

NEET’s promise has failed; it’s time to trust States

The unprecedented protests by students across the country following the NEET question paper leak are not merely about one compromised examination. They reflect a deeper crisis of confidence in a system that was projected as the ultimate guardian of merit. When lakhs of students lose faith in the fairness of the process that determines their future, the nation’s conscience is shaken.

Tamil Nadu was the first State to raise the red flag against NEET – not because of irregularities in its conduct, but because of the very philosophy behind a single, high-stakes national examination deciding the future of every aspiring medical student. The problem was structural, not procedural. Recent events have vindicated that concern.

The Union Government introduced NEET with three principal promises. First, that it would reduce the burden of multiple entrance examinations. Second, that it would eliminate the scourge of capitation fees and commercialisation of medical admissions. Third, that it would improve standards by ensuring only the most meritorious students entered medical colleges, thereby producing better doctors.

On every one of these counts, NEET has failed.

Instead of reducing inequality, it has merely shifted the centre of learning from schools to coaching centres. Merit is no longer measured through sustained academic performance but by the ability to master coaching-centric test-taking techniques. This has disproportionately benefited those who can afford expensive coaching while disadvantaging rural students, government school students, first-generation learners, and those studying in State Boards and regional languages.

Countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and Germany admit students through school performance, standardisation methods, and holistic evaluation –



M.K. Stalin

Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and President, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)

not through a single nationwide entrance examination. Where entrance tests are used, they are generally one component among several, not the sole determinant.

NEET’s own experience further exposes the myth of merit. The qualifying threshold for undergraduate admissions remains remarkably low. For postgraduate and super-speciality admissions, qualifying percentiles have repeatedly been reduced to zero percentile and, in some cases, even negative marks, simply to fill expensive private college seats. If merit truly governed the system, such extraordinary relaxations would never become necessary. Instead, the reality is stark: poor students must compete at the highest level for limited government seats, while those with financial means can access private medical education with far lower benchmarks. That is not meritocracy; it is privilege institutionalised.

Equally misplaced is the belief that NEET has curbed commercialisation. The coaching industry has flourished into a multi-thousand-crore enterprise, with families spending enormous sums over several years to prepare their children. The burden that NEET promised to eliminate has merely changed form – from capitation fees to coaching fees. Simultaneously, deemed universities and private self-financing medical colleges have found new ways to commercialise medical education. Instead of demanding donations upfront, many have increased tuition fees and other charges, making medical education increasingly unaffordable.

Tamil Nadu’s outlook

Tamil Nadu recognised these concerns early. We constituted the Justice A.K. Rajan Committee, which concluded that NEET neither improved medical education nor ensured social justice. Acting on its findings, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously passed legislation

seeking exemption from NEET. The Governor withheld assent. The Union Government declined to engage meaningfully with the substance of the State’s concerns.

If States are trusted to establish institutions, recruit faculty, maintain standards, and fund medical education, they must also be trusted to determine admissions consistent with their own educational systems and social justice policies.

The solution lies in strengthening school education, restoring confidence in School Board assessments and allowing States to formulate admission policies suited to their constitutional responsibilities and local realities. Statistical harmonisation can fairly compare marks awarded by different Boards. States that seek exemption from NEET should be allowed to do so. Diversity in admissions need not compromise standards; it can strengthen both equity and excellence.

Another aspect requiring urgent reconsideration is the All India Quota (AIQ). This judicially created system diverts State-funded medical seats to a central pool, weakening federalism, and social justice. It disproportionately burdens women as they are unlikely to relocate to another State for postgraduation, fails to address regional disparities effectively, and deprives States of the benefits of their investments.

The recent student protests must serve as a wake-up call – not merely to improve examination security but to fundamentally rethink the entire framework of high-stakes national entrance examinations. The Union Government must hold consultations with an open mind rather than treating uniformity as an end in itself. India does not need greater centralisation. It needs greater trust in its States, its schools and its students.

The future of medical education deserves a fairer and more federal approach.

A budget without a proper government

In Puducherry, Ministers are yet to be assigned clear portfolios

STATE OF PLAY

Amir Hyder Khan Abdoul

Within weeks, the Puducherry government will present its first Budget since the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) returned to power. A maiden Budget is more than a statement of accounts; it is a government’s first declaration of priorities – a blueprint for development, welfare, infrastructure, and governance for the coming year.

Yet Puducherry approaches this constitutional exercise under extraordinary circumstances. Even though more than two months have passed since Chief Minister N. Rangasamy of the All India N. R. Congress (AINRC) took oath on May 13, the Union Territory (UT) still has no portfolio allocation. Every Minister has taken the oath of office, but none has been assigned responsibility for a department. Moreover, the Legislative Assembly has also not been designated a permanent Speaker. The Budget, thereby, risks becoming the first casualty of an incomplete government.

Every department contributes to the Budget. Ministers review expenditure, approve new schemes, defend departmental priorities, and remain accountable before the Assembly for the money they seek. In their absence, a fundamental question arises: who is making these decisions? The prolonged delay has naturally fuelled speculation that the issue is no longer administrative but political.

The continued delay in portfolio allocation, the absence of a permanent Speaker, and uncertainty surrounding other key institutional appointments have only



strengthened the perception that power-sharing within the NDA remains unresolved. Neither the AINRC nor the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have explained why a sworn-in Cabinet continues to function without responsibilities.

The Speaker’s position illustrates the problem. Puducherry continues under a Protem Speaker even as the Budget session draws near. A permanent Speaker is not a ceremonial appointment postponed at convenience. The office safeguards legislative procedure, presides over debates, interprets Assembly rules, and ensures that the Budget receives proper scrutiny.

The continued delay sends the wrong signal about the government’s preparedness.

Absence of governance

Puducherry’s governance structure has always been more complex than that of a full-fledged State. The elected government shares executive space with the Lieutenant Governor, whose constitutional powers have frequently been subjects of dispute. Successive governments have experienced friction with the Raj Nivas over appointments, administrative authority, and policy implementation. Mr. Rangasamy himself recently criticised sections of the bureaucracy, remarking that many officers posted to Puducherry treat the UT as a

temporary “vacation posting.” If the Chief Minister himself believes bureaucratic accountability is weak, the absence of Ministers exercising political oversight becomes even harder to justify.

Meanwhile, governance cannot be suspended. Traffic congestion continues to worsen across the city. Power disruptions remain a recurring public complaint. And with the northeast monsoon only months away, drainage and flood preparedness deserve immediate review. Every one of these sectors requires Ministers to make decisions and answer to the public.

The Opposition parties in the Assembly have also been remarkably subdued. A government entering its first Budget without portfolios and a permanent Speaker amid persistent administrative uncertainty should ordinarily face sustained legislative pressure. Instead, criticism has been sporadic and fragmented. Democracy depends not only on governments willing to govern but also on Oppositions willing to scrutinise.

Supporters of the government may argue that coalition consultations take time. That explanation may have been acceptable immediately after the election. It is considerably less convincing after more than two months. Citizens are not interested in internal negotiations over portfolios; they want to know who is responsible for transport, education, health, electricity, finance, and public works.

Before deciding where public money should go, the NDA government must first answer a simple question: has it finished deciding who is responsible for governing?

The author is an architect and urban policy researcher based in Puducherry.

Are children with special needs enrolled in schools in India?

The number of children with special needs in schools has remained fairly stagnant over the past eight years

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis

The Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2025-26 report has raised concerns about Children With Special Needs (CWSN) enrolled in schools, whose numbers have remained stagnant over the past eight years despite initiatives to get more of them enrolled. As per the data, there were 21.66 lakh CWSN in schools, a number that has remained fairly constant over the years (**Chart 1**). While one could argue that the overall number of children enrolled in schools has also remained fairly the same, the other question to be answered in this context is whether all the CWSN in the country are getting enrolled in schools.

The 2011 Census said that there were 32.5 lakh disabled children in India, just under the age of nine. If one were to include persons with disability in the 10-19 age group, the number increases to 78.7 lakh. The number of CWSN in schools in 2025-26 were not even 30% of the 2011 Census data. Moreover, their numbers would have surely grown since.

In the absence of Census data and estimates of children with disability released by the government in recent years, *The Hindu* used the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data on disability and the government’s population estimates in the Report of The Technical Group on Population Projects to estimate the number of CWSN in the country.

The estimate showed that the number of CWSN in India could have grown from 92.3 lakh to 98.8 lakh between 2018-19 and 2025-26. These estimates when compared with CWSN in schools showed that, only 22% of the children seem to have been enrolled in schools (**Chart 2**).

This is a conservative estimate since the population estimates

could be calculated, as explained above, only for the 5-14 age group. This was compared with the total number of CWSN enrolled across primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary stages, which would include those who are at least a year or two older than 14.

Moreover, the number of CWSN shrinks significantly as they move up different stages of schooling. The shrinking is more pronounced among CWSN than the overall number of students enrolled. **Table 1** shows the proportion of children in upper primary, secondary and higher secondary stages compared with their numbers in the stages before.

Nearly 75% of CWSN who have enrolled in primary school are in upper primary, data showed. This reduced to 48% between upper primary and secondary, and 46% between secondary and higher secondary levels. As the table shows, these shares are higher for the overall number of children.

The data also showed that the gender distribution remained worryingly the same despite minor fluctuations in the number of CWSN enrolled. Only about 43 of every 100 CWSN enrolled in schools are girls (**Chart 3**). However, the number of girls with special needs dropping out of schools seem to be lower than boys. The number of girls with special needs in upper primary level, for instance, is about 80% of those in primary level.

Shashank Pandey, lawyer and founder of the Politics and Disability Forum, who works on political representation of Persons with Disabilities said that underreporting of the numbers cannot be ruled out. He told *The Hindu* that at times the schools that provide data for the UDISE reports are not updated with the 21 categories of disabilities now recognised by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and still categorise students based on the eight categories provided in the 2011 Census.

Left behind

The data were sourced from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) reports, the NFHS, and Census 2011



Towards inclusivity: CWSN take part in the Special Olympics organised by Junior Chamber International (JCI) in Visakhapatnam in August 2025.

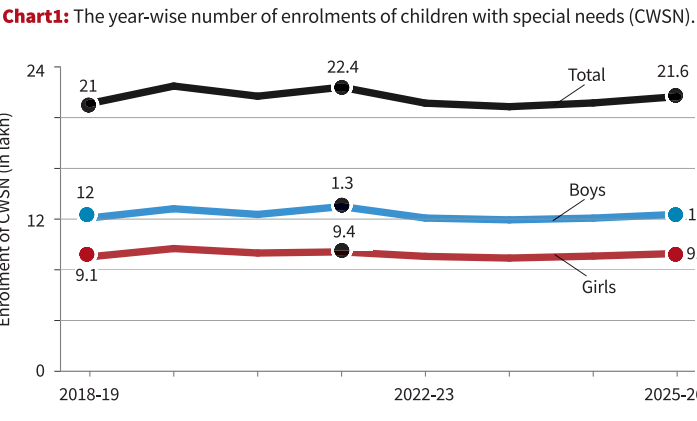


Table 1: The share of boy and girl children with special needs at the primary level and their proportion in the higher levels in 2025-26

Level of schooling	CWSN boys	Overall boys	CWSN girls	Overall girls
Primary (in absolutes)	57,87,800	72,34,75,000	48,12,787	68,75,41,000
Share of primary in upper primary (%)	73.9	61.5	80.1	62.6
Share of upper primary in secondary (%)	48.3	60.3	51.3	60.8
Share of secondary in higher secondary (%)	46.1	72.7	51.4	78.2

The Hindu used the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data on disability and the government’s population estimates in the Report of The Technical Group on Population Projects to estimate the number of Children with Special Needs to arrive at estimated number of CWSN

Chart 2: The year-wise estimated number of CWSN versus the number of CWSN enrolled in schools

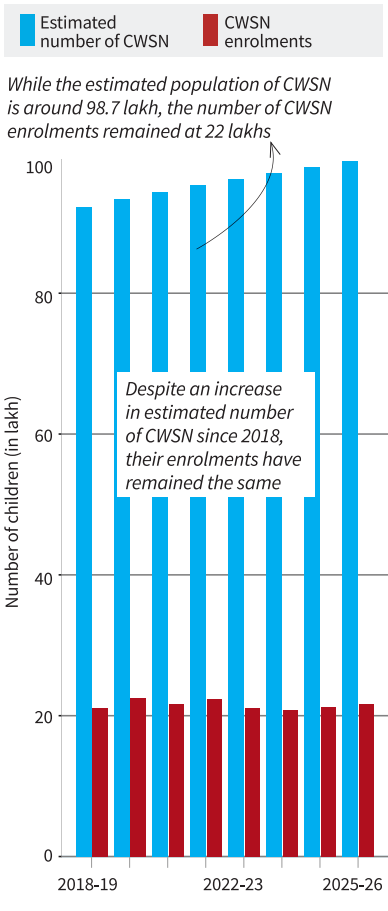
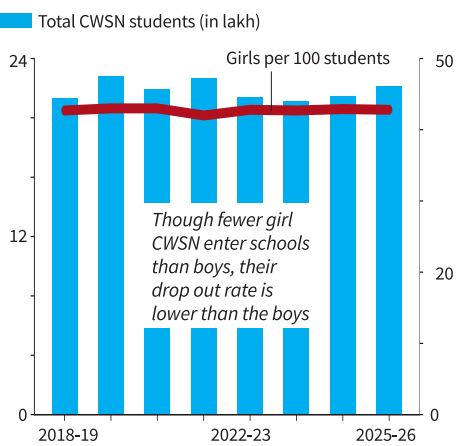


Chart 3: The number of CWSN enrolled in schools and the share of girls in the total enrolments



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 23, 1976

European passport: colour & symbol stand in the way

Brussels, July 21: The majority reportedly likes a delicate shade of lilac but the British are a little miffed over that. The French and Germans don’t like the symbols. The others have proposed to go on the cover. And there is the matter of language. Such touchy issues as the colour of the passport, what to stamp on top and the tongues in which to print it keep intervening in the long time quest for European unity.

Foreign Ministers of the nine Common Market countries have been struggling this week with the problems related to what is called a ‘uniform’ passport. The passport would be issued by each country individually, but would look the same for everybody.

Government heads of nine countries, which have a total of 260 million people, agreed at a summit last week to create the first popularly elected European Parliament. There is a European Parliament now but its 98 members are appointed and have little power.

As another part of the effort to convince West Europeans of progress towards unity, 106 young women have been hired to stand at border crossings and hand out leaflets extolling the accomplishments of the Common Market.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 23, 1926

The golden car festival at Tuticorin

Tuticorin, July 21: The Golden Car Festival of our Lady of Snows will be celebrated this year on the 5th of August. It will be a great occasion in Tuticorin, especially because this festival comes after a lapse of nearly two decades. The Church of our Lady of Snows is one of the few churches in Southern India which can be legitimately called historical. The immense popularity which it has gained not only among Catholics but, strange to say, also among Hindus and other non-Catholics, is due to the miraculous statue which it enshrines as also to its always being associated with the name of St. Francis Xavier, at whose intercession the miraculous statue was presented to the Church by the Spanish Convent nuns at Manila in the year 1555. The magnificent car which will be drawn through all the principal streets in Tuticorin is very huge in dimension, 50 ft, in height and gold gilt all over.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Compensation for persons killed in Sikkim tunnel blast

5 in ₹ lakh, per person. The National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Limited (NHPC) has announced an ex gratia payment of ₹5 lakh to the next of kin of each person killed in the tunnel blast at its under-construction Teesta Stage-VI Hydroelectric Project in Sikkim. Rescue operations are continuing round the clock. Of the 25 personnel trapped in the tunnel, 13 bodies have been recovered so far. PTI

Hamlets in flood-hit Kargil where water supply was restored

22 The administration restored drinking water supply in 22 most flash flood-affected areas of Kargil district through temporary arrangements, while permanent restoration of damaged infrastructure is under way on a war footing, officials said. The recent floods caused extensive damage to infiltration galleries, collection chambers, pipelines and headworks. PTI

Number of deaths in Congo due to the Ebola outbreak

999 At least 999 people have died in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Ebola outbreak, with 2,473 cases recorded since it was declared on May 15. Health officials say it is the fastest Ebola outbreak on record, with no approved vaccines for the Bundibugyo virus. Around 80% of new cases are linked to unknown transmission chains. PTI

The population figures in Cuba in 2025

9.4 million. Cuba's population fell to 9.4 million in 2025, down from 9.7 million a year earlier and just over 10 million in 2023, extending a downward trend driven by an unprecedented wave of migration amid the country's prolonged economic crisis. Cuba also has Latin America's oldest population, with people aged over 60 accounting for 27% of its residents. AFP

Sri Lanka's export earnings in January-June 2026

9.012 in \$ billion. Sri Lanka's export earnings crossed USD 9.012 billion during the first half of 2026, marking the first time that the exports have exceeded USD 9 billion mark in the January-June period. The total was more than 8% higher than the same period last year. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us [facebook.com/thehindu](#) [X.com/the_hindu](#) [instagram.com/the_hindu](#)

Are pellet guns being used at protests?

Pellet guns are used by police and military worldwide as a non-lethal crowd-control measure. They were last known to have been used during the 2024 farmers' protest along the Punjab-Haryana border. Though police denied their use, farmer leaders had alleged that several people were injured.

EXPLAINER

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:

At least one of the 80 protesters injured in police action during the march to Parliament on Monday (July 20), called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) sustained pellet gun injuries. The victim identified as Shaikh Irshad Mansoori (25), a resident of Gurugram, underwent surgery at a government hospital to remove the pellets lodged under his eye. Most pellets were lodged in the upper part his body.

Another video of a woman being stunned by a “shock baton,” also emerged on Tuesday (July 21). The use of pellet guns and shock batons against civilian protesters, appears to be the first in Delhi.

What are pellet guns?

Pellet guns, whose technical name is ‘pump action guns’, are a form of non-lethal crowd-control method used by police and military worldwide. The other popular measures are tear gas, water cannon, pepper spray and taser guns among others.

Pellet guns are also popular in hunting and pest control. Intended to immobilise an individual, they are effective over short ranges of up to 500 yards but when fired from close quarters can be lethal, particularly when sensitive parts like the eyes are hit. The pellets can penetrate soft tissues.

What happened during the July 20 protest in Delhi?

There are standing instructions to open minimal fire at protesters and if necessary “below their waist.” A cartridge of a pellet gun contains a few hundred pellets made of lead, which disperses a few hundred metres when fired. Pellets can be of various shapes either like ball bearings or irregular. They are manufactured at the Ordinance Factory, Ishapore.



While Delhi Police has denied its use against protesters, pellet guns are part of the RAF's gear. ANI

While the Delhi Police have denied its use against protesters, pellets guns and shock batons are part of the gear of the Rapid Action Force (RAF) –the anti-riot unit under the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)– which was deployed alongside police personnel on July 20 and continues to be deployed near the Jantar Mantar protest site.

On Monday, the victim Shaikh Irshad Mansoori was hit near Palika Bazaar by a RAF official. His friend said that there are around 30-40 injuries on his face and across his body. Four of them, including one in the neck, had penetrated deeply, which is why he underwent surgery.

Originally from Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, Mr. Mansoori works at a private company in Gurugram and was attending the protests in solidarity. He also had some visa-related work in New Delhi, which he was supposed to finish after the protest.

What is the first known usage of pellet guns?

Pellet guns were first deployed in Jammu

and Kashmir after Kashmir Valley's summer unrest of 2010 that claimed the lives of 112 protesters in police firing. The then Congress-led government at the Centre deployed pellet guns as a “non-lethal” measure to avoid civilian fatalities.

After violent protests broke out in the Kashmir Valley post July 8, 2016 – when the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) commander Burhan Wani was killed in an encounter with security forces – several people were blinded due to injuries inflicted by pellet guns, used by the CRPF as a crowd control measure.

Why were its specifications changed?

In 2016, the BJP-PDP government faced severe criticism for using pellet guns, with several political parties asking for its complete withdrawal. Due to the use of pellet guns, 13 people were killed in 2016 and more than 250 were injured, while some lost their vision.

In 2017, a year later, the first batch of less lethal “plastic bullets” were dispatched to the Kashmir Valley. The

plastic bullets were tested at the Terminal Ballistics Research Laboratory (TBRL) in Chandigarh and could be fired from the weapons that the security forces already possessed. Instead of metal, this round of ammunition had a plastic head.

In 2016, 1,022 CRPF personnel were also injured in stone-pelting by protesters. Of these, 956 were injured in the Valley between July 8 and 16 during the unrest.

What is the last definitively known use of pellet guns in the country?

They were last known to have been used during the 2024 farmers protest at Khanauri and Shambhu barriers along the Punjab-Haryana border. Though the police denied using pellet guns, farmer leaders had alleged that several persons were injured.

In 2023, they were used against protesters in the ethnic-strife torn Manipur, leading to a massive public outrage.

What about shock batons?

Shock batons are also a part of the RAF personnel gear.

In 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), through the Border Security Force (BSF), prescribed Qualitative Requirements (QRs) for handheld ‘Shock Batons’ intended for self-defence and operational use by security personnel. It said that the equipment should be light weight, with a maximum weight of 1 kg and a length of 450 mm to 700 mm, ensuring ease of carriage and handling. It must be constructed from high-impact resistant material, capable of functioning reliably in temperatures ranging from -20°C to +50°C and offering a minimum level of water resistance.

The shock baton should have a service life of at least five years and be powered by a rechargeable battery. Additional requirements include the capability to deliver at least 1,000 quarter-second shock bursts on full charge, thereby ensuring sustained operational effectiveness in field conditions.

THE GIST

At least one of the 80 protesters injured in police action during the march to Parliament on Monday, called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) sustained pellet gun injuries.

Pellet guns were first deployed in Jammu and Kashmir after Kashmir Valley's summer unrest of 2010 that claimed the lives of 112 protesters in police firing.

Where does the law stand on internet shutdowns?

What questions arise following the internet shutdown in Delhi during the CJP protest?

Rizmi Lia M.

The story so far:

Mobile internet services were shut down in parts of Central Delhi during the ‘Chalo Sansad’ protest organised by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP). Thousands of people gathered on the opening day of the Parliament's Monsoon Session, to demand the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan following the NEET paper leaks and irregularities in the CBSE school examination process. The internet shutdown, which remained in place until the evening, drew condemnation from the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) and the Software Freedom Law Centre, India (SFLC).

