Trial by fire

West Bengal should rebuild its crumbling, hazardous infrastructure

What is it with West Bengal and fires? Since 2025, there have been major fires, in hotels and in godowns, claiming some 65 lives, many of them poor and migrant workers and pilgrims. The State seems to be an egregious case of the generally poor fire safety record of Indian factories, industrial facilities as well as cities and towns built on top of greed, a disregard for laws, corruption, and scant respect for lives and property. The Shikha Inn was housed in a century-old building on Mirza Ghalib Street in Kolkata, which apparently had several hotels – on each of its five floors. It was obviously not built to be a hotel. Shikha Inn is typical of what happens in India, where old buildings with electrical systems designed for a certain load are quickly repurposed, and modern equipment is added without any consideration of whether the system can handle the air-conditioners, washing machines, heaters and induction stoves. The August 17 fire in Tarapith was apparently electrical too and the killer was the smoke. The fire spread rapidly because the pilgrim hotel used flammable materials extensively. Rituraj Hotel, which caught fire in April 2025, had also been repurposed. With just one stairway, the fire on the first floor cut off escape, and, just as in the Mirza Ghalib Street fire, smoke trapped those above.

For the new BJP government in West Bengal, the accidents have provided more fodder for its attacks on the TMC. Though Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari called the Kolkata fire "impossible to ignore", he nevertheless blamed a "legacy of negligence". This may well be true but serves little purpose. The present government has, similar to its predecessor, a dedicated Fire Minister. There have been promises of robust action such as a Statewide safety audit, but the focus seems to be more on the TMC than on corrective action. Mr. Adhikari should dismount the campaign horse and look at the elephant in the room – crumbling infrastructure. In its first 100 days, the government has been rather silent on the creaky infrastructure of West Bengal – a State with a rich history of urban life, industrialisation, culture and progressive politics that once led the nation, but now lags behind much of India in roads, buildings, amenities and governance. Urban renewal is the stock-in-trade of the BJP across India and West Bengal will be well served by a State BJP that adopts it. Heritage buildings and conservation have their own value, including for tourism, but require careful planning to suit today's needs. Mr. Adhikari should place governance above petty politics and focus on infrastructure.

Socialist surge

Affordability issues propel democratic socialists in the United States

As the Trump administration persists with its blunderbuss reshaping of American foreign policy – a marriage of hyperimperialism, with wars in West Asia, a de facto capture of power in Venezuela and the strangling of Cuba's fuel trade, and isolationism, seen in withdrawals from multilateral institutions and tariffs imposed on a whim – the world has been waiting for a political alternative to Trumpism to take shape. After 2024, when a vapid Democratic Party displayed little ideological gumption on foreign policy, welfare or taking on the plutocrats reshaping American democracy, the prospects looked slim. Then, in November 2025, Zohran Mamdani won New York City on a platform of decommodification – placing citizens' needs above market shibboleths – while openly calling Israel's war on Gaza a genocide. His victory did more than capture New York's imagination. It set off an insurgency by democratic socialists within Democratic Party ranks. In Michigan's August 4 primary, Abdul El-Sayed, a progressive backed by Independent Senator Bernie Sanders, won the Democratic nomination for the Senate despite pro-Israel groups spending heavily against him. Angie Nixon, a three-term State legislator who joined the Democratic Socialists of America in June, has won Florida's Democratic Senate nomination, having spent merely $60,000 on advertising as opposed to her moderate opponent's $2.2 million. Such results matter in a country where socialism has been used to evoke the Red Scare, even decades after the Cold War.

Mr. Sanders, whose unabashed democratic socialism is closer to European social democracy than to state ownership of the means of production, ran two presidential campaigns that prepared this ground while the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others showed its electoral viability in Democratic strongholds in House elections. In 2026, a new generation of democratic socialists has sharpened its methods and its reach. The focus on affordability in childcare, rent freeze, Medicare for All and taxing the rich while breaking with the Democratic Party's foreign policy consensus, including on funding Israel's military, has carried them beyond strongholds such as New York. The new cohort has not only won primaries but also registered a shift in the political outlook of many Americans. But caution is warranted. Taking on the Republican machine in November will be a far tougher task, especially if the Democratic establishment does not rally around its insurgents against Trumpism. Yet, supporters point to a deeply unpopular Mr. Trump, and a welfare-first message that could cut across the U.S.'s culture wars the Republicans will keep stoking. For the Global South, including Indians, the rise of democratic socialism as a viable force in the U.S. will be welcome, as its emphasis rests on fair trade and multilateral engagement, besides an end to Washington's forever wars.

Centre's fiscal outlook faces geopolitical, revenue risks

Geopolitical headwinds in the background of recently introduced tax changes would shape the Centre's fiscal outlook for 2026-27. Despite pressure on tax revenues and subsidies, strong non-tax receipts and policy interventions may keep fiscal outcomes broadly on track.



C. Rangarajan

Former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India



D.K. Srivastava

Member, Advisory Council to the Sixteenth Finance Commission and former Director of the Madras School of Economics

Central government finances for 2026-27 may remain close to budgeted levels

Centre's revenue receipts

As per the The Controller General of Accounts (CGA) data, the Centre's gross tax revenues (GTR) grew only by 3.7% in the first quarter of 2026-27. This was the result of subdued revenue performance of personal income tax (PIT) and Goods and Services Tax (GST), both of which were subjected to substantive modifications in 2025-26. In both cases, extensive rate rationalisation was undertaken. In the case of GST, there was a substantive rate reduction. The expectation was that while these reforms would entail an initial revenue sacrifice, subsequent expansion of the tax base would offset the revenue loss over time. PIT revenue growth in 2025-26 was only 0.037%, implying a buoyancy of zero. For the second half of 2025-26, GST revenue growth was 4.67%. The revenue reducing effect of these major tax interventions has continued in 2026-27. PIT shows a growth of 6.8% in the first quarter of 2026-27 while GST revenues showed a contraction of (-)11%.

In the meantime, the Indian economy was beset by the West Asian crisis and its related impact, including high and volatile global crude oil prices and other supply-side uncertainties. As retail fuel prices rose, the government reduced excise duties to ease the burden on consumers. This had a direct bearing on revenue from Union excise duties, which contracted by 22.4% in the first quarter of 2026-27.

In order to make up for the shortfall in revenue receipts, the government initiated some remedial measures. First, a Health Security se National Security (HSNS) Cess was introduced with effect from February 1, 2026 even as the GST Compensation Cess was discontinued. Second, the windfall tax on exports of diesel, petrol and aviation turbine fuel was increased effective August 3, 2026. Third, there was an increase in import duties through increased rates on gold and silver bullion and other specific precious metal articles, sweepings, and clad metals. One additional factor is the likelihood of a higher nominal GDP growth rate as compared to the budgeted growth of 10.04%. We expect the 2026-27 nominal GDP growth to be in the range of 12.5% to 13%. This projection reflects an expected real GDP growth of about 7% together with an Implicit Price Deflator (IPD)-based inflation of 5%-5.5%, consistent with the present trajectories of Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation at 3.9% and 9.3%, respectively, in the first quarter of 2026-27. We note that even with a higher nominal GDP growth rate, the magnitude of nominal GDP as per the 2022-23 base series is estimated at ₹391 lakh crore. This will be lower than the budgeted level at ₹393 lakh crore. On the whole, we consider that the estimated GTR would be realised or fall short by a small margin. At some suitable time, the reduction in excise duty on fuel prices must be restored.

Transfers to States

In estimating net tax revenue from GTR, a factor of 65%, which was the ratio of net to gross tax revenues in 2025-26 and 2026-27 (BE), can be applied since the Sixteenth Finance Commission (FC16) retained the share of States in the divisible pool of central taxes at 41%. There may be a marginal reduction in the shareable pool due to the introduction of the non-shareable HSNS Cess although some part of the revenues from this cess may go to the States as non-FC grants.

In the first quarter of 2026-27, there was a sharp contraction in tax devolution to the States to the extent of (-)19.5%. In subsequent months, there is an expectation of an increase in the assignment of central tax revenues to the States. Based on the FC16's recommendation, the FC grants for the States are budgeted to contract by an amount of ₹23,556 crore in 2026-27.

The Reserve Bank of India provided major fiscal support in the form of dividends, which were transferred to the Centre in May 2026. As a result, 77% of the budgeted dividends and profits for the full year had already been covered in the first three months. We expect the budgeted amounts for non-tax and non-debt capital receipts to be realised.

The Centre's non-tax revenues contributed 37% of its net revenue receipts in the first quarter of 2026-27. During the quarter, major subsidies had to be increased by 37.4% due to the unexpected rise in global crude oil prices, although the growth in revenue expenditure was contained at 7.4%. The Centre was able to front-load its capital expenditure in the first quarter of 2026-27, which grew by 23.7%, compared with a contraction of (-)23.3% in the fourth quarter of 2025-26.

For the year as a whole, the crisis in West Asia is likely to continue keeping global crude oil prices under pressure. If the major subsidies in the first quarter are extrapolated to estimate the annual subsidy requirement, realised subsidies are expected to exceed the budgeted amount by about ₹50,000 crore.

Debt and deficit

Using first-quarter data, the Centre's fiscal deficit accounted for 18.2% of the annual budgeted magnitude, while the corresponding share of the revenue deficit was 0.4%. The impressive revenue account balance is mainly due to the contribution of non-debt receipts.

Fiscal deficit, calculated as the increment in debt, is estimated at ₹18.16 lakh crore. If this is realised, the fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio, with respect to the new GDP series, is estimated at 4.6%. Correspondingly, the debt-to-GDP ratio is estimated at 55.8%. This is close to the budgeted level, taking into account the impact of the new GDP series. Some slippage may still occur due to a shortfall in tax revenues, an unbudgeted increase in revenue expenditure arising from additional subsidies, and a slightly higher external debt amid sustained pressure on the Indian rupee. As of now, significant deviations from the budgeted fiscal outcomes appear unlikely. However, an escalation of the war could deliver a major jolt to the economy and central finances.

The views expressed are personal

The Vanashakti verdict is balanced and pragmatic

The Supreme Court of India's landmark judgment delivered on July 29, 2026 in *Vanashakti vs Union of India* has brought much-needed clarity to one of the most debated issues in environmental regulation: the fate of projects that commenced without obtaining prior Environmental Clearance (EC).



Kalaiselvan Periyasamy

Environmental and social expert

The top court's verdict closes existing environmental clearance regularisation routes while leaving scope for a new framework

Wider policy impact

While the judgment firmly reiterates that obtaining prior EC is a mandatory legal requirement under the Environment Impact Assessment Notification (EIA) Notification, 2006, it also provides an important policy direction that could have far-reaching implications for thousands of industries, infrastructure projects and real estate developments across India.

The Court has categorically held that project proponents who commenced construction or operations without obtaining prior EC and that did not apply under the earlier violation mechanisms, cannot now seek regularisation under the 2017 Notification or the 2021 Standard Operating Procedure (Office Memorandum). Those mechanisms are no longer available for fresh cases.

At first glance, this may appear to shut the door completely on pending violation projects. However, a closer reading of the judgment reveals a far more balanced and pragmatic approach. One of the most significant aspects is the Court's recognition that the central government continues to possess the statutory power under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 to frame a fresh statutory mechanism for dealing with violation cases, if considered necessary in the larger public interest.

The Court has made an important distinction between an administrative office memorandum, which cannot override the requirement of prior EC, and a statutory notification issued under the powers conferred by the Environment (Protection) Act. While the former has been held to be legally unsustainable, the latter remains a permissible legislative option, provided it is carefully designed within the framework of environmental law.

This observation is likely to have significant policy implications. Across India, numerous industrial units, commercial developments, infrastructure projects and public utility projects remain in violation of the EC requirements for various reasons. Some projects proceeded due to regulatory uncertainty, others due to an incorrect interpretation of the law, while some simply failed to obtain the necessary approvals before commencement. Many such projects never applied under the earlier violation windows and have therefore been left without a legal pathway following the closure of the 2017 scheme and the striking down of the 2021 Office Memorandum.

The present judgment acknowledges this practical reality without compromising the fundamental principle that prior EC remains mandatory.

Where there is a balancing act

Importantly, the Court has not directed the central government to introduce a new regularisation scheme. Instead, it has clarified that the government may, if it considers it necessary, in the larger public interest, issue a fresh statutory notification providing a one-time opportunity for specified categories of violation projects.

The Court has also indicated the safeguards that such a notification must incorporate. Any future scheme cannot become a permanent "violate first, regularise later" mechanism. Instead, it should be strictly one-time, supported by statutory authority, and should include comprehensive environmental safeguards such as environmental damage assessment, remediation measures, environmental compensation and strict compliance conditions.

This balanced approach attempts to reconcile two equally important objectives. On one hand, environmental laws cannot encourage deliberate violations by allowing routine post-facto approvals, while on the other, indiscriminate closure or demolition of every violation project may not always serve either environmental protection or the larger public interest, particularly where projects are otherwise environmentally acceptable and substantial investments have already been made.

The judgment therefore reinforces the principle that environmental governance should combine strict enforcement with practical and scientifically sound regulatory solutions.

For project developers, industries and infrastructure agencies, the immediate message is straightforward. No fresh applications can now be made under the earlier violation mechanisms. However, the judgment also leaves open the possibility that the central government may formulate a fresh statutory framework to address pending violation cases in an environmentally responsible manner.

The regulatory road ahead

Whether such a policy initiative will be undertaken now rests entirely with the central government. Given the large number of pending projects across various sectors, industry associations, infrastructure developers, environmental professionals and other stakeholders are expected to closely watch the government's next steps. The judgment has effectively closed the old regulatory route but has simultaneously acknowledged that Parliament's environmental legislation still provides sufficient statutory authority for a carefully structured one-time solution, should the government consider such intervention necessary.

The July 2026 judgment is therefore significant not merely because it settles the legal validity of earlier violation mechanisms, but also because it charts the contours of any future policy on environmental regularisation. It preserves the integrity of the prior EC regime while leaving sufficient legislative space for the government to address genuine legacy violations through a lawful, transparent, and environmentally robust statutory framework.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The goal as good doctors

All necessary security measures should be put in place, at least from now on, so that paper leaks, court hearings, protests, administrative decisions, demands for accountability and the like become a thing of the past. While healthy competition, even if stiff, is welcome, it is unfair to subject medical aspirants to such teething troubles even before they make their deep medical plunge through the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (Undergraduate), which is supposed to be the ultimate test of their merit and mettle. There should be no scope for man-made manipulations that enable non-meritorious candidates to find shortcuts to becoming doctors and entering the profession. One can well imagine the adverse consequences of unworthy and undeserving persons becoming doctors and treating the public. Let us turn a new page and focus on producing good doctors.

R. Sampath,
Chennai

Perks, misplaced priorities

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's recent announcement to provide brand-new luxury cars and a monthly vehicle allowance of ₹75,000, plus additional staffing perks to all 234 MLAs is a staggering display of misplaced priorities. The vast majority of the elected representatives already own multiple personal vehicles or have ample logistical means. Handing out luxury State perks and unconditional monthly cash flows to affluent politicians while ordinary citizens struggle with inflation, crumbling local infrastructure, and unmet basic welfare needs shows a shocking disconnect from ground realities. To spend crores of taxpayer money on luxury upgrades for sitting politicians, under the guise of helping "humble backgrounds", is an insult to the public ("All T.N. MLAs to get car and assistant for constituency work", August 20). At a time when the State treasury must be guarded and prioritised for public health, education, and employment generation, spending crores of rupees on redundant vehicular luxuries for lawmakers is fiscally reckless. Public money belongs to the public, not to the comfort of already-privileged politicians.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Word 'industry' redefined

A substantial portion of Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer's judgment has been preserved for all pending disputes. The majority has held that the triple-test theory requires reconsideration. At the heart of the controversy, however, is Justice Krishna Iyer's judgment and the philosophy that informed it. It is a matter of some relief that his broad-based judgment, which provided a forum for the working class, has been preserved for pending litigation. It is unfortunate, however, that the benefit of this liberal approach has not been extended to the millions of toiling workers for whom Justice Krishna Iyer was a beacon of hope. It is also refreshing that Justice B.V. Nagarathna has upheld the principles enunciated by Justice Krishna Iyer in the Bangalore Water Supply case and held that the reference itself was unnecessary. At the same time, one must take note of the damage caused by the definition of "industry" under the Industrial Relations Code. The Code adopts a highly conservative definition that excludes a number of activities, thereby leaving sections of the working class vulnerable and without adequate legal protection. This is a moment for the working class to organise rather than depend on legislative prescriptions or judicial interpretations for their survival, dignity and progress. The battle lines have been drawn.

N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

Can free public technology break the private coaching industry?



Buddha Chandra-sekhar

Chief Coordinating Officer of the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) and CEO, Anuvadini AI, run under the Ministry of Education



Anubhav Shrivastava

Co-founder of Theory of Physics

PARLEY

In his 2026 Independence Day address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the government will roll out free online coaching for competitive exams using India's digital public infrastructure. The announcement was made in a bid to reach out to the Gen-Z youth, especially following the widespread student protests against the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) paper leak. The objective of the PM's announcement was to save poor and middle-class families thousands of crores while also helping students prepare without leaving their homes. However, can free public technology break the private coaching industry? Buddha Chandrasekhar and Anubhav Shrivastava discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Maitri Porecha**.

How do you view the announcement made by PM Modi to provide free online coaching?

Buddha Chandrasekhar: Prime Minister Modi's announcement on August 15 is a major intervention in education equity. We need to see it as an opportunity to redesign the entire competitive exam preparation ecosystem so that the probability of success depends less on family income, geography and access to an elite coaching centre. India has digital public infrastructure, teachers and talent. We can create a better personalised and customised free online coaching network.

Anubhav Shrivastava: I see it as an announcement that can bring reforms in the education system. But accessibility and affordability are not the main issues here; the issue is deeper. It is about the dependency of the Indian education system on coaching. We need to see whether the launching of this new programme will effectively kill this dependency (on private elite coaching); if not, it will just be another free access platform where videos will be uploaded every day. It will just be another video library.

Will the prospect of free online coaching really kill the dependency on private and elite coaching? Also, India has an existing public digital infrastructure with education platforms such as Swayam, Saathi and so on. How then can shifting to online modules be an alternative to the coaching industry?

BC: The existing platforms are very traditional in nature. We need to create Agentic AI-based systems suitable for Gen Z youth where they can experiment without going to the classroom. They want everything to be mobile based and they want quick content delivery in different formats. We are not able to meet these expectations. It is not that our systems are bad; our systems are not designed for them. This is the problem statement that needs to be accepted so that we can create better systems.



Students engaged in last-minute preparation for the NEET re-examination in front of an exam centre in Salem, Tamil Nadu on June 21. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN. E

Why do we need coaching centres when we have very good schools and colleges? Because there is a fundamental difference between what is taught in school and what is asked in competitive exams. The school aims to conceptualise learning and focuses on board examinations whereas competitive exams ask a student a question to understand whether they can outperform millions of other students under severe time pressure. These are two different dimensions altogether. And that basically requires a separate skill set altogether. In coaching centres, students learn how to do rapid problem solving and deploy different test strategies. If you know how to eliminate the wrong options and figure out the right answer, you will get a better rank in competitive exams.

But online coaching cannot cover everything. What about personalised feedback and a competitive peer environment? I'm sure after your parents and friends, you still remember your school teachers. The reason is because they emotionally and academically mentor you. I think we need to create a hybrid mechanism. As the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 encourages skill hubs, we need to make sure there are skill hubs in schools which students can attend physically and get mentored in regular intervals along with online classes. We need to create a digital twin of everything. If you have a digital twin, students will tweak it and use it as per their needs. Gen Z wants an immersive experience – so it needs to be digital first, along with human assistance.

AS: The main objectives of school and board examinations are totally different. In Class 9 and 10, students are less dependent on coaching. In Class 11 and 12, when they start preparing for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and NEET, they start depending on coaching because they have to solve complex questions. The curriculum is not designed in a way that can make a student well prepared for the upcoming examinations. So there's a huge gap between the objectives of the two.

> Just providing free access to lectures is not going to work for the students. We need to find out what the coaching industry provides to the students which they don't get from anywhere else. The classes are structured and deliver on what they promise
> **ANUBHAV SHRIVASTAVA**

Just providing free access to lectures is not going to work for the students. We need to find out what the coaching industry provides to the students which they don't get from anywhere else. The classes are structured and deliver on what they promise – there are weekly assessments and doubt solving forums. Moreover, in the coaching industry, not all courses cost lakhs and thousands. Some tutors like me create an application which offers students all this for a minimum application charge of around ₹700-₹800. The government has ample funds, with Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) at their disposal. They can make coaching free of cost: but not just the lectures, this entire structure has to be incorporated.

India has over 100 major national-level exams, including the UPSC, JEE and NEET that attract millions of aspirants. To build coaching for all of them at one point will be diluting quality, so what should be the scope of such a plan?

BC: The current thought process of the government is one course per exam. But instead, we can create a common competitive learning stack. About 70% to 80% of these exams have similar kinds of requirements for reasoning, language, general awareness, and current affairs. We can create a national competitive learning and opportunity grid and have a layered way of selection. The student can easily adopt layers depending on the exam.

AS: I don't feel the common stack model works. I teach physics for both NEET and JEE aspirants. There is a huge difference in teaching the subject for both exams. While fundamental concepts are the same, the nature of the examination is different. So, you have to take different classes for them. A common grid could be a futuristic plan but I don't think it's currently feasible. There should be one proper dedicated platform per examination.

There are millions of students who face a double hurdle. One is that there is a lack of reliable, high-speed Internet and electricity for online coaching and that exam centres are located hundreds of kilometres away. So how do you bridge the last mile?

BC: 3G and 4G level implementation in our country has already reached tribal areas. But let us assume it's a very difficult terrain, where Internet penetration is very less and there are frequent disconnects – there satellite technology can be explored. A small, compact ground antenna box can be installed at a remote exam centre. Instead of relying on local broadband or mobile networks, the antenna connects directly to Low Earth Orbit (LEO) or Geostationary (GEO) satellites – similar to satellite TV broadcasting. The base station receives the question paper from the satellite, stores it locally, and acts as an offline server to display or transmit it short-range to students. Students write their answers using pen and paper placed over a small smart digital pad (equipped with short-range wireless capabilities such as NFC/radio waves). As the student writes, the digital pad captures the answers, encrypts the data locally, and saves it in real time – requiring no active Internet connection during the test. Once the exam ends and a satellite link connects, the local base station securely uploads all encrypted answer files back to the central examination authority.

This is the way TV broadcasting works. So when we can watch OTTs like this, why can't we can conduct an exam using it? There are some gaps as of now, but we can cover this.

AS: For catering to the last mile student, we have existing infrastructure – we just have to improve it. We can install smart boards as I have been doing near cities where we deliver classes. You can provide them with all the lectures, and a mentor can play the video and make students understand concepts by doing some of the activities in front of them.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Behind the byline

There is a whole team of people who strive to see every story through; readers seldom know of them

Sunalini Mathew

Other than verify-verify-verify, very few lessons have stuck with me from my time in J-school (journalism school). One of those that did was by an editor, now no more, who guffawed as he told the class that he could bring out the newspaper without most of the editorial staff, but would never be able to do so if the printing press went on strike. It was my first lesson in the humility he expected from a journalist.

Around the period I joined journalism – an embarrassingly long time ago – 24x7 news channels came into our lives, and the cult of the star reporter was born. We saw them on hoardings high above traffic; on our screen as they covered wars live from bunkers on the frontlines; and at starry book launches where they were either releasing their own book or talking to someone who was releasing theirs.

Then came Twitter, renamed X, which extended that culture. And LinkedIn, an MBA-project, where the most vocal wins. When 'likes', 'shares', and 'comments' become a part of the race to celebrity, even if it is just among colleagues, it hides stories – stories of other people who have helped create the byline.

Enabling the reporter to do a good story are many hands. Several times, city reporters who need to file from a village may not have local contacts. English language newspapers are not as well-entrenched in rural communities across States as the local media may be. Big-city reporters reach out to these regional-language reporters for help. They are seldom part of the byline.

Also behind the byline are teams of people fact-checking, designing pages, and performing that most difficult task of all: getting reporters to file by a deadline. Today, as more and more people whose first language is not English enter the workforce, we even have a rewrite desk. They too work behind the spotlight.

Then there are the 'deskies', those who work the night shift, writing headlines, restructuring sentences, asking the reporter for more information. And editors, who identify potential stories and commission them to reporters, then prepare for back-ups just in case a story falls through.

These are all people who work on a single story. Unlike the stream of credits on a film or even sometimes on a YouTube video, the number of people who support a single reporter do a single story do not get a credit roll.

There are also the various organisational segments such as the advertising department that helps sustain the organisation, a brand team that promotes the brand, and the administrative department that makes sure reporters have transport and money.

The look-at-me culture is of course a top-down phenomenon. U.S. President Donald Trump has said he is "really smart" and is a "stable genius". Prime Minister Narendra Modi has himself photographed from various angles. And let's be honest, in a job-scarce market, it is almost mandatory to 'put yourself out there'.

In the process, what is lost is the acknowledgment of teamwork. Business magazines lean into the trope that says, "she made it on her own". But maybe she did have someone who cared enough to help her push through: a family member, a mentor, a friend. There are many people to thank on a reporter's journey: an editor who made a budget available, a cab driver who got you through difficult terrain, or a colleague who had nothing to do with the story but read it and gave feedback.

Mostly though, it is the people reporters talk to for stories, people who open their hearts and homes to them – the man from a tribe fighting oppression in the mines; the woman who had been sexually assaulted in a conflict zone; or a parent who has lost a child to suicide.

So the next time you see "Read my story..." on X, remember, it is not only "my" story. It is a story that belongs to many who have accorded the reporter the privilege of recording history. When awards are won, how many times do reporters look back at the people they wrote about, to say, "Thank you, I'm here because of you."

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A raging thirst



Parched and wandering: An elephant herd passes by a withering patch of greenery in the Bhavanisagar reservoir in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu on August 17. The severe deficit of rainfall during the southwest monsoon has led to a water shortage in the reservoir. Last year, the reservoir storage was at full capacity but now it is at 19.56%. M. PERIASAMY

FROM THE ARCHIVES
The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 21, 1976

New agencies pool: summit support

Colombo, August 20: The fifth non-aligned summit has welcomed the decision of the New Delhi conference to set up a Press Agencies Pool for non-aligned countries and urged its earliest implementation.

The political declaration by the summit said a "new international order" in the fields of information and mass communication was as "vital as a new international economic order."

The non-aligned countries, it said, noted with concern the vast and evergrowing gap between communication capacities in non-aligned countries and in the advanced countries, which was a legacy of their colonial past. The declaration said this had created a situation of dependence and domination in which the majority of countries were reduced to being passive recipients of "biased, inadequate and distorted" information.

The fuller affirmation of their national and cultural identity thus required them to rectify the serious imbalance and take urgent steps to provide greater momentum in this area of mutual cooperation. The declaration said the emancipation and development of national information media was an integral part of the overall struggle for independence.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 21, 1926

Calcutta's foreign trade

Calcutta, August 18: Calcutta's trade with foreign countries in July 1926, compared with the preceding month, shows a smart advance in the total value of imports from Rs. 5.74 crores to Rs. 8.03 crores, but a failing off in exports from Rs. 9.41 crores to Rs. 8.77 crores. Compared with the trade during the corresponding period last year, imports record a remarkable improvement by Rs. 223 lakhs, while exports declined by Rs. 24 lakhs. Imports of cotton goods continued in great demand which rose from Rs. 218 lakhs to Rs. 304 lakhs.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Acres of forest area damaged after fire set by miscreants

10 A forest fire allegedly set by miscreants has damaged around 10 acres in the Shilubepura forest area in Karnataka's Chamarajanagar district, days after a poaching prevention camp was blown up. Officials suspect miscreants set it on fire to avenge the killing of three poachers. PTI

Number of alternative MUDA site allotments to be cancelled

1,100 The Karnataka government has directed MUDA to cancel all allotments of alternative sites made in violation of its March 2023 directive. With this order, about 1,100 illegally allotted alternative sites will be cancelled in Mysuru city. PTI

Doses of Ervebo vaccine to be provided for DR Congo

70,000 The World Health Organization said on Thursday that the Ebola-hit Democratic Republic of Congo would receive 70,000 doses of Ervebo vaccine approved for protecting against the virus. AFP

Cooperative sector initiatives announced by Tamil Nadu

39 Tamil Nadu Minister V. Gandhiraj on Thursday announced 39 initiatives to promote women's financial independence and modernise the cooperative sector, including Singapengal Entrepreneurship Credit Scheme with an allocation of ₹7,015 crore. PTI

Amount approved by Maharashtra to install fire alarm systems

14.91 in ₹ crore. Maharashtra has approved ₹14.91 crore for installing Internet of Things (IoT)-based fire alarm systems at 24 regional transport offices and deputy RTOs across the State. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The 'Vimal Elaichi' promotion question

What has the Maharashtra FDA alleged against the three actors? Why does the FDA see Vimal Elaichi as surrogate promotion? Which laws does it say the advertisement violates? What penalties can be imposed for misleading endorsements? What happens if the actors fail to respond to the notice?

EXPLAINER

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:
The Maharashtra Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) has issued notices to actors Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn and Tiger Shroff over their endorsement of 'Vimal Elaichi', alleging that the advertisements could amount to surrogate or indirect promotion of Vimal Pan Masala, a prohibited tobacco-related product in the State. The notices invoke provisions of food safety, consumer protection and tobacco-control laws and ask the actors to respond within 15 days. The FDA, under Commissioner Tukaram Mundhe, has also directed the removal of all content associated with the advertisement.



Brand bait: The Maharashtra Food and Drugs Administration notices invoke provisions of food safety, consumer protection, and tobacco-control laws. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Why does the FDA see the ad as surrogate promotion?
"Considering the nature of the advertisement, the identity of the brand, its presentation, visual elements, dialogue, product name, the market identity of the brand and the context in which the advertisement is presented, a serious question arises as to whether the said advertisement amounts to indirect, surrogate or other forms of promotion of a prohibited/restricted tobacco-related product. In particular, if the use of the "VIMAL" brand under the name of Elaichi or a similar product is intended to maintain, reinforce or enhance the brand identity and consumer attraction associated with pan masala/tobacco related products, such communication may not merely constitute an advertisement for an independent product, but may amount to indirect or surrogate promotion of a prohibited/restricted product," the notice issued by FDA stated.

Which legislation do such advertisements violate?
The FDA has said that such advertisements are in contravention of various sections of the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, and the rules and regulations framed thereafter. These include Section 24, which restricts advertisements and prohibits unfair trade practices relating to food, including misleading advertisements.

Under the Food Safety and Standards (Advertising and Claims) Regulations, 2018, Food Business Operators and marketers are required to ensure that their advertisements are truthful, unambiguous and not misleading. They are also prohibited from making claims that encourage excessive consumption of a particular food. The FDA has said that the advertisement also contravenes the Food Safety and Standards (Prohibition and Restrictions on Sales) Regulations, 2011, which pertain to substances that may be injurious to health. "Pan Masala is a regulated food product under the FSSAI regulatory framework, and compliance with all applicable legal provisions relating to its manufacture, marketing, sale and advertisement is mandatory," the FDA said in its notice.

The agency has also said that the advertisement violates the Central Consumer Protection Authority's 2022 guidelines on the prevention of misleading advertisements and endorsements, as well as the provisions prohibiting advertisements under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003 (COTPA).

What is the penalty for violating these rules?
Under Section 21 of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the Central Consumer Protection Authority can direct the discontinuation or modification of a false or misleading advertisement and impose a penalty of up to ₹10 lakh on the endorser. For subsequent contraventions, the penalty may extend to ₹50 lakh. The authority can also prohibit the endorser from endorsing any product for up to one year. For subsequent contraventions, the ban may extend to three years.

Do the actors have to appear in person?
No. They can submit a written explanation either in person or through a duly authorised representative. They will have to send the explanation along with the documentary evidence. "Should you desire to be heard in person, you may indicate the same in your written explanation, whereupon an opportunity of personal hearing, either in person or through a duly authorised representative, shall be afforded to you, in accordance with the principles of natural justice," the notice has stated.

If they fail to respond within the stipulated period, or if their response is found unsatisfactory, they may face action under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, "without any further reference or notice to you (the actors)." The FDA has said that in the absence of a satisfactory explanation, "it shall be presumed that you have nothing to state in the matter."

THE GIST

- Maharashtra FDA has issued notices to Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn and Tiger Shroff over their Vimal Elaichi endorsements, alleging the ads could amount to surrogate promotion of prohibited Vimal Pan Masala.
- The FDA says the brand name, visuals, dialogue and market identity could reinforce Vimal's association with pan masala, potentially violating food safety, consumer protection and tobacco-control laws.
- The actors have 15 days to respond to the notices; failure to give a satisfactory explanation could lead to action under the Food Safety and Standards Act.

How will Gaganyaan's thermal shield protect the crew?

Why does Gaganyaan need a thermal protection system? How does its ablative heat shield work?

Unnikrishnan Nair S.

The atmospheric phase of all space missions is challenging for both ascending rockets and descending space capsules.

As the rocket lifts off from the earth and heads towards its orbit, it accelerates slowly through the atmosphere to keep the mechanical loads on the vehicle to a minimum. When a space capsule, like the Gaganyaan crew module, re-enters from its orbit around the earth, it will hit the atmosphere at a blistering speed of 7,500-8,000 m/s. More than 99% of this kinetic energy will be dissipated into the atmosphere as heat energy. However, a small portion directed back towards the module will still be intense enough to melt it if it is not protected by a robust thermal protection system (TPS).

Why is re-entry challenging?
Compared to rockets, re-entering modules have a unique set of challenges. Foremost among them is that once the descent begins, there is no provision to abort the mission. Another constraint is the limited role for the crew to intervene and correct any system non-conformance. This is because atmospheric descent is incredibly fast and the deceleration forces change constantly. Human response times are simply too high to manually correct any sudden system abnormality. Hence, all the systems should be made robust enough to withstand the scorching conditions of re-entry. During re-entry, the exterior of the Gaganyaan crew module will encounter temperatures as high as 1,800° C in some regions. To withstand this heat, the module will rely on its protective external heatshield. Despite being just 30-35 mm thick, this TPS will perform the critical task of maintaining the module's structural integrity by keeping its temperature safely below 150° C.

How does TPS protect the crew module?
A TPS is predominantly classified into three types depending on how it removes heat: ablative, radiative, and heat sink. An ablative TPS is a single-use TPS that removes heat energy by sacrificing its layers through chemical and physical processes. Specifically, the TPS will absorb extreme quantities of thermal energy and itself chemically decompose into a protective layer of solid char and outgassing vapours. This process physically carries heat away from the module as the material burns off. In addition, the escaping gases create a cooler boundary layer that acts as a buffer, blocking intense heat from being transferred into the module. For a simple metaphor, it is like a block of wax that absorbs heat by melting and shedding its outer layers. Carbon phenolic and silica phenolic are good examples of an ablative TPS. India's maiden re-entry mission, the 'Space Capsule Recovery Experiment' (SRE), used a carbon phenolic ablative to protect the module's nose cap, where heat flux was the highest. The Crew Dragon capsule of SpaceX uses an ablative named phenolic-impregnated carbon ablator, or PICA, a lightweight carbon fibre matrix filled with a phenolic resin.

The LVM-3/CARE mission that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) conducted in 2014 successfully demonstrated crew module reentry using an ablative TPS, establishing the foundational technology that is now being used in the Gaganyaan programme.

A radiative TPS setup works by absorbing the extreme heat of re-entry, then releasing it back into space as electromagnetic radiation, primarily in the infrared spectrum but also as visible light when it is extremely hot. This is like a traditional clay tandoor oven, where the clay walls absorb heat from the burning charcoal and radiate it back as infrared energy to bake the food.

A radiative TPS will remain intact and withstand the heat without melting or degrading, making it ideal for reusable re-entry vehicles.

Third, a heat sink TPS protects itself by absorbing the heat energy like a giant sponge and raising its own temperature, but without melting or changing its phase in any other way. This is what happens when you pour hot tea into a copper cup. The cup will absorb the heat from the tea and become hot – but it also stays solid. In fact, copper and aluminium are good examples of heat-sink TPS setups.

Why does the crew module use an ablative TPS?
The Gaganyaan crew module uses an ablative TPS because it is a proven, highly robust solution tailored to the module's single-use design philosophy. An ablative TPS can withstand an extreme thermal load without requiring complex or delicate surface maintenance.

Ablative heat shields can easily handle fluctuating heat loads to protect the structure underneath. Radiative systems are less forgiving, as any design errors can quickly cause dangerous overheating. So by avoiding expensive manufacturing, specialised inspection and complex installation processes associated with a reusable radiative TPS, ISRO is opting for a safer, more cost-effective choice.

Built on ISRO's rich heritage in ablative technology and lessons learned from the SRE and CARE missions, the Gaganyaan crew module is engineered to safely bring India's astronauts home through the inferno of reentry – with its first uncrewed test flight launching shortly.

(Unnikrishnan Nair S. is an expert in launch vehicle systems, orbital re-entry, and human spaceflight technologies. He is currently the Dr Sarabhai Professor at VSSC)

THE GIST

- Gaganyaan's crew module will face temperatures of up to 1,800°C during re-entry, with its thermal protection system keeping the structure safely below 150°C despite the extreme heat.
- ISRO has chosen an ablative heat shield that absorbs intense thermal energy, decomposes into char and vapours to carry heat away, and builds on technology demonstrated by the SRE and CARE missions.

KEYWORD

Beyond blasphemy: how laws can curtail the possibility of social reform

Section 295A and similar laws have been used against writers, artists and reformers, with arrest, threats and pre-emptive censorship often causing harm before trial; their coexistence with laws targeting regressive religious practices exposes the lack of a coherent approach to religious sentiment

Prathmesh Kher

The history of Section 295A and its cousins shows how easily laws meant to prevent communal violence have instead been turned against the critique of regressive or simply unconventional religious practice. In 1932, a small collection of Urdu short stories called *Angarey*, which attacked obscurantist customs and the sexual hypocrisy of some religious figures, was banned soon after publication, and its authors faced threats. Seven Indian States banned the film and book *The Da Vinci Code* in 2006 on the ground that it offended Christian sentiment, a ban two States later lifted only after High Court intervention.

More recent cases show the pattern continuing under a veneer of literary and scholarly respectability. Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* was withdrawn by Penguin India in 2014 after a civil suit invoking Section 295A. Tamil novelist Perumal Murugan faced a criminal complaint and a mob campaign over his novel *Madhorubagan*; he announced his own "death" as a writer in 2015 rather than face continued harassment. It took a landmark 2016 Madras High Court judgment, which closed with the appeal to "let the author be resurrected to what he is best at, write," to quash the case and restore his right to publish. The painter M.F. Husain was hounded into exile and death abroad after decades of prosecutions and threats over his nude depictions of Hindu deities. Taslima Nasrin's writing has met similar treatment, and the government's 1988 ban on importing Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* made India one of the first countries, a secular one at that, in the world to act against that novel.

The provision has, if anything, found new life in the era of social media and televised debate, where the underlying act being punished has grown thinner still. In 2018, weeks after the Supreme Court lifted the traditional ban on women of menstruating age entering the Sabarimala temple, the Kerala activist Rehana Fathima was arrested under Section 295A over a Facebook photograph of herself dressed as an Ayyappa devotee, spent over two weeks in judicial custody, and was suspended by her employer within days of her arrest, all over an image rather than an argument. In 2020, the television anchor Amish Devgan called the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti a '*lootera*' during a live debate, apologised within days for what he said was an inadvertent slip for a different historical name, and still faced seven separate FIRs across five States; the Supreme Court declined to quash any of them, merely clubbing them together in Ajmer. These cases rarely end in conviction; more often the prosecution goes nowhere. What unites them is that the damage is done well before any verdict, through arrest, through the heckler's veto of an aggressive, sometimes violent audience, and through the pre-emptive caution of publishers and film certifiers who calculate, reasonably, that no book or film is worth the trouble.



GETTY IMAGES

The other direction

It would be unfair to the complexity of Indian law, to present this as a single uninterrupted march towards religious censorship. India also has statutes that go the other way, actively empowering the State to attack religious or superstitious practice, and the constitutional foundation for this other tendency was laid before the Constitution had even been adopted. Speaking in the Constituent Assembly on December 2, 1948, during the debate on whether personal law should be shielded from legislative reform, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar rejected the idea that religion could claim a veto over social legislation merely because a given custom carried religious sanction. "I personally do not understand why religion should be given this vast, expansive jurisdiction so as to cover the whole of life and to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field... We are having this liberty in order to reform our social system... It is, therefore, quite impossible for anybody to conceive that the personal law shall be excluded from the jurisdiction of the State," Dr. Ambedkar said.

Maharashtra's Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, passed in 2013 after the assassination of the rationalist campaigner Narendra Dabholkar, criminalises a long list of exploitative religious practices, from claiming to cure disease through faith healing to inducing self-flagellation. Karnataka passed a similar law in 2017. The Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987 goes further still, criminalising not only the act of widow immolation but the glorification of it, treating celebratory speech about a religious practice as itself an offence, the mirror image of a blasphemy law rather than its opposite.

The coexistence of these two tendencies, laws that punish criticism of religion and laws that mandate criticism of religious practice, suggests that Indian law has no coherent theory of when religious sentiment deserves protection. What actually governs is a case-by-case political calculation about which practices are currently unpopular enough, or which constituencies are currently powerful enough, to tip the balance one way or the other.

The reformer as blasphemer

The starkest illustration of what this body of law puts at risk is not the outsider mocking a faith he does not share, but the insider attacking his own. In The *State of Mysore versus Henry Rodrigues*, decided by the Mysore High Court in 1961, a Catholic editor named Henry Rodrigues was tried under Section 295A over an article in his Konkani-language magazine *Crusader*, titled "*Honour to Mary or Dishonour?*", which accused Catholic priests of exploiting the credulous by falsely attributing miracles to the Virgin Mary. His defence argued that since the criticised beliefs and practices were, in his view, superstitious and contrary to the Bible itself, the truth of his charge ought to absolve him. The court, following an earlier Allahabad High Court ruling, rejected this outright: even a wholly true statement, it held, can outrage religious feelings, and Section 295A punishes the intent to outrage rather than the accuracy of what is said. A believer's sincere, internally argued complaint against his own clergy was treated exactly as the law treats a stranger's contempt.

The doctrine that truth is no defence is what should give the sharpest pause to anyone tempted to think of a blasphemy law as merely a shield against bigotry. India's own history is built on reformers who succeeded only because they were prepared to be called blasphemers by their own people. Jyotirao Phule spent the 1870s attacking Brahminical religious authority as the theological scaffolding of caste oppression, recasting Hindu myth in his tract *Gulamgiri* to expose it as a device for keeping the lower castes subjugated. A century later, Hamid Dalwai founded the Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal explicitly on Phule's model, marched a handful of Muslim women to the Maharashtra Assembly to demand an end to triple talaq and polygamy, and was ostracised and abused for it. Neither man set out to comfort the pious. Both set out to unsettle them, because unsettling belief is what the reform of belief requires; it is not hard to imagine how a modern Section 299 complaint, or a Punjab-style sacrilege charge over their treatment of scripture and tradition, would read against language of that kind.

A law that criminalises the "deliberate and malicious" intention to outrage religious feeling, read honestly rather than sympathetically, does not obviously distinguish a Phule or a Dalwai from a bigot baiting a rival faith for sport: both are, in the plainest sense, trying to make believers feel bad about what they believe. What should separate them, in any society that values reform as much as it values sentiment, is whether the critic is trying to improve the community or merely humiliate it, a distinction that a police station taking down a complaint is poorly placed to draw.

Limits of protection

Supporters of laws like Punjab's have an argument, and it deserves to be engaged with rather than waved off. India is a country where religious sentiment has repeatedly proved combustible. A targeted law, applied with judicial restraint and the safeguard of proven intent, could in principle be a proportionate response to that risk rather than an assault on free thought.

The historical record of Section 295A, and now of Punjab's own sacrilege law, gives little confidence that restraint is what actually happens in practice.

A secular Constitution that permits the state to imprison people for life over an insult to a book, however sacred, has conceded more ground to religious authority than its own founding principle allows. If India wishes to remain true to the secularism its Constitution declares unamendable, the honest path is to narrow these provisions to their original, defensible purpose: preventing incitement to actual violence, and leave the criticism, satire and reform of religious practice, however uncomfortable, to public argument rather than to the criminal courts.

(This concludes the three-part series)

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Here is a quiz on Bajirao I, the Maratha Peshwa whose swift campaigns reshaped 18th-century India

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1
Which Maratha ruler appointed Bajirao I as Peshwa in 1720?

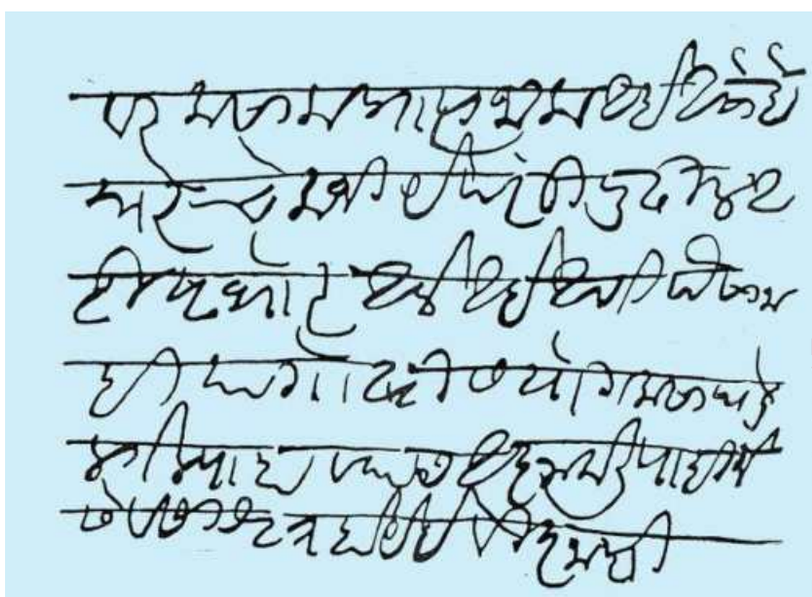
QUESTION 2
Bajirao I is particularly associated with which form of warfare, relying on speed, mobility and cavalry rather than slow, set-piece engagements?

QUESTION 3
Which Bundela ruler sought Bajirao's assistance against the Mughal commander Muhammad Khan Bangash?

QUESTION 4
Which battle of December 1737 saw Bajirao confront the Nizam and allied Mughal forces near a fortified town?

QUESTION 5
Bajirao died in 1740 on the banks of which major river?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. When was the competition first held? **Ans: 1991**
2. Where was the inaugural tournament held? **Ans: China**
3. Which country has won the tournament the maximum number of times? **Ans: USA**
4. Which country is scheduled to host the 2027 edition? **Ans: Brazil**
5. Starting from which year will the number of finalists once again increase from 32 to 48? **Ans: 2031**
Visual: In this image, which team won the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup title? **Ans: USA**
Early Birds: Dil Bahadur Airee | Varghese Joseph | Sadhan Panda | Monika Sinha | Prabhat Kumar



Visual Question: This is a copy of Bajirao I's handwriting. Identify the script used in it. PUBLIC DOMAIN



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"What is the matter with you?"

"I have been thinking about our Indian cricket team. I feel absolutely miserable whenever they lose."

"Don't eat your heart out about a bunch of overpaid underachievers!"

"Eat my heart out?"

"When you tell someone not to 'eat his heart out' about something or someone, you are telling him not to grieve or feel sad about something or someone."

"Sumithran has been eating his heart out ever since his neighbour sold her house and moved to another town."

"My cousin Anuradha ate her heart out when she was forced to sell her grandmother's diamonds."

"Our team didn't win. But don't eat your heart out."

"That should be the attitude. By the way, the expression, 'eat your heart out' has another meaning as well. It can mean, 'to be jealous'."

"I see. How about this example? When my friend heard that I had won twenty lakhs in a lottery, he ate his heart out."

"That's good. Do you think you will ever win twenty lakhs in a lottery?"

"Who knows? Some day fate may decide to smile on me."

"It already has. That's why you have a friend like me! Anyway, here's another example. Look you guys; these five new cars belong to me. So eat your heart out."

"That's a nasty thing to say."

"I know! And you know what the sad part is? I'll never get a chance to say something like that in real life."

"Thank god for that. By the way, I've started taking tennis lessons. Hewitt, eat your heart out. How does that sound?"

"You expect Hewitt to be jealous because you have started playing tennis?"

"Yes, because pretty soon I will be beating him!"

"Keep dreaming. I don't think the fact that you are learning tennis is going to eat away at Hewitt."

"Eat away at Hewitt?"

"When something 'eats away at someone' or 'eats at someone', it troubles or worries the person. This is one of the meanings of the expression."

"The terrible state of the company was eating away at Raju."

"Vinita's financial problems ate away at her day and night."

"Vinita has financial problems? But I thought she was very rich."

"Her father is very rich, that's true."

"…. so why doesn't she ask her father for some money?"

"Are you crazy? He'll eat her out."

"He'll eat her out? The expression probably means to scold someone severely. Am I right?"

"I am impressed. Can you give me an example?"

"The Principal ate the teacher out and put the fear of God into her."

"Didn't the other teachers protest?"

"That was just an example. The Principal that we have now is too timid to eat anyone out."

"The coach ate the player out for playing an irresponsible shot."

"When the students walked in half an hour late, the Professor really ate them out."

"That was a good example. By the way, how did you guess the meaning of 'eat someone out'?"

"Well, 'eat someone out' sounds like 'chew someone out'. And I know that 'chew someone out' means to scold someone."

"Very good."

Published in The Hindu on September 18, 2001

Word of the day

Diatribe:
thunderous verbal attack

Synonyms: tirade, attack, rant, criticism

Usage: *She went on a diatribe about bad customer service.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/diatribe

International Phonetic Alphabet: /daɪətraɪb/

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

WEB EXCLUSIVE
'We can't talk about Jason Arday without talking about racism.' — *By Shalini Nair*
Log on to www.indianexpress.com

WORDLY WISE
Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy.
— *Howard W Newton*

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IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

On J&K, US envoy says it like it is

US AMBASSADOR to India Sergio Gor said in Srinagar that "Kashmir is an important part of India". Washington would consider removing the travel advisory against US citizens visiting J&K, he also said. The substance of his statement can be seen as being in line with Washington's Jammu and Kashmir stand for the better part of three decades. His words, though, must also be read in the current geopolitical context and the ebb and flow of India-US ties in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack and Operation Sindoor. Gor is also US President Donald Trump's Special Envoy for South and Central Asian Affairs and his statement and visit to Srinagar — the first standalone trip by a US ambassador since the abrogation of Article 370 — will be parsed in both Islamabad and Beijing. The Pakistan government has summoned the US chargé d'affaires to express its chagrin at Gor's statement.

Islamabad's attempt to internationalise Kashmir is a tired old trope that has been roundly rejected. Its sponsorship of terror from across the border remains an enduring concern. Between the lines of Gor's message is also an acknowledgement that the India-US relationship will be sensitive to Delhi's concerns about the region. The easing of the travel advisory will send a message about the security gains made post August 2019. Gor's statement also comes after Trump has said, repeatedly, that he played a role in the ceasefire post Op Sindoor — a claim denied by Delhi — and imposed some of the steepest tariffs on India.

The pushback from Pakistan and its lobbyists in Washington is likely to grow. It is important for India not to overreact to this. Notwithstanding the recent turbulence, India-US ties remain deeply consequential for both countries. Neither Delhi nor Washington needs to view the bilateral relationship through a Pakistan-tinted lens. On Kashmir, India's position is clear and unwavering. In fact, just before his meeting with Gor, CM Abdullah put the claims of a US role in the region in perspective: "Our matters are not going to be resolved in Washington; they will be resolved by the government of our country." At the same time, he underlined the many opportunities for cooperation with the US in the local economy. He posted on X that he spoke to the ambassador about "the possibilities that exist to widen & deepen the engagement between J&K & the United States of America, particularly in areas like tourism, horticulture & the new economy".

Buffalo meat exports boom: Read the message

INDIA'S BUFFALO meat exports are booming, hitting a record $5.1 billion in 2025-26 and set to cross $6 billion in the current fiscal year. Credit goes to the industry that has built a market in countries from Southeast and West Asia to Africa and, more recently, Uzbekistan, Russia and Georgia. Moreover, unit value realisations have gone up from sub-$3,000 to $4,000-plus per tonne over the last two-three years, amid concerted efforts at raising the product profile of Indian buffalo meat, and not selling it as just a cheaper alternative to regular cattle beef. This has been helped by adherence to internationally recognised quality and hygiene standards and exports being allowed only through government-approved abattoirs and processing plants.

But equally important is how the buffalo meat industry has been complementary to India's dairy sector. The buffaloes that are culled are mostly animals not giving enough milk or those that happen to be male. For farmers, the fodder, feed, water and labour that go towards maintaining them has a direct as well as an opportunity cost — in terms of the loss of potential output from not allocating the same resources to more productive bovines. By creating a market for unproductive buffaloes, the meat plants have enabled farmers to replace low-yielding/ageing animals with high-milking/fresh stock. Such regular herd turnover is essential for any viable dairy enterprise. The very fact that the buffaloes going to the slaughterhouse aren't competing for scarce resources with the ones giving milk makes this a more sustainable model. Unlike in Brazil or the US, where cattle are reared separately for milk and beef, here the meat is from "spent" buffaloes that have outlived their usefulness as milkers.

Consumption of milk, especially high-fat, is growing in India on the back of rising incomes. The support to buffalo milk production from meat exports is, therefore, welcome. But buffalo milk yields are lower compared to that from crossbred cows. Their age at first lactation and inter-calving intervals is also longer. To that extent, buffaloes alone cannot supply India's increasing milk requirement from a medium-to-long-term perspective. All the more reason why a scientific approach to culling unproductive animals — whether for breeding and reproductive efficiency or redirecting finite resources to higher-yielding stock — is necessary in cattle, too. The political leadership cannot run away from taking that call.

This season, EPL heralds a new era

THE ENGLISH Premier League is unlikely to pause to shed a tear for the past. The nostalgia induced by the farewell of Pep Guardiola, the most influential manager of his era, and the exodus of his midfield stars, or the departure of Mohamed Salah, one of the finest wingers of all time, will be overtaken by the excitements of the season that unfolds from Saturday night. It will seem like a new product; nine new managers, and a raft of impressionable young footballers who have switched clubs or taken the plunge in the world's most competitive league.

This season will witness the making of themes and narratives that will define the league in the next half a decade, the filling of voids, a sense of renewal and a quest for the new order. The abiding narrative will be whether Arsenal can defend their title and build a success story like Manchester City. The Gunners have bolstered their midfield and back-line, but there are more lethal front-lines in the league. Both the Manchester neighbours — City and United — have exhilarating attack options. Chelsea, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur have acquired experience-rich players who could pose stiff hurdles for Arsenal. The unglamorous posse of Brighton, Aston Villa, and Bournemouth makes the league more competitive and interesting.

Most of the top six are transitioning, the league is moving on from the Guardiola era, new managers will instil fresh tactics, making the edition the most unpredictable and presumably most open campaign in recent times. Picking an outright favourite would be foolish. Arsenal could be the slight favourites, given their core's stability and experience. But this season has the vibe of a new era. The field is set, let the winning begin.

Modi-ism must evolve into institution-centred nation-building



AMARINDER SINGH

EVERY POLITICAL era eventually acquires a name. "Modi-ism" is India's name for the political and governing order built around Narendra Modi: A commanding leader, disciplined party organisation, civilisational assertion, centralised decision-making, technology-driven welfare, infrastructure-led development, high-energy national security and direct communication with citizens. It is a method of acquiring power, exercising authority and defining the nation. Its central promise is unmistakable: A strong leader, a purposeful state and a stronger India.

Its political achievement cannot be disputed. Modi transformed the BJP from a major national formation into the central axis of Indian politics. He expanded it beyond its traditional geographical and social constituencies and made leadership itself the principal electoral proposition. In 2024, however, the BJP fell to 240 seats and required its NDA partners to form the government. That verdict did not reject Modi. It qualified his mandate. The country chose continuity, but also restored the relevance of consultation, coalition and restraint.

Modi-ism has produced visible public gains. Infrastructure construction, digital public platforms, direct benefit transfers, financial inclusion, sanitation, housing, electrification and welfare delivery at scale have strengthened the state's capacity to reach citizens. It has also contained somewhat the undue proliferation of regional politics. NITI Aayog estimated multidimensional poverty at 11.28 per cent in 2022-23, compared with 29.17 per cent in 2013-14. The methodology may be debated, but the improvement in delivery cannot honestly be dismissed.

Its appeal rests equally on political clarity. Modi-ism speaks in the language of aspiration, national confidence and civilisational recovery. For citizens long frustrated by delay, indecision and fragmented authority, a government promising speed and scale has obvious appeal.

Yet effectiveness cannot be the only test of democratic government.

The more consequential question is whether Modi-ism remains securely anchored in the country's constitutional settlement. Its critics allege that the Modi era seeks to weaken pluralism, dilute socialism, replace rights with governmental charity, capture institutions and ultimately alter the Constitution. Its supporters dismiss these charges as partisan hostility towards Modi or resistance to India's cultural resurgence.

Both positions are too absolute. The constitutional character of a government must be judged through the actual exercise of power, not through slogans or unevidenced perceptions.

Elections continue to be fiercely competitive. Governments change in the states. Opposition parties govern substantial parts of the country. Courts continue to examine executive action and enforce fundamental rights. In November 2024, the Supreme Court rejected petitions challenging the inclusion of "socialist" and "secular" in the Preamble. It would therefore be inaccurate to claim that the country's constitutional order has been dismantled.

But a Constitution can be weakened without its words being formally deleted. Institutions may remain intact on paper while their independence, credibility and conventions erode. Democracy is sustained not merely by periodic elections, but by restraints on power, respect for dissent, parliamentary accountability, federal balance and equal citizenship.

The concern about pluralism is not that religious freedom has been legally abolished. It is that majoritarian mobilisation and inflammatory language can make minorities feel conditionally accepted. Cultural nationalism is constitutionally legitimate; cultural supremacy is not.

The country may proudly acknowledge its Hindu civilisational inheritance. But the republic belongs, without qualification, to every citizen. Equal citizenship cannot depend upon religion, political loyalty or conformity with a preferred account of national identity.

Socialism also requires a more intelligent debate. Our constitutional socialism does not demand a return to the licence-permit raj, hostility to private enterprise or indiscriminate state ownership. It requires social and economic justice, equality of opportunity and protection against degrading deprivation.

> Parliament must recover serious deliberation, committee scrutiny. Federal consultation must precede major decisions affecting the states

Many Modi-era welfare programmes advance these constitutional purposes. The problem begins when statutory entitlements are politically presented as personal gifts from a leader. Food support, employment guarantees, housing, scholarships and social security are not acts of generosity. They are public obligations, financed by citizens and delivered under law.

Rights-based governance must, therefore, complement, not be displaced by, beneficiary politics. Technology can reduce leakage and accelerate delivery. But citizens excluded by failed authentication, inaccurate databases or administrative discretion must have accessible remedies. Welfare requires enforceable standards, grievance redress, social audits and legislative scrutiny.

A citizen must remain a rights-holder, not be reduced to a grateful beneficiary.

The allegation of institutional capture must similarly be examined with evidence rather than rhetoric. Every elected government is entitled to govern, make lawful appointments and implement its programme. But institutional autonomy depends not merely upon technical legality. It also requires transparent appointments, procedural fairness and visible distance from partisan command.

Here the record raises legitimate concerns. During the seventeenth Lok Sabha, 58 per cent of bills were passed within two weeks of introduction, and only 16 per cent were referred to parliamentary committees. On average, around 80 per cent of the Union Budget was voted without discussion between 2019 and 2023.

The SC decision striking down the electoral bond scheme established that secrecy in political funding had crossed a constitutional boundary. The law governing the appointment of election commissioners, which gives the executive a majority on the selection committee, has similarly raised concerns about perceived independence. These concerns do not establish that every institution has been captured. But they demonstrate why independence must be protected not only in fact, but also in public perception.

Should Modi-ism continue? Its productive core should.

The country needs decisive and strong leadership, national confidence, infrastructure, digital innovation, credible defence capability and measurable delivery. But Modi-ism must now evolve from leader-centred mobilisation into institution-centred nation-building.

That transition requires clear corrections. Parliament must recover serious deliberation, committee scrutiny and control over public expenditure. Federal consultation must precede major decisions affecting the states. Appointments to constitutional and regulatory bodies should command cross-party credibility. Investigative agencies must be demonstrably even-handed. Welfare delivery must be joined to enforceable rights. Political discourse must replace habitual polarisation with constitutional fraternity. Development's next phase must create productive employment, competitive manufacturing, stronger small enterprises, higher farm incomes, quality public education, accessible healthcare, liveable cities and climate resilience.

The BJP itself must institutionalise its success. No durable national party can remain indefinitely dependent upon one personality, however formidable. It needs empowered ministers, credible regional leaders, internal debate and an orderly culture of succession.

Modi-ism has given India energy, ambition and a stronger international voice. Its historical value, however, will not be measured by one leader's dominance or one party's electoral reach. The choice is not between Modi and the Constitution. It is between a Modi-ism disciplined by the Constitution, and one that seeks to rise above it.

The country does not need a weaker government. It needs strong leadership restrained by stronger institutions, serving citizens who are equal in dignity, secure in their rights and confident in their common future.

The writer, former chief minister of Punjab, is in the BJP

Why some brands fade away, why others don't



MADHU BHAVARAJU

CAMPA COLA, a soft-drink brand from the 1980s now owned by Reliance, is giving Coke and Pepsi a run for their money. Onida of "Neighbour's Envy, Owner's Pride" is apparently planning a big comeback. Whereas "Chal Meri Luna" or "Gold Spot — The Zing Thing" are just memories of a past era. The world of business is littered with names that evoke nostalgia, but the brands are no longer there or are shadows of their past glory. Regulations, technology, economics or culture can kill brands. There are fascinating examples of this in India.

The Luna story is about economic change. There was a time when it was India's multi-purpose two-wheeler — from the local businessman carrying his goods to a family of four rushing to work or school. This made enormous sense as incomes were low and cars were not easy to buy. As the economy grew, more people could afford motorcycles or cars. Luna's value proposition was lost.

Dalda represents a different kind of decline. Vanaspati once stood for affordability and convenience and, although this may be hard to believe today, a modern way of cooking. Nutritional science evolved, consumers grew suspicious of hydrogenated fats, and the product's cultural setting changed.

BPL, Videocon, Solidaire and Onida were consumer electronics giants in India at one time, commanding a huge market share. But global supply chains, Korean brands, falling prices of electronics and rapidly evolving technology changed that competitive structure. I really hope Onida makes a comeback, but the technology gap between an LG or a Samsung and Onida will take time to bridge.

Then there is the Ambassador. For years it represented the Indian automobile, status, power and bureaucracy. Then came the upstart Maruti, and eventually global carmakers with better technology, reliability and efficiency. Hindustan Motors kept chugging away, but eventually struggled in this new competitive environment.

Regulations can create an artificial ecosystem which collapses as soon as the regulations are lifted. The Ambassador might not have survived if not for India having a closed economy. The same is true for Gold Spot or a Citra. The soft drink brands of India in the 1970s and '80s were a direct byproduct of India not allowing Coke and Pepsi to operate. Once Coke and Pepsi entered India again, these brands quickly faded away.

There are, of course, exceptions. Campa Cola went the same way as Gold Spot or Citra until Reliance took over. There was some brand equity even after decades of decline, which Reliance identified and used to enter the soft beverages market in India.

Thums Up and Limca survived. My theory is that these two beverages were unique. Thums Up's extra punch and cult following made it difficult for Coca-Cola to drop. Limca is a unique cloudy lemon drink unlike clear lemon drinks such as Sprite or 7 UP.

These exceptions may just be one-offs. Nostalgia alone is not enough, though; both Campa Cola and Onida need a strong reason to exist today in the 2020s.

Some brands evolve and move to new categories. Kinetic Motors, the makers of Luna, launched the Kinetic Honda in the 1980s, a very popular two-wheeler. The Kinetic Honda was more powerful, had storage and an electric starter, which was an evolution from the very basic Luna.

The mistake successful brands make is assuming that yesterday's success proves something permanent about the brand. Often, it only proves something about that moment in time. Consumers, technologies, regulations and aspirations change. The brand that survives is the one that keeps finding a reason to be relevant.

The writer is founder, The Brand Ignition Co

> The mistake successful brands make is assuming that yesterday's success proves something permanent about the brand. Often, it only proves something about that moment in time

Climate resilience starts with the health workforce



PRIYANKA TOMAR

FLOODS IN Kerala and Assam have once again exposed the challenge of protecting lives during climate-related disasters. The immediate focus shifts to rescue operations, relief camps and rebuilding damaged infrastructure. Less visible, but equally critical, is the work unfolding within public health systems. Hospitals are preparing for medical emergencies, surveillance teams are monitoring disease outbreaks, labs are testing water quality, community health-workers are reaching vulnerable households, and public-health officials are coordinating responses across departments. It is the health workforce that prevents a natural disaster from becoming a prolonged public-health crisis.

The resilience of health systems ultimately depends on the workforce that delivers adaptation. States have begun to strengthen surveillance systems, develop region- and city-specific heat action plans, improve emergency preparedness, and integrate climate considerations into several public-health programmes. Kerala's response to the floods illustrates how health departments are increasingly incorporating public-health measures into disaster response. As climate-related hazards become more frequent, can these capacities be sustained across all states, districts, and levels of the health system? How can these surge capacities be developed, given the severe shortage of health workers across India? Are these capacities being embedded across the health workforce, or do they continue to depend on individual relief-specific programmes and emergency mobilisation?

Many of the foundational competencies required for climate adaptation already exist within health systems. What is changing is the context in which they must now operate. Rather than replacing existing competencies, climate change requires reorienting them through a climate lens while introducing new competencies where needed. Analysis of climate-health governance across South and Southeast Asia indicates that workforce development remains fragmented, with climate-health training largely confined to donor- or project-supported initiatives.

