grieving families encountered condemnation when they most needed compassion.

I was in elementary school when a cousin died under what was then described as "questionable circumstances," meaning there was uncertainty about whether he would receive a Catholic funeral and burial. I grew up in a deeply Irish Catholic family. Three of my aunts were nuns, many of my cousins became priests, and my parents, siblings and I were all educated by the Jesuits.

I'll never forget my mother saying that our strongest instinct is to live and that when people die by suicide, they do so because they are desperately ill. She questioned the inequity of allowing notorious mobsters to receive Catholic burials while denying them to people whose deaths resulted from mental illness. Then she said something I have never forgotten: "The Catholic Church will eventually change its antiquated views on suicide." She was right.

Today, we understand that suicide is most often the tragic consequence of serious mental illness, depression, addiction or overwhelming emotional pain — not a moral failing or a lack of faith. Faith communities increasingly recognize that those struggling with mental illness deserve compassion, treatment and support.

The archdiocese's memorial is a powerful symbol of that transformation. But symbols are only the beginning.

If we truly want to prevent suicide, we must ensure that young people receive accurate mental health education before they find themselves in crisis. They should learn to recognize the warning signs of depression, anxiety and suicidal thinking; understand that asking for help is an act of strength rather than weakness; and know where to turn — for themselves or for a friend.

At NAMI DuPage, our Ending the Silence program has reached tens of thousands of students throughout DuPage County, and 600 National Alliance on Mental Illness affiliates nationwide now offer it. Presented by people with lived experience of mental illness who share their story of recovery, the program teaches students to recognize warning signs, understand that recovery is possible, and know where to seek help for themselves or a friend. Research consistently shows that the program increases mental health knowledge, reduces stigma and encourages help-seeking. The greatest impact, however, may not be in the information it imparts, but in the hope it inspires.

While many Catholic schools have embraced mental health education, others remain reluctant to invite programs addressing mental illness and suicide, often out of concern that parents may be uncomfortable with the topic.

In my seven years as CEO of NAMI DuPage, I have not received a single complaint from a parent after one of our presentations. Instead, we hear from grateful students, educators and families who tell us the program opened conversations that might never have happened.

During one presentation at a Catholic school, we asked students what they would do if they felt overwhelmed by sadness or anxiety.

The first response was, "I would pray." As a person of faith, I believe prayer is always appropriate. But God also gives us physicians, counselors, medications, caring teachers, parents and trusted friends. We pray when we face cancer, yet we also see an oncologist. We pray when we break a bone, yet we also go to the emergency room. Mental illness deserves the same combination of faith, compassion and professional care as every other illness.

The Gospel calls us not only to comfort those who mourn but also to protect the living. That means ensuring every young person knows the signs of depression, anxiety and suicide risk; knows where to turn for help; and understands that seeking treatment is an act of strength, not weakness.

Today, we understand that suicide is most often the tragic consequence of serious mental illness, depression, addiction or overwhelming emotional pain — not a moral failing or a lack of faith. Faith communities increasingly recognize that those struggling with mental illness deserve compassion, treatment and support.

The archdiocese's memorial beautifully affirms that those lost to suicide are worthy of remembrance, dignity and love. Now we have an opportunity to take the next step.

Imagine if every student in every school — public and private — had mental health education programs that encouraged conversation and offered hope for recovery. Imagine if every young person knew how to help a struggling friend. Imagine how many lives might be changed — or even saved.

The new memorial reminds us that every life is precious. Let us honor those we have lost not only with monuments, but also by ensuring that fewer families experience such heartbreaking loss in the future.

The memorial is a beautiful tribute to those we have lost. The greatest tribute we can offer, however, is to save those we still can.

If you or a loved one is experiencing mental health difficulties, help is available. Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. NAMI Chicago can connect you with local resources at 833-626-4244.

Geri McGinn Kerger is the retiring CEO and president of NAMI DuPage, an attorney and a lifelong Catholic.

OPINION

White supremacists marched in Washington on the holiday. What does that say about us?

Clarence Page

A passenger looks on as members of the white supremacist group Patriot Front ride the Washington Metro during Fourth of July celebrations in Washington. FINN GOMEZ/GETTY

On July 4, the nation's 250th anniversary, a mysterious group of young men in khaki pants, navy blue shirts, logoed baseball caps and white face masks appeared in the capital, marching out of a downtown Metro subway station in Washington and into the news.

By now, they look oddly familiar, part of the menagerie of uniformed street brawlers and torch carriers that emerged in the tumultuous first term of President Donald Trump.

And there are unsavory historical echoes as well. Though smaller in number, the neo-Nazis in the capital brought to mind the 1925 parade down Pennsylvania Avenue by thousands of robed Ku Klux Klansmen in a visible show of strength.

Indeed, the Patriot Front — the group that marched this month — appears to have similar publicity-seeking aims as the Klansmen of yore: to red-white-and-bluewash their violent bigotry. Unfortunately for them, passersby appeared to be much more concerned about the stifling 100-degree heat dome that settled over the city with particular ferocity.

Performers must sometimes suffer for their art.

The word "performative" gets thrown around these days — partly, I gather, as a result of the technological revolution that has enabled us all to carry a TV studio, also known as a smartphone, around in our pockets.

Given the opportunity to perform, a lot of people will do precisely that, across a wide variety of media, as long as they can pull in an audience.