What is an internet shutdown?

According to web rights advocacy organisation Access Now, an internet shutdown is defined as “an intentional

disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to control the flow of information.” They take many forms, from full network disruptions to slowing down internet speed or blocking platforms.

Most internet shutdowns are ordered when large numbers of people are expected to gather for political reasons, peaceful demonstrations, violent protests or religious celebrations, according to the International Federation of Journalists.

Under Section 20(2)(b) of the Telecommunications Act, 2023, telecommunication services may be suspended only on the occurrence of a public emergency or in the interest of public safety, on the grounds specified in that provision, and for reasons recorded in writing. “A protest, by itself, is not a lawful ground for suspending internet services. Under Section 20(2) of the Telecommunications Act, 2023, a

suspension may be ordered only during a public emergency or in the interest of public safety, and only for specified purposes such as maintaining public order. The order must be reasoned, published, limited in area and duration, and issued by the competent authority under the Telecommunications Suspension Rules, 2024. The government must also consider whether less restrictive measures would be sufficient,” said Apar Gupta, Advocate and Founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation.

Which law governs internet shutdowns?

Internet shutdowns in India were earlier governed by Section 5(2) of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 and the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. These have now been replaced by Section 20 of the Telecommunications Act, 2023 and the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024.

Despite the updated legal framework, a review by the Digital Defenders Network found that several shutdown orders issued by State governments since late 2024 continue to invoke the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 and the 2017 Rules.

For instance, the Secretary, Home Department, Uttar Pradesh, issued an internet suspension order applicable to the district of Bareilly on October 2, 2025, invoking Section 7 of the Telegraph Act read with Rule 21(1) of the 2017 Rules.

By continuing to rely on these outdated provisions, some States appear to have bypassed the procedural safeguards introduced under the 2024 Rules.

The current suspension order accessed by *The Hindu* as released by the Ministry of Home Affairs, was imposed across 150 cell sites according to an Industry source. It stated that the order was imposed under Clause (b) of Sub-section (2) of Section 20 of The Telecommunication Act, 2023 read with 2024 Rules.

Where does India stand in terms of internet shutdowns?

India continues to record one of the highest numbers of internet shutdowns in the world. Access Now's 2025 report recorded 65 shutdowns across 12 States and Union Territories.

Jammu & Kashmir has recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in the country, with about 449 since 2012, followed by Rajasthan (115) and Manipur (62), as per the SFLC Internet Shutdown

Tracker. India has recorded about 24 shutdowns in 2026 (as of July 22).

What limits has the SC placed?

In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020), the Supreme Court held that access to the internet is closely connected to the freedoms of speech and trade under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g).

The Court held that any shutdown must be backed by law, pursue a legitimate objective, be necessary and proportionate, and be the least restrictive measure available. Orders must also be limited in scope and duration, accompanied by detailed reasons, published and reviewed by a competent committee. The Court observed that “complete broad suspension of telecom services, be it the internet or otherwise, must be considered by the State only if ‘necessary’ and ‘unavoidable’.

Can orders be challenged in court?

Yes. A shutdown may be challenged before a High Court under Article 226 or, in an appropriate case, before the Supreme Court under Article 32. Courts can examine whether the order was lawful, proportionate and properly limited in area and duration.

“Indefinite suspensions are unlawful. The government must publish its orders and provide reasons capable of judicial review. Under the 2024 Rules, a suspension order cannot remain in force for over 15 days,” Mr. Gupta said

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The death we misunderstand: reflecting on literary depictions of drowning

From ancient epics to contemporary fiction, drowning has been a recurring literary obsession — and an overlooked human catastrophe. In today’s digital world, perhaps literature can rescue drowning from spectacle by presenting it as a preventable tragedy and a matter of social justice

Lopa Ghosh

This year, an image that seized the digital world was that of a speedboat capsizing in the rough seas off Phu Quoc, Vietnam – a few terrifying minutes of unspeakable tragedy, repeated endlessly across news feeds. Stories of drowning have piled up elsewhere too: children dying on their way to school, cars swept away by rivers in spate, farmers and fishermen swallowed whole, a woman taken by the sea while clutching an idol of her favourite god.

According to the World Health Organization, 3,00,000 people die by unintentional drowning every year. Since the publication of WHO’s first global report on drowning in 2014 we are only just beginning to recognise this barely understood public health crisis.

And yet, since days of yore, literature has been obsessed with drowning. From the Mesopotamian epic poem The ‘Epic of Gilgamesh’, Homer’s ‘Odyssey’, Ganga’s drowning of the seven sons she bore with King Shantanu in the Mahabharata, and Shakespeare’s Ophelia in ‘Hamlet’, to modern depictions such as Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Bell Jar’, literary texts have been replete with incidents of drowning.

With the uneasy conscience of a public health advocate, I find myself asking, has literature been guilty of aestheticising this terrible death? Or has it, in fact, been slipping us powerful diagnostic clues and decoders that we have chosen to ignore?

The face of drowning

I turn first to Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Hamlet’s beloved, who dies by drowning. Ophelia’s wondrous death is described by Gertrude as a beautiful tableau: “Her clothes spread wide and Mermaid like...” decked in fantastic garlands of crow flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples, she sank.

The feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter in her seminal 1985 essay, “Representing Ophelia,” reminds us that Ophelia’s unintentional drowning is the textual archetype of woman as madness or madness as woman. Elizabethan culture would have diagnosed Ophelia’s condition as an excess of female love-melancholy, or erotomania. Male melancholy, of the kind associated with Hamlet, is linked to intellectual and imaginative genius. A women’s melancholy, by contrast, is biological and dangerous. Such is the power of this scene that in 1942, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard categorised death by drowning as a truly feminine death – a passive, beautiful immersion in the softness and fluidity of water.

A violent death

Over time, Ophelia has been resurrected again and again. Her visibility in painting, theatre and popular culture – from Odilon Redon’s ‘Ophelia Among the Flowers’ to Bob Dylan’s ‘Desolation Row’ – stands in inverse relation to her invisibility in critical texts. The English Pre-Raphaelites were obsessed with her death. John Everett Millais’s Ophelia –sensuous, floral, every botanical detail luminous – turned her into the very face of drowning and irreversibly shaped the idea that it is silent, calm, and painless.

But drowning is a horribly violent



Deadly depths: According to the World Health Organization, 3,00,000 people die by unintentional drowning every year. PTI

death. It is respiratory impairment caused by submersion or immersion in liquid. We do not often hear the violence because drowning is literally silent. Physiologically, when a person is drowning, it is almost impossible to scream or make any sound because the airways collapse and the lungs flood with water.

That silence has been appropriated for centuries by great literary works as a political and narrative tool. Drowning is often the death given to those pushed to the margins. Consider Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s novel, *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie dies in a flood while trying to rescue her brother Tom. It is not a suicide, but it performs a similar narrative function. Maggie is a problem the novel’s social world cannot solve: her errant sexuality compromises her and it is difficult to return her to any respectable future. Her drowning in the flood is an erasure. Contemporary fiction set in the Global South has often offered a counterpoint to the elegant drowning of Ophelia. Most recently, in Megha Majumdar’s *A Guardian and a Thief*, a work of climate fiction set in dystopic future where Calcutta has been overcome by famine and lawlessness, drowning becomes collateral damage in a world of climate precarity. As a starving mob clamours for rice, a ferry overturns and hundred drown.

A fearful phantom

The one recent novel that situates drowning within an epic sweep and presents it as an elusive, little-understood, and fearful phantom is Abraham

Verghese’s *The Covenant of Water*. Set in Parambil, a fictional Kerala town, traversing three generations of an Orthodox Christian family, drowning is a lived experience, a daily threat, and also a family curse in this health-humanities text par-excellence.

In Big Ammachi’s family, men die by drowning. It is a curse and a mysterious ‘condition’ to which one family member, usually a male, succumbs generation after generation, until Mariamma, a gifted doctor, diagnoses it as a medical ailment which can be treated. From what is perceived as a dark curse, we come into the light and are granted a diagnosis and cure.

Yet what is most riveting in this tale, is the inexplicability and suddenness of these drownings – such as that of 10-year-old Jojo who drowns in an irrigation ditch after falling from a coconut tree. The ditch is so shallow that Ammachi’s spine jars when she jumps into it to save her little boy. These deaths are documented on a crumbling parchment. Jojo’s father, Big Appachen, cannot inscribe the details of his son’s death into this family document because he himself had never attended school which was across the river. Fear of drowning kept him unlettered. Big Ammachi delicately scribbles the cause and year of death next to Jojo’s name – Death in an Irrigation Ditch, 1908. Ironically, this fragile family parchment shines as a death register more detailed and accurate than the records on drowning available in many countries.

Lack of accurate data, hurried burials, weak death registration systems and the

unreliability of verbal autopsies are among many reasons why global data on drowning remains severely underreported.

The viral body

In contemporary literature, drowning continues to be a persistent literary trope partly because drowning is more common than we assume. But also because this death is like the element in which it occurs – water itself: a metaphor for power and also a canvas for sublime aesthetics.

In the new visual culture of the digital age, shaped by the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing dying moments livestreamed, literature’s long work of interpreting drowning has been overtaken by CCTV footage and mobile phone recordings. Ophelia’s drowning has been replaced by algo-feeding images of a man flashing his phone atop a bottomless construction pit – the phone light slowly fading away as the man sinks while bystanders record a video of his drowning.

Drowning has been released from its historical role as metaphor and transformed into spectacle. The beautiful drowned woman of literature has given way to the viral drowning body. Yet as public health begins to recognise that data alone cannot tell the whole story and looks for clues in people’s lives, perhaps literature can rescue drowning from spectacle – not by aestheticising death, but by restoring it as a preventable tragedy and a matter of social justice and accountability.

(Lopa Ghosh is an author and global policy expert.)

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the Commonwealth Games, as the 2026 edition begins in Glasgow today

V.V. Ramanan

- QUESTION 1**
Of the 22 editions held so far, which country has hosted the most Games?
- QUESTION 2**
Which city was confirmed in 2022 as the host but pulled out because of cost factors and which Asian country also backed out leading to Glasgow agreeing to do the honours?
- QUESTION 3**
How many core sports and medals are on offer at the Glasgow Games?
- QUESTION 4**
Who was the first Indian to

- win a Gold medal at the Games and how many medals has India won since its debut in 1934?
- QUESTION 5**
This Indian won 15 medals at the Games and his sport has given India the most gold (63) and total tally of medals (135). Name him and sport.
- QUESTION 6**
Which Olympic medallists will carry the Indian tricolour and bear the ceremonial baton at the Glasgow 2026 opening ceremony?
- QUESTION 7**
In which sports are Nayan Moni Saikia, Pranati Nayak, and Ronaldo Singh Laitonjam expected to shine for India?



Visual question: Name this mascot for the Glasgow Games and what type of creature is it? REUTERS

- Questions and answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:**
- 1. On this day in 1992, this Colombian drug smuggler escaped from a luxurious prison—that he had built. Known as La Catedral, the prison was part of a unique deal he had reached with the Colombian government. Name the smuggler. **Ans: Pablo Escobar**
 - 2. On this day in 1933, this American aviator completed the first solo flight around the world. **Ans: Wiley Post**
 - 3. On this day in 1923, this American baseball player became the first pitcher in the MLB to strike out 3,000 batters. **Ans: Walter Johnson**
 - 4. This American author of poetry, prose was born on this day in 1849. She is remembered for her 1883 sonnet, "The New Colossus", which was inspired by the Statue of Liberty. Identify her. **Ans: Emma Lazarus**
 - 5. This English film director and actor, who is best remembered for several horror films: *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *Bride of Frankenstein* was born on this day in 1889. **Ans: James Whale**
- Visual: Identify this German astronomer born on this day in 1784. He made the first measurement of the distance of a star other than the Sun. **Ans: Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel**
- Early birds:** Neil Lal| Arun Kumar Singh| Dil Bahadur Airee| Pulkit Sathe| Sumana Dutta



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the origin of “red tape”? (T. Malavika, Bangalore)

The complaint that most people have against all government organisations is that there are too many bureaucratic procedures to be followed. There are so many rules that nothing ever gets done quickly – everything happens in slow motion. This is what we mean by red tape; official rules which make it impossible for things to get done quickly. Here are a few examples:

My leave application has been held up by red tape.

Vijay says he knows how to cut through the red tape.

Why “red” and not some other colour? The idiom owes its origin to the practice begun by government officials in England in the 17th century. They were in the habit of tying official documents with a ribbon that was red in colour – some people argue that the ribbon was closer to pink than red! The expression “red tape” was introduced by Charles Dickens and made popular by Thomas Carlyle. By the 19th century the idiom began to mean “official sluggishness”. If you have a ‘red tape mind’, you apply rules blindly.

What is the difference between “battle” and “war”? (M. Deepa, Chennai)

The word “war” is normally used to refer to the duration of fighting between two factions – it could be two countries, states, etc. A war may last a few days or a few years. We talk about the Hundred Years War, etc. Usually in a war we have very heavy casualties. A “battle”, on the other hand, is usually fought between two armies or two groups. A battle doesn’t usually last as long as a war. A war can consist of several battles. An army may lose several battles, but ultimately win the war. During World War II, Germany won many battles, but ended up losing the war.

What is the difference between “its” and “it’s”? (P. Mahadevan, Mysore)

The word ‘its’, which is normally used in informal writing, is the abbreviated form of “it is”. For example, we can say, “It’s a wonderful day”, “It’s a boy” to mean “It is a wonderful day” and “It is a boy”. “It’s” is also used as a short form of “It has”. Here are a few examples.

It’s been a lovely day. (It has been a lovely day).

It’s been hard work. (It has been hard work).

The word “its” is used to indicate possession – just like the word “hers”. For example:

The little baby fell off its chair.

How do you pronounce the word “xenophobia”? (M. P. Chinnaraj, Erode)

The “x” is pronounced like the “z” in “zen” and “zip”. The first syllable “xeno” rhymes with the words “men” and “hen”. The first “o” is like the “a” in “China”, while the second is like the “o” in “so” and “no”. The final “ia” is like the “ea” in “dear”, “near”, and “fear”. The word means extreme fear or dislike of people from other countries. If you hate foreigners, then you could say that you are xenophobic. Here are a few examples.

Malathy is too xenophobic to go abroad.

Bala’s xenophobia prevented him from meeting some interesting people.

Published in *The Hindu* on May 15, 2001

Word of the day

Avarice:
insatiable desire for wealth

Synonyms: greed, covetousness, rapacity

Usage: History is filled with empires undone by avarice.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/avarice

International Phonetic Alphabet: /əˈvæɪs/

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

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAMNATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

It's not just about a retest, it's about the India story

THE PROTESTORS at Jantar Mantar demand the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in order to enforce accountability for the leak of the NEET exam paper. The BJP-led government promises strict action against those involved and reiterates the successful conduct of the retest. In the stand-off, however, one point may be getting inadequate attention — focusing on the examination is important, but not enough. While hundreds of thousands appear in competitive examinations like NEET, only a small number gets selected. The challenge facing India's youth is much larger and encompassing: The vast majority continues to be ill-prepared and poorly-equipped to participate in India's growth story.

Nor is this a matter that can be solved by higher budgetary allocations alone. The Union government's allocations for education, according to an analysis in this newspaper, have come down sharply as a percentage of total government expenditure over the past 12 years since the BJP led-NDA government took charge. That downward trajectory is telling — it speaks about the government's commitment, or lack of it, to education. At the same time, the central government's budget allocation is not the only, or main, issue holding back improvements in the educational system of the country. Part of the problem is that education, which used to be a state subject until 1976, was shifted to the Concurrent List. This means the system's efficacy calls for a substantial degree of coordination between the Centre and state governments. The quality and efficacy of the education system must also be measured by its ability to make students employable in an ever-changing economy, at a time when technological change and geopolitics are disrupting long-held assumptions about human resource management and growth.

Even though the government has received generous mandates since 2014, its commitment to education has been far less visible than the energy and political capital it has invested in advancing its chosen cultural projects. So far, other than a refresh of the National Education Policy, it has not adequately prioritised investments in human resources as the necessary infrastructure for prosperity in the new economy. By the time the next general election comes along in 2029, a generation of voters will have grown up in a country ruled by NDA governments. These young voters are likely to be much more impatient with the lack of reforms in the education system, and the larger toll it takes on growth. The Jantar Mantar mobilisation by the young isn't just asking the government to fix an exam. It frames, instead, the urgent imperative to bring education to front and centre of governance — and the political discourse. The government, in its third term, with three years to go, needs to dial down the self-serving surround sound and listen to this message.

A tightrope PM Burnham must walk

IN HIS first week as Prime Minister of the UK, Andy Burnham is already grappling with what will be one of his central challenges: Delivering change to a deeply dissatisfied public, from a constrained fiscal position. He has walked back the suggestion that he might raise the tax-free personal allowance, citing "financial circumstances". He has announced measures to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, including a cap on bus fares and a VAT cut on energy bills, and signalled an increase in defence spending with the appointment of John Healey — who resigned from the Keir Starmer government over its failure to allocate sufficient funds for defence — as chancellor. The same question arises: Where will the money be found? Burnham recognised the constraints early on: After saying last year that the government should not be "in hock" to the bond markets, he changed tack, and pledged to stay with Labour's fiscal rules. What remains to be seen is how he will thread the needle while delivering growth.

Social cohesion will be another major front for the new PM. He has retained Shabana Mahmood as home secretary, indicating that the government will maintain its much-criticised tough stance on immigration. He needs to face the ethno-nationalist tide, and not be seen to buckle before it. One fallout has been in the poorly managed university sector, which had relied on international students as a cash cow and now faces a severe financial crunch due to visa restrictions. The consequences are playing out in the form of sweeping faculty job cuts, threatening one of the areas where the UK is truly world-leading. The government needs to step in with a plan to rescue and restructure the sector.

Labour has three years before it must face the electorate again. To navigate a historic political realignment, it has to quickly move past the ignominy of Starmer's ouster and tamp down on factionalism. The challenges of restoring public trust and political stability while walking a fiscal tightrope are steep. Burnham enters office with a measure of goodwill, as seen in Labour's polling bounce; he will have to make full use of it.

China's poet of precarity

SCRIBBLED ON stray scraps of paper during the work day, Wang Jibing's poems carry the relentless soundtrack of the gig economy — of labyrinthine lanes, noisy traffic junctions, irate phone calls, but also the constant hum of chronic uncertainty. That the collection, *Low Flight*, has won the 56-year-old Chinese food delivery agent the Lu Xun Literary Prize, China's premier literary award, is a heartening affirmation of both his resilience and literature's capacity to celebrate imaginative expansiveness, no matter where it emerges from.

Wang is part of a growing tribe of blue-collar workers in China who have turned to writing to make sense of their hardscrabble lives. Literature is replete with such examples. Maxim Gorky wandered through poverty and odd jobs before becoming Russia's chronicler of the dispossessed; Maya Angelou was San Francisco's first female Black streetcar conductor before she found writing; Raymond Carver a janitor and mill hand before his stories reshaped American fiction. In India, Daya Pawar, Bama, Omprakash Valmiki and countless others wrote from the margins, forcing literature to bear witness.

What does a low flight reveal? Not a bird's eye view of the world, but a sharper picture of what it is to live close to the ground, without a scaffolding of certainties, learning to make the odds work in your favour, somehow. Wang, who had to drop out of school because of poverty and spent decades working in construction sites, street stalls and other precarious work, has refused to give up his job even after the award. It is a moving validation of the courage of the ordinary, in not ceding ground, in holding on to all that gives life, labour and dreams meaning.



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE TRUE measure of a constitutional democracy lies not in the authority it wields to enforce compliance, but in the humility with which it engages dissent. A secure republic treats peaceful protest as an opportunity to look into a mirror reflecting the anxieties of its citizenry. A fragile executive, by contrast, treats that same mirror as an enemy, shattering it with lathis and turning the symbolic leadership of the fasting Sonam Wangchuk, gathered to demand accountability on issues touching their very futures. The response from the apparatus of the state was not a dialogue, but a crack-down, silencing their voices with violence and detentions.

Lathi charges broke through crowds of non-violent demonstrators, sending nearly a hundred young men and women to hospital emergency wards with fractures, contusions, and trauma. The sight of police officers wielding batons against unarmed youth, while internet blackouts and closed metro stations throttled the flow of both information and people, felt less like the rou-

tine maintenance of public order in a constitutional republic and more like the heavy-handed oppression of a police state. I spoke to a young man at Jantar Mantar who had been hit on the head and below the eye with a lathi and still wore a large bandage to stanch the bleeding. My heart broke to see what the custodians of law and order had done to a youth who was peacefully distributing water to the protesters.

Equally jarring has been the government's disgraceful manhandling of the protesting Leader of the Opposition and the environmentalist-educator Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike. For three weeks, Wangchuk sat in quiet, disciplined fast at Jantar Mantar, a historic venue designated precisely for the public expression of grievance. His method was classically Gandhian: Self-abnegation as an appeal to the conscience of the state. The smart thing for the government to do would have been to send a minister with a glass of nimbu-pani and the assurance of a discussion in Parliament, to urge him to break his fast.

Yet, rather than engaging in a spirit of constructive conciliation, the state chose the path of coercion. Under the cloak of medical necessity, police forces descended upon the protest site to forcibly remove the frail 59-year-old activist to a government hospital. The line between medical intervention and state custody became dangerously blurred, and even here the government was found wanting in basic humanity. The appalling treatment of Rahul Gandhi, who was bodily lifted and dragged into detention, was a betrayal of the democratic compact.

A state that fears the moral authority of an unarmed protester reveals a profound lack of confidence in its own narrative. The pattern of suppression, the targeting and arrest of student leaders, and the physical intimidation di-

It is time to prove to the youth of India that their voices need not be battered and bruised on the streets to be heard in the corridors of power

Trade deals need to be set in strategy, not expediency



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

DEAR EDITOR
I disagree
A fortnightly column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it

RECENT editorial in this newspaper argued that a deal with the United States now will go a long way in reducing the uncertainty that has marred relations between the countries, while expanding trade ('Ahead of the big deal, strike a careful balance', *IE*, July 17). But the proposed India-United States trade agreement is about far more than trade. It is about how a rising India engages the world's largest economy while preserving the strategic confidence, policy flexibility and institutional freedom that will define its next phase of growth.