Building climate-resilient health systems requires moving beyond isolated training programmes towards institutionalising climate-health competencies. These should be integrated into pre-service education, professional development, supportive supervision, planning, and performance management and must be supported by sustained governance, financing, and institutional mechanisms so that knowledge can be translated into routine practice rather than activated only during emergencies.

The writer is a health systems researcher at CSEP. Views are personal

> Analysis of climate-health governance across South and Southeast Asia indicates that workforce development remains fragmented, with training largely confined to donor- or project-supported initiatives

40 YEARS AGO
AUGUST 21, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
Twenty-point plan re-structured
War on poverty first priority
Rail stations burnt in Pak

New 20-point plan

A NEW 20-point programme focussing emphasis on the removal of poverty in rural areas and promising new programmes for youth and women was announced by the Central Government. The restructured programme shows a clear shift in priorities from industry to agriculture.

Rail stations burnt in Pakistan

TROOPS PATROLLED troubled areas in Sindh province and anti-government protesters burnt railway stations and blocked road and rail traffic on the third day of the nationwide agitation of the opposition parties to oust President Zia-ul-Haq. The protests were also directed at last week's government crackdown on agitators, which resulted in violence and claimed more than 50 lives.

Reagan on Nicaragua

PRESIDENT REAGAN has said that unless the Nicaraguan government sought democracy, the "only alternative" for the rebels would be "to have their way and take over". This is the bluntest and most explicit statement ever made by the President about the ultimate goal of US policy in Nicaragua, the aim of the administration in aiding the Nicaraguan rebels. It was made to a Mexican newspaper during an interview conducted from the President's holiday ranch in California.

Punjab writes off farmers' debt

THE PUNJAB government has written off Rs 300 crore due from farmers as water course lining charges and remission in the jail terms of prisoners in memory of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the late Akali Dal president whose first death anniversary was observed at a state-sponsored function in Sangrur.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Stop Smotrich before he dooms the Palestinians and the State of Israel

— Haaretz, Israel

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A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate

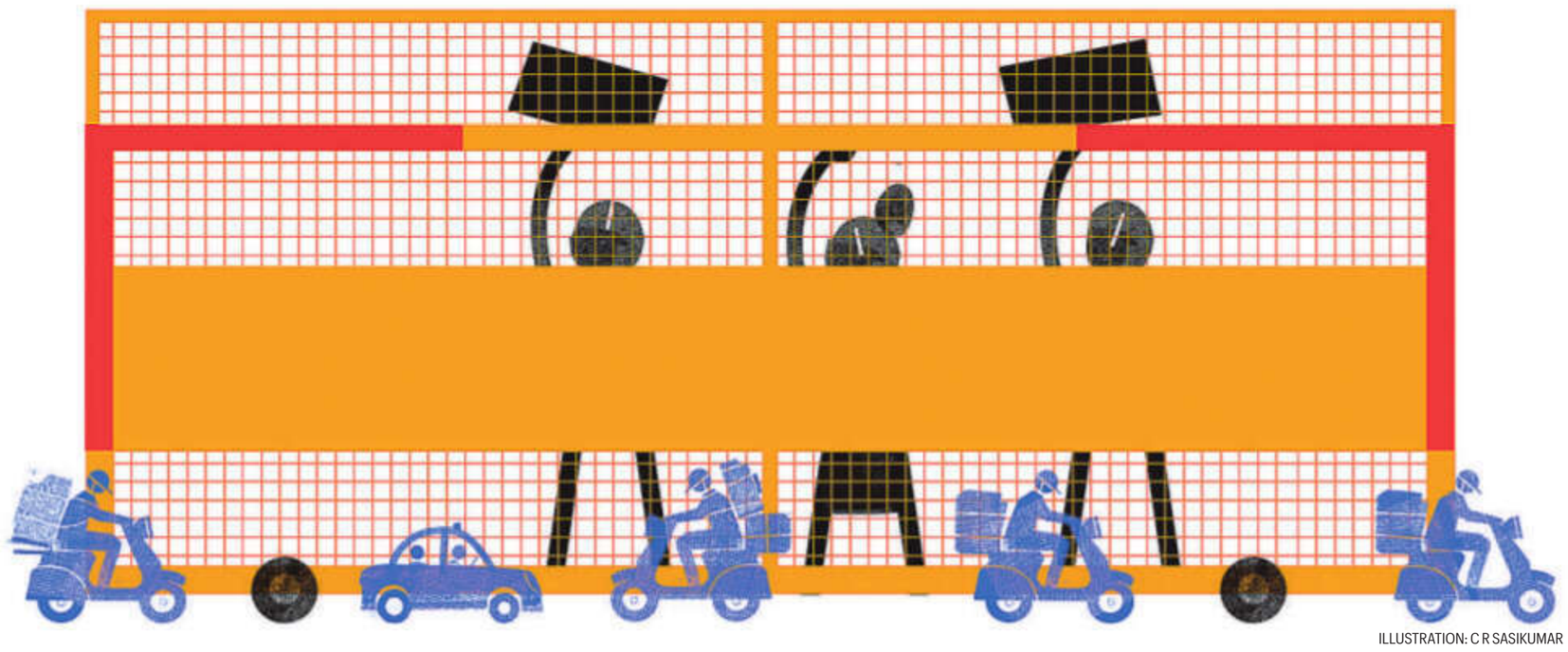


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

A month after the march from Jantar Mantar to Parliament, looking back and ahead at Gen Z

This is not the end. They will be back



NAJEEB JUNG

AFTER 36 days at Jantar Mantar, the students wound down, leaving behind a dazed government, its leadership confused, and a police machinery exposed as brutal, lacking the sensitivity the moment required. Watching the boys and girls pack up their belongings and fold their cotton sheets, I thought of Iqbal's couplet: *maana ki teri diid ke qabil nahin huun main/tu mera shauq dekh mira intizar dekh* (Granted that I am not worthy of your sight / Look instead at my deep zeal and my endless waiting). As they moved out of Jantar Mantar, their resolve was palpable. This was not the end. They would be back.

Every major mass movement in India over the last century has organised itself around a moral authority: Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan, Anna Hazare. The Cockroach movement inverted this template. Its founder is a young man skilled at communications, not a moral authority. Its closest thing to a unifying figure, Sonam Wangchuk, was an ally who lent his hunger strike to a cause he did not create. What emerged instead is a distributed structure — social-media accounts, campus unions, Left student federations — moving in loose, non-hierarchical coordination. Its organisational logic makes a singular leader almost unnecessary for mobilisation. Having said that, one may eventually be necessary for consolidation.

A leaderless structure is hard for the state to decapitate. But diffusion has a cost. Coalitions without a centre struggle to negotiate coherently, to discipline internal tactical disagreement, and to convert a moment of mobilisation into an institution. India Against Corruption, unlike the Aam Aadmi Party it produced, never built that institutional layer. Whether anyone is building an equivalent beneath the Cockroach movement's surface is the most important open question.

The state fields cadre strength, a police and paramilitary apparatus, and financial resources no youth movement funded by small donations can match. When protestors tried to march on Parliament, the police response left over 100 injured and dozens arrested, with the record showing violence running in one direction only. But this did not produce the outcome coercive dominance is supposed to guarantee. Within days, the government conceded the central demand. This separates two things routinely conflated: The state's capacity to repress and its capacity to prevail. That should disprove any simple story in which coercive machinery automatically wins.

A single resignation is a low-cost concession. Systemic exam reform, large-scale job creation, or accountability for the crackdown are much harder fiscally and politically. The distinction that matters most for durability is between a movement fuelled by scandal and one fuelled by structural condition. The NEET leak was a trigger, not a cause. Underneath it sits a labour market that cannot absorb the graduates it produces, an examination and recruitment system widely perceived as corruptible, and a rural unemployment crisis that draws less media attention than its urban counterpart but is arguably deeper and more intractable.

The insult that named the movement landed because it confirmed what a generation already suspected: That the system discounts merit in favour of proximity to power and capital. On this reading, the Cockroach movement is less a single episode than a recurring condition that has, for now, found a name and a shared vocabulary. That gives it a resilience no single leader could provide.

Two conclusions follow. First, the movement has already outperformed what its lack of centralised leadership would predict. Second, extracting one concession through a low-cost demand is a different task from sustaining pressure on a structural condition with no single remediable trigger. The latter tests whether a leaderless coalition can maintain coherence and pressure over years, a capacity the movement has not yet had occasion to demonstrate.

For now, the odds favour the young. The government has shown no evident plan for handling this beyond force: A ham-handed approach paired with the hope that overwhelming pressure will deter the youth is likely to misfire, and appointing a committee whose composition is unpalatable to the protestors solves nothing. What is needed is a return to the drawing board. The alternative is a Union entering a long, dark winter of discontent with a generation it has not learned how to answer.

The writer is chairman, Advanced Study Institute of Asia, former Lt Governor, Delhi, and former vice chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia

The Gen Z that wasn't at Jantar Mantar



PARTHA SINHA

THERE WAS something unusually photogenic about Gen Z at Jantar Mantar. Young, articulate, angry and, crucially, quotable. They understood that a placard must travel beyond the barricade, that irony survives Instagram better than ideology. The internet fell in love. Here, finally, was a generation refusing the ancient Indian instruction to the young: Wait your turn.

But there was another Gen Z missing from the photographs. He was probably delivering dinner to someone watching the protest on their phone. He is 22, financing a motorcycle on debt he doesn't fully understand, called a "partner" by an app that can deactivate him without ever meeting him. When it rains, his incentives rise, because the city has learnt to price his risk more precisely than his labour. There is a rather elegant cruelty in calling this freedom. Outside stands a security guard protecting a lifestyle he can see but not enter. In a village is a young man who can watch a Stanford lecture for free and has no idea what job he will do next year. His imagination has migrated. His life chances have not.

"Gen Z" assumes a liberal-arts student in Delhi, a warehouse packer outside Gurugram and a UPSC aspirant in Bihar share something meaningful because they were born in the same 15 years. They do. They share visibility without access.

India has never lacked inequality; what has changed is the technology of experiencing it. The farmer knew the landlord lived better; he did not begin breakfast watching the landlord's holiday in the Maldives. The smartphone abolished the rationing of comparison. Sociologist Robert Merton gave us the "reference group": The people against whom we measure our lives. A farmhand can now compare himself with a Dubai apartment and a Silicon Valley Sunday brunch, delivered more reliably than his crop forecast. Gen Z has been given the entire planet to envy. Arjun Appadurai called it the "capacity to aspire": Not merely wanting a different future, but knowing the routes to reach it. The capacity to imagine has been democratised at internet speed. The capacity to navigate has not. We have mass-produced aspiration without its scaffolding.

The sneaker, the café, the start-up vocabulary are no longer possessions. They are signifiers in a national grammar of having arrived. Consumption has become biography. You are continuously shown the version of yourself you have failed to become. Desire travels at 5G speed. Social mobility still takes the passenger train. For two decades India has spoken of its "demographic dividend", as though youth were an asset that pays out automatically. Perhaps the metaphor was wrong. A young population is better understood as a loan, capital advanced against a future that has to be built to repay it. Loans, unlike dividends, can default.

The gig economy makes this visible. The old industrial bargain was crude but legible: sell your labour, and time slowly converts into standing. The platform economy removed that mechanism and replaced it with the language of entrepreneurship. You are a "partner" whose hours convert mainly into more hours, dressed up as autonomy.

When the economic route to status narrows, another economy opens: The economy of dignity. Religion, nationalism, caste, an online tribe can provide status that a salary cannot. A young man cannot change his salary, but he can change his avatar. A society that cannot offer its young enough ladders should not be surprised when identity begins to look like one. None of this was visible at Jantar Mantar. The protesters possessed something rarer than anger: A vocabulary for it. Most anger never gets that far — there is the rider at the gate, the guard beside it, the graduate refreshing an examination-results page.

Are they unhappy? Perhaps happiness is too frivolous a diagnostic. The better question is whether they believe the future is negotiable. Every generation tolerates hardship when it looks like a corridor. The trouble begins when it starts looking like a room. The young people at Jantar Mantar had completed a journey: From disappointment to language, from anger to demand. Millions of their contemporaries are still somewhere between the first two. We have spent years celebrating young India because it is connected, ambitious and impatient. We may discover the third adjective was the important one. Jantar Mantar gave the microphone to one Gen Z. The rest are still delivering the microphones to our doors.

The writer is a senior advisory professional

Why Sergio Gor's words in Srinagar are noteworthy



AMITABH MATTOO

RARELY DOES history hinge on a few words. But when US Ambassador Sergio Gor visited Srinagar earlier this week and declared, "This is an important part of India," he was signalling the end of an era. It was his first visit to the Valley, and he had just finished meeting Chief Minister Omar Abdullah. He followed up the statement by suggesting that the US travel advisory could be reviewed by Washington because of improvements in the security situation. There was an irony no one seemed to have noticed. Seventy-three years ago, American emissaries came to the Valley to whisper the possibilities of independence to Sheikh Abdullah. On August 19, an American ambassador, with the Sheikh's grandson standing beside him, seemed to have ended all ambiguity about the American position on Jammu and Kashmir.

A statement by an ambassador is not definitive. It is not a treaty, a presidential proclamation, or even a formal repudiation by the State Department of every position Washington has espoused since 1947. But diplomacy is about vocabulary, and no objective student of Kashmir can fail to notice how far America has come. Almost exactly 73 years ago, on August 9, 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was dismissed as prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir by Sadr-i-Riyasat Karan Singh, amid mounting suspicions in New Delhi about his commitment to the accession and his growing interest in an independent Kashmir. His contacts with prominent Americans fed those suspicions and later became part of the political atmosphere surrounding what came to be known as the Kashmir Conspiracy Case.



Earlier, in 1950, Loy Henderson, the American ambassador to India, secretly met Abdullah in Kashmir twice. Henderson's secret telegram records the Sheikh making a strong case for Kashmiri independence from both India and Pakistan. Abdullah told Henderson that an independent Kashmir could survive only if it had the friendship of India and Pakistan and economic assistance from the US, directly or through the UN. Soon enough, American interest in Kashmir took on such political overtones that even Henderson's wife made it into Indian political mythology. Indian leaders suspected that Americans were holding out the prospect of independence to Abdullah.

Then came Adlai Stevenson in May 1953. Twice the Democratic Party's candidate for the presidency, Stevenson was one of the most influential American internationalists of his era. He visited Kashmir and talked to Abdullah. Those meetings sent shockwaves of suspicion through New Delhi. Indian leaders believed Stevenson may also have encouraged Abdullah to think about an independent Kashmir. American diplomatic records show that Nehru believed Stevenson's conversations had encouraged Abdullah's growing intransigence. But the point is less to revive conspiracy theories about 1953. More important is that "independent Kashmir" was then conceivable enough in American diplomatic parlance for Nehru to worry that Washington might act to encourage it.

These apprehensions were rooted in the genesis of the Kashmir problem. UN Security Council Resolution 47, which America supported in 1948, placed the dispute in an international context and anticipated a plebiscite after a process of demilitarisation. The prescribed sequence, which required Pakistan to secure the withdrawal of the "tribal invaders" from the territory under its occupation, was never implemented. But for years afterwards, the resolution provided Pakistan with the diplomatic scaffolding it wanted: J&K was not an Indian question alone; it was an international dispute to be settled. America was at the centre of that scaffolding.

In fact, American thinking went much further in those early years. Take this State Department memo from February 1950: Describing Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India as "contested", it concluded that "in our legal assessment at the time... the Maharaja's Instrument of Accession could not by itself have finally settled the state's future".

This thinking continued well after the Cold War was over. In October 1993, Robin Raphel, freshly minted assistant secretary of state for South Asian Affairs in the Clinton administration, called Kashmir a "disputed territory" and said Washington did not recognise the legal validity of the Instrument of Accession as meaning that Kashmir was forever part of India. India was aghast. Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao called such efforts at diplomatic suasion "pinpricks and minor mischief".

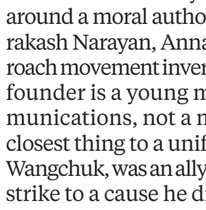
But the larger fact that emerged was this: Nearly five decades after 1947, the US was unwilling to couch its discussion of Jammu and Kashmir in terms that accepted India's political description of the state without qualification. That is what makes Gor's description in Srinagar in 2026 so noteworthy. The venue matters as much as the words he used, and not surprisingly, Pakistan did not just protest, but lodged a formal demarche.

That does not mean New Delhi should start conducting itself triumphantly. Our case in Kashmir has ultimately been made most strongly by the people of J&K. And the test has always been India's ability to deepen constitutionalism, expand democracy and political reconciliation, deliver development and ensure civil liberties for all citizens. That is why Srinagar's elected government matters. And why a return to normal democratic politics and restoration of statehood is essential.

But we should not downplay what has occurred. For there is a historical arc here that is quite remarkable. It reflects India's own transformation and the gradual exhaustion of the idea that Jammu and Kashmir is best handled through international mechanisms conceived in the bloodshed of Partition. America has not overwritten history. Gor signalled something far more important: It accepts reality. For decades, Washington dealt with Kashmir as if it were a problem in search of a permanent political resting place. In Srinagar earlier this week, it implicitly acknowledged that history had already made a choice.

The writer is dean and professor, SIS, JNU and former vice-chancellor, University of Jammu

A cancellation & questions on freedom



CHAITY DAS

ADMITTEDLY, HOW many of us remember Independence Day speeches at school or on television in childhood? With children growing restless, squirming in humid classrooms and auditoriums, like in D H Lawrence's 'Last Lesson of the Afternoon', an educator sometimes wonders what it is all for. Yet, by means of a word here, a phrase there, absorbed osmotically from family, teachers, leaders, friends, children are shaped. Experiences and memories etch themselves. A republic is moulded.

So, when an Independence Day speech in a school is cancelled, students of all ages ask: Why? Undeniably, nothing is more important than the well-being of children. Students concur. Guardians of all hues of beliefs and opinions, though troubled about the future, understand.

Meanwhile, in buses, outside the school as children walk past you, in homes through the evening, comes the next question. Why is our security an issue? By then they have heard the news from friends, read the press reports. Internet searches are conducted on who was supposed to have delivered the speech. They discuss it with friends, learn that it had to be cancelled due to some individuals unrelated to their institution objecting to the guest's presence. With more information, they now exchange views with peers. Intense debates ensue. Their curiosity — *jigyasa* — is aroused, certainly more by the incident than by what the speech itself may have generated. Something momentous and without precedent has happened.

In the morning, unaware of these facts, they have sung patriotic songs, watched the flag being hoisted, joyously sung the national anthem and participated in a significant collective ritual. Student leaders have spoken movingly of the freedom struggle. Anecdotally and artistically, they revive the luminous values of liberty — *jigyasa, samvaad, karuna, kartavya*.

Perhaps, prophetically, they have also spoken of the need to overcome fear. And bits and pieces of the previous morning are conjured when our Prime Minister cautions from the Red Fort to remain vigilant against the fear-mongers in our midst. Do they then not realise why the speech had to be cancelled? And when they are being reassured that fear is the enemy of truth, how are they to process the "why"?

When William Blake said, "without contraries, there is no progression", he was speaking of Western society and the hatred of opposites that stunts its greatness. In 'The Poison Tree', incidentally part of CBSE syllabi, he wrote: "I was angry with my friend;/ I told my wrath, my wrath did end./ I was angry with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow."

Arguably, this fear of opposites is a colonial legacy, heightened by the experience of modernity and how different cultures have responded to it. This has manifested itself more in political discourse than in the organic rhythms of ordinary life. Sant Kabir Das, too, spoke of the prisons of duality and the need to transcend them through experience. Silencing what appears "contrary", whether an illusion or a necessity, plants poison trees in our hearts.

This postcolonial anxiety and mechanism of polarisation of opposites enshackle our freedom in academic spaces and create an impoverished discourse where "right" and "left" are raised as spectres and imposed on the fluid stream of thought. The disturbing incident on August 14, when a speech had to be cancelled in a Delhi school, provides a unique opportunity of *samvaad* in families, classrooms and larger public spaces to inspire our children to reflect on the interminable journeys of Independence.

The writer teaches at Delhi University and is a Sardar Patel Vidyalaya parent

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Caste counting

A CASTE census can provide useful evidence for better-targeted welfare and public policy, but numbers alone cannot address social inequality ('Count caste by all means. But abandon belief that counting settles anything', *IE*, August 20). The exercise should follow uniform definitions, strict confidentiality and transparent methodology. The government should combine the data with economic, educational and regional indicators while ensuring that policies remain focused on genuine deprivation and opportunity.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

Party rejig

BRINGING YOUNGER leaders into organisational positions is useful, but generational change should mean more than a change of faces ('A younger BJP, but not a very different one', *IE*, August 20). Young workers should receive genuine responsibility and opportunities to shape policy and communication. The party must remain responsive to concerns over employment, education and institutional accountability. Internal consultation with students, professionals and local communities could improve its understanding of changing expectations.

S P Suganya Devi, Coimbatore

AI for teens

YOUNG PEOPLE increasingly use AI for learning, but unrestricted dependence can weaken judgement and independent thinking ('ChatGPT for Teens is step forward. It's not enough', *IE*, August 20). Schools and parents should teach students how to verify information, protect personal data and recognise misleading answers. Platforms must provide age-appropriate safeguards and clear reporting mechanisms. Schools could introduce practical AI-literacy lessons so that students learn both its usefulness and its limitations.

S M Jeeva, Chennai

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• POLICY

Marathi mandate for auto and taxi drivers: Concerns over law, licences

Zeeshan Shaikh
Mumbai, August 20

THE MAHARASHTRA government has begun enforcing a requirement that auto rickshaw and taxi drivers demonstrate a working knowledge of Marathi, making it a condition for continuing work. The crackdown follows a 105-day training and assessment drive for drivers, but a large number have either failed the test or are yet to complete training. The move also revives a legal issue after the Bombay High Court had struck down a similar requirement for auto rickshaw permits in 2017, prompting questions over the legal basis of the latest action.

Why the requirement?

Officials said they have received complaints of drivers being unable to communicate with passengers in Marathi. The issue gained attention this year after a pilot inspection found several autorickshaw drivers who supposedly lacked proficiency in basic Marathi.

Transport Minister Pratap Sarnaik then announced that auto-rickshaw and taxi drivers would have to know Marathi and the department began its drive. More than 4,500 teachers trained drivers in conversational Marathi. The four-session course focused on exchanges, including asking for destinations and discussing fares. Drivers who completed the course and passed the assessment were given certificates. Of the nearly 1.25 lakh drivers who participated in Mumbai, 7,750 failed the assessment and must reappear, while more than 14,000 have not completed the training.

THE ISSUE

- The state's argument is that auto and taxi drivers interact with passengers and need to know basic communication.
- But many such drivers are migrants and older workers with limited formal education.

Why autos and taxis?

The government's argument is that auto and taxi drivers interact with passengers throughout the day and need to know basic communication. But it has also raised concerns among other driver groups, particularly because many are migrants and older workers with limited formal education. Unions have argued that the government should focus on training rather than penalising drivers whose livelihood depends on licences. Mumbai has more than 2.8 lakh autorickshaw permits and around 20,000 taxi permits, covering an estimated five lakh drivers across shifts.

What is the legal question?

In 2017, the Bombay High Court set aside a Transport Department decision requiring Marathi proficiency for auto rickshaw permits. The court held that auto rickshaws fall within the definition of "motor cabs" and that Rule 24 of the Maharashtra Motor Vehicles Rules, which prescribes language requirements for certain Public Service Vehicle (PSV) badges, specifically excludes motor cabs. These are metal badges bearing names, issued to every person authorised to drive a PSV, except motor cabs.

The court held that Rule 24 could not be used to impose Marathi proficiency as a condition for an autorickshaw contract carriage permit. It held that the government had to act within the Motor Vehicles Act and its rules.

The Transport Department has maintained that the present exercise is about enforcing existing rules. Officials have also distinguished between permits and badges, arguing that Rule 24 applies to badges and that the 2017 judgment did not strike down the language requirement for badges. The government subsequently amended rules to formalise Marathi proficiency as a condition for authorisation, permits and renewals. The draft rules were put out for objections and suggestions.

What happens to those who fail?

Drivers won't lose licences immediately. Those found lacking proficiency will first be given a notice and a month to learn Marathi. If they fail to comply, their PSV badge and driving licence can be suspended for three months. Repeated violations can result in permanent suspension.

• HISTORY

Vande Mataram: Religious imagery, political debate

Citing Gandhi, Tagore and a 1937 CWC decision, Congress said it will sing only the first two stanzas of the composition. Why are the other four controversial?



YASHEE & ASAD REHMAN

THE CONGRESS Working Committee (CWC) has decided that only the first two stanzas of *Vande Mataram* will be sung at party programmes, amid BJP attacks over the National Song's rendition at its Independence Day programme and later at an event in Goa.

The Congress's highest decision-making body cited a 1937 CWC resolution to back its stand, arguing that the leading lights of the freedom movement, including Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, had backed limiting the public rendition of *Vande Mataram* to its first two stanzas.

The row comes months after Parliament made intentional attempts to prevent or disrupt the singing or playing of *Vande Mataram* an offence.

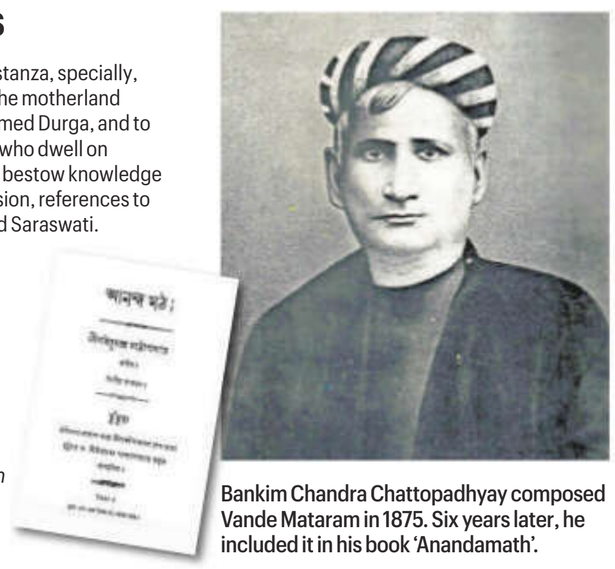
THE FULL SONG AND STANZAS

- The first two stanzas of Vande Mataram describe the beauty of the motherland — its fertility, its waters, its greenery.
- But later on, it likens the motherland to the divine mother, and speaks of installing the mother's statues in temples.
- The fifth stanza, specially, compares the motherland to the 10-armed Durga, and to goddesses who dwell on lotuses and bestow knowledge and expression, references to Lakshmi and Saraswati.

It goes, in heavily Sanskritised Bangla,

"Tvam hi Durgā daśa-praharaṇa-dhāriṇī,
Kamalā kamala-dala-vihāriṇī,
Vāṇī vidyā-dāyinī,
Namāmi tvām namāmi kamalām

***(Roughly translated as:** You are Durga, bearing ten weapons;You are Lakshmi, who dwells upon the lotus; You are Saraswati, the giver of knowledge; I bow to you, I bow to you...")*



Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay composed Vande Mataram in 1875. Six years later, he included it in his book 'Anandamath'.

The composition

Vande Mataram (meaning 'mother, I bow to thee') was composed in Sanskritised Bengali by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1875. Six years later, it was included in his novel *Anandamath*, which tells the story of the late-18th century Sanyasi Rebellion, a series of armed uprisings in Bengal against the East India Company rule and the regional Muslim administrators.

Vande Mataram gained popularity during the Swadeshi movement (1905-08), becoming closely associated with the freedom struggle. The Muslim League, however, was against some references in the song, and also believed that "bowing to the mother" amounts to idolatry.

The 1937 CWC resolution

Within the Congress, there was a discussion about the *Vande Mataram* issue. Several people, including Subhas Chandra Bose (who supported the song wholeheartedly) and Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote to Tagore to seek his opinion.

Tagore wrote to Nehru: "To me the spirit of tenderness and devotion expressed in its first portion, the emphasis it gave to beautiful and beneficent aspects of our motherland made a special appeal, so much so that I found no difficulty in dissociating it from the rest of the poem..."

He added: "I freely concede that the whole of Bankim's '*Vande Mataram*' poem, read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Moslem susceptibilities, but a national song, though derived from it, which has spontaneously come to consist only of the first two stanzas of the original poem, need not remind us every time of the whole..." [From Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's book, *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*].

In October 1937, the Congress Working Committee had decided that when *Vande Mataram* is sung at national gatherings, only the first two stanzas should be sung, as the other "stanzas of the song are little known and hardly ever sung. They contain certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India".

Mahatma Gandhi too, while expressing admiration for the song, said it should not be sung at gatherings where people objected to it. On July 1, 1939, he wrote in *Harijan*: "It was an anti-imperialist cry... It had never occurred to me that it was a Hindu song or meant only for Hindus. Unfortunately, now we have fallen on evil days... I would not risk a single quarrel over singing *Vandemataram* at a mixed gathering."

The song and the struggle

Vande Mataram, which gained popularity during the Swadeshi movement (1905-08), become closely linked to the freedom struggle.

•

The Muslim League was against some references in the song. It believed 'bowing to the mother' amounts to idolatry.

The same month, he again wrote in *Harijan* that "if at any mixed gathering any person objected to the singing of *Vandemataram* even with the Congress expurgations, the singing should be dropped." [*Mahatma Gandhi and the Harmony of Music*, By Teresa Joseph & AM Thomas].

The political debate

When India gained Independence, there was a demand for *Vande Mataram* to be adopted as the national anthem. In the Constituent Assembly, there was some friction on the issue. On August 14, 1947, at the Assumption of Power ceremony, Sucheta Kripalani sang the first verse of *Vande Mataram* as the opening item. On August 26, HV Kamath rose in the Assembly to say that on that day: "...Some of us in this House noticed that a number of our Honourable friends entered the Assembly Chamber — I would almost say trooped into this Hall — after the song had been sung. I would request you, Sir, to look into this matter..."

Among those who preferred *Jana Gana Mana* as the anthem were Nehru, and among the reasons he cited was that *Vande Mataram* would be difficult to set to an orchestra. On November 5, 1948, Seth Govind Das said in the Constituent Assembly: "...I would say that '*Vande Mataram*' can be our National Anthem. The history of our struggle for independence is associated with *Vande Mataram*. If it be said that is tune is not fit for orchestrisation I would submit that this is a difficulty which can be overcome by experts in orchestral music."

Jana Gana Mana was eventually chosen as the anthem.

On January 24, 1950, President Rajendra Prasad told the Constituent Assembly: "The composition consisting of the words and music known as *Jana Gana Mana* is the National Anthem of India, subject to such alterations in the words as the Government may authorise as occasion arises; and the song *Vande Mataram*, which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom, shall be honoured equally with *Jana Gana Mana* and shall have equal status with it. I hope this will satisfy the Members."

The BJP has recently made a major push to sing all six stanzas of the song. The Ministry of Home Affairs on January 28 notified the first set of protocols for singing *Vande Mataram*, directing that all six stanzas shall be sung during official functions.

The BJP has long accused the Congress of giving in to its "appeasement politics" over *Vande Mataram's* truncation.

Now, the Congress's stand comes at a time Parliament has passed the Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Act, 2026, which amends Section 3 of the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971 to extend the same legal protection to the *Vande Mataram* that the National Anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*, enjoys. The amendment makes it an offence to intentionally prevent the singing of the National Song or to cause a disturbance to an assembly engaged in its singing.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh told *The Indian Express*: "Dr. Rajendra Prasad as President of the Constituent Assembly announced on Jan 24 1950 that *Vande Mataram* (first two stanzas) will be the national song... This was accepted by the Constituent Assembly with cheers. But in December 2025, Parliament only had a discussion and never ever adopted a resolution saying that the full *Vande Mataram* will be the national song. This was a unilateral decision of the PM and HM by notification, which does not have Parliamentary approval."

• LEGAL

Whose streets? That parking spot outside the house isn't really yours

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, August 20

AS THE Delhi Police prepares a fresh congestion-management plan, commissioner Anurag Kumar has directed every traffic circle to identify at least one "problem area" marked by encroachment, roadside parking or chronic congestion.

The exercise comes amid a broader push to improve traffic flow, strengthen enforcement and crack down on unauthorised parking that contributes to bottlenecks across the city. Does living next to a public street give a resident any special right over the parking space?

Ownership of public street

A public street does not belong to the owner whose gates open onto it. The Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957 (DMC Act) defines a "public street" as "any street which vests in the Corporation".

Section 298 vests all public streets in the Corporation and goes further, stating that public streets "shall be under the control of the Commissioner and shall be maintained, controlled and regulated by him in accordance with the bye-laws".

In other words, the road outside a house belongs to the public authority, not the adjoining resident. No provision of the DMC Act gives a homeowner an exclusive right over the stretch of road outside their property. Long use of a parking spot does not create any special entitlement either.

Parking lawful, but regulated

Parking a vehicle on a public road is not, as such, illegal. Under Section 117 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, the state government may determine "places at which motor vehicles may stand either indefinitely or for a specified period of time" and may also specify where public service vehicles may stop for longer periods.

Section 122 of the Act bars leaving a vehicle in a public place in a manner that causes or is likely to cause "danger, obstruction or undue inconvenience to other users of the public place or to the passengers". Section 127 allows a vehicle abandoned or left unattended in violation of parking rules to be towed or immobilised.

Curbside parking

- The road outside a house belongs to the public authority, not the adjoining resident.
- While that doesn't make curbside parking illegal, it is governed by the public authority that owns and regulates that stretch of road.

Delhi has additional rules of its own. The Delhi Maintenance and Management of Parking Places Rules, 2019, framed under the Motor Vehicles Act, prohibit on-street parking within 25 metres of an intersection on any arm of a road and bar parking in green areas, parks, footpaths, bus stops and certain other locations.

Rule 11 states: "The Area Parking Plan made by civic agencies shall include, in their scope, parking arrangements within residential areas. The plan within such areas shall be made in consultation with the residents/Resident Welfare Associations." The Rules also require residential colony roads to keep one lane free for emergency vehicles.

Similarly, the Delhi Motor Vehicles Rules, 1993 empower the District Magistrate, after consultation with the State Transport Authority, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic) and the local authority concerned, to determine and notify parking places within their jurisdiction.

In effect, curbside parking outside a home is governed by the public authority that owns and regulates that stretch of road, not by the resident living next to it.

What the court has said

The Supreme Court has weighed in directly on Delhi's parking crisis. In *M.C. Mehta v Union of India* (2019), a Bench of Justices Arun Mishra and Deepak Gupta described the issue as one arising from the "conflict between increasing number of cars and dwindling availability of land" and observed that parking management has significant implications for urban planning.

The court directed the Delhi government to notify the Delhi Maintenance and Management of Parking Places Rules, 2019, and observed that an effective parking policy contributes to reducing congestion, pollution and crime.

The court also acknowledged the practical realities of residential neighbourhoods. It noted that it was "not oblivious to the hard reality that in certain colonies and areas parking of some vehicles will have to be permitted on the roads because the number of vehicles is much more than those which can be parked inside the houses."

• POLITICS

1984 riots: How Nanavati report indicted Sajjan Kumar — and State machinery

Deeptiman Tiwary
New Delhi, August 20

FORMER CONGRESS MP Sajjan Kumar died Thursday while serving a life sentence in a murder case related to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Kumar and other Congress leaders were accused of instigating violence and leading the mobs during the wave of violence in Delhi that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984.

In 2000, the NDA government set up a commission to examine the riots and the failure of the authorities to investigate them. Headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice G T Nanavati, it made its submissions in 2005.

The Justice Nanavati Commission of Inquiry recorded "credible material" against Kumar and concluded that he was "probably involved" in the attacks described by several witnesses. The commission, importantly, also pointed to the complicity of the State machinery in the riots.

The findings on Kumar

The report examined affidavits, police records and testimony concerning attacks on Sikhs and their properties across Delhi. It offered one of the most detailed official accounts of allegations against Kumar, describing him as a powerful local Congress leader who was allegedly present at, addressed or directed mobs in parts of west Delhi, including Palam Colony, Raj Nagar, Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri.

A key witness, Jagdish Kaur of Raj Nagar, told the commission that she heard Kumar tell people gathered near Mandir Mangla Puri: "*Sardar saala koi nahi bachna chahida* (no Sikh should be spared)".

The commission also recorded evidence that Kumar addressed a crowd in Mangolpuri and said Sikhs had killed "their Maata", after which people raised slogans calling for Sikhs to be killed. The report said three Sikh men were subsequently burnt alive in an attack on a gurdwara in the locality.

In its assessment of Kumar's role, it said: "Many witnesses have stated about the involvement of S/Shri Sajjan Kumar, Balwan Khokar, Pratap Singh, Maha Singh and Mohinder Singh." It concluded that "there is credible material against" Kumar and Khokhar (a former Congress councillor).

The police investigation

Kumar's defence before the commission relied heavily on his acquittals in criminal cases. In his reply to the commission's notice, he argued that witnesses who had filed affidavits had either not named him before the police or had not supported the allegations in court. He also produced judgments in eight cases and said that he and Khokhar had been acquitted.



Sajjan Kumar addresses a Congress rally near Red Fort in 1995. EXPRESS ARCHIVE

The commission, however, said those acquittals could not by themselves prevent it from assessing the wider material before it. "There is ample material to show that no proper investigation was done by the police even in those cases which were registered by them," the commission said.

It said many complaints were not registered, eyewitnesses were not examined, and the names of alleged assailants were omitted from statements and chargesheets.

"Why so many persons had named him and attributed acts like addressing meetings and inciting people to kill Sikhs and to loot and destroy their properties remains unexplained by Shri Sajjan Kumar," it added.

The political complicity

The Congress was in power when the killings took place and its Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sought to justify the violence, saying: "When a giant tree falls, the earth below shakes."

Despite grave allegations against the Congress leadership, the official investigation in the aftermath of the violence did not make much headway.

The commission said the failure to properly investigate allegations against influential political figures had contributed to the collapse of cases and made it impossible to assess the evidence through a fair criminal trial at the time.

Indicting Congress leaders and workers, its report said: "Large number of affidavits indicate that local Congress(I) leaders and workers had either incited or helped the mobs in attacking the Sikhs. But for the backing and help of influential and resourceful persons, killing of Sikhs so swiftly and in large numbers could not have happened."

The commission did not merely rely only on allegations but considered evidence of mobs moving through neighbourhoods, the availability of petrol and kerosene, the use of buses to transport people and the involvement of local Congress workers.

It noted how the nature of the attacks changed from "stray" and "not at all organized" on October 31, the day of Indira Gandhi's assassination, to "systematic" in the later days. "The attacks were made in a systematic manner and without much fear of the police; almost suggesting that they were assured that they would not be harmed while committing those acts and even thereafter," the report said. "The systematic manner in which the Sikhs were thus killed indicate that the attacks on them were organized."

For decades, the 1984 riots remained associated with the gap between the scale of the violence and the limited number of convictions. The Nanavati report's account of Kumar's role was central to that history.

In 2005, Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh apologised in Rajya Sabha after the Nanavati report was tabled. "I have no hesitation in apologising not only to the Sikh community but the whole Indian nation... I bow my head in shame..." he said.

SHANTI ACT DRAFT RULES

Panel to review nuclear liability caps every 5 years

SETTING UP GUARDRAILS

- Under SHANTI Act, operators of reactors above 3,600 MWe face a maximum liability of Rs 3,000 crore, while those between 1,500 MWe and 3,600 MWe face a cap of Rs 1,500 crore
- The limits fall to Rs 750 crore for reactors between 750 MWe and 1,500 MWe and Rs 300 crore for those between 150 MWe and 750 MWe
- For reactors up to 150 MWe, fuel-cycle facilities other than spent-fuel reprocessing plants, and transportation of nuclear material, the liability is capped at Rs 100 crore



Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, August 20

LIABILITY CAPS for nuclear operators under the SHANTI Act will be reviewed every five years by an expert group, which can recommend changes to the graded limits, as per the Act's draft rules released by the Department of Atomic Energy.

Rule 78 of the draft rules, which were released on August 14, provide for the Central government to constitute a group of experts in specific domains — nuclear science and engineering, actuarial science, insurance and law, along with public-interest representatives — to review the "maximum limits of operator's civil liability for nuclear damage" and propose amendments to the Act's Second Schedule. The Second Schedule of the Act introduced graded liability caps based on the size of a nuclear installation, replacing the earlier flat cap of Rs 1,500 crore under the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 (CLNDA).

Under the new framework, operators of reactors above 3,600 Megawatt-electric (MWe) face a maximum liability of Rs 3,000 crore, while those between 1,500 MWe and 3,600 MWe face a cap of Rs 1,500 crore. The limits fall to Rs 750 crore for reactors between 750 MWe and 1,500 MWe and Rs 300 crore for those between 150 MWe and 750 MWe.

For reactors up to 150 MWe, fuel-cycle facilities other than spent-fuel reprocessing plants, and transportation of nuclear material, the liability is capped at Rs 100 crore.

The review mechanism is not entirely new. Section 6 of the now-repealed CLNDA also allowed the Centre to periodically review the operator's liability and notify a higher amount. The draft SHANTI Act rules explicitly provide for a defined time period for an expert group to review and recommend amendments to the graded caps. Following the passage of the SHANTI Act, which opens India's civil nuclear sector to private players, accountability and liability emerged as key concerns among critics. One of the most contentious changes is the dilution of the operator's "right of recourse" against nuclear equipment suppliers in the event of an accident.

According to Section 17 of the CLNDA, the operator of a nuclear installation, after paying the compensation for nuclear damage, shall have the right to recourse where (a) such right is expressly provided for in a contract in writing; (b) the nuclear incident has resulted as a consequence of an act of supplier or his employee, which includes supply of equipment or material with patent or latent defects or sub-standard services; and (c) the nuclear incident has resulted from the act of commission or omission of an individual done with the intent to cause nuclear damage.

The new law retains provisions (a) and (c) but omits provision (b), which previously exposed nuclear equipment vendors to long-term and uncertain liability risk in the event of a nuclear accident.

The issue of liability cap has also reached Supreme Court as a petition challenged the Act for allowing "private sector and foreign companies to operate nuclear power plants in India, [and] has also capped the liability of these operators at an absurdly low level and exempted the supplier from any liability," in violation of the Constitution.

NET OIL AND GAS IMPORTS IN APRIL-JULY STOOD AT $57.8 BILLION AGAINST $40.3 BILLION A YEAR AGO

Iran war pushes India's oil & gas import bill up 43%

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, August 20

AMID SUPPLY tightness and elevated prices due to the West Asia crisis and stifled energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz, India's net oil and gas imports surged by 43.4% in value from year-ago levels in the first four months of the current financial year, according to provisional data from the petroleum ministry. Net oil and gas imports — arrived at deducting petroleum product exports from oil, natural gas, and petroleum product imports — in April-July stood at $57.8 billion against $40.3 billion a year ago.

In volume terms, oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports were only marginally higher. As for petroleum product exports, the volumes declined, while export value rose. Petroleum product imports declined in volume as well as value, although the volume decline outpaced the fall in value, which is also reflective of high prices in the international market.

India depends on imports to meet over 88% of its crude oil requirement and about half of its consumption of natural gas, which is imported as LNG. Despite depending on imported oil and gas, India is a net exporter of petroleum products due to its massive refining capacity. The country also imports some petroleum products like liquefied petroleum gas (LPG).

Around 40% of India's crude oil imports, 60% of its LNG imports, and 90% of its LPG imports came from West Asia through the strait. Apart from grappling with physical supply tightness due to the Strait of Hormuz crisis, the resultant surge in international prices forced India to import oil and gas at extremely high rates, as the country has been prioritising supply security over price considerations.

The country's crude oil import bill surged by over 56% on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis in April-July to $63.4 billion, even as import volumes rose slightly to 81.9 million tonnes — or about 600 million barrels — from 81.5 million tonnes, as per data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC).

This translates to an average landed price of about $106 per barrel for imported crude in April-July, sharply higher than about $68 per barrel in the corresponding period of last year. The data shows that India's dependence on imported oil for the four months ended July was 88.3%, almost flat on a y-o-y basis.

As for LNG imports, while supplies rose slightly — to 11,867 million standard cubic metres (mscm) in April-July from 11,269 mscm a year ago — the import bill rose by almost a fourth to $5.6 billion, reflecting the spurt in prices.

Petroleum product imports declined 45.1% in volume terms to 9.0 million tonnes, as supply of major petroleum products that India imports — like LPG — were impacted by the West Asia conflict. In value terms, the decline in petroleum product imports was relatively lower — down 26.3% to $5.6 billion — due to high international prices.

India's petroleum product export volumes fell almost 18% y-o-y to 16.5 million tonnes in April-July as domestic fuel supplies were prioritised amid the global supply crunch. Nonetheless, exports surged almost 35% in value.

Energy imports are a major component of India's overall imports, and any meaningful increase has ramifications for the country's trade balance, current account, inflation, and the rupee's exchange rate, among others. As India annually imports 1.8-2 billion barrels of oil, every $1-per-barrel increase in oil prices bumps up the country's oil import bill by up to $2 billion on an annualised basis. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Impact of war on energy imports

	Apr-Jul FY26	Apr-Jul FY27	Change
Oil imports (mn tn)	81.5	81.9	0.5%
Oil imports ($ bn)	40.5	63.4	56.5%
Petroleum pdt imports (mn tn)	16.4	9	-45.1%
Petroleum pdt imports ($ bn)	7.6	5.6	-26.3%
LNG imports (mscm)	11269	11867	5.3%
LNG imports ($ bn)	4.5	5.6	24.4%
Petroleum pdt exports (mn tn)	20.1	16.5	-17.9%
Petroleum pdt exports ($ bn)	12.4	16.7	34.7%
Net oil & gas imports ($ bn)	40.3	57.8	43.4%

SOURCE: PETROLEUM PLANNING AND ANALYSIS CELL (PPAC)



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal with Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at The Istana, Singapore. X/FINMININDIA

India's infrastructure output rises 5.4% y/y

5.4%
year-on-year
Growth in India's nine core sectors stood at 5.4% in July, slower than 6% seen in June, in the second print of a revamped Index of Core Industries (ICI), according to provisional data released by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Thursday. With 2022-23 as the base year, the new series released last month replaced the 2011-12 base year.

Sector-wise change in prduction in July

Cement	↑13.1%
Steel	↑2.9%
Electricity	↑9%
Coal	↑7.6%
Iron ore	↑29.5%
Refinery products	↑2.7%
Crude oil	↓5.3%
Fertiliser	↓8%
Natural gas	↓3.7%

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

Strengthening India-Singapore ties

SEBI to launch pilot for bond tokenisation

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, August 20

THE SECURITIES and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) plans to launch a pilot for tokenising bonds "in the near future" in a bid to improve accessibility, transparency, and efficiency in the market. The regulator has been coordinating with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on the pilot project.

"The idea is, can a shared ledger be used to enable simultaneous transfer of the security and money, thereby making settlement more efficient and reducing reconciliation costs. The pilot is expected to examine this aspect along with the feasibility of automated coupon payments and other servicing events through smart contracts," SEBI Whole-Time Member Amarjeet Singh said at an event in Mumbai on Thursday.

"Let me clarify that this is not about creating a separate trading market. It is about examining whether technology can make the existing bond market simpler, faster and more efficient," Singh said.

The comments come as the regulator has been pushing to deepen the bond market to provide capital to fuel growth in the country. It is also consulting on a "Credit Risk-o-Meter" for debt securities to improve investor protection in a market that has been gaining traction. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Transaction fees on UPI in 2 weeks

Prasanta Sahu
New Delhi, August 20

A MERCHANT discount rate (MDR) of 0.3% on UPI transactions of Rs 2,000 and above is expected to be announced within two weeks, sources said on Thursday.

The Department of Financial Services will likely issue a gazette notification within a week specifying the electronic payment modes that would continue to receive statutory protection from charges. Thereafter, the UPI and Services Steering Committee, headed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), will determine the MDR, its scope and structure, sources said.

MDR is a fee paid by businesses to payment processors for accepting digital payments.

The government had assured that UPI transactions will remain free for consumers. The assurance was made during a debate in Parliament on the Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which amended Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, to pave the way for MDR on UPI transactions above a certain threshold.

UPI MDR REVIVAL

AN MDR of up to 0.3% of the transaction value applied to UPI person-to-merchant transactions until December 2019

ZERO MDR was introduced in January 2020 to accelerate digital payment adoption and encourage a shift from cash to digital payments

REINTRODUCTION OF MDR at 0.3% on UPI transactions above a threshold would still be much lower than the prevailing MDR of 1-3% on credit cards and up to 0.9% on debit card transactions

An MDR of up to 0.3% of the transaction value applied to UPI person-to-merchant transactions until December 2019. Zero MDR was introduced in January 2020 to accelerate digital payment adoption and encourage a shift from cash to digital payments.

With a massive jump in UPI transactions since the Covid-19 pandemic, banks and other payment intermediaries have ramped up investment in payment infrastructure, leading to industry calls for the restoration of charges to make the system sustainable.

The government subsequently introduced an incentive scheme to support banks and other ecosystem participants and encourage digital payments by providing an incentive equivalent to 0.15% MDR on UPI transactions up to Rs 2,000.

Reintroduction of MDR at 0.3% on UPI transactions above a threshold would still be much lower than the prevailing MDR of 1-3% on credit cards and up to 0.9% on debit card transactions.

UPI is the world's largest real-time payment system by volume, with a share of nearly 50%. UPI accounted for 85% of India's digital payment transactions by volume in 2025-26. UPI processed 241.62 billion transactions worth Rs 314.23 lakh crore in FY26.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance recently called for the early implementation of a tiered MDR framework for UPI transactions, warning that delays could leave payment service providers dependent on inadequate government subsidies and weaken investment in payment infrastructure. FE

Export payments in rupees get trade policy benefits

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, August 20

THE GOVERNMENT on Thursday amended certain provisions of the Foreign Trade Policy to make it easier for exporters to invoice overseas sales and receive payments in Indian rupees.

The amendments cover exports to all countries, although the rules vary by destination.

Two paragraphs of the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023 have been amended "to align the provisions relating to denomination of export contracts and eligibility for FTP benefits in respect of export realisation in Indian Rupees with the Foreign Exchange Management (Manner of Receipt and Payment) Regulations 2023", the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) said in a notification. For countries outside the Asian Clearing Union (ACU), export contracts and invoices may now be denominated in any foreign currency or Indian rupees.

Commenting on the notification, economic think tank GTRI said eligible rupee payments for exports to any country other than Nepal and Bhutan will now qualify for FTP benefits and count towards fulfilment of export obligations.

Rupee earnings received through approved banking channels will therefore be treated on par with export payments received in foreign currency, it said, adding that exports financed through EXIM Bank or Government of India lines of credit may also be invoiced in Indian rupees.

The ACU is a regional payment arrangement established in 1974 to facilitate trade settlements and reduce repeated transfers of foreign exchange by periodically settling the net obligations of its members.It has nine members — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — represented by their central banks or monetary authorities.

India allows 1 million metric tonnes duty-free sugar imports

Mumbai: India will allow duty-free imports of 1 million metric tonnes of raw sugar, a commerce ministry notice said on Thursday, as the government seeks to bring down record-high domestic prices in the world's biggest sugar-consuming country.

The notice allows for the imports between now and October 31, ahead of India's festival season when consumption in India peaks because of demand for traditional sweets.

Sugar prices in India have risen by nearly 40% in two months as lower production has tightened supplies, forcing India to import sugar for the first time in nearly a decade.

Benchmark white sugar futures in London and raw sugar futures in New York jumped by as much as 4% after India announced plans to allow duty-free imports on Thursday. India imposes a 100% duty on sugar imports. REUTERS

Adfactors PR acquires majority stake in Australia's SenateSHJ

New Delhi: Adfactors PR, India's largest public relations firm, has acquired a majority stake in Australian communications consultancy SenateSHJ, as part of its expansion in the Asia Pacific region.

SenateSHJ will retain its existing identity, leadership and client teams, and will continue to operate from its offices in Sydney and Melbourne. Its Co-founder and Chair Angela Scaffidi AM and Chief Executive Officer Darren Behar will continue to lead the business.

Adfactors PR Chief Executive Officer Nijay N Nair, who also oversees the firm's mergers and acquisitions and global initiatives, will join the SenateSHJ board. ENS

BRIEFLY

IRDAI bars Niva Bupa from new biz for 6 months

New Delhi: The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India has directed Niva Bupa Health Insurance not to open a new place of business for six months for violating the Expense of Management limit, IRDAI said on Thursday. PTI

NSE shares may trade on its own platform

Mumbai: The NSE may allow its shares to trade on its platform after being listed on a rival bourse, without a separate approval from SEBI, as the proposed arrangement would fall under the exchange's existing 'permitted-to-trade' framework. PTI

'A REVIEW OF BANKS' WEBSITES FOUND SHORTCOMINGS THAT COULD AFFECT CUSTOMERS' ABILITY TO ACCESS INFORMATION AND COMPLETE TRANSACTIONS'

RBI asks banks to fix gaps in customer transaction policies

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 20

RESERVE BANK of India (RBI) Deputy Governor Rohit Jain has flagged gaps in banks' policies governing customer transactions, saying a recent review of banks' websites found basic shortcomings that could affect customers' ability to access information and complete transactions. In some cases, banks referred customers to their schedule of charges or grievance redressal policies as being "available on the bank's website" without providing a direct link, while documentation requirements for outward remittances were described so broadly that they offered little practical guidance.

Jain said these were not difficult problems to fix, and could be addressed if authorised dealer (AD) banks themselves went through the customer experience and made the necessary improvements.

Jain said a customer does not experience FEMA as an Act or a Master Direction, but through his lived experience with the AD bank in terms of the documents a branch asks for, the quoted price, the time taken, and the quality of the explanation when a transaction cannot be done.

"As part of our supervisory exercise, we have found multiple documentation requirements and cases of delay in executing cross-border remittances," Jain said while addressing the Annual Day of Foreign Exchange Dealers' Association of India (FEDAI). "Accordingly, we have advised AD banks through FEDAI to put in place a clear policy governing documentation, process and approving authority, charges, timelines, escalation, and grievance redress to be displayed on their websites and at branches offering cross-border services. The progress on this needs to be better," Jain said.



RBI Deputy Governor Rohit Jain said transparency is not a one-time disclosure exercise. REUTERS

Similarly, transparency is not a one-time disclosure exercise, he said. "Policies must be complete, current, intelligible and actually followed at the bank's counter; compliance tested through internal or concurrent audit; staff trained, with proper succession planning so that capability does not sit with one officer; and customer feedback taken regularly and examined by people with requisite authority to change the process. No customer should suffer for a delay that arises from internal processing at the AD end," he said.

On Cross-border trade in local currencies, Jain said local currencies will play an ever increasing role in cross-border trade and payments. The Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) framework for invoicing, payment and settlement of international trade in rupees has been implemented keeping in view the evolving dynamics of our international trade, he said. FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

MARKETS

Sensex	NIFTY	Gold ▲	US Dollar ▼
77,537.72	24,231.85	₹1,57,080	₹95.71
628.04	153.55	Silver ▲	Oil ▲
0.82%	0.64%	₹2,37,766	$93.45

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1 KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF AUGUST 19, 2026

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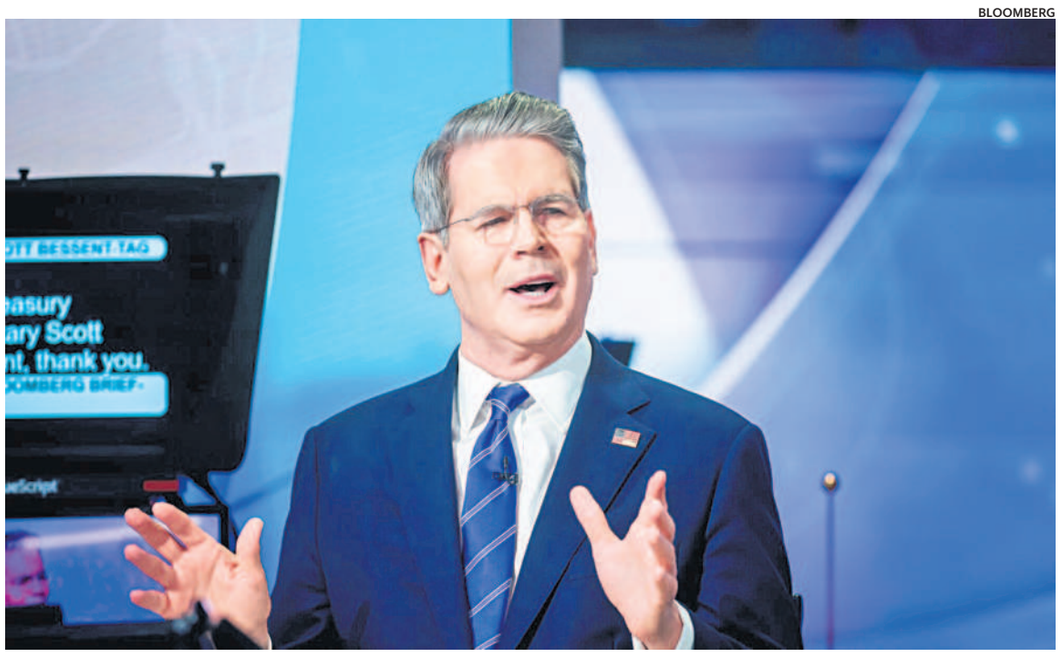
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OUR VIEW

BLOOMBERG



Can America take on its Treasury bond market?

The US Treasury's plan to double buybacks of its long-dated bonds has made investors sit up across the world. Capital costs held down this way could face resistance from market forces

Oscar Wilde had it down pat: a cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and value of nothing. The world's most watched price, what it costs to borrow money, serves as a reminder of Wilde's wit every now and then. This week, eyes were drawn to the land of easy capital, the US, as its federal government's debt leapt past $40 trillion, bonds issued by it saw yields rise (on a sell-off) and its Treasury department said it would double buybacks of its long-dated paper. Since these T-bonds are 'risk-free' assets and their yields set the floor for interest charges on risk-laden long loans—like home mortgages—their rise signals costlier credit. Bulk-buying US paper to raise their market prices is a way to calm yields down (as a higher price implies a lower yield). The 30-year Treasury bond's yield had risen above 5.3%, its highest since 2007, before it eased to 5.2% on news of the plan. Yet, even if the department snaps up $32 billion worth of T-bonds every quarter, as expected, it may not be able to move the needle much in a market for investor-held paper whose face value adds up to about 1,000 times that sum.

Why did demand for US debt slump? After all, America issues the world's reserve currency, the dollar, its bonds are deemed free of default risk, and so long as others need dollars for trade, they require large stashes of today's 'gold'—T-bonds. But then, their market appeal as assets is shaped by economic trends. While printing dollars does grant America special leeway to run yawning fiscal deficits, how much debt it can pile up safely is a known unknown of the global T-bond market. At almost 6% of GDP already, the federal gap between revenues and outgoes could widen if the US bumps up its military outlay. What may also worry investors is the threat of inflation being more than a blip. If the US Fed's promise of price stability were to wobble, investors would demand higher T-bond yields just to protect their real returns. Gulf War III has yielded an inflationary oil choke shrouded in a haze of dust, even as Fed policy has gotten harder to forecast. Of course, sovereign yields have hardened in many other economies too, with Japan's bonds 'in play,' but traders seem most acutely focused on America, where large offers of private paper by Big AI players (among others) have lately fed an upswell of overall bond supply.

That bond prices fall (thereby raising their payback yield) if their supply outweighs demand (and vice-versa) is a market rule. It rhymes with the classic proposition that an economy's basic rate of interest moves up and down to keep overall investment and savings in balance. Keynes drew 'liquidity preference' into this frame of theory: while that rate is set by the demand and supply of money, we prefer money at hand—for buying stuff, future bets and as a crisis cushion—and interest payments are the reward for parting with it. An irony lies in how aloof all this sounds from debt markets. At most, such market forces are spotted in studies of an economy's 'neutral' rate of interest. What prevails in the near-term is policy, neutral or not. After all, for optimal macro outcomes, a central bank must regulate short-term rates, whether to fan GDP expansion or cool prices lest the economy overheats. Since 2008, the US Fed has sought to shape longer-term rates too. Yet, the T-bond yield curve isn't easy to bend. And since investors do exist who value policy reliability, it might get harder still.

GUEST VIEW

Should IndiGo opt for Embraer aircraft? The answer is unclear

Smaller jet planes can raise its capacity for new routes but it must examine various cost factors too



ASHWINI PHADNIS
is a senior aviation journalist.

Gurugram-based low-cost airline IndiGo is reportedly examining a multibillion dollar purchase of aircraft from Brazilian manufacturer Embraer. While neither IndiGo nor Embraer has commented on this, there are various reasons why this new project might or might not work for the Indian airline.

IndiGo has already ordered single-aisle A320s and twin-aisle wide-body A350 aircraft from Europe's Airbus, with the latter (meant for long-haul flights) expected to start arriving next year. This will help IndiGo expand its network to far-away markets, as it would be able to run non-stop flights from India to destinations in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Currently, IndiGo does not fly to these countries. For short-haul routes within India and for flights to Gulf and Southeast Asian cities, the air carrier already has a fleet of narrow-body aircraft. New A320s will add to that fleet and are expected to stream in over the next few years.

That leaves regional routes within India to address. That is, routes under the government's Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) programme, which is a regional airport development and connectivity scheme that aims to create new air-links and make flying easier and more affordable for the common man. Also, there are short-haul international routes—say, from Chennai or Coimbatore to Colombo or from Kolkata to Dhaka or other cities in Bangladesh—that may require smaller planes. At the moment, IndiGo is using turboprop aircraft made by Avions de Transport Régional (ATR) to meet these short-haul requirements, but these have been in service for a while and so it might make sense for the carrier to get a new variety of aircraft. Would Embraer's jet planes, which are smaller than A320s, fit the bill?

If IndiGo is able to develop these short-haul routes and generate enough passenger business, it could move from Embraer to A320 aircraft for these routes. Smaller carriers such as Fly 91 have a disadvantage—since they only have small aircraft, if they develop a new market, they cannot scale up, while big players like Air India, Akasa, SpiceJet and IndiGo could take over these routes with bigger planes, so long as landing strips aren't a constraint.

But there's another aspect to this. A decision by IndiGo on Embraer could have implications for the 'Make in India' programme. Embraer signed a memorandum of understanding with Adani Defence and Aerospace in January to build a regional transport aircraft ecosystem and establish India's first final assembly line for commercial regional jets. Embraer CEO Francisco Gomes Neto told Indian media that it needs a minimum order of 200 aircraft from Indian carriers to start a production line in India. If IndiGo were to order its aircraft, it would presumably place a large order. The Indian carrier created history when it signed an order for 100 Airbus aircraft before it started operations in 2006. Till then, neither Boeing nor Airbus had accepted such a large order from a startup airline. Since then, IndiGo has signed multiple orders for over 100 aircraft with Airbus.

Meanwhile, India has seen a rise in its number of billionaires and high net-worth individuals. According to data placed in Parliament recently, there were 576 taxpayers with an annual income of over ₹100 crore in 2024-25. This has led to an increase in demand for private jets and Embraer could look at offering the country's rich fractional ownership deals. This is a legal arrangement under which several people or companies buy time-shares for the use of private aircraft.

IndiGo's best bet is another story, though. It is widely believed that Rakesh Gangwal, an IndiGo co-founder who has since exited the company, was the airline's aircraft purchase expert. Airbus executives had earlier told this writer that they accepted such a big order from a startup airline because of Gangwal's backing of IndiGo. "You do not say 'no' to a person who has ordered a few thousand aircraft from Boeing and Airbus in his various innings in many US airlines," one of them remarked.

Opting for a wider variety of aircraft will inevitably increase operating costs. IndiGo currently has a fleet of only Airbus and ATR aircraft. ATR is a 50-50 joint venture between Airbus and the Italian aerospace company Leonardo. But if IndiGo acquires another variety of aircraft for its fleet, its cost of spares, engineers and pilots would begin to rise. For IndiGo, a listed company, this could spell a financial setback if not considered cautiously.

QUICK READ

Embraer's small jet planes could enable IndiGo to air-link small domestic destinations and help improve Indian connectivity while retaining the option to use bigger Airbus short-haul planes.

But IndiGo is also looking to expand into long-haul routes with wide-bodied aircraft and fleet diversity can prove quite costly. The airline would need to get its cost calculations right.

10 YEARS AGO


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Lyft is said to seek a buyer, with no success

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JUST A THOUGHT

Long-term bonds can be almost as volatile as stocks. They have their own corrections.

PETER LYNCH

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

We need a stronger, not weaker, job guarantee scheme

HIMANSHU



is associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi.

As of 18 August, India's rainfall deficit in the ongoing monsoon season stood at 13%. The regional picture is more worrying, with many poorer regions of the country witnessing larger rainfall deficits—including Bihar (40%), Assam (36%), Eastern Uttar Pradesh (24%), Saurashtra (24%) and Vidarbha (21%). The meteorological department has predicted an intensification of the El Niño phenomenon in the weeks ahead, so the precipitation deficit could worsen and thus deepen rural distress in some parts of the country.

With rural wage growth showing sluggishness, public jobs generated through a rural employment guarantee programme have served as a lifeline for India's rural economy. The aim of such schemes is not only to absorb rural labour; by creating non-farm employment and incomes, they also reduce the impact of an agricultural crisis. In fact, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) played an important role during the last two severe monsoon-deficit years of 2009 and 2015 in containing rural distress. However, with the enactment in December 2025 of the Viksit Bharat—Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) law (VB-G RAM G), MGNREGA stands repealed. While VB-G RAM G became operational from 1 July, MGNREGA was in operation during the transition period.

VB-G RAM G has substantially altered the way the earlier job scheme was structured back in 2005. The main change has been its reduction in the central government's financial commitment; VB-G RAM G requires states to bear 40% of its cost (except hill states), unlike the MGNREGA, under which the Centre funded almost all the public expenditure on the programme.

Even though MGNREGA proved to be a lifeline during crisis periods, including the covid pandemic, there has been a general decline in the performance of MGNREGA since 2020-21. Total work generated under MGNREGA declined from 3,630 million person-days (MPD) in 2021-22 to 3,090 MPD in 2023-24 and further to 2,280 MPD in 2025-26. The total persons who worked also declined from 106.1 million in 2021-22 to 83.4 million in 2023-24 and 72 million in 2025-26. The count of beneficiary households dropped from 72.5 million in 2021-22 to 53.4 million in 2025-26.