That's very true of the Patriot Front, an ethno-nationalist group whose idea of "patriotic" apparently does not include nonwhites, non-Christians or people who aren't male.

They were founded by Texan Thomas Rousseau after the bloody 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, when they split from another racist organization called Vanguard America.

I first heard of the group in 2021 when they staged a protest at Chicago's City Hall, which they apparently planned to coincide with the annual anti-abortion rights March for Life rally in the Loop. (The organizers of the latter were not pleased.)

I was suitably disgusted but not shocked, as I've observed these kinds of groups before.

Today's Patriot Front reminds me of Frank Collin, the neo-Nazi leader who famously waged a legal battle in the late 1970s for the right to march in Skokie, a Chicago suburb with a heavily Jewish population. Collin later settled for the right to march in Marquette Park on Chicago's South Side.

Yet today's young white supremacists have learned from the mistakes of Collin's "Illinois Nazis," whose campy cosplay was memorably lampooned in the movie "The Blues Brothers." As NPR reported, Patriot Front scrupulously avoids swastikas and Nazi salutes, preferring to wrap themselves in classically American symbols and to present themselves as orderly and public-spirited.

On the Fourth of July, they got the publicity bump they were hoping for.

A Reuters photographer captured a Pulitzer Prize-worthy news photo of a Black woman sitting quietly by herself in a subway seat, surrounded by masked Frontmen on their best silent behavior.

Sights like that cause me to keep reminding myself that, no, this is not the 1960s. We've come a long way since those bad old days, to be sure. But as today's politics keep reminding us, we still have a long way to go.

We're a nation that elected a Black man to our highest office, but we also elected Donald Trump.

But I'm still curious about what motivates the 400 or so young men to leave their homes and take to the streets dressed like demented preppies. Their grievances, I have to say, are not very well articulated, judging by the Patriot Front website.

Is it to fill a void of fellowship and meaning in an increasingly online world? Is this part of the dark side — or, if you prefer, the white side — of the social media "manosphere"?

That's a popular label for the myriad websites, blogs, podcasters and online forums that promote a hyped-up version of masculinity, misogyny and anti-feminism to an audience that seems endlessly hungry for such content.

It's hard to disentangle the ideological strands of the online hard right, but a similar discourse has grown up around white identity. A thread that runs through neo-Nazi and other hard-right groups is the fear of other races, whose numbers and place in society seem to them uncomfortably on the rise, at the expense of white men.

Consider the so-called Great Replacement conspiracy theory. This is the notion, endlessly propagated online, that white populations in modern Western countries are being replaced by brown and Black alien populations, and that this replacement is a project — commonly attributed to Jews.

This was behind the infamous chant at Unite the Right in Charlottesville: "Jews will not replace us!" It also supplied the motive of the murderer who killed 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, as well as numerous other attacks.

As a nation we have been slow to understand the hate-inflected extremism that flourishes in a new media landscape with no editorial oversight and no sanction for the harm bad actors may do. Nor is it obvious what to do about it.

Yet I'm still old-fashioned enough to believe we do our young men — and women — a very valuable service by encouraging them to live, learn and work together across racial, religious and gender lines with all other Americans.

That's true patriotism to me, front, back and sideways.

Email Clarence Page at cptimee@gmail.com.

Voice of the people

Victory for Illinois farmers

Being an Illinois farmer is tough right now. Bankruptcies among farms in our state surged 55% in 2025 alone, while a series of damaging hailstorms has put a damper on what promised to be a strong crop season.

That's why it was so good to hear recently that we won a major victory at the federal level. Illinois farmers now have the right to repair their own tractors, combines and spreaders. The decision could save residents in our state millions.

Every farmer is familiar with the emission controls that by law are installed on their equipment. If a tractor suffers, say, a diesel exhaust fluid failure, it triggers a shutdown — and once that happens, the vehicle can be difficult to get working again.

Many believed that the Clean Air Act made it illegal for farmers to fix their own equipment once one of these shutdowns was triggered. This forced them to bring the busted machine to a dealer to fix the problem.

Of course, sometimes this is what's needed. Some repairs are too complicated or potentially unsafe to be handled by anyone other than a professional.

But there are also plenty of simple fixes that equipment owners can make themselves. Fear of fines and lawsuits from regulators was forcing farmers to spend money they didn't need to and even delay planting season as they waited for a dealer to have availability.

Truly this was big government run amok. That's why we should all cheer the right to repair.

Earlier this year, after Deere & Co. requested the agency provide this win to farmers, the Environmental Protection Agency ruled that nothing in the Clean Air Act stripped farmers of their fundamental right to repair the equipment they've bought.

Then, this month, Illinois, the Federal Trade Commission and four other states came to an agreement. Deere will "provide farmers and independent repair providers with the same equipment repair resources, including applicable software capabilities, that it currently provides to authorized Deere dealers," the FTC reported.

Retail sales manager Neil Motley shows off some of the bigger tractors on sale March 17, 2025, at The Backyard, a new John Deere dealership in Loveland, Colorado. The dealership plans to support local, small-scale farms. JENNY SPARKS/LOVELAND REPORTER-HERALD

The right to repair won't fix everything, but it will ease those struggles and make our livelihoods as farmers just a little more manageable.

Illinois and federal regulators should now build on this momentum. They should press other equipment manufacturers to do as Deere did and grant their customers repair rights. If the industry's biggest player is able and willing to help, other companies should be too.