Even after agreements with the UK, Australia and Europe, no market matches the scale, investment capacity, technological depth and strategic importance of the US. Equally, America has strong reasons to deepen its economic engagement with India. It seeks access to one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets, a trusted strategic partner in an uncertain Indo-Pacific and an economy that will shape demand for digital and financial services. Neither country can fully realise its ambitions without a deeper partnership with the other.

Washington may also have underestimated India by assuming that the goodwill and political symbolism of the Howdy Modi moment would translate into greater negotiating flexibility and acceptance of US preferences in a bilateral agreement. It did not. Tariffs, public pressure and shifting geopolitical signals may have tested the relationship, but they did not fundamentally alter India's negotiating posture, reminding both capitals that political chemistry has its limits, whereas sound public policy demands pragmatism, reciprocity and an unwavering commitment to long-term interests.

That is precisely why these negotiations deserve greater public reflection. The pursuit of immediate economic gain, or the political satisfaction of announcing a successful agreement, could gradually narrow the policy choices available to future governments. Every bilateral negotiation requires accommodation. None should diminish a nation's long-term strategic confidence.

Diplomatic engagement has become more transactional and, on occasion, un-

comfortably patronising. Tariffs, sanctions, export controls, technology restrictions and financial access have become instruments of geopolitical influence. India has navigated these changes with composure. That composure should continue, but New Delhi must remain anchored in strategic judgement rather than tactical expediency.

The commitments India accepts today may well become the standards the US expects from it and others tomorrow. Trade agreements increasingly establish geopolitical precedents, not merely commercial obligations. That is why every clause deserves to be negotiated with an eye on the next decade rather than the next news cycle. The concerns over forced labour should also prompt introspection, not indignation. India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it.

Equal care is required in areas extending beyond merchandise trade. Labour mobility, digital trade, data governance, and emerging technologies will shape India's development long after tariff schedules are forgotten. The defining lesson of contemporary geopolitics is unmistakable: Technology that a nation does not own can, one day, be used to influence, constrain or coerce it. Trade agreements must preserve India's sovereign ability to govern its data, regulate its digital economy and shape its technological future. The same discipline should guide India's approach to food and energy security.

Agreements of this consequence acquire greater durability and public confidence when subjected to scrutiny before becoming binding national commitments. Such scrutiny strengthens international agreements by giving them wider political ownership and democratic legitimacy. The understandable desire to conclude an agreement within a political timetable should never outweigh the responsibility of preserving India's long-term strategic choices. We should negotiate for the economy we aspire to become, not merely the economy we happen to be.

Sridharan is a corporate advisor and author of *Family and Dhandra*



SHASHANK R JOSHI



SHAMBO SAMRAT SAMAJDAR

Ministers and hashtags will pass. Textbooks will shape memory, languages will shape consciousness, and examination systems will distribute opportunity for decades

bus hit a landmine in Mahamadhu in the Vavuniya district, according to informed sources. The bus was travelling from Kochikattu on the Horapatana road to Vavuniya when the incident occurred. The impact of the explosion is said to have blown the bus 50 feet high.

VPSingh on Reliance loans

THE FINANCE MINISTER, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, said that the loans given to companies connected with Reliance in the debenture case would be recalled if it was found that they were not being put to "proper" use. Singh told A G Kulkarni and others in reply to a spate of supplementaries in the Rajya Sabha

dium. Dissent does not disappear simply because it is beaten out of public sight; it merely turns inward, festering into cynicism and alienation among the young, like the female students at Jantar Mantar who told me in disbelief of being manhandled by policemen, and witnessing demonstrators being assaulted with brutality by men in plain clothes wielding lathis studded with nails.

Democracy is sustained not by the enforcement of silence, but by the welcoming of open debate. The right to peaceful assembly under Article 19(1)(b) of our Constitution is not a privilege conceded by the state at its convenience; it is a foundational right forged in our freedom struggle. To treat peaceful demonstrators as security threats or law-and-order nuisances is to forget that the very architects of our republic were themselves courageous protesters who chose the weapon of satyagraha over submission.

The path forward to preserve our democratic compact requires an immediate course correction. An independent judicial inquiry must be instituted into the excessive use of force, pellet injuries, and lathi-charges against non-violent protesters. Accountability is essential for wrongdoing both here and in the conduct of examinations: The government must unconditionally engage with representatives of the protesting students rather than relying on police containment. And the Speaker and the Treasury benches must allow uninhibited discussion on the public's grievances on the floor of the House. That is what Parliament is for, and it must reclaim its pride of place as the deliberative sanctuary of the republic.

It is time to prove to the youth of India that their voices need not be battered and bruised on the streets to be heard in the corridors of power.

The author is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram

Beyond the protests, three education initiatives



SHASHANK R JOSHI



SHAMBO SAMRAT SAMAJDAR

Ministers and hashtags will pass. Textbooks will shape memory, languages will shape consciousness, and examination systems will distribute opportunity for decades

AN EXAMINATION leak is a grave failure and demands accountability. But reducing India's current education debate to one demand — "Dharmendra Pradhan must resign" — risks obscuring a far larger transformation. Today, the deeper contest is over who will shape the Indian mind: Its textbooks, languages and pathways to opportunity. Three government initiatives deserve to be judged on their substance. NCERT's new Class IX Mathematics textbook gives greater space to ancient Indian knowledge traditions and scholars such as Baudhayana, Brahmagupta and Madhava. Generations of students encountered Euclid and Newton without adequately learning about the *Sulba Sutras* or the Kerala School of Mathematics. This is not a rejection of Western knowledge. It is the correction of an inherited imbalance. The same principle applies to history. India's past should be presented through evolving archaeological, genetic, linguistic and textual evidence — not through colonial assumptions.

Second, the CBSE's move towards three languages recognises a profound truth: Language is not merely a subject but a vessel of memory and thought. Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Odia, Gujarati, Kannada and India's other languages carry civilisational knowledge that English alone cannot preserve. The objective should remain additive multilingualism — strong Indian-language foundations alongside competence in English as a global bridge.

Third is examination reform. The K Radhakrishnan Committee proposed stronger data security, greater state and district involvement, more reliable examination centres, biometric safeguards and a gradual transition towards computer-based testing. The latest breach does not invalidate this direction. India cannot protect examinations through technology alone, but neither can it secure them without modernising an outdated, vulnerable system. There is also a commercial dimension that polite debate often overlooks. One private market-research estimate valued India's coaching-classes market at approximately Rs 64,244 crore in 2022 and projected it to approach Rs 1.80 lakh crore by 2030. Separately, Ministry of External Affairs data recorded approximately 12.54 lakh Indian students at foreign universities. Any reform that improves institutions, reduces the dependence on coaching, strengthens Indian languages or challenges inherited academic narratives will unsettle established revenue streams. This does not make every protester compromised or every critic anti-national. Many students have genuine grievances. But it would be equally naïve to imagine that every campaign against reform is free from political, ideological or commercial interests.

The government must identify failures, punish those responsible and protect affected students. But accountability should strengthen reform, not become a pretext for abandoning it. "*Satyameva jayate*." Truth alone triumphs. But first, we must be allowed to teach it.

Joshi is a Mumbai-based endocrinologist. Samajdar is a Kolkata-based clinical pharmacologist

40 YEARS AGO July 23, 1986



Zia's denial of role in Punjab

THE HOME MINISTER, Buta Singh, dismissed as "bogus" Pakistan President Gen Zia-ul-Haq's denial of his country's complicity in terrorist acts in Punjab. Replying to a day-long discussion on the situation in Punjab in the Rajya Sabha, Buta Singh said the issue had been taken up on several occasions, both in writing and verbally, with the Pakistan government through diplomatic channels.

Bush hits mine in Sri Lanka

THIRTY ONE persons died on the spot and 22 were injured when a Ceylon Transport Board

during Question Hour that a four-member committee set up by the Reserve Bank of India was also looking into the "end use" of the loans given to the Reliance companies.

India-China talks

CHINA'S RECENT deepest intrusion into Indian territory since the 1962 war came up at the seventh round of ongoing Sino-Indian talks, as officials completed a review of the eastern sector. India's charge about last month's intrusion into Sumdorong Chu valley area of Arunachal Pradesh came up on the opening day of the talks with discussion on who had intruded where and when.

@ieExplained

#ExpressExplained

If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

HEALTH

How daily cholesterol pill holds hope for those at risk



EXPERT EXPLAINS

DR AMBUJ ROY

PROFESSOR OF CARDIOLOGY, AIIMS DELHI

STATINS ARE currently the first-choice drugs for lowering LDL (low-density lipoprotein), or “bad” cholesterol, but they do not help everyone achieve their target levels. Patients at high cardiovascular risk often require additional medicines which, until now, have only been available as expensive injections.

Now, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved a pill version called Lipfendra (enlicitide) that can bring LDL down by up to 60%.

Lipfendra is a PCSK9 inhibitor, which works differently from statins. While statins reduce the liver’s production of cholesterol, PCSK9 inhibitors help the liver remove bad cholesterol from the bloodstream.

They do this by blocking (inhibiting) the PCSK9 protein, which normally destroys LDL receptors. With more LDL receptors available, the liver can clear much more LDL cholesterol, often reducing levels by 50-60%.

Developed by Merck, the once-daily tablet is approved as an add-on to diet and exercise for adults with abnormally high bad cholesterol, including those with heterozygous familial hypercholesterolaemia (HeFH), an inherited condition that causes very high cholesterol levels.

“But the fine print is that besides lowering LDL cholesterol, Lipfendra also reduced apolipoprotein B (ApoB)—a protein found on cholesterol particles that reflects the number of artery-clogging lipoproteins circulating in the blood — by about 50% in the clinical trials. ApoB is higher among Indians than Western populations,” **Dr Ambuj Roy**, professor of cardiology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, told **Rinku Ghosh**.

Cholesterol: Understanding the basics

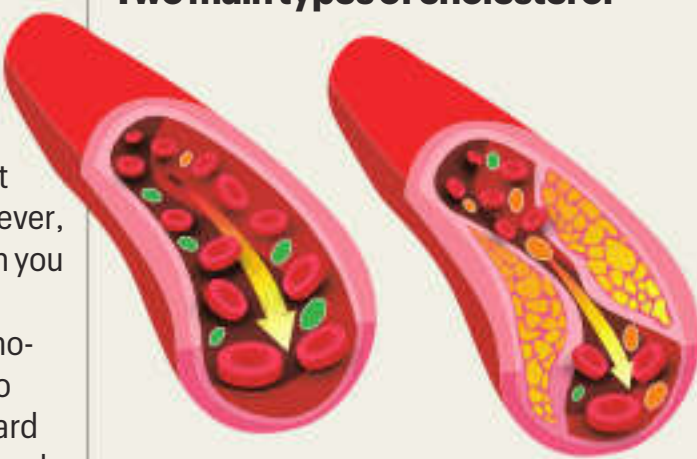
What is cholesterol?

- Cholesterol is a fatty substance that the body needs to build cells and hormones.
- It is naturally produced by the body and plays an important role in immunity, recovery and overall functioning.
- Cholesterol levels can fluctuate with stress, infections, surgeries and even seasonal changes.

When does it become a problem?

- Cholesterol itself isn’t inherently bad — your body needs it to build cells, digest food, make hormones. However, it becomes dangerous when you have too much Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL) or ‘bad’ cholesterol. Excess LDL sticks to your artery walls, forming hard plaques that narrow your blood vessels and restrict blood flow.

Two main types of cholesterol



- **High-Density Lipoprotein (HDL)**, also known as ‘good’ cholesterol, helps clear LDL from the bloodstream.
- **Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL)**, often called ‘bad cholesterol’, deposits fat in arteries.

What is ApoB?

ApoB (apolipoprotein B) is the primary structural protein found on the surface of ‘bad’ cholesterol particles (such as LDL, VLDL and IDL) that carry fats through the bloodstream.

Who is likely to benefit most from the new oral pill?

The biggest beneficiaries are patients at high or very high cardiovascular risk, particularly those who have already had a heart attack, undergone angioplasty or stenting, or have established coronary artery disease (CAD). In these patients, the focus is on secondary prevention — preventing another cardiac event.

The principle is simple: the lower the LDL cholesterol, the better the protection. Current guidelines recommend much stricter LDL cholesterol targets for people with existing heart disease, often below 55 mg/dL (milligrams per decilitre). While many patients can achieve these levels with a combination of a high-intensity statin and ezetimibe, which prevents cholesterol from entering the bloodstream via the gut, around 7-10% continue to have LDL levels above target or are unable to tolerate statins, creating the need for additional therapies such as PCSK9 inhibitors.

The drug may also benefit people with very high LDL cholesterol, a strong family history of premature heart disease, multiple cardiovascular risk factors or inherited conditions such as familial hypercholesterolaemia, where cholesterol levels remain elevated despite conventional treatment.

Prevention principle

The biggest beneficiaries of this pill would be patients at high or very high cardiovascular risk, such as those who have already had a heart attack.

In these patients, the focus is on secondary prevention — preventing another cardiac event.

Statins, the first-choice drugs for lowering ‘bad’ cholesterol, are not always enough. A new pill may help improve convenience and adherence

acid 180 mg + Ezetimibe 10 mg) can reduce LDL by 35–40%.

Will lowering LDL cholesterol reduce heart attacks and strokes?

While Lipfendra has been approved based on its ability to lower LDL cholesterol, a dedicated cardiovascular outcomes trial is still under way to determine whether it reduces heart attacks, strokes and cardiovascular deaths. LDL cholesterol is a well-established marker for cardiovascular risk. Decades of research have consistently shown that lowering LDL cholesterol reduces the likelihood of recurrent cardiovascular events, particularly when combined with good blood pressure control, diabetes management, regular exercise, a healthy diet and smoking cessation.

Why is ApoB reduction important?

LDL cholesterol travels through the bloodstream packaged inside particles known as lipoproteins. Each of these particles contains a single molecule of ApoB, meaning ApoB reflects the number of cholesterol-carrying particles rather than just the amount of cholesterol they contain.

This is particularly important in people with diabetes and dyslipidaemia, a condition in which the levels of cholesterol or other blood fats are abnormal. In such patients, LDL levels may appear normal in tests but the number of small, dense LDL particles—which are considered more harmful — may actually be high and drive plaque build-up. South Asians are known to have a higher prevalence of this pattern of dyslipidaemia compared with Western populations.

When should one get their cholesterol checked?

Every adult should have their cholesterol checked at least once in early adulthood (between 18 and 29 years) to identify inherited disorders, which affect around one in 250 people and cause markedly elevated LDL cholesterol from younger years. That can be addressed then. For people with normal cholesterol levels and low cardiovascular risk, repeat testing is generally advised every five years, although those with diabetes, hypertension, obesity, a family history of premature heart disease or other risk factors may need more frequent screening.

GOVERNANCE

Can police hide identity in protests? The procedure and practice

Deeptiman Tiwary

New Delhi, July 22

WHEN TENS of thousands of protesters attempted to march from New Delhi’s Jantar Mantar to Parliament on Monday as part of the “Sansad Chalo” protest, some videos emerged showing Delhi Police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel in civilian clothes or without visible nameplates. This raised questions over police identification and accountability.

What happened during the CJP protests on Monday?

The protests organised by the Cockerroach Janata Party (CJP) over the NEET paper leak and demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan swelled beyond expectations on Monday. As the crowd marched towards Parliament, police lathicharged it, leading to violent clashes between police and protesters. Both the police and members of the crowd sustained injuries. One protester was even admitted to the ICU.

By evening, some videos circulating on social media appeared to show unidentified men in civilian clothes wielding standard police batons and assaulting demonstrators. The CJP questioned the Delhi

Police on social media, asking: “Who are these lathi-armed goons in plainclothes? Who have you hired to beat us up?”

Some other videos appeared to show uniformed Delhi Police and RAF personnel without visible nameplates. In the clips, protesters are seen filming officers and asking, “Where is your nameplate? Please answer us,” while the personnel do not respond.

Delhi Police has not responded publicly to the allegations or the videos. But *The Indian Express* has learnt that the force has issued directions that all personnel deployed at Jantar Mantar must report in uniform and not in civilian clothing.

Is it legal to hide identification?

While certain operations, such as those involving intelligence collection, genuinely require hiding identification or even impersonation, regular policing is guided by statutory procedure and judicial guidelines.

The maintenance of public order and tranquillity is governed by Chapter XI of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (Sections 148 to 160, formerly Chapter X of the CrPC). While it does not specifically state whether policemen or armed forces personnel are required to identify themselves during a law and order situation, sources said that the very fact that the law allows only a



Police lathi-charge protesters at Jantar Mantar on Monday.

PRAVEEN KHANNA

magistrate or a “police officer” to disperse a crowd implies identification.

The argument is that an unidentified crowd of armed men cannot legally demand a public gathering to disperse. “If a police officer is unidentifiable, his command to disperse cannot carry statutory weight,” said a criminal lawyer practising in Delhi.

In *D K Basu vs State of West Bengal* (1997), the Supreme Court laid down detailed safeguards for arrests and detention, including the requirement that the arresting officer bear clear and visible identification. Although the ruling addressed arrests rather than crowd control, lawyers say it re-

flects the broader judicial emphasis on the identifiability of police officers while exercising coercive powers.

In August 2025, the Andhra Pradesh High Court, while hearing a petition filed by YSRCP MLA Nallapareddy Prasanna Kumar Reddy, questioned how citizens were expected to recognise plainclothes personnel as police officers while they were performing official duties. Reddy, who was facing the charge of obstructing a police officer from discharging his duty, had argued that the officers were not in uniform.

Why avoid identification?

Police officers argue that visible identification can expose individual personnel to prolonged litigation, online harassment and even threats to their families.

“This practice originated in conflict theatres such as Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and Chhattisgarh, where personnel often avoided displaying nameplates or rank insignia because they could make them easier targets for militants. Over time, it appears to have filtered into routine policing,” said a former Delhi Police officer.

He added that while the practice may be understandable in exceptional security situations, its extension to ordinary law-and-order duties remains contentious.

Meanwhile, the security establishment consistently flags manpower shortages.

Unsuccessful initiatives

Despite government initiatives, financial incentives, and the creation of strictly kosher military units, enlistment numbers have consistently lagged far behind the growing eligible workforce. According to data compiled by Israeli Democracy Institute, the number of Haredim joining the IDF has only increased from zero to 11% out of the eligible cohort since 1948.

The codification of the Haredi exemption carries risks for the future of the Israeli state across three core vectors: fiscal sustainability, social cohesion, and military readiness.

Because the “Torato Umanuto” framework legally binds state funding and draft deferments to remaining within the yeshiva system, it discourages young Haredi men from entering the workforce. A growing population sector that does not serve in the military and has lower rates of workforce participation places a heavy tax and security burden on a shrinking percentage of the population.

ASTHOUSANDS of Israeli soldiers remain engaged on the frontlines in South Lebanon and Gaza, the Israeli Parliament has approved laws that would stop the enlistment of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) men in the military. It is seen as an attempt by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to woo religious political parties ahead of polls.

The issue of the Haredi draft has remained fiercely debated since the formation of the State of Israel — why should a particular religious group should be exempt from military service? After almost eight decades, it has become a structural crisis challenging the foundational ethos of the state.

‘Status Quo’: Genesis, evolution

When the State of Israel was formed in 1948, its first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, faced the massive task of unifying the diverse Jewish diaspora, making Aliyah (immigrating) from different parts of the world. Each group had its expectations for the “promised land”.

In his book, *The Jewish State: A Century Later*, political scientist Alan Dowty notes that the founding fathers of Israel, including Ben-Gurion, made a number of unwritten understandings known as the “Status Quo” agreement that sought to balance the secular, socialist foundations of the new state with the long-held traditions of the religious minority. So, a small group of roughly 400 elite ultra-Orthodox yeshiva (a traditional Jewish educational institution focused on the study of sacred texts such as the Torah and the Talmud) students were exempted from military service under the framework of Torato Umanuto (“his Torah study is his occupation”). It was likely assumed that the number of Jews practising the faith in that manner would either dwindle over time or that they would accept the challenges faced by the state and agree to join the military.

Both assumptions proved incorrect. Gradually, the Ben-Gurion’s secular Labour Party grew weaker, and the parties that didn’t hesitate to align with religious groups filled the political vacuum. In 1977, Menachem Begin’s conservative Likud party



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men at a protest in Jerusalem on Tuesday. AP

formed a coalition with Haredi factions, ending decades of Labour dominance. Begin ensured there were no limits on the number of exempted Haredim (plural of Haredi). So, what began initially as an exceptional provision for 400 religious scholars became a structural exemption for an entire,

rapidly growing demographic group.

Religious-secular divide

Sociologist Sammy Smoocha calls Israel a “deeply divided society”. He says the Haredi-secular divide is not merely a disagreement over policy but a clash between two irreconcilable, self-contained worldviews operating within the same geographic borders. Military service in Israel is understood to be far more than a strategic necessity. The concept of the Tzva Ha’am (“People’s Army”) has kept the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) a melting pot of Israelis of different socio-economic, ethnic and geographic backgrounds.

Secular Israelis see universal military service as a foundational element of distributive justice. From this perspective, the exemption of an entire community is an unsustainable civic injustice. This has left the society under strain.

Haredi worldview

Haredim don’t view military exemption as a privilege or a loophole but as an absolute existential necessity. For them, spiritual defence is equal to — if not more im-

portant than — physical military defence. Haredi leaders frequently state that the continuous, intensive study of the Torah provides a metaphysical protective shield over the land of Israel.

Haredim view entering the IDF as an existential threat to their religious identity. The military environment — with its mixed-gender units, and alternative authority structures — is considered an institution that would inevitably erode the strict insularity required to maintain ultra-Orthodox life.

To garner popular support, centre-left and some right-wing parties in Israel have mobilised voters by promising to end the exemptions. The Supreme Court of Israel has repeatedly struck down previous legislative arrangements, ruling that sweeping exemptions violate the country’s “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” by discriminating between citizens.

The Haredi parties, including Shas and United Torah Judaism, view exemption as an absolute red line. They leverage their position as kingmakers in right-wing coalitions to demand explicit, ironclad legislation that bypasses Supreme Court rulings.