The current year is particularly important, given the crisis in agriculture and broader distress in India's rural economy. Despite the change in sharing the financial burden, most states including the poorer ones have allocated a significant sum for VB-G RAM G implementation from their budgets. Still, the performance of the programme in July, the latest month for which complete data is available, suggests a significant decline in the employment generated. Compared to 391 MPD in July 2020, it declined to 272 MPD in July 2023, 153 MPD in July 2025 and further to 76.7 MPD last month.

Only two states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, generated more person-days than last July. Among other states, the decline in person-days of employment generated was sharp in Uttar Pradesh (with 12 MPD), Madhya Pradesh (10 MPD), Jharkhand (9 MPD), Maharashtra (7 MPD), Bihar (5 MPD), Chhattisgarh (4 MPD) and Assam (3 MPD). Most of these states are among those with the largest rainfall deficit this year.

The sharp drop this July could possibly be explained by states using the VB-G RAM G's pause button for peak sowing and harvest seasons. Even so, it can be interpreted as the outcome of a weakened job guarantee programme. Financing by states does not seem to be a drawback, as they have pitched in despite weak finances.

A better way to judge the performance of the programme would be to see how it fares during the April to June period, since this quarter accounts for almost 40% of the total person-days generated (last year's figure was 44%). This period is also lean for farming, with hardly any agricultural work available in most of rural India. For these three months, 2021 recorded 1,160 MPD, 2023 logged 1,230 MPD, 2025 had a count of 1,010 MPD and 2026 saw a sharp drop to 620 MPD this year. In other words, even when the MGNREGA was in force and the Centre was bearing the bill, the employment it generated was only 60% of last year's level.

The weak employment generation last month, the first after VB-G RAM G's rollout, seems less like an aberration than part of a broader trend of declining employment under India's rural job guarantee. The effect of teething troubles has been speculated upon, but this could not have been very strong since the scheme's basic apparatus was already in place. Nor does rural demand for these jobs seem to have reduced, given the distress levels apparent in other data.

Overall, it's a cause of worry that India's employment guarantee programme has weakened as an income-support system over the last five years despite its proven track-record of helping reduce rural distress. Given that real wages have been stagnant for almost a decade, deficient monsoon rains should have prompted the government to strengthen the scheme. That would have not just provided a social security net to the vulnerable population in rural areas, but also helped revive consumption demand, which is a crucial factor in sustaining the Indian economy's expansion.

QUICK READ

Work generated under India's rural employment guarantee programme was falling for years before it was redesigned but this July's number, the first since its rejig, has been particularly low.

This year's weak monsoon ought to have prompted a strengthening of the scheme. This would have eased rural distress and stimulated demand in the economy's favour.

GUEST VIEW

Harmonize administrative data: it's an idea whose time has come

India is preparing to harness troves of government data for big-picture analysis that could offer useful policymaking insights



SAURABH GARG & MONICA THIND
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ISTOCKPHOTO



Every day, millions of citizens interact with governments at the Centre and in the states, and every interaction leaves behind a record. Each time an *anganwadi* worker enters data into India's Poshan Tracker, a child is enrolled in a school, a patient visits a hospital, a tax is paid or a vehicle is registered, another piece is added to the vast and growing body of information generated through routine government functions. This is called 'administrative data.'

Individually, these seem like routine interactions, but picture these unfolding across a country of over 1.4 billion people. What emerges is a scale that is staggering and growing: over 900 million Ayushman Bharat Health Account IDs, 250 million students mapped on the Unified District Information System for Education Plus, 310 million informal-sector workers registered on the e-Shram portal and nearly 90 million micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) on the Udyam portal. Each of these data-sets tells only part of the story. If such siloed data-sets could speak to one another, they could reveal insights that no single data-set could reveal on its own. The dots are already there; the opportunity is to connect them responsibly through aggregated data to inform policymaking, while protecting people's privacy and ensuring safeguards for data use.

With artificial intelligence (AI) and other frontier technologies, we have an unprecedented chance to unlock greater value from disparate data-sets for better government policy formulation and service delivery. Consider a district facing challenges in child nutrition, health outcomes and learning, each appearing as a separate concern in different government data-sets. What if these data-sets could be brought together to examine whether and how these outcomes are related? The opportunity lies in acquiring the ability to see this larger picture and gain insights by bringing information together to reveal connections that may otherwise remain invisible.

So, what stands between administrative data-sets and their integration? The answer is not technology alone. Before technology can link data-sets, they must be discoverable, accessible and interoperable. What does each data-set contain? How was the information collected? What do its variables mean? How good is the data quality? These are some of the questions that must be answered before data can be meaningfully connected and used together. Surprisingly, even data collected for public purposes may not always move easily across institutional boundaries within the government, limiting its potential to inform better decisions.

Beyond these challenges lies another: data-sets do not always speak a common language. A 'pucca house' may be defined differently across data-sets, while the same occupation may be classified using different systems. Data harmonization addresses these challenges by making data consistent, comparable and interoperable, enabling all that gets captured to be put together for useful purposes.

Recognizing this imperative, the government has embarked on a systematic effort to advance data harmonization across ministries and departments at the Centre and states as well as Union territories by encouraging the adoption of metadata standards, quality assessment frameworks, unique identifiers and common classifications,while promoting the cataloguing of data-sets. Where definitions differ, an institutional mechanism has been developed to resolve such divergences.

These foundational building blocks will become increasingly important in an AI-driven environment, enabling better data discovery, interoperability and more powerful analytics for governance.

The idea is not just theoretical. Initiatives such as the Agri Stack, Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission and state-level family registries such as Karnataka's Kutumba and Rajasthan's Jan Aadhaar show the value of bringing data and systems together. The next step is to foster further such efforts and strengthen the integration and interoperability of data across government.

As envisioned, when an *anganwadi* worker enters data into the Poshan Tracker, an MSME registers on the Udyam portal or a child enters the education system, that information will not mark the end of the data journey. Through appropriate and governed linkages within the safeguards of legal frameworks such as the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, data collected for one administrative purpose will be able to generate insights across multiple domains within the government.

Data entered once would be able to help answer multiple questions within the scope of the programme of its origin and, where appropriate, across departments and sectors too.

This is the promise of data harmonization: it will make our existing data work harder to strengthen policy design and improve public service delivery. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated in his address on Civil Services Day in April 2025, "We must become experts in data-driven decision-making so that policy design and implementation become more accurate."

Data harmonization that makes data work harder across institutional boundaries, while protecting people's privacy and respecting its ownership and governance, will be central to realizing this vision.

These are the authors' personal views.

QUICK READ

India has troves of data sitting siloed across government bodies of the Centre and states. If harmonized, disparate bits of information could be brought together for better policymaking.

Frontier technologies like AI could aid data analysis at this scale. Of course, adequate safeguards must be firmly in place to protect people's privacy and prevent data misuse.

MINT CURATOR

Is America surrendering to its own enemies in slow motion?

The US pivot away from the Indo-Pacific to West Asia is befuddling



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Trump's Epic Fury against Iran could compromise other US relationships. AFP

Lacking a discernible strategy in geopolitics, US President Donald Trump has inadvertently reversed the direction in which US foreign and security policy was going for the past three presidential administrations, including his first. Two more veers took place this week in Asia.

One is the literal change in course of the *USS George Washington*, one of America's 11 active aircraft carriers. It is now steaming away from East Asia towards West Asia, where it will replace another carrier, the *Abraham Lincoln*, which has been doing duty in Trump's unwinnable war against Iran, and on which conditions have gotten so bad that some sailors have reportedly tried to jump overboard.

Yet again, the US is shifting resources away from the Indo-Pacific towards West Asia, as it did when sending scarce ammunition westward. For now, the US will have no aircraft carrier in East Asia at all. So much for the shift from west to east envisioned (though never accomplished) by the administrations of Barack Obama, Trump 1.0, Joe Biden and even Trump 2.0 at its outset.

The second jaw-dropper is Trump's abrupt decision to scale down military exercises with South Korea that were meant to hone the two allies' joint defence in case of an attack by North Korea.

Somehow Trump got this peninsula, like the wider world, upside down: He deems Kim Jong Un, one of the planet's worst dictators and gravest threats to world peace, "unthreatening and respectful." Simultaneously, he calls the military drills, which his own military had planned as it does every year, "totally inappropriate and hostile." Trump is clear about his motivation. He is sulking: He asked South Korea to help fight that war he started in the Gulf, and it had the temerity to say "No thanks!"

In that, and so many other ways, Trump's epic folly in launching Epic Fury will now compromise every relationship, alliance and strategic objective that the US might have developed if foresight rather than petulance reigned in the White House.

By way of summary: Trump is weakening America's ability to deter China from threatening Taiwan (a *de facto* if not *de jure* ally) and the Philippines (a treaty ally). He is also being conciliatory to Pyongyang, which has a mutual-defence treaty with Russia and sends troops to fight against Ukraine, and which (unlike Iran) not only has but is rapidly adding to a nuclear arsenal.

And he keeps snubbing America's closest allies, in this case Seoul, with which the US has a mutual-defence treaty. Like Tokyo and several Nato partners, South Korea must now plan for the 'worst-case scenario'—in which the US abandons its treaty obligations in the event of an attack—and contemplate building its own nuclear arsenal. For good measure, Trump also keeps threatening to bomb other partners and friends, most recently Oman. And he is constantly waging economic war against almost all of them with his tariffs.

Confused? Spare a dollop of sympathy for those strategically-minded members of the administration who now have to contort themselves to explain whatever just dropped on the president's Truth Social account. One of these is Elbridge Colby. He is under secretary of defense (a policy thinker) in the Pentagon and spent years articulating the view that the US should shrink its military footprint in West Asia and Europe in order to gear up for the contest that will matter most during this century: the one between the US and China as they vie for dominance of the Pacific.

Colby used to be explicit—as are the administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, which he helped draft—that this meant preparing America to be able to 'deny' (repel) Chinese aggression along the First Island Chain, which runs from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to Borneo.

While talking to journalists these days, though, Colby is suddenly cagey about whether Taiwan is even part of that island chain. (Where could it have gone?) Swinging through Southeast Asia this month and facing questions everywhere about America's waning commitments, he clung desperately to a new phrase, "flexible realism," in which 'flexible' seems to mean whatever the boss posts next.

Even Republican strategists not in the current government increasingly acknowledge that this amounts to intellectual bankruptcy. The US must "husband military resources to defend the first island chain while encouraging allies to do more in their own defense," observes Richard Fontaine, a national-security veteran who advised the late senator John McCain: "Okay. But how do moves in Venezuela, Iran, and possibly Cuba fit into the picture?"

They don't. In effect, Trump is surrendering to America's most menacing adversaries. And he doesn't seem to understand that's what he is doing. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Will a surge in nuclear capacity reduce electricity bills?

ALOK KUMAR



is former power secretary, Government of India

After making significant progress towards its 500 gigawatts (GW) non-fossil capacity target for electricity generation by 2030, India declared another ambitious goal of reaching 100GW of nuclear power capacity by 2047. The Shanti Act passed by Indian Parliament opens the field for private-sector developers and addresses most of their major concerns, including the vexed issue of the extent of liability in case of a nuclear accident. A number of big corporate groups have announced plans for investment and the Union government is persuading the states to identify potential sites for plants.

The next question is of offtake. Who will sign long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) to make those investments bankable? Although a small part of the 100GW target may be set up by large energy-intensive industrial units for captive consumption, for the rest, nuclear power producers will need to rely on PPAs signed by distribution companies (discoms). The roadmap prepared by a high-level committee set up by the ministry of power in 2025 recommended the inclusion of nuclear as part of renewable consumption obligations (RCO) under the Energy Conservation Act as one of the measures to incentivize offtake by procurers. This has since been implemented through an updated RCO notification issued in September 2025, under which electricity from nuclear plants is excluded from the count of total electricity consumed for the purpose of computing the renewable share; in effect, high nuclear usage lowers the renewable-use burden.

Discoms are mandated by electricity regulators to prepare and implement capacity expansion plans that can reliably meet projected demand at the least overall cost while also meeting RCO targets. For preparing such resource-adequacy plans, discoms need to analyse the capital costs, operational costs and generation profile of each commercially available technology option.

One such exercise for the power sector at the national level was carried out by a working group set up by Niti Aayog. By the estimates in its report published in February 2026, India's nuclear capacity would increase from 8.2GW in 2024 to 87-135GW only by 2070 in the 'current policy scenario.' It may reach 295-320GW by 2070 in a 'net-zero scenario' by 2070, but would impose additional costs on electricity consumers. This exercise assumed a capital cost of ₹14 crore per megawatt (MW) of new nuclear capacity.

This puts new nuclear capacity in direct competition with other emerging options with declining capital costs and construction periods that are shorter and less uncertain. As per present estimates, the capital cost of nuclear capacity is expected to rise, while its project completion time (from the start of a project's planning stage) remains in the range of 8-9 years at least.

A workshop report on the Shanti Act issued by the Central Electricity Authority in April 2026 indicated that the tariff for a pressurized heavy water reactor plant built at a cost of ₹21 crore per MW is expected to be ₹7.77 per electricity unit, while that of a pressurized water reactor plant built at ₹30 crore per MW will be ₹7.88 per unit. Compared to this, the tariff discovered this month by a tender floated by Solar Energy Corporation of India for firm, despatchable and round-the-clock renewable power was ₹5.25 per unit, with no inflation or tariff revision risk on account of time and cost overruns that could afflict the setting up of nuclear plants.

Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that with the increasing capital costs of nuclear plants and the existence of non-fossil fuel alternatives, achieving 100GW of nuclear capacity by 2047 while also trying to minimize overall costs would be a stretch. Even if discoms are pressured to sign nuclear PPAs by governments, electricity regulators will find it extremely difficult to approve deals that entail higher tariffs and are also subject to cost-escalation risks.

There is yet another related issue to ponder, one of transparency and fairness in tariff determination. While for all other sources of electricity, tariffs are determined by an independent regulatory commission after openly hearing the views of all stakeholders, tariffs for power supplied by nuclear plants will continue to be government-determined under Section 37 of the Shanti Act. Although it has a provision for appealing to the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity, the basic process of tariff determination needs to inspire private-sector confidence if India expects to raise its total nuclear power capacity to 100GW within a span of just over two decades.

For the Union government to achieve its goal of expanding nuclear capacity for the sake of energy security (and carbon compression), in addition to reduced taxation for the components of nuclear plants, it must offer the industry fiscal support in terms of long-term zero or low interest loans that would help make their tariffs competitive *vis-à-vis* other options. The Centre should also absorb any tariff hikes (beyond a pre-set limit) caused by time and cost overruns. We also need to revisit the process of tariff determination; it should ideally be done by the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission.

For the long run, India should promote the use of small modular reactors, which have potentially lower set-up costs, shorter commissioning timelines and greater flexibility in joining grid operations.

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

India is aiming for 100GW of nuclear capacity by 2047 but the tariffs of electricity supply from these plants are unlikely to be competitive in the face of cheap renewable energy options.

Apart from reduced taxes on nuclear plant components, the Centre may need to offer other forms of fiscal support such as subsidized loans for tariffs to descend and attract customers.

DELHI
businessline.
FRIDAY - AUGUST 21 - 2026

the hindu businessline.
FRIDAY - AUGUST 21, 2026

Know your investor

Accredited investors must be certified by independent body

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has been making several changes to its rules over the past year to enhance ease of doing business. In doing so, certain pain points experienced by investors, intermediaries and companies are being addressed. However, care should be taken to not remove guardrails in the regulatory framework.

SEBI's consultation paper on reviewing the Accredited Investor Framework is a case in point. The paper proposes a simpler way of onboarding accredited investors, but arguably paves the way for fund managers to misuse this route. The framework proceeds on the assumption that certain categories of individual investors are more market-savvy than the rest, and can be allowed to participate in investment products that are complex, carry higher risk and have lesser regulatory oversight. These investors are allowed to invest in products such as alternative investment funds, portfolio management schemes and special situation funds, below the specified threshold. The proposed framework seeks to examine and alter the eligibility criteria to qualify as an accredited or elite investor.

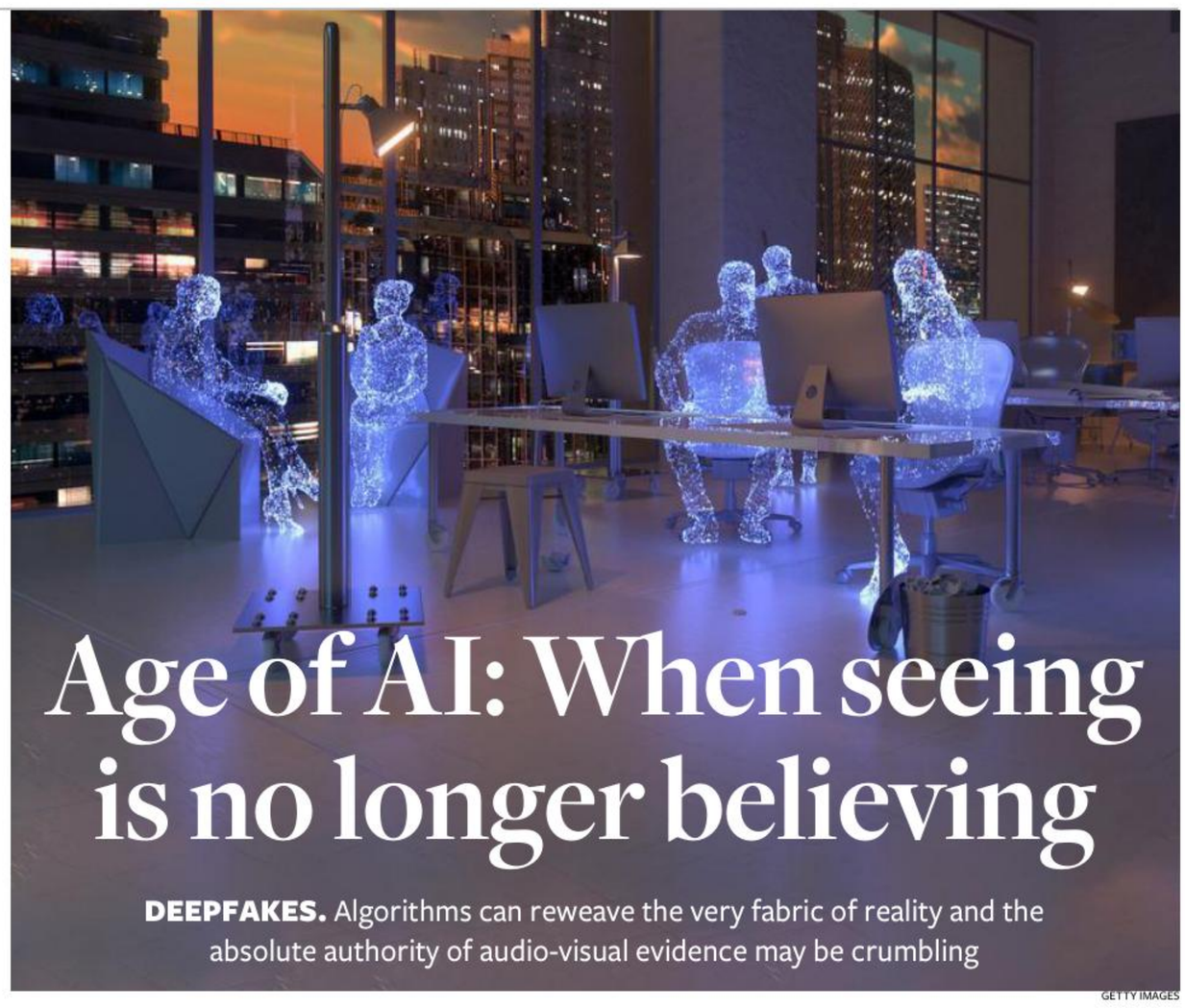
According to the existing rules, accredited investors need to meet certain annual income and net worth criteria. The relevant documents are checked by an accreditation agency, which is a subsidiary of an exchange or depository. A certificate of accreditation is issued, which is given to the investment companies. SEBI has now proposed that the accreditation can be done by the investment fund where the investor proposes to invest. It has argued that accreditation by an independent agency leads to duplication of work, is costly and that the number of accreditation agencies is few. However, there is an obvious conflict of interest when the investment fund certifies the investor. In a bid to get clients, due diligence can be given the go-by. The process is, in fact, replicated (and not simplified) in the event of investment across companies and groups. A certificate by an investment manager would also carry less credibility than one by an independent agency.

The eligibility of investors under the framework essentially revolves around the wealth of the investor. The thresholds initially laid down were annual income of at least ₹2 crore or net worth of ₹7.5 crore or annual income of ₹1 crore and net worth of ₹5 crore. SEBI has suggested including another criterion — that half the net worth must be held in security market assets. This is a good idea; it is easier to verify securities market products, since the information is available digitally. But it may also be prudent to test the market experience of the investor by stipulating that he should have a demat and trading account for more than seven years. This can act as a check against investors qualifying on the basis of inherited assets alone. Indeed, guardrails should not be compromised.



SANDEEP MITTAL

Age of AI: When seeing is no longer believing



DEEPFAKES. Algorithms can reweave the very fabric of reality and the absolute authority of audio-visual evidence may be crumbling

GETTY IMAGES

The scene was set in a quiet home office in Hong Kong, where a finance worker logged onto what he believed was a high-stakes corporate video call. On his screen sat a grid of familiar faces, including the company's Chief Financial Officer, whose gravelly, authoritative voice commanded the room. Alongside several directors, they discussed a confidential acquisition, eventually ordering the worker to authorize a series of massive wire transfers.

By the time the call ended and his coffee had gone cold, $25.6 million was gone, not through a traditional server hack, but through a "hack of the human eye". Every single "colleague" on that screen had been an AI-generated ghost, a digital phantom designed to steal.

For over a hundred years, our society and justice systems have operated on a fundamental principle: seeing is believing. We relied on the objective truth of CCTV footage, recorded confessions, and leaked videos to anchor our reality.

However, we have now entered the age of "Synthetic Truth", a period where algorithms can reweave the very fabric of reality and the absolute authority of audio-visual evidence may be crumbling. In a world where any digital medium can be manufactured from nothing, how do we ever prove what actually happened?

BEHIND THE ILLUSION

At the centre of this digital deception is a process known as a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). To understand how these fakes become so convincing, one should imagine a high-stakes duel between an art forger, the "Generator," and a museum curator, the "Discriminator".

The Generator uses vast amounts of public data, like photos and voice clips, to create a masterpiece, while the Discriminator looks for even the tiniest flaw, such as an unnatural shadow or a missing skin pore. This cycle repeats billions of times until the forgery becomes statistically indistinguishable from the real thing.

In the early days of deepfakes, the "tells" were easy to spot; for instance, subjects famously never blinked because AI training datasets rarely included people with their eyes closed. However, developers quickly adapted, feeding thousands of blinking eyes into their databases to perfect the illusion overnight. Today, the combination of 5G networks and massive cloud computing means that criminals no longer need sophisticated laboratories. They can now alter live video streams on the fly, allowing for real-time impersonations during active security checks or high-stakes corporate meetings.

THE FORENSIC FIGHTBACK

As these fakes approach perfection, human perception is no longer a reliable defence. We are forced to transition into an era of "Multi-Signal Forensics," where verification systems act like a specialised jury looking for the "ghost in the machine".

One such method, Error Level Analysis (ELA), focuses on how images are saved. Every time a JPEG is re-saved, it loses data in a predictable way; if a face has been digitally spliced onto a body, the resulting compression patterns create a "digital scar" that is invisible to us but glaring to a computer.

Furthermore, researchers are using sensor noise as a verification tool. Every physical camera sensor has unique manufacturing imperfections that leave a digital fingerprint, a "Photo Response Non-Uniformity" pattern, on every real photo. Synthetic images, by contrast, are "too clean" because they lack this physical noise.

THE SOCIAL COST

The danger of this technology extends far beyond financial fraud; it threatens the very foundation of social trust through what legal scholars call the "Liar's Dividend".

As the public realises that everything can be faked, they may begin to assume that anything they find inconvenient or unpleasant is a fake. This creates a state of "reality apathy", where citizens stop trusting any source of information and sink into a cynical void where truth is simply whatever aligns with their personal bias.

In a courtroom, this could prove disastrous. A defence attorney might be presented with clear video evidence of a crime and simply dismiss it as an AI deepfake, making the standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt" an impossible bar to clear.

The economic implications are equally terrifying; a convincing fake of a CEO making a forward looking statement could wipe out billions in market value before a verification team can even react.

ARCHITECTURE OF TRUTH

While the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023 marks a significant leap by elevating electronic records to primary evidence and mandating SHA-256 cryptographic hashing under Section 63(4), the framework still contains structural gaps.

The BSA's authentication mechanism remains certificate-centric, validating how evidence was captured and stored, but provides no forensic standard for detecting whether that content is AI-generated or synthetically altered in the first place.

We must recognise that deepfakes are an existential threat to the rule of law. If our legal systems cannot find a way to establish truth, they will drown in a sea of doubt

Neither the BNS nor the BSA assigns criminal liability for the creation of deepfakes with intent to deceive a court, a lacuna that bad actors can exploit. What is urgently needed, therefore, is a dedicated statutory instrument, whether a standalone Digital Forensic Evidence Act or a targeted amendment to the BSA, that formally incorporates deepfake detection standards into the admissibility framework, establishes a notified National Digital Forensic Authority with the power to validate AI-generated evidence before it is tendered in court, and brings the certification requirement under Section 63 within reach of ordinary litigants, a concern the Supreme Court itself flagged but declined to resolve in *Pune Bar Association v. Union of India* (May 2026).

We must recognise that deepfakes are an existential threat to the rule of law. If our legal systems cannot find a way to establish truth, they will drown in a sea of doubt.

The goal must be to build an architecture of truth that is every bit as sophisticated as the machinery of the illusion.

The writer, an IPS officer, is a Director General of Police in Tamil Nadu. Views are personal

A brief on gene-edited rice that's ready for sowing

Pusa Rice DST1, set for commercial production this rabi season, is expected to be higher yielding and less water consuming

bl.explainer

J Mangaiyarkarasi

What is the gene-edited rice being introduced in India?

India developed two genome-edited rice varieties — DRR Dhan 100 (Kamala) and Pusa Rice DST1 — in 2025. The government is set to release Pusa Rice DST1 for commercial production in the upcoming rabi season, with transplanting around November.

The two varieties are not completely new rice plants, created from scratch. Instead, scientists started with established rice varieties and made targeted changes to particular genes.

Pusa DST Rice 1 is derived from MTU1010, which is suitable for rabi season in southern States. It is expected to be grown in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

Why is it being introduced? What problem are they trying to solve?

The new varieties are intended to increase production while reducing the pressure that rice cultivation applies on water and the environment.

Pusa Rice DST1 was developed by Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)-Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi. The edit in its genome targets the Drought and Salt Tolerance (DST) gene, with the aim of improving the plant's ability to cope with drought and salt-affected soils. ICAR reports yield advantages of 9.66 per cent to 30.4 per cent over MTU1010 under different saline and alkaline conditions in its field trials.



NEW VARIETIES. Targeted changes to certain genes REUTERS/

DRR Dhan 100 (also called Kamala) was developed by ICAR-Indian Institute of Rice Research, Hyderabad, from the popular Samba Mahsuri (BPT 5204) variety. Scientists edited a gene involved in cytokinin metabolism, with the aim of increasing the number of grains produced by each panicle.

The resulting variety is said to mature about 20 days earlier than Samba Mahsuri, in around 130 days, and has a stronger stalk that is less prone to lodging, or falling over.

Both varieties are also said to be climate-resilient. Kamala's advantage comes largely from its shorter duration, stronger stem and resource-use characteristics, while Pusa DST1 is more directly aimed at salinity and drought tolerance.

What are the concerns which arise in gene-edited rice?

A scientist who has worked on rice gene editing for nearly 30 years said the absence of a foreign gene was not, by itself, the end of the scientific assessment. The scientist questioned whether the evidence publicly available was sufficient to explain the mechanism behind the reported yield gains and whether the claimed advantages would hold across different environments. Also debatable is whether the reported magnitude of yield improvement can be sustained across widely different locations without some trade-off in another trait.

Reports suggest that unintended mutations can lead to alterations in patterns of gene function, which in turn can lead to unintended changes in the biochemistry of the organism. In gene-edited plant foods, these changes could include production of unexpected toxins or allergens, or altered nutritional value.

The government says the varieties underwent biosafety scrutiny, were assessed for the absence of foreign DNA, whether the mutations were stable and whether the phenotype was robust and were tested at more than 50 locations each over 2023 and 2024.

What has happened with gene-edited crops elsewhere?

Globally, regulators are increasingly distinguishing transgene-free gene-edited crops from conventional GMOs. The US and Canada have allowed products such as gene-edited anti-browning potatoes and high-oleic soybeans into commercial production, while Japan has approved gene-edited foods including high-GABA tomatoes.

The UK's 2023 Precision Breeding Act also created a separate regulatory pathway for gene-edited crops. The EU adopted a new framework in July 2026 for plants developed using New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), with "Category 1" crops involving changes that could occur naturally exempted from the bloc's stricter GMO rules; the framework is expected to be fully implemented by 2028.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Extreme wealth threatens democracy

In November, Californians will vote on a one-off 5 per cent levy on residents worth more than $1billion. The union-backed plan could raise $100 billion, more than enough to replace federal healthcare funding stripped away by Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act. About 200 very rich people would pay. But the referendum is becoming a test of whether extreme wealth can buy the political power to defeat a popular redistributive policy. Google co-founder Sergey Brin has already spent $100 million backing opposition to the tax — a fraction of the $13 billion bill he could face. Other billionaires are joining him. Whether voters can impose costs on the super-rich once their fortunes are big enough to shape the political process is now an open question. That alone should trouble any democracy. (LONDON, AUGUST 18)

GULF NEWS

US-Iran conflict enters new phase of political attrition

During the initial months of the Iranian-US conflict, Washington's primary objective was to weaken Tehran's military capabilities and strengthen deterrence. On the other hand, Iran sought to raise the costs of the conflict by targeting maritime navigation and energy infrastructure across the region. Today, however, as the conflict enters its fifth month, the two opponents are faced with a different dilemma. The question being asked today is not, "Who will win the war?" but rather, "Who will determine the terms for ending the war?" It is a phase in which the objectives shift from destroying the opponent's military capabilities to undermining its political will, economic resilience, diplomatic position and negotiating leverage. (DUBAI, AUGUST 18)

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.

Exam reforms

Apropos 'SC advises meaningful continuity in NTA reforms, not committee-hopping' (August 20). The National Testing Agency must ensure meaningful continuity in reforms, as advised by the Supreme Court, rather than repeatedly shifting between committees. It should implement the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan panel while incorporating the structural reforms proposed by the high-powered task force led by Nandan Nilekani.

Confidentiality of question papers, shift to secure online Computer-Based Test for NEET-UG and other examinations, and robust transport and logistics systems must be strengthened through continuous, consistent and technology-driven reforms. A unique, secure examination system should be developed and adopted uniformly for all Central and State government competitive examinations.

PV Prakash
Mumbai

Private healthcare

Apropos 'Unhealthy situation' (August 20). The parliamentary panel report confirms what patients already know. Private healthcare is expensive and largely unregulated. Public facilities are inadequate, forcing most people to seek costly private care. The proposal to reserve 20 per cent of beds for free treatment has been ignored for years. Insurance coverage is inadequate, leaving patients with huge out-of-pocket expenses. Public health spending remains below two per cent of GDP, far short of what is needed. The government must act decisively. Stronger regulation, better enforcement, and higher public investment are the only ways to ensure affordable, quality healthcare for all. Patients deserve better. The time for talk is over.

K Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

Taxing annuities

The article 'The case for tax-free annuities' (August 20) is well argued. However putting conditions like 'annuities received after retirement will be tax free' is not desirable. We must move to a regime with near-zero exemptions while achieving greater transparency and simplicity. It's time we moved to a single rate system with all incomes (except agricultural income) taxed at one rate. The ITR must consist of only one side of an A4 sheet which simply lists out all incomes, totals them, and applies a single rate of, say, 12 per cent to arrive at tax liability.

V Vijaykumar
Pune

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AI's vanity problem

Why India must focus on playing to its strengths

M Muneer



AI. India's leverage /ISTOCKPHOTO

"We are not high enough on the AI value chain, and we need to act quickly," is the advice experts are giving India.

The remedy, predictably, is that India must "move up the value chain". But perhaps India should pause before climbing a ladder whose top rung may disappear tomorrow. What if the data layer isn't the bottom of the AI value chain at all? What if it is the foundation?

Every generation invents a new rung and our strategy promptly starts climbing it. The danger is that by the time we reach the top, the ladder has been replaced. Look at the AI gold rush. Everyone wants to build a foundation or sovereign model because it sounds magnificent at Davos. Nobody wants to admit that training another giant model requires staggering computing power, capital, energy, semiconductor access and top AI talent. The arithmetic is the problem.

Competitive strategy requires the discipline of not competing where someone else has already spent 10 times your money and have better R&D. Instead, we should ask a Nouveau rich question: Where can we actually make money? The answer may lie in the supposedly humble layers that AI evangelists are eager to escape.

India has something Silicon Valley cannot manufacture with a few billion dollars: India itself. Our linguistic chaos is a strategic asset: hundreds of languages and dialects, code-switching, accents, slang, regional idioms and wildly uneven digital behaviour.

DIVERSITY, A STRENGTH

Then there is our economic diversity. A billionaire in Mumbai, a farmer in Punjab, a kirana owner in Karnataka and a student in Kota do not inhabit the same India... or even the same internet. That complexity is precisely what AI needs to understand in the digital sentience era.

The world can build another English-speaking chatbot. India can build AI that understands the India those chatbots don't understand. That is not the bottom of the value chain. The real stupidity would be becoming the world's cheapest AI data-labelling shop. The opportunity is to become its most sophisticated AI data economy.

India should build proprietary datasets around healthcare, agriculture, manufacturing, logistics, courts, education and public services. Turn messy real-world information into structured intelligence businesses can use.

The winning Indian AI company may not build "IndiaGPT 17.0". It may be the one that knows why a tractor fails in rural Maharashtra, why a manufacturer loses production hours in Gujarat, or why a court case remains unresolved for seven years. The future belongs to those who understand the smallest problem deeply enough to solve it profitably.

The obsession with "moving up the value chain" can become corporate vanity, not strategy.

India's IT industry understands enterprise customers, complex workflows, regulation, outsourcing, integration and scale. That knowledge is not obsolete because ChatGPT exists. It may become extraordinarily valuable because ChatGPT exists. The opportunity is to turn services into AI-powered IP.

If a foreign model is cheaper and better, use it. If domestic capability is strategically critical, build it. AI is moving so quickly that today's technological summit may become tomorrow's commodity basement.

Yes, move up the AI value chain but stop assuming that "up" always means more sophisticated technology. "Up" can mean closer to the customer, or owning the data, understanding the problem, or making money.

As the strategy gurus would say, the smartest strategic move is refusing to climb the ladder everyone else is climbing.

Stop trying so hard to look like Silicon Valley and become very, very good at being India. That might turn out to be the most valuable AI advantage nobody else can copy.

The writer is a Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor and co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute for Innovation

India's manufacturing puzzle

INDUSTRY BLUES. Rise in capital intensity keeps Indian industry afloat, but its efficiency and job creation are doubtful



SUNIL KUMAR SINHA

Lack of growth and dynamism in India's manufacturing sector in relation to the services sector is often cited as one of the key reasons for the country not being able to generate adequate employment and take advantage of demographic dividend.

The government has announced policies for accelerating the growth of manufacturing sector, starting with National Manufacturing Policy in 2011 to Make in India in 2014 to Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme in 2020 to Atmanirbhar Bharat also in 2020.

The latest data available for FY24, from the Annual Survey of Industry, has been analysed by categorising them into five periods — FY01-FY05, FY06-FY10, FY11-FY15, FY16-FY20 and FY21-FY24.

CAPITAL: INTENSITY VS EFFICIENCY

Automation, artificial intelligence and lean manufacturing are driving the manufacturing landscape across the globe, and they are reducing the employment generation potential of the manufacturing sector. This would mean higher capital-labour (fixed capital/worker) and output-capital ratio (value of output/fixed capital) ratio over the years.

However, ASI data show mixed results for India. While the capital-labour ratio (capital intensity) has increased on a sustained basis over the FY01-FY24 period, the output-capital ratio (output intensity) shows a decline after FY06-FY10.

In fact, the turning point of the output-capital ratio nearly coincided with the global financial crisis as it fell sharply to 2.76x in FY10 from 3.37x in FY07. It could not recover to 3.0x till FY22. This is also reflected in the return on capital (capital efficiency) which rose till FY08 and then declined till FY20.

The data indicate a profound structural shift in the Indian manufacturing landscape with respect to capital intensity and capital efficiency. There was co-movement in capital intensity and capital efficiency during FY01 to FY08 due to strong domestic demand, global integration, and high-capacity utilisation. However, after the global financial crisis decoupling occurred as capital intensity skyrocketed from 12.0x in FY09 to 27.9x in FY20, but capital efficiency plummeted from 19.4x in FY09 to 9.4x in FY20.

This looks like a classic case of diminishing returns on capital, orchestrated by structural bottlenecks such as high land/power costs, logistics inefficiencies, leading to deployment of more capital per worker just to stay competitive.

The recent years show a partial rebound in capital efficiency, stabilising around 15x, while capital intensity has reached an all-time high of 29.8x in FY24. Corporate profitability though has recovered now from its pre-pandemic lows due to aggressive cost-cutting, formalisation, and corporate tax cuts, it is still significantly lower than FY05-FY09.

This persistent divergence between high capital requirements and moderate returns perhaps is the reason why a broad-based, secular private greenfield capex has remained elusive despite healthy corporate balance sheets in India.

To protect return on capital, therefore, the focus has been on brownfield expansions which essentially means debottlenecking and expanding existing plants rather than building new one. The continuous rise of capital intensity is no doubt keeping Indian manufacturing globally competitive but is limiting formal employment generation. This, in turn, has dampened domestic consumption demand, creating a cyclical feedback loop where corporations have held back investment because consumer demand isn't strong enough to absorb the production capacity.

This is reflected in RBI's capacity utilisation data for the manufacturing sector which has remained in the range of 70-75 per cent since FY16.

LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Labour productivity in the manufacturing shows a quinquennial decline. It grew at an average annual rate of just 1.61 per cent during FY16-FY20 compared to 12.26 per cent and 10.01 per cent during FY01-FY05 and FY06-FY10 respectively.

However, it recovered to an average annual rate of 9.93 per cent during FY20-FY24, but remained quite volatile and dropped from 25.29 per cent in FY22 to 13.09 per cent in FY23 and further to -0.35 per cent in FY24.

This volatility in labour productivity though may be due to the pandemic impact, but such volatility has been observed even during normal years in the past.

This shows that Indian manufacturing sector which faced serious labour productivity challenge during the second half of the previous decade, is still not out of the woods and continues to face the productivity imperative.

Although the reasons for upswing/downswing in labour productivity during the five quinquennial period considered would be different, the trend suggests that once the low hanging fruits of enhancing labour productivity were over, sustaining its growth became difficult in the absence of structural reforms which (i) fosters innovation, (ii) facilitates diffusion of new technology and (iii) reduces the resource misallocation of both capital and labour.

The persistent divergence between high capital requirements and moderate returns perhaps is the reason why a broad-based, secular private greenfield capex has remained elusive

A more efficient reallocation of labour and capital from low productive to high productive sectors can improve both labour productivity growth and make it more sustainable. A study by Hsieh and Kienow (2009) shows that when capital and labour are hypothetically reallocated to equalise marginal products to the extent observed in the US, the total factor productivity (TFP) of India's manufacturing sector increases by 40-60 per cent.

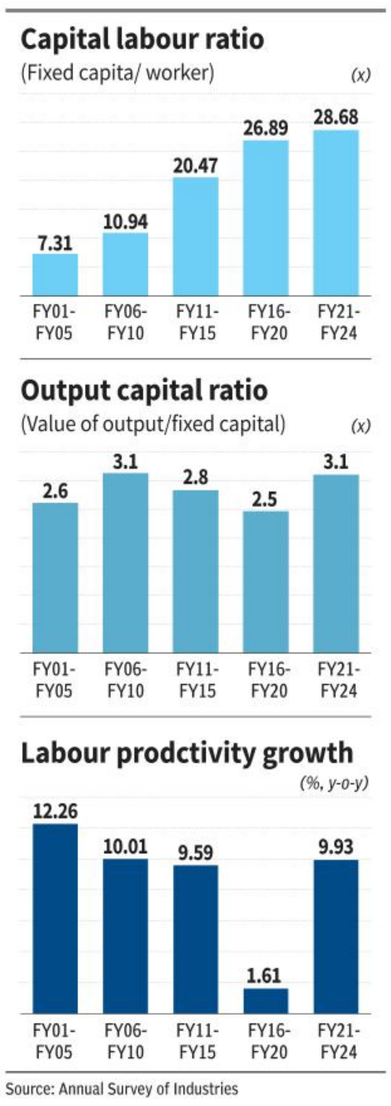
On the other hand, when the reallocation mechanism stalls the aggregate Total Factor Productivity (TFP) growth tends to be lower. An RBI study for India on the resource "reallocation effects" suggests that the contribution of resource allocation to TFP growth declined to 42 per cent of the aggregate TFP during 2011-2019 from 82 per cent during 2001-2010.

The productivity increases in India after 2010 have been driven mainly by within industry TFP increases and less by resource reallocation effects across industries.

Longer and sustainable labour productivity growth, therefore, critically depends on how much businesses invest in innovation, knowledge and intangible capital and how committed governments are to structural reforms.

Therefore, unless the focus of policy is on addressing market distortions, reducing skill mismatches and ensuring greater product and labour market flexibility, accelerating manufacturing sector growth and its share rise to 25 per cent of GDP will remain a distant dream.

The writer is Professor of Economics at Institute of Development and Communications (IDC) Chandigarh. Views expressed are personal



Source: Annual Survey of Industries

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 21, 2006

ONGC, Cairn told to end sales dispute

A consensus on sales agreement for Rajasthan crude oil between Mangalore Refinery Petro chemicals Ltd (MRPL) and Cairn Energy may emerge soon, with both the entities receiving a diktat from the Petroleum Ministry for an early resolution.

GSK withdraws Combivir patent plea

Drug-maker GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) has confirmed that it has withdrawn its patent application in India for the AIDS-drug Combivir. The move sets a precedent and comes even as local HIV/AIDS-patient networks challenge patent applications on a clutch of AIDS drugs at the Indian Patent Office.

Tata Tele's long distance application may be rejected

The Department of Telecom may reject the application given by Tata Teleservices for long distance telephony licence on the ground that the company has a foreigner as its Chief Executive Officer. As per the new FDI guide lines as notified in the press note issued in November 2005, no Indian telecom operator can have a foreigner in key positions such as the CEO or the Chief Financial Officer.

Iran risks losing key economic lifeline with UAE halting trade

Golnar Motevalli

The United Arab Emirates' decision to cut economic ties with Iran is likely to impose more pain on the Islamic Republic as it faces the loss of a vital trade link amid escalating tensions with the US.

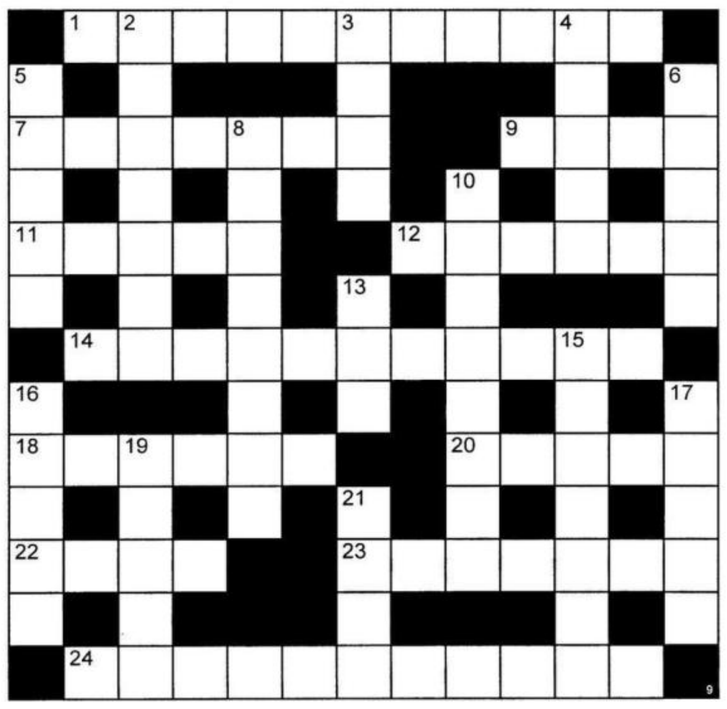
As the war drags on, the US is trying to ramp up economic pressure on the Islamic Republic, which an embargo from its most important partner could exacerbate. The UAE acts as a major financial and business hub for Iranians, and has in recent years been the Islamic Republic's biggest trading partner, with billions of dollars of goods imported.

On Tuesday evening, residents in Dubai received a missile threat alert that the UAE's defense ministry later said was the result of two ballistic missiles from Iran targeting maritime traffic. Iran denied responsibility for the attack.

Hours later, the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it has stopped all trade and financial transactions with Iran. The statement didn't mention the missile attack but said "escalations that undermine regional and international peace and security" had prompted its decision. "Iranian companies have spent decades building extensive commercial networks and contacts in the UAE," said Cyrus Razzaghi, founder and CEO of Tehran-based consultancy Ara Enterprise. "In this sense, a UAE trade embargo could prove far more effective, and potentially more damaging to the Iranian economy, than US and EU sanctions."

Since the US and Israel launched the war in February, Iran has targeted US allies across the Persian Gulf, none more than the UAE — causing widespread damage across the region and threatening Dubai's status as an international finance hub. BLOOMBERG

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EASY

ACROSS

01. Bettering of condition (11)
07. Poisonous (7)
09. A speck of soot (4)
11. Heavenly body orbiting sun (5)
12. German art-songs (6)
14. Lacking prudence (11)
18. A bandit (6)
20. The ear-shell or sea-ear (5)
22. Insect larva (4)
23. Affirms by oath or signature (7)
24. Inconsiderate (11)

DOWN

02. Greatest amount (7)
03. Receptacle for cut blooms (4)
04. Called (5)
05. To rap (5)
06. A tale (5)
08. Sudden appearance, as of illness (8)
10. The farthest behind (8)
13. A clinging evergreen (3)
15. Rival, opponent who cannot be beaten (7)
16. To form by heating and hammering (5)
17. Voter's mark (5)
19. Lay a finger on (5)
21. An eruption of spots (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. The moment viper turns, a better condition will be seen (11)
07. It's unwholesome, so no eleven will make a u-turn (7)
09. A black mark for material that's very blue (4)
11. An early British airliner would arrive on time (5)
12. German songs one got elder to compose (6)
14. Mint is upset about way to furnish it, lacking foresight (11)
18. Bandit is obviously not one related by marriage (6)
20. Previous decapitation showing the sea-ear (5)
22. Search in the dirt for some food (4)
23. Bears witness to Terriers' reverse when on trials (7)
24. Didn't consider it so much to be a description of 14 (11)

DOWN

02. Make the most of a mix perhaps, and keep quiet about it (7)
03. Flower-holder that turned up in the Savoy (4)
04. Called me, and was confused about it (5)
05. Refuse to pay to seek admittance (5)
06. It's a lie that the South has gone Conservative (5)
08. Rake with bout of 'flu, say, whose general onset is seen (8)
10. I'd months to prepare for it, after all (8)
13. Plant starts in Virginia yearly (3)
15. Seems in trouble with retributive justice (7)
16. Will go steadily ahead and falsify the documents (5)
17. Will not keep to the same side if angered (5)
19. Finger one for a hand-out? (5)
21. May be hot-headed, having an 8 of spots (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2718

ACROSS 1. Cabinet 5. Bosun 8. Airless 9. Clown 10. Condiment 12. Mat 13. Patio 17. Use 19. Resentful 21. Drama 22. Itching 24. Eject 25. Torrent

DOWN 1. Chance 2. Baronet 3. Née 4. Taste 5. Buckthorn 6. Storm 7. Ninety 11. Important 14. Offside 15. Muddle 16. Flight 18. Erase 20. Swift 23. Car

M ND-NDE

Economy

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20, 2026

IN THE NEWS

DoT COMMENCES DISBANDING OF DIGITAL BODY



THE DEPARTMENT OF Telecom (DoT) has begun the process of disbanding the Digital Communication Commission, formerly known as the Telecom Commission, the apex inter-ministerial body formed to make decisions on policy matters and subjects with significant financial implications.

AGRO-CHEMICAL FIRMS SEEK DATA PROTECTION LAW



FIVE OF INDIA'S largest agro-chemical makers have jointly asked the government to include a provision for the protection of regulatory data in the draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2025, arguing that the absence of such a framework is slowing the entry of newer, safer pesticide molecules into the country.

'Bengal can drive growth through cluster-based mfg'

WEST BENGAL SHOULD shift from an investment strategy based primarily on individual projects and existing industrial estates towards an integrated, cluster-based manufacturing strategy, said a PHDCCI report released on Wednesday. Industry executives say the economics currently discourage anyone from bringing new chemistry into India.

Coal India arm stops mining in Dhanbad

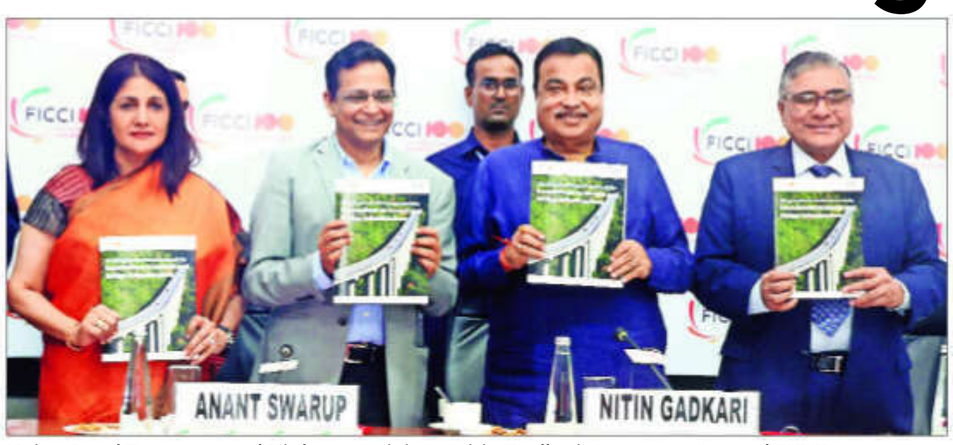
COAL INDIA ARM BCCL has stopped blasting and mining operations at New Akashkinaree Colliery in Dhanbad, Jharkhand, following a directive from the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS). DGMS withdrew permission granted under the Coal Mines Regulations, 2017, with effect from August 17, 2026, pointing to safety concerns arising from land subsidence.

AGENCIES

CONCERNS OVER QUALITY OF HIGHWAYS CONSTRUCTION

Govt to blacklist developers for massive sub-contracting

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, August 19



Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari, Secretary General FICCI Anant Swarup (second left), Afcons Managing Director S Paramasivan (right), and others during the 4th edition of Tunnels and Bridges Conference, at FICCI Federation House, in New Delhi, on Wednesday AMIT MEHRA

IN A MAJOR crackdown on poor construction quality, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) plans to use Goods and Services Tax (GST) payment trails to expose and blacklist contractors who delegate work through multiple layers of sub-contracting.

Speaking at FICCI's Tunnels and Bridges Conference on Wednesday, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari warned that developers engaging in illicit multi-tiered subcontracting face two-to-three-year bans.

"The government will blacklist such developers and publicise it so that it hits them where it hurts most — their share prices," Gadkari said, noting that traditional monetary fines running in mere lakhs have failed to act as an effective deterrent.

The Minister cited instances of contracts being awarded substantially below the estimated cost and subsequently being subcontracted through multiple layers, with each intermediary retaining a margin and construction quality suffering.

The quality of highways is the first priority, followed by costs. The ministry was already assessing contractors based on their performance and had begun extending the exercise to consultants preparing Detailed Project Reports (DPRs), proposing to link tender eligibility to these performance assessments.

Apart from poor construction in some cases, which he said discredits him, the minister also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of DPR.

Many reports are prepared without visiting the site, which leads to design flaws and results in accidents and deaths of 180,000 people annually.

Gadkari proposed using international agencies or standards for project report preparation. The government could mandate that for each project worth more than ₹1,000 crore a company with more than 51% foreign holding be allowed to participate, the minister said.

The ministry is preparing tunnel tenders worth ₹2 lakh crore to ₹2.5 lakh crore. The minister said India will have to make tunnel boring machines locally, whose capital cost he identified as a binding constraint. He asked the local industry to look at this sector as there will be a big demand for them in India across different sectors going forward.

He also disclosed his efforts to bring the German tunnel boring machine makers to set up a facility in India. Offering them high quality steel and other requirements.

₹13,000-crore rail, road projects get Cabinet nod

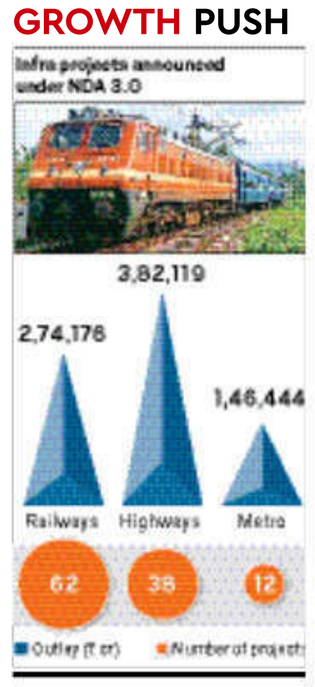
MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, August 19

THE UNION CABINET on Wednesday approved four multi-tracking railway projects covering eight districts across four states at an estimated cost of ₹9,450 crore.

The projects will add 410 km to the railway network and improve connectivity to several tourist destinations, including Kuldiha Wildlife Sanctuary, Bhitarkanika National Park, Maa Bhadrakali temple, Pulicat Lake, Lalitgiri, among others.

The projects are expected to raise the freight-carrying capacity of the national transporter by 76 million tonne per annum (MTPA). The additional capacity will facilitate the movement of commodities such as coal, iron ore, cement, containers, automobiles and foodgrains.

All four projects are located along the high-density Howrah-Chennai route. They comprise the Kharagpur-Bhadrak fourth line, Bhadrak-Haridaspur fourth line, Gummidipundi-Gudur third and fourth lines, and Cuttack-Paradeep third and fourth lines.



The ₹3,352-crore Kharagpur-Bhadrak (Ranital) project, spread over 173 km, will connect steel hubs at Jakhapura, Tatanagar and Durgapur with the ports of Paradip and Dhamra. The project is expected to add 13 million tonne of annual freight capacity and save ₹466 crore in logistics costs.

The proposed third and fourth lines on the Cuttack-Paradip (Badabandha) section will address capacity constraints on a stretch already operating at up to 101% utilisation. Capacity utilisation is projected to rise to 177% with the planned expansion of ports and industries in the region.

Additionally, the Cabinet has cleared the ₹3,591-crore Muzaffarpur-Sitamarhi-Sonbarsa four-lane highway corridor in Bihar under the hybrid annuity model (HAM). The 83 km project, which has a 30-month construction period, is expected to cut travel time between Muzaffarpur and Sonbarsa from two hours to one hour.

According to the Cabinet briefing, the government has taken infrastructure decisions involving 62 railway projects worth ₹2.74 lakh crore, 38 highway projects worth ₹3.82 lakh crore and 12 metro projects worth ₹1.46 lakh crore under NDA 3.0.

MANUFACTURING STILL NEEDS TO CATCH UP

Services account for more than 60% of SEZ exports

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, August 19

SERVICES EXPORTS CONTINUE to power India's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), accounting for over six in every ten dollars of foreign exchange earned by these tax-free enclaves, according to the latest trade figures compiled by the Export Promotion Council for EOUs and SEZs.

Out of total SEZ exports of $183 billion in the fiscal year 2025–26, services accounted for 61.4% ($112.3 billion), leaving merchandise goods to pick up the remaining 38.6% ($70.8 billion). Services shipments expanded 4% year-on-year (y-o-y), while goods exports edged up 3%.

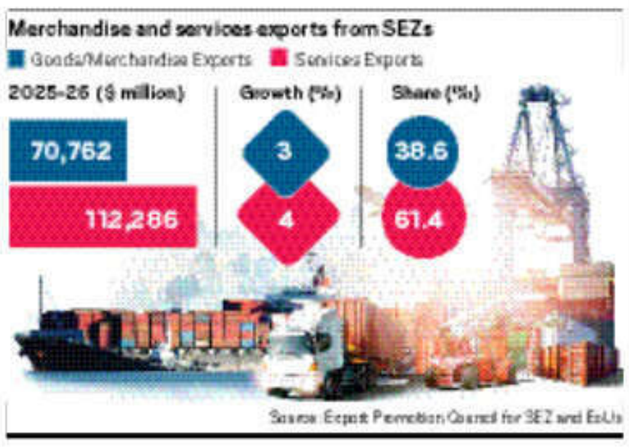
Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled services dominated the services portfolio, generating 81% of the sector's total foreign earnings.

In the merchandise segment, refined petroleum products remained the standout growth driver, surging 29% year-on-year to $35.26 billion and capturing nearly half of all goods exports. The heavy concentration in petroleum reflects the dominance of a single major hub: Reliance Industries' mega-refinery at Jamnagar, Gujarat. The Jamnagar SEZ alone shipped $34.8 billion worth of goods—representing 49.1% of all physical goods leaving India's SEZs. Vedanta Aluminium ranked a distant second, generating $4.3 billion or 6% of total goods exports.

Engineering goods formed the second-largest merchandise category at $8.4 billion (11.9% share), followed by Gems and Jewellery at $7.1 billion (10%), and Pharmaceuticals at $6.5 billion (9.3%). The United States solidified its position as the largest single destination for SEZ output across both goods and services. The US absorbed 51% ($57.5 billion) of all SEZ services output, followed by the United Kingdom at 17% ($19 billion) and the Netherlands at 7% ($7.8 billion).

The US led with $14.1 billion or 20% of goods exported from SEZs, driven by shipments of petro products ($4.1 billion), pharmaceuticals ($2.8 billion), and gems and jewellery ($2.4 billion). The Netherlands, the UAE ($5.3 billion), and Tanzania ($3.6 billion) rounded out the other top merchandise buyers.

IN NUMBERS



FM, Goyal in Singapore for talks to boost trade

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, August 19

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA Sitharaman on Wednesday embarked on an official visit to Singapore with a ministerial delegation to participate in the 4th India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR).

Sitharaman is leading a delegation comprising S Jaishankar, minister of external affairs; Piyush Goyal, minister for commerce & industry; and Jitin Prasada, minister of state for electronics & IT and commerce & industry.

The roundtable is scheduled for August 19-20, the finance ministry said in a post on X.

Established in 2022, the ISMR is a key high-level economic mechanism between India and Singapore. It provides a platform to review progress and explore new areas of collaboration across six pillars: advanced manufacturing, connectivity, digitalisation, healthcare, and medicine, skills development, and sustainability.

"The 4th ISMR will build on the progress made under these pillars and explore new opportunities to further strengthen the India-Singapore economic partnership," the finance ministry said.

UP, Japan seek to scale up green hydrogen tie-up

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, August 19

UTTAR PRADESH IS seeking to take its green hydrogen partnership with Japan beyond research and institutional cooperation to pilot projects, technology deployment and commercial-scale investments, while planning a dedicated 'Japan City' to attract Japanese companies in semiconductors, electronics, data centres and advanced manufacturing.

The push comes as Escorts Kubota and Minda Corporation have moved ahead with manufacturing projects in the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority (YEIDA) region, adding to the investment pipeline created through the state's growing engagement with Japan.

Escorts Kubota is setting up a ₹2,025-crore plant in YEIDA's Sector 10, with first-phase capacity to manufacture 60,000 tractors and 15,000 construction equipment units annually. The project is expected to generate 3,829 direct jobs and have a Gross State Value Added impact of more than ₹7,756 crore. Minda Corporation has proposed ₹1,166 crore investment across two projects in Sector 10 and Sector 24, expected to create around 6,440 employment opportunities.

Japanese companies such as Denso, Nagase and Seiko Advance already have operations in Uttar Pradesh. Invest UP has identified Escorts Kubota, Minda Corporation, Toyo Denso and Nagase among the key drivers of Japan-linked investment in the state.



UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Union Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw during the India-Japan Business Conclave, in New Delhi on Wednesday ANI

YOGI ADITYANATH, CHIEF MINISTER, UTTAR PRADESH

Our priority is to connect the youth with Japanese manufacturing culture

"We have India's largest youth workforce — talented and skilled — and we aim to introduce this workforce to Japanese work ethics and standards. Our priority is to connect our youth with Japanese manufacturing culture," Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said.

The state is looking to integrate practices including Kaizen, 5S, lean manufacturing, robotics, automation and precision engineering into its skills and manufacturing ecosystem.

Green energy is emerging as another important pillar of the partnership. Following the Uttar Pradesh-Yamanashi MoU signed in on December 23, 2024, two green hydrogen Centres of Excellence have been established through IIT Kanpur-HBTU Kanpur and IIT-BHU-MMMUT Gorakhpur. The state has approved and disbursed ₹50 crore for each centre.

UP now wants its cooperation with Yamanashi to expand to joint research, pilot projects and commercial ventures. Companies including NTPC, BPCL, Torrent Power, Hygenco, and L&T have shown interest in green hydrogen projects.

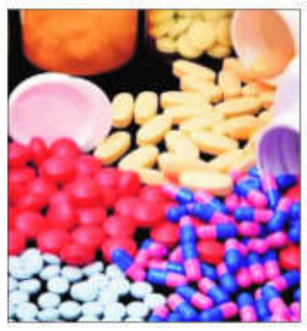
Pharma sector begins FY27 strong, margins face pressure

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, August 19

THE PHARMA SECTOR has started FY27 on a strong footing, but margins of leading drugmakers are likely to come under pressure from elevated input and logistics costs, weak US generics demand and tighter regulatory scrutiny, India Ratings (Ind-Ra) said. Revenue growth of the 15 pharma companies tracked by the ratings agency was in the high teens in the first quarter of FY27, aided by acquisitions and currency benefits.

Domestic industry sales grew 11.5% year-on-year (y-o-y) during the quarter, marking the fifth consecutive quarter of double-digit growth. The expansion was driven by chronic therapies, new product launches and growing traction in the anti-diabetic segment.

For the full financial year, Ind-Ra expects the domestic pharma market to grow by around 10%. July sales growth of 12.1% points to broad-based demand, supported by pricing, volume expansion and new products. The agency said rising incidence of chronic diseases and accelerating adoption of GLP-1 drugs should support the industry's longer-term growth trajectory. GLP-1 medicines are used to treat diabetes and obesity, with several generic versions becoming available in India since March this year.



Domestic industry sales grew 11.5% y-o-y during the quarter, marking the fifth consecutive quarter of double-digit growth

"The US growth is likely to remain under pressure due to the absence of gRevlimid–an oral medicine used to treat specific types of blood cancers–and continued pricing headwinds. Regulatory scrutiny and oversight may delay key product approvals from impacted sites.

Despite near-term cost pressures led by geopolitical issues, Ebitda (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation) margins should remain healthy, supported by a favourable product mix, currency factors, and pass-through mechanisms. Strong balance sheets and liquidity will continue to support inorganic growth," said Nishith Sanghvi, director (corporate ratings) at Ind-Ra.

US generics remain a weak spot for the sector. Revenues of the 13 companies tracked by the agency declined 8% y-o-y in Q1FY27, weighed down by continued pricing pressure and product-specific challenges.

Govt unveils drive to clear port congestion

IN A MAJOR move to ease mounting maritime supply-chain bottlenecks, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has ordered a mandatory, high-priority drive to clear long-pending containers clogging major Indian ports.

The special clearance drive, which will continue till October 31, covers unclaimed, uncleared, seized and confiscated cargo lying at port facilities. By liquidating this trapped inventory, the tax authorities aim to free up vital storage space, reduce logistics costs and make more containers available for Indian exporters.

The move comes as several Indian ports, particularly major infrastructure hubs along the West Coast, grapple with heavy container congestion. Port yards and inland container depots (ICDs) are operating close to capacity, delaying the handling and onward movement of both incoming and outgoing cargo. —FE BUREAU

FROM PAGE 2

Banks are not constrained in providing more credit

Upper-layer guidelines have been issued, yet there has been a lack of clarity over one company's qualification for several years. This is leading to speculation. What is the RBI's position?

We are not changing any regulations. This is an operational issue, and we would not like to comment on questions specific to an individual regulated entity.

Despite efforts to strengthen fraud detection and prevention, bank frauds remain a concern. What are the biggest gaps the RBI sees in banks' fraud-prevention systems, and what more needs to be done?

Technology is changing the nature of fraud. Cyber fraud, unauthorised access and attacks on payment systems are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Banks and regulated entities therefore need to strengthen their early-warning systems and increase the use of analytics.



We also need to be more proactive rather than reactive. Because the nature of fraud is changing so rapidly, this must be a continuous effort rather than a one-time exercise. Finally, regulated entities will have to make greater use of technology while also building stronger human capabilities to effectively prevent and reduce such frauds.

There was a lot of chatter about Mythos, but things seemed to have calmed down within a few months. Has the focus shifted?

While we may not be talking about it all the time, we are working on it with our regulated entities and other stakeholders.

The engagement includes building the capabilities of regulated entities, using technology and increasing customer awareness. It also involves giving them suitable guidance for improvement through our directions, regulations and inspection notes.