— State Rep. Chris Miller, R-Oakland

Solar farms take over farmland

I am writing to express my concern about the increasing number of solar farms being developed across the state of Illinois. The energy generated by solar farms does not begin to justify the destruction of thousands of acres of valuable farmland.

Across the country and across Illinois, farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate. For example, a 6,000-acre solar farm was recently approved near Manhattan.

The day is coming when our dwindling farmland will not be able to grow enough food to feed our country or export our surplus to other nations.

I'm not against solar energy, but solar energy has not yet advanced to the point that solar farms are economically feasible without government subsidies. When a large corporation buys thousands of acres of productive farmland so that they can enrich themselves off of government subsidies, that is simply wrong.

Solar panels are known to last 25 to 30 years. As recycling solar panels is currently not practical, used solar panels will likely end up in landfills, creating environmental concerns.

Solar farms are also a visual blight on the rural countryside.

I believe that the most egregious action taken in the furtherance of the propagation of solar farms across Illinois was the energy omnibus bill passed in 2025 by the Illinois General Assembly. This bill prohibits local jurisdictions from establishing requirements for commercial solar energy facilities that are more restrictive than the state law.

I'm not suggesting solar farms be banned from the state of Illinois. My belief is that local municipalities and counties should have the right to make determinations about these projects. The current law is state government overreach.

The citizens of Illinois must demand that their state representatives give the power to regulate solar farms back to local counties and municipalities.

— Mark Turvey, Bolingbrook

Be realistic about secession

Red Illinois counties complaining about high taxes? Do the residents there realize their counties are subsidized by Cook County and the collar counties? Do they honestly think Indiana will raise taxes statewide to subsidize them?

And the secession question was decided over a century ago. It's a no-go.

I was raised on a farm downstate but have lived in Chicago and the suburbs since graduating from college. Less nostalgia for the past and more planning for the future are needed.

— Marilyn Smith, Arlington Heights

Advice for the disenchanted

Reading the July 17 letters supporting the secessionist move of downstate Illinois counties, I find one writer who gets his information from the right-wing Illinois Policy Institute, and another comes from someone living in Florida!

For those who are upset by the supposed dominance of Chicago in Illinois politics, I would suggest that the best solution can be found in elections. Find and elect state representatives and state senators who are sympathetic to your complaints. This is the best way to be heard. This comes from a proud lifelong Illinoisan.

— Paul Breit, Tinley Park

Willie Wilson's suggestions

I am always amazed at the commonsense proposals suggested by Willie Wilson on the Opinion page ("Billions of dollars in spending has not saved Black Chicago from the scourge of gun violence," July 16). It would serve our elected politicians well to listen and follow some of his recommendations to curb gun violence in Chicago.

— Jean Bonavolonta, Roselle

A question for Chicago

What does freedom mean to a young person who has no realistic hope of using that freedom to build a better life? Freedom without opportunity can become an empty promise. Opportunity without freedom can become government dependence. A wise society must strive to preserve both.

The purpose of Chicago's new Office of Gun Violence Reduction should therefore be more than simply attempting to reduce the number of shootings. Its greater purpose should be to help create the conditions in which fewer young people believe that violence is their only path to money, status, protection or survival.

Perhaps Chicago's greatest challenge is not simply to ask: How do we stop the shooting? But also: How do we give people a realistic reason to choose a different life?

— Rudy U. Martinka, Elmhurst

Note to readers

We'd like to hear from you about Chicago's parking meter problem. Do you have advice for the city? Submit a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

EDITORIAL

Joint inspection at border crossing will boost connectivity

Ease of travel has long been a key factor behind Hong Kong's success, but travelling to nearby mainland China has sometimes been less convenient than connecting with international destinations. The city is set to take a welcome step towards smooth access. Authorities gazetted fresh legislation last Tuesday to regulate an upgraded border crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. It introduces a novel "joint inspection" clearance model to cut clearance times from 30 minutes to five.

Expeditiously passed by the Legislative Council in a special meeting last Friday, the Huanggang Port Hong Kong Port Area Bill provides the legal grounds for the city to implement a co-location arrangement at the border crossing. The official opening of the upgraded port is being finalised with mainland officials, but the joint clearance model is a historic milestone and welcome enhancement of the city's integration into the Greater Bay Area.

The National People's Congress Standing Committee, China's top legislative body, passed a bill on June 26 to authorise the city's jurisdiction over part of the port area. The State Council, China's cabinet, confirmed the specific boundaries on July 8 and approved the commissioning of the Hong Kong port area at midnight on July 31, with the city exercising jurisdiction. The new arrangement for travellers to undergo departure and arrival clearance at a single checkpoint was scrutinised by the legislature during a special House Committee meeting last Thursday. Travellers will only need to show travel documents required for their destination at one checkpoint instead of passing through separate counters.

The legal change will complement the capabilities of the revamped Huanggang Port. Design flow will increase to 200,000 passenger trips per day, with potential to hit 300,000 once the MTR's Northern Link Spur Line is ready. Seamless travel is an increasingly important component of the bay area scheme to link 11 regional cities into an integrated economic and business hub. The new capacity upgrade cements Hong Kong's vital role in the central government's vision.