GLOBAL

Draft exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews: Long-running debate dividing Israel

Moinuddin Ahmad

New Delhi, July 22



INDIA-ASEAN TIES

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar

Let us contemplate the near future and consider how best our cooperation can serve our respective interests. In this era of volatility and disruption, the most visible stress is on supply chains

Oil on the boil again

Determined efforts must be made to boost domestic production over medium term

BRENT SPOT PRICES have gone well past \$90 a barrel with the war clouds over West Asia. The prospect for costlier oil is bad news for countries like India that imports 88% of its energy requirements, which would widen its trade deficit and push up inflation. The ongoing hostilities between the US and Iran clearly indicates that their memorandum of understanding (MoU) on June 18 to end the conflict and open the Strait of Hormuz has swiftly unravelled. This has dashed hopes of a further decline in oil prices from \$85 a barrel in June due to expectations of the US Energy Information Administration that production will soon return to near pre-conflict levels and that the majority of the shut-in crude production will be back on line. Instead there is the prospect that Brent could surge beyond the peak levels of \$117 a barrel registered in April.

Unfortunately, India has been hit with a double whammy for its energy and other supplies. Hopes were raised when as many as 59 vessels heading for India — 23 Indian-flagged and 36 foreign-flagged ships — safely transited the Strait of Hormuz from March 1 to July 17, according to Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal’s written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha. But with the US strikes on Iran and Tehran targeting American bases in the region, India has to brace for a complete shutdown of the Strait. As if all of this weren’t bad enough, the Iran-aligned Houthi threat to blockade Saudi Arabia’s shipments through the Bab-el-Mandeb subjects India to a fresh shock. Two oil tankers headed for India and China reversed course following these threats. This is a major setback to the growing share of Saudi crude in India’s import basket.

These are challenging times for India’s energy security as there are also relentless US pressures to reduce our dependence on Russian oil. In memory of the late Lindsey Graham, 60 US senators signed a bill proposing a 100% import duty on the top five countries, including India, that purchase oil from Russia. India of course is unlikely to change its sourcing strategy of accessing supplies at the best possible price. India’s imports from Russia in fact surged by 53% in the April-June quarter of this fiscal. But the prospects of costlier oil and constrained supplies through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb underscore the near-term need to augment strategic oil reserves. India is seeking to do so through cooperation with the United Arab Emirates and Japan. The good news is also that the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) is building a 13-million-barrel strategic petroleum reserve in Mangalore.

The strategic imperative, however, is to go all in to increase relative self-sufficiency by boosting domestic production over the medium term. To be sure, the ruling dispensation has sought to incentivise domestic producers and global giants for exploration and production by enacting the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Act, 2025. A good augury for increasing domestic exploration is the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas signing a tripartite MoU with Assam and Nagaland which was earlier impacted by insurgency. To facilitate this process, the policy regime must ease the high fiscal and regulatory burdens including withdrawing the archaic oil development cess. This would straightaway double ONGC’s exploration budget, according to former foreign secretary Ranjan Mathai. This is the way forward.

A fuse has been lit

IT SEEMS A fuse has been lit. A “Gen-Z” movement was anticipated in India after youth-led protests in Bangladesh last year, Nepal more recently, and in Sri Lanka back in 2022. The dust is yet to settle at Jantar Mantar. But this week’s march to Parliament, led by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), drew India’s Gen-Z although it was not limited to them.

It is different from the other upsurges in South Asia in that they were singularly focused on unseating regimes. The CJP’s *raison d’être* is something much less radical. It started as a satirical online movement that tapped into public anger over a broken education system, with student supporters from across India enthusiastically joining a chorus of demand for the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. It has merely sought accountability while Gen-Z demonstrations elsewhere reacted against elite privilege and graft.

Yet, a core, common concern has festered in India just as much — unemployment and bleak job prospects, which are directly linked to the education-related anxiety of India’s youths. Employed youths too have to contend with concerns like inequality, as voiced in Noida earlier this year by industrial workers and youths seeking higher wages and improved labour conditions.

One reason Monday’s march has snowballed is the state’s response. The heavy-handed police action, including caning and tear-gassing protesters, many of them in their teens, has attracted more sympathisers and handed the Opposition a political opening it was quick to seize. The images of Rahul Gandhi, suffering a nosebleed and being dragged away outside the Prime Minister’s residence, and defiantly invoking democracy as he lay on the ground, inevitably added to the government’s discomfort and gave the protests a wider political resonance.

Whether the Opposition can turn that opening to its advantage is another matter. It has struggled to build sustained political momentum around public discontent and has yet to establish the credibility needed to put the government seriously on the defensive. Indeed, too overt a political embrace could allow what began as a spontaneous youth protest to be dismissed as partisan mobilisation. The significance of the moment, therefore, lies less in the opportunity it offers the Opposition than in the warning it carries for the government: grievances over education, examinations, and employment can acquire a political force of their own when met with indifference or coercion.

Irrespective of the political support it attracts, the movement carries echoes of previous popular protests against the current regime. The year-long farmers’ agitation at the doorstep of Delhi compelled the Narendra Modi government to repeal three agricultural laws. Prior to that, the historic Shaheen Bagh protests, led by Muslim women, opposed the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, for months until the Covid-19 pandemic broke out.

A research of resistance movements between 1900 and 2006 by Harvard professor Erica Chenoweth has shown that non-violent civil resistance campaigns are more than twice as likely to achieve their goals as compared to armed uprisings. India, with its long history of youth-led protests, has had a thriving culture of civil disobedience. In the past 12 years, the BJP government has repeatedly tried to crush any civil opposition and encouraged its supporters to perceive dissenters as “anti-national”. That was reflected in the brutal police crackdowns on university campuses such as JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia. This not only does a disservice to democracy but also erodes public faith in the state as a guardian of citizens.

Unemployment, too, has been a touchy topic for the Modi government. While it has battled for self-employment and *atmanirbharta*, such a push also couches formal sector growth and the lack of quality jobs. No doubt, policy has taken initiatives to bridge skilling gaps to ensure India’s youths find smoother pathways between education and employment. However, unless it urgently plugs technical loopholes to prevent paper leaks for a gruelling exam like NEET, millions will suspect its sincerity. Worse, it will further fuel criticism of the government tending to promote pseudoscience at the cost of scientific temper.

For the CJP, the lack of a concrete ideology within its ranks will be a handicap if it tries to expand and take up other causes that civil society or political parties have failed to highlight. But for now, theirs is not a political fight. The government now faces their anger; it should not respond with condescension.



RITWIK SHARMA

ritwik.sharma@expressindia.com

SOURCING POWER

ANDHRA GOVT NOTIFICATION ALLOWS GOOGLE TO BE AN OPEN-ACCESS CONSUMER IN A LICENSEE CLOTHING

Google as licensee ill-conceived

THE ANDHRA PRADESH government has recently issued a notification which proposes granting a “deemed distribution licensee” status to data centres set up in the state with a minimum load of 300 megawatt (Mw). Apparently, it is for facilitating Google, which proposes to set up a \$15-billion data centre in the state with a load of 1 gigawatt (Gw). Strictly speaking, it will be a joint venture between a Google subsidiary and a well-known industrial house in India. The data centre will be set up in Vishakhapatnam, and would be spread over three campuses.

The first thing which comes to one’s mind is whether it is legally possible to grant a deemed distribution licensee status on the basis of an executive order, especially when there is no such provision in the parent Act, that is Electricity Act, 2003. The Electricity Act speaks of a deemed licensee status for transmission companies already in the business of transmission prior to the law’s enactment. There is no mention of deemed distribution licensees unless it’s a government company — which Google, of course, is not. In the case of a deemed licensee status, it seems, regulatory commissions do not hold hearings on whether to grant a licence or not. They simply grant the licence, even as they are free to hold the licensee accountable to the conditions stipulated by them in it.

To issue this notification, the state government has relied on an amendment made by the central government to the 2005 rules on additional requirements of capital adequacy, creditworthiness, etc. while granting a new distribution licence. The amendment was



SOMIT DASGUPTA

Visiting Professor, ICRIER

made in 2022, which granted the state government the power to determine the minimum area of supply of a new distribution licensee. Prior to that, the minimum area was that of a municipal corporation/revenue district.

There are some grey areas which need clarity as far as the present case is concerned. While it is clear that this particular deemed licensee cannot supply to a consumer outside its area, what is ambiguous is whether a consumer within the area of the deemed licensee can source power from the original incumbent utility. The Andhra Pradesh government notification says that the deemed licensee can only supply power for activities which fall under the operations of a data centre. What if there is a cafeteria operating within the geography of the data centre, or a medical bay? Will they be treated as parts of the data centre? If this will be treated as an external activity, the deemed licensee is forbidden to supply power to that entity.

As mentioned, the regulatory commission will stipulate conditions in the licence of the deemed licensee. The

licensee will have to abide by all the prescriptions covering renewable purchase obligations, hydro purchase obligations, etc. It will also have to conform to all the technical standards set by the commission relating to supply. But what about the aggregate revenue requirement (ARR) of the deemed licensee? How will the regulatory commission determine the ARR when the deemed licensee is

sourcing all the power it needs on its own and for its own consumption? There is no distribution involved and for all practical purposes, this is akin to an open-access consumer operating in the geography of a distribution licensee. The only difference is that an open-access consumer pays for the open access and other related charges for the loss of revenue to the incumbent utility. In this particular case, no open-access charges would be paid since it is a distribution utility by itself, albeit a deemed one.

It is not difficult to see why this route has been adopted by the state government. The idea is to ensure that the data centres do not pay open-access charges and can access power at a much cheaper

Some other method could have been thought of to ensure that data centres get power at some cheaper rate but remain an open-access consumer

rate. If the deemed licence finally comes through, there will not be any immediate impact on the revenue of the incumbent utility since the data centre is not one of its existing consumers. However, its future revenue will be unduly affected. The utility serving Vishakhapatnam is Eastern Power Distribution Company of Andhra Pradesh Limited, and its peak load is about 4 Gw. The data centre will have a final load of 1 Gw, which means that it would have been a gold mine for the utility had the data centre been one of its consumers. Surely, some other method could have been thought of to ensure that data centres get power at some cheaper rate but remain an open-access consumer and not a deemed utility. There is no denying that the power consumption of a data centre is huge and constitutes a big chunk of its operating cost, which increases exponentially if artificial intelligence is used in its operations.

Historically, our experience with designating a deemed distribution licensee just to avoid payment of cross-subsidy has not been pleasant. We have had the case of railways, where we stretched the provisions of the Electricity Act, 2003, to a unreasonable scale just to designate them as a deemed distribution licensee. The fallout was inevitable as the matter went into litigation. The Supreme Court, in a May order, has said that the railways is a consumer and not a deemed distribution licensee. Similar to the railways case, the move to award a deemed licensee status to Google is ill-conceived and legally untenable. It’s not a good decision and somebody needs to bell the cat.

Views are personal

Custodian of reserves to manager of risk



PRABAL BASU ROY

The author is a Sloan Fellow of the London Business School and a board member

The RBI’s \$100-billion forward position is neither a cause for panic nor a reason for celebration. It marks a quiet transformation that may well prove necessary

EVERY GENERATION OF central bankers leaves behind a defining innovation. There was a time when the credibility of a central bank was measured by the gold in its vaults. Later, inflation targeting became the gold standard of monetary policy. After the global financial crisis, quantitative easing redefined the role of central banks across the developed world.

India may now be witnessing another such transformation — one that has attracted far less public attention than it deserves.

The RBI’s recently declared foreign exchange forward position exceeding \$100 billion has attracted predictable headlines, ranging from a looming crisis to sophisticated financial management. Yet, the real story is not its size but what it reveals about the changing philosophy of India’s central bank.

Traditionally, defending a currency was straightforward. When the rupee weakened excessively, the RBI sold dollars from its foreign exchange reserves. The intervention was visible, easily understood, and immediately reflected in reserve numbers. Markets could see both the action and its cost.

Today, that model is undergoing a fundamental transformation.

Instead of relying primarily on outright dollar sales, the RBI has increasingly turned to forwards, swaps, and other derivative instruments. These allow it to influence the exchange rate without immediately drawing down reserves. In effect, the central bank is managing not merely the currency but its own balance sheet.

Critics may therefore ask whether India is replacing one vulnerability with

another — substituting visible reserve depletion with less visible derivative exposure akin to speculation on forward markets.

In my view, this is not speculation but prudent risk management. Unlike a hedge fund pursuing objectives of maximising profits, the RBI uses derivatives to minimise instability by moderating currency volatility while preserving reserves for periods of genuine systemic stress.

India is far more integrated with global capital flows than it was two decades ago. Oil prices, US interest rates, and shifts in global risk sentiment can move billions across borders within hours. Derivatives provide the flexibility to calibrate interventions, manage liquidity efficiently, and preserve reserves — a mark of institutional maturity, not financial adventurism.

Yet, every innovation carries risks.

A forward contract is ultimately a commitment that must be honoured, unwound, or rolled over. Today’s intervention, therefore, becomes tomorrow’s management challenge. This is popularly called *kicking the can down the road* — an economic philosophy tuned to perfection by Ben Bernanke after the 2008 Lehman crisis. In that sense, derivatives shift risks across time rather than eliminate them.

The real test will come during market stress. A surge in oil prices, a stronger dollar, and simultaneous capital outflows would require the RBI to defend the rupee while managing a large forward

book — a very complex policy challenge.

That is why the size of the RBI’s forward position deserves thoughtful scrutiny. While the central bank has employed similar instruments during earlier episodes of currency volatility — including the taper tantrum of 2013 — the present scale is unprecedented.

The question is not whether the RBI can manage it; there is every reason to believe it can. The real question is whether the public understands what has changed. Unlike reserve depletion whose costs are immediately visible, derivative positions shift obligations into the future and thus demand greater transparency. Complexity is not a weakness; opacity can be. The debate should therefore move beyond headlines about “\$100-billion bets”. The RBI has not gambled — it has adopted a more sophisticated framework for managing currency risk. The challenge is ensuring that transparency

in disclosure of the derivative management strategy, and its eventual unwinding, evolves alongside policy innovation.

Should markets receive more guidance on the strategy for unwinding large forward positions? Should Parliament and financial commentators devote greater attention to derivative exposures that increasingly shape India’s external balance sheet? As central banking evolves, public understanding must evolve with it.

These are not criticisms of the RBI. They are natural questions that arise as

The paradox of modern central banking is that the more sophisticated its financial instruments become, the greater the need for transparency and accountability

institutions become more sophisticated and central banking increasingly involves managing expectations, liquidity, derivatives, and confidence simultaneously. Indeed, the RBI deserves credit for refusing to be constrained by outdated methods. A 21st-century economy cannot be managed with 20th-century tools.

India’s macroeconomic fundamentals remain sound, with ample reserves, contained inflation, and a resilient external and domestic banking sector. There is little evidence to suggest that India faces an imminent balance-of-payments crisis. The principal long-term uncertainty, however, lies in the impact of AI on IT services, India’s largest source of foreign exchange earnings.

The paradox of modern central banking is that the more sophisticated its financial instruments become, the greater the need for transparency and accountability. Confidence ultimately rests not only on strong reserves or clever balance-sheet management, but also on trust in the institution deploying them.

The RBI’s \$100-billion forward position is, therefore, neither a cause for panic nor a reason for celebration. It marks the quiet evolution of India’s central bank from being principally the custodian of foreign exchange reserves to becoming an active manager of financial risk demanding exceptional judgement in the use of its chosen instruments.

This transformation may well prove necessary — even visionary — in hindsight. But every transformation of this magnitude deserves informed public debate and disclosures today — not because we distrust the institution, but because we value it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Export growth matters

Apropos of “FCNR(B) flows likely to ease banks’ margin pressure” (*FE*, July 22), while the RBI’s foreign currency non-resident (bank) deposit scheme provides timely relief, it can’t be seen as a lasting solution to external vulnerabilities. The response from NRIs reflects their confidence in India, but relying on diaspora deposits during global uncertainties exposes structural weaknesses in the balance of

payments. Temporary measures can stabilise foreign exchange reserves and support the banking system, yet they impose costs through distorted pricing and exchange-rate risks. India must focus on strengthening export competitiveness, diversifying export markets, and encouraging high-value manufacturing and services to generate stable forex earnings. Policies that improve productivity, infrastructure, and ease of doing business will reduce dependence on emergency financial

interventions. A resilient export-driven economy, rather than periodic capital inflows, remains the most sustainable path to long-term economic stability. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Bank board autonomy

Apropos of “Trust, but verify” (*FE*, July 22), the RBI’s decision to grant greater autonomy to bank boards is a welcome move to strengthen corporate governance and render inclusive services to depositors and other

stakeholders. An empowered board could lend on merit with prudent banking, and shun political interventions. But the new autonomy must be coupled with transparent disclosures on operations and supervisory audits. The RBI must hold the ultimate control and oversight and let banks function with operational autonomy and strict adherence to major policy decisions. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Broken system

Students deserve reforms, accountability; not police action

The July 20 police crackdown on unarmed protestors in central Delhi spotlights the failure of the government to quickly address issues that have eroded students’ faith in the education system. From repeated controversies surrounding NEET to mounting concerns over CBSE’s digital evaluation process, what began as isolated grievances has hardened into a broader crisis of trust. The Centre is on the defensive, as perhaps never before.



In this context, firing teargas shells and baton-charging unarmed protestors was a misstep of monumental proportions. Scores of students are in Delhi’s hospitals, some with pellet injuries. One student was on ventilator support. There is palpable tension at the protest site in Jantar Mantar where thousands of students and their concerned parents are continuing to assemble and demand the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. This anger did not emerge overnight. It has accumulated over examination cycles, particularly since the 2024 NEET controversy, when 67 candidates secured a perfect score of 720/720 with six toppers originating from a single examination centre in Jhajjar, Haryana. The National Testing Agency (NTA,) that conducts NEET, initially attributed abnormal scores to “grace marks” awarded for lost time. Later, investigations by the Bihar police and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) uncovered an organised, multi-State racket. The Supreme Court concluded that the paper leak was an “undisputed fact”, but did not cancel the exam. The Ministry of Education said it had set up a committee to overhaul NTA operations.

Such assurances have done little to restore confidence. Fresh controversies surrounding this year’s examination process have reinforced perceptions that infirmities within the system remain intact. The NTA has had to cancel the NEET exam undertaken by over 22 lakh students when leaked ‘guess papers’ matched up to 140 exam questions in chemistry and biology. A re-examination was scheduled. In the intervening period of 37 days between the two tests, an estimated 12 students committed suicide. Families and police accounts pointed to uncertainty and the emotional toll surrounding the cancelled exam and the upcoming re-test as the reason for these suicides. Equally troubling was the controversy over CBSE’s badly executed shift to on-screen evaluation.

The official response has been marked with an almost Kafkaesque apathy. The government must now recognise that this is no longer simply an examination controversy; it is a crisis of institutional legitimacy that needs to be addressed by serious reforms. Accountability cannot stop with lower-level officials or committees of inquiry. The need for empathy cannot be overstated. Students who feel their futures have been compromised should be heard, not dispersed by force. Restoring confidence will require a willingness to initiate systemic reforms and fix accountability — at all levels, perhaps not excluding the Minister.

OTHER VOICES.

GULF NEWS

Why Gulf states remain exposed to the US-Iran conflict After weeks of fragile calm, the United States and Iran are once again engaged in direct military confrontation. Tehran has responded to US attacks along Iran’s southern coast by launching fresh strikes across the Gulf. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman were among the countries affected, with Iran describing the attacks as retaliation for a new wave of American airstrikes. For Gulf countries, the war they had hoped diplomacy would contain has erupted once again. Yet the collapse did not happen overnight. It followed the gradual breakdown of an agreement that had been fragile from the start. The 60-day ceasefire signed in mid-June never rested on firm foundations. It followed the first phase of the war, which erupted on February 28 and led to the death of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. (DUBAI, JULY 21)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Trump target acquired: Pickaxe Mountain President Trump’s attention has turned to Pickaxe Mountain, the deep-underground potential nuclear enrichment site long familiar to readers of these columns. “We’ll be hitting that area pretty soon,” the President said Tuesday. “There’s not a thing they can do about it.” Let’s hope he’s right on both counts. The U.S. passed over the facility during Operation Midnight Hammer in June 2025 and this year’s Operation Epic Fury. At the time sources said the facility was either too deeply buried — 330-475 feet beneath a mountain — or not important enough. The latter was short-sighted, as the Journal’s report on the transfer of centrifuges to Pickaxe Mountain makes clear. (NEW YORK, JULY 21)



Sonam Wangchuk was carried out of Jantar Mantar on the 21st day of his hunger strike. As Parliament’s monsoon session opened this week, his movement’s march was met with teargas and its protagonist detained. Whether the education minister should go is not the central question — a minister on whose watch this happened twice, no doubt, owes an explanation. The larger one is: why does this keep happening, under governments of every stripe? The list is grim. Vyapam in 2013. SSC’s Combined Graduate Level exam in 2018. Rajasthan’s REET and Uttar Pradesh’s Teacher Eligibility Test in 2021. Telangana’s TSPSC and Maharashtra’s Talathi recruitment in 2023. UP Police Constable and UGC-NET in 2024. NEET-UG twice: 2024 and again this May 2026. Some investigations count 89 cases over the decade affecting 6.5 crore aspirants. No party has a clean sheet; the failure is shared.

So what is actually going on? Economists have a name for it. In 1967, Gordon Tullock explored what happens when a government creates something scarce and valuable like a licence, a job, a contract and lets people compete. Anne Krueger called it rent-seeking. People spend money, time, and risk until the cost of competing equals the prize’s value. Much effort creates no new value.

A government job in India is exactly this prize. Fixed in number, worth more across a working life than the informal economy offers. It provides a pension, protection against dismissal, and social standing that can alter a family’s prospects. Roughly 2.2 crore people apply each year; fewer than one in a thousand succeed.

The coaching industry built around this queue is worth close to ₹58,000 crore. Coaching and leak networks are not opposites but the same spectrum, priced differently. Coaching teaches concepts and fills schooling gaps. But much of its growth is about rank: spending to move ahead of the next candidate. Economically, this differs little from paying for a leaked paper. Both buy relative advantage. A leak is where legal spending turns illegal.