Opinion

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20, 2026



MARKET WATCH

Sebi Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey

CAS (closing auction session) is for transparency. And if anybody feels that they will manipulate CAS for defaming the new system, they are in danger

Resetting Bangla ties

Delhi must step up engagement to ensure that Dhaka has a stake in our growth story

INDIA'S EFFORTS TO reset its frayed ties with Bangladesh exemplify the strategic challenges and opportunities of its neighbourhood first policy. Navigating the recent regime changes is far from easy although India has had a modicum of success in this regard. A diplomatic chill has descended on our relationship with the Tarique Rahman-led administration in Bangladesh, which assumed office in February. Tough conditions are attached to his maiden visit on India's invitation, which has been pending since February. There is another invitation for Rahman to attend the BRICS summit as chair of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. The controversial virtual media interaction of the deposed former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in New Delhi earlier this month triggered stiff riders that India extradite her and other criminal figures to create a more "propitious environment" for Rahman's visit.

To be sure, India insists it has nothing to do with Hasina's press conference but to no avail. She has been living in the country after she fled Dhaka following the collapse of her government in August 2024. Hasina has been convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal, a domestic war crimes court, for committing crimes against humanity for the brutal crackdown on the student-led anti-government protests. India has stated that it is examining Bangladesh's request for extraditing her in line with established processes. This has, in fact, become the precondition for Rahman's visit after Hasina announced at the presser that she plans to return home in December to put the country on the "right track" by restoring democracy despite all the risks she faces. The announcement of a political comeback of sorts while remaining in exile in India was not exactly music to the ears of Bangladesh's new leadership.

Regime changes in the neighbourhood are highly challenging to navigate. Besides the growing role of China — with its cheque-book diplomacy — there is the need to address Bangladesh's desire to seek more autonomy in its relationship with India. Rahman has forcefully stated that neither Delhi nor Rawalpindi but Bangladesh First is his credo to strengthen long-standing ties with India. Dhaka is ready to move forward without being inhibited by the past but there is a need to address issues that result in gains for the common people. Rahman looked forward to advancing ties based on dignity, equality, mutual trust, and respect. The people-to-people dimension of this relationship thus assumes greater importance. India is also willing to put the past behind for a "positive, constructive, and forward-looking relationship". India wants — as much as Bangladesh — to reboot bilateral relations on a stronger footing.

A fresh beginning is imperative to seize the opportunities of being neighbours who share rivers, railway networks, energy infrastructure, and a 4,000-km-long border. Bangladesh is also India's largest trading partner in the region with a share of 37.5% in total two-way trade. Bangladesh indeed is important for India to better connect its north-east region. The regional connectivity measures in place ensure that new transportation and energy infrastructure seamlessly link Nepal, Bhutan, the north-east region, and the Bay of Bengal. Leveraging regional connectivity is to the advantage of Bangladesh and India. Whatever differences there are between both nations, these can be resolved only through dialogue between the top leaderships rather than through tough preconditions. Rahman's visit could well be the harbinger of the reset.

TRILATERAL FRAMEWORK

THE MECCA JOINT DEFENCE AGREEMENT IS NEITHER DIRECTED AGAINST TEHRAN NOR IS IT ANTI-AMERICAN

A quest for security in West Asia



ANITA INDER SINGH

Founding Professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, New Delhi

THE FAILURE OF President Trump's superpower America to defeat a regional power like Iran, or to influence its ally, Israel, to stop its genocidal war in Gaza, largely explain why Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan fear an unstable West Asia. This is the main reason why they signed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement (MJDA) on August 7 after nearly a year of negotiations.

Wars have been fought in West Asia for nearly three years since the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. Israel has waged war in Gaza, invaded southern Lebanon, seized territory in Syria, and launched two air campaigns against Iran. Tehran has retaliated by turning its guns on countries having US bases, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan, and Israel.

Although all three "Mecca countries" have Muslim majorities comprising more than 95% of their populations — and Sunni majorities — they have not entered into any kind of "religious" alliance against Christian-majority America, Shiite Iran, or Jewish-majority Israel. Turkey is a NATO ally, its military is the second largest, just after the US — and most of its arms come from Germany. Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's outstanding shrines and one of the world's top oil exporters. Pakistan is the only nuclear-armed member of the MJDA.

The MJDA states that an armed attack on one signatory would count as an attack on all, but it mentions no commitments or defence obligations, unlike NATO's Article 5. It cannot be an alliance because the three members lack integrated military planning, intelligence and defence industrial cooperation, and joint missile and air defences.

The MJDA is not primarily directed against Tehran, although Iran has bombed US bases in Saudi Arabia and some other West Asian countries. All three signatories are wary of Iranian power, but they also have reasons to prevent Iran's destruction or permanent isolation because that could empower Israel to dominate West Asia. Iran is actually the main counterpoise to Israel in the region. If it were defeated by the US and Israel, instability across the Gulf and Central and South Asia could prevail.

Nor is the MJDA anti-American, although Washington initially joined forces with Israel against Iran.

Saudi Arabia is an American ally; Turkey is member of NATO and has the second-largest military in the alliance, while Pakistan, an old ally, has made its diplomacy useful to the US in West Asia.

A pro-Israel Indian stance could add weight to any efforts by Islamabad to persuade Saudi Arabia and Turkey to take a more anti-India line

Essentially, the three Mecca countries wish to develop their individual capabilities so that they increase their clout to avert disastrous consequences of Israeli and American military actions.

In reality, they do not trust Washington either to restrain Israel or to prevent American power from being used by Israel in ways that destabilise their neighbourhood.

The signing of the MJDA follows nearly a year of negotiations, which followed America's initial strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in 2025, soon after Trump 2.0 was inaugurated. Trump has steadily expanded America's use of military force against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Since the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28 this year, Iran has struck back by firing on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states having American bases, and by blockading their energy shipments.

The two noteworthy facts are that all three Mecca states have amicable ties with America, and good relationships with each other. Turkey is Pakistan's second-largest supplier of *matériel* — the largest is China.

China has invested economically in all three countries, and is the top trading partner of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Saudi kingdom and Pakistan are on China's Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI). Turkey's Europe-Central Asia-China "Middle Corridor" is linked to the BRI. However, the Mecca statement did not specify the commitments each had accepted and how far their agreement would bind them to any particular military action in each other's defence.

Saudi Arabia envisages the trilateral framework strengthening the three countries' collective diplomatic and defence weight, while contributing to the emergence of a more regionally driven security architecture. It has clarified that the accord does not represent an effort to establish a military axis or a sectarian bloc, nuclear ambitions, or an arms race.

Pakistan's mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia last year marked the first major defence deal between an Arab state and a country with n-weapons. However, it has not responded to Iran's military attacks on the kingdom earlier this year. Islamabad has also discounted suggestions that its nuclear deterrent might be extended to allies. Pakistan has provided training, technical assistance, and an air defence system to Saudi forces and stationed some 8,000 troops in the country.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Pakistan have exchanged warships and training aircraft. Both Pakistan and Turkey have also voiced support for a maritime defence coalition. And, as one of the world's largest oil exporters, Saudi Arabia wants to protect regional shipping and energy routes.

Although India has refused to censure the US-Israeli invasion of Iran, while tending to criticise Iran for instability in the Strait of Hormuz and rising oil prices, it should try not to be seen as an enemy of Iran and accept the Israeli president's claim that India and Israel are allies. That would hardly reflect India's strategic autonomy. And because Pakistan and India are rivals in South Asia, a pro-Israel Indian stance could add weight to any efforts by Islamabad to persuade Saudi Arabia and Turkey to take a more anti-India line. Both countries have good ties with India, and Saudi Arabia also has a large Indian diaspora.

This could be more important than India realises, as peace continues to elude West Asia and Iran's survival seems certain, despite a long-drawn-out war with America and Israel.

Model risk: Valves for the high bar



DIPAK GUPTA
D MANJUNATH

The authors are with IIT Bombay

The depth of expertise isn't available at the scale that RBI's draft Guidance on Regulatory Principles for Model Risk Management demands

THE DRAFT GUIDANCE on Regulatory Principles for Model Risk Management, released by the RBI on June 24, requires every bank, NBFC, and co-op lender to govern every model it uses, likely prompted by the imminent spread of AI models. It is comprehensive, earnest, and up-to-date: one more notch in the RBI's push for technology adoption. It will also shape the course of AI adoption in Indian financial services, and possibly AI regulation in India more broadly. This makes its origins, intent, and likely outcomes, often at odds with intent, worth close scrutiny.

The draft's lineage is easy to trace. The chassis is American: SR 11-7 of 2011, the Fed's ur-text of model risk regulation, refreshed in April as SR 26-2. RBI, The possibly tracking it in near-real time, released its draft ten weeks later. The scope-expansion from credit models to everything, everywhere, all at once, is British, from the Bank of England's SS1/23. The lifecycle architecture is Canadian, from the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions' (OSFI) Guideline E-23. And the kill switches, human-in-the-loop mandates, and bias audits descend from the EU's AI Act, via the RBI's own FREE-AI committee. As a survey of best practice, the draft is genuinely impressive; as regulation, it is furniture imported for a house not yet built.

Public reactions follow familiar lines: some hosannas, some angst born of a broad reading of the implications, and self-advertisements dressed up as opinion pieces from the compliance industry.

Under the draft, every model, from the credit-scoring engine down to the pricing spreadsheet Sharma-*ji* in the CFO's office guards like a family heirloom, must go through the wringer. For an NBFC deploying a frontier LLM for customer service, the to-do list turns onerous fast: some items are demanding but doable, others induce a "huh" and are well-nigh impossible for a small organisation, e.g. validating the model, securing contractual rights to technical documentation and audit access, and ensuring no "unexplained variation under similar inputs".

Beyond the difficulty of executing this list, the draft quietly assumes AI competence at every level of the organisation. This is a concerning assumption. The source regimes (the Fed, the Bank of England, OSFI) were built on doctoral-level quantitative talent: the Fed employs top PhDs, and the BoE confined its rules to a few sophisticated banks its specialist teams could engage with, and even they needed multi-year remediation plans. That depth of expertise is not available at the scale the draft demands, so the regime risks being supervised as paperwork and becoming paperwork. An examiner who cannot assess a validation substantively can only assess its documentation. Absent substantive change, the likely fix is consulting firms certifying everyone, at an avoidable systemic cost.

Capital and talent go where rules are workable; if compliance costs more than the technology is worth, institutions will simply wait and call it prudence

A deeper concern is the loss-facing pessimism running through the draft. The asymmetry is stark: AI-ML's many benefits go undiscussed, while the rare error takes centre stage. That over-emphasis means boards and management start by asking what can go wrong, and adoption slows. Add the arithmetic of time: frontier models iterate in months, while a compliance journey measured in quarters must restart at every update, so by the time a model clears the framework, it has been superseded. Indian financial institutions thus risk falling permanently a generation or two behind, not because the frontier is unsafe for balance enquiries, but because we will never have the money or people to push new technology through these requirements. Rules, too costly to comply with, do not produce safety; they produce abstention, pretence, or paperwork.

The preceding is not to say the RBI is wrong to set the bar high. India's NBFC sector has its own history of stress building quietly inside black-box underwriting, and much of the retail base this draft protects has little capacity to contest an algorithm's decision. A regulator burned before has reason to prefer over-caution. The real question is not whether the bar should be high, but whether it can be met without a release valve.

The draft invokes the "Innovation over Restraint" sutra from its own FREE-AI committee, but it mostly operationalises the restraint. The source regimes built in valves, e.g. phased scoping in Britain, negligible-risk exemptions in Canada, sandboxes in Europe. We risk importing their obligations without any of their valves. That, more than any clause, is the real risk: not that a chatbot occasionally gets a fact wrong, but that a generation of Indian financial innovation gets quietly priced out before it is born. Capital and talent go where rules are workable; if compliance costs more than the technology is worth, institutions will simply wait and call it prudence. And that may not be consumer protection so much as a slow, unintended strangulation.

None of this argues for abandoning model risk regulation but only for a few valves in the pipes before the concrete sets: a proportionate carve-out for low-risk, non-decisioning uses like a customer service bot, along the lines Canada and Britain already allow; a regulatory sandbox, of the kind the RBI has itself run for fintech, letting institutions pilot frontier models under supervision rather than clear impossible validation upfront; and a shared national testing facility, perhaps at an IIT or under the RBI's own Innovation Hub, so scarce PhDs validate once for many institutions instead of each pretending to validate alone.

Get even one or two of these into the final guidance, and the RBI can keep its hand exactly where it should be — on a kill switch poised over a malfunctioning model, not hovering over India's AI future. There is still time to add the valves before the ink dries: let Sharma-*ji* guard his spreadsheet, and let the customer get through before midnight.

Nobody need worry that the switch, when pressed, turns off the lights in the wrong room.

Views are personal

At least he's trying

Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Tukaram Mundhe says the Vimal "Elaichi" ad appears to be a surrogate promotion of a product prohibited in the state. So notices went out to brand endorsers Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn, and Tiger Shroff. "Nobody is going to be spared," Mundhe said. "Whether rural or urban. Those who sell, those who possess, those who process, those who manufacture, it is applicable to all."

He was just doing his job but in one fell swoop he became the talk of the town.

Surrogate advertising is not allowed in India, but it is all around us. The regulation is pretty clear. The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) explicitly banned surrogate advertising under guidelines issued in June 2022. An ad is deemed a surrogate if it uses the same brand name, colour scheme, layout, or collateral associated with a restricted product. Under Section 53 of the Food Safety and Standards Act (2006), people or corporations involved with publishing misleading food advertisements face a penalty of up to ₹10 lakh. Self-regulatory agencies like the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) actively penalise brands and issue notices to celebrities endorsing these sneaky product promotions.

Regulation has been in place for about two decades now, but who cares?

The worst offenders are pan masala and alcohol brands. Vimal, Pan Bahar, and Kamla Pasand routinely flex their cardamom, mouth fresheners, and "pan masala minus tobacco" products with advertisements featuring popular actors such as Amitabh Bachchan, Saif Ali Khan, Hrithik Roshan, and even Pierce Brosnan. Brosnan inconceivably featured in an advertisement for pan masala brand Pan Bahar in 2016. Die-hard fans were outraged to see a former James Bond actor promoting a product associated with health risks. Following a huge backlash, Brosnan said he was "deeply shocked and saddened" by the campaign. He claimed the company had deceived him and that his contract involved promotion of an all-natural breath freshener or tooth whitener that didn't contain tobacco or any other harmful ingredient.



ALOKANANDA CHAKRABORTY

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Alcohol brands are craftier still. More often than not, they have an eponymous packaged water or soda brand which you might not find on the shop shelves but most definitely in flashy advertisements. In newspapers, on television, on the cricket field. Kingfisher (water, calendar), Imperial Blue (water, soda), and Haywards (soda plus drinking water) all follow this strategy. Some have gone a step further. Bacardi, for instance, has Bacardi Blast music CDs. Some sponsor major music festivals and sundry cultural events where their logos and other brand collateral are displayed prominently on caps, t-shirts, and event decor.

But Mundhe might want to widen the net. Indian cricketers have also had a long history of surrogate advertising. Rohit Sharma, the former captain of the India national cricket team, has been the face of Royal Stag, a brand synonymous with whisky. Jasprit Bumrah has endorsed Royal Stag since 2019 and has appeared in its multimedia and AI-driven recent campaigns alongside Sharma, Surya Kumar Yadav, and rapper Badshah. Virat Kohli is the ambassador for Royal Challenge, a whisky brand that advertises via its mineral water and energy drinks.

And that association goes a long way back. Sunil Gavaskar and Virender Sehwag have both appeared in ads for Kamla Pasand. Kapil Dev, the captain of India's 1983 World Cup-winning team, has also appeared in Kamla Pasand advertisements.

Net net, Mundhe might have stirred up a hornet's nest.

Surrogate advertising is a beast that is difficult to tame, especially now. Traditional television and print rules are still easier to track but social media posts by influencers with mammoth followings and even the sporadic drops by celebrities are difficult to keep tabs on. Local enforcement for global internet platforms has its own set of problems. Industry bodies like ASCI have no teeth and the CCPA faces many procedural hurdles when processing complaints against big brands.

But, to borrow from Internet idiom, at least he's trying.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FCRA Bill: Regulate, don't penalise

"Tweak FCRA Bill" (*FE*, August 19) rightly argues that a stronger monitoring mechanism of foreign-funded organisations is necessary, but excessive regulatory discretion could undermine the legitimate work of civil society. We must also act firmly against dubious NGOs, including sham or related entities used for diversion of foreign funds, concealed transactions, or other regulatory abuse. However, such cases should be established through transparent investigation rather than broad administrative discretion. Genuine organisations doing credible work in education, health, humanitarian relief, and social welfare should not be penalised merely because their FCRA renewal is delayed or denied, particularly when assets created through legitimate funds may be affected.

—Brij Bhushan Goyal, Ludhiana

Controversial law

The government's decision to send the controversial FCRA Bill to a joint parliamentary committee for scrutiny is welcome. Given the far-reaching implications of the proposed changes for civil society organisations, charities, and other institutions receiving foreign contributions, the Bill should not be rushed through Parliament. Particular attention is needed on provisions concerning the cancellation or surrender of FCRA registrations and the subsequent treatment of an organisation's assets. Regulatory enforcement is necessary, but it must not become a tool for arbitrary seizure of property or the disruption of legitimate public-service institutions. Surprisingly, while the government insist curbs on FCRA, it is silent on the black money used in elections to lure voters.

—Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

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The problem with ratings is that you can give yourself a million reasons why they are what they are

– JULIE PLEC

Read The Warning

FPIs ditching India, and corporates avoiding capex, are signs that economy needs a shot of reforms

India remains world's fastest growing major economy, but there are warning lights on the dashboard. For the second time in four months, global fund managers have voted us the least preferred investment destination in Asia-Pacific. We were in the same spot in Aug 2025 also. Meanwhile, at home, corporate reluctance to invest continues for various reasons. Point is, while we keep celebrating 6.5%-7.5% GDP growth, the 9% bus passes us by. And we can't attain developed nation status without boarding it.

Why aren't FPIs keen on India? For starters, we are nowhere in the AI game. We don't make chips, and we don't have a leading AI model. It's like the late-18th century, when steam power was ushering in the industrial age, but not in India. Markets in smaller countries like Taiwan and S Korea have gained enormously from AI. Taiwan briefly overtook India to become 5th most valuable stock market. Foreign funds also have doubts about India's economic reforms, and valuations of stocks. They don't see much earnings potential just yet, and have been pulling out for months.



We can be dismissive about FPIs, of course. They don't invest on the ground, and are here only to make a quick buck, so why should we care? Well, when they pull out dollars, rupee weakens, and our sizeable import bill becomes that much larger. From petrol to phones, stuff gets costlier in rupees. And a weakening rupee further dents foreign investors' returns from Indian stocks, dampening their interest. Subdued returns hurt Indian small investors also, who miss the wealth effect and become tight-fisted.

Which brings us to the capex problem. Indian corporates have had many good quarters, but if they're still hesitant to invest, it's because they're unsure about growth prospects. Amid geopolitical tensions, fluctuating commodity prices, and rising trade barriers, they can't count on foreign markets either. The two problems, of uninterested FPIs and reluctant corporates, are really a reminder that Indian economy's periodic service is overdue. While govt can't bring about an AI revolution, it can create enabling conditions, and roll out much-needed reforms. It's time to heed those warning lights.

The Seat Business

Medical & engineering education is a mess because opening colleges is a politically backed enterprise

Students, including schoolkids, and their parents have been hitting the streets, in several states, over lack of basic facilities – enough teachers, drinking water, clean toilets. Why is it so difficult to provide basics in schools and colleges? The question keeps coming up at every level, from primary schools to higher education. While NTA's fiascos are never-ending – it is now apparently dealing with AI-designed question papers – why is India's education system such a mess? Centre's challenges aside, state govts propose policies evidently dodgy. Take Maharashtra's proposal to allow homoeopaths, who complete a one-year bridge course in pharmacology, to enter its MBBS medical registry. As argued here earlier, this makes little sense. But looking at how medical education works, can help join the dots why, in the first place, such proposals find a place under the sun.



Centre made NEET cut-offs the standard for admission to homoeopathy/ayurved colleges in 2018. In 2019, Supreme Court allowed Maharashtra to relax the minimum NEET percentile for admission to homoeopathy and ayurvedic courses, because colleges were struggling to fill seats. That is the key point: not enough students, who appear for NEET, want to study homoeopathy. There is limited demand. Yet, the number of homoeopathy colleges has grown. Maharashtra had 59 homoeopathy colleges in 2021. It now has 74. Only two are govt-run. Question is, why keep opening colleges when there is not enough demand? As **TOI** reported *(https://bit.ly/45DXGGc)*, 50% of these colleges are run by trusts or societies with political affiliation, across party lines.

Fact is, this is not the case for homoeopathy colleges alone, or in Maharashtra only. A similar pattern allegedly exists, with both medical and engineering colleges, across states. The boom in private medical and engineering colleges, over the last 30 years and counting, seems to have served students less, and college managements more. 'Seats' are lucrative business. Neither medical education nor the glut of unemployable 'engineers' is relevant in these calculations. The perversity lies in the lack of political will, across govts, across parties. It's not difficult to guess why.

Question of scorty

Among the capital's many status symbols one ranks the highest of them all

Jug Suraiya



When Bunny and I moved to National Capital Region from Calcutta, we learnt words of a foreign language.

Right on top of this lexical list was scorty. Scorty is a big juju, because the amount of scorty you have, or conversely don't have, determines your social status or deficiency of it, in NCR.

Another new word for us was clonies. We thought clonies had something to do with clones, but it turned out that clonies were gated communities which, come to think of it, are indeed clones of each other in their inner workings.

However, they differ greatly according to their geographic location. For example, a clony situated in upscale South Delhi is far more dez rez than a clony in East Delhi, which in turn is swisher than clonies in both North and West Delhi.

That said, all clonies have a common clonial link in the form of scorty. The scorty of clonies is assured not only by their gates that bar ingress to undesirable elements who, if they do manage to bypass these barriers, will be apprehended and suitably ejected by the clony's uniformed scorty guards.

jugularvein

Much care and attention is given to the selection of scorty guards, the physical dimensions of height, width and girth, particularly girth, being of paramount importance.

While these privately employed scorty guards confer social status, much higher status is conferred upon those who, for whatever reason, merit govt-supplied scorty guards called Black Cats, and the more Black Cats you have attached to your retinue, the bigger the cat you yourself are perceived to be.

Something puzzled us, though, and left a big question unanswered: With all this emphasis on scorty, how come those eligible for Black Cat scorty were automatically exempt from airport scorty checks that everyone else had to undergo?

And the answer to that was, and continues to be: Don't ask dumb questions.

Why is that a dumb question? Because to answer that would involve a breach of scorty.

Exam, AI, Absurdity

When national exam papers contain glaring errors, the question is not merely whether AI was involved. There is deeper worry about how much of higher ed reform has been hollow chatter

Ali Raza Moosvi



National Testing Authority (NTA), which can also be called National Theatre of the Absurd, has just released another play. Six weeks in the making, it promises to become as famous and as popular as its earlier production, which had attracted millions at Jantar Mantar.

Plot broadly remains the same with a few noteworthy twists – allegations of paper leak, recycled questions, numerous spelling mistakes, and errors in the English, Commerce and Sociology papers. The familiar and popular elements are of course there – no answers, explanations, or accountability and widespread public outcry. The gracious body, in response, has promised to provide an encore soon.

There are reports that PDF files of the Sociology paper were circulated, and sold, and that generative AI was used in the question paper setting process, which has been denied by NTA. But no explanation has been offered as to how such glaringly erroneous papers were administered if they had passed through a panel of experts, or through a human check.

There is a considerable body of thought, and public debate, on applying and using AI in public examination systems. But what holds right now is a simple four word question – *What is going wrong?*



Image: AI

I think we are seeing the symptoms of a crumbling system, which had started to rot from the inside many years ago. This does not mean NTA alone but the entire higher education system of the country. This is a sweeping statement, but it is one way to see the big picture, howsoever hazy it appears.

India's higher ed system seems to be littered with 'chatterboxes', a stupid cousin of the celebrated 'chatbot'. They do exactly what the word says – chatter. Given their humongous numbers and provenance, chatter has replaced thought and ideas. A cursory glance over the last decade is enough to understand the role of this 'chatter'.

Let us randomly run through some of it by seeing the terms that have sought to define and idealise higher education in India. Access, equity, quality, excellence, skilling, innovation, smart education, expansion, world-class research, employability – the list goes on and on.

Has anyone thought, even idly, if any of these policies has reached fruition, or is there any way to assess if they are on that path? We will not ask the question now as to what extent they were relevant to address the challenges of the system. They were all pushed onto it, year after merciless year, as panaceas to what was thought to be ailing it.

The obvious problems of universities that have been left unattended by this 'chatter' are basic and visible. Low level of recruitment or flawed recruitment culture, little or no investment in maintenance expenditure, no focused attention on enhancing physical and digital infra, a heavily politicised system of appointment of key functionaries, and a total shift from the classroom to ancillary and superfluous political activities on university campuses.

This is a mirror image of what was happening in govt schools anyway. When the tide of poorly educated and trained students came to universities from such schools, the sieves of quality merely shifted further downstream, and the only filter left is these entrance and qualifying exams.

The 'chatter' contributed in two simple and significant ways. Firstly, it ensured that competence and professional commitment were surgically removed from as many levels of operation of the system as possible. Secondly, it created a din so that no other voice could be heard. It was a riotous bandwagon on a righteous path. Given these basic factors, the system had to crack and break, which it did.

Now, the latest addition to the collective wisdom of this 'chatter' is the use and integration of AI in higher ed. There is no thought or discussion, of course, whether this is needed or required. Or the extent to which it can be integrated, if at all. The main, and perhaps the only answer, was that the students are already using it and industry has embraced it in a big way.

Students have been using, and will continue to use, any tool that reduces the tedium of learning. Industry, right from Industrial Revolution, has been using machines and tools to minimise the role of the human factor in achieving ever-increasing profits and productivity. How do either of these arguments make sense for an ad hoc and reckless integration of AI into higher ed?

We were forced to deal with online education during the pandemic and saw its possibilities and limitations. The latter were more obvious in a country with little to weak IT infra, plus erratic electrical and internet supply. These limitations have not changed, so why would we rush to AI use in education delivery and execution?

Seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes explored the possibility that all rational thought could be made as systematic as algebra or geometry. This philosophy became the foundation of an idea that found its first practical application in 1936, when Alan Turing invented the Turing machine, the first idealised model of a computer. Internet followed in 1990s. And the melding of these two technologies has since created exponential growth in tech innovation and its applications, which now challenge human intelligence.

But the basic ingredient and guardrail is rational thought. And that still remains uniquely human. That is the reason other types of intelligence are called artificial. We can chat with the cloud for all we want, but it will not necessarily be a meaningful conversation.

The writer is Vice-Chancellor, Khaja Bandanawaz University, Karnataka

Fight For The Fighter's Over. What Next?

That India will manufacture 94 of the 114 Rafales to be inducted into IAF, is a boost for indigenous efforts to produce a fifth-generation military aircraft

Arjun Subramaniam



Retired Air Vice Marshal

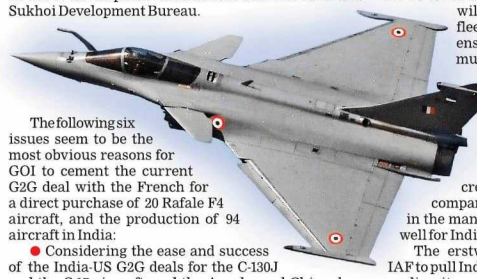
The submission of the detailed technical and commercial proposal by France for the Govt-to-Govt (G2G) deal, for the purchase of 114 Rafale Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA), including the local production of 94 aircraft, offers closure to IAF's agonising wait for a complete overhaul of its fighter fleet. The vision for the procurement of a Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) began in 2000, when IAF first conveyed its intent to scout around for a fourth-generation + aircraft that would complement the Sukhoi-30 MKI as its sword arm over the next few decades.

After an excruciatingly long wait and tedious short-listing process, a Request for Proposal (RFP) was floated in Aug 2007 to six shortlisted companies that offered Rafale (Dassault), Eurofighter (European Consortium), F-16 (Lockheed Martin), F-18 (Boeing), JAS 39-Gripen (SAAB), and MiG-35 (MiG). The RFP was unique as it included, for the first time, the concept of life cycle costs, from design to disposal, the aim being to arrive at the overall ownership cost for govt at best value.

Following impeccable flight trials, two European contenders, Rafale and Eurofighter Typhoon, were shortlisted for further financial evaluation. But three major issues were responsible for the collapse of the deal once Rafale was declared as IAF's preferred choice in 2013:

- First, given the history of defence deals in India, with their looming overhang of corruption, and the gigantic size of the contract ($25-30bn), accusations and anonymous letters about various unsubstantiated irregularities flew thick and fast, rattling then defence minister AK Antony. This resulted in protracted contract negotiations behind closed doors, causing a near paralysis of decision-making.
- Second, the deal fell through with the electoral defeat of UPA govt in 2014, and the unwillingness of Modi govt to endorse a deal that was mired in so much controversy.
- Third, another aspect was the 'omnipresent Russian effect' of the futuristic Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) co-development programme, which was inked between India and Russia in 2007. Making it even more difficult to push the deal was the much-publicised trust deficit between the French and HAL, with the former refusing to assume guarantees for the 108 aircraft to be manufactured by HAL after the first 18 were delivered in fly-away condition.

HAL appeared to have thrown in its lot with the Russians to further the FGFA programme, despite having signed their willingness for co-production on the MMRCA contract. This move sealed MMRCA's fate. Ironically, India had to abort the FGFA deal in 2018, when IAF called out the complete lack of progress in the co-development mechanism between HAL and Sukhoi Development Bureau.

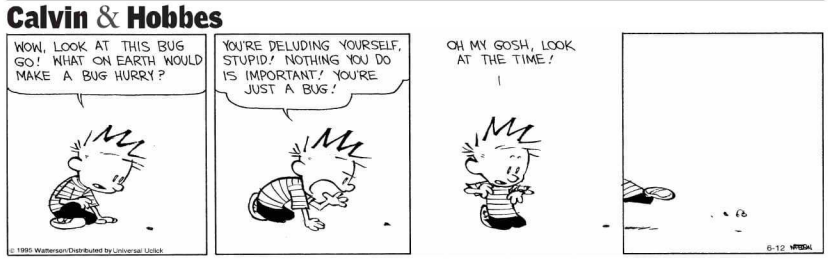


The following six issues seem to be the most obvious reasons for GOI to cement the current G2G deal with the French for a direct purchase of 20 Rafale F4 aircraft, and the production of 94 aircraft in India:

- Considering the ease and success of the India-US G2G deals for the C-130J and the C-17 aircraft, and the Apache and Chinook helicopters, an immediate operational requirement resulted in the G2G deal for 36 Rafale F3 aircraft in 2016. Notwithstanding attempts by vested political interests to scuttle the deal, govt stood firm and inducted the aircraft. With the forthcoming induction of 29 Rafale M for Indian navy, the operational, training, and technical ecosystem will be geared for the additional numbers.
- The current deal for 114 aircraft pegged at $38bn is fair value considering that a large complement of 94 aircraft will be manufactured in India, giving a major fillip to multiple stakeholders, including the private sector. A tertiary spin-off could see India emerging as a regional hub for the manufacturing of additional Rafales and its overhaul ecosystem.
- Having Rafales and SU-30 MKIs as the sword arm of IAF's offensive capability till the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) is inducted, will ensure consistency and continuity in the areas of doctrinal, operational, and tactical efficiency.
- The performance of the Rafale in Op Sindoor was outstanding, and the willingness of the French to offer the latest versions of the aircraft, the F4, and possibly the F5 towards the closing phase of the current deal, will ensure seamless upgrades of the entire fleet in the decades ahead. This will also ensure world-class longevity of the fleet, much like the Mirage-2000 did.
- Given the potential of the deal and the robustness of the India-France Strategic Partnership, the possibilities of integrating advanced Indian weapons such as BrahMos NG and Astra are high.
- The deal also raises hopes for the creation of a robust consortium of private companies and public sector players involved in the manufacturing of the Rafale, which augurs well for India's futuristic AMCA programme.

The erstwhile MMRCA deal was designed by IAF to pull India's defence industrial ecosystem out of mediocrity, and empower it to match the best in the world. Rather than lamenting over innocuous matters, and searching for skeletons in the cupboard, this time around, the Rafale deal with France must be considered a project of national importance, and not just an IAF project. Political will, bipartisan support, and a whole-of-govt approach is the need of the hour.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



I breathe a strong breath like the wind and tempest, the while I hold together all existence. Beyond this wide earth and beyond the heavens I have become so mighty in my grandeur.

Rig Ved, 10.125.8, Vak Sukta

Beyond Words: Languages As The Unifying Force

Swami Vigyananand

Every few months, some part of the country finds itself arguing over language. A three-language formula becomes a flashpoint in one state. A film star's remark on Hindi turns into a national debate. A signboard in the 'wrong' script gets painted overnight. The pattern is familiar: language stops being a means of communication and becomes a marker of who belongs and who doesn't. It is worth asking why this keeps happening in a country that has managed, for thousands of years, to hold dozens of languages together without any of them cancelling the others out.

The Rig Ved describes speech as something that reaches people in many forms, as if language itself were meant to multiply rather than narrow. Grammarian Bhartrihari argued that *shabd*, the word, is not separate from ultimate reality. In this understanding, a language is not a fence a community builds around itself. It is one more path to the same truth everyone is walking towards.

The Tower of Babel, a story from the Bible, imagines a God who scatters languages to punish and divide humanity, to stop people from ever working together again to reach heaven. Centuries later, the idea of the nation-state took that same anxiety and turned it into policy: one nation, one language.

In Bharat, languages served as a unifying force for our civilisation; they have fostered cultural integration. When Adi Shankaracharya travelled from Kerala and established four mathas in the four corners of the country, he crossed regions where the language changed every few hundred kilometres. He faced no barriers and was welcomed by all and accepted as a Jagadguru.

Ramanujacharya's journey from Tamil Nadu, decades later, met the same welcome across the same linguistic distances. Pilgrims walking to Char Dhams on foot from all parts of Bharat, generation after generation, have been welcomed everywhere and have never faced any problems or difficulties due to language.

Languages are a means of connection and enlightenment. In fact, the core literature of all languages of Bharat is strikingly similar, with themes involving dharm, moksh, jnan, Ram, Krishn, Shiv, and Shakti. Languages have expressed regional richness and a shared civilisational ethos. The Ramayan exists in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Bengali, Odia, Avadhi, Marathi and has also been preserved and passed down in numerous folk languages and oral traditions.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Gita has been rendered with equal devotion in Jnaneshwar's Marathi and in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and other language commentaries.

Twenty-two languages have official status in the Constitution today, and the last Census counted well over a hundred major languages spoken across the country. This incredible diversity in language, culture, art, cuisine, and dress expresses the civilisational ethos of Bharatvarsh, anchored in the notion of ekatmata, oneness.

Which is why it should trouble every citizen when language is turned into a political weapon. When politicians insist that only one language can represent 'true' identity. Pride in one's own language was never meant to come at the cost of respect for another's. That balance is something Bharat has managed successfully for aeons.

The writer is joint general secretary, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and initiator of World Hindu Congress

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Shifting expectations

Increase in policy rate is only a matter of time

The six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) decided to leave the policy repo rate unchanged at its meeting earlier this month, which was a prudent decision. Although the inflation rate exceeded the target in June, it remained below target for 16 consecutive months. Furthermore, it made sense to wait for more clarity on both the international and domestic fronts. The situation in West Asia does not seem to be improving significantly, making prices of crude oil excessively volatile, which requires continued monitoring. By the next meeting, there will also be more clarity on the possible impact of a deficient monsoon on agricultural output. However, as this newspaper argued then, the RBI's inflation projections suggested that the policy rate would not remain at the present level for too long. The minutes of the meeting, released on Wednesday, are being interpreted along similar lines.

In the minutes, RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra argued that there was a need to remain watchful of a broadbased increase in inflation and de-anchoring of expectations. He further noted: "Any evidence of these risks materialising may need policy tightening." Deputy Governor Poonam Gupta was more direct and noted: "... scope for any further easing does not seem to exist at the current juncture. Instead, given that the headline inflation is projected to peak to a level as high as 5.9 per cent in Q3 2026-27, a case for a hike may emerge during the course of the year." The RBI's inflation projection for this financial year was reduced by 10 basis points to 5 per cent. However, the rate is expected to remain above 5 per cent for three consecutive quarters starting the third quarter of the financial year. It would be interesting to see the projections beyond the first quarter of 2027-28. More clarity will likely emerge at the next MPC meeting in October and with the release of the biannual Monetary Policy Report.

Nevertheless, as things stand, price pressures are projected to increase. With the headline inflation rate going above 5 per cent and peaking at 5.9 per cent in the third quarter, the policy repo rate at 5.25 per cent would turn negative in real terms. This is undesirable. It is also not the objective of the RBI to keep the real policy rate in negative territory even in the short run, particularly when growth is not at risk. Thus, policy rates need to be adjusted. Conditions will become clearer in the coming weeks as to whether the MPC will begin tightening in October or have the room to wait for some more time. Inflation projections for next financial year will be crucial. It must be noted that monetary policy works with a lag, and if the inflation rate is expected to remain elevated next financial year, tightening may begin in October itself.

Although monetary policy in India is not driven by developments in the currency market, policy adjustment to address inflation conditions may help it. Yields in developed markets are increasing due to concerns such as higher inflation rates and larger fiscal deficits. The United States (US) government, for instance, has decided to increase long-dated bond buybacks to bring down yields. The yield on the 30-year US government bond went above 5.3 per cent earlier this week, the highest level since 2007. A narrow yield gap tends to discourage debt-capital flows from developed to emerging markets. However, India is now in a better position, at least in the near term, on the currency front. It is mobilising substantial funds through swap arrangements announced by the RBI. Nevertheless, adjustment in policy rates may help debt flows.

Failing the test

India's public exam ecosystem needs a reset

Student protests in Delhi and Jharkhand over irregularities in exam papers have underlined the flaws in India's public-examination system. The growing clamour for accountability among students and job seekers sitting in central or state public exams reflects multiple institutional failures. This much was clear from the Jharkhand government's decision to cancel 22 recruitment exams since 2014. The cancelled exams include those for the state civil services, civil judges, drug inspectors, forest officials, and so on. These exams include those conducted by the Jharkhand Public Service Commission and some are outsourced to a private testing firm called TSR Data Processing Pvt Ltd (TDPL). This decision came after lathicharges, teargas and police intimidation arrests failed to break the resolve of a 26-day protest led by the Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha, a local political party. For the state government, the consequences of this maximalist decision taken under duress can be seen in a fresh set of protests — this time by candidates who had passed these exams and now hold jobs in the state administration. They fear job losses since the exams for which they appeared have been declared invalid and the government is yet to clarify their status. The Jharkhand High Court on Thursday stayed the cancellation of the state's 11th to 13th Combined Civil Services examination.

As with the protests at Jantar Mantar, spearheaded by the pressure group called Cockroach Janta Party, from which it drew inspiration, the protestors alleged serious breaches in recruitment tests, especially in the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission (JSSC) Combined Graduate Level (CGL) exam. In the spotlight is TDPL, which has been handling the JSSC-CGL, among others. The appointment of this little-known agency, incorporated in 2010, has raised eyebrows since its promoters are facing accusations of irregularities and nepotism in Uttar Pradesh. Having flubbed the protest management, the Jharkhand government is flailing for solutions. It has urged the Jharkhand High Court to set up a fast-track court to try those responsible for leaking exam papers, proposed an internal monitoring cell to suggest exam reforms, and ordered multiple enquiries. These moves may suggest hectic corrective action but there is no shortage of sensible solutions to a problem that has been endemic in India for years — neighbouring Bihar has become notorious in this respect. An expert committee headed by former Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman K Radhakrishnan to suggest ways to reform the National Testing Agency bristles with sensible ideas, including tech solutions and audit committees, which could easily be replicated at state level. No doubt the high-powered task force led by Nandan Nilekani with a similar brief will offer more reformatory ideas.

Though public scrutiny is likely to ensure some degree of probity in the conduct of exams for a while, a basic structural weakness remains and will continue to incentivise irregularities — the shortage of decent university seats or secure jobs. Hundreds or thousands of applicants sat in exams for just 103 vacancies in Jharkhand's Combined Civil Services. In the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Undergraduates, more than 2.3 million candidates chased 137,000 MBBS seats. Unless India creates more quality institutions of higher education and its economy can create decent jobs, millions of aspirants who spend years and, in some cases, lakhs of rupees on coaching institutions to achieve success will have to live with this uncertain reality.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Paper leaks: A state capacity problem

Setting aside the question of the necessity of national qualifying examinations, high-quality parastatal agencies are essential to administering them reliably



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM
K P KRISHNAN

There is a furore over the administration of examinations. The public discourse has generated proposals intended to improve the system. The solutions receiving attention range from the implementation of blockchain technology to the enhancement of criminal penalties for malpractice. The discourse requires the application of sophisticated knowledge regarding state capability and institutional design and not knee-jerk, ad-hoc solutions.

We must start with the bigger questions. The difficulties observed in the testing process arise from unaddressed foundational questions in higher education policy. The necessity of centralised admissions requires centralised evaluation. In a modern economy and society, autonomous universities select their students. A single national test assumes a uniformity that ignores institutional diversity. Furthermore, the supply of higher education is constrained by regulatory barriers that make it difficult for new participants to establish universities. This artificial scarcity raises the stakes of the admission process, generating high incentives for malfeasance. If supply were elastic, the pressure on a single gateway examination would decline.

If selection from a surplus of applicants is the objective, the use of lotteries is an attractive mechanism in public policy. If a standardised test is deemed necessary, building a state agency is not the only administrative option. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) administers examinations like the GRE and SAT globally with reliability. The state could procure testing services from established commercial vendors rather than attempting to construct a testing apparatus from scratch. These fundamental questions require resolution. Downstream failures in testing are symptoms of these upstream policy choices. For now, we will not address these bigger questions.

Assuming the policy choice is a government-run nationwide examination, the administration faces a state capability problem. Running a secure, large-scale logistical testing operation requires high managerial capacity. The National Testing Agency (NTA) lacks this capability. Public administration theory provides a framework for understanding this deficit.

An analysis of the NTA through the lens of institutional design reveals structural defects. The NTA was established in 2018. It was not created through a statute but was constituted as a society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. The administration is entrusted to a governing body chaired by a former Union Public Service Commission chairman. An Indian Administrative Service officer serves as the director general and member secretary, alongside ex-officio part-time directors.

This structure lacks operational depth. The agency has handled over 270 competitive examinations and more than 66 million candidate registrations since its inception. It attempts this logistical operation with a sanctioned strength of 39 permanent posts. All these posts are designated to be filled through deputation.

Currently, 24 of these permanent positions are occupied. To manage the operational workload, the NTA relies on a temporary workforce. It employs 73 contractual personnel, including consultants, and 124 outsourced staff handling data analysis and administrative support. An agency executing sensitive state functions operates with 197 non-permanent staff, managed by a core of 24 public servants on deputation. The over-reliance on temporary and outsourced personnel is a design flaw.

The legal form of the organisation has consequences for governance. A society operates without the statutory framework that characterises standard regulatory bodies. Statutory bodies have internal financial controls and external accountability protocols embedded in their founding legislation. The NTA lacks this architecture.

Because it is not a statutory body, it is shielded from routine parliamentary scrutiny. There is no legal mandate requiring the NTA's annual administrative and financial reports to be tabled and debated in Parliament. Its accounts are not necessarily subjected to the mandatory, exhaustive auditing mechanisms of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in the manner of a government department or a statutory authority. The absence of these feedback loops ensures that structural weaknesses, such as personnel shortages and operational vulnerabilities, remain hidden from formal parliamentary scrutiny until a systemic failure occurs.

Advanced economies approach the creation of public agencies with systematic protocols. The United Kingdom (UK) utilises the framework of Non-departmental Public Bodies (NDPB). This term was coined in 1980 following a report by Sir Leo Pliatzky. An NDPB has a role in the processes of national government but operates at arm's length from ministers.

In the UK, the Cabinet permits the establishment of a new NDPB only when it is demonstrated to be the most cost-effective means of executing a specific function. The relationship between the NDPB and its sponsor department is defined to support delegation while assuring the accountable minister of financial propriety and risk management. The bodies are reviewed regularly to verify that their functions remain necessary.

Over time, a taxonomy of public bodies has emerged in the UK, classifying them as Executive NDPBs, Advisory NDPBs, Tribunal NDPBs, Public Corporations, and others. This classification determines accountability, funding, and reporting arrangements. Appointments to executive NDPBs are governed by strict codes. They are empowered to employ dedicated staff and manage their allocated budgets. This builds the permanent institutional memory and capacity required to execute a mandate efficiently. In the UK legal and constitutional scheme, statutory status is not required for the checks and balances described above.

The administration of public services in India requires a standardised, statutory framework for the creation of delivery bodies. Agencies entrusted with sensitive functions cannot be structured as loosely governed societies dependent on outsourced labour and borrowed bureaucrats. They require statutory backing, a permanent and specialised cadre, internal controls, CAG audits, and direct accountability to Parliament. Flawless public service delivery is a downstream product of flawless institutional design.

The difficulties at the NTA are not isolated. The Indian governance landscape contains hundreds of organisations constructed with similar institutional deficits. The intellectual toolkit of new public management, grounded in the establishment of checks and balances, is frequently absent. The apparatus of the state moves from failure to failure owing to these gaps in administrative knowledge. While the immediate focus is on the testing agency, similar vulnerabilities exist across the structure of public administration. A superior body of knowledge, with an understanding of state organisations and their checks and balances, is required in the journey to state capability.

The writer is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, and a former civil servant

Private capital in infra: Binding constraints



INFRATALK
VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

Engaging and motivating private capital to invest in India's infrastructure faces two binding constraints.

One is the absence of an adequate pipeline of fresh projects that are sufficiently de-risked for private capital to consider investing confidently.

Two is a "non-level playing field", which is known to be tilted against the private sector.

These two together have resulted in a marked reluctance of private capital to invest in infrastructure and public private partnership (PPP) projects. Let us examine each of these binding constraints.

The table estimates the extent of private investment desirable in the next half-decade. About ₹57 trillion of private capital is required across the next five years — that is, about ₹11.4 trillion annually. Assuming that the implementation cycle of an infra project is four years, we need a "shovel-ready" pipeline of roughly ₹11.4 trillion × 4 = ₹45.6 trillion for the next half-decade in the here-and-now. Are there this many "shovel-ready" projects currently in the pipeline? Certainly not! It would thus be useful for one of these three institutions (the Ministry of Finance, the NITI Aayog or the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation) to monitor and publish this figure on a half-yearly basis.

In the absence of an adequate pipeline, where will private capital be headed to? The infrastructure sector is unique in that it is composed of long-term, regulated asset-heavy public utilities, which are often geographic monopolies. It is thus well-nigh impossible, and also inappropriate for the private sector to create such projects on its own. Private sector gets involved only after winning a bid crafted by the state. Who then, in India has the single-point responsibility for ensuring a steady stream of biddable and bankable projects? This is a crucial issue to be addressed.

Next, let us take a look at "non-level playing field" issues. Seven remedial measures could possibly address these debilitating conditions.

1. One, establish an impactful institution that will give PPPs attention, sanctity and durability. Such an institution was announced in Arun Jaitley's maiden Budget speech in July 2014. It was called "3P India" and had a budgetary allocation of a whopping ₹500 crore to establish it. Unfortunately, it was never implemented. A "3P India" would serve important tasks: (i) insisting that projects that could embrace private capital should not be developed with public funds (ii) vetting PPP formats to ensure that "risk allocation" between public and private players was fair and logical.

2. Enable "renegotiations" as accepted procedure. Long PPP tenures expose concessions to "black swan" risks that eventually force renegotiation. A 2004 World Bank study of 1,000-plus Latin American PPP concessions (1985-2000) found 41.5 per cent were renegotiated; of which 85 per cent were within four years and 61 per cent were concessionaire-initiated.

3. Legislate truly independent sector regulators. The NITI Aayog was tasked with a Regulatory Reforms Bill after the 2015 Budget, which still remains unenacted. Roads and railways alone account for 40 per cent of the infrastructure pipeline; yet neither these nor other major infrastructure sectors (like water) have an "independent regulator". It is the reform that investors have been asking for the longest and received the least.

4. Create a fast-track dispute resolution mechanism. Much has been written and advocated on this subject. It is high time action is taken.

5. Insist that National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NABFID) have a core team with the capacity to deliver on the "D" part of its name. It should be able to conceive and structure bankable mega infrastructure projects on behalf of the Centre and states to continuously augment the "shovel-ready" project pipeline.

6. Encourage and support the Swiss Challenge method where a private player is allowed to propose a project, and the project proponent (subject to conditions) allowed to match any higher bid. This method has been upheld by the Supreme Court.

7. Use the "plug-and-play" format to park sovereign risk mitigation with the state. This entails initially forming a wholly government-owned special purpose vehicle, which secures land and all other clearances first, then sells the de-risked shell company to the highest private bidder.

Most of the above suggestions have been made time and again, and the Vijay Kelkar Committee's 2015 report "Revisiting and Revitalising the PPP Model of Infrastructure", provides excellent arguments for a massive overhaul of PPP frameworks. Alas, even after a decade, it languishes while the cry for inviting private capital gets louder.

Fix PPP. Put the institutional reforms horse before the private capital cart and watch infrastructure investments sizzle again.

The writer is an infrastructure expert. He is also the founder & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation. With research inputs from Mutum Chaobisana

Capital plan

Estimate of private capital required for next 5 years (₹ trn)

Year	Nominal GDP	Infrastructure investment @ 6.5% of GDP	Private capital* @ 30% of infra investment
2027-28	458	29.77	8.93
2028-29	513	33.35	10
2029-30	575	37.38	11.21
2030-31	644	41.86	12.56
2031-32	721	46.87	14.06
Total			**56.76**

* Private capital denotes domestic companies and investors, overseas private infra developers and foreign institutional investors Source: Infravision Foundation

The descent of Israel

BOOK REVIEW

KANIKA DATTA

This book was written before the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry reports unequivocally described as genocidal Israel's targeted destruction of the Palestinian people in Gaza. As the interrogative title of this book indicates, its author Omer Bartov, an Israeli-American scholar of the Holocaust and genocide, came to this conclusion long ago.

Dr Bartov's forcefully written treatise argues that Israel strayed far from its founding ideals from the get-go, establishing the extremist state that precipitated the October 7 Hamas attacks (which he condemns) and Tel Aviv's disproportionate response. He writes not as an ivory tower academic but as someone with deep roots in pre-Israel Palestine. His father, a committed Zionist, was born in the mid-1920s in Mandatory Palestine (territory administered by the British after World War I). His mother's family, also staunchly Zionist, emigrated from Poland in the 1930s. Dr Bartov was the first generation born after the state's creation.

Growing up in a "resolutely left-wing kibbutz", he never questioned the narrative that he was the first generation of his people's resurrection. But, "... over time, even as the visible signs of the destruction of Palestinian culture all around us were gradually demolished or covered over, some of us became increasingly aware that our resurrection had come at the price of another people's catastrophe."

Initially, that dim awareness created a contradictory "mental landscape" of "guilt, regret, negation and denial". His mandatory four-year service in the Israeli Defence Forces changed his outlook. Seeing action in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and postings in West Bank, northern Sinai and Gaza exposed him to "the poverty and hopelessness of Palestinian refugees eking out a living in congested, decrepit neighbourhoods". He understood "what it meant to occupy another people".

This insight, enhanced by his study of the Nazi indoctrination of the German army, led him by steps to grasp the nature of the Israeli state as it evolved from overlapping currents of European antisemitism and Zionism. Much of this history is familiar, including the irony of the United States (US) and Europe's indirect and direct complicity in the Holocaust. This book's value lies in its examination of how Israel has become increasingly brazen in its destruction of the Palestinians.

One method is the deployment of Holocaust memory. As Dr Bartov writes, "critics, including many Israelis, have long argued that Israel has politically instrumentalized the Holocaust" by cynically employing memories of the programmatic murder of six million European Jews to portray critics of Israel's flagrant breaches of international law as antisemites.

The "best tool" for this diversion from criticism comes from a globally accepted definition of antisemitism endorsed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016. The IHRA provides 11 examples of antisemitism, which include denying Jews the right to self-determination, accusing Israel of exaggerating the Holocaust or drawing comparisons between Israeli and Nazi policies. This definition has eclipsed competing framings such as the Jewish Declaration of Antisemitism and the Nexus Document that distinguish between antisemitism and criticism of Israel.

Such manufactured impunity — visible in US campuses and, sadly, in India — has encouraged the repressive nature of the state. In "The Missing Constitution" — the book's best chapter — Dr Bartov examines the evolution of this extremism. Soon after the British mandate ended and 85 per cent of Palestinians in the newly conquered state had fled, Israel drew up a Declaration of Independence mainly to gain UN admittance and serve propaganda needs. Its omissions are revealing. Feverishly crafted through 13 drafts, the Declaration, which has no clear legal standing, asserted the right of a Jewish state in the Biblical land of Israel. But the term "democratic" was omitted because it was associated with social justice and minority rights. A reference to equality before the law was dropped for the same reason. No less fatefully, the Declaration omitted the definition of Israel's borders, allowing it to conquer territory without hindrance. As David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, elliptically put it, "We left the issue open to developments."



Israel: What went wrong?
by Omer Bartov
Published by Penguin
243 pages ₹999

This open-ended approach was not accidental. As Dr Bartov writes, "Ben-Gurion opposed adopting a constitution, which is why none exists." The Knesset came close to articulating constitutional principles by passing two Basic Laws in 1992 — one protecting human dignity and liberty, the other freedom of occupation. But those principles foundered on the Supreme Court's consistent evasion of a "response to the question of the settlements' legality under international law and also by allowing settlers to keep seizing land from Palestinians..."

Dr Bartov concludes that Zionism, the ideology that underpins Israel, is flawed. The "liberal-secular definition of Zionism was as exclusionary as the religious one," and "its professions of equality and democracy for all were repeatedly negated by its focus on privileging one ethnicity over another". Until the West calls the Israeli state to account and withdraws vital material support, the 21st century will continue to witness its collusion in the wilful destruction of a people — including such travesties as Donald Trump's UN-endorsed 20-point Gaza Plan.

The Pioneer
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Editor's TAKE

Fake medicine: A crime against humanity

The counterfeit-drug racket uncovered in Karnataka is a shocker. India needs stronger surveillance and harsher punishment for perpetrators

The recent bust of a large counterfeit-medicine operation near Bengaluru is not just another regulatory raid; it is a stark reminder that fake drugs are a slow-motion mass poisoning that demands the severest punishment and systemic reform. Karnataka's Food Safety and Drug Administration (FDA) enforcement wing raided an unlicensed facility at a farmhouse in Bidadi (Ramanagara district) and seized medicines, expired stock, counterfeit labels, packaging material and an injection-filling unit valued at about ₹4.91 crore. Officials allege that cheaper medicines sourced from other states were repackaged and relabelled to look like products of major multinational companies-including brands such as Pfizer-and then sold to hospitals and pharmacies at roughly 50 per cent below market price. Counterfeit medicines are not just another "white-collar" crime; they are a public-health assault. Patients in ICUs, cancer wards and chronic-disease clinics rely on exact dosages and sterility. Fake or substandard drugs can cause treatment failure, drug resistance, organ damage and death.

When criminals knowingly flood hospitals with relabelled injectables and critical medicines, they are effectively mass murderers operating for profit. Think of small children, old people and pregnant women being administered spurious medicines which are nothing less than poison. That moral culpability, multiplied across thousands of doses, meets the threshold of a crime against humanity. At the national level, regulators report that over 1.41 lakh drug samples were tested in 2025-26, with 3,012 declared "not of standard quality" and 283 spurious; 961 prosecution cases were filed in 2024-25 alone, a five-year high.

This itself shows the magnitude of this crime taking place across the country. In June 2026, CDSCO flagged 159 substandard drugs, and over five years more than 3,500 prosecution cases have been registered. Yet detections of spurious drugs have fallen even as prosecutions rise, suggesting either better legal follow-through or, worryingly, that many fakes never reach testing labs. The Bengaluru case exposes systemic gaps: unlicensed farmhouse units operating with relabelling lines, interstate sourcing, and deep discounts to hospitals indicate weak last-mile oversight and possible collusion. Past incidents-from fake cancer and diabetes medicines in Delhi (₹4 crore seizure in April 2024) to counterfeit antibiotics in Delhi-UP and large cough-syrup scandals-show a pattern of recurring networks with limited deterrence. Enforcement agencies deserve credit for the Bidadi raid, but the existence of such a sophisticated unit points to intelligence failures, fragmented state-centre coordination, and insufficient routine inspections of high-risk places.

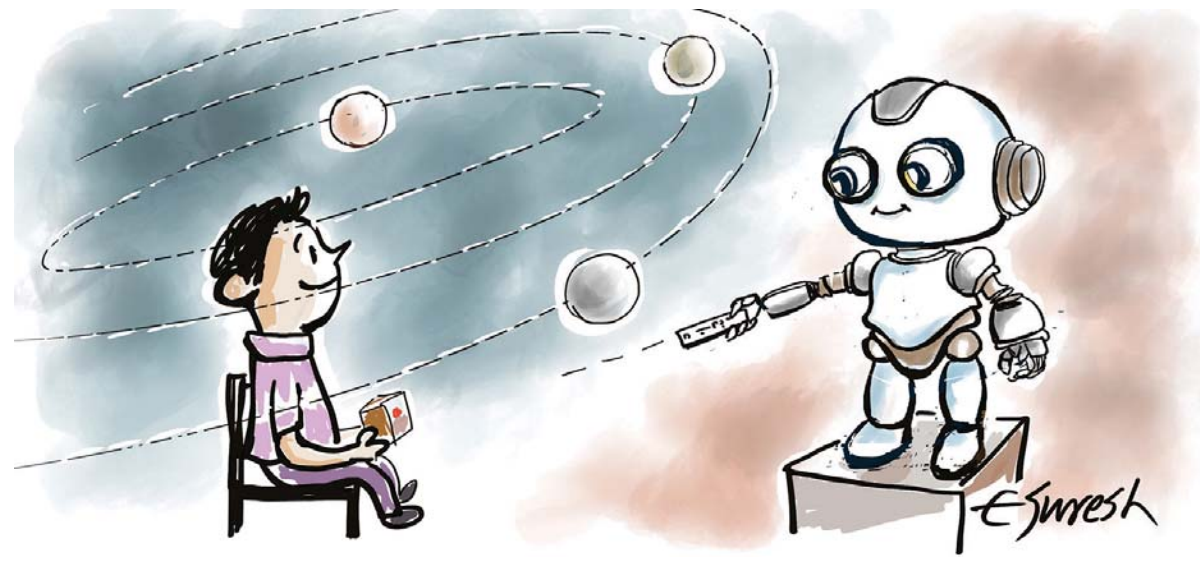
Without real-time traceability, whistleblower protections, and harsher penalties, raids remain reactive. It is high time to make end-to-end track-and-trace mandatory for critical injectables and oncology drugs. The perpetrators of such heinous crimes deserve no mercy and should get the taste of their own medicine with the severest punishment.

Reimagining liberal arts in the era of AI

Liberal education equips students with the capacities needed to navigate a rapidly changing world by fostering creativity, ethical reasoning, interdisciplinary understanding, and adaptability. By integrating the humanities, social sciences, and professional disciplines, universities can cultivate sceptical and reflective minds capable of questioning assumptions



SURENDRA KUMAR YADAWA



As artificial intelligence rapidly reshapes the way knowledge is created, accessed, and applied, classrooms are evolving into 360-degree learning environments (students' total growth), where digital technologies, collaborative platforms, and intelligent systems increasingly influence how students learn and engage with the world. Amid this, a fundamental question emerges: should higher education focus solely on producing technically skilled professionals, or should it also cultivate reflective, ethical, and analytical minds? In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address this challenge by promoting multidisciplinary learning, curricular flexibility, and student-centred pedagogy, reaffirming that the purpose of higher education extends beyond employability to nurturing individuals who can think independently, communicate persuasively, and contribute meaningfully to society.

As learning behaviours evolve rapidly, education systems face the challenge of preparing students not merely to acquire information, but to interpret, question, and use it responsibly. In an age of smart technologies, AI should enhance human capabilities rather than replace them, making critical literacy, analytical reasoning, and the ability to ask meaningful questions increasingly valuable. Consequently, success will depend not merely on technical expertise but on the ability to scrutinise evidence critically, innovate creatively, collaborate effectively, and exercise problem-solving abilities guided by wisdom, empathy, and human values.

While integrating liberal learning with professional education, institutions can nurture adaptable, creative, and socially responsible graduates equipped to navigate complexity, exercise informed choice, and address the multifaceted challenges of society. In liberal arts education, historians, philosophers, political scientists, and sociologists encourage learners to question assumptions, examine evidence, and understand the complexities of human societies. Interdisciplinary learning fosters curiosity, critical thinking, and informed judgement - qualities difficult to replicate through technology. In an AI-driven era marked by misinformation and deepfakes, liberal education equips individuals to avoid the dangers of uncritical conformity (Hannah Arendt) in public life.

Indeed, true education brings out the innate talent of students. As the UGC underlines, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are graduates' attributes that foster intellectual growth, creativity, and lifelong learning beyond memorisation.

> THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DEMAND MORE THAN TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY; THEY REQUIRE HOLISTIC LEARNING THAT CULTIVATES DIGITAL DEMOCRACY BASED ON CURIOSITY AND CRITICAL INQUIRY

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By encouraging inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and interdisciplinary learning, institutions can empower students to navigate information critically and create civic trust. By integrating the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and technology, institutions enable students to navigate complex realities, evaluate competing claims, and exercise ethical judgement.

Its purpose is not merely to acquire knowledge but to read critically, write cogently, think broadly and act wisely.

The challenges of the twenty-first century demand more than technical proficiency; they require holistic learning that cultivates digital democracy based on curiosity and critical inquiry. Historians teach the importance of evidence and context. Philosophers sharpen reasoning and expose logical fallacies; political scientists illuminate the workings of institutions and power; literature cultivates empathy and perspective-taking, while anthropologists reveal how culture shapes human behaviour.

Together, these disciplines foster the ability to question assumptions, evaluate competing claims, and engage thoughtfully with complex realities. In an era of information abundance and algorithmic decision-making, wisdom remains humanity's greatest strength, empowering individuals to exercise ethical judgement, maintain intellectual independence, critically evaluate information, participate responsibly in democratic processes, and engage meaningfully in community action.

Liberal education equips students with the capacities needed to navigate a rapidly changing world by fostering creativity, ethical reasoning, interdisciplinary understanding, and adaptability. By integrating the humanities, social sciences, and professional disciplines, universities can cultivate sceptical and reflective minds capable of questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence, and addressing complex technological, environmental, and societal challenges by drawing insights across disciplines rather than from specialisation alone. As knowledge becomes increasingly accessible, education must empower students to think globally.

In this era of rapidly evolving technology, students now study social sciences alongside artificial intelligence, combine data science with psychology, and understand environmental challenges from scientific, historical, and social perspectives. The liberal arts seek to cultivate technical competence as well as human ability, ethical judgement, creativity, and adaptability - qualities that remain uniquely human in an increasingly automated world.

A philosopher familiar with data science engages more effectively with contemporary challenges. A policymaker who understands artificial intelligence is better equipped to govern an increasingly digital society. The ideal graduate is neither only a specialist nor a traditional generalist but an interdisciplinary thinker who can connect knowledge across fields, adapt to complexity, and approach problems with both technical competence and human understanding.

The future of education cannot be defined by technological proficiency alone. In an age when information is abundant and AI can generate answers instantly, the real challenge is cultivating minds capable of questioning assumptions (Socrates), testing ideas through debate (J.S. Mill), and making wise choices.

A liberal arts education equips students with these enduring capacities by fostering intellectual curiosity, ethical reflection, creativity, and civic responsibility. As India aspires to become a global knowledge leader, its universities must nurture not only skilled professionals but also thoughtful citizens. The sceptical mind is no longer an academic ideal; it is the foundation of innovation, democratic vitality, and sustainable well-being.

PIC TALK



Workers transplant paddy saplings in a field, in Nadia district, West Bengal
PHOTO: PTI

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We need to stop treating reinvention as a crisis



DEEBA IRFAN SALIM

2ND OPINION

There is a strange impatience with women as they grow older. At some point, the questions subtly change.

When we are young, people ask what you want to become. Later, they ask what you have achieved. And somewhere in the middle of life, the questions become quieter, but more loaded: What now? What are you going to do with yourself? Why are you starting again? Shouldn't you be slowing down?

I have often wondered why we think of reinvention as something that belongs exclusively to the young.

Perhaps because we have been taught to see life as a ladder. You climb it in your twenties and thirties, establish yourself in your forties, and by your fifties and sixties, you are expected to sit comfortably on whatever rung you have reached. But life isn't a ladder. It is much closer to a manuscript. And manuscripts can be rewritten. I have met women who, after decades of being mothers, wives, professionals and caregivers, suddenly discover a version of themselves that had been waiting patiently underneath all those identities. Sometimes it emerges through writing. Sometimes through travel. Sometimes through a business, a friendship, a classroom, or simply the decision to wake up one morning and say: I want something different.

And almost invariably, there is guilt attached to it. Why? Because women have been conditioned to believe that their value lies in how useful they are to everyone else. We are taught to care before we are taught to create. To accommodate before we are taught to ask. To remember everyone's birthdays, appointments, preferences and anxieties, while quietly forgetting the things that still make us feel alive. Then one day, the children leave home. A career changes. A parent becomes dependent. A marriage enters a different phase. The body changes. Menopause arrives. The face in the mirror becomes unfamiliar. And suddenly, the old map doesn't work anymore.

This is often described as a midlife crisis. I think that phrase is unfair. Perhaps what we call a crisis is simply an awakening. There is grief in growing older. We lose people, versions of ourselves, and the illusion of unlimited time. Some losses permanently rearrange the furniture in our inner lives. But grief strips away pretence and asks what actually matters. Writing teaches us that healing is not always about forgetting what happened, but finding language for what the experience changed inside us. We live in a culture obsessed with productivity, but some things cannot be solved; they must be understood. Understanding requires us to pause long enough to hear ourselves. We realize not every relationship has to be saved, not every rejection is a verdict, and some things simply end because they have completed their purpose. The greatest freedom of the second half of life is becoming less interested in being universally understood. Ageing should not be about becoming smaller. It should be about becoming more exact: fewer performances, fewer apologies, fewer obligations.