There are space limitations standing in the way of a public car park or coach bays at the new crossing. Authorities appear to be on track to roll out shuttle buses from satellite parking as a solution. While many Hongkongers will cheer the eased access, it could renew anxieties among some about northbound movement of customers. But amid inevitable market shifts, many vendors are finding ways to survive and thrive in the new environment. The focus should be on finding ways for Hong Kong residents and visitors to best use the new faster crossing as they forge a brighter future for the city and nation.

Investors' AI fervour merits greater caution

Volatility comes with rallies. As stock markets in China and overseas advance, they are sending mixed signals. Investors' love-hate relationship with artificial intelligence (AI) is greatly to blame as they rotate between pure AI plays and their underlying hardware and chip producers. Eddie Yue Wai-man, chief executive of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, has therefore issued a warning about an AI bubble as well as financial systems being hacked or otherwise harmed by the new tech.

Stock indexes have repeatedly hit new highs despite the ebbs and flows of the AI trade. In China, tech stocks have driven a bull run but consumer stocks lag behind. The Star Market 50 Index, a technology-focused board, has jumped more than 50 per cent this year. In contrast, the CSI 300 Index, the benchmark that tracks the largest listed firms on the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges, is about 10 per cent below its peak from 2021.

Yue is right to caution against investors' obsession with AI. After all, when an investment bubble bursts, panic inevitably sets in. With external threats such as geopolitical tensions and global inflation compounding existing market risks, the road ahead could become very scary. The current valuations of many tech and AI stocks in China and the United States – the two countries competing for tech dominance – are based more on faith than actual profits.

Yue said local banks must prepare adequate capital buffers to protect against a potential AI market downturn. Fortunately, the city's banking system has always maintained a resilient financial cushion to absorb macroeconomic shocks.

Meanwhile, AI and quantum computers have become so powerful that, if they fall into the wrong hands, they could pose a serious threat to financial systems and their data protection.

This will be a steep learning curve. The most experienced bankers, regulators, security experts and tech executives must work together to pre-empt such threats.

Fortunately, Hong Kong and mainland China do not lack such professionals. It's a matter of getting the best people together to advance and safeguard the new tech.

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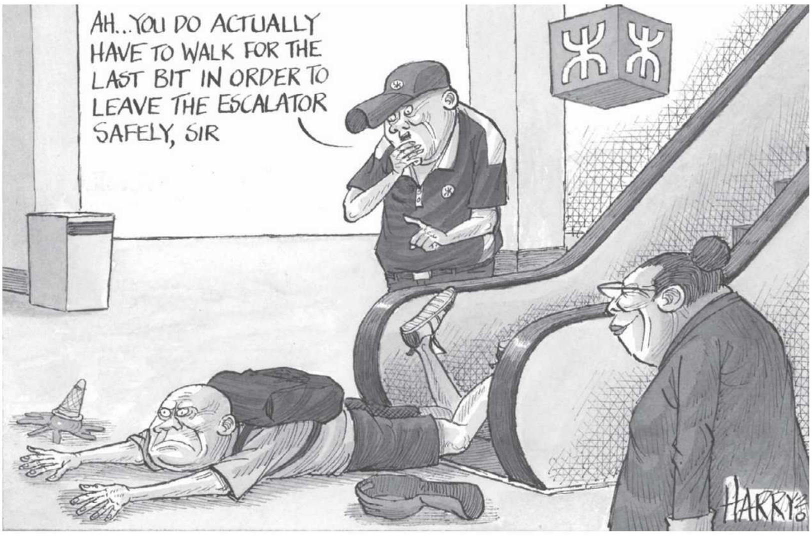
HARRY'S VIEW ON CAMPAIGN DISCOURAGING WALKING ON ESCALATORS



Untying the knot

Michael Han says authorities are rewiring financial architecture to address systemic risk, breaking deep structural ties between property and banking

Capital seeks sanctuary. In China's property sector, however, that quest for safety had inadvertently erected a cage. The recent government takeover of Wuhan-based private lender Zhongbang Bank, expected to see a dilution of its private capital amid serious credit risks, is a calculated regulatory action. It echoes a larger and darker precedent.

A few years ago, another commercial lender, Shengjing Bank, became caught up in the Evergrande debt crisis. There was speculation property developer Evergrande leveraged its controlling stake in the bank to siphon possibly billions of dollars through opaque lending channels, effectively treating the regional lender as its private treasury. That catastrophe required a massive state-led bailout.

While Zhongbang Bank's distress stems from its conglomerate founders being squeezed by slowing industrial supply chains and real estate-adjacent debt, both episodes ring the same systemic alarm. And they mark the beginning of a cold, structural divorce, a dismantling of the highly lucrative marriage between private corporate capital and domestic banking.

For 20 years, a tripartite growth engine drove China's unprecedented urbanisation. Property developers relied on bank credit to expand their assets. Banks relied on property collateral to grow their balance sheets. Local governments relied on land sales to fund infrastructure.

Today, as the real estate market endures a historic contraction, this once impenetrable alliance has become a conduit for contagion. Regulatory intervention is transcending a mere write-off of bad loans. It is fundamentally rewiring Chinese financial architecture to address the systemic risk, breaking the deep structural ties between real estate and banking.

To understand the severity of the entanglement, one must look at why private developers aggressively acquired stakes in commercial banks in the first place.