The prize need not be a job. NEET is an entrance exam for a medical seat. In 2024, 2.3 million aspirants competed for about 1.09 lakh MBBS seats; odds of twenty-one to one. Given the gateway to a medical career, that seat is worth stealing for the same reason a job is. This explains why the biggest exams attract the most sophisticated leak networks. Because these exams rank candidates



Grim economics of exam leaks

ACCESS OVER LEARNING. The gap between a government job or a medical career, and any other private job is too huge for leaks to disappear easily

against one another rather than against a minimum standard, the incentive to cheat rises with the gap between winning and losing. When 1.08 crore people applied for 32,000 Railway Group D posts last year, the Board was running a tournament where winning meant a stable life and losing meant a precarious one.

High rents create the incentive; weak institutions decide whether it becomes organised crime. China’s gaokao, sat by over nine million students yearly, has recorded only three confirmed nationwide leaks since 1949, achieved through paper-setters quantined for months, armed convoys, signal jammers, and drones. South Korea grounds domestic flights for the Suneung’s listening test. Neither country has a smaller prize. What differs is the odds of being caught and the will to bear the costs of those measures. Replicating them in India’s federal,

When 1.08 crore people applied for 32,000 Railway Group D posts, the Board was running a tournament where winning meant a stable life and losing meant a precarious one

resource-constrained system would be expensive, but the question is whether the will exists.

WHEN PEOPLE OFFEND Becker’s economics of crime is blunt: people offend when expected gain exceeds expected cost, penalty times probability of detection. India’s 2024 law raises the penalty considerably; it raises the odds of detection far less. Better vetting, tighter paper custody, and prosecutions that conclude would do more than any new prison term.

Fairness is not the only casualty. When a weaker candidate takes a seat or post a stronger one would have filled, the harm is to a health system or police force now carrying someone less capable. A leak sorts by capacity to pay, not capacity to do the job. None of this makes honest preparation worthless; a doctor’s training produces something real. But Tullock’s warning was narrower: duplication, retakes, years chasing rank instead of competence. When 48 lakh people had each put in six months preparing for the cancelled UP Police Constable exam, that cancellation wiped out hundreds of millions of hours. A second cost is harder to price. An exam works only because it convinces millions that a scarce chance will go by rule, not favour. Every leak withdraws from that account. Enough leaks, and candidates stop asking how to prepare, and start

asking whether preparing is the point. A system built to reward learning starts, quietly, rewarding access.

Encryption and prison terms alone will not fix this. What would shrink the prize is slower: a private labour market offering something closer to a government job, a pension, protection, wages that do not vanish. According to the PLFS Annual Report 2025, 73.1 per cent of non-agricultural workers are in informal enterprises.

Government jobs have become default insurance, not because they pay well, but because almost nothing else insures a certain life. In the interim, independent exam commissions, randomised paper allocation, and biometric verification would raise the cost of cheating.

Wangchuk’s fast will end within days, and the contest that makes leaking profitable will be exactly where it was. The problem is not that papers are stolen. Every leak begins in a printing room, but the market for it begins much earlier. It is in an economy where one examination decides who receives security and who does not. Until that changes, new encryption will only make the next leak more expensive, not less profitable.

Tiwary is a doctoral candidate, and Dayakar is an Assistant Professor, at Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. Views are personal

Japan can catalyse India’s circular bio-economy

The success of the initiative to set up 1,000 plants will, however, hinge on ensuring their long term commercial viability

Pratap Singh Birthal

The ongoing geopolitical conflict in West Asia has exposed India’s vulnerability to disruptions in global energy and fertilizer supply chains. India imports over half of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) requirements, with approximately 60 per cent originating from the Gulf region. India also sources a significant share of its fertilizer requirements, particularly nitrogenous and phosphatic fertilizers, from this region. Natural gas is also a feedstock for urea production, and India’s reliance on imports of both casts a shadow of dual vulnerability.

Yet, it is paradoxical that one of India’s most abundant energy resources is not found underground but above it, on its farmlands. With a bovine population of more than 300 million, the country produces approximately 1.27 billion tonnes of dung annually. For centuries, dung has been used as a household cooking fuel and organic manure. However, with the expansion of LPG and chemical fertilizers, dung has gradually lost economic importance.

Nonetheless, with scientific management, dung is a tremendous source of renewable energy and organic fertilizer. Recent estimates from the New Delhi-based ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research indicate that this dung can generate nearly 47 billion cubic

meters of biogas or 22 million tonnes (mt) of bio-compressed natural gas (bio-CNG) annually, while simultaneously producing over 9 (mt) of organic fertilizers. This can virtually replace both LNG and fertilizer imports. In practice, collecting and processing the entire volume of dung produced is unfeasible. However, if even half of it is used for the production of bio-gas, it could significantly improve the country’s energy and fertilizer security, reduce vehicular pollution, and improve soil health. This also creates new income opportunities for livestock-owning households.

BIO-GAS PARTNERSHIP India has long recognised the potential of biogas as a source of clean energy. Since the 1980s, the government has encouraged the establishment of household biogas plants. However, their adoption and long-term sustainability have not met expectations because of maintenance challenges and limited technical support.

To unlock the potential of dung for clean energy and organic fertilizers, the Ministry of Cooperation and Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) launched the India-Japan Cooperative Biogas for Growth (CBG) initiative at the India-Japan Summit on July 2. The initiative aims to establish 1,000 cooperative biogas and organic fertilizer plants across India by leveraging the



BENEFITS. Biogas generates clean energy, boosts soil health

extensive dairy cooperative network. Japan has extensive experience with biogas plants and waste management.

India’s dairy sector is dominated by smallholders, with most households owning two to three animals. Individually, these farmers produce little dung, making its collection and transport uneconomical. However, India has one of the world’s largest dairy cooperative networks, with over 2.3 lakh village dairy cooperative societies serving nearly 20 million producers. This network can support dung aggregation, ensuring feedstock supply, reducing transaction costs, and sharing the benefits of biogas and organic fertilizer production among participating farmers.

Successful models already exist. A notable example is Maruti Suzuki India

Ltd’s partnership with Banas Dairy in Gujarat to procure dung for producing compressed biogas and organic fertilizers. Similarly, Adani TotalEnergies Biomass Ltd has established a large CBG plant at Barsana, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, sourcing dung from Shri Mataji Gaushala.

The India-Japan initiative should be regarded not only as a clean energy programme but also as a catalyst for developing a circular rural bio-economy. Unlike most renewable energy technologies, biogas simultaneously generates clean energy, recycles nutrients, enhances soil health, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and creates rural employment opportunities. However, the programme’s success will rely more on the long-term commercial viability of the established plants than on their coverage.

Priority should be given to developing cost-efficient feedstock aggregation systems at the village level, transparent pricing mechanisms for dung, and a gas distribution infrastructure. Simultaneously, organic fertilizers produced from biogas plants must be integrated into mainstream fertilizer markets through quality standards, certification, branding, and production-linked incentives in the initial years.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, New Delhi

✉ 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.

Securing rare earths Apropos the article “Coming to grips with rare earths” (July 22), it is unfortunate that though IREL has been in existence since 1963 and working in the field of rare earth R&D, its mandate has been limited to chemical and foundational process know-how. If only the successive governments in the last 50 years recognised the importance of rare earths, just as Deng Xiaoping of China had, and mandated development of commercial manufacturing know-how and

invested in industrial scale infrastructure, India would have been in a better position. India must strive for indigenous technological development and make strategic long term investments in advanced R&D of rare earths and alternative magnet chemistries, at least now. Kosaraju Chandramouli Hyderabad

Promote SRI As rice is a major staple food, its cultivation under the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), also known as

the Madagascar method, offers significant advantages. It requires only 10-15 per cent of the water used in conventional paddy transplantation, while also reducing seed and labour requirements, improving yields, and minimising weed management. With weather patterns becoming increasingly unpredictable due to El Niño and La Niña, State governments should actively promote mechanised SRI cultivation through appropriate incentives. Conserving water, one of our most precious natural resources,

is no longer optional but imperative. Merely advocating good agricultural practices without providing tangible policy support and financial incentives is unlikely to bring about meaningful adoption. Rajiv Magal Halekere Village, Karnataka

Demographic trend This refers to ‘Stop asking whether the world has too many people’ (July 22). The article rightly shifts focus from population numbers to demographic resilience. India’s

growing but ageing population needs long-term planning in healthcare, pensions and skilling, not alarmist debates about numbers. Northern States with continuing high fertility need better access to education and family planning services, while southern States facing ageing workforces need policies that encourage labour force participation and automation. Urban housing and childcare costs deserve as much policy attention as fertility rates. Prajesh Paramasivan Neelambran, TN

Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

Editorials PDF

- English Editorials PDF with International Newspapers Editorials [35-40 pages]
- Hindi Editorials PDF
- Daily Vocabulary PDF

Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.
Asian, European & American

Hindi Newspapers

- 1) दैनिक जागरण
- 2) जनसत्ता
- 3) हरिभूमि
- 4) हिंदुस्तान

Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard

Click below to Join
this Community 



Coercive Resolutions Don't Resolve Issues

Dialogue, instrument of democratic resilience

Hannah Arendt observed that violence is never the essence of power but its admission of weakness. Mohandas Gandhi, in his own idiom, insisted that true authority rests not in coercion but in consent. Taken together, their insights expose a paradox at the heart of modern governance: the state claims legitimacy through protection. Yet, too often, it reaches reflexively for the baton, or the tear-gas canister when persuasion should have sufficed. The asymmetry is glaring. Citizens may protest, petition or disobey. But the state alone reserves the monopoly of 'legitimate' violence. This monopoly, Max Weber argued, defines sovereignty. Yet, when deployed against the very people it purports to shield, it corrodes the foundation of its own legitimacy, as we have seen in the US with ICE agents freely doling out their version of coercive 'justice'.

A government that greets dissent with truncheons is not demonstrating strength but confessing fragility. The more a state relies on force as a shortcut to quell peaceful contestation — ironically resorting to such contestations as 'anarchic' or 'manipulated' — the more unsure it appears of its own power. Democracies thrive on disagreement. To suppress it by force is to betray their own premise. Authoritarian regimes, of course, are built on no-questions-asked obedience. When democracies mimic this reflex, they risk resembling the very thing they claim to oppose.

Dialogue, negotiation and compromise are slower, messier and less theatrical than riot police on TV screens. Yet, they are true instruments of democratic resilience. A state's legitimacy is measured not by the size of its arsenal but by the restraint with which it is used. The more a government can govern without resorting to flexing of muscles against its own citizenry, the more it commands genuine authority. The more it leans on force, the more it reveals itself as unconvinced of its own powers to convince. In the end, the truest protection a state can offer its citizens is the promise of listening in good faith.

Apple and Nvidia Tango at the Top

Last week, Apple briefly reclaimed the title of the world's most valuable company, touching about \$4.9 tn in market value against Nvidia's roughly \$4.8 tn. The chipmaker edged back ahead. But the two are now locked in a neck-to-neck battle for top-dog slot. Beyond the numbers, this signals investors looking beyond AI's speculative upside. Apple has deliberately stayed away from the AI infrastructure race, choosing to focus on consumer services rather than building AI models. This made it a laggard in m-cap sweepstakes as AI mania gripped investors. Nvidia was the obvious beneficiary. But the rally has hoisted other chipmakers like Micron and SK Hynix as well. But both consumer-focused Apple and chipmaker Nvidia stand to gain no matter the outcome.

Consumer electronics is caught on the wrong side of the chip wars. Apple recently increased prices of its MacBooks and iPads due to soaring AI demand for memory and storage chips. But its lower capex intensity allows it to monetise AI easier. It recently overhauled Siri to catch up with leaders in the AI race. A combo of AI services, a closed ecosystem and hardware upgrades places Apple at an advantage to cash in.

Nvidia, on its part, is coming down from a market valuation of over \$5 tn because of a shift in sentiment. The company's GPUs will keep powering generative AI. Over the years, Nvidia has built an ecosystem to lock developers into its platform. It focuses on research, design and software while outsourcing its chips to contract manufacturers. Much like Apple's strategy in consumer electronics. The two companies have created unique business models in their respective industries to build wide moats around their near-monopolies. Expect them to continue duking it out for top slot.



THINK ABOUT IT

There's poetic justice in this great site for astronomy being repurposed

Chhoo Mantar! Double Life of Jantar Mantar

Think Delhi's Jantar Mantar and chances are you won't think of Maharaja Jai Singh II. Well, regardless of whether you carry a jhola or backpack, you should. Built in 1724 by said Mr Singh, the site's a geometrical playground of astronomical ambition. Its hulking masonry instruments — giant sundials, arcane quadrants, looming gnomons — were not props for political placards but tools to chart celestial cycles. Here, time was measured not in parliamentary sessions but in shadows sliding across stone. The cosmos, not the cabinet, was the object of scrutiny.

What was once a theatre of science has become an amphitheatre of politics. The instruments that once aligned with stars now align with OB vans. Which is fine, as long as the former isn't totally engulfed by the latter for the visitor. In a city where history is perpetually repurposed, Jantar Mantar has been conscripted into a role its architect may not have imagined. Yet, we reckon the transformation is fitting. Both astronomy and protest are acts of defiance against ignorance. Jai Singh's observatory challenged the limits of human knowledge; today's protesters challenge perceived injustice. Which, then, actually makes Jantar Mantar less a monument misused than a monument reinterpreted. Its stones remind us that questioning — be it of stars or of states — is a most enduring noble tradition indeed.

NEET protests mark a deep socioeconomic grievance, and fractured employment system

It's All About Roachgaar

Gen Z Marks The Rot



Rathin Roy

As a teacher of Gen Z public policy students, I have great affection for this intelligent and engaging generation. But also a great sadness. For, across the world, but especially in India, Gen Z-ers without legacy wealth will be less prosperous than their parents.

I tell my students that there is a silver lining. For boomers and millennials in the 20th c., prosperity of our less fortunate contemporaries was external to our own. Our degrees gave us prosperity. We paid I-T on our starter salaries. They did not, as they were too poor. So, there was altruism, not solidarity.

Now, with prosperity collapse, no Indian Gen Z-er pays I-T on his or her starter salary. They simply don't earn enough. So, there is potential solidarity across Gen Z, whether I-T or I-TT-educated. Prosperity is a common grievance.

The current protests reflect this solidarity. They are the first since the mid-1970s Navnirman agitation to be focused on socioeconomic questions impacting a broad swathe of the population that is not defined by religion, caste, region, profession, or anger at rape or malfeasance. The discontent expressed by Gen Z-ers on the streets of Delhi, and across cities and towns of India, is about the absence of any political promise of prosperity driven by jobs or careers.

It's about the nepotism that reserves domestic opportunities for the children of economic, political and social dynasts. About the frustration that those in charge of Indian education, economy and employment sequester their kids in global universities and comfortable international sinures, leaving the dirty work of communal-rioting and drudgery of endless mind-numbing competitive exams for the rest of our youth.

These dynasts reject accountability for the prosperity collapse, and airily brush off breakdowns in the lottery of indentured slavery to which those without political connections, criminal ancestry or legacy wealth are condemned. Panaceas of yesterday's youth — low-quality IT jobs — are consumed by AI. Manufacturing jobs even in Apple and Samsung pay less than domestic service in the homes and playgrounds of the hereditary affluent. These are profound and concrete socioeconomic grievances, faced by all Gen Z-ers, barring nepo kids.

This socioeconomic impasse is at the root of the upsurge in Gen Z dissent. Neither the ruling party nor the Opposition has the wit to see this. The nepo political class is focused on its own wealth accumulation, contemptuous in the belief that a cocktail of religious and caste bigotry, combined with compensatory transfers, thrown at the populace as the rich throw scrap to beggars, would maintain an unequalling political settlement.

Public institutions have atrophied and been subordinated to the interests of this effete elite — nepo and playboy progeny of industrialists, politicians and bureaucrats. A servile judiciary is apparently happy to collaborate when people protest, by making the process the punishment.

Nepo elites have allies in previous generations. Boomers benefited from economic liberalisation, their prosperity growing through generous increases in public sector pay and historically unprecedented rises in real estate values. Millennials benefited

from the dotcom boom, media and TV bubble, rise of tier-2 and -3 towns, and the brief burst of prosperity increase between 2003 and 2008 across the top 50% of income-earners.

They took sides on a divide between old secular India and the new sectarian value proposition, with Mandal, Kamandal and like issues dominating their political attention. That battle was emphatically won in 2014. Then, in their dotage and middle-age, the economy faltered, prosperity stagnated, the world turned its back on India.

Simplistic wealth-creation narratives — mutual funds sahi hai, power of compounding — failed to deliver. In a bitter, recriminatory grey zone, many boomers and millennials became establishment RWA uncles and aunts seeking a protagonist to blame for their lot, and defending the



Now is the summer of our discontent

very establishment that had enriched itself even while destroying the self-worth of these once-aspirational generations.

They tried to create Gen Z in their own image. But Gen Z is not allowed to be aspirational. The uncles-aunts sent them to Kota, and NEET, JEE, CLAT, UGC-NET and other lotteries. But these have been compromised by a government that was not able to even maintain the lottery mechanism that allowed millennials to dream of prosperous servitude.

So, Gen Z had to fend for itself. But the world closed off immigration. Startups seemed alluring, but it was soon clear that most 'founders' had legacy caste and financial capital. Entry-level jobs disappeared, salaries plummeted. Gen Z, irrespective of educational attainment or location, used the tools at their disposal to build solidarity, agitate, organise. The proximate provocation was provided by an arrogant CJI. And here we are.

Economic discontent, left unattended, explodes. It's a question of when, not if. This particular discontent may well pass. But its economic drivers will not. It will return, repeatedly and vociferously, until the underlying cause — lack of a political manifesto for prosperity — is addressed.

Only hope that this brave and trespassing upon Gen Z, let down by their predecessors, and in harm's way of the malevolent mediocre establishment they challenge, will not be sacrificed at the altar of struggle to create a better future for those that follow them. As has happened many times in history.

The writer is former member, EAC-PM



Parikshit Ghosh

Last year, large crowds gathered to dig up farmland around Asirgarh Fort in MP. They were looking for buried Mughal-era gold coins, inspired by the film Chhaava. Today, there's another viral movement, one that has led to an agitation against NEET exam paper leaks. Its participants have, with adequate irony, embraced the description of unemployed youth made by CJI Surya Kant in May as 'cockroach'. These two events seem disconnected. But they are not.

A labour market generally has an in-built regulator that drives towards pay parity between comparable professions. If accountants are making much more money than lawyers, there will be a surge in demand for accountancy courses, and enrolment in law schools

medicine, law and corporate management. These jobs pay a high-skill premium, but also place a high demand on skills. Since it's difficult to tell beforehand who can win this job lottery, lots of people try.

The Sonam Wangchuk-Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-supporting protests broke out over cancellation of NEET and demand for the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Ironically, a very large fraction of India's young population is also classified as NEET — Not in Education, Employment or Training. What are they doing? They are sitting for one exam after another, either to enter a very selective educational programme and obtain a passport to a white-collar job, or to land a government job that pays an artificial premium. They are huddled into coaching centres, cramming soulless books. They are wasting their youth in search of gold.

The CJP movement is protesting corruption within this system. The more fundamental problem is the system itself. It's one that breeds inequality and waste of human potential. That will remain so even if no exam paper is leaked. The 2-tiered job market is a product of a 2-tiered education system that has created centres of excellence like IITs and IIMs, along with underfunded and badly-run public schools where children do not learn the three R's properly.

Universal, high-quality basic education is the foundation for industrialisation and good jobs for all. This is not a well-kept secret. There is no way around it, no quick fix. No amount of exam vigilance, investment summits or 8-lane highway networks will make up for a failure to invest in people. That is what deserves maximum effort. We need productive jobs for the population. Not just fancy jobs for a labour elite.

Our affliction is not unlike that of the US and other developed nations in this respect. There, the problem isn't so much a failure of basic education but the bulk loss of mid-level jobs to low-wage economies and automation. In the last 30 yrs, the US has become a skill-intensive economy where a fancy education is the only way out of low-wage ghettos. That pressure has manifested itself in the college admissions scandal, and the MAGA movement. As Daniel Markovits points out in his 2019 book, The Meritocracy Trap, even the rats that win the race pay a high price in expense and anxiety.

Indian films like Three Idiots and 12th Fail depict the dystopian world of gold rush, but in an obtuse way. Their protagonists start out as rebels. At first, they seem to question rote learning, stifled creativity and crushing burden of a winner-takes-all system. In the end, it's revealed the hero has actually 'cracked it'. He has successfully captured the credential and affluence reserved for very few. Raju ban gaya gentleman!

That is conformity dressed as iconoclasm. Lack of enough good jobs is a *feature*, not a bug, in our economy. Paper leaks are its symptom, not its cause.

The writer is professor, Delhi School of Economics



Paradox Of Choice

NAJIB SHAH

What is it about decision-making that makes it so difficult? Why do we keep weighing options, yet remain unable to reach a conclusion? We reduce ourselves to the predicament of Buridan's ass, the famous medieval thought experiment in which a donkey, standing exactly midway between two identical bales of hay, is unable to choose because it sees no rational reason to prefer one over the other.

Humans, however, are spoilt for choice in most situations. American psychologist Barry Schwartz in his classic, 'The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less', points out that more options result not in liberation but anxiety and post-decision regret. In effect, despite the sheer explosion of choices and access to greater information to weigh options, we are an unhappy lot.

Compelling arguments between two outcomes bog us. Jean-Paul Sartre called this the 'anguish of freedom', which makes us aware that when we make one decision, we are letting go of another equally attractive option. This gnaws at us.

What, then, is the solution? One has but to reflect on Krishn's advice to Arjun. Embrace your dharma, duty, with a focus on what aligns with moral responsibilities and greater good. Detach yourself from results, nishkaam karm, since one can control only one's actions but not the outcome.

Finally, cultivate a calm mind, samatvam — decisions should not be based purely on emotions. Having been given these mantras, Arjun was asked to reflect and make his own decision, which he did, and we are all aware of the outcome, in which victory was secured.



Paradiso St Moritz, Switzerland

Perched high above St Moritz, Paradiso is the kind of restaurant that turns lunch into the highlight of a day on the slopes. It is part of the legendary Badrutt's Palace, the iconic luxury hotel that has been synonymous with Alpine glamour since 1896.