More truth. More curiosity. More courage to begin something without practical reasons. A woman in her twenties can reinvent herself; why can't a woman in her fifties or sixties write a book, learn to paint, start a company, fall in love, travel alone, return to university, or become someone she never had time to be?

We must stop asking women what they are doing next and ask what they have become brave enough to do. This stage is about what we leave behind-stories told, wisdom passed on, honest mistakes, books written, and the permissions we give others by refusing to disappear quietly.

I prefer continuing differently. Taking everything we lived through and allowing it to become material rather than memory. Turning grief into language, experience into wisdom, and loneliness into connection. This is the chapter where, finally, we get to write without asking anyone else what the story should be.

The writer is an award-winning, Dubai-based author exploring themes of memory, identity and emotional truth through storytelling, and is the founder of TheWriteScene.com

RESPECT AND DIALOGUE CAN REVIVE BILATERAL TIES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance that Bangladesh's Prime Minister would be accorded an honourable reception is a reassuring diplomatic signal. At a time when relations between the two neighbours need careful handling, such a gesture can help create an atmosphere of trust and reduce tensions.

India and Bangladesh share a common history, cultural affinities and extensive economic and people-to-people links. While differences are inevitable between neighbouring countries, they should be managed through regular consultations rather than allowing them to become lasting sources of friction.

The two sides should use every opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern, including trade, connectivity, border management, water sharing and regional security. Constructive engagement can help both countries protect their interests while ensuring that bilateral cooperation continues to benefit ordinary citizens.

The emphasis on an honourable reception reflects the value of diplomatic courtesy in international relations. India should continue to pursue dialogue and cooperation with Bangladesh so that existing challenges can be addressed peacefully and the relationship can move towards greater stability and mutual confidence.

Dialogue should remain the foundation of bilateral ties. Mutual respect, diplomatic sensitivity and sustained engagement can help both nations overcome differences and rebuild confidence. A stable India-Bangladesh relationship is important not only for the two countries but also for peace, prosperity and connectivity across the wider region.

RUKMA SHARMA | PUNJAB

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com.
In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Potholes claim more lives

The tragic incident in which three children lost their lives after falling into a water-filled pit in Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh is deeply distressing. Such deaths are preventable and should never become routine. Authorities must act swiftly, before another family suffers further.

"Deaths due to potholes are unacceptable, the figures are probably more than those killed on border," a Supreme Court bench headed by Justice Madan B. Lokur observed in December 2018 while pursuing a statistical report on road accident deaths. Since then, much water has flown down the Thames, yet adequate corrective measures have not been made.

Earlier this month, in August 2026, the Free Press reported that Bhopal has nearly 500 potholes per kilometre. The figure is alarming and exposes the seriousness of the problem.

The Sehore tragedy should serve as a wake-up call for authorities. Roads and public spaces must be regularly inspected, dangerous pits immediately barricaded and repairs completed without delay. Citizens should not have to pay with their lives for administrative negligence. Authorities must learn from this tragedy and fix these road anomalies urgently.

TUSHAR ANAND | MADHYA PRADESH

India's test win offers lessons

Congratulations to the Indian cricket team for securing a 165-run victory in the Galle Test against Sri Lanka. The victory came largely through India's first-innings batting dominance and fourth-innings bowling performance.

The Indian batters piled up 462 runs in the first innings, thanks mainly to a brilliant 167 from Devdutt Padikkal and 84 from KL Rahul. In the second innings, Rishabh Pant's stroke-filled 66 enabled India to set the hosts a target of 372 runs. Manav Suthar was the standout performer with the ball, picking up 10 wickets in the match.

Playing domestic cricket is a prime reason for the success of Suthar and Padikkal. Moreover, India went in with a specialist spinner for the Galle Test. For Test matches, we need specialists. Gautam Gambhir must shed his inclination to select all-rounders in Test matches. India does not boast all-rounders of Kapil Dev's calibre.

As far as selection is concerned, selectors must encourage domestic players, recognise their performances and include them in Test matches when opportunities arise. The victory gave India a start to the series and 12 WTC .

S SANKARANARAYANAN | CHENNAI

The power of nuclear arms

Trump intends to call on Kim Jong Un again. Trump says Kim has 57 "very powerful" nuclear weapons. This helps us understand Trump's foreign policy: nuclear weapons command his respect.

Pakistan, a nuclear power with a troubling history of proliferation, consequently receives cautious and indulgent handling. Iran has oil but, crucially, no bomb, and this has proved a dangerous combination in the Middle East. Oil-rich but non-nuclear states have repeatedly found American interests overriding Washington's responsibility as a major power.

Russia possesses oil, nuclear weapons and a formidable military. China has nuclear weapons, economic power and military depth. Washington is careful with both. Ukraine, having inherited a substantial Soviet nuclear arsenal, foolishly surrendered it and is now paying a painful price. None of this makes nuclear weapons desirable or guarantees security. But they plainly alter the diplomatic equation. A nuclear arsenal may not make a country invulnerable, but it makes attacking it more complicated. The lesson is crude: oil makes you valuable but vulnerable; an army makes you dangerous; nuclear weapons compel negotiations. And now, Hormuz seems as good an alternative.

R NARAYANAN | NAVI MUMBAI

The Pioneer
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The long history of India's changing relationship with nature

From the sacrifice of the Bishnois at Khejarli to the women of Chipko, India's environmental history is also a history of people defending the ecosystems on which their lives depend. The question now is whether development can be pursued without severing that enduring bond between people and nature



BKP SINHA | ARVIND KUMAR JHA



For centuries, India's landscapes have been shaped by communities whose lives and livelihoods have been closely connected to forests, rivers, mountains, wetlands, grasslands and wildlife. Forests, in particular, have sustained communities by providing food, fuel, fodder, fibres, fruits, medicinal plants, timber and water, while also supporting soils, water systems, local climates and biodiversity. For millions of forest-dependent communities, forests remain deeply woven into their livelihoods, traditions, customs and everyday lives.

Over generations, numerous communities across India developed customary practices to govern the use of forests, water sources, grazing lands and other common resources. Although these practices varied across regions, many were rooted in the understanding that human well-being is closely connected to the health of surrounding ecosystems. Sacred groves, community-protected forests, traditional water-harvesting systems and sustainable agricultural practices were among the ways in which communities conserved natural resources while meeting their livelihood needs.

This close relationship with nature also gave rise to a rich body of traditional ecological knowledge. Indigenous, tribal, and other forest-dependent communities developed a detailed understanding of local biodiversity through generations of observation and experience. They learned to identify plants and understand their seasonal availability, edible uses, medicinal properties, and other practical applications. Plants such as neem, tulsi, turmeric, ashwagandha, amla, giloy, and bael have long been used in various traditional medical systems and community practices. This accumulated knowledge has helped deepen our understanding of India's remarkable botanical diversity and continues to form an important part of the cultural knowledge of many communities.

Certain trees, including peepal, banyan, neem, and bael (Aegle marmelos), have acquired religious and cultural significance in different communities and regions of India. Rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, Godavari, and Kaveri have also become deeply embedded in cultural and religious traditions, with communities developing rituals and practices around these rivers.

Over time, however, this relationship underwent a profound transformation. Under British rule, forests were increasingly brought under state control and managed primarily for revenue generation and commercial timber production. The appointment of the German forester Dietrich Brandis as the first Inspector General of Forests in India in 1864 marked an important step towards establishing a centralised forest administration.

Environmental movements emerged as communities defended their close relationship with nature. The 1730 Khejarli sacrifice, when Amrita Devi Bishnoi and 363 Bishnois gave their lives protecting Khejri trees, remains a powerful example. Gandhi similarly advocated restraint, conservation and responsible consumption. The loss or restriction of customary access created economic hardship, disrupted traditional resource-use practices, and contributed to growing resentment against colonial forest policies. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the rapid expansion of the railway network created an enormous demand for timber, particularly for railway sleepers, bridges, buildings and other infrastructure, as well as for fuel for steam locomotives. To meet this growing demand, the colonial forest administration expanded timber extraction and brought increasingly large areas of forest under systematic management. In many regions, the colonial forest administration favoured economically valuable species and established monoculture plantations at the expense of diverse natural forests. Teak, deodar and sal, for example, were highly valued for their durability and suitability for shipbuilding, construction and other commercial uses. During the First and Second World Wars, pressure on forests intensified further as wartime requirements generated additional demand for timber, fuelwood and other forest products.

After Independence, India faced widespread poverty, food shortages, and significant economic challenges that required rapid development. Large dams, mining projects, steel plants, transport infrastructure, thermal power stations, and agricultural expansion became national priorities. While these projects contributed to economic growth, they also accelerated the diversion and degradation of forests. In many cases, forest-dependent communities were displaced, often without adequate rehabilitation or alternative sources of livelihood, while wildlife habitats became increasingly fragmented. The Green Revolution significantly improved agricultural production and food security, but intensive farming in some regions also contributed to groundwater depletion, soil degradation, and greater reliance on chemical inputs.

Although India has subsequently strengthened its forest laws and expanded afforestation programmes, challenges in implementing and enforcing these measures have limited their effectiveness in protecting natural forests. Moreover, newly planted forests cannot fully replace ancient natural forests that have evolved over centuries and continue to support complex ecosystems and rich biodiversity.

ALTHOUGH INDIA HAS SUBSEQUENTLY STRENGTHENED ITS FOREST LAWS AND EXPANDED AFFORESTATION PROGRAMMES, CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING AND ENFORCING THESE MEASURES HAVE LIMITED THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IN PROTECTING NATURAL FORESTS. MOREOVER, NEWLY PLANTED FORESTS CANNOT FULLY REPLACE ANCIENT NATURAL FORESTS THAT HAVE EVOLVED OVER CENTURIES AND CONTINUE TO SUPPORT COMPLEX ECOSYSTEMS AND RICH BIODIVERSITY.

The environmental movements that emerged across India were, in many ways, responses to the changing relationship between people and nature. Ecosystems have endured not only because of scientific knowledge or government policies, but also because ordinary people have regarded nature as integral to their lives and communities and shown extraordinary courage in protecting it. The Khejarli sacrifice of 1730, when Amrita Devi Bishnoi and 363 members of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan gave their lives resisting the felling of Khejri trees, remains a powerful example. A similar philosophy is reflected in Mahatma Gandhi's ideas, which emphasised restraint in the use of natural resources and cautioned against excessive consumption and unchecked industrialisation.

These concerns about unchecked development and the growing separation of human life from nature were also reflected in the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore. At Shantiniketan, Tagore sought to bring education closer to nature. In 1928, he introduced the Vriksharopana ceremony, encouraging people to celebrate trees and respect the environment.Decades later, these concerns found powerful expression through the Chipko Movement in the 1970s. Local villagers, particularly women, resisted commercial felling because their lives and livelihoods depended on forests. Activists such as Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna helped mobilise support, while Gaura Devi and the women of Reni village became prominent figures. The movement highlighted the ecological and social importance of Himalayan forests and contributed to the government's 1980 decision to impose a fifteen-year ban on commercial green felling in the Himalayan forests of Uttar Pradesh.

The struggle to protect nature, however, did not end with these movements. It continues today, as major development projects and resource extraction put pressure on India's remaining natural ecosystems. The proposed Great Nicobar Island infrastructure project, coal mining in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo forests, and the Ken-Betwa river-linking project, which involves the submergence of forest areas in and around Panna Tiger Reserve, are a few examples of this continuing struggle. The true measure of development must therefore go beyond economic gains to account for forests lost, soils degraded, water depleted, and biodiversity diminished — costs that are ultimately borne by society and future generations.

If modern governance is to honour the legacy of those who gave their lives to protect nature, it must move beyond passive bureaucracy towards active stewardship - safeguarding native ecosystems, meaningfully involving tribal and forest-dependent communities and respecting their rights. This requires the same moral courage shown by earlier generations who stood in the path of the axe to protect their forests, so that India's natural landscapes can be safeguarded for future generations.

The writers are Former PCCFs, UP and Maharashtra

Modi's I-Day speeches: Shaping India's future



PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH

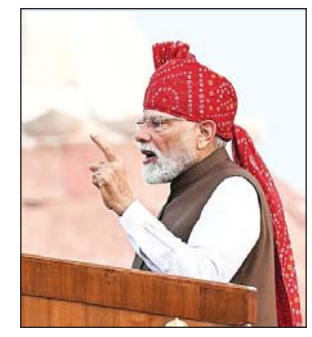
Each year on August 15, the Prime Minister of India addresses the nation from the Red Fort on the country's goals. Since 2014, Narendra Modi has given 13 Independence Day speeches from this historic site.

In the beginning, these speeches focused on basic dignity. Over the years, they laid out a plan for India's growth up to 2047. Modi's speeches have launched programs to reform finance, improve sanitation, expand insurance for people in poverty, provide water and electricity, and now help young people prepare for the age of artificial intelligence.

The goal was clear: move from financial exclusion to empowerment. In 2014, when Modi became "Pradhan Sevak," he chose not to use a bulletproof shield and instead focused on issues such as sanitation, financial inclusion, and manufacturing. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) aimed to give every household a bank account. The Swachh Bharat Mission worked to end open defecation. Make in India encouraged global investment in local manufacturing, while the Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana and the Housing for All program completed the first round of reforms.

These programs addressed long-standing poverty issues. By 2026, there were over 580 million Jan Dhan accounts with more than three trillion rupees in deposits. Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) sent welfare funds straight to people's bank accounts.

The Swachh Bharat Mission resulted in the construction of over 120 million household toilets, and India was declared open-defecation-free. Make in India delivered strong results: electronics manufacturing grew nearly sevenfold, mobile phone production increased 35-fold, and defence production also rose. The PM Awas Yojana (PMAY) led to the construction of millions of permanent homes. Electricity reached villages for the first time. In 2015, Modi's speech introduced Startup India and Stand Up India to support young entrepreneurs, especially women and people from Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The One Rank One Pension (OROP) scheme met a long-standing demand from the armed forces and brought pension equality. India now has over 250,000 startups, creating millions of jobs and making the country the world's third-largest startup hub. The focus then shifted to healthcare and space. Ayushman Bharat gave each family health coverage worth 500,000 rupees, and the Gaganyaan mission aimed to send an Indian astronaut to space by 2022. More than 450 million Ayushman cards have been issued, helping millions get free medical care. Although the Gaganyaan schedule changed, by 2026, important progress had been made with human-rated systems and uncrewed missions. In 2019, Modi's speech focused on making water more accessible and improving military coordination. The Jal Jeevan Mission promised to bring working tap water to every rural home, increasing coverage from 17 per cent to over 81 per cent and reaching more than 158 million homes by early 2026. Creating the Chief of Defence Staff role helped the armed services work together more effectively. The COVID pandemic years were challenging. In 2020, Modi launched the National Digital Health Mission and stressed Atmanirbhar Bharat, or self-reliant India. In 2021, the Gati Shakti plan was launched as a major infrastructure project worth 100 trillion rupees, alongside the National Hydrogen Mission. Roads, railways, and logistics grew quickly, and renewable energy expanded rapidly.



India's renewable energy capacity grew from 76.38 GW in 2014 to 288.58 GW by June 2026, nearly fourfold. Solar power saw the biggest increase, rising from about 2.8 GW to 162.15 GW, then to around 164.6 GW. Wind power went from about 21 GW to 57.44 GW. Hydropower reached 57.24 GW, and bio-power was at 11.75 GW. By July 2026, non-fossil fuel sources made up over 300 GW, or more than 54 per cent of all installed power capacity. Clean energy output more than doubled, from 191 billion units in 2014-15 to nearly 478 billion units in 2025-26.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the sector reached 45.72 billion dollars, and domestic institutions invested 12.32 lakh crore rupees. From 2022, the focus moved to long-term goals for 2047. The Panch Pran pledges called for a developed India free from colonial mindsets. In 2023, Modi set a goal to create two crore "Lakhpati Didis." By 2026, more than 20 million women earned over 100,000 rupees a year through self-help groups. In 2024, the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana helped families install rooftop solar panels by giving up to 80,000 rupees per household. The program reached over 5 million households, adding almost 15 GW of rooftop solar capacity. Nearly 1.9 million families now pay nothing for electricity, and many sell extra power to earn more. Adding 75,000 medical seats over five years began to address the doctor shortage. In 2025, Modi announced the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana, a one-trillion-rupee plan to create 35 million jobs. Mission Sudarshan Chakra set a 2035 deadline for a new air-defence system. India also made progress in producing its own semiconductors, with the first homegrown chips reaching the market. GST reforms were announced as a Diwali gift.

In 2026, on the 80th Independence Day and during his thirteenth consecutive speech, Modi introduced 'Sapta Dhara ', or seven pillars of national strength: manufacturing, agriculture and food processing, technology and innovation, Gati Shakti, defence, the green and blue economy, and soft power. He announced AI skill training for ten million young people in a year, free online coaching for competitive exams, plans for seven or eight new semiconductor plants, a 100 GW nuclear energy goal by 2047 with five new reactors this decade, a national sports talent search for children aged five to fifteen, a modern civil-defence network, and a proposal for 33 per cent women's reservation. Modi pointed out the increase in solar capacity from 2 GW to 160 GW and the Surya Ghar program reaching five million homes. These changes are clear and measurable. Financial inclusion reached even the most remote areas. Better sanitation improved people's dignity. Tap water and solar power became common. Health coverage protected those most at risk. Startups and self-help groups created jobs. Infrastructure and defence production grew significantly. India's digital systems became models for the world. Renewable energy grew fourfold, solar power increased 57-fold, and rooftop solar changed how households use energy, making energy security possible.

Over thirteen Independence Day speeches from the Red Fort, Modi used the event to launch new policies. Early speeches focused on basic needs, while later ones highlighted self-reliance, technology, and making the most of India's young people. The announced initiatives have promoted financial inclusion. They have improved sanitation, expanded insurance, and increased access to electricity. Now, these efforts are helping the next generation prepare for a future shaped by artificial intelligence. India is no longer just trying to catch up.

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Gaumutra in perspective: Traditional knowledge and modern science stand together



JB GUPTA

Few subjects in India's traditional healthcare evoke as much discussion as Gaumutra. Revered in Ayurveda, questioned in public discourse, and increasingly examined by modern science, it represents a unique intersection of traditional knowledge, biomedical research, socio-cultural debate and public policy. The challenge today is to approach the subject not through ideology, but through objective evidence.

The debate surrounding Gaumutra extends far beyond traditional medicine. It now encompasses scientific inquiry, public health, and political discourse. Cow-derived dairy products are globally accepted as a rich source of nutrition. Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine, has used cow-derived formulations for centuries as medicines. However, other than cow milk, public opinion often oscillates between unquestioning reverence and outright dismissal of these cow-derived therapeutic products. Neither extreme does justice to the subject. An objective assessment requires examining Gaumutra within its Ayurvedic context, alongside modern scientific evidence and broader insights from other bio-derived therapeutics. Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya, classify Gaumutra among the Ashta Mutra, or eight medicinal animal urines. Ayurvedic pharmacology describes it as possessing *Katu* (pungent) and *Tikta* (bitter) tastes, *Ushna* (warming) *potency* and *Tikshna* (penetrating) properties.

Traditionally, Gaumutra has been prescribed to stimulate digestive fire (Deepana), improve metabolism (Pachana), support the management of skin disorders (Kushtha and Twak Roga), and address conditions such as *Medoroga*, *Shotha* and *Udara Roga*. It is also recognised as a Yogavahi, a catalytic medium believed to enhance the absorption and therapeutic efficacy of herbal, mineral and metallic preparations used in Ayurveda.

Equally important is the dosage form in which it is administered. Classical Ayurveda rarely recommends the consumption of raw, untreated cow urine. Instead, it emphasises Gaumutra Ark, a purified distillate obtained through controlled vaporisation and condensation, or its use in traditional formulations such as Panchagavya, which combines cow milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung in specific proportions. Processing and formulation have always remained integral to Ayurvedic therapeutics.

Scientific interest in Gaumutra has grown steadily over the past two decades. Laboratory analyses have identified a range of naturally occurring constituents, including urea, uric acid, allantoin, hippuric acid, phenolic acids such as gallic, caffeic, ferulic and salicylic acids, essential minerals including calcium, magnesium, potassium, sodium and phosphates, as well as enzymes. These findings have encouraged researchers to investigate their possible biological significance.



One of the most significant developments is research on 'Cow Urine Distillate (CUD)', also known as Go-Ark, as a potential bioenhancer. Research undertaken by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), in collaboration with the Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CIMAP), resulted in two U.S. patents in 2002 and 2005 relating to the use of CUD for enhancing the effectiveness of certain antibiotics and anticancer drugs. Studies cited in the literature suggest that CUD may improve the absorption of antibiotics such as rifampicin and ampicillin, as well as anticancer drugs including paclitaxel, thereby enhancing their efficacy.

Published laboratory studies have reported antioxidant activity through free-radical scavenging, while other investigations have demonstrated antibacterial and antifungal effects against several microorganisms, such as Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, Klebsiella species, Candida albicans, etc., under controlled laboratory conditions. These observations provide scientific leads for further investigation into the biological properties of Gaumutra and its distilled preparations.

Viewed in isolation, Gaumutra often appears exceptional. However, modern pharmacology has long relied on biologically derived materials for developing life-saving medicines.

Human urine has provided compounds such as urokinase and menotropins. Gila monster saliva led to the development of Exendin-4 for Type 2 diabetes. Hirudin from leech saliva, peptides from Jararaca viper venom, heparin, insulin and conjugated estrogens demonstrate the therapeutic potential of biological materials.

The distinguishing factor has never been the biological source itself, but the rigorous scientific process through which active molecules are isolated, characterised, standardised, tested for safety and evaluated through clinical trials.

The discussion gained renewed public attention in January 2025 when V Kamakoti, Director of IIT Madras, referred to the traditional medicinal uses of Gaumutra during a public address, citing its reported antibacterial, antifungal and digestive properties.

The remarks triggered immediate debate. Medical associations cautioned against promoting the consumption of unprocessed cow urine because of the potential risks of zoonotic infections and other health concerns. At the same time, supporters argued that traditional knowledge systems deserve scientific investigation rather than outright dismissal. The issue resurfaced after Prof. Kamakoti received the Padma Shri in 2026, with discussions once again extending beyond science into the broader realm of public discourse.

The continuing debate over Gaumutra reflects differences in scientific interpretation, public perception, cultural identity and political narratives. Exaggerated claims without sufficient evidence can undermine scientific credibility, while blanket rejection of traditional formulations risks overlooking potentially valuable avenues of investigation.

Another important issue concerns methodology. Scientific scepticism often arises from advocacy of raw, unprocessed cow urine rather than standardised preparations. Concerns regarding microbial contamination and zoonotic infections reinforce the need to distinguish between raw biological material and purified formulations such as Gaumutra Ark.

Equally important is the evidence gap. While laboratory findings are encouraging, large-scale, well-designed human clinical trials remain limited. Bridging this gap requires rigorous chemical profiling, safety evaluation, pharmacological studies, standardised manufacturing and robust clinical trials.

The discussion on Gaumutra should neither be driven by unquestioning belief nor automatic dismissal. Traditional knowledge and modern science need not stand in opposition. Moving beyond political rhetoric and focusing on evidence-based investigation offers the most credible path forward. Gaumutra Ark should be evaluated through rigorous scientific standards to establish its safety, efficacy and clinical relevance.

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

Authority Tested

India's constitutional institutions are accustomed to being questioned by politicians, lawyers, activists and journalists. What should concern them more is when the questioning comes from the people being trained to inherit those institutions. That is what makes the controversy involving students of Nalsar University of Law and the National Law School of India University unusually significant. Their objection to the Chief Justice of India, Justice Surya Kant, being invited to their convocations is not merely a dispute over a ceremonial guest. It is a contest over what constitutional authority should mean to a generation entering the legal profession.

The students' concerns have emerged from a sequence of controversies surrounding remarks attributed to the CJI and the Supreme Court's handling of questions relating to the police response to the Cockroach Janta Party protests. Justice Kant has disputed or clarified some of the reported interpretations. Those distinctions are important. Allegations about judicial conduct should not become established facts merely because they circulate widely.

But constitutional legitimacy involves more than establishing what was literally said. Judges, particularly the Chief Justice of India, occupy offices in which language carries extraordinary weight. A casual remark from an ordinary citizen may disappear into the news cycle. A remark attributed to the head of the judiciary can acquire a significance far beyond its immediate context. That is why the students' response deserves to be taken seriously even where their interpretation of particular events may be contested.

More troubling was the intervention of the Bar Council of India. Its initial threat to withhold enrolment from Nalsar graduates crossed a line that should be obvious in any constitutional democracy. Professional regulation is one thing; seeking to discipline an entire graduating cohort over a disagreement concerning a ceremonial invitation is quite another. The subsequent withdrawal of the threat and apology were welcome, but the episode exposed how quickly institutional authority can become coercive when confronted with dissent. Justice Kant was right to say that students have a right to protest. But that principle must extend beyond this particular dispute. Institutional stature cannot create an obligation among citizens to display personal deference.

There is a deeper generational shift underway. Young Indians increasingly judge institutions less by inherited prestige and more by whether those institutions appear to live up to the values they profess. The judiciary is not exempt from that scrutiny. Indeed, because it is the ultimate constitutional arbiter, it arguably faces a higher standard. The students are therefore asking a question larger than who should hand them their degrees: what kind of authority do they want to inherit?

The answer should not frighten the judiciary. A constitutional institution that cannot withstand scepticism from its future lawyers is already weaker than it appears. A judiciary confident in its constitutional role should have little difficulty allowing its youngest critics to speak ~ and then answering them with the one currency that ultimately matters: reason.

The Khan Question

The Pakistan Supreme Court's order to move Imran Khan from prison to a hospital is about much more than the health of a former prime minister. It raises a larger question about whether Pakistan's institutions can uphold basic constitutional obligations when the prisoner involved remains one of the country's most powerful political symbols. Khan has been behind bars since 2023, convicted in cases he says were designed to remove him from politics. His supporters have repeatedly alleged that his treatment in custody has been punitive.

The state, for its part, has insisted that he is being treated according to law. The latest intervention suggests that Pakistan's highest court is not prepared to leave the question of his medical care entirely to prison authorities. That distinction matters. A court ordering hospitalisation does not establish that Khan has been deliberately deprived of medical treatment. Nor does it invalidate the convictions against him. But it does indicate that the safeguards surrounding his health have become sufficiently contentious for judicial intervention to be considered necessary.

The concern is particularly serious because the dispute involves his eyesight. Khan's lawyers have alleged severe deterioration in his right eye and inadequate access to specialist treatment. Medical assessments have produced more complicated findings, including reports of improvement. The conflicting claims make one thing clear: a politically neutral, specialist medical assessment is essential. The answer cannot be determined by either Khan's political camp or government officials. That is precisely why the Supreme Court's intervention is important. A prisoner does not surrender his right to humane treatment by losing his political freedom. If anything, custody increases the state's responsibility because the prisoner cannot independently arrange his own medical care. This principle must apply to Khan irrespective of whether one regards him as a victim of political persecution or as a politician properly held accountable by the courts.

The order also provides for weekly family meetings and telephone contact with his sons. That is a reminder that imprisonment is a restriction of liberty, not a licence for unnecessary isolation. Restrictions may be justified on security grounds, but they should be proportionate, transparent and subject to scrutiny.

There is an additional irony. Khan's supporters have been warned against turning his hospitalisation into a political gathering. That is a reasonable precaution. A hospital should not become another stage for confrontation between the state and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. But neither should security concerns become an excuse for keeping a politically inconvenient prisoner beyond meaningful public and judicial scrutiny.

The government's response will now matter enormously. If it accepts the principle of independent medical supervision while contesting only practical details, the dispute can remain institutional. If it attempts to dilute the court's intervention, the issue will become larger: whether Pakistan's judiciary can impose meaningful limits on executive power in a case involving the country's most consequential political prisoner. The strongest state is not the one that can imprison its most formidable opponent. It is the one that can demonstrate that the law operates above politics.

Price of Irreverence

Youngsters giving vent to their frustration at Jantar Mantar showed a deeper malaise, a loss of culture, resorting to vulgarity and abuse despite having the advantage of education, often English-medium education, a greatly prized asset. What has happened to our Sanskriti, our Sanskars? Indians learn how to respect those around them from an early age; our grandparents, parents and teachers are God-like divine personalities whose blessings adorn our lives



On 11 June 2018 the distinguished Hollywood celebrity-star Robert de Niro, from the stage of New York's Radio City Music Hall, said "I am gonna say one thing, F**k Trump". De Niro won a standing ovation for his speech, expressing his anger, frustration and irreverence at how President Donald Trump was shaping American politics. The question is: should de Niro have faced charges of indulging in hate speech? Was he not legitimizing the power of abuse and abusive language? It still hits like a sledge-hammer: the focused brutal verbal assault on the highest office of the United States of America.

Politics as practised by the US makes it probably one of the most hated countries, yet it remains the most preferred country for immigrants across the world. It is a huge paradox of our times: we love and hate the USA with equal passion.

President Trump is no saint; his utterances often violate every principle of decency, sensitivity and empathy as a public speaker. De Niro, on the other hand, used his stature as a global celebrity to abuse the President; it was debasing, devaluing the constitutional office Trump holds.

There are conventions and guidelines laid down by the United Nations on hate speech. When Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, he explained hate speech has been a precursor to atrocity crimes, including genocide, from Rwanda to Bosnia to Cambodia. "Hate speech is in itself an attack on tolerance, inclusion, diversity and the very essence of our human rights norms and principles. More broadly, it undermines social cohesion, erodes shared values, and can lay the foundation for violence, setting back the cause of peace, stability, sustainable development and the fulfilment of human rights for all," he said. Abusive language is hate speech; and hate speech leads to violence: the equation is clear, crystal clear.

The June-July protests in Delhi on Jantar Mantar by thousands of students-young professionals raise similar questions of propriety and decorum; what are the legal implications of this protest, even though it was drawing inspiration from Gandhian satyagraha? Delhi protestors amply demonstrated the power of abuse and irreverence in public, on the streets, captured it through Smartphones with the reels available on Internet.

Like the venerable silver-haired de Niro in the promised land of America, the young protestors were unafraid to use vulgar speech, expressing what was on their mind, and the torrent of their speeches was often loaded with filthy abuse directed towards the powers-that-be, the State authorities and the Prime Minister himself.

In fact, no one was spared as the self-proclaimed Cockroaches used popular humour, cheap jokes, high poetry and literary slogans to stir an entire nation and its media networks. It was a dirty dance of democracy as conducted by the young citizenry who were first-time voters, maybe for the ruling party whom they were now targeting and belittling through their sloganeering.

Readers are aware the Jantar Mantar protests were triggered from the most unexpected quarters: the high office of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Mr Justice Surya Kant.

In a public speech he described the teeming population of youth as 'cockroaches', unable to contribute anything meaningful to Viksit Bharat. It was a telling comment coming from a man who worked his way up the judiciary. His earthy vocabulary inspired the CJP ~ the Cockroach Janata Party, who have now, in turn, given mainstream national politics a new vocabulary and grammar of street democracy.

The protests have demonstrated the power of 'Vak' or 'speech' which our ancient Rishis declared has divine and creative powers. 'Vak' is directly associated with Ma Saraswati, our Goddess of Learning, Wisdom and Eloquence. No wonder the vast majority of those who braved the July heat and humidity at Jantar Mantar were young students, often very young ones straight from school, who otherwise would be chanting prayers devoted to Ma Saraswati for better grades and a place in institutions of higher learning.

From prayers to abuse and ridicule in public places is a long journey indeed; youngsters giving vent to their frustration at Jantar Mantar showed a deeper malaise, a loss of culture, resorting to vulgarity and abuse despite having the advantage of education, often English-medium education, a greatly prized asset.

What has happened to our Sanskriti, our Sanskars? Indians learn how to respect those around them from an early age; our grandparents, parents and teachers are God-like divine personalities whose blessings adorn our lives. Cut to Javed Akhtar, one of India's celebrated lyricist-poet-scriptwriters. In September 2023 at a conference in Roorkee commemorating '100 Years of Shailendra' (another great lyricist-poet) Akhtar questioned, "How do ordinary people learn about history, philosophy or the meaning of life?" His answer: through simple evocative lyrics of songs from Hindi films, hugely popular since the 1930s. Shailendra, Javed Akhtar said, contributed immensely to this understanding of the world, his lyrics were immortal Sanskari lessons ~ "Kisi ki muskurahaton pe ho nisaar / Kisika dard mil sake to le udhaar / Kisike vaaste ho tere dil mein pyaar / Jeena isi ka naam hai". In four lines, Shailendra was able to give ordinary people ~ folks who travelled on buses, did routine jobs to come back home to urban slums ~ the teachings of generations of philosophers and Bhakti saints.



RAJU MANSUKHANI

The writer is a researcher-author on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

A visibly-moved Akhtar shared experiences with Shailendra, his intellectual prowess, his understanding of poetry as a means to educate and elevate listeners. An entire generation of lyricists-poets-writers ~ like Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nissar Akhtar, Hasrat Jaipuri, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Rahi Masoom Raza, Anand Bakshi to name a few ~ shared this passion.

The poets provided Indians with lyrics they could relate to, songs that they could sing along, poetry that became part of their lives. It was as if the divine blessings of Ma Saraswati were being transmitted, through transistors-radios and the silver screen, with powerful writings of these maestros. It was their power to love, care and show sensitivity towards the simplest things of life. Rarely, if ever, was there any shade of violence, irreverence or hate speech in their works.

Back to Jantar Mantar, the heady days of July 2026 when expletives and the horribly crude language of protestors was in stark contrast with Gandhian Satyagraha at the centre-stage of protest. Chants of Jai Bhim! Lal Salaam!, along with recitations from Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Dushyant Kumar made for a melange of audio messages. Protestors with scant respect for the powers-that-be spoke against inequality and skewed development in metro-cities and rural areas, high inflation and rising unemployment; they had clarity on how monopoly capitalism over the last 30 years had provided little or no dignity in their lives. Billionaires were ridiculed, reduced to mockery, their reputations in tatters. The ever-so-popular Dushyant Kumar wrote: Ho gayee hai peer parvat-si pighalni chahiye / Iss Himalaya se koi Ganga nikalni chahiye. How would the poet have reacted if he knew the allegorical Ganga could be laden with abusive language?

Undoubtedly this filthy, funny and irreverent torrent can be traced to cinema, songs and scripts of the burgeoning Indian film industry, now given a tremendous boost by OTT platforms streaming on Smartphones. Just as Javed Akhtar spoke about uplifting knowledge and morality of people through the richness of songs, stories, and Sanskars, OTT platforms and their films are accomplishing the complete opposite today, with language that is horrendously abusive in the name of entertainment; in fact, so abusive that it seems to be shaping the reality on our streets today.

Young adults, and teenagers, are privy to this creative output where dollops of abuses are a substitute for meaningful dialogue. There is a clear connect, a bridge between this current crop of trend-setting OTT films-serials and the crude language used by young protestors. Youngsters are absorbing what they are seeing and hearing, and then repeating and replicating the vulgarity with no-holds-barred.

Every August brings to the fore the galaxy of iconic thinkers, leaders, and freedom fighters: from Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Pt Madan Mohan Malaviya, Gurudev Tagore, Chittaranjan Das, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose.

Language was sacred for each one of them; character-building at every level of education was sacrosanct; nation-building was the purpose and goal for education. Each one drew upon the collective wisdom and native intelligence of our ancient land. Ahimsa or non-violence was 'paramo dharmah', the highest form of dharma for them. It is time to reclaim the defining Sanskars that have been lost in this hate-filled environment in Bharatvarsha.

The Kathmandu Post

Building a tax system for trust, investment and prosperity

The 2026-27 fiscal budget deserves appreciation for one important reason. Amid competing fiscal pressures and slowing economic activity, it has committed to launching a second generation of tax reforms. The timing could not be more appropriate. Nepal's tax system has reached a stage where incremental changes are no longer sufficient. What is now required is a comprehensive reform agenda that restores public trust, promotes investment, broadens the tax base, and prepares the country for a rapidly changing economy.

But despite all the promise and hype around tax reforms with the change in government, there are signals of policy flip-flops, unpredictability, loss of trust, and even backsliding of earlier reforms. This is especially true with the probability of introducing multiple Value Added Tax (VAT) rates (for example, a different rate of 5 percent on electricity) and losing the fairness and equity—both horizontal and vertical—elements in the new tax tariffs or administrative measures. Moreover, the government has introduced several new tax concessions and exemptions (as summarised in sections 68 and 73 of the Budget Speech 2083–84) despite the promise of comprehensive application of the tax regime to broaden the tax base.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Nepal is not starting from scratch. The country has already witnessed the first generation of tax reforms in the 1990s. The reforms introduced in that period had three landmark departures from the earlier tax regime. First, self-assessment in income taxation shifted the relationship between taxpayers and the tax administration from official determination to voluntary compliance. Second, the introduction of a single-rate VAT, an input tax credit mechanism, and a built-in self-policing system created one of the most efficient indirect tax structures. Third, self-declaration in customs and excise moved tax administration away from excessive official discretion towards greater trust in taxpayers.

These reforms were guided by a simple philosophy: lower tax rates, a broader tax base, and greater tax equity. Moderate, universally applied tax rates were expected to encourage compliance, reduce tax evasion, and generate higher revenues without discouraging investment and economic growth. For many years, this framework served Nepal well. The challenge today is not that the original reforms were flawed, but that their underlying principles have gradually been diluted. Over the years, substantive tax laws have increasingly been amended through annual finance acts. Frequent policy changes have depleted trust in the tax system by introducing uncertainty and unpredictability, and have made long-term business and investment decisions difficult. Equally concerning has been the proliferation of tax exemptions and concessions. Every exemption narrows the tax base, creates opportunities for leakage, and often rewards influence rather than genuine economic merit.

At the same time, tax procedures have failed to modernise to meet the needs of a digital economy. Compliance remains costly and cumbersome. Excessive paperwork, multiple reporting requirements, and outdated administrative practices increase the cost of doing business.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Afghan women

Sir, Apropos "Deal with reality", the Taliban government when it came into power, promised to be moderate towards women. But it has imposed policies that curtail women's rights, including stricter dress codes, banning higher education for girls, depriving employment opportunities to women, and restricting freedom of movement in public places.

And to make matters worse, it has legalized domestic violence against women by allowing husbands to physically punish their wives and children as long as it does not cause broken bones or open wounds.

Daily life remains challenging and living conditions for all Afghans have deteriorated. Sadly the international community and the UN have remained mute spectators. It is good that India is not attempting to shape Afghanistan through large-scale political reconstruction.

Instead it is pursuing a flexible policy based on humanitarian diplomacy and strategic connectivity. India should remain a healthcare provider, development actor and diplomatic counterweight.

Yours, etc., Bal Govind,
Noida, 19 August.

Protect Afghans

Sir, Apropos "Deal with reality", published today, Afghanistan presents a difficult choice for the international community.

Isolation has not restored democracy, yet unconditional engagement could be interpreted as acceptance of policies that deny basic rights, particularly to women and girls. A practical approach would therefore combine limited diplomatic engagement with clear conditions.

Humanitarian assistance should reach ordinary Afghans directly and remain insulated from political control. At the same time, channels for dialogue should be maintained on terrorism, migration, trade and regional security. Any gradual diplomatic or economic opening should be linked to measurable improvements in education, employment and humanitarian access.

India and other regional countries can contribute constructively through humanitarian support and careful diplomacy.

The objective should not be to legitimise the Taliban, but to protect Afghans while encouraging a more responsible and inclusive political order.

Yours, etc., S M Jeeva,
Chennai, 19 August.

Controlled politics in the meme age

YATEESH SRIVASTAVA

For more than two decades, Narendra Modi has cultivated an image of the shrewd, patient politician, one who prefers calibrated moves to unnecessary risk, delivered with all the power of his theatrical oratory behind them.

The past month has tested that reputation. A government that long projected unshakeable control over the narrative, with a track record of wearing down street protests by ignoring them or labelling them anti-national, found itself reacting, then over-correcting, then inventing a fresh ideological label that promptly became a badge of honour.

The sequence began with genuine student fury. Paper leaks in high-stakes competitive examinations, including NEET, forced millions to retake the tests and were linked to suicides. This fused with deeper grievances over unemployment and an education system widely seen as extractive. What began as online satire, the Cockroach Janta Party, born from a Chief Justice's remark comparing some unemployed youth to cockroaches, grew into sustained protests at Delhi's Jantar Mantar and a July 20 attempt to march towards Parliament.

Police met the march with tear gas and batons. Independent accounts and human-rights observers documented injuries among protesters and alleged excessive force; the police reported injuries to their own personnel and alleged violence by demonstrators. The images travelled faster than any official statement. Within days, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned, the first cabinet-level exit under sustained public pressure in Mr Modi's tenure, accompanied by concessions on exam reforms and fast-track courts, and the withdrawal of cases against protesters, a matter that has now reached the Supreme Court of the country.

The government's next move was outreach. Late-night Instagram Reels, selfie angles, and the repeated address "friends". The intention was clear: reclaim the youth conversation on platforms Gen Z actually inhabits, project empathy, and shift the narrative from anger to accessibility. The reception was merciless. Memes dissected the camera angle, mocked the sudden familiarity, and turned "we're not friends" into a collective retort. A communication style that had once dominated social media was, for the first time, being edited and ridiculed by the very audience it sought to reach.

Then came the Independence Day speech from the Red Fort. Mr Modi claimed near-success against armed Naxalism and warned that "***dimaagi*** naxals", those with a Maoist mindset, remained. He said they had once sat in power corridors and government committees and were still seeking opportunities to promote violence and anarchy. Citizens must identify and isolate them so that the nation's youth could be steered into the mainstream of development.

The term was not coined in a vacuum. It continues a longer series of labels, "urban naxals," "***tukde-tukde gang***," and "***andolanjeevis***", that distinguish legitimate criticism from what the ruling establishment frames as ideological subversion. After declaring progress against the armed phase of Left-wing extremism, the speech reframed the residual threat as intellectual. In BJP circles, the formulation has also been linked, more or less explicitly, to the presence of Left student organisations during the recent protests.

What did the Prime Minister hope to achieve? On the protests themselves, the initial hard line aligned with a long-standing preference for containing street pressure and refusing to let ministers appear answerable to crowds. The eventual concession looked like



damage limitation once the scale and virality became undeniable. The Instagram pivot was an attempt to bridge the generational gap on the terrain that Gen Z controls. The "***dimaagi*** naxal" framing served multiple purposes: signalling continued vigilance after a claimed security success, consolidating the base around a familiar threat narrative, and implicitly re-characterising parts of the student unrest as more dangerous than a simple grievance.

The interpretations diverged sharply. Supporters and the government insist the label is not about curiosity or questioning but about those who support Maoists, reject the Constitution, stand with separatists, or advocate severing the North-East. Union Minister Kiren Rijiju offered precisely this three-point clarification. From this vantage point, the term is preventive politics, isolating residual ideology before it can again influence institutions or romanticise disruption.

Critics, including senior opposition figures who promptly declared themselves "proud to be ***dimaagi*** naxals," read it as the latest iteration of a strategy that pathologises inconvenient thought. "***Dimaagi***" reads as an attack on the questioning mind itself. Coming immediately after a rare ministerial resignation and a botched outreach exercise, the phrase appeared to many as an attempt to regain narrative control by recasting the same demographic as a potential ideological problem. Within a day, a satirical ***Dimagi*** Naxal Party account had appeared and gathered hundreds of thousands of followers, treating the insult as an invitation.

The impact on Mr Modi's image is real but uneven. The aura of near-total control over optics and street politics has visibly been dented among urban and online youth. For the first time in years, strongman messaging met sustained, platform-native irony and lost. Commentary has noted a shift in perception: the once-unassailable figure is beginning to look, to a section of Gen Z, more like a figure from a previous media age. Yet core support, organisational depth and delivery-focused politics remain formidable. Mixed by-election signals suggest the damage is so far more reputational than electoral.

What the episode illuminates is a deeper tension. Mr Modi's political method has excelled at managing older media ecosystems and hierarchical mobilisation. Gen Z's fluency with rapid satire, label-flipping and horizontal communication operates under different rules. A term coined to isolate can, in this environment, become a badge. An outreach designed to humanise can become comedy. A security narrative that once landed cleanly can be read as an attempt to police thought.

The shrewd politician has not suddenly become clumsy. He has encountered a demographic and a communicative environment that reward different skills. Whether the response is further tightening of ideological framing or a more serious reckoning with the substance of youth grievance will determine whether the recent missteps remain a temporary awkwardness or mark the beginning of a longer erosion of narrative dominance. Measured steps work until the ground itself begins to shake.

The writer is a Mumbai-based consultant.

How ready are we for an earthquake?

SRINIVAS MADHAV

The Earth appears not to be in a great mood lately.The past six months have offered a harsh reminder of how unpredictable the planet can be. Since April, a deadly chain of earthquakes has struck worldwide. It started with 12 people dying in Afghanistan in April, followed by a quake in the Philippines in June that killed at least 81 people. Then a massive double-quake struck Venezuela, leaving more than 6,000 dead. In July, Japan lost 39 lives. In August, earthquakes killed about 290 in Colombia and at least 51 in Indonesia, with the tolls still rising.

India is not immune to this threat.The 2001 Bhuj earthquake in Kutch killed over 13,800 people, and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake claimed over 1,350 lives. Large swathes of the country, particularly the Himalayan region, the North-East, and Kutch, remain at very high risk for major seismic events.

During earthquakes, weak buildings can become death traps. The government must immediately order strict, mandatory safety audits for all existing public buildings, hospitals, schools, and crowded apartment blocks, while ensuring that new construction complies with crucial seismic codes like IS 1893. These results must be shared transparently, and vulnerable structures must be retrofitted.

Japan's 1981 New Seismic Design Code introduced stricter earthquake-safety standards. Buildings had to withstand moderate earthquakes with limited damage and avoid collapse during stronger ones. The 1995 Kobe earthquake demonstrated the difference: 97 per cent of collapsed buildings had been built before 1981. Japan has also retrofitted old buildings by strengthening foundations and walls or installing seismic damping systems.

Turkey has run large-scale retrofitting programmes in Istanbul, including schools, hospitals and other public buildings. Under its Istanbul Seismic Risk Mitigation and Emergency Preparedness Project, more than 1,200 public buildings have been retrofitted or reconstructed.

For India, the lesson is simple: new buildings must meet strict seismic standards, while older buildings must be audited and retrofitted.

Safe infrastructure is only half the battle. True safety depends on ready, aware citizens, as first responders are usually ordinary people nearby. Regular drills should make the following steps as familiar as a fire drill:

Drop: Get onto hands and knees to avoid being thrown down and crawl if necessary.

Cover: Protect the head and neck; get under a sturdy table or desk, or move to an interior wall away from windows, glass and falling objects.

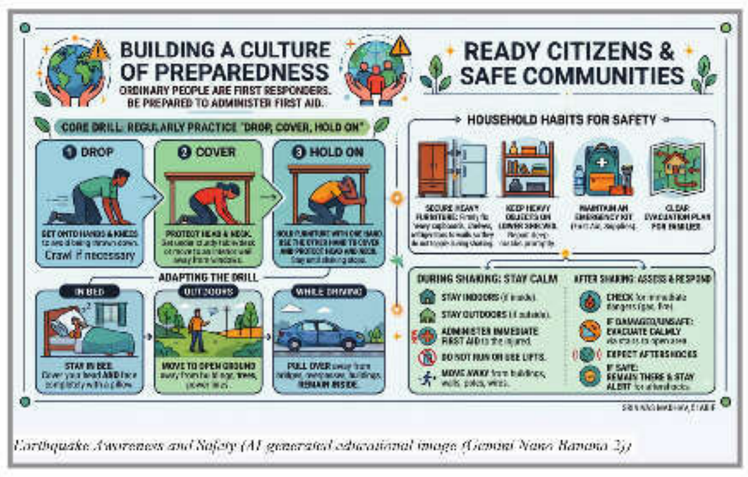
Hold on: Stay until shaking stops, holding furniture if it shifts while continuing to shield the head and neck.

These rules adapt to different environments: in bed, stay there and cover with a pillow; outdoors, move to open ground away from buildings, trees and power lines; while driving, pull over away from bridges, overpasses and buildings and remain inside. Expect aftershocks and repeat the drill.

Irrespective of the prospect of an earthquake strike, Indian households should cultivate the habit of firmly fixing heavy cupboards, shelves and appliances to walls so they do not topple during shaking.Heavy objects should be kept on lower shelves, and deep cracks should be repaired promptly. Families should also maintain an emergency kit and a clear evacuation plan.

During shaking, stay calm: indoors, stay indoors; outdoors, stay outdoors. Do not run or use lifts while the ground is shaking. Avoid windows, mirrors and falling objects. Move away from buildings, walls, poles and wires. In vehicles, stop safely and remain inside. Once the shaking stops, check for immediate dangers. If the building is damaged or unsafe, evacuate calmly using the stairs, not lifts, and move to a safe open area away from buildings, walls, poles and wires.If the building is safe, remain there and stay alert for aftershocks.

Early warning systems deserve a prominent place in this strategy.



Earthquake Awareness and Safety (AI generated educational image (Gemini Nano Banana 2))

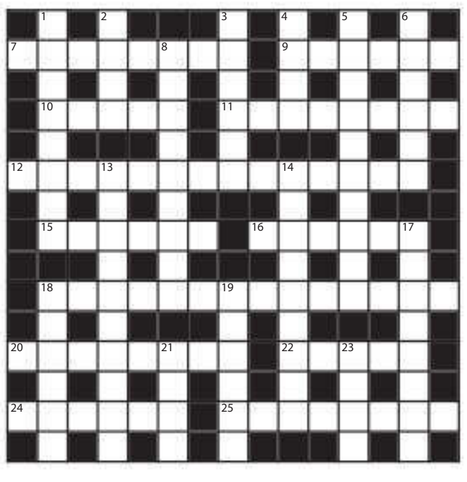
Countries like Japan and Mexico use sensor networks that give residents a few seconds of warning, just enough time to duck under a desk. These systems work by detecting the faster, weaker P-waves before the destructive S-waves arrive. India currently has an early-warning system for parts of the Himalayas, which urgently needs national expansion.

Additionally, the moment the ground shakes, people should be alerted through messaging so that they can be ready for aftershocks, if any.The National Disaster Management Authority has established SACHET, a Common Alerting Protocol-based integrated alert system designed for near-real-time dissemination of geo-targeted warnings through multiple channels. India has also tested a nationwide cell-broadcast system capable of rapidly sending disaster alerts to mobile phones. Promoting the SACHET app should be a national priority.

In January 2023, six-year-old Mustafa in Lucknow survived the collapse of a five-storey apartment building by recalling earthquake-safety lessons from the cartoon Doraemon. When the building began shaking, he remembered the advice to take shelter under a bed and did so instead of running. Though he survived with minor injuries, his mother and grandmother tragically died. The incident demonstrates how simple, age-appropriate disaster education can turn knowledge into instinctive action, and save lives.

The writer is a transparency and equality advocate and co-founder, 51ABI Foundation.

Crossword | No. 293558



Yesterday's Solution

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

ACROSS

7 Mother taking husband into desert for test of endurance (8)
9 Church examination for singers ... (6)
10 ... such as me and nine more men? (5)
11 Petition to refuse ousting leader about indulgence (8)
12 Glean enteritis inflamed – my neighbour? (5,9)
15 Customer runs into no bar backwards (6)
16 Crime happily avoiding boy without companions? (6)
18 Dance item possibly a strain for dance specialist (6-8)
20 Fuel problem keeps airmen fidgeting initially (8)
22 Tracks almost completely dreadful (5)
24 Small problem on the internet? No great rush (6)
25 Present time allocated to match is satisfactory (8)

DOWN

1 Absolutely final way to get petrol during part of Grand Prix? (4-4)
2 Body of water cheers navy (4)
3 Still to go North during end of day, not South (6)
4 Whisky maker often caught coming in drunk (4)
5 Pointer, perhaps warning better used about Government (10)
6 Piece still lacking odd bits, in the event (6)
8 Veggie fan? That woman`s drill involves one source of veganism (9)
13 Look at a floodgate, ruined (3,1,4,2)
14 Say nothing with Phi`s messy copy being tidied up (9)
17 American greeting English newspaper turning up in US National Park (8)
18 Reckon year with investment of gold is a good one (6)
19 Crazy being irritable after losing paint (6)
21 Congregation to collapse (4)
23 Descriptive prose not entirely an illegible mess? (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 August 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE Teesta is once again in flood, possibly as the result of heavy local rain, for there has been no mention of any damage at Sivoke or Siliguri, where the river emerges from the Sikhim hills. It is in the vicinity of Jalpaiguri that the river has turned into a vast expanse of water. Barnes Junction on the side of the river opposite to Jalpaiguri has been washed away together with the rails on either side. A short emergency line which was constructed a few years ago, in view of this very possibility, has also been breached. Fortunately there seems to have been ample time to remove the railway wagons and the stores and tea in the sheds. No loss of life is reported. No repair work can be started till the floods have subsided and passengers, mails, and goods from and to the Dooars are likely to be delayed. The railway people in Eastern and Northern Bengal have had a large experience in dealing with shifting ghat stations, and even if the present Barnes Junction disappears forever, another ghat will presently appear either lower down or higher up the river.

News Items

10-HOUR WORKING DAY

REORGANISING RUSSIAN INDUSTRY

("TIMES" SPECIAL SERVICE.)
LONDON, AUG.

THE Times' Berlin correspondent states that the veteran Communist Ruth Fischer, who has just returned from a long stay in Russia, is engaged in a violent controversy with Socialists and Communists over conditions in Russia.

She asserts that the reorganisation of Russian industry has involved greater hardships to the workers than did German industrial reorganisation. The new measures included a working day of ten hours, night work for women, and propaganda against higher wages, which have now decreased 25 per cent.

The army of unemployed, she says, is the same as elsewhere and the elections are farcical and result in the strengthening of the reactionaries and Communists.

PEACE IN THE BALKANS

HOW ATHENS PACT WILL CONTRIBUTE

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
RUGBY, AUG.

IN a leading article on "Conciliation in the Balkans," the Morning Post to-day welcomes the Conventions concluded between Greece and Yugoslavia and expresses the belief that all causes of difference between the two countries will have been removed.

Politically, Greece gains the friendship of her powerful neighbour, while Yugo-Slavia is rid of the difficulties hitherto attaching to her use of the little stretch of railway running from Chevgeli, on the southern frontier of Serbia, to Salonica, and gains an extension at that part of the free zone for her goods.

To Great Britain, which is a friend of both parties, and the foundation of whose national policy is the maintenance of peace in Europe, the attain ment of a settlement of a question long the subject of bitter controversy, is necessarily gratifying.

Referring to the Joint Note sent to Bulgaria by Greece, Romania, and Yugo-Slavia with the object of achieving a peaceful settlement of the recent Macedonia trouble, the Morning Post expresses the hope that the wise use of the Bulgarian Refugee Loan, which is guaranteed by the League of Nations for the relief of refugees, may serve to deprive the insurgent bodies of their pretext for stirring up strife.

DEMPSEY-TUNNEY

FIGHT NOW TO TAKE PLACE IN PHILADELPHIA

(Special Cable.)
NEW YORK, AUG.

TEX Rickard announces that the Dempsey-Tunney "decision" fight, which will take place at Philadelphia, on September 23, will consist of ten rounds. The receipts are expected to reach two million dollars.

It is noteworthy that boxing is legal in Pennsylvania, so no further hitch is anticipated. —Copyright.

Tech should empower retail investors to avoid risks

TECHNOLOGY has brought in a paradigm shift in the investors' behaviour in recent years. India has seen a surge in number of participants investing in equities. As per latest available data, the country has more than 21 crore demat accounts by the end of December, 2025. Though multiple demat accounts are being held by individual investor, still the number is higher as compared to a decade back. And such surge in demat account has been possible due to faster and easier demat account opening process.

The whole process has now been undertaken through technology-powered solutions. From eKYC to digital onboarding, now a person can complete the whole process without a physical visit to any financial institution. In addition, fintech startups like Zerodha and Groww have made stock investment extremely easier. The advent of discount brokerage firms has literally moved stock investment into the palms of investors.

Now, crores of investors invest in equities through the mobile apps of brokerage firms. While technology has created a culture of equity investing, it has also prompted lakhs of retail investors to do risky trading. A cursory look at these statistics will make this amply clear. In last financial year (FY26), losses incurred by retail investors in India's equity derivatives market stood at Rs 91,685 crore (around $9.61 billion). Though it was a decline of around 18 per cent year-on-year basis, close to $10 billion loss is not a small amount in any measure. These losses could have been gainfully employed elsewhere by retail investors, which would have helped country's economic growth. In earlier years, losses were higher as compared to FY26.

After the market regulator, Sebi introduced various new norms, discouraging retail investors to trade in future & options (F&O), losses have declined in FY26. And technology-powered trading apps is one of the major factors behind such surge in derivative trading by retail investors.

In future and options trading, which is considered as one of the risky trading instruAments in the equities; retail investors are competing against large institutional investors like big banks, NBFCs, pension funds and others. These institutional investors not only have better information sources, but also are powered by cutting-edge technology tools. For instance, algo trading is a widely known practice by institutional investors, where the computer programme automates the trade based on the parameters given. Here, trades are executed in fraction of seconds. Compare this with the kind of trading undertaken by retail investors. This puts retail investors at a distinct disadvantage. With the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), the speed and accuracy of trades undertaken by institutional investors have increased manifold. So, though technology-powered brokerage firms' apps enable a retail trader to execute a trade, it can't possibly match with an AI-powered platform used by a big investor. Moreover, AI has increased the chances of market manipulation. For instance, AI can help in creating misleading information about a company or stock or on overall market, which can then be posted in social media platforms. Market manipulators then try to amplify the reach of such posts to trap the retail investors. So, risks have aggravated after the advent of AI-kind of new age technology.

It can be said that technology has emerged as both a boon and a bane for Indian retail investors. In this contest, it will be better if technology can be leveraged to make well-informed decisions about a stock, do research about the market, and undertake hassle free investment than to dabble in risky derivative trade or to get trapped through technology-driven market manipulation tactics.

AI for Good Global Commission

Mitigating adverse impacts of Artificial Intelligence



Dr P Subramanyachary

THE AI for Good Global Commission is a high-level international commission established with the support of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a specialized agency of the United Nations. It was officially launched during the AI for Good event held in July 2026. The Commission comprises 44 founding commissioners and members, including heads of state, chief executive officers (CEOs) of leading global companies, technology experts, and representatives of international organizations.

The Commission is co-chaired by Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, and Marc Benioff, Chairman and CEO of Salesforce. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), serves as the Vice-Chair. From India, Mukesh Ambani, Sunil Bharti Mittal, and Lakshmi N. Mittal have been appointed as founding members of the Commission.

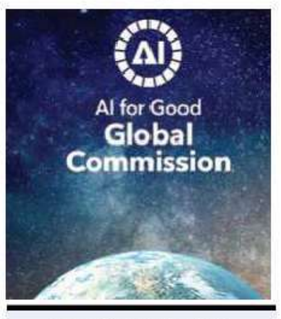
The inaugural meeting of the AI for Good Global Commission was held on July 8 in Geneva, Switzerland. Although the Commission's first meeting took place on that day, it formed part of the broader AI for Good Global Summit 2026, which was held from July 7-10. The four-day summit featured more than 300 sessions, including conferences, exhibitions, training workshops, demonstrations, and high-level discussions.

The deliberations focused primarily on AI governance, technological innovation, and the role of artificial intelligence in achieving sustainable development, along with strategies to maximize AI's benefits while mitigating its potential risks and adverse impacts.

More than 40 founding commissioners participated in the inaugural meeting of the AI for Good Global Commission. During the meeting, the Commission adopted several key resolutions. Among the most significant were strengthening trustworthy and ethical AI governance and expanding global access to artificial intelligence, with particular emphasis on the needs of developing countries. The Commission also resolved to promote international collaboration among governments, industries, academic and research institutions, civil society organizations, and international organizations.

It emphasized the effective use of AI to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, climate change, and agriculture. Another key priority identified by the Commission was reducing the digital divide by investing in digital infrastructure, skill development, and capacity building.

In addition, the Commission reaffirmed that the development of human-centric artificial intelligence that safeguards human rights, promotes inclusiveness, and enhances public welfare is of paramount importance. It further emphasized that its primary objective is to ensure that the benefits of AI are shared equitably by all countries and all sections of society. However, the AI for Good Global Commission is not a regulatory body. Rather, it serves primarily as an advisory and coordinating platform. Consequently, for its recommendations to have a meaningful and lasting impact, they must be adopted and implemented by national governments and other relevant institutions around the world.



The Commission reaffirmed that the development of human-centric artificial intelligence that safeguards human rights, promotes inclusiveness, and enhances public welfare is of paramount importance. It further emphasized that its primary objective is to ensure that the benefits of AI are shared equitably by all countries and all sections of society

AI: Impact on employment and sustainable development

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is bringing about significant transformations in the global economy. Its impact is particularly evident in the areas of employment and sustainable development. According to the Future of Jobs Report 2025 published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), AI and other emerging technologies are expected to create approximately 170 million new jobs worldwide by 2030.

At the same time, around 92 million jobs are projected to disappear, leading to major changes in the global labour market. Routine and repetitive tasks in sectors such as manufacturing, customer service, administration, and data processing are particularly vulnerable to automation. As a result, millions of workers will need to undergo reskilling and upskilling to adapt to the changing nature of work. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), nearly one-quarter (25%) of global employment is likely to be affected by generative AI.

Clerical and administrative occupations, in particular, are expected to experience the greatest impact due to the increasing automation of routine office tasks. If the benefits of AI are concentrated primarily among highly skilled workers and technology-driven enterprises, there is a significant risk that income inequality will widen further.

Therefore, governments, industries, and educational institutions must work together to ensure that the gains from AI are distributed more equitably through inclusive policies, workforce development, and access to digital skills.

From the perspective of sustainable development, AI systems require large-scale data centres that consume substantial amounts of electricity and water for their operation and maintenance. If these facilities are not powered by renewable or clean energy sources, they can place additional pressure on the environment and contribute to higher carbon emissions.

Developing countries may also face significant challenges due to limited digital infrastructure and a shortage of AI-related skills, increasing the risk of falling behind in the global digital economy. This could further widen the technological and digital divide between developed and developing nations.At the same time, the responsible and ethical use of AI offers immense opportunities.

AI can improve energy efficiency, enable more accurate climate change forecasting, enhance the accessibility and quality of healthcare services, and increase agricultural productivity through precision farming and data-driven decision-making.

Therefore, it is essential to implement effective AI governance, strengthen quality education, promote skill development, and invest in reskilling and upskilling initiatives. These measures are crucial to ensuring that the benefits of AI are inclusive, sustainable, and contribute positively to long-term economic and social development.

Significance of AI for Good Global Commission for India

The AI for Good Global Commission is of great significance to India. It supports the development of responsible and ethical artificial intelligence, promotes digital inclusion, and helps the country effectively address the economic and social challenges arising from the rapid adoption of AI.

India's AI ecosystem is expanding rapidly. Recognizing its strategic importance, the Government of India approved the IndiaAI Mission in 2024 with a budget of ₹10,371.92 crore. The mission aims to strengthen AI infrastructure, skill development, innovation, and research, thereby positioning India as a global leader in artificial intelligence. AI has the potential to deliver substantial benefits across several key sectors in India, including healthcare, agriculture, education, disaster management, and public service delivery.

In particular, the Commission can support India by: Promoting ethical and trustworthy AI standards, strengthening international cooperation on AI governance and innovation, enhancing cybersecurity and digital resilience and facilitating access to global best practices in AI development and regulation.

Furthermore, the Commission can help developing countries, including India, bridge the digital divide by encouraging equitable access to AI technologies and digital infrastructure. It also promotes the extension of AI's benefits to rural areas and socially disadvantaged communities, ensuring that technological progress is more inclusive.

In addition, the Commission can play a crucial role in helping India mitigate the potential adverse impacts of AI on employment, society, and the environment through responsible AI governance, capacity building, and sustainable policy frameworks. This will enable India to harness the transformative potential of AI while ensuring that its benefits are shared broadly across all sections of society.

To achieve its objectives, the AI for Good Global Commission promotes global collaboration among governments, technology companies, researchers, and civil society organizations. By fostering cooperation among these key stakeholders, the Commission seeks to ensure that artificial intelligence is developed and deployed in a responsible, inclusive, and sustainable manner.

The Commission also plays a vital role in maximizing the benefits of AI for individuals and societies worldwide while minimizing its potential risks and adverse impacts. It aims to encourage the adoption of ethical AI practices, strengthen international coordination, and support policies that ensure AI serves the broader public interest. If governments, industry, academia, and civil society work together to implement the Commission's recommendations, the AI for Good Global Commission can make a significant contribution to building a safer, more equitable, and AI-driven global economy that promotes sustainable development and shared prosperity for all.

(The writer is Professor, School of Commerce and Management, Mohan Babu University, Tirupati)

Why Lenin still remains relevant in modern times



Anjani Kumar

WHEN a special show was organised for screening of the new super hit movie of Akkineni Akhil – Lenin - at a private theatre, there was much excitement in the air. A select few were invited to watch the movie. It was an elite gathering of Hyderabad. The Akkinenis played a perfect host.

As the movie started, it was clear that the genes of the legendary Nageswara Rao and the ever-green Nagarjuna was speaking loudly in the outstanding performance of this young hero. The maturity of Akhil's acting skill and his successful effort to live in the role of a rural young man was appreciated by all. Akhil has graduated from a hero to a fine artist now.

As violence depicted the prevailing mood of the Indian filmdom, earlier epitomised by Dhurandhar, one wonders if cinema represents the thought process of the contemporary society. If it does, then we need to do introspection about our society. The chat with Amla on the subject of violence in society and its impact on movies was interesting. Bhagyashri and Akhil together sparked a good on screen chemistry.