Real estate is inherently capital-intensive, requiring stable cash flows over multi-year development cycles. In a financial system dominated by indirect, bank-led financing, developers face extreme policy volatility. Regulatory shifts regarding presale funds, trust financing or mortgage quotas can materialise overnight.

For heavily leveraged companies, a sudden credit tightening does not just compress profit margins; it triggers a liquidity freeze. Acquiring equity in financial institutions was a rational, defensive strategy for developers seeking a credit sanctuary. This capital linkage accelerated growth during the boom years but became a fatal vulnerability during the downturn.

The notion that Chinese developers have successfully diversified their funding channels over the past decade is largely an illusion. While trust companies, asset management plans and private equity funds proliferated, the underlying capital for these shadow banking products frequently originated from commercial banks. When defaults began to cascade, the risk boomeranged back to bank balance sheets.

Banks are being forced out of their traditional roles as creditors. Through debt-for-equity swaps and the seizure of collateral, financial institutions are inadvertently becoming the owners of unfinished housing projects and commercial complexes. They are absorbing operational and construction risks they have neither the mandate nor the expertise to manage.

A comparison with mature markets exposes the structural fragility of this bank-centric model. The US real estate sector regularly experiences cyclical downturns, but systemic shocks are heavily buffered by deep public capital markets. American real estate companies operate like normal corporations.

They can go public through initial public offerings, issue unsecured corporate bonds to a wide array of institutional investors and execute secondary equity offerings with relative ease to raise capital. They also rely heavily on real estate investment trusts (Reits). According to the National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts, US Reits command US$1.6 trillion in market capitalisation.

In contrast, Chinese developers faced a deeply restrictive domestic capital environment. For years, regulatory agencies effectively froze domestic initial and secondary listings for property firms to curb housing speculation. At the same time, access to domestic corporate bond markets was heavily rationed and often arbitrarily shut off during tightening cycles.

Denied the normal financing avenues available to standard corporations, Chinese developers were pushed towards shadow banking and the high-risk tactic of acquiring stakes in commercial banks. Meanwhile, China's Reit market, which only recently began expanding beyond infrastructure into commercial property, remains in its infancy with a capitalisation of around 220 billion yuan (HK$254.5 billion).

Resolving this systemic crisis requires more than regulatory walls to separate developers from shares in banks. Regulators are correctly scrutinising bank ownership, penetrating opaque equity pledges and dismantling illicit related-party lending networks. The goal is to strip industrial capital of its undue influence over financial institutions.

The ultimate remedy lies in treating developers as normal corporate entities within a fully functioning capital market. Policy must pivot towards cultivating Reits, real estate private equity and standardised asset-backed securities, while reopening the equity, loan and bond markets to healthy developers. Equitable access to normal corporate finance would naturally dissipate the desperate urge to capture commercial banks.

The turbulence surrounding institutions like Zhongbang Bank and Shengjing Bank represents more than a failure of corporate governance. It embodies the necessary friction of a vast economic transition. Beijing's recent policy agenda confirms the next phase of growth relies on building better flats, shifting the focus from sheer quantity to quality.

The era of shared prosperity between concrete and credit has ended. The price of a resilient, modern financial system is ensuring banks return to the business of pricing credit, while the real estate industry learns to survive on the unforgiving discipline of the open capital market.

Michael Han is assistant president and Shanghai general manager at Yuepu Technology Group

Top spot for property prices is nothing to celebrate

Alice Wu says that for all the city's recent successes highlighted by officials, the benefits are not translating to more affordable lives for many Hongkongers

Hong Kong has come out on top again, but not in a good way. After earning the distinction of having the highest petrol prices in the world, we have again been named the world's priciest residential property market in the "Mapping the World's Prices" report released by Deutsche Bank.

We managed to keep our top spot despite a 10 per cent drop in property prices from pre-pandemic levels. Naturally, this is not something Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu will be blowing his horn about.

Generations of Hongkongers have been priced out of the city's property market. Wages have not kept up. In the Deutsche Bank report, we are ranked 30th out of 69 cities in terms of monthly salary.

According to the annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey, it would take a household 14.1 years of income, without other expenses, to buy a median-priced home in Hong Kong. The city is at the top of that survey, too, holding the title of the world's most unaffordable housing market for 16 straight years.

No wonder we have a low birth rate. Some young people might be delaying marriage and having a family of their own to focus on their careers. Women attaining higher levels of education are also known to contribute to the falling birth rate. But some households put off having children because space is too much of a premium. That's what paying 14.1 years of your income for housing, without other expenses, translates into. That's not a choice – it's reality.

How do we manage to keep these prices high and out of reach for ordinary people? That, too, is an old tale. Wealth disparity is the main driver. Nothing better illustrates our two-track reality than having luxury houses on The Peak and cage homes fitted in old tenements.

Ultimately, the Hong Kong government controls supply. It will release only one residential site for sale in the July to September quarter, as officials say we are on track to meet our housing targets. But the government's tight leash on land supply will put upwards pressure on residential property prices.

The Deutsche Bank report recognises that Hong Kong remains a global magnet for talent and capital. Such talent is attracted to invest in property, and these people are the ones propping up prices. The city's private residential market is expected to continue to grow for the rest of 2026 and into 2027.

We have two housing markets: the private market and the public and subsidised one. Public and subsidised housing takes care of those who can't afford to own homes in the private market. Demand remains high, and while the average waiting time for public housing might have shortened on paper, it is still long. As the Deutsche Bank report notes, "The richest cities are not always the easiest places to live."