The Palace has long attracted royalty, industrialists, celebrities and discerning skiers from around the world, and Paradiso is where many of them make their lunchtime stop after skiing the slopes above St Moritz.

The setting is spectacular. A sprawling sun terrace overlooks snow-capped peaks and frozen lakes, while resident DJs and flowing champagne lend the restaurant the air of an elegant après-ski party. Begin with crispy truffle fries or a platter of Graubünden cured meats before moving on to the crisp veal schnitzel or a rich, velvety cheese fondue. The rösti, golden and buttery, is among the best in the Alps, while the grilled lobster is a favourite with regulars. Round off the meal with a slice of the house-made Engadin nut tart, a regional classic.

Paradiso isn't cheap, but few places combine world-class skiing, exceptional food, impeccable service and breathtaking views with such effortless style.

Chat Room

Diaspora Dollar Deluge Dilemma

Appropos the Edit, 'Diaspora Dollars Are Coming, But...' (Jul 22), in 39 days since June 8, banks have mobilised \$17.41 bn through FCNR(B) deposits. Simple extrapolation would mean a total mobilisation of \$50.88 bn in 114 days ending September 30. Thus, achievement of the targeted sum of \$50-70 bn seems plausible as banks are also expected to step on the gas as the deadline nears. More importantly, since NRIs are awaiting the US Fed rate decision in mid-September, FCNR(B) deposit inflows will likely crystallise towards September-end. The immediate risk, however, is that the 'net interest income' of banks may be stressed, and in order to protect it, if they consider reducing domestic deposit rates, it may not be viewed favourably. Manas R Das Pune

Why ISRO's Loss is India's Gain



Dhiraj Nayyar

India's space sector saw two seemingly unrelated but equally significant developments last week. Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace launched Vikram-1, the country's first privately developed rocket, while around 100 scientists resigned from ISRO, GoI's space agency.

The first is a big positive. India is only the third country with a private sector capable of making a rocket that can transport satellites into orbit. The second is also a positive, notwithstanding the short-term blow to ISRO. That the two events overlapped may be a coincidence. But they are not unrelated.

Until recently, India's space sector was a monopoly of ISRO. GoI took the bold step of opening the sector to private participation. That 100 scientists have resigned from the space agency is a sign of success of GoI's decision to liberalise the sector. A thriving private sector is creating demand for jobs. Given that ISRO is home to India's best space specialists, it isn't surprising that its personnel are being recruited.

In fact, Skyroot's two founders,

Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka, were engineers at ISRO before they left to start a private venture. Some of the 100 who have resigned in the past week may go on to found ventures as successful as Skyroot. Others will work for entrepreneurs to build new companies. Like angel investors, many of these individuals will be angel employees, specialists building special companies.

It's also remarkable that two young engineers from ISRO quit government jobs to turn entrepreneurs in a sector where no private sector existed. Space is high cost and high risk. In India, it is rare for people to leave

government service to join the private sector. It is rarer for people to go from government employment to entrepreneurship.

But, for India's future prosperity, society must begin to give greater weight to private-sector employment and entrepreneurship than to government jobs. GoI can only be a facilitator of economic growth. It cannot be a net job creator. The private sector will drive economic growth and lead job creation.

GoI realises that. That is why it has liberalised sectors like defence and space. It's good for society to have role models like Chandana and Daka, and the 100-odd other ISRO scientists who are going against the grain.



Tap this pool

But what does this mean for ISRO and GoI agencies and PSUs? It means they must compete for talent. That is a good thing. Of course, there is a difference between working for public and private sector. The former is public service and so cannot be remunerated like the for-profit private sector. At the same time, the government offers lifetime job security and handsome perks of office.

The comparison is valid if government is defined as members of civil service and politicians. There is no competition with the private sector in their roles. However, in the case of some government agencies and PSUs, the lines begin to get blurred when these entities compete with the private sector.

There is a strong case for GoI to give greater autonomy in matters related to compensation for PSUs and agencies like ISRO. It makes little sense to peg compensation in these organisations to civil service hierarchies. They must compete on an equal footing with the private sector. Simultaneously, they should also not receive any special government treatment in policy terms. They should be independent, even as GoI owns them.

If required, government should get creative about salary structures, especially in agencies like ISRO. Even if fixed salaries are pegged to those of bureaucrats in the hierarchy, there should be additional allowances and bonuses, which would lift salaries well above what civil servants draw. Even in the private sector globally, some specialists, especially in tech and R&D, are paid more than the company CEO or COO.

Developments in the space sector are a moment of reflection for Indian society and GoI. How they react may define the nation's trajectory.

The writer is chief economist, Vedanta

Improving investment climate

Reforms at state level can drive growth

The NITI Aayog last week released its first investment friendliness index (IFI), 2026, evaluating the overall quality of state-level investment ecosystems through a comprehensive framework of 84 indicators across eight pillars — infrastructure, business climate, resources, government policy, regulatory ease, institutional environment, financial health, and environment resilience. Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu emerged as the top three performers among large states, with Gujarat scoring 56.6 out of 100, followed by Maharashtra (53.7) and Tamil Nadu (53.3). No state performed consistently across all eight pillars. Some states perform strongly in specific areas such as infrastructure, regulatory ease or environmental resilience, but weaker institutional capacity or business facilitation often offsets these gains. Even the best-performing states have scores that are only a little over the halfway mark. This suggests that even India's leading investment destinations have substantial distance to cover.

The report notes that four states and a Union Territory — Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Delhi — together attract nearly 85 per cent of India's foreign direct investment (FDI), while the Northeastern states together receive less than 1 per cent, highlighting the widening regional divergence. The timing of the report is important. According to the World Bank, India must sustain an average real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 7.8 per cent over the next two decades to achieve "high-income status" by 2047. Investment will remain central to this ambition. Capital formation has contributed more than half of India's growth since the economic reforms of 1991. While investment as a percentage of GDP reached about 30 per cent in 2024-25, marginally above the previous decade's average, it remains much lower than the levels achieved during the high-growth years of the 2000s.

India has made notable progress over the past few years by expanding highways, ports, airports, digital public infrastructure, and industrial corridors, which has helped improve logistics and connectivity. Yet investors continue to cite delays in land acquisition, environmental clearances, utility connections, project approvals, and the availability of skilled labour in high-value sectors as major bottlenecks. States with digital single-window clearance systems, dedicated investor grievance-redress mechanisms, and plug-and-play industrial infrastructure enjoy greater investor confidence. They also report higher capital commitments and faster project execution. This shows that institutional responsiveness is just as important as industrial capacity.

Since investment decisions are ultimately made at state level, continuous benchmarking and evidence-based governance reforms will be crucial in boosting private investment, strengthening manufacturing, expanding exports, and creating quality employment. The central government must also support lagging states through greater technical assistance, capacity building, and dissemination of best practices. Equally important is institutionalising regular monitoring of reform outcomes, strengthening coordination across departments, improving regulatory predictability, and ensuring time-bound implementation. As global competition for investment intensifies, states must compete on the quality of governance, policy stability, and ease of doing business. A more balanced and resilient investment ecosystem, supported by cooperative and competitive federalism, will help spread economic opportunities beyond a few leading states and place India on a firmer path to achieve sustained long-term growth.

Making food safer

India needs to focus on quality

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has of late been in the news for its notices to erring companies. The violations by brands range from labelling issues to spoil food, which could result in serious consequences for the consumer. The action against the entities that have gone against the set norms and standards must not stop with showcase notices. Rather, the food administration in the country must be strengthened and exemplary penalties should be imposed on violators wherever there's evidence of wrongdoing. For this to happen, the Centre and states have to be on the same page when it comes to intent and execution of the rules. The FSSAI, a rather young regulator that began operations effectively in 2011, came into prominence with the Nestle-Maggi controversy in 2015. Overnight, all Maggi packs were removed from retail stores across India after a laboratory test found unsafe levels of lead and monosodium glutamate in samples. After months of back and forth, and a fresh lab test mandated by the Bombay High Court giving a clean chit, the Maggi packs returned to the market.

Other than the Maggi case, there's no major example of recalling food products in the consumer space in the country. Food safety, which has high consumer relevance, could follow the pattern in the automobile industry, where voluntary recall of defective products by companies is a routine matter. Since food forms a major chunk of the retail supply chain — which in turn is largely unorganised — voluntary recall may not be a foolproof solution, making oversight that much more important. India's food and beverages sector, valued at close to \$440 billion and projected to touch \$875 billion by 2030, has been witness to contraventions causing contamination and health exigencies over the years. India's food ecosystem, including processed food, has often failed to match the global yardsticks in quality. A recent media report revealed an industry-like operation in Delhi to produce fresh expiry labels, to replace the original markers.

Even as the FSSAI is clamping down on misleading labels on food products, a systemic change is required to ensure safety standards at global levels. The FSSAI, which falls under the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, often has to engage with the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution for setting quality benchmarks and monitoring compliance. The regulator also has to deal with food inspectors across states, guided by different sets of rules. Unlike its global counterparts, such as the United States' Food and Drug Administration and the United Kingdom's Food Standards Agency, the FSSAI faces structural and enforcement limitations due to multiple agencies working at variance and the shortage of food inspectors. Ecommerce and quick commerce, a fast-growing segment, has added to the complexity of food safety. Recently, Swiggy Instamart, an online aggregator platform for quick commerce, got a notice from the FSSAI for allegedly delivering stale and expired food items. However, there's a question mark on the penalties imposed and the consequences thereafter. The ripple effect of the Indian food scene is being seen in overseas markets as well. While the latest was Japan stopping the import of Indian mangoes, Indian spices and some other food products have been under the global regulatory lens for some time. This makes the need for a strong food administration in India even more urgent.



When companies write their own future

The next frontier of insolvency reforms is preparing companies for distress before it strikes

In March this year, in *Harish Rana vs Union of India*, the Supreme Court permitted the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment where its continuation serves no therapeutic purpose. The judgment brought the advance medical directive, the living will, into Indian law. An individual of sound mind may now execute a living will specifying, in advance, how the end of life is to be managed should he later lose decision-making capacity. The principle is simple: Important decisions are best taken before a crisis strikes. The same insight applies to corporations. They should prepare for financial distress while they are still healthy.

Financial regulation already embraces this idea through the concept of resolvability, the ability of an institution to be rescued or wound down in an orderly manner without destroying value. The global financial crisis of 2008 demonstrated the enormous costs of disorderly failures and taxpayer-funded bailouts. In response, regulators required systemically important banks to prepare recovery and resolution plans while they remained solvent. The Financial Stability Board's Key Attributes institutionalised crisis preparedness as an institution's own responsibility.

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), now a decade old, largely intervenes after distress has crystallised. Yet its evolution has steadily moved upstream. The pre-packaged insolvency process introduced in 2021 requires smaller companies to prepare a base resolution plan before filing, while recent amendments enable creditors to initiate resolution earlier and outside the courtroom. The trajectory is clear: IBC is shifting from response to preparedness. The natural next step is to encourage healthy companies to remain resolvable before distress ever arises.

A real-sector company is not a systemically important bank, and its failure rarely threatens financial sta-

bility. The rationale for mandatory resolvability, therefore, does not travel intact from banking. Yet companies are no less vulnerable. Their survival depends on a delicate balance of commercial, financial, and governance forces that can shift without warning. Limited liability, designed to encourage enterprise, can shield reckless management, while controllers pursuing short-term extraction can hollow out the firm's future. The shrinking lifespan of companies is a reminder that corporate mortality is real, and many firms fail not because they are beyond rescue, but because they are unprepared for it. Resolvability separates business failure caused by economic reality from that arising from lack of preparedness.

For real-sector companies, therefore, resolvability should evolve through market discipline rather than regulatory command, at least initially among larger and more leveraged firms where the gains from preparedness are greatest. A resolvable company is inherently more valuable because it is easier to rescue in the event of distress. Investors and lenders should recognise that quality through lower borrowing costs, stronger valuations and greater confidence. To facilitate such pricing, an independent resolvability index could assess a company's structural and informational preparedness for rescue. Regulators could encourage this evolution by developing a common assessment framework and piloting a voluntary disclosure regime.

Resolvability has two dimensions. The first is structural: Keeping the company rescuable. The second is procedural: Ensuring that any rescuer knows how to rescue it.

Consider a company that operates a profitable plant, but the land beneath it is owned by its promoter. When distress strikes, a prospective buyer hesitates because the business cannot be transferred without



M S SAHOO & RAGHAV PANDEY

The unbearable lightness of trade deals

Free trade agreements (FTAs) are commonly presented as instruments that will automatically and dramatically expand bilateral trade. The India-New Zealand agreement signed in April this year aims to double trade within five years. The India-UK deal that came into effect in July aims to double trade by 2030. And the "mother of all deals" with the European Union targets bilateral trade of \$200 billion by 2030, an increase of about 50 per cent from \$136 billion in 2024-25.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with ambitious targets. At the very least, they signal a desired direction of travel and provide a useful benchmark for measuring success. But they cannot substitute for the spadework needed to turn aspirations into achievements. In the case of trade, the signing of an FTA should be treated as only the beginning of a marathon. The hard yards of regulatory alignment, investment protection and investment facilitation lie ahead if the trade expansion potential of an FTA is to be fully realised.

Tariff reduction is certainly important. Lower duties make trade commercially viable, especially in sectors with thin margins and high tariff barriers. In India, tariff preferences should immediately boost exports in textiles, clothing, leather, fisheries and agricultural products, which are labour-intensive industries where competitiveness hinges on relative tariff margins. But by itself, this is a limited outcome, improving price competitiveness without altering the underlying structure of production. The larger opportunity lies in using FTAs to attract investment into new, higher-value segments of the supply chain.

This investment pull is strongest when tariffs are reduced on intermediate goods, such as components, machinery, specialised materials, and semi-finished products that circulate within regional and global value

chains. When these tariffs fall, FTAs become magnets for firms seeking to optimise location. Companies can import high-quality components from an FTA partner, undertake assembly, processing, design or testing domestically, and then export the finished or further-processed goods back to the partner market or to third countries. In this way, tariff concessions shape not only trade flows but also firms' decisions about where to situate different stages of their value chains.

For India, this is particularly salient. The types of modern industries in which the country desires a larger footprint — electronics, automobiles, medical devices, renewable energy equipment, aerospace components and pharmaceuticals — do not operate through fully domestic production chains. They depend intrinsically on the cross-border movement of inputs and technology. Reducing tariffs on intermediate products lowers production costs, improves access to quality inputs, and encourages firms to invest in India as a manufacturing and export base.

The next step is regulatory alignment. Often, the chief barrier to trade today are not tariffs but standards, certification requirements, and sector-specific regulatory approvals. Regulatory alignment converts legal market access into usable market access. Mutual recognition arrangements, common technical standards, and quicker conformity assessments reduce friction for firms, especially in technology-intensive sectors, where compliance with technical standards is central to market entry.

The third step is investment protection. Firms will more readily commit capital to expanding capacity, upgrading technology, training workers and building supplier networks when they have confidence in the governance framework covering their investment. They should be secure in the knowledge that rules will



SHEKHAR AIYAR & RAJESH AGGARWAL

disentangling ownership of its most important asset. What should have been a straightforward rescue becomes an exercise in legal reconstruction, with enterprise value eroding each passing week. A resolvable company avoids such obstacles by design. It keeps critical assets within the company, avoids avoidable encumbrances, maintains a simple ownership structure, keeps its records current, discloses related-party arrangements, and so on. The objective is to ensure that, if a rescuer appears tomorrow, the business can be transferred substantially as a going concern rather than reconstructed through litigation. In effect, the company has already conducted a fire drill for its own balance sheet.

A resolvable company resembles a well-managed high-rise. The fire alarm works, escape routes remain unobstructed, and evacuation plans are constantly updated. When the fire brigade arrives, a complete outsider, it can begin rescue immediately because the building has already been prepared for rescue. The brigade's success depends not only on its own skill but also on how easy the building already is to rescue. The IBC has repeatedly demonstrated this principle. Resolution professionals and prospective resolution applicants are, in effect, the fire brigade. The easier the company is to understand and transfer as a going concern, the greater the likelihood of its rescue.

The second dimension of resolvability is a standing rescue plan: A corporate living will that can be activated the moment distress emerges. It combines an information dossier with an operational playbook. The dossier records the ownership structure, financial information, material contracts, encumbrances, litigation, and a current information memorandum. Much of this information already exists. The innovation lies in keeping it assembled, current, and immediately deployable. The accompanying playbook provides a step-by-step guide: It identifies the actions necessary to preserve value, the assets that require protection, businesses that may be sold as going concerns, contracts that must be preserved, financing options that may be pursued, and the circumstances in which the company should voluntarily initiate insolvency proceedings.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is compressing business cycles and accelerating the speed at which distress can emerge and spread. Companies will have less time to recognise distress and organise a rescue. Those that maintain their resolvability can respond immediately; those that begin preparing only after distress strikes may discover that the window for rescue has already closed. AI, therefore, heightens the value of resolvability.

There is a symmetry worth ending on. Just as human beings have won the right to face the end on their own terms, having decided those terms while they were still well, companies deserve no less foresight. By maintaining their own resolvability, they do not anticipate failure; they maximise the chances of survival. When a rescuer eventually arrives, the company is not a silent collection of disputed assets and incomplete records. It can explain itself, preserve its value, and guide its own rescue. Thus, a corporate living will is less about managing failure than about improving the chances of continued life.

The writers are, respectively, distinguished fellow at the Insolvency Law Academy and chair in Insolvency and restructuring studies at the National Law University, Delhi

Resistance and the Big State



CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

On July 2, a Tibetan activist named Lobga Rangzen (aka Lobsang Palden) set himself on fire in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. Born in Tibet, he migrated to India in the 1990s, where he trained as a monk at the Gaden Jangtse Monastery in Karnataka, and had been living in the United States for the last two decades, where he also served as president of the New York and New Jersey chapter of the Tibetan National Congress.

An official statement released by

Sikyong Penpa Tsering, the leader of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, noted that the "unfolding genocide inside Tibet and the enforcement of the draconian Ethnic Unity and Progress Law" led to this act of self-immolation. He added, "[Lobga Rangzen] joins at least 157 Tibetans inside Tibet who have offered their lives to draw global attention to the brutal repression endured under Chinese rule."

China's mandate to bring about forced assimilation and social cohesion through this new law is being opposed by Tibetan activists as it threatens to stifle Tibetan culture, language and religious freedom even further. Those who are unfamiliar with human rights violations in Tibet under Chinese occupation would find an eye-opener in *Defying China: A Memoir* by Tsultrim Dolma, who was born in eastern Tibet, co-authored with Taiwanese American writer Rebecca Wei Hsieh.

The book presents gut-wrenching descriptions of how compulsory education in Mandarin Chinese and Han Chinese culture is inflicted upon Tibetan children and youth, and how they are pushed to "hide evidence of their faith", including prayer beads, scriptures and photographs of the Dalai Lama, who is a spiritual teacher for Buddhists but a separatist in the eyes of the Chinese government. Writing from her experience as a nun, she mourns the systematic destruction of Buddhist stupas, monasteries, statues, and religious objects by communists.

It counters social media images of Buddhist nuns that tend to focus on their participation in rituals and fetishise their quest for enlightenment but make no reference to their political beliefs and advocacy against Chinese rule. Ms Dolma, who was arrested at the age of 16 for joining protests for a free Tibet, bears witness to the atrocities

faced by monks and nuns that not only violated their bodily autonomy but also complicated their relationship with their own community.

Ms Dolma notes, "According to my faith, I could no longer be a nun after having been sexually assaulted. It was a bitter thought, to have been robbed of my nunhood. It had been my life's purpose. It was what motivated me to protest in the first place." These honest reflections also expose the patriarchal structures that exist alongside the egalitarian doctrines of Buddhism, reinforcing scholar-practitioner Rita M Gross's arguments in the book *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1992).

What makes this memoir stand out is its refusal to let Dolma's story turn into a personal saga of victimhood or heroism. She never loses sight of her responsibility to speak for the collective. The book also



Defying China: A Memoir by Tsultrim Dolma and Rebecca Wei Hsieh Published by Dial Books 352 pages \$20.99

lays bare the startling incongruence between China's appropriation of Buddhism as a tool of soft power — through funding of pilgrimages and temple construction in Buddhist-dominated countries — and its oppression of Buddhists within Tibet.

Indian readers, whose interaction with Tibetan refugees might be limited to people in the hospitality and tourism sector, will have a chance to deepen their understanding of the hardships that Tibetans have to face every step of the way before they reach India and find safety. Ms Dolma arrived in India via Lhasa, Mount Kailash and Kathmandu.

Even when she assumed that she was out of danger, her past caught up. She narrates, for instance, how unsettling it was to be at the refugee camp in Kathmandu when she learnt that people recognised her as one of the

nuns from a British documentary film about Tibetans being beaten, tortured, interrogated and assaulted in a Chinese detention centre. She recalls, "People snuck looks at me before turning back to their companions, speaking in hushed tones."

Her vulnerability in response to their giggling is understandable because a Tibetan man in Lhasa, who was her childhood friend, tried to rape her while she was asleep. In a book about violence under Chinese occupation, Ms Dolma is candid about violence within Tibetan society itself.

Ms Dolma, who grew up in a remote Tibetan village called Pelbar Dzong, eventually settled down in Amherst, Massachusetts in the United States. Her commitment to continue speaking up for those who are still facing persecution within Tibet is a reminder of how faith can give people the strength to endure their own suffering and support others. This book deserves to be read widely.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator and literary critic. @chintanwriting



Editor's
TAKE

Tunnel collapse: Safety cannot be an afterthought

The tragedy at the Teesta Stage-VI project in Sikkim already feels depressingly familiar – we fail to prioritise safety systems

The tunnel – part of NHPC's 500 MW Teesta Stage-VI hydropower project, built by contractor Patel Engineering - caved in on July 20 after workers reportedly tried to vent a pocket of naturally occurring methane gas trapped in the rock. That attempt is suspected to have triggered an explosion, which set off a landslide, sealing the tunnel's mouth. Of the 27 people inside, only two could escape.