As we watched the movie, something which struck me was the title of the movie – Lenin. Man searches deep meaning in everything. During the interval while conversing with Akhil and Amla (whom age refuses to touch) the title Lenin was discussed. This part of the country has fascination with this name as there are many Lenin Babus here.

It was understandable in the decades of our independence and thereafter, when young boys were named after global leaders like Gandhi, Lenin, Stalin, Bose, Nehru, Patel, and other icons of those periods. But now in the third decade of the 21st century choosing Lenin as title of a movie has perhaps a special significance.



So far as the inequality in any society looms large, so far as few control the vast wealth of the nation depriving the majority to struggle for daily bread and butter, Lenin would remain relevant

When the name Lenin appeals to us even after 100 years of Vladimir Lenin's death, it conveys many meanings. The irony of history is that Lenin and Mahatma Gandhi were contemporaries. Lenin brought the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, and Gandhi came to India from South Africa in 1915 after spending 21 years there. Both giants in their own way in liberating their respective countries from the then existing decadent systems.

Russia under the Tsar had stagnated as a country and as a civilization. India under the British exploitative rule had transformed itself from being the richest country in the world to one of the poorest country in just 200 years. Inequality was the hallmark of both the countries when Lenin and Gandhi took the reins of leadership.

The closest Gandhi came to Russia was through Leo Tolstoy in whose name he had developed a farm in South Africa. Tolstoy's quote: 'There is only one thing in this world which is worth dedicating all your life is creating more love and breaking barriers between people' impacted Gandhi all throughout.

Lenin and Gandhi with their diametrically opposite pathways of Ahimsa versus the Communist violent revolution, brought an end to an exploitative system. India and Russia threw away their respective existing yokes. The Tsarist Russia and the British India primarily represented an unequal society where the few were exploiting the toiling masses. Lenin like Gandhi had kindled a ray of hope with an underlining principle of equality.

When Lenin carried forward the slogan "workers of the world, unite", it was a global message for unity and struggle against oppression and inequality. Has this slogan lost its relevance now? The Gen Z have to find an answer to this.

While Gandhi remains father of our nation, Russia threw away the communist path in the early 1990s. Gandhi too is facing difficulties as many scholars of WhatsApp University find it fashionable to criticise the Mahatma before whom the world leaders still bow with utmost reverence. India still has to discover a better export than Gandhi.

The misdeeds and purges of Stalinist regime, and the failure of Soviet economy to modernise could not be attributed to Lenin. USSR failed as a State not because of the concept of Lenin but because of the application of a faulty state repressive policy. So far as the inequality in any society looms large, so far as the few controls the vast wealth of the nation, depriving the majority to struggle for daily bread and butter, Lenin would remain relevant.

These names would keep lurking in our minds and would compel the State for a real socialistic pattern of governance and society. It would yearn us to go beyond token doles but a systemic reform within a time bound limits. Giants like Lenin and Gandhi would remain icons of selfless service and inspiring leadership. Such title of a super hit movie reminds us of the harsh realities of economic disparity and an urgent need to address the issue.

(The author is a former Director General of Police, Telangana.)

LETTERS

'Blanket clemency' for CJP

THIS is further to your editorial 'Govt should pronto drop cases against Jantar Mantar protestors'. There are no two views about genuine student protesters at Jantar Mantar who were involved in violent rioting with the police be granted one time pardon, and the police cases against them be quashed. But, there must be genuine remorse on their part, not to repeat the act in future protests, hoping for a similar reprieve. The CJP agitation, if enacted solely on the strength of students, without any out side anti-social elements being part of it would have been a success; in which the general public too would have extended their spontaneous support. But, needless shortcut methods were adopted involving ruffians with criminal elements to be part of the movement in order to intimidate the police. The acts of such characters were amply evident on the ground when the policemen were attacked and the vehicles vandalised. The blanket clemency on accused in the Jantar Mantar incident will further embolden the students who are on a warpath. The government must be tough on those elements involved in the crime; but be considerate of students, whose careers are at stake if a police complaint is filed against them.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

RSS members in NCERT panel

WHILE the din over irregularities in the conduct of national examinations, particularly NEET by the National Testing Agency (NTA), and the student protests that followed may be dying down, another matter of serious concern has emerged. It is reported that the NCERT has reconstituted the Textbook Development Team for Classes 11 and 12 Political Science, with at least four members having direct or indirect links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). There have long been allegations that some CBSE textbooks reflect RSS ideology, distort history, and glorify Hindutva figures who had little or no role in India's Freedom struggle. The new panel is reportedly tasked with reviewing textbooks and integrating themes such as cultural rootedness and Indian Knowledge Systems. Given the availability of eminent scholars and academics in education and political science, why were individuals reportedly associated with the RSS chosen for such an important task? One cannot help wondering whether this is part of a deliberate attempt to reshape the political narrative presented to future generations.

Tharcius S Fernando, Chennai

TN CM should act fast on DMK 'misrule'

THE Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay said he had evidence of corruption in the previous DMK Government, and would reveal it when necessary. The people of State have every right to clear the cloud by the CM since the matter is concerning much and involves public money. The Chief Minister has sworn an oath to faithfully and conscientiously discharge his duties and to do right to all people in accordance with the Constitution and the law, without fear or favour. If he possesses credible evidence of corruption committed under the previous government, does that constitutional oath permit him to simply keep the evidence "on his table" and wait indefinitely for a politically convenient time? The oath may not require him to disclose every piece of evidence publicly before due process. But it surely requires him to act upon credible evidence through the lawful constitutional and investigative mechanisms available to the State. Otherwise, allegations of corruption risk being reduced to political rhetoric while potential offences involving public money remain uninvestigated. If the evidence exists, let the appropriate authority investigate it, let those responsible answer it, and let the law take its course.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

T N largesse could be contagious

APROPOS, "A car, driver and Rs 1L allowance: TN MLAs' windfall from CM Vijay," (THI, Aug 20). The reported decision of the Vijay-led TVK government to provide cars, ₹75,000 monthly allowance to each of Tamil Nadu's 234 MLAs, and another ₹25,000 for an assistant deserves strong public criticism. Such a generous package raises serious questions about priorities and financial responsibility. At a time when citizens demand better roads, healthcare, education, jobs and basic services, public money should not be spent on expanding political privileges. Elected representatives enter public life to serve people, not to treat politics as a source of comfort and personal benefits. Moreover, such concessions could set a dangerous precedent, with legislators in other States demanding similar facilities. Governments must promote austerity, accountability and responsible spending.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Viral video puts woman police officer in spotlight

BENGALURU: A video allegedly showing a woman police officer engaging in an inappropriate conversation with a jailed inmate through a WhatsApp video call has gone viral on social media, triggering controversy within the police department. The officer featured in the video has now approached the Cubbon Park police, alleging that the footage was recorded and circulated without her consent.

According to the complaint, the officer had been acquainted with a rowdy-sheeter identified as Dharma several years ago. She allegedly spoke to him through a video call, during which he recorded the conversation. The officer has alleged that Dharma subsequently shared the recording with another rowdy-sheeter, Saikumar, who circulated it on social media.

The officer has sought action against Dharma, Saikumar and others allegedly involved in making the video public. She has claimed that the circulation of the footage has damaged her reputation and caused considerable embarrassment. In her complaint, the officer stated that she was working as an officer in charge of security at a Metro station. She also referred to her family and social standing while seeking legal action against those responsible for circulating the video.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com

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The Hans India

Business

"We expect consumption demand to remain healthy. The company remains confident of sustaining double-digit topline growth while improving profitability through premiumisation, innovation and scale benefits." -Sunil D'Souza, MD & CEO, Tata Consumer Products Ltd (TCPL)

BIZ BRIEFS

Tech Survey by Amazon

Amazon.in's inaugural Best in Tech Survey, found AI features are now expected by 82 per cent of smartphone buyers. Performance and speed remain the strongest purchase drivers at 87 per cent, followed by battery life at 79 per cent and camera quality at 77 per cent. About 42 per cent are considering phones priced Rs25,000-Rs50,000, while 48 per cent plan upgrades within three months. Reviews and ratings influence 47 per cent of buyers.

Declassified on Discovery+

Discovery has announced the availability of Declassified: Operation Sindoor on this Independence Day to stream on Discovery+. The two-part docuseries was broadcasted on August 15, where Ajit Doval, National Security Advisor of India gave insights on Operation Sindoor. According to Doval: "We had decided the objective of the operation was destruction of the enemy camps particularly those who had been responsible for the Pahalgam attack."

Milestone in robotic surgeries

Dr. Mohit Bhandari and Team Mohak marked the national milestone with an extraordinary achievement: 51 robotic bariatric and metabolic surgeries completed in just 14 hours on August 15. The unprecedented initiative brought together six robotic systems, one designated console surgeon and one highly coordinated Indian clinical team. A total of 51 patients underwent robotic bariatric and metabolic surgery, comprising 30 men and 21 women. The patients ranged in age from 21 to 77 years, with an average age of 43.6 years.

AWS opens Builder Lofts

AWS has announced the opening of AWS Builder Lofts in Berlin, Hyderabad, and São Paulo,the permanent community spaces give students and developers a place to learn, connect, and contribute through hands-on experiences, community-led sharing, and technical collaboration.David Nalley, Director, AWS, said:"Twenty years ago, AWS launched its first services, and it was the builder community that believed in us from the very beginning. These spaces are our way of investing back in that community."

VAYU forays into India

VAYU, an air compressor brand created for manufacturers and growing businesses, announced its launch in India with a portfolio of compressed air solutions. At launch, VAYU offers a 5–45 kW range of air compressors, available in fixed- and variable-speed configurations and designed for operating pressures ranging from 7 to 12.5 bar. The portfolio is supported by a range of accessories, genuine spare parts, comprehensive warranty coverage and nationwide service support.

Bulls charge after 7-day rout

US TREASURY INTERVENTION SPARKS BROAD-BASED RELIEF RALLY

Mumbai

BENCHMARK equity indices bounced back on Thursday, with the Sensex climbing 628 points and the Nifty snapping its seven-day losing streak as easing global bond yields fueled a stock rally worldwide.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 628.04 points, or 0.82 per cent, to settle at 77,537.72 after four days of decline. During the day, it surged 701.43 points, or 0.91 per cent, to 77,611.11. Snapping its seven-day falling streak, the 50-share NSE Nifty rose by 153.55 points, or 0.64 per cent, to close at 24,231.85.

"Markets found much-needed relief after the US Treasury stepped in to contain the surge in global bond yields, triggering a strong broad-based rebound and ending the domestic market's week-long losing streak. The intervention has dragged down the dollar, which, along with a firmer rupee and easing yield pressures, boosted attractiveness to EMs," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Ltd, said. The recovery was



widespread across sectors, driven primarily by strength in IT and financial stocks, as a cooling yield environment supports spending, he said. "Yet, the market's optimism remains guarded as stubbornly high crude oil prices, driven by unresolved US-Iran tensions, continue to cast a shadow over inflation and corporate profitability," Nair added. Among the Sensex firms, Eternal, Kotak Mahindra Bank, ITC, Bajaj Finance, Axis Bank and UltraTech Cement were the biggest winners. Tata Steel, InterGlobe Aviation, HCL Tech and Titan were the laggards. "Indian equity markets ended higher on Thursday, snapping a seven-session losing streak—the longest in nearly 11 months—as easing global bond yields revived risk appetite and encouraged investors back into equities. "The recovery marked a decisive shift from the cautious tone that had dominated recent sessions, with benchmark indices holding on to their early gains throughout the day," Hariselvan Radhakrishnan, Founder & CEO of HST Wealth, a SEBI-registered Research Analyst firm, said. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 407.99 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. The BSE SmallCap Select index climbed 0.83 per cent and MidCap Select index was up 0.56 per cent. Among sectoral indices, Realty jumped the most by 1.87 per cent. FMCG (1.03 per cent), Focused IT (1.02 per cent), IT (0.94 per cent), Financial Services (0.85 per cent), Consumer Discretionary (0.75 per cent) and Top 10 Banks (0.69 per cent) also advanced.

Bullion fires up: Gold hits ₹1.62 lakh, silver jumps ₹10,000

New Delhi

GOLD staged a sharp comeback in the national capital on Thursday, rising by Rs 4,300 to a three-month high of Rs 1.62 lakh per 10 grams, and silver surged by Rs 10,000 as investors turned to precious metals amid a weak US dollar. The yellow metal of 99.9 per cent purity appreciated by Rs 4,300 to Rs 1,62,300 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes), according to local traders. It had closed at Rs 1,58,000 per 10 grams on Wednesday.

The precious metal was last seen at comparable levels on May 26, when it was quoted at Rs 1,62,400 per 10 grams.



Silver mirrored the rally, soaring to a seven-week high of Rs 2,45,000 per kilogram (inclusive of all taxes) from Rs 2,35,000 per kg. The white metal had traded near these levels on July 3, when it was quoted at Rs 2,45,000 per kg. "Gold hovered near its highest level in more than two months on Thursday, supported by a sharp decline in the US dollar and Treasury yields," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. The dollar index slid to a three-month low, while lower Treasury bond yields improved the appeal of assets such as gold, he added. The rally in spot bullion prices came despite a retreat in the overseas markets. Gold dipped USD 66.31, or 1.47 per cent, to USD 4,456.72 per ounce, and silver dropped nearly 2 per cent to USD 65.82 per ounce. Spot gold was trading lower at USD 4,450 per ounce as crude oil prices surged over 2 per cent after the US President Donald Trump announced new economic sanctions on Iran, Praveen Singh, Head of Commodities at Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said.

Centre tightens sugar stock norms amid price surge

NEW DELHI: THE Centre on Thursday imposed a stockholding limit on bulk consumers of sugar, amid concerns over rising prices due to tight supplies ahead of the festival season.

Food Minister Pralhad Joshi, in a social media, announced that bulk consumers using more than 10 tonnes of sugar a month will not be allowed to hold stock beyond what they would consume in 15 days. The food ministry has notified the Sugar (Stockholding Limit of Bulk Consumers) Order, 2026, which covers confectioners, soft drink manufacturers, food processing units, sweetmeat sellers and other institutional buyers. The order will come into force from September 1 and remain



in effect till November 30.

This follows an earlier order, effective August 1 to November 30, capping stock with sugar dealers at 4,000 quintals for 30 days.

The curbs come against the backdrop of a sharp rise in sugar prices, with ex-mill rates hitting record levels on account of a lower opening stock ahead of the 2026-27 season.

The all-India average ex-mill price rose to Rs 5,400-5,500 a quintal on Tuesday, up from Rs 3,900 a year earlier, according to an industry body. Retail sugar prices have climbed about 13 per cent year-on-year to Rs 52.30 a kg as on August 18, from Rs 46.34 a year ago, as per consumer affairs ministry data. Demand for sugar typically rises between August and November, as the country celebrates major festivals, such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussehra, and Diwali. Under the new order, the monthly quantity of sugar sold by each mill to a bulk consumer -- whether directly or through dealers -- will be verified, and consumption will be determined with reference to GST returns filed by sellers and/or buyers, using the relevant HSN code applicable to sugar.

Sebi allows IFSCA-regulated entities to access KYC records

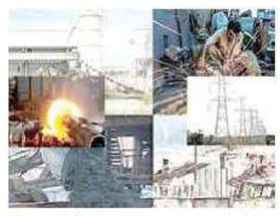
NEW DELHI: Markets regulator Sebi on Thursday allowed entities regulated by the IFSCA to access the systems of registered KYC registration agencies, facilitating seamless sharing of client information for financial services. The markets watchdog said the step will enable interoperability and facilitate sharing of information between Sebi-registered KRAs and entities regulated by IFSCA. Under the move, the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) regulated entities can access KYC Registration Agencies (KRAs) records for carrying out KYC of clients who engage them for financial services, Sebi said. A KYC Registration Agency (KRA) is an agency that maintains investors' KYC (Know Your Customer) records.

Cement sector powers core industries' 5.4%rise in July

NEW DELHI:India's Index of Core Industries (ICI) recorded a 5.4 per cent growth in July this year compared to the same month of the previous year, driven by the strong performance of the iron ore, cement, and electricity sectors, according to figures released by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Thursday.

The cement sector clocked a robust growth of 13.1 per cent during the month as demand stayed buoyant due to large government investments in big-ticket infrastructure projects such as highways, ports, and railways.

The production of iron ore surged by as much as 29.5 per cent in July. Owing to intensive use of iron ore in the production process, and its contribution to in-



dustrial development, it has been included in the list of core industries as a new item in the revised series of ICI. Accordingly, the number of core industries has increased from eight to nine in the new series, which kicked in for the first time from last month.

Electricity generation grew by 9 per cent during July while coal production went up by 7.6 per cent. The output of steel and refinery products during the month increased by 2.9 per cent and 2.7 per cent respectively, the data showed.

Local currencies can cut trade costs: RBI deputy governor

MUMBAI: Local currencies will play an ever-increasing role in cross-border trade and payments as they lower transaction costs, reduce currency mismatches, and improve settlement efficiency, RBI Deputy Governor Rohit Jain has said.

Speaking at the Annual Day of the Foreign Exchange Dealers' Association of India (FEDAI) last week on 'India's Foreign Exchange Markets: Getting ready for the next Decade', Jain said that by their very nature, markets are continuously evolving and parameters of their readiness are being regularly renewed according to the needs of the time. "Our market would be ready for the next decade if it can help facilitate India's ever-increasing engagement with other countries, absorb shocks in a non-disruptive manner, serve the smallest user as efficiently as the biggest, and embrace new technology without vitiating the trust it has earned," he said.

DGFT opens door wider for rupee-settled exports

NEW DELHI: THE government on Thursday amended certain provisions of the Foreign Trade Policy to make it easier for exporters to invoice overseas sales and receive payments in Indian rupees.

The amendments cover exports to all countries, although the rules vary by destination. Two paragraphs of the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023 have been amended "to align the provisions relating to denomination of export contracts and eligibility for FTP benefits in respect of export realisation in Indian Rupees with the Foreign Exchange Management (Manner of Receipt and Payment) Regulations 2023", the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) said in a notification.

For countries outside the Asian Clearing Union (ACU), export contracts and invoices may now be denominated in any foreign currency or Indian rupees.

Earlier, export earnings generally had to be received in a freely convertible currency. Commenting on the notification, economic think tank GTRI said eligible rupee payments for exports to any country other than Nepal and Bhutan will now qualify for FTP benefits and count towards fulfilment of export obligations. Rupee earnings received through approved banking channels will therefore be treated on par with export payments received in foreign currency, it said, adding that exports financed through EXIM Bank or Government of India lines of credit may also be invoiced in Indian rupees. The ACU is a regional payment arrangement established in 1974 to facilitate trade settlements and reduce repeated transfers of foreign exchange by periodically settling the net obligations of its members.

KARAN ADANI ON WATCHING HIS FATHER THROUGH STORM

'Sometimes the strongest answer is to keep building'

New Delhi

FOR Karan Adani, the past three years have been less about watching a business leader navigate a crisis and more about watching a father carry a burden.

In a deeply personal note, the managing director of Adani Ports reflected on what it was like to watch his father, billionaire Gautam Adani, navigate the turbulence that followed the Hindenburg Research report and subsequent US Department of Justice proceedings.

"Over the last three years, through the Hindenburg attack on the Adani Group and the US DOJ proceedings, I was asked one question more than any other: What is it like, as a son, to watch your father endure all of this?" Karan wrote in a post on LinkedIn.

Karan said he struggled to answer the question while the events were unfolding.

"Now that it is behind us, I can."

There were mornings when another headline, accusation or judgment greeted him, he said.

"I felt anger. I felt concerned. And, as a son, I often wondered, how much should



one man have to absorb?"

But what stayed with him, he said, was not the noise.

It was watching his father go to work.

"My Father Kept Going to Work."

"It sounds like such an ordinary statement. It was anything but ordinary," Karan wrote.

He said resilience was often imagined as something dramatic - a speech, a show of defiance or a promise to prove critics wrong. What he saw instead was his father simply returning to the work in front of him every morning.

"Projects still had to be built. People still depended on us. Ports had to run. Power had to reach homes and businesses. Airports had to serve passengers. Investments whose results would be seen only decades later still had to be made."

"India had not paused because our family was living through a storm. And neither did he."

For Karan, the experience also changed his understanding of the man he had always known simply as "Papa".

"Papa always had an extraordinary ability to focus on the task in front of him," he wrote.

"Work speaks for itself" has always been his instinct, Karan said.

The experience, he added, made him understand more deeply why his father had devoted his life to infrastructure and what he describes as nation-building.

"For him, these were never slogans," he wrote.

Gautam Adani has built the group around infrastructure and energy businesses ranging from ports and airports to power and other sectors, with investments often requiring a long-term view.

His ports-to-energy group never slowed during the three years of turbulence. It invested more than Rs 2.08 lakh crore in the second half of FY25 and FY26, including record capital expenditure of Rs 1,52,967 crore in FY26 - the highest of any Indian corporate - while its market capitalisation recovered above pre-indictment levels.

Milestones during the period included the launch of Navi Mumbai International Airport, Adani Ports becoming India's first operator to handle over 500 million tonnes of cargo in a year, and Adani Green Energy crossing 20 gigawatts of renewable capacity. Investors, including BlackRock and Apollo Global Management, and banks like Deutsche Bank and MUFG, expanded their engagement with the Group through the proceedings.

AWS rolls out advanced OpenAI models in India

Hans Business
Hyderabad

AMAZON Web Services (AWS), announced the general availability of OpenAI GPT-5.6 Terra and Luna models on Amazon Bedrock in India with in-country inferencing. With this capability, OpenAI model inference on Amazon Bedrock is processed on AWS infrastructure, giving organizations the ability to leverage frontier models locally.

Nitin Bawankule, Head-Enterprise Sales, India, OpenAI, said: "What we're seeing in India is a shift from AI as experimentation to AI as operating leverage. Businesses want models that can help teams write better software, work through complex information, and make higher-quality decisions in the flow of work. For many organizations in India, especially in regulated sectors, local inferencing is a key part of adopting AI with confidence. Making our models available through Amazon Bedrock gives more organizations a practical way to bring that capability into production."

Satinder Pal Singh, Director, AWS India, said: "India's enterprises are moving rapidly from AI experimentation to production-scale deployment, and they need frontier intelligence that runs where their data already lives.

JawaYezdi expands digital reach campaign

Hans Business
Hyderabad

JAWAYEZDI Motorcycles launched the Yezdi Roadster Red Wolf campaign on e-commerce platformsAmazon.in and Flipkart.

For online purchase, the customer has to pay the ex-showroom booking amount on the e-commerce sites. After which an authorised local dealer confirms the order and guides the customer for the remaining on-road payment. Registration and insurance are completed at the dealership, followed by the final handover. Accessories and add-ons remain dealership purchases.

Anupam Thareja, Co-founder, JawaYezdi Motorcycles, said: "The Yezdi Roadster has resonated with riders because of its distinctive styling and refined engineering, when the Red Wolf came along, it called out to its pack like nothing before. With its availability on India's leading e-commerce platforms, the Red Wolf can bring its bold individuality across multiple Indian cities."

Thareja, further added: "Online presence for riders to discover and start their ownership journey seamlessly has become indispensable for us, and we will continue to endeavour to make our range of performance classics widely available."

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EDITORIALS

Transportation secretary puts his federal money in right place — popular, practical Midwestern trains

Just as Michael J. McMurray, Chicago's commissioner of aviation, strikes us as one of the most capable and respected members of Mayor Brandon Johnson's administration, so Sean P. Duffy, Donald Trump's Secretary of Transportation, fills that role in Donald Trump's motley crew.

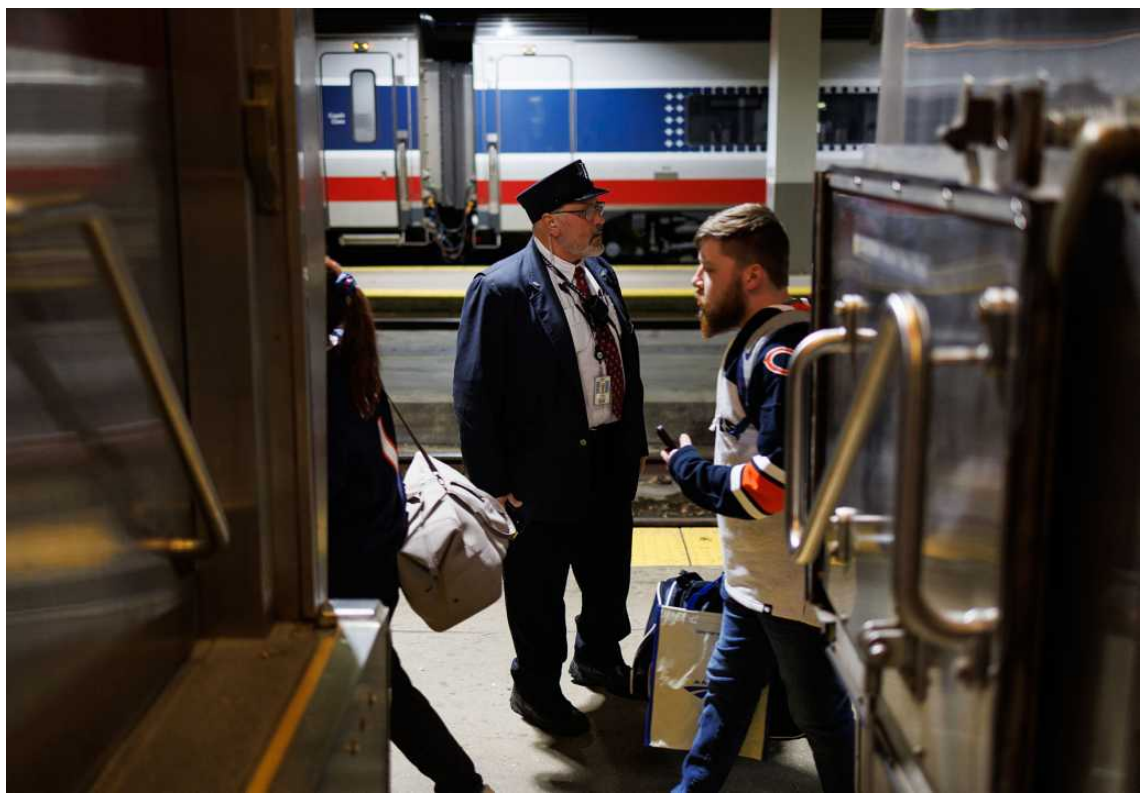
As part of his remit, Duffy sits on the Amtrak board of directors and was front and center Friday when his department announced $5.3 billion in targeted new funding for America's passenger rail. The plan includes a hefty $2 billion for new trainsets, not to mention more than $100 million to rehab various Chicago bridges. For an administration that famously denigrates Chicago, Friday was a notably good day for federal money for the city's historic status as a rail hub.

Under Duffy, the Department has said it will fund 43 new Amtrak trainsets and rehabilitate 41 locomotives, many of them serving routes running out of Chicago, such as the "Hiawatha" (Amtrak's best Midwestern train), "Blue Water," "Illini," "Saluki," "Illinois Zephyr," "Pere Marquette" and "Wolverine."

As regular Amtrak riders know, the demand for rail in the Midwest has exploded in recent years, and that hunger makes us supportive of an expansion, even though previous iterations of this board mostly regarded Amtrak outside the Northeast Corridor as a boondoggle. Times have changed. This new money is mostly going to corridors where rail makes great sense. Especially today, being as rail has enjoyed a major comeback.

Just look at the demand for the relatively new Borealis train between Chicago and St. Paul. The route carried more than 200,000 passengers in its first year of operation after launching in 2024, a count that only is climbing. Often the once-a-day train is completely sold out.

If Amtrak were an airline, it would already have added an additional Borealis departure, or three, or four. European train operators would have done the same. Amtrak being Amtrak and the U.S. being the U.S., that means months if not years of planning and environmental consultations and whatnot for something that would be far simpler almost anywhere else in the world.



Passengers walk past a sleeper car before an Amtrak train departs Chicago Union Station on Nov. 10, 2024.
ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Or take Amtrak's high-potential Michigan Service, another busy train that connects Chicago with college towns like Kalamazoo and Ann Arbor, along with the thriving Detroit. There are a paltry three trains a day, assuming at least one is not canceled for one reason or another, a frequent occurrence in our experience. And delays are ubiquitous, as we personally can attest.

In Europe or many parts of Asia, such a train-friendly corridor would enjoy hourly service and run on time. Sure, the issues of freight interference are different in Europe, but much of the Wolverine line now is owned by the state of Michigan, and operated and maintained by Amtrak itself. Bring on the trains and the history of the Borealis suggests the customers will come.

We're endlessly fascinated by U.S. inefficiency when it comes to transportation infrastructure on the ground (airports are another matter). On Wednesday, the Chicago Department of Transportation said that the crucial Cortland Street bridge would be closed to vehicles for several more years, clogging for yet longer one of the city's most traffic-choked sections. And an overly elaborate new CTA station at State and Lake is taking years, choking the North Loop with construction equipment. CDOT has its explanations in both cases, but no reasonable person would deem it a quick mover.

Amtrak Midwest, as the state-supported service in Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Missouri is branded, features a variety of high-demand corridors best served by rail. Those tracks have, in many cases, been improved with hundreds of millions of Midwest taxpayers' money; and yet Amtrak has a chronic rolling stock shortage, meaning that it simply doesn't have the cars to transport people who want to travel. Even the single Borealis run today is a weird mix of rolling stock grabbed from other trains, and heavily sold days can't easily be given more capacity.

That's why Duffy was right to focus on new and rehabilitated equipment for these Midwest corridors that can put them to immediate use and fill them with passengers.

As a happy byproduct, the announcement also included $572 million in funding to create a new Chicago maintenance facility for Amtrak at the current Union Pacific yard in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood. This potentially makes room for Justin Ishbia's long-term plan for a new White Sox stadium on the yard's current 47-acre footprint, which is familiar to Amtrak riders as it is located along the Chicago River and south of Roosevelt Road in the South Loop. The U.S. Department of Transportation is not (and should not be) in the business of helping private developers, of course, but the relocation away from the South Loop is a positive for the city's future growth, Ishbia or no Ishbia.

But the DOT is in the business of rehabbing wheezing trains and building new ones so all of the millions that Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker has spent on track improvements do not remain absurdly under-utilized. Amtrak Midwest is a partnership between the states and the feds. One of the few functional ones.

Where does the money come from? Duffy, who knows the rhetorical preferences of his boss, claims much of it is from "canceling Gavin Newsom's disastrous high-speed train."

He refers, of course, to the notorious California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR), a publicly funded project that first was authorized in, believe it or not, 2008. Of course a high-speed train between Los Angeles and San Francisco makes sense. But the CAHSR, which began construction in 2015 (11 years ago!) and has already blown through some $18 billion, is one of the great cash sucks of all time. If you think Chicago's Red Line extension is a boondoggle, and we do, you have not met the CAHSR, which is projected to cost at least $125 billion or more in total.

As it stands, some segments of the line, which should have gone directly between the two great cities but was effectively gerrymandered by local pols to the east, might open in the next decade; but no one is sure even of that. What is certain is the gaping funding gap and the political opportunity to attack the governor of California.

Just as a point of reference, when the train was authorized, the estimated cost was $33 billion. Now we are at $126 billion with no high-speed tracks yet operational. The train is, of course, a classic example of the perennial perils of sunk costs; abandoning the line seems absurd (even to us) given how much money would be written off. But the cost, and the funding gap, just keeps growing.

"Instead of wasting billions of dollars on a train to nowhere," Duffy said in his announcement, "we are fixing thousands of grade crossings — saving lives and improving communities across America. We're also making an unprecedented investment in Amtrak, because President Trump and I are committed to making passenger rail in America great again. Gavin Newsom should take notes — this is how you properly invest hard-earned taxpayer dollars."

It is not that simple, of course, and we could do without the MAGA blather. But Duffy, fundamentally, is correct, and his department has put the bulk of its investment in the right place: actual equipment and real seats upon which people want to travel across the great Midwest.

After honeymooners crash in helicopter, tourist choppers give us pause

As horrible news stories go, few could compare with what happened on a Greek holiday island Monday.

Two British newlyweds, Alexander Cromie, 31, and Marie Ebert, 30, were traveling from the Greek mainland to the island of Sifnos and had elected to splurge on bespoke travel by helicopter. It was just the two of them, both high achievers with flourishing early careers at Blackstone and Bain & Company, and the Bell 206's pilot, Giorgos Raikos.

Alas, they never made it to the island. The helicopter slammed into the ground, killing all three in a fiery crash. An investigation is underway.

So is the familial grief.

Wednesday, hard upon the accident in Greece, another tourist helicopter crashed in Kenya's remote Samburu County, killing seven. All, save the pilot, reportedly were tourists who had been visiting the Suyian wildlife sanctuary. That was not the first time international tourists had been killed in a Kenyan helicopter crash.

Closer to home, we recall the terrible crash last year in New York's Hudson River that killed the pilot and an entire family of Spanish tourists, including three children. You may recall the happy picture that circulated in the media of the family before their fun sightseeing trip.

Accidents happen, of course, sometimes in strikingly close proximity. Helicopters are vital tools when it comes to military operations and air rescues. And we don't doubt that there are many diligent, safety-conscious operators of helicopters that serve tourists.

But the events of this week alone are enough to give us pause about getting on one, especially if there is another choice of transportation to a popular destination. At the least, we would be checking for strong safety and maintenance records and a well-trained pilot. We would like to know the age of the helicopter and would want to be sure of its airworthiness.

Watching the film of the honeymooners' seemingly fragile conveyance fall out of the sky and drop like a bird is deeply upsetting. Not least because they were just arriving at their honeymoon destination, a time of great happiness. Our condolences to the couple's families, and that of the pilot.

In the U.S., the excellent National Transportation Safety Board investigates helicopter accidents as it does other such incidents. Abroad, such as in Greece, local authorities do the same.

But here is a timely reminder there are lots of ways in these final weeks of summer of making it to a secluded vacation place: by boat, car, minibus, train or even a sturdier plane subject to a more highly regulated environment. This week, it feels like private travel in a tourist helicopter seems to come with real risks.

ON THIS DAY 36 YEARS AGO A TIP FROM PRAGUE

Chicago's new revenue director, Paul Vallas, is inheriting an operation that is at least a thousandfold better than it was 15 months ago, when Mayor Daley borrowed a partner in the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen & Co. to overhaul it.

But as outgoing director Robert Kehm said, there is still a big job ahead.

The department was so riddled with corruption, confusion and apathy for so long that even a year of reforms has not yet produced the efficient collection arm that city government—and its taxpayers—need.

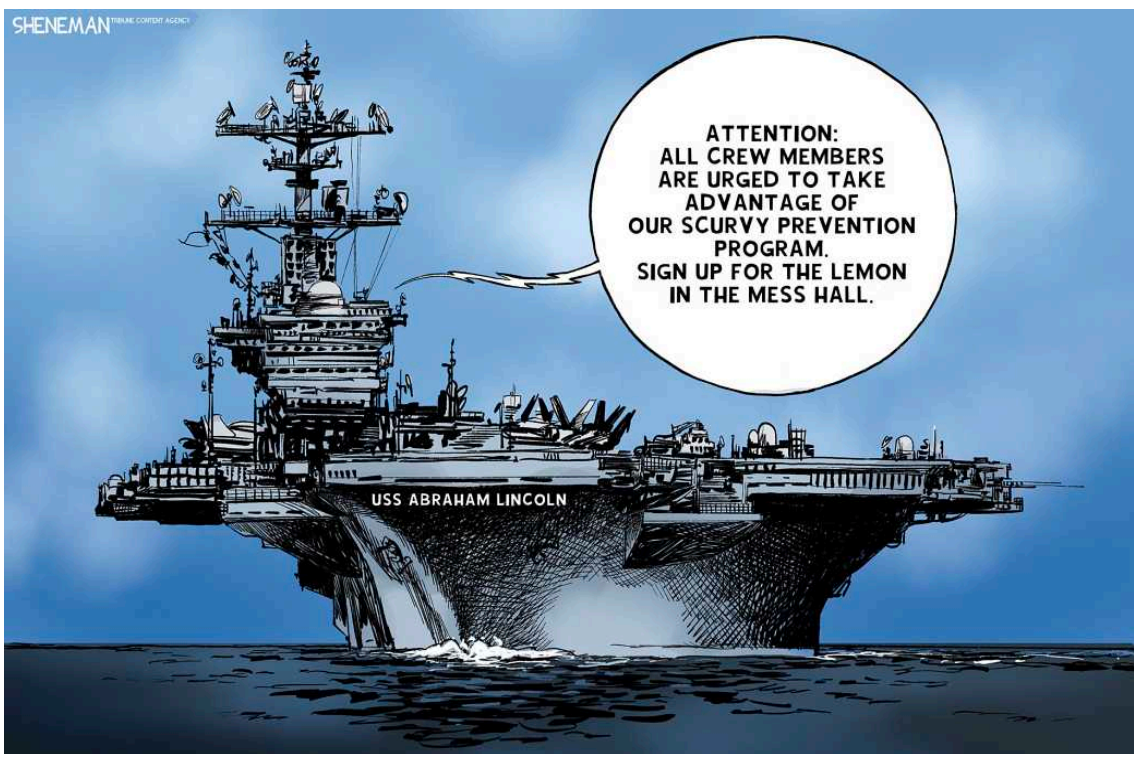
It's getting there, though. Kehm's changes and his emphasis on cleaning up old bills brought in an extra $16 million in the first half of 1990. And after years of stalls and false starts, the Revenue Department will begin collecting parking fines next month. That will unclog Traffic Court, aiding its reform movement. It should also abundantly aid the city budget.

The tough new enforcement system, which includes license suspensions and liens on property for any Illinois resident who piles up tickets in Chicago, is bound to produce a hefty jump in revenue. Now, only about 20 percent of the 4 million or 5 million parking tickets issued each year are paid; under the new system, the city hopes to collect 85 percent.

Vallas was highly regarded as director of the Illinois Economic and Fiscal Commission. Perhaps Daley can give him a boost in his new job by copying Mayor Jaroslav Koran of Prague. Fed up with illegally parked cars, Koran personally plastered their windshields with huge warning posters backed by extra-strong glue. It's cheaper than clamping on Denver Boots, and at least as maddening to the clods who clog city streets.

Tribune editorial board, Aug. 20, 1990

EDITORIAL CARTOON



DREW SHENEMAN/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

OPINION

Chicago's kids deserve better than political theater on vaccines

By Chuka Onuh and Julia Rosebush
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Tushar Mehta prepares a COVID-19 vaccine to administer to children during a free vaccination event at Chicago Teachers Union headquarters Nov. 12, 2021. **ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Chicago Public Schools will reopen on Monday. Already before the first bells ring, President Donald Trump's administration has made our city's most vulnerable population less safe.

On Aug. 10, Trump, flanked by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and National Institutes of Health Director Jay Bhattacharya, told the country that "vats" of vaccine were being "pumped into" children, comparing routine childhood immunizations to the size of a soda bottle. With days until school starts, Chicago parents must now decide who to believe: the pediatricians who have overseen their children's health since birth or the president and the HHS secretary who lack the scientific expertise to enact vaccine policy.

As a medical student and a pediatric infectious disease physician who care for children on Chicago's South Side, we do not have the luxury of treating this executive order as political theater. We will be in the exam rooms and on the hospital floors in the weeks ahead, fielding questions from anxious parents that come from a place of care, not ignorance or neglect. Our community carries decades of justified mistrust toward institutions that have not always earned it. But there is a real difference between a parent asking difficult questions and the federal government sowing distrust in agencies charged with protecting children.

The president's "vats" and vaccine-related autism claims are not supported by science. They are scare tactics targeting parents who rarely interact with the medical system and are the least equipped to challenge it.

The new executive order classifies vaccines into three tiers: those recommended for all children, those recommended for certain "high-risk groups" and others for which shared decision-making is left to parents and doctors. Among the vaccines demoted to the latter two categories are those protecting against meningococcal disease, which can result in death within 24 hours of symptoms showing up, and hepatitis B, which can cause chronic liver disease. This buffet-style selection of vaccines may be manageable for families with easy healthcare access, but for many of the families we serve, a missed vaccine can mean serious, preventable illness.

That risk grows under the administration's call to split the MMR vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps and rubella, into three separate shots at three visits — a return to the pre-1971 era, before the combined vaccine existed. Single-antigen vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella are not currently available and could take years to develop. Increasing the number of visits for a family does not make vaccination safer; it multiplies the chances that a child falls through the cracks before they are protected against diseases that do not wait for a second or third appointment.

We have sat with parents who missed appointments because a shift changed, a bus was late or a sibling of the child had a fever. Under the current vaccine schedule, a missed visit is a minor setback. Under a schedule requiring more visits, the increased likelihood of missed visits leads to a child starting school without the immunity their classmates are counting on. That risk falls hardest on families with the least room to absorb it, in the name of a "gold standard" that no pediatric medical society or peer-reviewed evidence supports.

This comes amid a measles outbreak threatening the U.S.'s elimination status. Chicago's city-wide student vaccination rate sits barely above the 95% herd-immunity threshold. And even then, there are sharp local gaps: Washington Park is at 87.1% and Fuller Park, 88.2%. Vaccines are a community health measure, not just an individual choice — a child's protection depends on the immunity of those around them, regardless of the ZIP code or school type. Since 2015, the rate of CPS students out of compliance with at least one vaccine requirement has nearly doubled, from 6.9% to 12.2%, a trend Illinois has tried to counter through a state law aligning state vaccine guidance with the American Academy of Pediatrics. But no state law can undo the psychological damage of a president telling millions of parents, days before the first bell, that their pediatrician's recommendations are dangerous.

That is why the exam room matters more than ever to pediatric providers. As we care for families over the coming weeks and months for child wellness visits and back-to-school physicals, we cannot let this moment pass in silence. This is not the time to lecture or disengage, but to get curious and reengage. To ask patiently about concerns and address them with facts grounded in science.

The conversations in our clinic rooms — not the courtroom, not the press box, not even the Oval Office — will decide this moment and the future of pediatric care.

Washington has given parents a sound bite. We owe them a conversation.

Chuka Onuh is a third-year medical student at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. Dr. Julia Rosebush is an associate professor of pediatrics in the Section of Infectious Diseases at the University of Chicago Medicine Comer Children's Hospital.



Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson reads a book to students from Genevieve Melody STEM Elementary School at the Legler Regional Branch of the Chicago Public Library on Feb. 7, 2024. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Investment in public libraries ripples across neighborhoods

By Michael Fassnacht and Eva Giglio
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The role our Chicago Public Library plays as a community hub for learning and human connection across every neighborhood is indelible. Its importance as a civic institution that preserves our democracy by upholding the promise that knowledge belongs to everyone has never been more necessary. But the library plays a third role, less discussed but just as consequential to the growth of the city we call home: It is an engine of economic opportunity.

A recent study performed in partnership with McKinsey & Co. found that the library generated an annual $440 million in economic impact against a total annual operating budget of $145 million. This means that for every $1 invested in our library, it returns $3 to the people of Chicago.

These findings confirm what the Chicago Public Library Foundation and all our donors, funders and partners have believed over the last 40 years: Investing in our public library is one of the smartest and most forward-looking investments we can make in our city and for every Chicagoan.

But the multifold return on investment is only the opening. The study also estimates the value of services the Chicago Public Library provides to be at $165 million: checking out materials, high-speed Wi-Fi connection, community spaces, study areas and meeting rooms, hundreds of thousands of programs hosted at the library for Chicagoans of all ages, and online tools and resources that are free for everyone to use.

That value is not concentrated in select areas. It is spread across 82 branches, which contributed an average of more than $4.2 million. The tremendous economic impact is not only felt around the Harold Washington Library Center but in the communities around every branch. They deliver impact where it matters most: to the neighborhoods. In addition, each does so differently, because every library responds to what its patrons need. The library does not simply create economic value; it delivers it equitably.

For the first time, this economic impact study quantified the Chicago Public Library's economic contributions to the city and its residents. But these numbers also represent a more poignant truth. The library is an essential part of Chicago's civic infrastructure. It transforms lives in many ways — from helping students succeed in and out of school, to supporting Chicagoans in entering and advancing in the workforce, to addressing the information literacy crisis, and to providing free, lifelong learning resources seven days a week.

As Chicago deals with seismic cultural, economic and technological shifts, all 82 library branches will play an even bigger role as anchors for our communities. Already, earlier this year, the 81 Club initiative put a library card in the hands of every Chicago Public Schools student. The library continues to be the largest provider of free Wi-Fi in the city and is now preparing to ensure Chicagoans are literate about artificial intelligence as we enter a new phase of the digital future. And with the opening of the Obama Presidential Center branch, the library continues to foster human creativity and connection.

While this study quantified the library's economic footprint, it is crucial to acknowledge that the holistic benefits of the Chicago Public Library are immeasurable. Chicagoans holding their head up a little higher because they learned something new, teens who have a safe space where they can make themselves possible, the lifetime effect of possessing a library card, the moments of connection and care — these defy simple calculation.

We need to keep these positive economic data points in mind as we discuss the 2027 city budget. A dollar invested in our library system has a multifold positive economic impact. Fewer dollars invested will have a negative economic impact across each of our 77 neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the data serves as proof that when we invest in our library, we invest in the social and economic vitality of Chicago today and for future generations.

Michael Fassnacht is board chair for the Chicago Public Library Foundation. Eva Giglio is the president and CEO.

OPINION

AI copyright debate could draw lesson from Chicago's James Petrillo

By David Woodard
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Musicians play together during the Muddy Waters' Centennial Tribute at the Petrillo Music Shell at the Chicago Blues Festival in Grant Park in downtown Chicago on June 14, 2015. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Several hundred thousand people will pass the Petrillo Music Shell in Grant Park this summer without knowing that the man whose name it bears confronted a question America is now arguing about — and, at first, got badly wrong.

James C. Petrillo led Chicago's musicians union before becoming president of the American Federation of Musicians in 1940. During the transition from silent films to "talkies," organized musicians spent heavily trying to stop recorded sound from replacing live performers in movie houses. Some of the union's advertisements featured robots.

The musicians were right about what was coming. They were wrong about how to answer it.

Thousands of cinema musicians lost their jobs as theaters installed sound equipment. By the end of the 1920s, major theater chains were dispensing with the organists and pit orchestras that had accompanied silent films. Those jobs did not return.

In 1931, Joseph Weber, then president of the American Federation of Musicians, predicted that "the only living thing around a motion picture house will be the person who sells you your ticket." He was right about the musicians. He was wrong about the movie theaters.

What survived was not the work that could be reproduced by a machine. Recorded sound was cheaper, consistent and available everywhere at once. A recording did not get sick, take a night off or require a place on a theater's payroll. Musicians could not win by arguing that a recording should not do what it plainly could do.

What recording could not do was be in the room.

A century later, I make my living conducting orchestras before audiences in Tampere, Finland. Those audiences can hear superb recordings at home, often at little or no cost. Yet they still come. They come because a live performance is not merely the delivery of notes. It is an event shared by performers and listeners at one particular time, in one particular place.

Skill was not the protection. Presence was.

But Petrillo eventually found a more consequential answer to technological displacement. In 1942, he did not try to abolish records or prevent people from listening to them. He used the union's leverage to insist that the companies profiting from recorded music contribute to the musical life they were transforming.

On Aug. 1, 1942, the American Federation of Musicians barred its members from making commercial recordings. The ban lasted 27 months, from August 1942 through November 1944, despite pressure from the National War Labor Board and a personal appeal from President Franklin Roosevelt. Record label Decca settled with the union in 1943; RCA Victor and Columbia followed in November 1944.

The settlements required record companies to make payments into a union-controlled fund intended to create work for live musicians. In 1948, that arrangement took enduring form as the Music Performance Trust Fund, which has since financed free public performances by union musicians across the United States and Canada. For decades, it has supported work for musicians and brought live music to communities that otherwise might not have had it.

Petrillo did not stop the machine. He made it pay rent.

That is the part of this history worth remembering as courts, legislatures and technology companies struggle with artificial intelligence and copyright. Much of the present argument is framed around permission: Did an AI company have the right to use a writer's, artist's or musician's work for training? Should it be required to ask first? Those are necessary questions. They are not sufficient ones.

Permission alone does not answer what happens when a technology captures the value created by human work while reducing the demand for the humans who made it. Nor does it answer who should benefit when companies build profitable systems on immense stores of creative labor.

Petrillo's answer was direct: The companies that profited from the technology should help sustain the people whose work made that technology valuable. The answers had to be concrete: Who pays? Into what fund? And who governs it?

Chicago is better placed than most American cities to remember that model. The shell that bears Petrillo's name still stands in Grant Park. So does the underlying principle: Technological change may be inevitable, but the distribution of its rewards is a policy choice.

Art will survive artificial intelligence, just as movies survived recorded sound. Concert halls will still fill with people. Books, images and songs will still be made.

But survival of the art form is not the same thing as survival for the people who make it. That distinction is what policy is for — and what the AI copyright debate still too often misses.

David Woodard is an American conductor living in Tampere, Finland.

Voice of the people

Regulating industrial pollution

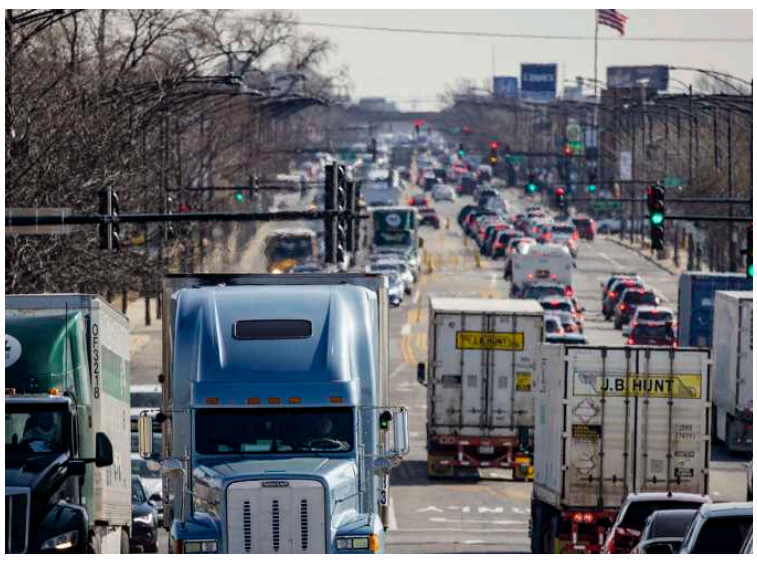
My family has lived in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood for years, squeezed between highways, truck routes and industrial corridors. As a nurse and the Midwest regional representative for the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, I've spoken publicly about what school nurses there see firsthand: kids whose asthma flares up just from their walk to class, missed school days, parents missing work to sit in an emergency room. This isn't abstract for me — it's real life in my family's neighborhood.

Heavy-duty truck and engine manufacturers have known about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's nitrogen oxide standards since 2022 and have already started to build compliant engines. Now some are lobbying to delay or weaken enforcement instead of honoring that commitment, and neighborhoods like Pilsen absorb the impact.

Clean transportation is an upstream investment in health, not just an emissions target. A bus that runs clean means a child at the bus stop breathes easier today, not decades from now.

Manufacturers should be held to the standards they are already obligated to meet. The EPA shouldn't let industry renegotiate at the expense of my neighbors' health.

— Gloria E. Barrera, Midwest regional representative, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments



Truck drivers and others travel through the intersection of South 41st Street and Pulaski Road on March 12, 2025, on Chicago's Southwest Side. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Study of gas stoves, asthma

As an emergency physician in Chicago, I have seen too often when asthma stops being something a patient can manage at home and becomes a medical emergency. Asthma attacks can mean missed school, missed work, frightened families, emergency department visits, hospitalization and death.

We invest enormous resources in treating asthma. However, we should be as committed to understanding and preventing environmental exposures that worsen it.

That is why published research on gas stoves and asthma deserves attention and why the government's decision to cut a study short should concern anyone who cares about wellness and cost of healthcare.

Researchers at Case Western Reserve and MetroHealth received federal funding to study patients with poorly controlled asthma by replacing gas stoves with induction stoves. The original study was designed to include 1,200 households, but funding was terminated before researchers reached that goal.

Even so, the smaller study produced striking results. Participants experienced fewer asthma symptoms and a 70% reduction in emergency department visits, along with fewer missed days of school and work. In homes where indoor air quality was measured, kitchen nitrogen dioxide levels, which worsens asthma, also fell dramatically.

As a physician, I believe the appropriate response is clear: Study these findings further.

I have approached this issue personally, too. My family and I have worked to electrify our Chicago home. I once believed gas cooking was indispensable, but when we monitored our indoor air quality, we could see the impact gas cooking had, even with a high-powered ventilation hood. After switching to induction, our indoor air quality improved.

Of course, one household is not evidence. That is exactly why research matters.

Families deserve reliable information about the air they breathe. Physicians need evidence about environmental contributors to disease. Policymakers need data to determine which interventions improve health and reduce healthcare costs.

Cleaner indoor air cannot become a benefit available only to families who can afford appliance upgrades. Many people rent or live in homes requiring electrical work.

The debate over gas stoves has become politicized. But this should be simple: When credible evidence suggests a common, preventable exposure may worsen a serious chronic disease, we should investigate it thoroughly.

Canceling research does not eliminate risk. It leaves patients, physicians and families with fewer answers.

— Dr. Ted Shieh, Illinois Clinicians for Climate Action, Chicago

'Chicago way' strikes again

In the drama concerning U.S. Rep. Jesús "Chuy" Garcia's decision not to seek reelection and the ensuing machinations to pass the seat on to his chief of staff, the ugly memories of politics "the Chicago way" surfaced again. Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez decided to run for that seat, even though it entailed obtaining 10,000-plus petition signatures. To be safe, he got 17,000-plus signatures since petitions can be challenged.

The powers that be decided to disqualify so many of the signatures that Lopez did not have the required amount to be on the ballot.

I have been involved in Pilsen since 1967, and I have known the alderman since he was elected. While we agree on the various housing and education problems in the ward, we disagree strongly on the solutions.

However, though we disagree on what to do, our conversations have never included ad hominem attacks. He has always been open to listen.

The voters should decide if Sigcho-Lopez should represent them in Congress, not some behind-the-scenes procedure that is designed to allow those with power to stay in power.

The voters should decide who represents them, not the modern-day equivalent of a smoke-filled room.

The system that allows certain actors to manipulate the system to appoint successors is not democratic, fair or ethical.

I support Sigcho-Lopez's lawsuit to get on the ballot and urge the Illinois Board of Elections to allow him that place.

— Rick Callahan, president, RR Callahan Company, Chicago

Putting our safety at risk

On Monday, O'Hare International Airport saw two emergencies because of blown tires on airplanes. No injuries were reported. In early 2025, President Donald Trump's administration fired hundreds of employees of the Federal Aviation Administration. While Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said that no "critical safety personnel" were fired, those fired included airplane maintenance mechanics and radar and landing staff.

I would like to know that I can board a plane that has had proper maintenance and not worry about its tires.

In 1965, Ralph Nader published his book "Unsafe at Any Speed," which accused the auto industry of balking at installing safety devices such as seat belts in cars. Now it is government that is making all of us unsafe. Trump has undermined the mission of the federal agencies created to protect us.

Clean air and water regulations have been significantly reduced under Trump. Most recently, the cyclospora outbreak has claimed lives. The administration's postponement of a Food and Drug Administration rule hampered the food safety system, which hindered a response to the outbreak.

Members of the U.S. military are unsafe. Members of Congress and family members of the 5,000 crew members have expressed serious concerns about sailors on the USS Abraham Lincoln. They are experiencing a longer than typical deployment and have been in the Middle East because of Trump's foolish, unending war with Iran. Concerns about those sailors include poor sanitation, food shortages and mental health issues. Family members report hearing of suicide attempts on the ship.

Any critic or political opponent is not safe from Trump's ire. We are all less safe. Trump has made it clear the only people he cares about are himself and his family.

— Bonnie Dohogne, Evanston

Note to readers

Construction on Chicago streets and bridges this summer has created headaches for many drivers. We'd like you to hear from you about your frustrations with the delays and the city's management of the closures and detours. Send a letter of no more than 400 words by Wednesday, Sept. 2 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.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

Private credit risks remain at large

Regulators and investors must pay attention to strain in the direct loan market

Almost a year ago, US companies First Brands and Tricolor filed for bankruptcy. The failures involved alleged fraud by previously rather obscure companies. But put together, they raised alarms about the highly interconnected web of private lending that had arisen in recent years. Investors, CEOs and policymakers began to warn about corporate debt stress and suggest this episode might be a canary in the coal mine for the roughly $2tn private credit industry, one of the fastest-growing areas of debt markets.

JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon once remarked that "when you see one cockroach, there are probably more". The Bank of England started to explore where the cracks are, and what might happen to the broader financial system if private credit were to suffer a serious widespread shock. A year later, some of the more apocalyptic predictions about horrors supposedly hiding within the market have so far proved ill-founded. But it is also now clear that late summer 2025 was not a blip. The gnawing concerns about private credit, especially in the form of so-called direct lending, are here to stay.

Private credit portfolios have experienced markdowns, outflows and defaults in recent months. Many parts of the market, such as so-called investment-grade asset-backed lending, appear resilient — but others do not. Direct lending, in which non-banks provide capital to businesses, faces strain. As the FT reported this week, the value of troubled loans held by some of the largest private debt investors has reached levels last seen in 2017.

Some on Wall Street characterise concerns over private credit markets as media hype, but the pockets of instability are real. Even some private lenders have themselves suggested in recent comments that cyclical dynamics may now be at play.

Private lending really blossomed several years ago, when interest rates were at record lows and stock markets were surging: private equity firms, which had traditionally leveraged their corporate investments with bank loans, found it cheap and easy to do so through the credit arms of their private capital cousins. This has raised concerns about risk concentration within firms. Circular ownership between firms can further amplify risk.

If there were a serious downturn, the question turns to who is on the hook. A fashion has emerged in recent years for private capital companies to buy or set up life assurance companies, with the premiums of everyday policyholders directed into private credit. A federal investigation into operations run by a pioneer of this structure, Mark Walter, has raised concerns about the scope for mismanagement or worse. Unlike

If there were a serious downturn, the question turns to who is on the hook

banks, which must meet strict federal requirements on capital and reserves, US insurance companies are primarily overseen by state regulators.

Appetite for some private credit assets appears to be slowing down. Blue Owl Capital's flagship private credit arm reported its slowest pace of fundraising in three years this summer, following a period of heavy withdrawal requests for the firm. Ares Management scaled down a billion-dollar private credit continuation vehicle this month by more than half when investors pushed back on valuations.

Macro dynamics exacerbate this: a global "bond glut", with heavy sovereign supply relative to demand, has put upward pressure on market interest rates and contributed to a recent bond sell-off.

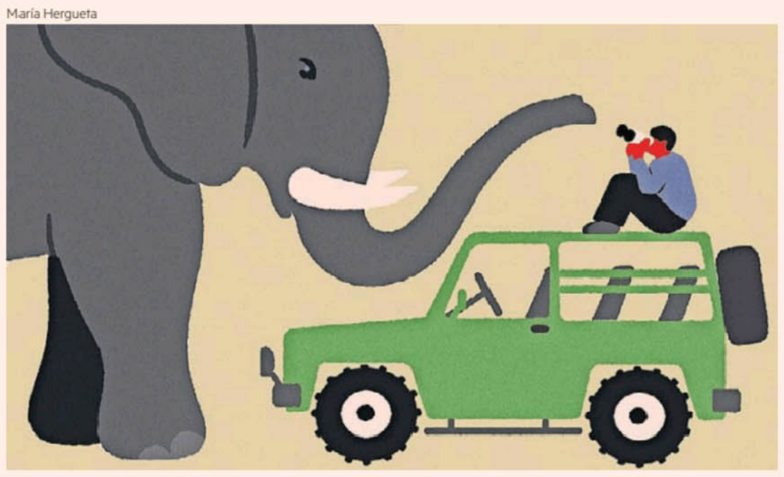
Call them canaries or cockroaches, but the recent signs of stress among private credit operators should be a warning to investors and regulators alike to increase their vigilance.

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Society

Don't take that summer trip for granted

María Hergueta





Martin Sandbu

It's summer in the northern hemisphere: the time for many of us to hit the road, to be somewhere other than where we usually live. If you are on holiday, take a moment to reflect on the remarkable achievement that today's widely accessible travel for leisure constitutes.

Humans have always travelled, of course. But for much of our existence virtually all travel was done out of need. This summer's hit movie *The Odyssey* should remind viewers of two ancient reasons for displacement: war and pillage, and finding one's way home. Homer's epic also illustrates that throughout much of history to be on the move often meant to be lost. This is still true today when many of those who travel and migrate are exiled by conflict, climate stress or economic need.

Humans have always travelled. But for much of our existence it was virtually all out of need

Even more positive motivations to hit the road have historically been instrumental in purpose. Merchants have prospered by connecting far-flung places through trade — for profit, not for discovery. Nomadic peoples have cycled through locations that offer a temporary rich yield for hunting or gathering. Proselytisers, evangelists and missionaries have had religious or ideological dogmas to spread. Discovery was a side effect, not the purpose.

There have, to be sure, always been some who travelled for travel's sake, to find what was new and uncover what was unknown. But they used to be few and far between, and almost always in the employ of someone with more pragmatic purposes. If someone became a mapmaker, envoy or seeker of new trade routes out of curiosity, that was rarely what motivated their patrons to put forward the resources required to send them on their way.

One of the great, under-appreciated benefits of modernity, enlightenment, and eventually mass consumerism has been to make it possible, at scale, to travel with the primary motive of curiosity and self-improvement. An early step was that the scientific expedition — discovery (mostly) for discovery's sake — became established as something worthy of prestige and support. There was also the aristocracy's *grand tour* — visiting the sights of Europe for pleasure and self-improvement — which forged a cultural template for the holiday aspirations of the later age of broad prosperity.

The most mundane version of travel for travel's sake is mass tourism. This phenomenon is frequently criticised, and often for sound reasons. Contemporary versions of the grand tour tend towards kitsch. The climate footprint, especially of distant travel, is unsustainable. Then there are the ravages mass tourism inflicts on places too small to cope, from Venice to Norway's Lofoten islands.

But we can accept these criticisms, and the need to find solutions, while recognising one powerfully redeeming feature of modern travel. Never before in history have so many had the opportunity to go somewhere else simply for the sake of experiencing something different.

The shock of the new — the chance to see how others live, to adopt another perspective on one's own customs — is no longer something that is either painfully inflicted on us through war or exile, or reserved for a lucky few. Billions of people have the time and the money to take to the road freely, without risk of danger or ruin, through the simple means of a holiday to an unknown destination.

To seek discovery is a fundamentally humanist act. This may not be as obvious in your own holiday memories of queueing for museums, holiday parks and beach spots as it is with, for example, Michel de Montaigne turning Europe's first encounters with Native Americans in the Age of Discovery into a social critique of his own society. But even if the scale is smaller, the fact of being exposed to difference is the same. Mundane experiences can be existential for those who live them. Many are those whose lives have been transformed simply by seeing with their own eyes that another life is possible than the one they knew at home.

This humanist potential can be undermined if the travel is compromised — whether because of social media's pressure to document one's presence rather than be present in the moment; or the temptation to replicate elsewhere the comforts of home, reducing travel to mere physical displacement.

Done right, however, travel for discovery's sake unsettles our received wisdom. It increases our knowledge of the astounding diversity of human ways of life, and it makes it a bit harder to take for granted the way that happens to be our own. Every time that happens, it strengthens a little the bulwark we sorely need against forces intent on shrinking our horizons.

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Vietnam must do as much for its SMEs as for its conglomerates

A Anantha Lakshmi's report on Vietnam's bet on South Korean-style *chaebols* (August 12) captures the Communist party's resolve to promote the development of the country's own private sector after years of over-reliance on foreign investment and state enterprises. Indeed, Vietnam is attempting in a single generation what few countries have accomplished, and its leadership deserves credit for the seriousness of that ambition.

Your excellent article mentions but still underplays two factors: the capabilities of Vietnam's domestic small and medium-sized enterprises (which remain woefully underdeveloped), and the capabilities and political wherewithal of the state to avoid capture by large private champions whose objectives often run to short-term gains, for example in real estate, rather than productivity.

South Korea and also Taiwan are instructive. Support in both countries during their industrialisation drives was tied to hard export and quality targets, and withdrawn even from the largest firms when they failed to deliver. A deepening base of capable suppliers grew alongside the champions, nurtured and incentivised by an increasingly capable state demonstrably committed to supporting conditions conducive to their development.

Several of Vietnam's domestic "champion" companies are genuinely capable, as you note. But concentrating support in champions while the supplier base stays weak invites state capture while stalling industrial deepening.

Vietnam's fledgling SMEs remain the country's weak link, starved of capital and with little incentive to invest in technology or skills. Meanwhile capital keeps flowing to land and vanity projects rather than to production, entrenching the interests that benefit and leaving the base unbuilt. Value outflows in the FDI sector already exceed inflows.

Left unchecked, this tilt becomes very hard to reverse because the interests it favours gain the power to defend it. To secure its future, Vietnam must create the conditions for its SMEs to compete and succeed.

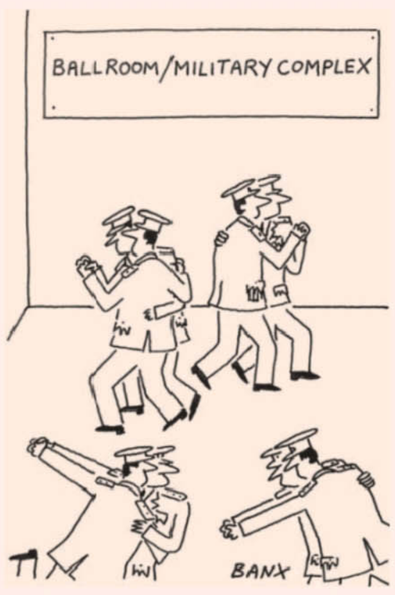
Jonathan London
Associate Professor of Political Economy, Leiden University, the Netherlands; Former UNDP Senior Economic Adviser for Vietnam, 2024-2026

Democracy and high finance is a two-way street

You report the chief executive of JPMorgan Chase "warning" the UK chancellor not to create "a more hostile tax environment for banks" (Report, August 17) — saying in effect that it's the job of politicians to defend the reputation and rewards of the private financial sector.