Hong Kong's quality of life ranking has fallen to 55th this year, down seven places from 2025. "Extremely high costs" related to property, pollution and long commuting times are the main reasons for the drop. Housing costs – whether for rental or purchase – are weighing on expendable income and quality of life.

Given all this, it is no wonder that the trend of Hongkongers making weekend trips out of the city to get better value by shopping on the mainland is becoming a permanent fixture. People want more bang for their buck. Has the government given up on reversing the trend of the holiday exodus? Despite all the good news and achievements recently highlighted by officials, including good performances in global competitiveness and talent rankings, the city's cost of living remains high. The fruits of our successes are not being shared with the average Hongkonger, while the costs of transport, healthcare and public services continue to rise.

If the government's professed concerns about building strong communities and instilling a strong sense of belonging are true, it must do more to address housing affordability. Otherwise, Hong Kong will continue to be a city where people feel trapped and make do until a better place or opportunity comes along, treating the city as a temporary home.

The government wants to inspire hope for the future. Elevated home prices will only erode confidence. City life might be competitive and stressful, but it must at least be liveable.

Alice Wu is a political consultant and a former associate director of the Asia Pacific Media Network at UCLA

OPINION

Questionable equality

Nikola Mikovic says energy exports and a trade surplus can't fix Russia's dependence on China

China and Russia are not formal allies, but their ties have grown significantly closer in recent years. The two countries have been "comprehensive strategic partners of coordination for a new era" since 2019, often sharing the goal of countering Western dominance in the international arena. But which nation holds the upper hand in this relationship?

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, commenting on an article in The Wall Street Journal on relations between Moscow and Beijing, said on July 14 that the Russian-Chinese partnership was "based on the principle of equality". However, if China is Russia's largest trading partner while Russia accounts for only about 4 per cent of China's foreign trade, can the relationship really be considered equal?

Before the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014, the European Union, rather than China, was Russia's most significant economic partner. In 2013, EU member states accounted for roughly 57 per cent of Russian exports and 46.5 per cent of its imports. At the time, Russia was a major supplier of natural gas to Europe, particularly Germany. Thanks to the Nord Stream pipelines, Berlin received relatively cheap energy from Russia, which helped fuel Germany's economic growth.

Things began to change after the 2014 removal of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych, Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas. The Kremlin's actions prompted the EU to start imposing sanctions on Moscow.

Aware that the Kremlin was unlikely to resume business as usual with Europe, Russian strategic planners sought alternative markets for the country's gas exports. China appeared to be the best option.

President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a 30-year, US$400 billion natural gas deal in May 2014. Russia's energy giant Gazprom agreed to supply China with 38 billion cubic metres of gas annually through an agreement finalised with the China National Petroleum Corporation.

Ever since, Moscow has strongly pushed for the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, aiming to increase gas supplies to its strategic partner. The problem is that China does not need that much gas.

As a result of Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has little choice but to seek to redirect its gas exports eastward. Under such conditions, the Kremlin is in no position to dictate the price of its natural gas. That is why Beijing pays US$258.80 per thousand cubic metres for Russian gas, a rate 39 per cent less than Gazprom's other long-distance foreign clients, who pay an average of US$420.20.

Beyond gas exports, Russia has become heavily dependent on China economically, technologically and financially. Russia relies heavily on China for critical tech and hardware, while Chinese brands dominate the Russian consumer electronics and automotive markets.

Western sanctions have isolated Moscow, while recent Ukrainian drone and missile strikes have severely damaged Russia's energy infrastructure, further increasing its reliance on China. According to reports, Moscow is negotiating the import of petrol and other refined petroleum products from China.

In a partnership in which one side depends on the other for both export revenues and critical imports, the very notion of equality seems rather questionable. Even so, Peskov rejects any interpretation of Russia as China's junior partner, calling such a view "completely flawed".

> [Moscow] remains dependent in areas such as technology, manufactured goods and access to markets

Russians in general have a favourable view of China. A Levada survey earlier this year found more than 80 per cent of Russian respondents viewed China positively. Even so, the Kremlin would not publicly admit Beijing has significant leverage over Moscow. Having failed to achieve its strategic goals in Ukraine and facing large-scale damage to its energy infrastructure, Moscow seeks to maintain the image of a major actor on the international stage, especially ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for September.

Russia will continue to insist on its "equal partnership" with a country on which it has become increasingly dependent, while China, ever pragmatic, has no reason to highlight its role as the de facto senior partner. Instead, Beijing will focus on strengthening the bilateral economic relationship.

Putin's actions in Ukraine have effectively drawn Russia into China's geoeconomic orbit. Bilateral trade between the two countries has grown substantially, surging from US$95.8 billion in 2014 to a record US$240 billion in 2023. Although Russia maintains a trade surplus, the current structure of the partnership favours China in the long term.

A trade surplus does not mean Moscow has the stronger position. It remains dependent in areas such as technology, manufactured goods and access to markets. Cut off from Western trade, Russia cannot realistically live without the Chinese market.

On the other hand, despite being a major buyer of Russian energy, China could survive without Russian natural gas and oil. Beijing has diversified its energy sources, expanded renewable energy at home and holds a strong position in pipeline negotiations. That is why, in the case of the Power of Siberia 2 project, China is reportedly seeking very low gas prices and flexibility in how much it buys.