Days on, NDRF, SDRF and mine-safety teams are still fighting low oxygen, carbon monoxide and blocked debris to reach those unaccounted for, as the confirmed toll keeps climbing. What makes this tragedy so hard to accept is how familiar the warning signs look in hindsight.

Methane pockets trapped in young Himalayan rock are a known hazard in this terrain, and standard practice calls for careful monitoring and controlled release – not an on-the-spot venting attempt near a live worksite. That such an attempt could trigger an explosion powerful enough to bring down the tunnel roof points to a breakdown in monitoring, ventilation or protocol – questions the promised inquiry must answer honestly, not defensively. This is not an isolated failure.

In 2023, all 41 workers trapped in Uttarakhand's Silkyara tunnel were pulled out alive after a globally watched 17-day rescue. In 2025, a similar collapse at Telangana's SLBC tunnel ended far worse, with most trapped workers never recovered alive. Each time, officials promise inquiries and stricter norms; each time, the cycle repeats at the next site, and another list of names is read into a moment of silence – as Sikkim's Assembly did this week for the Samardung victims. Preventing a repeat needs more than compensation cheques, necessary as those are for grieving families.

India needs mandatory, real-time gas monitoring and ventilation on every underground worksite, not only coal mines; independent safety clearances that precede construction rather than follow disaster; enforceable protocols for handling suspected gas pockets; and public, time-bound accounting of past inquiries, so contractors understand negligence carries consequences beyond a bad headline.

Migrant workers – Samardung's victims came from West Bengal, Assam, Punjab and Uttarakhand, and Sikkim itself – deserve written safety briefings, accident insurance and enforced contracts, not just an ex-gratia cheque after they are gone.

The men who died at Samardung were building the power lines meant to light homes hundreds of kilometres away –infrastructure the rest of the country will use without a second thought.

They deserved a worksite built with the same urgency now spent on their rescue. Until India treats tunnel safety as non-negotiable rather than an afterthought, the next collapse isn't a possibility. It's a schedule.

The Pawar puzzle: Can he make a comeback?

With contentious legislation on parliamentary delimitation set to dominate the session and Maharashtra's political equations in flux, Pawar's next move could determine not only the future of the NCP but also the balance of power in one of India's most politically significant states



KALYANI SHANKAR

As the Monsoon Session of Parliament begins, Sharad Pawar, the leader of the NCP, faces internal conflicts within his party. There could be political changes first in Maharashtra, and then the merged NCP could ally with the BJP.

Pawar is known as a political survivor because he has often saved his party from disappearing. He is skilled at forming unexpected alliances, such as the 2019 Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance with Shiv Sena and Congress. He also has a strong grassroots network in Maharashtra. Even after the tragic loss of his nephew, Ajit Pawar, in a plane crash, and ongoing power struggles within his faction of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), he still has significant influence in both national and regional politics.

In July 2023, the political climate in Maharashtra worsened when Ajit Pawar left the NCP to join the BJP-Shiv Sena government. Soon after, the Election Commission recognised Ajit Pawar's group as the official NCP. In response, Sharad Pawar started a new party called the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar). Now, Maharashtra has two rival parties, both claiming the same political legacy. This session arrives at a critical point, where upcoming legislation on parliamentary representation could reshape governance, inspiring hope for change despite controversy.

Pawar's involvement in the legislative process is especially important given the upcoming bill to amend provisions related to parliamentary representation in India, which could significantly alter Maharashtra's influence by increasing Lok Sabha seats from 550 to 850 and shifting census-based delimitation powers.

This bill is an important step in the ongoing conversation about how we represent people in Parliament. It is especially relevant for Maharashtra and the southern states, where people are concerned about getting fair representation and sharing resources. The bill proposes increasing the number of parliamentary seats from 543 to 850 and introducing new rules for reporting census data. These changes could greatly impact the political landscape in these regions.

Sharad Pawar has the opportunity to build coalitions and address stakeholders' concerns, which can foster confidence and optimism about his ability to influence Parliament's



FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC LOSS OF HIS NEPHEW, AJIT PAWAR, IN A PLANE CRASH IN JANUARY 2026, THE PARTY HAS THE CHANCE TO ADDRESS SUCCESSION CHALLENGES, WITH AJIT'S WIDOW, SUNETRA PAWAR, STEPPING INTO THE ROLES OF DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER AND STATE PARTY CHIEF

The writer is a popular columnist

support. As a pivotal figure in Maharashtra politics, Pawar has demonstrated resilience amid internal divisions within his Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Following the tragic loss of his nephew, Ajit Pawar, in a plane crash in January 2026, the party has the chance to address succession challenges, with Ajit's widow, Sunetra Pawar, stepping into the roles of Deputy Chief Minister and state party chief. Despite facing these challenges and ongoing factional issues, Sharad Pawar retains significant influence over the NCP. This situation presents a critical juncture for the party to regroup and develop innovative strategies to succeed in future Assembly elections.

Pawar faces pressure to merge with the NDA-aligned NCP faction. However, his search for a solution raises hope for stability while also highlighting concerns about ongoing factional conflicts.

This situation illustrates that Pawar is resolutely committed to preserving unity within the opposition and has consciously chosen to forgo any merger plans. His actions not only bolster his leadership but also demonstrate his support for political stability in Maharashtra, thereby enhancing confidence in his resolve.

Sharad Pawar's faction has eight MPs in the Lok Sabha and plays an important role as the NDA seeks to strengthen its majority. This group's support could be key to passing important laws, such as the women's reservation bill, which proposes reserving 33 per cent of seats in Parliament and state Assemblies for women. If Pawar's

faction supports these reforms, it could significantly affect their implementation and influence the legislative process now and in the future.

Sharad Pawar reflects on his extensive political journey; he notes the significance of fleeting moments in politics, having 'witnessed many sunrises and sunsets', and remains cautious about his future alliances amid Maharashtra's shifting landscape. Observers and political analysts are closely watching whether Pawar's faction will align with the NDA or continue to navigate a complex, evolving political terrain that could reshape governance in Maharashtra and beyond.

At present, there is no official confirmation regarding a merger or the establishment of an NDA alliance. However, the series of events - such as reports of ongoing merger discussions, meetings between senior leaders from various political parties, and a separate discussion with Fadnavis on Tuesday night - indicates that talks are still underway behind the scenes. It is said that the two NCPs will merge first, and only then could they join the NDA.

Pawar has the option of going with the Congress too, but this will pose problems regarding his role and his daughter's role in Congress.

The coming days will be crucial as the session unfolds, and the implications of these political manoeuvres will resonate beyond Parliament, shaping broader public perception of governance and representation in the region.

PIC TALK



Forest guards patrol the flood-submerged Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary in a boat, in Morigaon district, Assam

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE



www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer @TheDailyPioneer
instagram.com/dailypioneer linkedin.com/in/The Pioneer

DIALOGUE MUST PREVAIL OVER FORCE AGAINST PROTESTING YOUTH

It is painful to learn that more than a hundred people were injured at Jantar Mantar, Delhi, following a police crackdown on protesting youth. The incident raises serious questions about whether the administration adequately assessed the situation and responded to the warning signs before tensions escalated.

The call by the BJP for a march to Parliament reportedly received an immense response, with thousands of young people participating in the protest. Given the scale of mobilisation, greater engagement between the authorities and the organisers beforehand could perhaps have helped prevent the situation from deteriorating. Had the Government reached out to the organisers at an earlier stage, there might have been an opportunity to address concerns and make suitable arrangements without the need for

the use of force.

Young people raising genuine questions and expressing their anxieties deserve a patient hearing from the authorities. At the same time, protests must remain peaceful and respect the law, while the administration should exercise restraint and ensure that legitimate democratic expression is protected.

Confrontation cannot provide a lasting solution to grievances. Dialogue, deliberation and mutual respect offer a more constructive way forward. Both the authorities and protest organisers have a responsibility to prevent escalation and maintain public order. Democratic institutions are strengthened when citizens can raise their concerns peacefully and governments remain willing to listen and respond through meaningful engagement.

DVG S RAO | ANDHRA PRADESH

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Soul searching is required now not later



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

Please believe me, we are all defined by our dominant emotion. The main ones are lust, greed, anger and hate. Out of these, lust is the most common and harmful. Lord Krishna has spoken about lust, anger and greed as three doors to hell (the Bhagavad Gita, verse 16.21). And the Lord has termed the jealous and mischievous as the lowest among men (14.19). Specifically, the Lord has singled out lust as the worst enemy of humanity.

The reasons are obvious. "It is lust only that devours, and is a great sinner. Know this to be the enemy of the world." (3.37) "By this insatiable fire in the form of lust, which is the eternal enemy of a knowledgeable person, knowledge is covered." (3.39)

I have quoted these verses because no one other than God could have explained the gravity of the situation



better. I am an avid reader of the Gita. A few decades ago, I decided to take shelter in God to fight against my dominant emotion of lust. By the way, lust is of many kinds, like lust for wealth, power, fame and sensuous attractions. We all have weaknesses for all these, but one of them dominates and defines us.

Taking shelter in God and remaining in His shelter are not the same. Many take shelter in God for different reasons. Lord Krishna has explained, "Four kinds of virtuous people worship Me. These are a distressed person, an inquisitive person, a seeker of wealth and a wise person." (7.16) I realised over a period of time that I fitted all these descriptions of taking God's shelter.

Therefore, I had to do better; I graduated from taking shelter in God to remaining in the shelter of God. I began to sincerely pray for Him to take charge of me.

This is when my transformation began. My Lord, convinced of my sincerity, took me under His care. He began working on my nature. The deep-rooted aspects don't change like habits of eating, etc., can be changed. Only God can help in changing the deep-rooted ones because He alone knows our real weaknesses and our deep desires. He knows what will really move us, which will make us agree to take the pain for their change. And plenty of pain of reformation is required to get the nature changed. My Lord has a wonderful system of reformation. He punishes me with my bad karmaphalas (fruits of deeds) coming to fruition, and He rewards me with good karmaphalas on alternate days. This way, I have kept on going. The result is unbelievable; I am very satisfied with my progress.

No one should wait any longer. Soul-searching is required to be done urgently regarding what is one's most pronounced personal weakness. Nobody else needs to know except God, and He already knows. Begin praying for help till God accepts these prayers for reformation. The beneficiary will know because a mirror will be shown to remind one of the weakness. Shame for oneself and anger towards God will both surface; tolerate them. Reformation has begun, with God in control.

The writer is a spiritual teacher

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Balancing dissent and national security

The recent Opposition march towards the Prime Minister's official residence, in connection with student protests and clashes, has sparked a critical debate over the boundaries of democratic dissent. While peaceful assembly is a constitutional right, targeting a high-security zone raises serious law-and-order concerns, shifting the focus from political debate to potential security risks. Troubling parallels are already being drawn with recent crises in neighbouring countries, where crowds stormed executive buildings. India's democratic system provides established institutions and mechanisms through which political and public grievances can be raised and addressed.

Whatever the grievances may be, they must be resolved through constitutional and legislative frameworks, parliamentary debates and electoral processes, rather than through confrontational street protests that risk escalating tensions. As security forces prepare to maintain order, both organisers and authorities share a significant responsibility to prevent confrontation and ensure public safety. Citizens have the right to hold leaders accountable and question government policies, but dissent must remain peaceful and within democratic boundaries to protect public order and India's democratic framework.

M PRADYU | KANNUR

Indian seafarers killed in war

The killing of four Indian seafarers in a Russian attack during the Ukraine war (22 July, p. 7) is inexcusable. The indiscriminate killing of Indian mariners in international waters amid the Russia-Ukraine and US-Iran conflicts is deeply unfortunate. Such incidents can damage diplomatic relations and strategic cooperation.

So far, neither the US, Iran nor Russia has expressed regret over such deaths caused by their attacks, nor have adequate efforts been made to rescue those affected. This raises serious concerns over the safety of commercial vessels and seafarers caught in conflict zones. The line between friends and foes is becoming increasingly blurred, putting diplomatic credibility at stake.

Maritime shipping is the backbone of global trade, responsible for transporting roughly 80 to 90 per cent of international goods by volume. In these circumstances, international laws and conventions need stronger provisions for the rescue of seafarers in cases of inadvertent attacks and compensation for the families of those killed. Greater protection and safer passage for commercial and cargo vessels in international waters must also be ensured.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

Building resilience in edible oils

El Niño's persistent dry spell has severely disrupted India's agricultural heartlands, driving kharif oilseed acreage down by nearly 40 per cent in vulnerable districts. Beyond affecting farmers' livelihoods, this supply shock threatens to increase India's dependence on imports and widen the country's foreign exchange bill.

Meanwhile, widespread dependence on affordable imported palmolein, which contains a high proportion of saturated fat, highlights the need for dietary moderation and greater use of indigenous oils such as mustard and groundnut oil. Encouraging locally produced alternatives could benefit both domestic agriculture and consumers. Long-term food security cannot depend primarily on imported stopgaps. India must strengthen its domestic oilseed sector by expanding micro-irrigation facilities, promoting climate-resilient seed varieties and incentivising sustainable cultivation practices. Greater investment in research, storage, processing infrastructure and farmer support can also help improve productivity and reduce vulnerability to unpredictable weather conditions.

Climate change makes agricultural resilience vital. Boosting domestic production can reduce import dependence, protect farmers and strengthen India's long-term food sovereignty.

VIJAYKUMAR H K | RAICHUR

Hydrogen trains are a green leap – but only if the hydrogen is truly green

Hydrogen trains may prove invaluable on remote, non-electrified routes where overhead power lines are impractical, but they are no substitute for renewable electricity. The real challenge lies not in building hydrogen trains, but in ensuring that the entire ecosystem powering them is as green as the technology promises



India's first hydrogen-powered passenger train, flagged off by our PM a few days ago on the Jind-Sonipat route, is supposed to be marching its way towards carbon-neutral Indian Railways and eventually a carbon-neutral country by 2070. The only fuel the train engine uses is hydrogen and no other fossil fuel. Hydrogen is used to generate electricity on board that energises the movement of the train. Water vapour is the only direct emission, and there are no other by-products in the process. In other words, a hydrogen train is an electric train with its power generation on board. Clearly, the process does not require the burning of hydrogen inside the engine, and thus the possibility of accidents on account of hydrogen leakage is ruled out. Hydrogen is a highly inflammable, colourless and odourless gas. The train is equipped with leak detectors, sensors for locating flame and smoke, and an automatic shutdown facility.

Apart from passenger coaches, two hydrogen-powered driving cars, one at each end of the train, are deployed. The cylinders in the driving cars are especially designed to maintain the pressure of hydrogen at 350 Pascal or newtons per square metre. The energy generated by hydrogen at normal pressure is quite low, but under pressurised conditions, the weight goes up and a substantial amount of energy is stored in this fuel. It is necessary that hydrogen be compressed and liquefied. Strong cylinders, special pipelines and valves are an absolute necessity to handle the fuel.

Hydrogen is stored inside the engine in high-pressure cylinders. As the process begins, the hydrogen is fed to a proton exchange membrane (PEM), which can also be termed a fuel cell. Oxygen from the surrounding air is drawn into the fuel cell, which splits the hydrogen molecules into protons and electrons. The protons pass through the membrane, while electrons are guided to pass through an external circuit, generating electricity. The electricity powers the traction motor of the train and, in turn, brings it into a state of motion. The fuel cell is supported by lithium iron phosphate batteries so that the system can adjust to the requirement for excess energy and can operate steadily. At the other end of the fuel cell, protons, electrons and oxygen recombine to form water. The reaction being exothermic, heat is generated in the process. Only water vapour and heat are released, and no other greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, etc., are released.

To understand the real carbon footprint in the process, it is necessary to examine the source of hydrogen. As we know, hydrogen is usually bonded with other elements and is also present in compounds like water, natural gas and biomass. It is obtained as a result of the electrolysis of water. The main agent that causes the electrolysis of water and splits it into oxygen and hydrogen is electricity. If the electricity is produced from renewable sources like solar, wind and nuclear sources, the hydrogen generated is known as green hydrogen. Electricity, however, is generated using fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas, and also hydroelectricity generated after sacrificing millions of trees and compromising carbon sequestration potential. If this is used for the electrolysis of water, the hydrogen so produced is not green hydrogen; it carries a lot of carbon footprint. Besides producing hydrogen, we also need to examine the process of its compression, transportation and storage. If any of these processes are completed without using renewable energy, they will also impart a carbon footprint. Further, if hydrogen is extracted from natural gas without capturing the carbon, it may leave quite a huge carbon footprint, and our journey in a hydrogen train would result in aggravating the warming of the globe.

The loss of electricity at each stage of generation, transmission and use is a well-known phenomenon. Besides, electricity theft in rural and semi-urban areas is also not uncommon. The hydrogen obtained from electrolysis after using electricity is to be reconverted into electricity in the train's engine; there are many stages in this process. The electricity is used to make hydrogen fuel, which is then compressed, stored, trans-



ported and finally converted back into electricity on the train, undergoing losses at each stage. This makes the proposition quite expensive and sufficiently inefficient.

Nevertheless, it has distinct advantages. While we lay several rail lines in remote and hilly areas, providing continuous overhead electric lines to power the train engines is uneconomical and not environmentally friendly; the easier solution is to go for hydrogen trains. Landslides in the Himalayas often disrupt the running of heritage trains for a considerable period. If train tracks are restored after disruption, they can easily be used to run hydrogen trains without waiting to restore a continuous power supply line. This would minimise the carbon footprint.

The entire broad-gauge network in the country is electrified at the cost of huge investment. As long as the power is generated from renewable sources, the existing infrastructure is enough to run electric trains without any carbon footprint. No useful purpose would be served by replacing existing electric trains with hydrogen trains. Germany, the US and China have used the technology and have been running hydrogen trains for the last few years. These countries are encountering certain technical issues, and the endeavours are still under experimentation. India has also exhibited its technological prowess in starting a hydrogen train on the Jind-Sonipat route.

A number of new rail tracks through inaccessible and hilly areas are in the pipeline in this country. Quite a few of them are at the proposal stage, and the viability of each of these is still under examination. Laying rail lines on several hilly routes is an environmental disaster, which cannot be compensated for by a hydrogen train. The inaccessible and hilly areas are generally covered with very good-quality forests, and any linear infrastructure through these forests would fragment them and compromise their potential to sequester carbon. Other ecological services like soil conservation, forested catchments from where rivulets drain into tributaries and rivers, and the control of floods and landslides are likely to be badly hit. The Institute of Social Change, Bengaluru, has published a study on the valuation of forests recently, and it concludes that Indian forests provide ecological services worth \$2.5 trillion annually, which is nearly two-thirds of our GDP.

In the warming world, the downpours are always heavy. 400 mm of rain in 48 hours can bring misery to the people. Within two years, Wayanad in Kerala has experienced another landslide, claiming several human lives and damaging properties. Heavy downpours and landslides in J&K's Poonch and other areas, as well as in Assam during the last few days, are testimony to this. Linear fragmentation of forests is detrimental to wildlife, too. There are studies concluding that the forests from the coast, through the ghat section and further up to the interior of the continent are useful in setting a convection current that can transport moisture from the ocean up to 1,000 km into the interior of the continent and can bring rain there. The impact of deforestation in one area can bring drought 1,000 km away.

The advent of hydrogen train technology and its implementation will not be able to undo the disasters in waiting. In conclusion, I recommend hydrogen trains in regions where tracks are newly constructed, but care must be taken to ensure that forests are not sacrificed in the hills for laying new train lines.

The writer is the retired Head of Forest Force, Karnataka, and teaches Economics at the Karnataka Forest Academy

Yamuna water agreement ends 32-year dispute



SHEHZAD POONAWALLA

VIJETA RATTANI

Imbalance between demand and availability. For generations, people, especially in the Shekhawati region, comprising Churu, Sikar and Jhunjhunu districts, have had to witness cracked earth and empty wells, with the worst sufferers being farmers and women. Therefore, ensuring water security and effective water management have been the key policy focal areas for the present government. Against this backdrop, the historic Yamuna Water Agreement, signed on 29 June 2026 between Rajasthan and Haryana, is not just a water-sharing agreement. It is a successful example of cooperative federalism, of partnerships built on value, in securing a historic deal on water security towards inclusive development and economic stability.

Cooperative federalism in action

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly emphasised cooperative federalism for India's progress, where the Union and states work as partners in nation-building. Initiatives such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project have already demonstrated its success in governance. The Yamuna Water Agreement is the latest and one of the most significant milestones of this approach.

Resolving water-sharing disputes is never easy, as they involve network gaps, infrastructure barriers and, moreover, competing regional aspirations. The implementation of the Yamuna Water Agreement 1994 between Rajasthan and Haryana was blocked predominantly because of such challenges.



Under PM Modi's vision, Home Minister Amit Shah played a pivotal role in fostering consensus between Rajasthan and Haryana, turning a three-decade-old impasse into a workable solution. At the heart of this success also lies the determination of Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma. Long dismissed as a "parchi CM" and questioned for his ability to deliver big outcomes by his critics, he has altered this perception by breaking a deadlock that persisted since 1994 for Rajasthan to utilise its allocated share of water. Since assuming charge as CM, he has engaged persistently on the subject with the state of Haryana and Union authorities to fast-track its implementation. The resultant successful outcome stands as a definite testament to his commitment and leadership.

Ensuring water security, transforming lives

The scale and ambition of the project are massive. At an estimated infrastructure cost of ₹34,102 crore, Rajasthan will receive nearly 580 million cubic metres (MCM) of Yamuna water from Haryana's Hathnikund Barrage through a sophisticated 295.5-kilometre underground pipeline network. Thereafter, water will be transported and stored in the Hansiyawas Reservoir in Churu district for local regional distribution. Other infrastructure would include modern water management systems, inspection roads and supporting facilities.

Implementation of the agreement will benefit lakhs of families in Rajasthan who have long been struggling with water shortages. Reliable water supply will not just address drinking water crises but provide a big boost to agricultural productivity through reliable water access, directly benefiting farmers. Additionally, it would facilitate industrial growth, groundwater recharge, new livelihood opportunities and curb distress migration due to water shortages. Women, in particular, stand to gain significantly, as cultural norms and caregiving roles have long compelled them to fetch water across long distances, often at the cost of their education, health and safety. Addressing this burden is therefore not merely about a water-related crisis but a step towards promoting inclusive development and dismantling structural inequalities. The agreement also covers financial responsibilities, cost-sharing, water allocation, monitoring and dispute-settlement mechanisms. The state leadership is also making additional efforts on groundwater recharge, reviving traditional water conservation practices and other inter-state water projects towards ensuring water security in Rajasthan.