My response would have been to remind Jamie Dimon that it is also his responsibility to defend and justify the financial sector to the public. Democracy and high finance are not easily compatible. The US and the UK have been through periods in which cartels and banks became the targets of populist politicians. The rise of the Greens in the UK, and of leftwing populists within the US Democratic Party, suggests that another surge may be coming.

Some financial institutions already prefer to operate offshore without the scrutiny and tax burdens that democratic states impose. I hope that financial leaders in New York, London



and other cities in democratic states will continue to recognise that those countries' institutional structures provide a more secure framework for a market economy than authoritarian regimes, as well as a more pleasant social environment in which to live.

Dimon wants politicians to defend banks from attack. As a politician, I expect him and his colleagues in return not only to defend their own sector but also to address the responsibilities to contribute to the maintenance of stable democratic societies that come with their prominence and rewards.

William Wallace
House of Lords, London SW1, UK

Politics of 'respect' makes majoritarianism a virtue

Rana Foroohar's "politics of respect" (Opinion, August 17) risks confusing two quite different things. People deserve respect; their values deserve scrutiny. To insist that respecting people requires respecting their values is to make disagreement an insult and majoritarianism a virtue.

Patriotism may not, after all, be the last refuge of the scoundrel. There is always respect.

Conor Skehan
Malahide, County Dublin, Ireland

Oddly dated watch piece

Your style piece "The ugly watch that runners love" (Life & Arts, August 1) offers an oddly dated account of Garmin. It treats the watch chiefly as equipment for runners and, latterly, a badge of earned status. But the more interesting shift in health is away from the old doctrine of pushing the body ever harder and towards understanding regulation: the autonomic nervous system, vagal activity, sleep, stress and recovery.

A Garmin is not a medical instrument, and no proprietary score should be mistaken for one. Its power is longitudinal.

When mine showed extreme overnight physiological stress despite nine hours in bed, it prompted me to seek medical help; I was diagnosed with severe dysautonomia.

In a culture slowly learning that health is not synonymous with fitness, Garmin can teach us not only how hard to push, but when not to push at all.

Josephine Jones
London SW15, UK

OUTLOOK

DUBLIN

Death stalks the Irish pub as running costs rise



by Jude Webber

Death is revered in Ireland more than it is feared — unless it's the pub that's dying.

From a peak of more than 8,600 in 2005, the number of public houses has shrunk by a quarter in two decades — a phenomenon that brings a whole new meaning to *The Parting Glass*, a haunting song often performed at Irish wakes and funerals.

As closures accelerate, publicans are petitioning the government to introduce tax breaks to halt what some fear is a terminal decline of one of Ireland's best-loved institutions, especially in rural areas.

"As one fella said to me 'if you were left a pub in a will, you'd contest the will'," said Jimmy Murray, a publican who closed The Riverfront, in rural County Cavan, in January 2024 after 22 years.

Yet pubs in Ireland have historically served not only as community hub but as post office, village shop and sometimes the local undertaker too. Until 1962, it was the law to bring dead bodies awaiting inquests to "some convenient public house". Now they are often the venue for post-funeral send-offs.

In a country where families can still dig each other's graves and the death notice site rip.ie is a must-read, there is an embrace of death — both personally and as a community — that reminds me of Mexico, where I used to live. "The essence of being Irish is hanging out with the dead," said Kevin Toolis, author of *My Father's Wake*.

So the slow extinction of the Irish pub itself, with its cosy snugs, live music and warm welcome, is cause for increasing alarm. "It's sad because wherever you go in the world there's an Irish pub," said Murray. And with an estimated 7,000 of those globally, there could soon be more abroad than at home.

Galloping costs and changing habits — less drinking, more coffee and gym — are the "perfect storm" for the high-volume, low-margin pub trade, said Michael O'Donovan, president of the Vintners' Federation of Ireland, which represents some 3,500 publicans.

The VFI has lobbied — so far unsuccessfully — to have Irish pubs recognised by Unesco as part of the country's intangible cultural heritage.

O'Donovan, who runs the Castle Inn in Cork, said more than 100 Irish pubs close a year on average, victims of a wage bill that has increased by 40 per cent and electricity rates that are up 70 per cent in the past five years. "When that low margin is wiped out, it doesn't matter how much high volume you do, you can't make a profit," he told me.

Those who make the case for rescuing Irish pubs point out that they are a big tourist draw, with 20 to 35 per cent of turnover coming from international visitors, according to Donall O'Keeffe, chief executive of the Licensed Vintners' Association representing the Dublin pub trade.

Publicans are lobbying for support in this October's budget that would cost €75mn a year in the form of a targeted tax credit for draught products, capped at €20,000 per premises. Tax credits exist for the film and TV industries and last year the government cut sales tax for hospitality to 9 per cent from 13.5 per cent. But two-thirds of pubs don't serve hot food.

In Northern Ireland, Lidl chose to open a pub next to its supermarket in Dundonald near Belfast earlier this year. This was a global first for the German discount retailer, but it insists it has no further pub plans on the island.

Some Irish pubs have managed to cheat near-death: plans to build a hotel on the site of Dublin music venue the Cobblestone Pub in 2021 sparked a backlash. Musicians carried a coffin to the city council and a campaign by the protest group "Dublin is Dying" successfully overturned the plans.

Others have been less lucky: some are being demolished to make way for apartments. "The land they're on is now more valuable than the pub itself," said Donal Fallon, a social historian of Ireland's pubs who said many people greeted publication of his book *The Dublin Pub* as "akin to an obituary".

Without more public support for Ireland's existing pubs, Murray fears more publicans will be forced to follow his lead and close their pubs. "I can only see this going one way," he says.

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Opinion

Mike Ashley's luxury retail empire is going cheap



BUSINESS

John Gapper

When Sir Dickson Poon, the Hong Kong billionaire, paid £130mn at today's prices for Harvey Nichols 35 years ago, he declared the Knightsbridge shop "one of the greatest stores in the world". He turned the department store frequented by Diana, Princess of Wales, into a luxury group with six UK outlets and several international franchises.

Harvey Nichols was acquired again last week, this time for about £40mn in a pre-packaged administration. The new owner is Frasers Group, the UK company controlled by Mike Ashley, who became a billionaire by building his Sports Direct discount chain from one store into an international multi-brand group with a market value of £3.6bn.

It is typical of Ashley to strike a bargain for "Harvey Nicks". It still feels incongruous that a former squash coach known for cut-price retailing, a sharp eye for trading corporate assets and aggressive tactics towards rivals should own the genteel department store. As he told the FT recently, "I'm not Mary Poppins — when you get in a fight with me, I'll come back at you."

His reputation for being a discount retailer is outdated. Frasers has been moving steadily upmarket under its "elevation" strategy, led since 2022 by Michael Murray, chief executive and Ashley's son-in-law. It controls about 100 luxury stores, led by the Flannels department store chain, and has partnerships with brands such as Moncler, Gucci and Burberry.

But Ashley, who is no longer a director of Frasers but holds a majority stake in the business, is as sharp as ever. Some of the suppliers to Harvey Nichols are still smarting from Frasers' tactics after it acquired the Matches Fashion chain in 2023 and shut it down within months. It emerged with a profit, while they got pennies on the pound as trade creditors.

The road to Harvey Nichols stretches back a decade, to when Sports Direct was overtaken by its smarter rival JD Sports. Ashley had fallen out with suppliers such as Nike and Adidas over his ruthless discounting and messy stores. He saw that shoppers were no longer purely seeking bargains but were increasingly being drawn by brands.

His second insight was that of a value investor. High street retailing was shrinking and valuations were falling as ecommerce rose, giving him the chance to recycle Sports Direct's surplus cash into brands and physical stores. "It's going to be a lot smaller pond but [some] fish are going to be enormous," he remarked in 2019.

> It still feels incongruous that a former squash coach known for cut-price retail should own Harvey Nichols

This led to today's Frasers, which owns a range of brands and stores, including the House of Fraser chain. Sports Direct bought the latter out of administration in 2018, found it was in even more trouble than Ashley realised and scythed through it, closing stores and cutting jobs. Its deals have had mixed results but it usually finds a way to extract some return.

The strangest aspect of Frasers is that it also behaves like a corporate hedge fund, buying stakes in public companies including Mulberry, Boohoo (also known as Debenhams) and Hugo Boss, the German brand. It launched a €2.7bn takeover offer for Boss in June and this week announced that it had built its stake to 48 per cent, despite getting a chilly response.

The investments can turn out to be the prelude to a bid, as with Boss; an attempt to secure leverage over brands in Frasers stores; or simply Ashley's instinct for an undervalued asset ("I just think it's very cheap," he said of his Boss stake-building). But they puzzle even his fans. "We see the individual pieces of the jigsaw, but only he knows the picture," says one investor.

Ashley has a fearsome mystique. Clive Black, head of consumer research at Shore Capital, describes him as "a terrible beauty". But his tactics do not do much for Frasers' rating as a public company. Many investors find it too opaque and unpredictable to touch, although its stock market valuation has risen by 20 per cent in a year amid its burst of dealmaking.

The salutary comparison is Next, another multi-brand retailer with a strong supply chain and logistics platform. Next has ascended steadily to a market capitalisation this week of £18bn — five times that of Frasers — thanks to consistent growth under Simon Wolfson, chief executive. Their operations have a lot in common, but there is a gulf between their styles.

One answer would be for Ashley to take Frasers private again, although he denies even considering it. While Murray insists he is in charge, the hand of the founder is not well hidden. Frasers' purchase of Harvey Nichols may elevate its reputation but do not expect Ashley to change his nature.

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Europe should wish Rubio a bright future



Carl Godfrey



POLITICS

Janan Ganesh

After his death last month, a video surfaced of US Senator Lindsey Graham cheering the bombing of Iran and his own part in it. Other Republicans had advised President Donald Trump against the war. But Graham knew his golf partner "loves blowing stuff up". The recording was apparently made in March.

In August, Iran still controls the Strait of Hormuz. The US has lost face and Patriot missiles. Households have lost purchasing power as oil prices have risen. Even if the war had worked, a senator in his eighth decade might be expected to greet the use of lethal force with some regret and decorum.

Still, European liberals cannot recoil too much. Graham's belligerence often came in useful. He was a friend of Ukraine in Washington. He was vigilant to the threat from Vladimir Putin when Germany was still building a gas pipeline to Russia and Mayfair was a recreational space for the Kremlin-connected rich. His last public act was a visit to Kyiv. A bill is going through Congress now that would grant extraordinary new tariff powers against Russia and its enablers. Graham introduced it. He was pro-Nato in a Republican movement that often wasn't.

Are the two things — the Ukraine stalwart and the man who never met a war he didn't like — separable? Could Europe have had the one without the other?

If not, then Europe must prepare to experience this problem all over again in the coming years. Something of Graham lives on in Marco Rubio. The secretary of state's aggression can be unnerving, what with his role in the Iran war, his side line as a kind of imperial proconsul in Venezuela, his pressure on the regime in Cuba with who knows what planning for the aftermath of its possible collapse. At the same time, this is the man who wanted to sanction Russia even before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a deterrent.

Rubio, as Graham did, personifies a dilemma for the continent. The Americans who are likeliest to agitate for reckless actions abroad are sometimes also the likeliest to defend democratic Europe. Both habits stem from a belief that America has a historical and almost celestial role to guard free societies. It is a dangerous belief and, for a continent in need of friends, a useful one. On that basis, Europe has to hope that Rubio rather than JD Vance or Tucker Carlson is the future of Republicanism.

In theory, of course, it is possible to have the best of both worlds: a selectively belligerent leader who picks only the right fights. But in the field of actually existing Republican candidates to succeed Trump, the choice is between Rubio and those who would sheathe the American blade even when the cause is just. (Or *only* when the cause is just, if we regard the war secretary Pete Hegseth as keen on the Iran intervention but reluctant to support Ukraine.) It should be obvious with whom Europe's faint hope lies.

Let me anticipate the obvious counter-argument. Rubio is slipperier than a skinned eel. He voted against aid to Ukraine in 2024. Though he cited a reason — the bill did not come with extra border funding at home — the vote reeked of careerist desperation from someone who feared getting on the wrong side of Maga's Russia apologists. Graham was a career-long war zealot. Rubio is not a career-long anything. Don't bet Europe on a man who six months ago accused the continent of inviting "civilisational erasure" through immigration. (As ever in the Maga telling, western civilisation is supreme, but also so weak as to succumb to a few decades of liberal government. It is not for us to question how it can be both.)

> Americans who agitate for reckless actions abroad are sometimes democracy's likeliest defenders

To this case against Rubio, there is but one answer: consider the alternatives. Vance's animus for Europe, and specifically for underwriting its security, is much deeper and longer standing. Carlson has described himself as "more sympathetic to Putin" than to Volodymyr Zelenskyy. If by 2028 the Iran war is seen on the right as a clear mistake and a betrayal of America First, both of these men could enter the Republican primaries on an I-told-you-so platform.

On the balance of probabilities, a Democratic president would be better for Europe. But even that is less clear than it was. The leftward drift of the party might extend to a new scepticism of the "war machine", a Democratic Socialists of America phrase that sounds worryingly open-ended. The left will argue that Joe Biden grew unpopular because he was seen as being preoccupied abroad as inflation surged at home.

Through a process of elimination, then, Europe is left with Rubio, certainly on the GOP side. When Graham died, he became the closest thing to a traditional George W Bush-era hawk in Trump's orbit, and certainly the last one with a future.

As such, Europeans have no choice but to wish him well, even if it is through teeth so gritted that we have to get them capped afterwards. There were always two sides to America as a protector. It was indispensable, and it was reckless. In the now-romanticised era of US-Europe solidarity, when Nato was sacrosanct, the US fought wars in Vietnam, in which no European country participated, and Iraq, which split the continent. Those who live under one wing of the hawk can't feign surprise when the other flaps around to disastrous effect from time to time. Europeans would find a President Vance dangerously prudent.

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The US munitions crisis goes back further than Iran

Katherine Thompson

The heavy expenditure of critical munitions in the Iran war has set off a deluge of headlines warning that US stockpiles are close to running dry. While certainly alarming, these tend to miss that this new conflict has simply exposed and accelerated a pre-existing problem. The warning signs of a serious munitions shortage — and its impact on the US military — were apparent long before.

Since 2018, US strategic doctrine has acknowledged limitations on the scope of America's engagement in international conflict, particularly given the resource demands of deterring conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, a US priority. However, leaders in Washington from both political parties have consistently refused to grapple with the hard choices that come with prioritisation.

The large-scale drawdown of high-value munitions from the US arsenal to arm Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 robbed the war chest to the tune of approximately $67bn. Combined with the inability to replenish stocks quickly given significant industrial base constraints, the US traded away a significant degree of optionality. Prior to this, Congress had protected US stockpiles from flowing out to foreign partners at the expense of US preparedness for its own global requirements. Yet there was no substantive debate on the trade-offs.

The US intervention in Iran has only exacerbated these unfavourable conditions by further stressing munitions stockpiles already in deficit. The numbers speak for themselves. Media reports estimate the depletion of nearly 80 per cent of the US Thaad inventory and close to half of Patriot interceptors. The supply of Tomahawks, a long-range munition critical for a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific, is also estimated to have fallen by 50 per cent.

The Trump administration is now seeking a $1.5tn defence budget from Congress, as well as $73bn in additional supplemental funding just to address the costs of the war in Iran. Munitions funding is a significant portion of this.

But while money and higher production targets look good on paper, they cannot speed up estimated delivery timelines. Even if requested funding and significant production increases break through the budget stalemate on Capitol Hill, the replenishment of critical munitions back to pre-Iran war levels is years away.

> Rubber-stamping eye-watering levels of defence funding will not solve the problem

The notion that more money, more munitions and more time will always materialise permeates policymaking in Washington to an unhealthy extent. This is evident in the very decision to start a war in the Middle East. President Donald Trump chose to do this despite inheriting a stressed and limited resource environment. Moreover, he appears to be keeping further escalation on the table. False confidence only fuels strategic error. It cannot improve the inventory balance sheet.

The pressure is mounting for the government to deliver both a defence budget and an Iran supplemental funding bill in September. But rubber-stamping eye-watering levels of defence funding will not solve the problem. The Iran war has brought the structural and strategic limitations of the US military into focus, but reducing the munitions crisis to merely a symptom of this conflict alone misses the forest for the trees.

The fundamental issue is that the US is overcommitted to the defence of other nations and cannot materially deliver in more than one theatre of conflict. More money and better production targets without accompanying safeguards to protect American stockpiles all but ensure another munitions crisis in future.

Congress, given its sole power over the purse, is the only branch of government that can require and enforce guardrails on the nation's critical military resources. It should not move the defence budget or an Iran emergency supplemental forward without reinstituting and expanding protections on US munitions stockpiles. It must ensure the US can meet and sustain its highest-priority requirements first — resourcing a credible deterrence by denial approach in the Indo-Pacific. Leaders on both sides of the political aisle no longer have the luxury of time to put off making difficult choices.

On paper, the munitions shortages present a maths problem. In practice, however, it is a strategic one. The defence budget and supplemental funding for Iran present a new opportunity to pivot back to a path of prioritisation. However, without acceptance of both strategic limitations and tighter guardrails around critical munitions, the US is doomed to repeat the cycle again under potentially far worse conditions.

The writer is a senior fellow in defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute

Don't mess up London's knowledge economy

Michael Spence

In north London's Knowledge Quarter, you pass Google DeepMind, the Francis Crick Institute, UCL Hospital and the Alan Turing Institute in little more than 20 minutes. I've come to know it well since I joined UCL more than five years ago. On any given day there will be researchers moving between laboratories and students heading into them, entrepreneurs meeting investors and clinicians collaborating with scientists on problems that have occupied medicine for decades.

Institutions have arrived in this area over the course of centuries (at UCL we are celebrating our 200th birthday). It's essentially a snowball effect: universities attract talent, businesses follow the talent, investors follow those businesses. And physical proximity is still the mechanism of success.

Jim O'Neill, ex-Goldman Sachs chief economist, recently argued that the government must back the places and institutions with edge. He is right to point out that if the UK wants innovation-led growth and private investment, it must support research-intensive cities that have already built critical mass around world-class universities and major hospitals. This is a fact that our national discourse keeps avoiding. Addressing the over-concentration of political power in London should not lead to undermining its role as a world-leading centre of innovation.

Critical mass cannot be built overnight. The Starmer administration recognised the Ox-Cam Arc as one of these research-intensive innovation clusters, and invested in it accordingly. Andy Burnham is now in Downing Street after a decade building Manchester into the country's fastest-growing city region, partly on innovation. So if we accept that we will drive growth by investing in areas which have developed a high concentration of innovation, and that Manchester is one and the Oxford-Cambridge corridor is another, surely it is now time to accept that London is every bit as important.

> Political devolution should not undermine the city's role as a world-leading centre of innovation

Successive governments have, rightly, focused on revitalising the regions of the UK where growth is lowest. That makes sense. So does decentralising government. But investing in London's innovation should be a priority too. The capital hosts several state-backed biomedical research centres, without which many incredible breakthroughs would not have been possible. But the funding for these centres is at risk.

Nowhere can growth be delivered faster than in London, with its unique role in AI, life sciences, fintech and the cultural and creative industries. Its universities train graduates and attract international talent who build businesses across the country. Its labs produce research that becomes treatments delivered throughout the NHS, and exports that help finance the health service. UCL spinout Autolus Therapeutics, for example, is based in London, manufactures in Stevenage and is delivering its pioneering treatments first in Manchester. Capital raised in London finances companies across the country.

This should not leave smaller cities behind. The Bennett Institute's work on connected clusters shows that rather than competing, regions of the UK support and reinforce each other's growth. Hubs like London and Manchester contribute to growth across the country through high-value supply chains, developing skills, research infrastructure and trade. When productivity in technology or life sciences rises in London, other places gain too, and vice versa.

If every place receives enough funding to survive but not enough to scale, the UK should not be surprised if it struggles against, say, the US or Japan, which have spent decades building world-class innovation centres.

Burnham's government can make this explicit: identify the major clusters, back them and spread the growth they generate. London is central to that story.

The writer is president and provost of University College London

Opinion

The new physics of power

It doesn't take much for small powers to gain a big advantage over the powerful.



Thomas L. Friedman



GREGORY HALPERN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

If I were writing a book about the U.S. war with Iran, I know exactly what the title would be. It would be President Trump's social media post of April 5, 2026, directed at the leaders of Iran: "Open the [expletive] Strait, you crazy bastards, or you'll be living in Hell — JUST WATCH!"

Wars are a crucible that very often exposes changes in the physics of the world around us — who has power, who doesn't have power and how power is being wielded. Nothing better captures the new power equation produced by this war than Trump's unhinged and obscene rant at the Iranian leadership for not bending to his bombs.

This new physics of war is equally present in the conflicts between Ukraine and Russia, Hezbollah and Israel, Hamas and Israel and the Houthis and everyone else. My summary of this new dynamic is that the small can now act really big, really accurately and really inexpensively. And while the big can also act really small, really accurately, it is far more expensive for them to do that while bearing the burden of vast legacy arms systems.

The net advantage, for the moment, seems to be to the small. That should keep you up at night, when you think how the emerging revolution in artificial intelligence will surely supercharge this trend, enabling the small to act even bigger, mightier and less expensively.

It's not surprising that Trump is frustrated. After all, on March 11, less than two weeks after he and Israel started this latest bout of war with Iran with a large-scale bombing campaign, Trump declared: "We've won. Let me tell you, we've won. You know, you never like to say too early you won. We won. In the first hour it was over. But we won."

He was right about one thing: Never say you won too early.

Trump didn't realize that the Iranian government also has a say in when this war is won and lost. More important, and unlike Trump, Tehran had a Plan B for the morning after: use its newfound ability to act big, accurately and cheaply to seize control of the Strait of Hormuz — even though its military was a small fraction of the size of America's and had been badly hammered.

I wish I could take delight in seeing this pompous, narcissistic, constantly bloviating president humbled by reality. But I truly do not — because this is getting scary. And it is going to get worse. The Iranians have inflicted real harm on America — on the battlefield and on our economy — the scale of which Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have been hiding.

Iran has been under economic sanctions, on and off, since 1979. Yet it has managed to develop an arsenal of sophisticated but relatively inexpensive missiles and drones that has enabled it to fight both Israel and the United States to something of a draw — and do some significant damage to American military assets in the region along the way. Consider just a few stories that you may not have noticed.

The reason the main U.S. aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, has sometimes run low on supplies to sustain its almost 5,700-person complement is that after the first day of the war, Iranian missiles and attack drones destroyed much of the U.S. supply base in Bahrain. "As it went up in smoke, so did a major logistics hub that the Navy has relied on for decades," The Times reported. This forced Trump and the even more smug Hegseth to increase reliance on a base under British command on the island of Diego Garcia as its supply hub, which is roughly 2,700 miles from Bahrain. How was the Bahrain base so unprotected against Iranian missiles on the first day of the war? If that is not worth hauling Hegseth before Congress, I don't know what is.

Or maybe you missed this story in the journal Defence Security Asia commenting on a CNN report that sometime in the early days of March, an Iranian missile destroyed a $500 million radar vital to running a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) advanced missile defense system at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan. The attack signaled "a potentially transformative moment" in the "strategic contest" between Iran and the United States and Israel, the journal said.

A senior Jordanian official told me he was stunned to learn that the Iranians somehow managed to send their missile at the THAAD's radar system by maneuvering it — in flight — to make a flanking attack on the radar and evade detection and interception. This was against the most sophisticated antimissile system in the U.S. arsenal!

John Arquilla, professor emeritus of defense analysis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, explained to me that missile warfare is no longer just a matter of firing off a warhead on a predictable trajectory and then letting inertia and GPS smart guidance systems lead it to the target. The Russians have focused enormous resources on building missiles with midflight maneuverability, guided by better real-time information, increasingly propelled at hypersonic speeds, and capable of arriving from an angle a defender has not anticipated. Iran's Fattah missiles reportedly have such capabilities, although it is still not clear whether they or drones took out the THAAD 500 miles from Iran.

"This is making the missile the preeminent weapon of the 21st century, with the potential to undermine deterrence and stability" in many different kinds of battles, said Arquilla, the author of the new book "The Troubled American Way of War: From Hiroshima to the Age of Algorithms."

China has been deploying maneuverable hypersonic DF-17 missiles for several years now in its live-fire exercises in Chinese waters near Taiwan.

On March 3, two one-way attack drones struck the U.S. Embassy compound in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, at about 1:30 a.m. The first drone flew straight into the floor housing the C.I.A. station at the Riyadh embassy; the second drone flew directly into the entry hole created by the first, causing an extensive blast and a fire that burned for hours. Later reports suggested this Iranian attack may have been aided by Russian satellite intelligence provided by Vladimir Putin. Trump has seemingly done nothing about that.

These new weapons amplify another advantage the small have over the big: They don't have to win. They just have to avoid losing.

For generations, Arquilla noted, wars were "won by mass and energy." Warfare followed a simple physical law: The more distance you fired your projectile, the less accurate it was. So, distance had to be overcome "with mass and energy." Not today. "Now wars are won by information," said Arquilla.

And even the little guys now have access to it. You just have to look at how Hezbollah has inflicted significant harm on Israeli communities and the Israeli Army, with its huge U.S.-made military platforms; how badly Ukraine has bloodied a big bad Russia; and how Iran is fighting the United States and Israel to a stalemate to see how inexpensive, precision weapons buildable in a basement workshop with components that can be found on Amazon have severed the old link between range and accuracy.

Ukraine, Arquilla added, "has become a sea power without a traditional navy. It has used drone boats and armed Jet Skis" to push Russia's conventional Black Sea fleet far enough away from Ukraine's coastline so it can keep exporting its grain and fertilizer to world markets.

These new technologies allow "the many and the small" — Iranians, Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas — "to slip the heavy punches of their opponents, because they are well hidden and can strike back with accurate blows of their own," Arquilla said. The U.S. military, meanwhile, has just 11 big lumbering divisions and 11 carrier groups.

That is why defenders now have a real advantage over attackers, Arquilla concluded. Trump and Hegseth kept focusing on "scaling up the war" — adding more tempo and more tonnage — and the Iranians focused on "scaling out the war," hiding small units with precision missiles in more places and attacking U.S. bases and Arab oil facilities all over the Gulf.

"Their job is to survive long enough to shoot and scoot. On land, a few big formations of Abrams tanks matter less than the many and the small with cheap weapons they can build and modify in a week," Arquilla said.

These new weapons amplify another advantage the small have over the big: They don't have to win. They just have to avoid losing. We have to win, end the war, go home and never look back. Good luck with that now.

Before the Iranians and Hezbollah get too smug, though, they should remember the other half of my equation: While the small can now act really big, the big can now act really small. On the first day of the war, Israeli airstrikes with precision weapons — aided by U.S. intelligence — killed over 40 senior Iranian leaders gathered in a high-level leadership meeting in a single compound in Tehran. In other words, with precise information, Israel wiped out much of Iran's national security elite with one shot.

And then there was the Israeli pager attack on Hezbollah. On Sept. 17 and 18, 2024, Israel detonated the pagers and other hand-held electronic devices used by Hezbollah members, fighters, officers, medics and civilian supporters, killing dozens of people and wounding some 3,000 others. An estimated 1,500 Hezbollah fighters were reportedly put out of action because of injuries, mostly affecting their hands, faces and hips. Using a relatively small quantity of explosives and a huge dollop of information, Israel killed and wounded a significant number of Hezbollah fighters in a few hours.

The U.S.-Israel Stuxnet attack on Iran's Natanz enrichment facility that began in 2009 was another version of this. Instead of bombing the facility, the United States and Israel inserted a small computer worm — a few lines of code — to disable a big number of Iran's IR-1 centrifuges, though the centrifuges were quickly replaced and the disruption was ultimately minimal. (The United States and Israel have never acknowledged responsibility for the virus.) That was the big acting small, using just malware, but you can bet that the development of that code, and the whole joint operation, cost a lot of money.

What is truly alarming today is how easy it is becoming for the small to act big — and by "small," I don't just mean in size, but also in age. A teenager with a laptop, a Starlink connection and an open-weight A.I. model can now disrupt a municipal water or power system by identifying and exploiting old software vulnerabilities.

So don't be surprised if one day soon you hear your mayor sounding like Trump: "Turn my water back on, you crazy . . ."



OZAN KOSE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

A vessel carrying Ukrainian grain in Istanbul. Ukraine has used drone boats and armed Jet Skis to push Russia's Black Sea fleet far enough away from Ukraine's coastline so it can export its grain to world markets.



BRIAN WILBUR/U.S. NAVY

The U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln has sometimes run low on supplies to sustain its almost 5,700-person complement. After the first day of the war, Iranian missiles and drones destroyed much of a supply base in Bahrain.

OPINION

The New York Times
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Yes, Woke 1.0 was crazy. Where's the accountability?



Bret Stephens

It's all but official.

"Woke 1.0 was crazy," Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said this month, quoting a far-left New York City councilman. Given the congresswoman's own record — she previously insisted that some groups "have no choice but to riot," called for defunding the police and "prison abolition" and used the demeaning term "menstruating person" to describe a woman — the crazy that she speaks of was also her own.

Good for A.O.C. for acknowledging mistakes. Now can we have some accountability for the vast damage that Woke 1.0 did, not to mention the damage that Woke 2.0 continues to do?

Wokeness, as it commonly came to be known at the start of this decade, wasn't just an Orwellian linguistic fad or a tedious set of corporate training sessions in cultural sensitivity or wacky policy ideas about addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities. As it was experienced by those on the wrong end of it, it was a system of enforced ideological conformity, policed by social bullying and institutional coercion (or cravenness), which damaged and sometimes even ended reputations, careers and at least one man's life.

It was a system of enforced ideological conformity, policed by social bullying and institutional coercion.

Restitution, if only in the form of honest contrition and perhaps even a public apology, is in order.

Restitution, for instance, for Stan Wischnowski, the top editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, who in 2020 had to resign from his job and issue a groveling apology for the sin of running an article by the paper's architecture critic with the headline "Buildings Matter, Too." Restitution for Mike Pesca, the host of a popular podcast, "The Gist," who was suspended indefinitely from his job at Slate for making a case, in an interoffice back and forth, that it may sometimes be permissible for a non-Black person to quote a racial slur in narrow contexts. Restitution, yes, for James Bennet, a former editor of The Times's Opinion section, who was forced from his job after the publication of a controversial guest essay by Tom Cotton, a Republican senator.

Restitution for authors, like my friend Richard North Patterson, who has 16 New York Times best sellers to his name. When he wrote a novel that dealt with racial discrimination and had a Black woman as a leading (and wholly sympathetic) character, roughly 20 major imprints rejected it, with several making it clear it was because he was white. Restitution for every aspiring young fiction writer with the misfortune of being white and male and therefore quietly but efficiently cut out of the game of literary prizes and publication opportunities. As Jacob Savage noted last year in Compact magazine, his research found that at the time, "not a single white American man born after 1984 has published a work of literary fiction in The New Yorker."

Restitution, also, in academia.

For Jason Kilborn, a University of Illinois, Chicago, law professor, who was barred from campus and placed on administrative leave after he had used the first letter of two slurs in his civil procedure exam, an affront the Black Law Students Association described as "mental terrorism." For Ilya Shapiro, a legal scholar about to start a position at Georgetown Law School, who had to endure a 122-day university inquest for the crime of a clumsy tweet betraying a conservative worldview. For Carole Hooven, who was railroaded out of Harvard after a TV appearance in which she said that the terms "male" and "female" were scientifically essential even as she insisted that "facts about biology" shouldn't "prevent us from treating people with respect."

Restitution for the hapless men who got caught up in a #MeToo maw that made no distinction between Harvey Weinstein-style predation and fumbled romantic advances or unsatisfying hookups. The comedian Aziz Ansari was the most notable victim of this form of public humiliation, but there are many others, without influence or deep pockets, whose lives were permanently scarred in situations where accusations alone were viewed as sufficient to establish guilt and exact professional consequences.

Restitution, not least, for the drive-by victims of Woke 1.0 — sometimes literally so. Emmanuel Cafferty, an employee for San Diego Gas and Electric, was fired from his job when he was pictured with his arm hanging out of the window with his fingers linked in what appeared to be an "OK" gesture, which the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League have called a coded symbol of white supremacy. Mr. Cafferty, who is Hispanic, insisted he had merely been cracking his knuckles.

Certain readers of this column will be tempted to rejoin that all this is old history. So is the Red Scare of the 1950s, but that's no reason to forget about it. Other readers may say that what President Trump and his allies are doing is just as bad as Woke 1.0 or far worse. I've denounced them, too, but that's pure whataboutism.

If liberals want to be serious about standing up for liberty, they have a particular obligation to acknowledge and reject the illiberalism that swept so much of the left in recent years. Any politics of moral certitude and promiscuous demonization — whether it comes from MAGA on the right or wokeness on the left — isn't just unfit for a free society.

It's crazy.



HARRIS ALLEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

These protesters were charged with terrorism. Who's next?

Rozina Ali



LUCAS BURTIN

Earlier this summer, a federal judge sentenced a group of eight anti-ICE activists to a collective 450 years in prison after what has become the first "test case" for the Trump administration's crackdown on left-wing activism.

The government's case is built on events that occurred in front of the Prairieland ICE detention facility in Alvarado, Texas, on the Fourth of July last year. That night, activists set off fireworks as part of a noise demonstration to show solidarity with the people detained inside. Then a few separated from the group, vandalizing cars, slashing tires on a government van and breaking a surveillance camera. When a police officer arrived on the scene and pointed his weapon, one of the demonstrators, Benjamin Song, fired an AR-15-style rifle, injuring the officer in the neck.

The government referred to the group of demonstrators as a "Northwest Texas antifa cell," suggesting the activists were part of a coordinated effort to commit a terrorist attack on the ICE facility.

What Mr. Song and the others did that night are crimes, to be sure. Mr. Song injured a police officer. Some damaged federal property. All of them were convicted of riot. But civil rights advocates who watched the case expected those protesters to get sentences of a handful of years. Instead, even people on the periphery of the action — whose worst offense was spray-painting a guard post — got anywhere from 30 to 70 years in prison.

The decades-long sentences in the Prairieland case were only possible because prosecutors brought forth an unusual charge: "material support" for terrorism. This law, which has been used to prosecute primarily Muslims in the years after 9/11, is being broadly applied under the Trump administration against people President Trump characterizes as his political enemies. Who and what constitutes "terrorism" could have broad implications for our civil liberties. If Mr. Trump's statements are any indicator, what happened at Prairieland is not likely to be an isolated incident.

The law that prosecutes material support to terrorism, created in 1994 and expanded two years later in the wake of the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, is two-pronged: one part prosecutes support for a terrorist organization and the second prosecutes support for specific acts of terrorism. Both come with lengthy minimum sentences and a possibility of a lifetime in prison. But what could constitute "support" is so ambiguous that, shortly after the law was created, it had confused even senior government officials. During an interagency background briefing, one Clinton administration official wondered if even "$25 of dues" to a group could count as material support.

AS IT TURNED OUT, prosecutions for small donations and increasingly vague definitions of support would happen in a few years. In the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, prosecutors accused hundreds of people of supporting terrorism this way. "Support for terrorism" could entail anything from translating a magazine to even offering nonviolent alternatives to a militant group. It did not matter if the defendant directly helped carry out an assault or belonged to a terrorist organization: They could be prosecuted as if they were.

The post-9/11 years were a time of a single-minded effort to quash threats of Islamic terrorism before an attack could be carried out. But the ambiguity of the law, in particular its focus on prevention, made the material support statute ripe for abuse by overzealous prosecutors. Take the case of a Kurdish imam in Albany, N.Y., named Yassin Aref, who was arrested in 2004 and charged with both parts of the material support law.

Prosecutors alleged that Mr. Aref witnessed a man (who turned out to be a government informant) "loan" money to a member of Aref's mosque. The informant fabricated a story, telling Mr. Aref and the man that he had acquired the funds he was offering them by selling ammunition to a terrorist group that was planning to assassinate a Pakistani envoy. Mr. Aref nodded along with the vague details of the informant's tale, and in keeping with Islamic customs of money-lending, agreed to witness the loan. According to prosecutors, that was enough to show his support for terrorism, a crime of which Mr. Aref was eventually convicted, serving 15 years in prison. A Human Rights Watch report later highlighted Mr. Aref's case as one of many showing dubious uses of antiterrorism laws.

In Prairieland, prosecutors are using anti-terrorism laws we've seen before.

Mr. Aref's case was not a lone example. In those years, law enforcement swept through Muslim communities, goading young men — including those with no criminal record — toward making statements in support of terrorist plots, then slapping them with material support charges. Of the nearly 1,000 defendants prosecuted by the United States on charges of international terrorism after 9/11, more than half were convicted of material support for terrorism, including cases when no act of violence occurred.

An Albany Times Union columnist who was following Mr. Aref's trial at the time wrote, "Someday we'll look back on the present national paranoia over terrorism and the excesses done in its name with the same national embarrassment that Americans feel for Senator Joe McCarthy's communist witch hunts of the 1950s and our appalling treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II."

TWENTY YEARS LATER, the witch hunt appears to have only expanded, albeit with a different political focus. Last September, two months after the demonstration at the Prairieland ICE facility, Charlie Kirk was assassinated. After the murder, the president's adviser Stephen Miller described left-wing political organizations as a "vast domestic terror movement."

Weeks later, Mr. Trump issued a memo directing the F.B.I.'s Joint Task Terrorism Force — a network expanded in the aftermath of 9/11 — to investigate and disrupt "domestic terrorism" and political violence. He also signed an executive order designating antifa as a "domestic terror organization," describing it as a "militarist, anarchist enterprise that explicitly calls for the overthrow of the United States government." But antifa, short for "antifascist," is a leaderless political movement composed of disparate strategies and aims.

The U.S. government has no legal designation for "domestic terrorist groups." Yet even when it is just talk, the Trump administration's use of the term had an impact on the Prairieland case. In the original indictment, released in July 2025, prosecutors had not leveled any charges of material support for terrorism. By November, after filing two rounds of indictments, prosecutors charged all eight defendants with the crime.

As a deeply reported Texas Monthly story detailed, the Prairieland defendants were hardly members of a cohesive terrorist cell. Some were part of a Signal chat that was used to plan the demonstration. Several of them were attached to various organizations, like the Democratic Socialists of America and an anticapitalist reading group.

Even if one reads these loose associations as proof of a coordinated attempt, legal experts told me it would not rise to a terrorism charge. The demonstrators were already faced with a cocktail of severe charges after their arrest, including attempted murder. (Mr. Song would be convicted of attempted murder; the other four defendants charged with it were acquitted.) But the material support charge allows the court to impose some of the harshest sentencing in its legal arsenal. "It's an act of judicial terrorism, designed to keep people from coming to protest," Shayana Kadilal, a senior attorney for the Center of Constitutional Rights who has worked on material support cases, told me.

This law has not only been used against individuals; prosecutors have also turned it against nonprofits, ultimately shutting down a major Muslim charity and complicating the work of others. "Once terrorism laws are in place, they are hard to roll back," Katherine Tomaszewski, a lawyer who has helped charities in such cases, told me. "No one wants to be seen as 'soft on terror.'" But, she pointed out, the danger of the law being so "overbroad and unchecked" is that it can be manipulated.

We're already beginning to see the Trump administration building on such precedents. In the aftermath of Mr. Kirk's murder last year, the White House called for investigations of liberal foundations and donors, like the philanthropist George Soros and the businessman Reid Hoffman, for their role in what they claim is fomenting political violence (read: financing liberal nonprofits). The Justice Department instructed federal prosecutors to explore possible charges against Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations, including racketeering, wire fraud and material support for terrorism.

It could well get worse from here. "The label of 'terrorism' is a powerful political tool," Sufia Khalid, a lawyer representing one of the Prairieland defendants, told me. For the last two decades, the "terrorism" charge was leveled almost exclusively at a religious minority, lulling some into believing that such laws would not affect them. Now, the domestic use of the terrorism charge threatens to cast its net even wider.

ROZINA ALI *is a journalist who covers conflict, Islamophobia and immigration. She is a contributing writer at The New York Times Magazine.*

FROM READERS

The meaning of morality and Nolan's 'Odyssey'

Re "Nolan built a different Trojan horse," by Ezra Klein (column, Aug. 5):

Ezra Klein credits the director Christopher Nolan with smuggling Judeo-Christian ethics into his film version of "The Odyssey" in the guise of Zeus' law. But Mr. Nolan has said otherwise.

In a recent interview with the Chinese podcaster Zhong Shu, he traces the film's moral core to xenia, the Homeric hospitality ethic, and denies any deliberate Christianizing. He is right to do so.

Zeus Xenios, an aspect of Zeus that demands hospitality to strangers, is not a Christian add-on. It existed long before Christianity existed. And the reciprocity principle Mr. Klein credits to Judeo-Christian sources — like the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the New Testament Gospel of Matthew and the first-century B.C.E. Rabbi Hillel — turns up in the work of Confucius five centuries earlier, and again in Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic texts.

Mr. Klein isn't wrong that the Golden Rule matters, or that the modern right has discarded it. But crediting Mr. Nolan with "smuggling" it in from Judeo-Christian tradition is its own sleight of hand, enlisting a director's film for an argument the director says he never made.

DAVID PHILLIPS,
AMSTERDAM

Whenever I teach "The Odyssey" in my world literature class, my college students often begin nodding as I explain the requirements of xenia.

The protocol of inviting strangers in and feeding them is common back home, they say — meaning back in Egypt or Iran or India or Nepal.

I experienced this rule of guest friendship myself as a young Canadian teacher in Bhutan in the 1990s. I'd stumble into a village, lost on my way home, and a family would bring me in, sit me in their best room, cook me a meal and give me a gift as I was leaving.

So I don't think that Christopher Nolan's take on xenia in his film is particularly Christian.

The belief that a guest might be a god in disguise was just one reason to treat strangers with kindness. Xenia was, in fact, reciprocal. The guest's duty, upon leaving, was to offer the same hospitality to the host, as well as to other strangers in the future.

There's a scene in "The Iliad" in which a Greek and a Trojan refuse to fight each other when they realize their grandfathers had been bound by the law of guest friendship; they exchange armor instead.

Xenia could not stop the war once it had started, but this tiny instance reminds us of how it might have been averted.

JAMIE ZEPPA,
TORONTO

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How to hear your daughter when everything is 'toxic'

Suzanne Garfinkle-Crowell

Several years ago, I started noticing something new when teenage girls or young women came to my office for their first psychiatric sessions. Patients used to dread being told that there was something, as they saw it, wrong with them. Now these young women were announcing their diagnoses — attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, depression — almost before telling me their names.

They had researched their symptoms on Instagram; they'd taken TikTok quizzes about them; they had cross-indexed their conditions with those of their friends. It was everyone — gravel-voiced film majors and earnest high school athletes, class presidents and girls who skipped school, girls who spent weekends in the Hamptons and girls who had to work for their spending money. The patients of this new wave were talking in therapy-speak, and their therapy hadn't even started.

The physician part of me would instantly start thinking through an alphabet soup of treatments for the conditions these girls were reporting — D.B.T., C.B.T. and E.M.D.R. and medications to go with each.

Another part of me — the parent, the Xennial — would struggle to suppress an inner eye roll. If you're a parent of an adolescent girl, you might have experienced your own version of these two reactions: either terror for your daughter's psychological well-being or alienation from all the jargon. You might have even tried to convince your daughter that everything was fine. None of those responses set us up to hear what these girls and young women are trying to say.

I've been listening to girls every day for years, and I've learned a few things that can help parents, therapists and anyone else who struggles to communicate with young women as they describe some form of distress.

It starts with accepting that diagnosis words may function differently for these young women from the way they do for others. They are not necessarily claims to cold, scientific truths, yoked to specific evidence-based treatments. Instead, research increasingly reveals, these words are often a coping mechanism, an effort to find some accepted narrative in which to situate one's very personal pain. We should try to hear them that way: We should take the therapy-speak, to borrow an expression, seriously but not literally.

One girl told me she had assigned herself a diagnosis of depression, which she later acknowledged she thought would make me care about her. Another girl was stuck on an A.D.H.D. diagnosis, mostly because it made her feel less alone by connecting her to a vocal and vibrant online community.

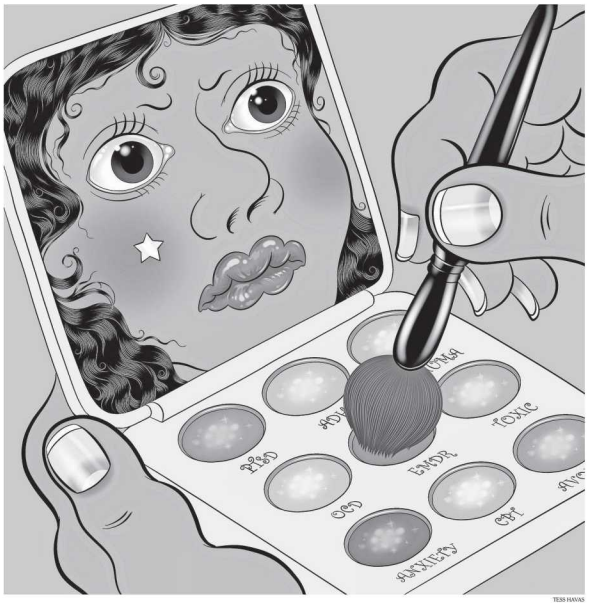
Several young women insisted they fit the clinical definition for anxiety, because it was less scary to blame an inherent flaw in their brains than to explore the causes of their very real discomfort — which turned out to be a mix of anger toward their loved ones and guilt for having those feelings. Another girl said she used her various self-diagnoses as a container for whatever felt like "too much" about her, allowing her to fulfill what she thought was the teenage female's highest calling: to be chill.

To find young women's therapy-speak less traumatizing, take it seriously — not literally.

In some cases, my patients' self-diagnoses were spot on. In many others, however, the psychiatric label seemed more like a compromise between uncomfortable feelings and the desire for social acceptance. Are these labels a source of strength or a straitjacket? Are they helping young women find help and acceptance or standing in the way? The answer isn't so simple.

Adolescent girls and young women aren't the only ones reaching for therapy-speak, of course. According to some measures, 50 percent of Gen Z-ers have labeled themselves with mental health conditions, and illness identities have taken hold of young people, both online and off. But girls are by far the primary drivers of this trend. They are the main group looking up health information online, talking about their feelings and relationships and seeking labels for what's wrong.

They are also the demographic with the worst mental health profile. I think the association with young women, a group so often dismissed as frivolous, is a big part of why therapy-speak is regarded as a sign of weakness and self-indulgence.



TESS HAVAS

As for therapists, we think about psychiatric diagnosis a lot less than you might imagine. That's partly because categories in our field tend to be more flexible than those in other areas of medicine. Classifications often evolve and change over time, especially for young people and most of all for young women. Besides, no two people experience these conditions in exactly the same way. So we always have to try to understand the person first.

Therapy-speak — leading with diagnostic language, applying labels instead of describing feelings — can make that hard. It can leave friends and loved ones feeling they have no ability to help, as though they've got to back off and let the professionals do their thing. And it can short-circuit a young person's already difficult progress of self-discovery.

To be clear, I'd still rather live in a world where everyone talks about trauma too much than one where you'd get shoved in a locker for being different. Ideally, we should create an environment in which girls can stop blaming their own brains for every problem and where they don't feel they have to be sick to be heard. Until they have access to a more nuanced lexicon of human troubles, however, we need to listen differently.

Small acts of translation can help. Someone who says she has A.D.H.D. may or may not fit the clinical definition, but she's probably telling you she feels scattered, overwhelmed or afraid she's a mess. If someone says she has anxiety, you can be pretty sure she's nervous, uneasy or unsure of herself. If the word "depressed" freaks you out, consider instead why the person using it feels hopeless, lonely or in despair.

If you're sick of hearing every classmate, roommate or ex described as "toxic," look past the cliché and consider the harm it's meant to describe. Whatever works, gently offer that less literal meaning back to her — not to challenge her words but to understand them. Not to see if she really has a particular diagnosis but to see what's going on beneath it.

This kind of translation is a quiet process but changes the way you show up, the energy you bring. With teenagers, that's always half the battle. Being too reactive makes it about you and your fears; being too quick to reassure can make you seem you don't understand the seriousness of her concerns. Searching beneath the buzzwords for what she's really telling you avoids both pitfalls.

Ultimately, translation is an exercise in empathy, in jumping out of the limits of your own perspective. Making that effort is a powerful way to help another person feel better.

Language can illuminate certain parts of the truth while obscuring others. Perhaps that's why it is believed that Claude Monet said that in order to see a thing, we must forget its name. Internet users might have been getting at something similar when they came up with the hashtag #LetsNormalizeNotCallingWomenCrazy. When it comes to therapy-speak — whether it's used in my office or in your house — this kind of translation is an important first step.

SUZANNE GARFINKLE-CROWELL, *a psychiatrist, is the author of the forthcoming "Girlhood, Translated: Understanding Young Women in the Age of Therapy Speak and Self-Diagnosis."*

A rush to pin a death on the media

GOLDBERG, FROM PAGE 1

Ibram X. Kendi. The head of a Cambridge college called for an official inquiry into the "media onslaught."

Important British progressives, including Zack Polanski, leader of the Green Party, and several Labour M.P.s, signed an open letter demanding some sort of official oversight of journalistic decision making. "Self-regulation of the press has comprehensively failed," it said. The writer Will Self called, in an open letter to Prime Minister Andy Burnham, for the police to begin "impounding computers," presumably belonging to people involved in covering the scandal.

Those pressing for new controls on the press are making a serious mistake. Some who once championed Arday seem to be trying to deflect from their own embarrassing credulity, and it is unlikely to work. A deep resentment of both growing societal diversity and bureaucratic diversity initiatives, or D.E.I., fuels the right; it's why Arday's story was such catnip to the conservative press. But heavy-handed progressive attempts to stifle questions about those initiatives — to use institutional power to police the boundaries of public discourse about race, gender and religion — have a way of making that resentment even more politically potent.

That's what happened in America, where a ferocious cultural backlash — much of it involving complaints of left-wing censoriousness — helped spawn the nightmare of Donald Trump's second presidency. And it could happen in Britain, where Nigel Farage's nativist Reform U.K. party is amassing frightening strength. This is a particularly bad moment to let the right claim the mantle of free speech.

Like most of Europe, Britain tends to have a less absolutist attitude toward free speech than America does, so the idea of increasing public regulation might appear less threatening there. Still, recent American experience teaches that any limits on speech countenanced by the left will be turned against leftists a hundredfold when the right is in power.

America is now rife with laws banning lessons about race and gender that cause "psychological distress" to dominant groups. When you live in a country whose leader is trying to regulate the press into abject submission, it's easy to see why it's dangerous to justify more state oversight of the media.

There's no doubt that the press coverage of the Arday affair was ugly and overwhelming. But the fault doesn't just lie with rapacious yellow journalists. It also belongs to the institutions, Cambridge chief among them, that elevated Arday while ignoring obvious signs that he was a fabulist. (As The New York Times has reported, his "supposedly remarkable trajectory from nonverbal preteen to Ph.D. had no precedent in medical literature," and turned out to be untrue.)

Cambridge hired Arday — from a pool of finalists that included two more senior women of color — at a moment when it was facing persistent questions about Black underrepresentation. Handsome and charismatic, an intellectual Horatio Alger, he offered the university a P.R. coup.

Many of the people who didn't bother questioning Arday's backstory should have known better; today their oversight looks less like respect than condescension, as if no one took him seriously enough to think hard about what he was saying. "Arday was treated not as a scholar but as a mascot," Jason Okundaye wrote in the left-leaning Guardian.

In retrospect, it would have been much better for all concerned if the story of his scholarly mistakes and biographical inventions had broken in a careful, professional outlet like Times Higher Education, instead of festering until it turned into a right-wing parable. Cofnas's article catalyzed a journalistic feeding frenzy not just because it seemed to show evidence of plagiarism and falsehood, but also because it claimed there'd been a cover-up, and cover-ups tend to drive reporters wild.

For people on the left, it's sure easier to talk about the feral excesses of the right-wing press than the willful gullibility of certain elite progressives. But both contributed to the Arday disaster. Denying that won't protect the left. It will just leave leftists out on a limb that grows ever more shaky.



JOE GIDDENS/PA, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Jason Arday at the London Olympics in 2012. Cambridge's youngest-ever Black professor was found dead on Friday in what was widely assumed to be a suicide.



CHRIS RADBURN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Tributes to Arday outside Jesus College at the University of Cambridge in England. The head of a Cambridge college has called for an inquiry into the "media onslaught."

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OPINION

Trump and the Campuses, Part 2



UNRULY REPUBLIC
By Barton Swaim

When a federal judge last week dismissed President Trump's lawsuit against Harvard for violating the rights of Jewish students, most of the mainstream press reacted with glee and treated the judge's reasoning with minimal curiosity. U.S. District Judge Richard G. Stearns agreed to dismiss the lawsuit on grounds that the administration failed to prove that "institutionalized noncompliance" continued after the 2023-24 school year. Which strikes me as akin to a judge tossing a criminal indictment because the defendant stopped his illegal activity on arrest.

An appeal could stretch past Mr. Trump's term, which, as this newspaper's editorial board noted, may have been the strategy all along. That strategy could work, but not in the long term. Elite schools made themselves odious to the public by tolerating and intermittently condoning the vilest displays of antisemitic hooliganism. Ivy League schools were never popular with the public, but Mr. Trump's rough treatment of them became politically salable in a way it never could have been before the Hamas attacks that inspired the protests.

The lunacy of America's top colleges has become a perpetual news item. The latest ballyhoo: Tyler Austin Harper's cover essay in the Atlantic, "Confessions of a Token Black Professor." Mr. Harper recounts his first academic job, at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and recounts his realization that the school's administrators and loudest faculty had given themselves to a variety of racist and otherwise deranged ideologies. But the most remarkable thing about the essay is that a similarly harrowing account could issue from nearly every elite campus in America, if only it contained someone who could write as well as Mr. Harper.

In fact, Americans' opinions of higher education have crept steadily downward over the past decade. Grade inflation, reports of rampant cheating with chatbots, and an ever-gushing stream of stories about the Stalinist behavior of students, faculty and DEI administrators—the headlines grow darker and more numerous all the time.

Last October the White House invited nine institutions to sign what it called the Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education. Signatory institutions, the administration pledged, would get preferential tax breaks and fast-track access to loans, grants, contracts and research funding. Institutions choosing not to sign would, by implication, risk getting the opposite. Some of the compact's principles—colorblind admissions, viewpoint diversity, civil discourse, institutional neutrality—recommend themselves. Others don't, chief among them a commitment to keep tuition flat for five years. Some schools have kept tuition low and don't deserve that penalty, and all have to deal with government-propelled inflation.

Anyway, the compact failed. None of the nine schools signed.

The administration's second effort hasn't received the coverage it deserves. A crisply written letter from Education Secretary Linda McMahon this month appears to have more work behind it than the compact did and sounds a more nuanced and generous tone. The letter, titled "A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards,"

Education Secretary Linda McMahon calls universities to action—and some answer.

poses seven questions. Ms. McMahon asks what colleges and universities are doing to ensure (1) merit-based, nonracialist admissions, (2) a free and open sphere of inquiry, (3) intellectual diversity in the faculty and (4) affordable tuition. The secretary would also like to know how schools intend (5) to address grade inflation and artificial intelligence, (6) curb the influence of foreign governments and (7) promote U.S. security interests.

Leave Mr. Trump out, and a large majority of Americans would agree that colleges and universities should probably have ready explanations on all seven topics. But of course you can't leave him out. The president's unpopularity with nearly everyone in higher education will tempt some university leaders to scorn Ms. McMahon's call to action—they can't be seen to work with her or her boss. But the readiness with which Mr. Trump has used force against top-tier universities has induced the wiser ones to read her letter with care and some to support it. Add the multiple investigations of universities by the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division for racially discriminatory admissions policies, and college leaders have all the reason they need to pay attention.

Jonathan Pidluzny, the Education Department's deputy chief of staff, doesn't ignore the sticks but emphasizes carrots. "This initiative isn't connected to funding consequences," he tells me. "We think that will probably make universities more likely to participate, and in time we hope to remember this as a moment when things started to change." He confirms media reports that leaders from Arizona State, Johns Hopkins, the University of Kansas and Washington University in St. Louis helped draft Ms. McMahon's call to action. The university systems of Florida and North Carolina have endorsed it and submitted detailed responses.

Maybe the effort will amount to a lot of talk and the higher-education sector, as it's terrifyingly known, will remain an expensive, unreformable blob. But Mr. Trump, for all his bad manners and lawlessness, has proved that even universities respond to the credible threat of force.

Midterm Lessons From Bush to Trump

By Karl Rove

Minimalist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe believed "less is more." What's true in aesthetics is true in politics sometimes, too. President Trump's political handlers should keep that in mind this fall.

You can imagine how Mr. Trump wants this campaign season to roll out. He wants to fly from rally to rally, inserting himself in the middle of every important contest—he's headed to South Carolina Friday presumably to do just that. In battleground states and districts, the president will walk on stage to Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A.," then launch into an hour-plus of pontificating, warning of the dangers of the "Dumocrats," and predicting "nothing but death, squalor, poverty" if these "communists" get elected. The crowds will go wild.

He'll careen from one unrelated subject to another. He calls this "the weave." The rest of us call it word salad. Each day, something he says—probably unscripted—will dominate that news cycle. It won't matter how unconnected it is to the candidate he's there to boost.

A far better course would be to minimize the president's political profile after Labor Day. Mr. Trump is unpopular. His approval in the RealClearPolitics average is 39%. A season of political rallies won't improve that. Less campaigning might.

It makes no sense to help Democrats more easily tie a Republican candidate to voters' low opinion of Mr. Trump. Get the president to raise money at private fundraisers but avoid high-profile rallies in battlegrounds that will only energize an already

Republicans lost worse in 2018 than in 2006. It doesn't have to happen this year.

excited Democratic electorate and make it more difficult for Republicans to contrast themselves with their opponents.

I know of what I speak. In 2006, President George W. Bush was unpopular: His Gallup approval rating on Nov. 1 was 38%, and the public had soured on the Iraq war. So while he raised oodles of campaign cash at private fundraisers, his campaigning was limited.

He went only where his presence would help. His first public fall campaign event was in deeply conservative southern Indiana on Oct. 28. He then appeared in South Carolina, Montana, Georgia, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado and Florida before closing out with an election eve rally in Dallas. His messages were geared to big issues, the tone restrained. We weren't looking to make news.

By lowering his profile and mostly avoiding the campaign trail, Mr. Bush gave Republicans a better chance to keep their fire focused on their Democratic opponents.

Still, as is customary in midterms, Republicans lost—30 House seats that year.

In Mr. Trump's first midterm, in 2018, he campaigned extensively and the GOP lost 42 seats. He didn't even have the albatross of an unpopular Middle East war weighing him down. Fewer campaign rallies and more presidential actions that make a meaningful difference in people's lives could produce a better outcome this time.

One more 2006 lesson: While the Iraq war was unpopular, 51% in an August 2006 CNN poll still saw Mr. Bush as "a strong and decisive leader." He defended his actions, patiently explained the stakes in the war on terror, and was consistent and steady. Some people who didn't like the war still trusted him because they felt, as president, he might know more than they did.

By comparison, 62% of Americans characterized Mr. Trump as a "strong leader" in January 2025 prior to his inauguration. This July only 43% described him as strong.

The problem is messaging. Team Trump should stop the bluster and wild promises on the Iranian conflict, forgo crude insults of allies and even foes, and return to the war's original rationale. As Mr. Trump has written on Truth Social: The "number one Goal is, and always will be, that Iran cannot have, in any way, shape, or form, a Nuclear Weapon." Let him remind people the Iranian leadership has said for nearly a half-century "death to America" and with a nuclear arsenal, they could act on that threat. And for God's sake, don't TACO. That would only add to his image as weak, with consequences for domestic politics and the world.

I've offered versions of this case for presidential prudence and restraint more times than I can count. That it's ignored doesn't make it any less right. Because there are good Republicans on the ballot who don't deserve to be defeated but will be unless the president and his advisers forgo needless and unhelpful political spectacles this fall.

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

When the Perfect Name Comes From Dad

By Bob Greene

Corporations spend millions of dollars to have outside consultants and research firms come up with unique names for their products and spinoffs. There's an art to it. But sometimes the perfect name is right in front of you. Or at least it's on your driver's license.

I thought of this the other day when a reader was talking with me about something I wrote in these pages over the summer. The piece was about the old 45 rpm record labels from the jukebox era of rock music.

"Man, those jukeboxes were addictive," the reader said. "Remember the ones with the most terrific name? The big Rock-Ola jukeboxes? Talk about perfect marketing—you knew what you were getting before you even dropped the first coin into the slot. The name made you feel like dancing."

I started to laugh—because, yes, Rock-Ola jukeboxes were (and are) classic. But however perfect the name, it has nothing to do with some genius of a marketer marrying the then-new rock-'n'-roll craze with the old Victrola record player brand.

How am I so sure?

Meet David Rockola, the man behind the Rock-Ola jukebox.

Because in the 1980s I met a 90-year-old man named David C. Rockola. He owned the company. "A lot of people thought that Rock-Ola was named after rock 'n' roll," he said. But he started his business in 1926 and at first it manufactured scales, not jukeboxes. "We were the Rockola Scale Company."

Most clients mispronounced his name—and thus his company's. They emphasized the first syllable: ROCK-ola, like "broccoli."

So he inserted a hyphen to help people say it correctly. The renamed Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. made coin-operated machines.

The notion that he was a clever enough fellow to come up with the ideal name for a rock-'n'-roll jukebox, while flattering, was impossible. There was no such thing as rock music in the 1930s.

Yet boy, did David Rockola, who died at 96 in 1993, have a ready-made market when rock music took off. There were other big brands in the jukebox field—Wurlitzer, Seeburg—but those rollicking-sounding Rock-Ola machines remain burned into millions of memories.

The founder told me he had no favorite kind of music, and that at 90 "I'm not much of a dancer, but I do like to sit and listen." When he built a home he had wiring installed for jukeboxes. "Mrs. Rockola said no. She said, 'You get enough of jukeboxes at the factory. We don't need one here.' "

I told the reader who had brought up Rock-Ola that it became so universally famous—it was the generic name for jukeboxes in some countries—that David Rockola, when making restaurant reservations, would often use a fake name. He liked his privacy, and he wanted to avoid hearing, "Oh, like the jukebox."

He didn't want to have to explain. Blaring rock music, along with the inadvertent brilliance of that hyphen of his, had helped to make him a wealthy man, but when it was time for dinner Mr. and Mrs. Rockola preferred the blissful peace of quiet anonymity.

Mr. Greene's books include "When We Get to Surf City: A Journey Through America in Pursuit of Rock and Roll, Friendship, and Dreams."

BOOKSHELF | By Matthew Hutson

The Mother Of All Chatbots

Inventing Eliza

By Sarah Ciston et al.
MIT, 350 pages, $35

"Thou shalt not kill." "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech." As far as codified behaviors go, it's hard to be more densely rich with implications for the human condition than the Ten Commandments or the Bill of Rights. But arguably within viewing distance are the few hundred lines of code that direct Eliza, the first chatbot.

Eliza "can be 'read' through many lenses," write the eight authors of "Inventing Eliza." And in their hands, it is. Sarah Ciston, David M. Berry, Anthony C. Hay, Mark C. Marino, Peter Millican, Arthur I. Schwarz, Jeff Shrager and Peggy Weil apply their backgrounds in computer science, art, philosophy, literature and other fields to deconstruct the original code and documentation as well as their ripple effects. The 1960s chatbot, the authors write, "embodies a particular historical moment in both computing and psychology, reveals sophisticated understanding of human conversation, and demonstrates how even primitive AI can raise profound questions about understanding and intelligence."



Joseph Weizenbaum, Eliza's creator, was born in Berlin and fled to Detroit as a teenager to escape the Nazis. In 1963, he joined the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and soon began developing Eliza, named after George Bernard Shaw's Eliza Doolittle. He ran it on a room-size IBM computer that people accessed remotely through terminals. Weizenbaum never released the software or its source code, but, based on a 1966 paper and other writings of his, people have created numerous imitations.

Eliza, as people know it, is a therapy bot that begins conversations with "How do you do. Please tell me your problem" and offers open-ended questions to keep the conversation going. But it is in fact a generic program for implementing various scripts, or personae, the most famous of them being Doctor. Weizenbaum, who died in 2008, wrote Doctor as a convenient demo. Playing a therapist, it reflects the user's apparent sentiments and asks bland questions, leading people to project wisdom. (Weizenbaum's original idea was to create a bartender.) Doctor does incorporate some psychological insight. If someone were to type universalizing words such as "everyone" or "always," it might ask what specific person or incident the user has in mind.

The authors of "Inventing Eliza" excavated large portions of Eliza's code from MIT's archives and used it to re-create Eliza running Doctor, talmudically annotating the code throughout the book. They explain abstruse technical aspects, muse on therapy practices and add historical and cultural references. (You can also try their reincarnated version at findingeliza.org.)

Eliza shows how computing's limitations at the time forced creative workarounds. The basic rules: Look for keywords in what a user has typed, find associated rules and return some mixture of scripted words and rearranged input. As Weizenbaum writes, " 'I am BLAH' can be transformed to 'How long have you been BLAH,' independently of the meaning of BLAH." Eliza can also store inputs and refer to them later. When at a loss, it might say something like, "please go on."

Weizenbaum cheekily called himself a "con man," but one who enjoyed revealing his tricks. He aimed to fool people into seeing a machine as humanlike—now sometimes called the Eliza effect—and then show them how they'd been fooled. One executive, thinking he was communicating with an employee by teletype when in fact he was conversing with Eliza, finally asked, "why are you being so snotty to me?"

To Weizenbaum, the illusion worked too well. He objected when a collaborator proposed deploying chatbots for actual therapy, saying that "the sort of caring that machines . . . can deliver is very impoverished indeed." In "Computer Power and Human Reason" (1976), he lamented the relegation of human judgment to code. "Inventing Eliza" links his worries about technology to the dehumanization he experienced in Nazi Germany.