That does not mean that Beijing will aggressively push Moscow to make concessions, whether in the energy sector or elsewhere. Instead, it is likely to favour cooperation while further strengthening its own strategic position.

Russia might continue to present itself as an equal partner in this game, but the underlying asymmetry of the relationship tells a different story.

Nikola Mikovic is a freelance journalist, researcher and analyst based in Serbia

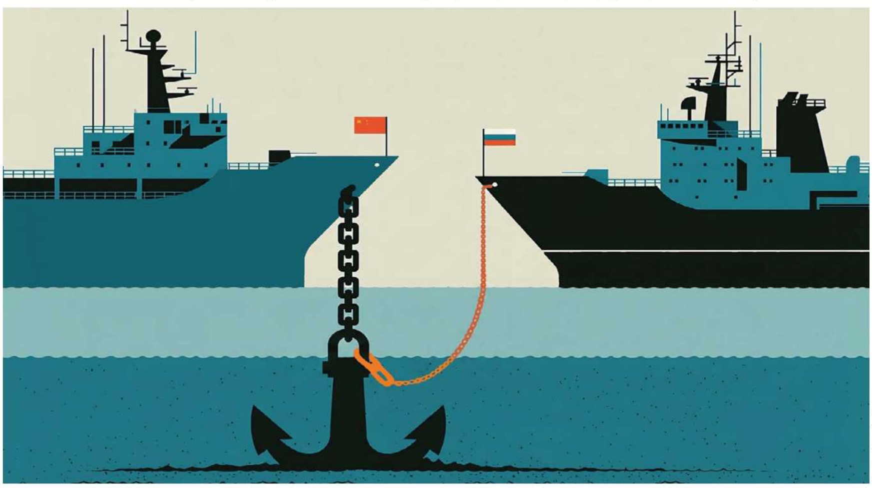


Illustration: Kaliz Lee

Hong Kong's chance to redefine its competitive strengths

Cheng Xianyue says city's five-year plan will shore up market with governance and vision

Hong Kong's decision to introduce its first five-year plan has prompted familiar questions. Does this signal greater government intervention at the expense of the free market? Will it make Hong Kong's development model more similar to that of the mainland? Could it overlap with the annual policy address and budget? And without detailed key performance indicators, might it become little more than a symbolic document?

These concerns deserve a serious response.

For Hong Kong, the purpose of a five-year plan is not to remake an open international city in the image of another development model. Rather, within the framework of "one country, two systems", it is to place Hong Kong's strengths, national strategic opportunities and local challenges within a coherent road map.

Hong Kong's past success rested on an open and flexible market, its free-port status and extensive links to global capital. Yet these advantages have been expressed mainly through its capacity to connect and allocate resources, rather than to create new economic structures. When land remains scarce, the industrial base is narrow and research outcomes struggle to reach the market, flexibility alone does not produce a new growth curve.

This reflects what economist Douglass North described as path dependence. The more efficient a system becomes at performing its functions, the more its participants are incentivised to optimise them for short-term gain. Over time, the system can become locked into an established model, limiting its willingness to explore alternatives.

Unless Hong Kong's traditional strengths are placed within a longer-term policy framework, government initiatives may fail to generate cumulative impact in the face of a flexible but impatient market. International capital values free flows, but also predictability. Talented people look not only at current opportunities but also at prospects. New industries require coordination across land, research, education, finance and institutions.

A five-year plan should therefore be understood as an instrument of long-term governance and a means of overcoming path dependence. The deeper purpose of planning is to create policy continuity and institutional momentum.

Hong Kong can no longer rely solely on its traditional advantages to sustain growth. Innovation and technology, international tertiary education, the Northern Metropolis and the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park within it are major initiatives. Unless they are integrated into a coherent strategy, policies will remain fragmented and the public will struggle to understand where Hong Kong is heading.

This shift requires a clearer understanding of the relationship between an effective government and an efficient market. The plan should bring them into closer alignment. Markets are good at identifying opportunities, allocating capital and encouraging innovation. But when Hong Kong faces long-term bottlenecks in housing, industrial land and infrastructure, market adjustments are unlikely to be enough. The government's role is to reduce uncertainty through strategic direction, institutional coordination and infrastructure investment.

> Hong Kong can no longer rely solely on its traditional advantages to sustain growth

In drafting the plan, the Hong Kong government has emphasised executive leadership while consulting the Legislative Council and the public. This combines top-down design with participation, allowing the government to take responsibility for long-term direction while leaving room for society to shape Hong Kong's future.

More importantly, the plan should be defined by clear priorities and choices. Over the next five years, three tasks should take priority: creating space for industrial development, closing the gap between universities and industry, and transforming financial and professional services into support for new sectors. Without progress, Hong Kong risks remaining trapped in a contradiction: it possesses many advantages, but generates too little new growth.

At the centre of this transformation is the Northern Metropolis. If Central represents Hong Kong's traditional model of finance-led growth, the Northern Metropolis should represent industry-led growth based on land, research, talent and cross-boundary collaboration.

Hong Kong's imbalance is that its financial centre is highly developed while its industrial hinterland remains weak. Without space for emerging industries, finance will eventually run short of compelling local growth stories.

The proposed university town is another crucial component. Hong Kong has five universities ranked among the world's top 100, yet their impact on the local industrial structure remains limited. The important question is whether they can translate academic excellence into industrial strength.