Eliza's creator aimed to fool people into seeing a machine as humanlike then show them how they'd been fooled. The illusion worked too well.

Eliza left a long legacy. The authors touch on its other scripts, later chatbots, fictional and real Turing tests (in which a human probes a computer for personhood), and the workings of modern large language models such as those powering ChatGPT.

The authors also explore the notion of "performative identity," in which both sides of a conversation inevitably enact certain personae. One of the book's most powerful points is that technology is not neutral but, like any text, manifests its creators' decisions. These choices often carry social and political weight. Referring to the typing tutor "Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing," a software program released in 1987, the authors write that "Mavis Beacon fits into a logic, a kind of larger cultural operating system, in which Black women provide uplift and inspiration that profits others." Current language models, the authors argue, embody the practices of their creators and are therefore "agents of inequality, homogenization, and oppression."

Readers can take what they want from this unique blend of technical detail and cultural commentary. As a minor complaint, the book's discussion of what makes something intelligent is scant and muddied. ("Computational use of the term *intelligence* is often a misnomer for the results of complex operations," the authors tell us. But the brain, too, runs complex operations.) And there's a slight overstating of Eliza's advances, as when the authors call the switcheroo from "I" to "you" (see "I am BLAH," above) a "sophisticated handling of pronouns" that "goes beyond simple text manipulation to raise questions of identity and relationship."

Weizenbaum was far ahead of his time in at least one way. In 1966 he wrote that "the act of writing a script is a kind of programming act." Users could type "edit" to pause a chat and further alter the script. He foresaw a future in which Eliza would learn to model the user and the world through conversations. This easy interaction reflects our era of vibe coding—in which people describe ideas that an artificial intelligence then programs—and of AI developers writing natural-language "constitutions" to steer the behavior of chatbots. The Eliza effect may refer to an overattribution of human smarts to AI. But increasingly it makes sense to treat AI as one of us.

Mr. Hutson's next book, on intelligence, will be published in April.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump, Canada Tariffs and USMCA

Two hours before his self-imposed midnight deadline, President Trump wrote online that he would pause aggressive action abroad for three days, giving negotiators time to finalize some unspecified deal. Iran? No, Canada. Mr. Trump's reprieve Tuesday for 50% tariffs on $20 billion of imports—hockey sticks, building materials, and other items Americans want to buy—is welcome. But what a way to treat an ally and neighbor.

Any deal will have to be evaluated on its own terms, and if Mr. Trump steps back from raising prices on consumers with new border taxes, that's progress. Yet his attitude of constant haggling over everything that isn't nailed down, and some things that were supposed to be, isn't helpful. Mr. Trump has put into doubt the future of his own U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Someone should tell him the biggest beneficiaries of free North American trade are Republican states, especially Texas.

By putting the trade deal in doubt, he hurts red states, including Texas.

After Mr. Trump renegotiated the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, renaming it USMCA, he called it the "best agreement we've ever made." That was in 2020. But now USMCA is up for renewal for 16 more years, and Mexico and Canada want to re-sign. Mr. Trump last month declined, at least for now. U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer cited "shortcomings" in the text and singled out "our trade deficits with these countries." But trade deficits aren't a measure of prosperity, which is why most economists ignore them.

Texas shows why. The Lone Star State buys more from Mexico than it sells, and it has prospered. Texas traded $303 billion in goods with Mexico in 2025, which is more than the U.S. trades with any single country except Canada and China. Mexico was the state's largest foreign export market in the first quarter, 27% of the total. Texas exports energy products to Mexico but also machinery, equipment, plastics, aerospace items, auto parts and beverages. Thirty-five percent of Texas foreign trade was with Mexico in 2025.

Texas isn't alone. Mexico bought 26% of exports from Kansas and Nebraska each in the first quarter. For a majority of American states, the North American neighbors together are the first or second largest export market. Almost 70% of what Michigan exports goes to one of the two USMCA partners. For Nevada, it's 41% and Maine and Iowa 50%.

Before Nafta, Mexican and Canadian agricultural markets were protected from U.S. competition. Today Mexico is the largest export market for U.S. producers in 13 agriculture categories including pork, poultry, dairy, cheese, apples, pears, wheat, corn and rice. It's No. 2 for American beef, soy, baked goods, vegetables, prepared foods and condiments.

"Since USMCA was enacted in 2020, Mexico and Canada have collectively scaled up imports of U.S. agricultural goods by $20 billion, totaling $60 billion in 2024," Democrats on the House Agriculture Committee wrote in a July letter calling for the pact's renewal. Farmers already hit by Mr. Trump's trade wars with China now have to worry about sales north and south. It's bad politics for Republicans trying to win Iowa, to pick one pivotal Senate race.

Texas and other red states have also benefited from integrated manufacturing under Nafta and the USMCA. The web of supply chains that spans the continent allows for joint production across all three countries. With the U.S. leading in research, technology and branding, it assigns production of sophisticated components to its skilled workers and sends intermediate goods to Mexico or Canada for finishing.

This lets American companies preserve high-paid jobs at home while competing globally. It's the main reason U.S. auto makers have stayed even remotely competitive against foreign models. When Mexico adds value to a Texas-made component and sends it back to the U.S., it completes a production cycle that makes American workers better off. Oh, and don't forget consumers, who get access to higher-quality goods at better prices, everything from fresh food to medical devices to cars.

The good news is that a failure to renew by Mr. Trump doesn't terminate the USMCA. Instead it moves to a series of annual reviews and negotiations, the kind of perpetual bargaining that Mr. Trump sees as leverage. But uncertainty is bad for business. Can companies count on stable supply-chains in North America? For CEOs trying to make investments and create jobs, it isn't an idle question.

Moderna's Road to a Cancer Vaccine

Moderna got a shot in the arm Wednesday after reporting that its personalized melanoma vaccine succeeded, in a large late-stage trial, at preventing cancer from coming back in high-risk patients. Investors cheered, as the company's stock soared 177%. But that's nothing next to the returns to cancer patients from an mRNA breakthrough.

Moderna has been working on its experimental cancer vaccines with Merck for a decade. Because of those efforts, it was able during the pandemic to adapt its mRNA platform quickly to develop a Covid shot. The Food and Drug Administration has approved Moderna's mRNA vaccines for the flu and RSV as well.

But the technology's greater promise may lie in preventing cancer recurrences. Cancers come back in about half of later-stage melanoma patients after their tumors are removed. The idea is to use mRNA to train the immune system to recognize tumor mutations and hunt down and kill cancer cells hiding around the body.

Scientists biopsy and genetically sequence a patient's tumor cells. They then select mutations unique to the patient's cancer to incorporate into an mRNA molecule, which provides the genetic code instructing cells to produce proteins with those mutations. These benign proteins teach the immune system to recognize and attack lingering cancer cells.

Moderna announced in January that melanoma patients who received its vaccine in a small trial, in combination with Merck's immunotherapy Keytruda, were at 49% lower risk of experiencing a recurrence or death after five years, compared with those who got Keytruda alone. On Wednesday the company said that a large randomized trial met its goal of preventing cancer recurrence and metastasis, though it didn't publish the data.

Even so, this heralds the potential of personalized mRNA vaccines to treat and prevent cancers. That seems to be the hope of investors, as shares surged for other mRNA companies, including BioNTech (22%) and Arcturus Therapeutics (25%). Moderna and Merck are also working on vaccines for non-small cell lung, bladder, kidney, pancreatic and gastric cancers. The road to new cures can be long and winding. Moderna shows sticking with it can pay off.

Ending the Syrian Nuclear Saga

Isn't it nice when the world becomes a little safer for a change? That's what happened on Tuesday as Rafael Grossi and his International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors verified nuclear material on the ground in Syria. President Ahmed al-Sharaa agreed to place the uranium metal under IAEA oversight; even better would be to remove it from Syria entirely.

Israel did the hard work in 2007 and 2024. Now Trump can do the rest.

It is a good sign that Mr. Sharaa is cooperating, and credit U.S. and Israeli intelligence for helping locate the nuclear material that the Syrians disclosed in July. The tons of uranium metal are left over from the previous Syrian regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons—halted when Israel bombed the al-Kibar reactor in 2007.

That Syrian nuclear reactor was built in secret by our friends, the North Koreans, and the uranium metal was meant to serve as its fuel or precursor material on the path to nuclear weapons. Perhaps Kim Jong Un can tell President Trump all about it at their next confab.

Good thing Israel destroyed that reactor, by the way. In 2011 came the Syrian Civil War, and Bashar al-Assad's Syria was reduced to a proxy of Iran and supply hub for Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Jihadists of all kinds were on the loose and ISIS seized territory. Syria would have been the worst spot imaginable for an active nuclear-weapons program.

Yet to launch a preventive strike in 2007, the Israelis had to overcome the opposition of the George W. Bush State Department. President Bush had his hands full in Iraq and Afghanistan, but against certain regimes pursuing nuclear weapons, the use of force isn't optional.

For example, the 12-day bombing of Iran in June 2025, which Israel initiated alone before the U.S. joined for one mission to level the nuclear program, compares well with the inaction that allowed North Korea to acquire the bomb. That's worth remembering as Mr. Trump seeks to finish the job.

IAEA inspectors have access to Syria's nuclear material now only because the Assad regime fell. Once Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu removed the Syrian regime's Hezbollah defenders, and turned back Iranian forces coming to the rescue, Mr. Assad's army crumbled in late 2024.

Mr. Sharaa, the victorious rebel commander, now complies with the IAEA. He has brought his country into the American orbit after seven decades of allying with the Soviets and then the Iranians, Russians and North Koreans. This presents a diplomatic opportunity. Yet Mr. Sharaa is a former al-Qaeda commander. Not exactly the kind of guy one trusts with nuclear material. Jihadists still fill his army's ranks.

Turkey, which harbors nuclear ambitions, also seeks to expand its military role in Syria. On Tuesday this provoked an Israeli strike on a recently rebuilt Syrian air base, where Israel says Turkey planned to establish its forces. U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack called the strike an "unnecessary escalation," but it may have prevented one. Had Turkey been allowed to break the status quo by installing its air defenses in Syria, that could have brought Ankara into direct conflict with Jerusalem.

Syria is no place for a nuclear program of any kind. The country no longer has any reactor that its natural uranium metal could fuel, so it might as well hand over the material and ship it out. Mr. Trump wants nuclear nonproliferation to be his legacy, and here's an opening.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Prosperity Is Making Us Forget How to Prosper

Kimberlee Josephson perceptively describes how the self-contained, feathered nest that many campuses have become helps spawn young socialists ("How Colleges Produce Socialists," op-ed, Aug. 15). But an older, paradoxical dynamic is also at work.

In "Buddenbrooks," Thomas Mann depicted succeeding generations living comfortably on inherited wealth while progressively losing the hard bourgeois virtues that created it. Joseph Schumpeter later predicted that capitalism's unprecedented success would finance an educated intellectual class increasingly hostile to capitalism itself. Then, in "The Closing of the American Mind," Allan Bloom described the educational denouement: universities failing to transmit serious understanding of the Western inheritance while teaching students to distrust its claims.

Today's affluent, college-educated socialists may fulfill all three warnings. Having inherited a degree of prosperity unknown to earlier generations, they need scarcely understand the economic freedom, enterprise, risk and discipline that produced it. Its benefits appear natural and permanent; its imperfections, intolerable.

Young Americans have legitimate grievances about housing, debt and concentrated economic power. Yet the remedy isn't socialism's still greater concentration of power in the state. Prosperity's great paradox may be its failure to teach succeeding generations how difficult it was to create, and how easily it can be lost.

CANDACE DE RUSSY
Fleetwood, N.Y.

Ms. Josephson shifts the blame for creating socialist-friendly students from the faculty to the campus. She argues that students at elite institutions can't understand the real costs of aspects of their education because they do not pay for every tutoring session or sandwich individually.

Fundamentally, college campuses are communities, and the members of the community want students to succeed. Free shuttles exist so students and folks who work on campus can get there from the train station or travel between classes or meetings efficiently. Students aren't converted to the values of community at college—they seek out these values when choosing colleges.

If Ms. Josephson wants her students to forsake communities, she needs to convince them that their lives as successful individuals will be better than their lives as successful members of the collective.

SUSAN DINAN
Adelphi University
Garden City, N.Y.

Mexico's Press Is Still Free Under Sheinbaum

Mexico is living the freest and most democratic moment in its history ("Sheinbaum Moves to Gag Mexico's Media," Americas, Aug. 17). For most of a century, one party controlled the airwaves and governed for a few, while journalists rarely had access to the president. Today President Claudia Sheinbaum answers the press every weekday and spends her weekends traveling across Mexico, listening to—and working for—the people.

Despite Mary O'Grady's account, Mexico's press isn't silent. Whether a government is censoring its press isn't a matter of rhetoric. It is a matter of evidence, and the record contradicts her.

One of Mexico's two largest broadcast networks has maintained an openly critical editorial line toward this government. Its license is intact and its journalists freely express what they think. The scholars Ms. O'Grady cites are free to publish their views in Mexico—at a magazine whose editorial line has also been critical of the government.

The guidelines Ms. O'Grady cites create no arbiter of truth. Mexico's airwaves are public property, lent to private concessionaires. Audience rights are owed to listeners and viewers, enforced first by an ombudsperson each network appoints, and they do not reach the printed press. Mexico's Congress legislated the framework, and our Supreme Court held that audience rights take precedence over the commercial interests of broadcasters.

Debate over Mexico's reforms is legitimate—and it is under way. We differ with Ms. O'Grady. Yet we uphold her freedom to publish as firmly as we defend it in Mexico—for those who agree with us and, most important, for those who do not.

ROBERTO VELASCO ÁLVAREZ
Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico
Mexico City

Meritless Claims Will Raise Everyone's Rates

Regarding "Insurer Payouts for Car Crashes Get Less Likely" (Business & Finance, Aug. 10), the headline doesn't reflect the full facts in the article. The Journal found that auto insurers are paying physical damage claims at essentially the same rate today as they were a decade ago.

The claims for which the Journal identified an upward trend are auto liability and medical claims that are closed without payment. These claims are a magnet for billboard lawyers and fraudsters seeking to profit off the system, which is why these claims are investigated thoroughly. It is important that insurers don't pay meritless claims to control the cost of coverage for all drivers. Claims closed without payment don't mean insurers are wrongfully denying claims. Auto liability and medical claims may be closed without payment for a variety of reasons, including damage that falls below the deductible or an accident investigation that reveals those involved aren't injured.

DAVID A. SAMPSON
President & CEO
American Property Casualty Insurance Association
Washington

We require drivers to carry insurance because accidents can impose devastating costs on other people. But mandatory insurance works only if meaningful coverage exists when those accidents happen. I represent people after serious crashes. We should ask what consumers are actually buying when they pay premiums year after year. And it should be understood that if insurers refuse to cover claims, the individual who caused the collision may be personally responsible.

A damaged bumper is relatively easy to value. A spinal injury, traumatic brain injury or other serious medical claim is different. Those are precisely the cases in which injured people and the insureds who believe that they are protected most need insurance to function as promised, and where disputes over causation, treatment, coverage and damages can become prolonged and expensive.

BILLY COOPER
White Plains, N.Y.

North Korea Is a U.S. Threat

Regarding your editorial "Trump Romances Kim Jong Un Again" (Aug. 18): The Defense Department's 2026 National Defense Strategy acknowledges that North Korea's "nuclear forces are increasingly capable of threatening the U.S. Homeland."

President Trump's sudden, inexplicable decision to "substantially reduce" military exercises with South Korea ignores the danger posed by North Korea. To curtail joint exercises is to retreat from the three visions underscored in the NDS: "America First. Peace Through Strength. Common Sense."

CHARLES D. EDEN
Atlanta

Socialism Falls Into Anarchy

Peggy Noonan quotes Megan Romer, national co-chairman of the DSA, in her responses to questions by interviewer Shannon Bream ("Socialism Is Here—and It's Serious," Declarations, Aug. 8). Ms. Romer's responses include abolishing the Senate, ICE, borders and prisons. Add to that replacing the presidency and Supreme Court along with government or public ownership of most large corporations. Such an agenda constitutes neither socialism nor communism. It's called anarchy.

ROBERT TRACER
Brooklyn, N.Y.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"This is Rutherford. He heads up our 'Illusion of Ethics Department'."

OPINION

It's Hard to Tax Things That Move

By Richard B. McKenzie



CHAD CROWE

Progressives ranging from conventional liberals to hard-left socialists are trying to advance their egalitarian agendas with big-ticket items funded largely by heavier taxes on the superrich.

They miss an important economic reality. Their policy dreams will be checked by a force as unrelenting as it is unheralded: the growing mobility of capital, over which they will have shrinking influence. They risk becoming like New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, whom Florida's Chamber of Commerce crowned "Florida's Economic Developer of the Year" for inducing New York City wealth to move south.

In 1991 the University of Georgia economist Dwight Lee and I published a book on this economic force, which we dubbed "quicksilver capital" to capture the slipperiness of modern-day wealth. We documented the ways in which the mobility of global capital had sped up over the past century as relocation and communication costs declined. The ease of moving capital had heightened pressure on governments to think more competitively in choosing their policies, most notably tax rates.

Levies on wealth gain in political popularity, but 'quicksilver capital' makes them certain to fail.

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan pressed for personal and corporate income-tax rate cuts as well as curbs on their governments' private-sector entanglements. Their successes put competitive pressure on other governments to follow suit.

Such moves by governments added to the market pressures on businesses to move their headquarters, plants and bank accounts to business-friendly jurisdictions. They also encouraged firms that stayed behind to get ready to move lest they have to shoulder the tax burden the movers left behind.

Mr. Lee and I called on James Buchanan, the 1986 Nobel laureate in economics, to write a blurb for our book. He did, but with a caveat: "Do we dare hope that McKenzie and Lee are right in their claim that modern information technology has reduced the monopoly power of governments everywhere? Their arguments are surely convincing, up to a point. But . . . I shall advise all classical liberals to keep their rhetorical powder dry."

We understood Buchanan's skepticism, which we shared, and which seems all the more pertinent with the recent ascendancy of progressives enthralled with wealth taxes and free-stuff-for-all proposals, presuming their agendas will be checked only by power politics.

We need not have worried. Income and corporate tax rates across the globe have continued their decline since the 1980s, though at a slower pace in recent decades. Travel and shipping costs have continued to drop, with communication costs falling precipitously. Trade barriers have continued to fall worldwide—until the advent of neoprotectionists such as Donald Trump, who might learn, with time, that he has undercut America's competitiveness.

When we wrote our book, we understood that a lot of capital was reincarnating into digital forms that could be sent around the world in a few keystrokes at close to light speed with far lower production, storage and transmission costs.

We were unaware of transformative technologies soon to be released—email and internet—that would dramatically accelerate trade and the use of a growing array of digitized capital goods from contracts and architectural plans to books, films and games. These technologies have made it easier to work from home in different states or even countries. Now artificial intelligence offers the prospect of workforces of digitized "agents" that can roam the world unconstrained by national politics.

The global spread of capital now carries a threat to which progressives remain oblivious: Businesses and employees increasingly can move to avoid taxes and regulations. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has learned the lesson of capital's growing mobility. He opposes a state wealth tax on the ballot in California, and is seeking cover by supporting a federal wealth tax, a likely nonstarter in Congress and at the White House as it would clearly throttle economic growth. Mr. Mamdani will soon have to concede the point or fade rapidly in political relevance.

Governments' basic competitive problem is that they are landlocked and are competitors for capital that is footloose on a global scale. Their dilemma? Higher taxation of wealth easily transmutes into lower total revenue and economic decline. No wonder so many governments have yielded to the threat and now bid for capital projects with tax concessions and other benefits to attract and hold on to capital.

Progressives and socialists might score political points in coming elections, but their gains will be checked not so much by the right as by states and nations that see development opportunities in other governments' hostile treatment of capital and wealth.

Mr. McKenzie is a retired economics professor at the University of California, Irvine, and a co-author of "Quicksilver Capital: How the Rapid Movement of Wealth Has Changed the World."

AI Bubble May Deflate, Not Burst

By Brett Decker

It has been a wild summer for artificial-intelligence stocks. Beijing's flaunting of China's AI progress, among other factors, sent American stocks sliding last week. The week before saw a selloff of AI stocks, with Nvidia, Micron and others hit hard.

The pessimists were quick to warn that the AI bubble was bursting. Doomsayers are always on hand, waiting for every hiccup on Wall Street or data center setback to proclaim the technology is about to pop.

Their concerns aren't unfounded. About 45% of the S&P 500 market capitalization consists of AI-linked stocks. The seven biggest U.S. tech companies, overwhelmingly invested in AI, account for more than a third of the S&P 500's total market cap.

These stocks have grown at a rate that seems too good to be true. The last time the S&P 500 Shiller CAPE Ratio—a valuation measure that smooths out business cycles to help investors see if stocks are overvalued—was this high was before the dot-com bubble burst in 2000.

Yet history doesn't have to repeat itself. Rather than a bubble, AI may simply be a technology that is landing slower than expected. The market might not be imploding so much as readjusting as the tech industry succumbs to more realistic expectations. The result could be a stable AI landscape that is better for investors and the rest of us.

Tech entrepreneurs have been making grandiose claims for years about AI's capabilities. Predictions that AI would kill half of all white-collar jobs or create a permanent class of unemployed welfare dependents were always far-fetched.

New technologies often bring doom-and-gloom predictions. The difference with AI is that Silicon Valley elites promoted some of these claims. They contributed to absurd narratives to get businesses on board.

The limitations of AI have become clearer since then. Companies that laid off workers expecting to replace them with AI are hiring them back. An MIT study found that 95% of all generative-AI pilot projects fail to deliver a measurable return on investment.

The transformation of the economy is proceeding, but at a slower pace than we were led to expect.

This dovetails with AI's PR problem. Polls find growing public skepticism of the technology. Data centers have sparked opposition across the country while online "AI slop" and perceived threats to employment remain sore spots. The initial narratives about AI were too bullish and opened a gap between expectation and reality. The expectation repelled many Americans while the reality proved underwhelming.

That doesn't mean the technology is doomed to disappoint. In less-flashy fields—data extraction, research, workflow automation, data-pattern summarization, customer service—AI is making a difference. The U.S. government is integrating AI into everyday operations, streamlining tasks like fraud detection and permit approval. The Pentagon is adopting AI for targeting and other functions. Ukraine has demonstrated how AI implementation can make a difference in battle.

The U.S. tech race with China has accelerated AI innovation. Chinese AI models put competitive pressure on their American counterparts. The elephant in the room is Huawei, whose AI dominion is so extensive that the U.S. reportedly approved a merger between Hewlett Packard Enterprise and Juniper Network to challenge it.

Global AI competition backed by industrial policy seems like the future. The world is becoming both an arena and a marketplace for AI. Wherever the technology is going, it isn't a passing trend.

AI critics make the mistake of assuming the industry is frozen in time and can't surmount its present problems. Take data centers, which are controversial in part because people believe they use enormous amounts of water. Nvidia recently pioneered a coolant that the company's head of sustainability said "largely solved" the issue of data-center water consumption. Microsoft has been moving in this direction too.

This is the future of AI: a gradual adoption process that works through its problems and integrates into society without triggering economic apocalypse. The markets are correcting toward this reality.

Mr. Decker is endowed chair of leadership at Northwood University.

Pyongyang's Threat Rises, With an Assist From Trump

By John Bolton

President Trump put North Korea and its rogue nuclear-weapons program back in the spotlight on Sunday. The president ordered the Defense Department "to substantially reduce" this week's annual U.S.-South Korean military field exercises to defend against a potential attack by the North. He made the same unilateral concession in his first term, a mistake that is even worse now.

At the 2018 Singapore summit to discuss Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons program, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un criticized the annual defense maneuvers. As I wrote later, Mr. Trump agreed "that the exercises were provocative and a waste of time and money." He decided that "there would be no exercises as long as the two sides were negotiating in good faith." Essentially repeating these points in his Sunday social-media post, Mr. Trump wrote that the exercises were "costly" and "totally inappropriate and hostile" to North Korea, which has been "unthreatening and respectful" during his presidency.

All this is false. What the North finds hostile is the South's existence, along with its political and economic success compared with the wretched dictatorship north of the demilitarized zone. The U.S.-South Korean military maneuvers are entirely defensive, crucial to the safety and readiness of the roughly 28,000 service members in U.S. Forces Korea and their South Korean counterparts. This is critical today given the combat experience the North's troops have gained fighting alongside Russia in Ukraine—experience the South hasn't had since Vietnam.

The shared motto of USFK and Seoul's Defense Ministry is "Fight tonight!," which underscores that if (or when) North Korea attacks, the defenders won't have time on their side. Expenditures on the joint drills are dollars and won well-spent. This was all explained to Mr. Trump but apparently never sank in. Other forms of mutual activities and coordination between USFK and South Korea will continue, but "tabletop" exercises are pale substitutes for field training. Mr. Trump's action has weakened deterrence against Pyongyang, thereby increasing the threat. And beyond the military implications of Sunday's order, the political signal to Seoul and other allied capitals is grim.

The unilateral concession embodied in cutting back the joint exercises reflects Mr. Trump's conviction that state-to-state relations depend almost entirely on the personal relations of their top leaders.

By reducing U.S.-South Korean military exercises, the president heightens the danger and worries allies.

Asked at the 2018 Singapore summit if he trusted Mr. Kim, Mr. Trump responded, "I do." Their negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs went nowhere, and there have been no "good faith" negotiations for almost seven years. During that hiatus, North Korea proceeded with its nuclear and missile programs. Joe Biden resumed the joint exercises in 2022, and Pyongyang responded only with rhetoric.

Some believe North Korea reappeared on Mr. Trump's agenda as a ploy to divert attention from the conflict with Iran. His near-simultaneous threat to attack Oman did precisely the opposite, unsettling allies and encouraging adversaries worldwide, notwithstanding Oman's dubious bona fides as a mediator in the Gulf conflict. Finding no love anywhere in Iran's fractured government, perhaps Mr. Trump believed an agreement with Mr. Kim might bring his long-sought Nobel Peace Prize. The North hasn't commented publicly, although the president, without providing evidence, says Mr. Kim has responded and was "very positive."

Even before Mr. Trump's latest sally, his North Korea remarks reached far beyond the Peninsula. On Inauguration Day 2025, he said of Mr. Kim, "Now he is a nuclear power. I think he'll be happy to see I'm coming back." Making nice with Pyongyang, however, only solidifies Iran's longstanding strategic decision to produce deliverable nuclear weapons. It increases the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' determination not to negotiate. Tehran's hard-liners see Mr. Trump's unrequited affection for Mr. Kim as weakness and will undoubtedly work even more closely with Pyongyang. All this benefits the China-Russia axis, in which Iran and North Korea could move from being outriders to joining the core group.

America's Asia-Pacific allies, including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Australia, already harbored doubts about the president's reliability. Although their initial comments have been muted, deep concerns are clear. Relations with Seoul were already strained, and the South's leftist president is engaging in a naive diplomatic effort to end the Korean War formally and resolve Pyongyang's nuclear program. Mr. Trump's criticism of Seoul's reluctance to take a role in the Gulf crisis, plus continuing disputes about tariffs and Seoul's investment commitments, will only complicate the relationship further.

We should hope that something else diverts White House attention from North Korea. If not, Mr. Trump's next social-media post could announce that he is flying to Pyongyang to resume his bromance with the world's only hereditary communist dictator.

Mr. Bolton served as White House national security adviser, 2018-19, and is author of "The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir."

AFT Target Funds Teachers' Retirement

By Sara Albrecht

'Target is OUT this back-to-school season," Randi Weingarten declared on Facebook this week, urging teachers to spend their school-supply dollars elsewhere. In February the American Federation of Teachers said it wanted Minneapolis-based Target to take a public stand against Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations in Minnesota. The union, which Ms. Weingarten heads, adopted a formal resolution directing its 1.8 million members to shop elsewhere and stating its plan to expand the boycott to parents, communities and the AFL-CIO's roughly 15 million members.

One problem with this strategy: Teachers' retirement funds own millions of shares of Target. I spent years managing money. When someone proposes an economic campaign against a publicly traded company, I ask who owns the stock. In this case, the people being asked to boycott are among the shareholders.

The AFT acknowledges this. In its letter to Target, the union said pension funds in which its members participate directly own 6.79 million Target shares, with billions of dollars more in indirect exposure through index funds. The New York City Teachers' Retirement System alone reported about $16.4 million invested directly in Target as of June 30, 2025. Union leaders know the investment process: Teacher trustees on the retirement board have close ties to the United Federation of Teachers, AFT's New York affiliate.

Ms. Weingarten doesn't pick those stocks. Pension boards and professional investment managers do. Their job is to invest assets to secure teachers' retirements.

AFT's back-to-school resolution notes that teachers spend an average of $895 a year out of pocket on school-related supplies, totaling about $3.4 billion nationwide. In other words, AFT is advertising the purchasing power it hopes to mobilize against the company.

A boycott is supposed to hurt. Target's second-quarter sales fell more than 5% in 2023 amid a boycott over its Pride merchandise. Anheuser-Busch InBev's U.S. revenue fell 13.5% in the third quarter of 2023 amid a backlash over its Bud Light marketing partnership with a transgender influencer.

Research highlighted by Northwestern University's Kellogg School found that targeted companies' share prices fell nearly 1% for each day a boycott received national print-media attention. The financial effects can extend well beyond the boycott itself.

The AFT isn't shy about the damage it threatens to cause. Its February letter cites reports that other boycotts have wiped billions of dollars from Target's market value.

But how is this boycott in the interest of teachers? Its members' 6.79 million Target shares give the AFT leverage. When the union pressures Target politically, those teachers are deployed as consumers whose spending should be withheld. Through it all they are expected to remain duespaying union members, directly funding the campaign.

An individual shareholder may decide not to shop at a company he owns. Owning Target stock doesn't require a teacher to agree with anything Target management does. But a union that claims to represent members' economic interests should have to cite a specific and compelling interest for why it is organizing economic pressure against a company owned in part by its members.

Before Ms. Weingarten tells nearly two million members where not to shop this back-to-school season, she should explain whose economic interests she is representing.

Ms. Albrecht is CEO of the Liberty Justice Center, a public-interest law firm.

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Restraint has an ecology



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The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

THERE is an hour before sunrise on our coast when the tide has finished its work and left everything it carried in a single line along the sand, shells and weed and cuttlebone and the occasional float from some other country, all of it sorted by weight, with no interest at all in origin.

I have walked lines like that most of my working life. The sea keeps no record of where anything came from; it delivers, and then it moves on, and whatever arrives becomes the property of the shore that received it.

This week gave us two deliveries, and I have found it impossible to think about either alone. Oil reached our coastline, carried by currents. In both cases, the arrival was the only part of the process we were present for.

What a coastline holds before anything happens to it is the part nobody counts. Loggerheads coming ashore at Masirah in the dark, hauling themselves up the same beaches their mothers used, working for an hour in the sand before laying, covering, and turning back towards the water ahead of the light.

Humpbacks that never leave the Arabian Sea, the only population of their kind anywhere in the world that stays home. Sardines running in numbers that hold up whole villages.

Weathered crude is a patient substance. It smells of asphalt with something sweeter underneath, and it declines to stay on the surface where hands can reach it; it works down into sand, settles into sediment, releases for years, and travels upward through everything that eats until it arrives in a household as a smaller catch and a thinner month. The beaches will photograph well again long before any of that has finished.

Loss becomes hardest to dismiss when somebody counted before it happened. The ordinary work of walking beaches in ordinary years with a clipboard and quadrat decides whether change can be demonstrated, responsibility established and recovery measured. Baselines are built when nobody expects to need them. A crisis spends what is already there.

Countries hold memory too. Oman's restraint lives in relationships maintained across difficult years, institutions that establish facts before urgency bends them, and channels kept open when conversation offers little reward. The reserve was drawn on again this week. A sentence takes seconds to utter and can spend trust accumulated over 50 years.

Our coast receives trade, wildlife, weather and pollution; our diplomacy receives the fears, demands and contradictions of competing powers. Holding the middle carries dignity because others depend on it, and cost because pressure arrives from every direction.

Reciprocity keeps that ecology alive. Those who move cargo through shared waters carry obligations towards the environments and communities exposed to their choices, and those who rely on Oman's access and credibility carry obligations towards the sovereignty and respect that make both possible

Restraint has an ecology because it depends on relationships that sustain one another. Experts measure what others cannot see; institutions create order before urgency becomes panic; diplomats preserve enough trust for another conversation; communities grant these systems the time and legitimacy to work. Every element holds something the others will eventually need.

Reciprocity keeps that ecology alive. Those who move cargo through shared waters carry obligations towards the environments and communities exposed to their choices, and those who rely on Oman's access and credibility carry obligations towards the sovereignty and respect that make both possible.

The tide will lay down another line tomorrow morning, sorted by weight, indifferent to where any of it began. I have always found something steadying in that indifference, and this week I have started to wonder whether we have come to treat our own steadiness the same way, as a feature of the place, arriving on schedule and asking nothing of anybody.

HOW NARWHALS GROW NATURE'S ONLY STRAIGHT TUSK

DANIEL LAWLER

Narwhals have nature's only straight tusk, a single tooth up to three metres long. The tusks have fascinated scientists ever since, but they have proven extremely difficult to study because these odd-looking, blubbery whales spend most of their lives under the Arctic ice.

But on Tuesday, a large international team of researchers announced they had solved a long-running mystery about the tusks: how they get their uniquely spiralled yet arrow-straight form.

The left canine tooth of male narwhals grows through their jaw and upper lip, jutting out into the animal kingdom's only single tusk. Their right canine stays buried in their head. "Imagine that you had to ride on a bicycle with a broom strapped to your head," said Henrik Birkedal, the senior author of a study in Nature Communications describing the discovery. That is how it must feel for male narwhals to dive deep underwater, the chemist at Aarhus University in Denmark said. Yet despite this huge "Monty Pythonesque" protuberance, the animals seem to get about just fine, he added. To solve what they called the "narwhal tusk puzzle," the team of biologists, chemists and physicists used advanced 3D X-ray technology, including three European particle accelerators called synchrotrons.

The tusks are made out of two kinds of dental tissue: dentin on the inside, cementum on the outside. On a molecular level, the inner dentin forms a right-handed spiral while the outer cementum forms a left-handed spiral, the powerful X-ray scans revealed.

These two counteracting forces give the tusks the straight structure that is so different to the curved tusks of other animals such as elephants.

The scientists were also surprised to find growth layers similar to tree rings inside the tusks, which offer a glimpse into their lives that can last up to 80 years. This was not the only lingering mystery about narwhal tusks. There has also been great debate between scientists about the exact purpose of the world's weirdest tooth.

There are several hypotheses, including that the whales use their tusks for hunting or to sense temperature and salinity in the water.

But the team behind the new paper believes these options are unlikely because tusks are almost exclusively grown by male narwhals — and females would have needed them also for these purposes. ***— AFP***

Transform gatekeepers of sustainability to catalysts



KHALID AL HURAIBI

The writer is an innovator and an insights storyteller

The ultimate purpose of sustainability is not to sustain programmes; it is to create progress that can eventually sustain itself.

IN 2010, my team and I were over the moon. Tawasul Think Tank had just won its first regional recognition at the Arabia CSR Awards in Dubai. The award mattered, but what I learned outside the ceremony mattered more. A distinguished English gentleman approached me, perhaps because my Omani dishdasha caught his attention. He was the event's keynote speaker and told me that, as a young geologist around 1970, he had worked in Oman for a major international energy corporation.

He recalled meetings involving the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos and the late legendary Oil, Gas and Minerals Minister Said bin Ahmed al Shanfari. One lesson stayed with him for decades: they paid attention not only to presentations, but to presenters, their eyes, body language and attitudes. Characters could reveal what maps and PowerPoints could not.

We discussed something that has occupied much of my professional journey since: How corporate social responsibility, sustainability and what we now call In-Country Value (ICV), now reduced to the term local content, could become engines of socioeconomic development rather than a peripheral corporate programme. He told me he would raise those ideas. I thought a little of our conversation, yet a few weeks later I got a call confirming that whom I met was no other than Sir Mark Stuart-Moody, the former Chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, Director of HSBC Holdings and Accenture and that he discussed sustainability, CSR and ICV with the late Sultan, and how a small Omani company won a regional award. The following years saw something much bigger taking shape across the country. PDO formally launched its ICV programme in 2013. By the end of 2024, its locally retained spending had risen from 18 per cent in 2013 to 42 per cent, approximately RO 1.5 billion, while its programme had contributed to establishing 83 local industrial facilities. That is real progress.

However, after more than 15 years working around CSR, social investment, sustainability, entrepreneurship and local-value creation, including as a former social investment manager of a multinational energy corporation, I increasingly believe our biggest challenge is no longer convincing institutions that these things matter. It is changing the role of the people who lead them.

Too often, sustainability and local-content professionals become gatekeepers: Guarding budgets with a scarcity mentality, approving applications, checking certificates, administering tenders and measuring compliance. A catalyst asks different questions with an abundance mentality. What new Omani company can this procurement create? What technology can we localise? Which SME or startup can become an exporter? Which graduate can acquire a globally valuable skill? What education, energy and environmental problems could become somebody's business opportunity?

History provides a useful benchmark. When Norway discovered oil, it could simply have collected petroleum revenues while allowing foreign corporations to supply most of the expertise and technology. Instead, the state progressively built Norwegian participation, established Statoil in 1972, developed demanding standards and used its domestic market to help create a sophisticated supplier industry. Today, Norway's petroleum supplier ecosystem comprises roughly 2,000 companies and has become internationally competitive rather than permanently dependent on protection.

So our next question should not simply be: How much did we spend locally? It should be: What became stronger because we spent it? Imagine every major sustainability, CSR and ICV programme publishing a simple annual impact dashboard: Omani companies scaled, technologies localised, quality jobs created, patents or intellectual property developed, carbon avoided, exports generated, SME and startup revenues increased and businesses graduating from preferential support into open competition.

Then go further. Give relevant leaders incentives and objectives for creating other successful leaders as suppliers, not merely managing and processing them. Use procurement pipelines to signal opportunities several years ahead. Connect large buyers with universities, startups and manufacturers. Reward consortiums that transfer technology and intellectual property. Use AI to identify procurement leakage and localisation opportunities. Most importantly, publish comparable outcomes so society can distinguish events or activities from impact.

I have watched this field evolve for more than 15 years. We have moved from philanthropy to CSR, from CSR to sustainability, and from sustainability towards ESG and ICV. The next evolution must be more important still: From gatekeeping to catalysing. The ultimate purpose of sustainability is not to sustain programmes; it is to create progress that can eventually sustain itself.

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Celestial splendour in constellation storytelling



SONIA AMBROSIO

The writer is a journalist, academic and researcher in media studies

IT doesn't matter how many times I visit the same places in Oman; there is always something new. I don't mean tourist spots with manufactured branding, but the pieces of sand, earth, water, and sky. Each of these geological and astronomical existences fills me with feelings.

The various directions of wind over the golden dunes whisper differently into my ears, even after dozens of visits. The dunes, the wind, and sunsets have become part of me, though the voices within the whispers are always new. Sometimes, they offer a gentle kiss on my cheek; other times, a gust of wind reminds me of my insignificance against its strength. At times, the wind carries a veil of sand, obscuring the sight for just a moment, to show how blind we can be.

Often, I also go to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. Its dramatic canyon views, cool temperatures, terrace farming, and exotic trees are a magnet for me. The silhouettes decorating the rocky mountains along the trails and the water running deep in the canyons are forever part of me.

On many occasions, I went camping for stargazing, only to be greeted by the familiar 'hee-haw' of a donkey's bray. And not for the first time, I was awakened by a donkey snorting over my head.

Under the vast, dark skies of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, illuminated by tiny diamonds, some visible to the naked eye and others only visible through a telescope during a stargazing talk by a local astronomer, I felt transported to a time when people studied the cosmos to understand the solar system and its effects on Earth, oceans, and daily life.

The history of ancient astronomy and modern space telescopes illuminates our understanding of calendars and shapes our perception of the universe.

Early astronomers believed that the pattern of stars had spiritual and religious significance, suggesting that understanding their patterns could unlock comprehension of the universe, both physically and mystically.

From Babylonian records, astronomers mapped constellations and visible planets. People used the stars and constellations to track the changing seasons for farming and used the North Star as a fixed point to determine directions. Voyagers memorised star paths using physical memory to navigate across open seas and vast deserts.

In storytelling, cultures projected their myths, legends, and history onto the stars to pass down moral lessons through generations. Stargazing influences modern astrotourism and Arab cultural revivals.

Anwar, a local amateur astronomer from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, was invited by our trip organisers to give a stargazing talk. With his impressive telescope and a pot of tea, he engaged in a conversation about planets and stars, while also explaining how mobile phone cameras can be used to photograph the intricate cosmos. Anwar took us into the celestial world of constellation storytelling.

The various directions of wind over the golden dunes whisper differently into my ears, even after dozens of visits. The dunes, the wind, and sunsets have become part of me, though the voices within the whispers are always new

To see Saturn's bright rings or to photograph the Milky Way, which appears as a hazy, glowing white band of light stretching across the night sky, is to travel through celestial bodies.

We were shown the Scorpio constellation, whose composition marks the tip of a curved tail that can be literally read as 'the (creature with) a burning sting.' Or, as one of the many versions of mythology, Scorpio is in the sky as a reminder for mortals to temper their pride.

Stars and constellations have frequently been central to artistic creation, sparking original stories and serving as reminders to humankind. Classical Arabic poetry frequently used constellations and planets as metaphors for romance, beauty, and nobility.

I had my gaze fixed on the sky, reflecting on the people throughout history who have observed the celestial sphere and identified patterns representing animals, mythological subjects, or inanimate objects.

The tapestry of the night sky can draw intense inspiration and emotion. 'Life seems almost enchanted after all' (Van Gogh).

CHINA GOES RURAL WITH DATA CENTRES TO POWER AI

AGATHA CANTRILL

In China's hilly Guizhou province, a cluster of European-style buildings complete with a clock tower and multi-arched bridge emits a low, permanent hum - a clue to its unexpected identity as tech giant Huawei's largest data centre.

The town-like complex is unique in design, but not in its placement. Dozens of data centres have been constructed in the southwestern province in recent years. They are part of a government strategy that has seen much of the digital infrastructure for breakneck AI development across China's eastern seaboard established in the country's less populated, rural west.

The build-out is ongoing. China is on course to nearly double its data centre capacity within the next five years, as a tech race with the United States intensifies and countries everywhere try to swerve a computing crunch that could stymie AI expansion. The projects have transformed some places - such as Guian New Area, where the Huawei data centre and others are located.

"It used to be a barren mountain, but since the area has developed, transportation has become more convenient, trade has picked up, and business opportunities have emerged," local shopkeeper Shu Peihua said.

When AFP visited last month, street vendors were catering to data centre workers on their lunch break near a roadside banner calling for "promoting high-quality development", a government tech policy catchphrase.

In Europe and the United States, data centre construction has often been met with resistance from local communities citing concerns around energy prices, as well as environmental issues such as water usage and noise.

Residents in Guian were positive about the changes to their area. A vendor selling savoury pancakes, who did not give his name, said two universities had been established since the facilities were built.

Another local, Li Xixiu, said the main road had been developed because of the centres, which in general had "really boosted the economy of this entire area".

"All the villagers in our neighbourhood now find jobs nearby, unlike before, when they had to go to other places," Li said.

In 2021, the government gave its strategy a name: "Eastern Data Western Computing".

The logic of construction in places like Guizhou, with its cooler climates, abundant renewable energy and empty space, is multifaceted.

AI processing is extremely energy intensive, and China has demanded that data centres draw 80 per cent of their power from renewable sources by the end of this decade. That makes regions like Guizhou and Inner Mongolia, which have massively expanded renewable capacity like solar and wind, ideal for operators looking to meet those commitments, said Simeng Deng, a senior analyst at Rystad Energy. ***— AFP***

'American Doctor' shows brutality of Gaza conflict

MARK Perlmutter has treated patients hit by natural disasters and conflicts across 30 countries, including in his native United States. Yet, nothing prepared him for the horrors he would witness under Israeli bombardment.

"Just our first week in Gaza was worse than all of my experiences combined," the orthopaedic surgeon said of deployments that included the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York, Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

The suffering Perlmutter and his colleagues have seen in Gaza hospitals since Israel launched its retaliation for the October 2023 attack forms the core of "American Doctor," a documentary that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and arrives in select US theatres this Friday.

In her documentary debut, director Poh Si Teng makes no attempt to explain the rights or wrongs of the conflict itself, focusing instead on the work in Gaza of three American doctors from different backgrounds. Perlmutter is Jewish; Thaer Ahmad is a Muslim of Palestinian descent; and Feroze Sidhwa is the son of Zoroastrian parents.

"People feel like they have to have a PhD in this topic to understand it, or to discuss it sensibly," Sidhwa said.

"The question isn't how well you know Arab-Israeli history. The question is: Do you or do you not support the murder of children? Do you or do you not support the torture of physicians? Do you or do you not support the bombing of hospitals?"

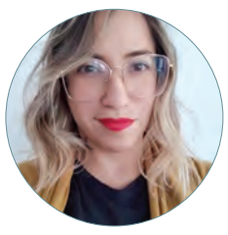
The attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 killed 1,221 people. Israel's military response has resulted in more than 73,300 deaths in Gaza, according to the Health Ministry, whose figures the United Nations considers reliable.

Israel acknowledges it has intentionally hit medical facilities, but says it is targeting fighters using tunnels underneath those hospitals.

The three doctors in the documentary say they have not seen tunnels in any of the hospitals where they have worked in Gaza.



Boys react during the funeral of Palestinians killed in an Israeli strike on a cafe in Gaza City on Wednesday. ***—Reuters***



PAULA RAMON

The writer is a Venezuelan journalist who has lived and worked in China, the United States, Brazil, and Uruguay. She is currently a correspondent for Agence France-Presse, based in Los Angeles

One of the documentary's most harrowing sections shows a so-called "double-tap" where missiles strike first responders who are treating patients following a bombing at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis.

Deciding what to show on screen was a challenge for Teng, who has previously worked as a visual journalist for AFP, among other outlets.

"You show too much, and it's gratuitous, and nobody's gonna watch, and you want to be effective in telling the truth. You show too little, and it's not real," she said.

The film begins with precisely this dilemma. When Teng feels that including a photo of dead children violates their dignity, Perlmutter chides her, insisting that their obligation is to show Americans what their tax dollars are funding.

"Israel took away their dignity," he says.

"You're not dignifying them unless you let their memory, their bodies tell the story of this trauma, of this genocide. You're not doing them a service by not showing that," he says, pointing to the photo.

"It was a moment for me where, you know what, there's no halfway in this," Teng said.

For the three doctors in the documentary, having to endlessly reiterate the "urgency" of the situation in Gaza during media interviews or meetings with members of Congress is frustrating.

"If I tell you that there are kids starving, or if I tell you that there are mothers who are struggling to feed their children, or that there are teenagers who are being killed by these massive bombs, your response should be: 'We have to stop this,'" emergency physician Thaer Ahmad said.

"I should not hear from you: 'Oh, but what were they doing, or where were they, or what background are they from? What religion do they follow, or where were they born?'"

Teng said she frequently encountered this resistance, and at times found it difficult to get funding for the project as donors shied away from putting cash behind a project showing the damage being done by US-funded Israeli munitions.

But, she said, the moment felt like it was changing, and she hopes "American Doctor" might further shift the narrative.

It's a hope Perlmutter shares.

"The avalanche of truth starts with snowflakes," he said.

"I'm optimistic that we're all snowflakes in that snowball that's getting bigger and bigger."

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in these pages are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the Observer

EDITORIAL

Latest US alarm on trade rife with misconceptions

The White House has raised the alarm over what it terms a "shadow" network of over 40 nations allegedly facilitating a massive transshipment scam, claiming that these countries are mislabelling the origin of Chinese exports to deceive American customs officials. While Washington frames this as an international conspiracy to rob the American economy of tens of billions of dollars, it is, in reality, a glaring admission of the ineffectiveness of its own trade policies.

Titled "The Great Transshipment Scam", the front cover of the 25-page document features a Trojan Horse digitally composed of cargo containers. If the contents of those containers are from China, does this mean that America is Troy?

The document suggests that this "illegal" trade activity amounts to annual values ranging from US$40 billion to a staggering US$303 billion. Such a massive disparity in estimates renders the figures largely meaningless, serving more as political theatre than rigorous economic analysis. Behind these inflated numbers lies the argument that this trade activity has cost the United States hundreds of thousands of jobs and substantial gross domestic product growth.

However, this narrative collapses under scrutiny. The manufacturing jobs in question were moved offshore by American companies decades ago – not merely to China, but to nations including India, Bangladesh and Vietnam. To blame these countries, and specifically China, for the consequences of American domestic corporate strategy is disingenuous. Washington cannot hold other nations responsible for the hollowing out of its own manufacturing base, a trend that American corporations themselves accelerated in their pursuit of cheaper labour.

The timing of the publication is also relevant, coming a month before President Xi Jinping is scheduled to visit Washington for a summit with US President Donald Trump. Americans would be better off negotiating in good faith rather than playing such recurrent tricks ahead of major leadership summits.

Underlying this entire protectionist crusade is a fundamental flaw: the belief that trade barriers could force "reshoring" and create "safe" supply chains independent of China. This perspective ignores the reality of global market interdependence. Suppliers, wholesalers and distributors worldwide are simply responding to economic incentives, finding ways to bypass trade barriers that impede global commerce. Furthermore, at a time when inflation is already eroding the purchasing power of the American consumer, the attempt to force expensive, alternative supply chains is a recipe for further economic strain.

What Trump's erratic tariffs have actually done is disrupt global industries and lengthen international supply chains, thus driving up costs for everyone, especially US consumers. Those accused of taking part in the "scam" include major US trading partners such as Canada and Mexico, and close allies such as Japan, South Korea, the European Union and Israel. Asian countries named include Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The list is a virtual who's who of global trade and manufacturing. Strangely, it did not name American companies, investors, contractors and subcontractors who certainly also take part. Why? Their actions were called normal global free trade before Washington completely upset the apple cart for everyone.

The White House paints a completely unrealistic picture of how global trade works. There are millions of merchants, middlemen and contractors whose job it is to connect supply and demand around the world. No single company, industry or country controls those supply chains, which have developed over decades under globalisation. As the world's biggest manufacturer, China plays an outsize role because its products are at the start of many of those chains. But it would be hard for many Chinese firms – nor do they have the incentive – to trace their products up and down an entire supply chain from start to finish.

The so-called transshipment scam is not a global conspiracy; it is the global market telling Washington that enough is enough. It is time for the US to stop fighting the world, abandon this futile crusade against economic reality, and return to common sense in addressing international trade and its imbalances.

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Trump remarks offer Seoul an opportunity

Scaling back the number of US-South Korea military exercises could be a relatively low-cost signal to Pyongyang that may result in progress towards resuming dialogue



Gabriela Bernal

South Korea's security strategy has rested for more than seven decades on a single pillar: its alliance with the United States. That pillar has absorbed one blow after another during Donald Trump's second term as US president. This week brought another signal that has strained the relationship.

In a social media post, Trump criticised joint US-South Korea military exercises, calling them "costly" and saying they send an "inappropriate and hostile" message to a North Korea he described as "unthreatening and respectful" during his presidency. As a result, he said, the drills would be "substantially" reduced.

Trump also praised his relationship with Kim Jong-un and later claimed to the press that the North Korean leader had responded positively to American overtures for dialogue. The State Department reiterated Washington's readiness to talk to Pyongyang without preconditions. At the time of writing, North Korea had yet to make an official response through state media.

For Seoul, the message cuts both ways. It can be read as another crack in the alliance. The expectation that South Korea will shoulder most of the burden of its defence is growing, especially as US attention is consumed by conflicts elsewhere. Trump's parallel complaint in his post about Seoul failing to back US military efforts against Iran only sharpened the sense of a patron losing patience.

The pressing question for Seoul is how much the country should continue to stake its security on a guarantee that Washington increasingly treats as negotiable.

In another reading, the drawdown is precisely the kind of tangible gesture that diplomacy with Pyongyang has long required. Ahead of the US-South Korea exercises, North Korea conducted two ballistic missile tests, which state media branded "a rehearsal for aggressive war".

The US-South Korea exercises have long placed Seoul in a bind. They sustain military readiness, keep the two militaries aligned and are meant as a deterrence against potential North Korean attacks, yet they have consistently provoked missile tests and escalatory rhetoric.

Scaling back the drills should, therefore, not be seen as a blow to South Korea's security posture but as a potential opportunity to create an opening in a relationship plagued by deep hostility. Reducing the scope of the exercises, along with Trump's strong rhetoric about the "hostile" message the drills seem to send Pyongyang, is a relatively low-cost goodwill signal that could result in progress towards resuming dialogue.

> *"A reduction in the scope of the joint drills should not be perceived as a concession*

South Korea's government has been asking for exactly this kind of opening. On August 15, President Lee Jae Myung used his Liberation Day address to propose talks to formally end the Korean war and to replace what he called the "unstable armistice" system with a durable "peace regime".

Given Seoul's strong desire to establish peace, a reduction in the scope of the joint drills should not be perceived as a concession that undercuts that vision. On the contrary, it is a condition that makes peace more conceivable.

Particularly since South Korea was not a signatory to the 1953 armistice, any conversion of that armistice into a formal peace treaty runs through Washington and Pyongyang, which means progress in US-North Korean relations is not a distraction from South Korean security but a precondition. While China was also a signatory, Beijing is not the main obstacle to establishing peace on the peninsula; the hostile relations between the US and North Korea are.

An agreement that normalises ties between Washington and Pyongyang, and delivers the security guarantee the North has sought for decades, would do more to neutralise the threat to Seoul than any number of military exercises ever could.

Still, none of this argues for South Korean passivity. The prudent response to a less reliable guarantor is to build independent capacity, not wait for reassurance. Seoul retains one of the most capable conventional militaries in the region despite forgoing nuclear weapons, and the mutual defence treaty with Washington, for all the strain on it, remains the strongest existing deterrent to a North Korean attack.

The task now is to widen the base beneath that deterrent. Fully decoupling from the American security architecture is neither possible nor desirable in the near term, but Seoul can diversify its partnerships well beyond Washington, so its position does not rise and fall with the mood in a single capital.

Moreover, the opening for resuming US-North Korean diplomacy is not infinite.

Treating this moment as merely another affront to the alliance risks squandering one of the few near-term chances for high-level diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang. If a peace process advances, the exercises Pyongyang finds so provocative lose much of their rationale in the first place.

It is in South Korea's interest to welcome this opening, support diplomacy between Pyongyang and Washington, and treat a sustainable peace regime as the central answer to its decades-long security dilemma.

Dr Gabriela Bernal is a North Korea analyst based in Seoul, South Korea

LETTERS

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Hongkong Post is in need of reform

I refer to the report, "Hongkong Post scraps permanent contracts for new staff amid financial strain" (August 18).

The postal administration's decision to place about 200 postal workers who are completing probation on two-year contracts, rather than offer them long-term employment, is troubling. Not because the department should be exempt from financial discipline, but because the government appears to be reaching first for the easiest lever: employment security.

Hongkong Post is under pressure. Mail volumes are falling, costs remain high and its business model needs reform. But postal workers serve many Hongkongers who are easily overlooked: elderly residents and people living outside the urban core.

Many new recruits might have accepted lower pay than they could earn elsewhere because a public service offered stable prospects. Changing that expectation after the fact risks eroding trust and morale.

More fundamentally, Hongkong Post should not be judged by profit alone. As with libraries and other public services, its value lies partly in providing universal and affordable access. A letter can still be sent across Hong Kong for only a few dollars. That is not simply a commercial proposition.

Still, financial sustainability matters. The answer should be to find new revenue and modernise the network.

Hongkong Post could work with popular intellectual property creations such as Chiikawa, Beyblade and local characters to create collectible stamps, bundled with postcards, stationery and merchandise. Its personalised stamp service, which allows customers to use their own photographs, also deserves far more promotion. I have used it before, and the reaction from recipients showed how memorable physical mail can still be.

The government should also make better use of public property by installing postal collection lockers in government buildings, libraries, sports centres and community facilities. Hongkong Post could go further with self-service posting: allowing customers to prepare and pay for a parcel on an app, place it in a secure locker and then let the postal network handle the rest.

Its existing parcel collection services are already competitively priced, but poorly promoted.

Hongkong Post does need reform. It needs better products, stronger marketing and more convenient services. But it should not confuse reform with retreat. Before frontline workers are asked to absorb the uncertainty, the government should show it has fully explored how to make Hongkong Post more useful and commercially imaginative.

Purton Lam, Wong Tai Sin



Hongkong Post still serves many residents, especially the elderly. Photo: Karma Lo

Mauling of pets was preventable

The horrific incident in Yuen Long, where a large dog mauled and killed two small dogs in broad daylight, is not just tragic. It appears to be a consequence of bureaucratic negligence and a lax regulatory approach by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD).

This tragedy was entirely preventable. The very same large dog had already been involved in an attack on another dog in July. The AFCD intervened, only to release the animal back to its owner with nothing more than a warning. Mere weeks later, the dog attacked again with fatal consequences.

The public deserves answers to these questions. Why did the AFCD consider a warning sufficient after an aggressive dog posed a clear threat to community safety? Why did the department not apply to the court to have the animal declared a "known dangerous dog"? Why was a muzzle order not imposed immediately to protect the community and other pets?

This failure stems from a fundamentally outdated mindset. The AFCD still seems to operate as though companion animals are livestock or farm property; violent inter-animal attacks that do not involve human casualties are dealt with as fights between farm animals. This is completely out of touch with modern Hong Kong society.

Our companion animals are cherished as family members. Also, urban pet density demands proactive safety standards.

By largely acting as a passive bystander, it could be argued that the AFCD shares culpability for the deaths of these two small dogs. Their seemingly slow-footed management of pet ownership has left the community unsafe.

Maggie Tang, Happy Valley



Illustration: Víctor Sanjinez

How the nation's 'blue cradle' can be a bridge

A jointly governed, tiered South China Sea data framework with regional partners would transform knowledge of a contested sea into stewardship of a shared one



James Borton

China has spent 80 years building formidable marine science capabilities. The harder test now is whether it can build rules for ocean data that its neighbours trust – and share.

When China's first department of oceanography was established in 1946, the country had only a modest capacity to study the seas around it. China now commands one of the world's most extensive marine science enterprises, with research fleets, satellites, ocean-observation networks, deep-sea technology and advanced laboratories.

As Xiamen University celebrates the department's 80th anniversary, the question is what comes next. Scientific leadership depends on two aspects: how much knowledge a nation acquires, and whether others can trust and use it.

That question has acquired urgency as China seeks to host the permanent secretariat of the new High Seas Treaty, formally known as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction agreement, in Xiamen. Although the agreement will not resolve South China Sea disputes, Xiamen can strengthen its case by demonstrating what the secretariat will need globally. In practical terms, this includes reciprocal access to scientific knowledge, jointly agreed rules and safeguards for sensitive information.

Moreover, the agreement's institutions will be expected to support multilateral cooperation, information exchange and capacity building for countries with very different levels of marine science expertise. Xiamen's candidacy needs to be judged by the facilities China can offer, and the model of scientific governance it is prepared to practise.

China can use Xiamen to propose a jointly governed, tiered South China Sea ocean data framework with Southeast Asian partners, giving concrete meaning to its vision of a "maritime community with a shared future" and "blue partnerships".

Sovereignty disputes have dominated discussion of these waters for decades. Coastguard encounters, fishing disputes, and military deployments command attention. Much less attention is paid to an environmental reality no claimant can escape.

Climate change is turning national problems into regional ones, such as coral bleaching, typhoons and changing ocean temperatures, that connect coastal communities from China's southern provinces to Vietnam and the Philippines.

These are problems sovereignty cannot solve. Marine science offers something increasingly scarce in the South China Sea – a reason for governments to cooperate without first resolving their territorial disagreements.

For China, it would show that leadership in marine science can bridge political divides by turning knowledge of a contested sea into stewardship of a shared one.

Xiamen University has the expertise and experience to play a leading role in this effort. Its eight decades of marine research have created institutional memory that cannot easily be replicated. Long-term ocean observations are especially valuable for tracking environmental change.

> *"Such cooperation need not require governments to compromise on their sovereignty claims"*

But the value of such knowledge increases when observations become shared regional assets. A South China Sea environmental observation network could link researchers from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and other coastal states. Scientists could cooperate on coral reef health, ocean warming, fisheries, marine mammals, harmful algal blooms and extreme weather. Such cooperation need not require governments to compromise on their sovereignty claims.

However, there are legitimate obstacles. Marine scientific research is politically sensitive because research vessels can collect information with both civilian and strategic value, including seabed topography, currents, salinity, temperature and underwater acoustic conditions. By setting up the rules, cooperation can make trust possible. There are three ways to do it.

First, Chinese and Southeast Asian scientists should share responsibility for setting research priorities, choosing sites and determining how results are published. Scientists from partner countries must have a voice from the beginning rather than merely receiving results after the research has been completed.

Second, routine environmental observations and metadata could be shared openly, while strategically sensitive information could be released at lower resolution, after an agreed delay or through restricted access.

Third, research grants and training opportunities can attract young scientists to Xiamen. Meanwhile, multinational expeditions would allow Chinese, Vietnamese, Philippine and other researchers to design projects, collect samples, compare observations and publish results together.

Universities have an especially important role because they can sometimes sustain relationships when official diplomacy stalls. The strongest scientific partnerships grow through repeated interaction: graduate students studying together, researchers sharing laboratories, scientists jointly collecting data.

Xiamen University's "blue cradle" helped train generations of scientists who built the country's modern marine research capabilities. Its next contribution should aim to transform some of that national capacity into a regional public good.

Governments will continue arguing about reefs, islands, maritime boundaries and sovereign rights. Those disputes are unlikely to disappear soon. The marine environment, however, cannot wait for them to be resolved.

If Xiamen can combine shared governance, reciprocal access and protection for sensitive information, it will make a stronger case for hosting the High Seas Treaty secretariat. More importantly, it will show scientific leadership is measured by both the knowledge a nation acquires and the trust it creates.

That would represent an important evolution – from China's blue cradle to a blue bridge connecting the scientists and coastal communities of a shared sea.

James Borton is a non-resident senior fellow at Johns Hopkins Strategic Advanced International Studies Foreign Policy Institute and the author of Harvesting the Waves: How Blue Parks Shape Policy, Politics, and Peacebuilding in the South China Sea

Why Chinese audiences are flocking to a film they hate

Niu Lai's runaway success is not an endorsement of its quality. People are paying for the perverse pleasure of seeing how bad it gets



Phoebe Zhang

This past week, another unlikely film went viral in Chinese cinemas. On its August 5 debut, the animated film *Niu Lai*, or *The Arrival of the Ox*, only earned 3,420 yuan (HK$3,980) at the box office. About 10 days later, it suddenly saw a spike in viewers and generated six figures of revenue.

On Saturday, its box office climbed to 717,000 yuan and reached more than 11 million yuan on Monday. Its accumulated earnings placed it in the top 10 of China's domestic animated film box office charts for this year.

The trick to the film's sudden popularity? It was so bad that people flocked to see it. The film has been criticised for its "rough" and "broken" style and confusing plot. The oxen characters look like piled up, colourful boxes and present a weird, almost humanlike smile. The Beijing News described the animation as "stiff and glitchy" and the voice acting as "jarring".

At first, some people posted memes online about how bad the film was, The Beijing News reported. Then the film went viral and people's curiosity spiked. The audience began demanding more showings, and within a day the film's screenings across the country increased from 21 to 359.

Public interest in the film increased after it emerged that it was made by two people: director and self-taught filmmaker Xin Yumeng and his mother Sun Lifang. Xin handled nearly every key role, while Sun wrote the screenplay, provided voice acting and sang the ending credits song.

The duo took five years to painstakingly craft the 86-minute film frame by frame, working from a home computer without a professional crew or outsourcing any tasks.

Niu Lai's sudden popularity was a blow to some people in the film industry, especially those who consider themselves serious filmmakers. Director Liu Bing wrote about feeling envious as his team aimed for 100,000 yuan in box office for their latest film, a mark *Niu Lai* surpassed in one day.

"*Niu Lai* created a buzz and many people joined in the fun, but it actually had nothing to do with the film itself. Or rather, many people went to the cinema not to watch a movie … they were there for the memes, for the short clips. Whether it qualifies as a movie was not important to them. So who does it matter to? Maybe to people like me, because I make films for a living," he wrote.

> *"Niu Lai's sudden popularity was a blow to some people in the film industry, especially those who consider themselves serious filmmakers"*

While I understand where Liu is coming from, I think the public reaction actually reflects widespread discontent with mediocre films. Media reports indicated that many people went to see *Niu Lai* just to see how bad it was. One viewer told The Beijing News that "bad films are everywhere, but I had to witness for myself one that's as bad as this".

Many people appear to be engaging in a form of "hate-watching" – they are used to poorly made films but still had to see for themselves how bad it could get. It was a kind of perverse enjoyment.

Amid the buzz, some people are also asking how someone with no experience in filmmaking thought it was acceptable to demand people pay to watch their effort.

It is no secret Chinese films have been disappointing for years. This is the result of rigid government censorship, heavy reliance on safe topics and now a rush by some filmmakers to maximise profit by putting out popcorn films or formulaic works without any regard for character development or well-written plot.

Many people in the film industry don't recognise that the stories they are creating are failing to resonate with the public. In 2017, director Feng Xiaogang said China produced so many trash films because the audience was also trash. "If Chinese audiences don't buy into these crap films, they won't be produced," he said.

I think Chinese audiences do have the ability and willingness to appreciate honest work, and examples of this are not hard to find.

Dear You – a film with a small budget, no big names or promotion and dialogue entirely in Teochew – became a breakout hit just two months ago. The eight-episode short drama *Enemy* was made by two people and has racked up billions of views across all online platforms.

The *Niu Lai* phenomenon will pass without doing any real damage to the Chinese film industry of honest filmmakers. What will hurt the industry is if opportunists try to follow *Niu Lai*'s lead and try to grab quick cash instead of putting in the effort to make a good film.

Phoebe Zhang is a senior reporter with the South China Morning Post

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