The strategic value of the university town is in connecting universities, research institutions, industrial estates, start-ups and residential communities, forming an integrated platform for talent development, research and commercialisation.

Housing, healthcare and elderly care must also be understood within this framework. They are not merely social costs but also foundations for retaining talent, stabilising expectations and rebuilding public confidence. The Northern Metropolis is expected to deliver more than 70,000 housing units and 1 million square metres of economic floor space over the next five years. The deeper significance lies in bringing housing, employment, education and healthcare into a single strategy, addressing a weakness in Hong Kong governance: many individual policies, but insufficient systemic coordination.

Ultimately, debate over the plan should focus on whether it can help the city break free from short-termism, departmental fragmentation and policy inertia.

For Hong Kong, this is a test of its governing capacity. Can it preserve its international character while strengthening strategic execution? Can it define its role within the national 15th five-year plan, address structural problems and create a stronger basis for development? If the plan can help Hong Kong move from passively connecting the world to actively shaping new sources of growth, it will mark the beginning of an era in which the city redefines its competitive strengths.

Cheng Xianyue is a member of the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies

LETTERS

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China's new human rights action plan is a significant move

In June, China released its fifth National Human Rights Action Plan for 2026-30. For the first time, the action plan devoted a section to business and human rights, setting out the state's commitment to support Chinese enterprises in abiding by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and fulfilling their human rights obligations at home and abroad.

The explicit inclusion of Chinese overseas investments is significant. As advocates for communities negatively impacted by investments from multilateral development banks and other financial institutions, we at Accountability Counsel know that cross-border investments can result in unintended environmental and social harms. We welcome that the Chinese government will commit resources to helping enterprises develop policies on complying with local laws and fulfilling social responsibilities and – crucially – improving complaint handling mechanisms. Our advocacy experience and database of over 2,400 submissions to complaint mechanisms situated within financial institutions, companies and government agencies shows that they can be transformative for local communities and institutions.

The test of any plan of this type will be in its implementation. We hope that it will include the further development and strengthening of two ongoing initiatives.

First, the government should continue to support the first-of-its-kind mediation and consultation mechanism set up by CCCMC (China Chamber of Commerce of Metals, Minerals & Chemicals Importers & Exporters), China's mining industry association. The mechanism seeks to facilitate mediation processes to resolve complaints from people concerned about negative impacts of mining projects abroad. It was established in 2023 through a collaborative effort that included input from civil society with experience in designing accountability processes. If done right, the mechanism will help fulfil China's ambition as a leader in green mining. As it starts handling its first cases, we call for adequate staffing and financial resources for case processing, and encourage mining companies to participate voluntarily and constructively.

Second, the government should publish implementation criteria for the 2022 green finance guidelines for banking and insurance, requiring all Chinese banks and insurers to manage environmental, social and governance risks, including by establishing complaints-handling mechanisms. This could take the form of a collective industry-wide mechanism run by the National Financial Regulatory Administration, or individual mechanisms hosted by each institution.

Communities have unique expertise in how to address harm. If they have trusted channels for sharing their advice with decision makers, the Chinese government's newly enshrined human rights ambitions are more likely to meet their mark.

Leo Lou, policy associate, Accountability Counsel

Investors eyeing Central Asia must note geographical reality

In his letter from Moscow, "Is Central Asia truly out of Russia's orbit?" (July 6), Mergen Mongush points out that while a chess pawn can transform, "a country can't move". Indeed, this unyielding geographical reality underpins the economic landscape of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Despite high-profile political pivots towards strategic diversification, the sheer gravity of Russian economic ties remains the definitive anchor for regional stability.

The hard data lays bare this structural dependency. According to the World Bank, personal remittances – mostly from migrants in Russia – amounted to 47 per cent of Tajikistan's gross domestic product in 2024. For Kyrgyzstan, the figure was 17 per cent.

This economic tether reaches far beyond Central Asia; in the South Caucasus, Armenia remains deep in Moscow's financial embrace, with Russian remittances totalling US$3.9 billion in 2025 and representing 13 per cent of the country's GDP.

Even Uzbekistan, a rapid growth engine attempting to carve out new economic pathways, finds the pull of the Russian labour market hard to resist.

Central Bank of Uzbekistan data for the first quarter of 2026 reveals that out of US$3.8 billion in money transfers, those from Russia accounted for 72.4 per cent. While alternative corridors are gradually opening, with Kazakhstan and South Korea nudging their remittance shares to 4.1 per cent and Europe to 3.3 per cent, Russia's financial footprint remains larger.

Such a heavy presence leaves regional household consumption acutely vulnerable to Moscow's regulatory whims. A clear case in point is when Moscow increased the monthly fee for its work patent, a legal employment permit required for visa-free workers from non-Eurasian Economic Union nations like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, from 8,900 to 10,000 roubles (HK$1,005) starting in January; for the first quarter of the year, Uzbek patent holders dropped 8.8 per cent quarter on quarter.

Ultimately, deep social ties, established migration networks, visa-free privileges and linguistic familiarity cannot be replicated overnight by nascent Western or Asian corridors. For global investors eyeing Central Asia, the enduring lesson is clear: while countries may attempt new moves, they are still playing on a chessboard heavily tilted by regional gravity.

Joseph Chan, chairman, Silk Road Economic Development Research Centre

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