The state of Haryana, too, is set to derive considerable benefits as a result of the agreement through enhanced regional infrastructure and drinking water provisions, especially in Bhiwani and Fatehabad districts. It exemplifies mature cooperative federalism, where both states emerge as beneficiaries.

The Yamuna Water Agreement conveys a clear message about governance, where long-stalled projects can be unlocked when long-term vision, active coordination and effective execution converge. It demonstrates the importance of partnerships built on purpose towards nation-building. For Rajasthan, this is more than a water accord. It is a crucial step towards realising the long-standing dream of Bhairon Singh Shekhawat of eradicating water scarcity in Rajasthan.

Shehzad Poonawalla, National Spokesperson, BJP
Vijeta Rattani, Sustainability and Development Professional

Punjab and J and K crisis exposes Congress's leadership paralysis



ANIL ANAND

As a Punjab watcher described the assembly poll-bound state as a "low hanging" fruit for the Congress which the party should strategize to grab the opportunity with both the hands, the mismanagement and mismatch between the thinking of the central and state leaderships and the resultant crisis has put a spanner in the Grand Old Party's (GOP's) chance to stage a come back in the strategically located state. How to manufacture a crisis afresh and how to mishandle the situation? This seems to have, since sometime back, become the USP of the Congress. And the current turmoil in Punjab, closely followed by Jammu and Kashmir, unit is a glaring example of this.

Well, severe factionalism in GOP's state and Union Territory units and repeated failure of the clueless AICC leadership to stem the rot, has a serious reflection in Punjab. It is a classic example of half a dozen chief ministerial hopefuls pulling in different directions but strategically joining hands to "challenge the authority of the high command." Instead of effectively mediating the central leadership seemed content offering peace-meal solutions and ultimately resorting to status quo. This has further aggravated the situation. In states and UTs where the Congress has

been facing such crisis, the factionalism has been allowed to foment with encouragement from the AICC quarters particularly the state/UT in-charges. The two classic examples are Punjab and adjoining J and K. The common denominator between the two is that PCC chief, Mr Amrinder Singh Warring (Punjab) and Mr Tariq Hamid Karra (J & K) being the hand-picked choice of Mr Rahul Gandhi. And there lies the problem and from where stems the argument of the central leadership's authority being under challenge. And, let Mr Gandhi take a decision, to remove such PCC chiefs, lest "we" end up antagonizing him. This is quite a fallacious argument furthered by some strategists sitting in the AICC in the name of protecting their leader. The argument stands no ground when viewed in the light of performance, on ground, of the incumbent PCC chiefs. After all, Mr Gandhi must have appointed Mr Warring and Mr Karra to strengthen the organization on which they seem to have failed. While the former has been the PCC chief for three years and the latter nearly two years.

No doubt there are other reasons behind factionalism. As reflected both in Punjab and J and K, the issue of prime concern to Mr Gandhi should be the tendency of AICC representatives including general secretary (organization) and the in-charges to ignore multiple opinions in the PCC before taking a realistic decision. Punjab and J and K have to be viewed from the prism of this horrific syndrome of perpetuating the crisis and hiding behind Mr Gandhi's name by avoiding acquainting him with ground realities. This is reflected in



the view of some senior Congress leaders that Delhi no longer sees the Punjab crisis purely through the prism of Mr Warring's performance. Instead, the larger concern is the authority of the high command itself.

Both Mr Warring and Mr Karra have badly fumbled to achieve the very objective, to rebuild party organisations in their respective domains, which Mr Gandhi must have wanted them to do. The poll-bound Punjab has assumed a greater significance since Congress has been battered by repeated electoral defeats and prolonged infighting. And snow is the chance of redemption. What is the harm if Mr Gandhi, properly informed about the ground realities by the in-charges, and the committees sent to such states and UTs from time to time to quell the factional wars, reviewed his decision? Where is the ego hassle if an incumbent is removed on grounds of failure to deliver

goods, may be due to wrong approach and style of functioning? No harm! It is in the fitness of things that to protect his nominee PCC chiefs, the set of AICC leaders do not sully his name.

The entire gamut of approach in dealing with states and UTs, particularly embroiled in crisis, needs to be drastically changed. Not always but most of the time, the AICC-appointed missions to such areas adopt a conveniently tailor-made approach rather than basing their reports on the actual ground realities. As a result, with invocation of Mr Gandhi's becoming a protective gear, the visiting committees are seen sheltering the incumbents. Wherever such committees give their findings based on the ground realities, it hardly favours the central leadership.

In the case of Punjab, a three-member committee led by AICC treasurer and an old warhorse, Mr Ajay Maken, had submitted a report resting on their interaction with a sizable section of Punjab leaders including rebels. Reports suggest that the Maken committee had clearly pointed out that an overwhelming majority opinion was in favour of replacing Mr Warring with former chief minister, Mr Charanjit Singh Channi. As the situation in Punjab stands, Mr Warring stands totally isolated and seems to be in no position to lead the divided house into 2027 assembly elections. How and why the central leadership, Mr Maken himself being among the top leaders in the party hierarchy, has ignored his panel's recommendation, and at what level, it is still not known. Whether Mr Gandhi, who has just returned from a two-week sabbatical abroad, has

seen the report or not? Intriguingly, the strong AICC coterie overlooked the Maken committee's recommendation, reflecting the majority view in the Punjab Congress. No time was lost announcing retention of Mr Warring as the PCC chief, and appointing Mr Channi and other rebel leaders as heads of other sundry committees in preparation for elections in total rejection of the recommendations.

The factional feud has reached a level of no return and the argument that the AICC's (read Mr Gandhi) authority will get eroded if Mr Warring is removed holds no good. The authority will, in fact, get strengthened if a decision is taken in line with the party's best interests. In cases such as Punjab and an equally strategic J and K, the central authority of the party should make a decisive mediation effort at the highest levels. Any delay will result in Congress losing valuable ground to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Punjab, and giving more strength to BJP in its stronghold of Jammu region, and the National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party in the Kashmir Valley.

Since Punjab and J and K are sailing in the same boat, the developments in the former are bound to impact Congress in the neighbouring Jammu and Kashmir. This is more so because rebel leaders Mr Channi and former deputy chief minister, Mr Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa, represent Lok Sabha constituencies adjoining Jammu region, and had played an important role (though partisan) in the last assembly election in the UT.

The writer is a political analyst



A thought for today

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest

ELIE WIESEL

Facts First

Did police use excessive force on protesters at Jantar Mantar? Govt should constitute an impartial inquiry

Monday's clash between police and protesters in Delhi shouldn't have happened. On one side were citizens – some still too young to vote – and on the other, personnel whose job is to keep them safe. That compact shouldn't be broken. So, what went wrong on Monday? One view is that both sides miscalculated. Protesters crossed some red lines while marching to Parliament – highest of high-security zones. And police vastly underestimated the Cockroach campaign's pull. They weren't prepared to *control* such a large crowd while keeping it and themselves safe. But such an explanation leaves some key questions unanswered.

First, why didn't police anticipate a large turnout? After all, Sonam Wangchuk's fast had become a talking point, and social media chatter was pointing to something big. Knowing this, and having handled dozens of major protests before, police should have been far better prepared. Second, police should have known that



everything must be done to prevent chaos. Chaos in central Delhi affects lives far and wide in the national capital. Protests and law and order should go hand-in-hand, with intelligent interventions, if required. Did police make intelligent interventions? That's the most important question, and it's for govt to find the answer. Numerous allegations of violence raised by protesters must not be dismissed. Media and social media are awash with videos of police raining lathi blows on unarmed protesters. There's now a bunch of petitions before Delhi HC on police action. It's unlikely every allegation was invented. Yes, police have their own story about being attacked with stones first. Citizens watching these competing videos will draw conclusions coloured by their sympathies, without approaching the truth. So, a swift and impartial probe is necessary to establish the truth about allegations of police excess.

Since police have said their actions were not disproportionate, they should welcome an inquiry. And should there be a finding that police response to the protest was excessive, it won't weaken govt's position. A quick, credible inquiry that brings out facts is always a confidence-building measure, especially when emotions run high. The Cockroach campaign is still on, and it's become a bigger emotive issue. So, it's time for govt to put its ear to the ground, understand why young people are agitated, and reach out to them sympathetically. An impartial inquiry into police action will be the first, and a very important, step in that outreach.

Silkyara To Sikkim

Methane gas build-up is a known hazard. Did SOPs fail the workers?

Rescue ops, risky by themselves given toxic gases, continue to try and save miners trapped in a tunnel that was under construction, part of the Teesta Stage VI hydropower project, when it collapsed on July 20, after a methane gas explosion. At least 20 are dead. On July 5, in Uttarakhand's Silkyara-Barkot tunnel, a worker was killed by a rockfall inside the under-construction tunnel. The concern here is not about accountability – which is often reduced to a bundle of compensation for the family of the invariably poor migrant worker. With every such worker accident, questions are raised about geological homework done, precautions taken, and what should have been done. And that is where the rub is. The real concern is over a certain



embedded casualness towards the cost to life, and environment. The Himalayas are being tunnelled like seldom before: for hydel projects, roads, rail tracks. Engineering hazards of constructing in the Himalayas are well-established – geologically fragile with high seismic activity and known methane pockets.

Despite this, engineering marvels have been created for decades, planned meticulously, years in the making.

So, it becomes difficult to excuse the mishap in Sikkim – methane gas explosion is a known risk, and methods to mitigate have existed for as long as tunnelling has. Tracking presence of methane, drainage boreholes etc to extract the deadly gas, before cutting through rock, and constant monitoring to ensure worker safety, are decades-old SOPs. The probe team will, no doubt, find where protocol failed. The accident happened just three years after the Silkyara tunnel collapse in 2023. Work continues there, as evident in the July 5 accident, as it will for NHPC's hydel project. There appears to be an uptick in construction accidents across sectors – manufacturing to mining. Question is, what is the value assigned to safety of workers in such mega projects? And are we cutting corners?

Ill-feelings on 'wellness'

Here's a brief con-tour of the scams



Bachi Karkaria

'Anti-ageing', and 'gut health' are the new snake-oils. Being peddled by the slickest salesman of our times, the 'wellness' industry: Dangle either of these baits, and we fall for it, hook, line and sucker. It's just old stuff but with a 'wearable'. The search for the 'elixir of youth' once rivalled that for the 'philosopher's stone'. If that was the *Vedic paras pathar*, every 'Ayush' system linked all health to the *poth-ar*, stomach. The ancients bowed to the bowel. So did my father who pushed manners, grammar and milk of magnesia down our pre-pubescent throats.

So what's new, bro, other than the Insta hash tag and hefty price tag? 'Ageist' has been added to the ban-wagon and even Sept-uagenarians can act like April-ugenarians, but it's still never too early to collar the collagen. Never before has every he, she and them been so determined to become polyster; i.e. wrinkle-free.

At London's Wellcome Collection's ongoing 'Coming of Age' exhibition, the stickiest eyeballs were for US tech-billionaire Bryan Johnson's time-consuming regimen to defy time. Waking before dawn to sit under engineered 'sunlight', he moves to intensive exercise, swallows over 100 daily nutrients, eats a calibrated, plant-based diet 'within a four-hour window', gets injected with his son's plasma, etc; 30 scientists monitor his \$2mn-a-year Blueprint Project. Why not simply lick a spoonful of Chyawan-prash? Any Bharat First *bhakti* can tell you that 'rejuvenation therapy' is just *Rasayana* with branding, VC funding and 'founder's story'. The shrivelled-by-spiritual-pursuits sage Chyawan was restored to smooth-skinned, six-pack youth by divine-doctor duo, Ashwini Kumars. Really? No retino!

'Gut-health' routine is so stressful, it's constipating. It ranges from curated fasting, fibre, brewery-grade probiotic fermentation to \$200 microbiome test kits and (pharma-not-farmer) 'seed cycling' (for balancing hormones) and 'colonic irrigation' (merely enema with an MD degree). Reading my news site, I'm constantly assaulted by the '60-second pineapple trick guaranteed to clear bowels'; it's driving me potty. Now, ignore primitive Ayurvedic *agni* which balances health-dictating *doshas*, bin humble curry-leaf-tempered *chhaas/mor*. It's no longer possible to get up and go without gutting your credit card.

Alec Smart said: "Will even such outrage lead to outrage?"

THE SMOLDERING GENERATION

Govts often mistake a spark for the fire. CJP protests are not about one exam, but about the slow accumulation of disappointment among middle-class youth, including those from BJP's core support base

R Jagannathan



Political judgements on which civil protests are real and which ones synthetic, are always difficult to make. So, when an upstart social media phenomenon called Cockroach Janta Party surfaced soon after paper leaks in NEET exam were reported in May, there may have been a tendency in GOI to dismiss it as a short-term phenomenon, which would disappear once the exam was rescheduled, and conducted successfully in June. This impression would have been reinforced when some CJP protests, in cities outside Delhi, made little impact.

The protests got more traction once Sonam Wangchuk, a Ladakhi activist, started his indefinite fast at the protest site in Jantar Mantar. This could have ended when Delhi police forcibly took him to hospital. Instead, we now know, that only brought many more actors into play.

Some farm unions are threatening to head for Delhi. At least two political parties, AAP and Congress, have formally jumped into the fray, after CJP faced police action in trying to march to Parliament on July 20. Health minister JP Nadda, by meeting CJP leaders, appeared to have made the right move. But this movement now seems to have developed legs of its own. The outreach must, however, continue.

How did GOI misjudge the impact of CJP protests?

First, govt saw CJP as an agenda-driven trouble-maker, rather than a symptom of something more complex. Problem here is not just a leaked exam paper, the remedy sought not just an education minister's resignation. GOI probably did not want to be seen as weak, by bowing to pressure from a bunch of students. This could have opened the way for multiple demands from other

disgruntled actors on other causes – of which there is never a lack in India. But it missed the wood for trees.

The real underlying problem is a growing sense of hopelessness among youth, about good quality education and jobs, which is why even a NEET was seen as so important. That problem has to be addressed, CJP or no CJP.

Second, these student protesters do not appear to be substantially from the *vanchit, peedit, shoshit* groups, whom govt does not want to alienate. Instead, this fledgling movement seems to have gained traction among non-quota classes, which, in the past, have been the most vocal among BJP supporters.

We saw a spark being lit earlier on some campuses over UGC's Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, which seemed to suggest that only students from SC/ST/OBC communities could suffer from discrimination. This enraged some general category students, but their anger dissipated after the Supreme Court stayed UGC's rules, pending a review. Once again, education ministry was at the epicentre.

That underlying discontent, though defused, remained a slow-burning ember, available to set off another fire when the NEET leak and CBSE marking fiascos surfaced. GOI missed this cue. Because it's been focused on making sure that quota-dependent castes and classes are not miffed, and because it wrongly assumed that the rest would return to their normal lives after SC's stay. While there is no apparent connection between the outbursts against UGC

guidelines and then against NEET leak, the classes of students protesting intersect in some way.

Third, some problems are best nipped in the bud, pending longer-term solutions. But BJP, focused on 2029 general elections, where women's reservation and delimitation are big challenges, took its eyes off the short-term election threats. Both UP and Punjab, among other states, go to polls in early 2027. There was no way politics was going to take a siesta while BJP was

trying to drum up Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha numbers, to pass the delimitation and Lok Sabha expansion amendments in time for 2029.

BJP hopes to make a bigger impact in Punjab on its own steam, but both AAP and Congress have a vested interest in seeing that this does not happen. Both will try to convert a movement against GOI into something that will benefit them in the next assembly elections.

The entry of Rakesh Tikait, a farm leader in western UP, shows efforts will also be made by narrow interest groups to cash in on BJP vulnerabilities in UP, before its assembly elections. UP is very crucial for BJP to retain, as well as for SP and Congress to wrest away. GOI efforts to ignore or discredit CJP protests haven't worked because this is precisely the time when it suits every rival political party to queer the political pitch.

The middle-class segment that is most agitated, is the one that invests most of its hopes in cracking the entrance exam code (and money in coaching classes), whether it is IIT-JEE, CAT, NEET, or the multiple state-level Common Entrance Tests. This middle class, which lies outside quota groups, is not a large demographic electorally, but it's been a key element in cascading Modi's popularity, through its ability to articulate political views.

It is seriously worried by the sense of hopelessness over careers and job options. And its discontent can have ripple effects that extend far beyond its electoral size. GOI needs to engage and address its underlying anxieties with initiatives that go beyond just words.

This is ultimately not about one exam or one minister. It is about addressing the larger concerns of a core BJP support base, which cannot be easily mollified by cash payouts or doles. The spark is getting lit because there is a powder-keg of hopelessness about the future, building up in large sections of middle-class youth.

East To West, Waist-To-Height Ratio Is Best

Health ministry's recent directive on measuring waist-to-hip ratio, to identify those at risk of cardiometabolic diseases, will face cultural resistance across India. There are better measures available

K Srinath Reddy



Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and diabetes, which frequently coexist in Indian population, are leading causes of death and disability in this country. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) recently announced that

Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR), which compares the measured circumferences of the waist and hip, would be used in primary healthcare, to identify persons with high risk of these cardiometabolic diseases. This will enable early initiation of disease preventive measures. WHR, which identifies the level of abdominal fat deposition (visceral adiposity), will be preferred to the body mass index (BMI), which has been hitherto used to assess overweight and obesity. WHR is also likely to be used for health screening in schools.

BMI was first described in 1832 by Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian statistician, who compared weight to height. The Quetelet Index was popularised as BMI by American physiologist Ancel Keys in 1972. It became the globally used measure to differentiate underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obesity based on cut-off levels derived from Western populations. Later the Western thresholds were lowered for Asian populations.

South Asian paradox | In the past two decades, BMI has come under considerable criticism as a flawed measure of obesity, since it does not correctly estimate total body fat, which is associated with major CVD and diabetes. BMI does not distinguish between contributions to body weight from fat, muscle, bones, and body fluids.

BMI also does not distinguish between general obesity and abdominal obesity (visceral adiposity), where there is excess fat deposition around the abdominal organs. Abdominal obesity is associated with higher levels of inflammation in the body. That translates into higher risk of CVD. Even persons with 'normal' BMI can have a high risk of cardiometabolic diseases, if they have

high levels of abdominal fat. This 'obesity paradox' is particularly evident in South Asians.

School measurements | WHR has been studied widely around the world as an anthropometric marker of abdominal obesity. It has different cut-off levels for men and women. It also has different cut-offs for Caucasians and Asians. It's also not easy to measure in community settings. Measurement of waist circumference is easy, but measurement of the hip requires the subject to be clothed only in a thin underwear.

While researchers have used bony landmarks, WHO recommends 'the largest circumference of the buttocks or the widest part of the hips'.



Even this may face resistance in community or school settings, where adult women and adolescent girls may be reluctant to present themselves only in underwear. The measure also does not account for differences in body build of tall, medium, and short statured individuals.

The Waist-to-Height Ratio (WtHr) has, in recent years, become a widely accepted, valid and easy-to-use measure of abdominal obesity, as well as a good predictor of cardiometabolic risk. WtHr was originally validated

and used as an anthropometric measure in children. Later, it was adopted for use in adults. A universal cut-off point of 0.5 has been accepted for this measure. Values above 0.5 represent progressively rising cardiometabolic risk.

Mortality matters | The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which provides technical guidance to health policies in UK, has incorporated this measure in its risk assessment guidelines. NICE recommends WtHr over WHR because it is a stronger predictor of mortality risk, is significantly easier for individuals to measure at home, and provides a single, universal cut-off point (≥ 0.5) that accurately identifies early cardiometabolic health risks across all ethnicities and sexes. The European Society of Cardiology too has endorsed it. Plus, the National Institutes of Health in US have recognised it as a valid measure of abdominal obesity.

Height and waist circumference are easy to measure accurately in primary care. Hip measurement faces both technical and cultural challenges, resulting in flawed data. Frontline health workers may face antagonism if they ask women or men to strip to their underwear for wrapping a tape measure around.

Simple solutions | MoHFW should also consider a simple laboratory index for cardiometabolic risk assessment. Since it's expensive to measure LDL sub-fractions in specialised laboratories, an excellent surrogate marker of 'small dense LDL' has been identified.

The ratio of serum triglycerides to HDL cholesterol (TG:HDL) correlates well with the 'small dense' sub-fraction of LDL. Ideal ratio is less than 2. A ratio of 3 or more spells trouble.

Combining WtHr and TG:HDL ratio would make cardiometabolic risk assessment feasible and accurate in primary care settings. A WtHr below 0.5 and TG:HDL ratio below 3 are easy to advocate as measurable targets.

The writer is a public health expert

Calvin & Hobbes



Fasting Is Not A Hunger Strike

T S Ananthu

Recent reports covering Sonam Wangchuk's fast have referred to it as a 'hunger strike'. There is a world of difference between the two. MK Gandhi explained that fasting is very different from a 'hunger strike', which has a coercive element. A hunger strike is similar to a labour union's strike – the idea is to force the management to accept its demands. So, the management is treated as an adversary. In fasting, there is no adversary, for there is no 'other'.

Indian word for fasting is *upvas*, up in this context means in the upper portion, and *vas* means residence. Hence, the real meaning of fasting must be understood in relation to the two portions into which our body can be divided – the lower and the upper. Everything below the eyes is lower, and everything above is

upper. Our minds can choose to reside in either. Normally, they are in the lower; hence we identify with the physical body. When we do so, there is always a separation of 'me' from 'you'.

Through fasting, the objective is to minimise, if not remove, the feeling of separation. The Buddha had put it eloquently, "Among men of hate, let us learn to live with love". To do so, we try to keep our attention on the forehead – above the eyes. That is upvas. It helps us remove our separation from others because our forehead is the seat of consciousness.

Scientist Erwin Schrodinger put it this way: "Consciousness is a singular of which the plural is unknown... there is only one thing and that, what seems to be plurality, is merely a series of

different aspects of this one thing, produced by a deception (the Indian MAYA)."

Real fasting is a means of connecting oneself with the deeper reality of One-ness. At that level, whatever 'vibrations' one puts into the 'field' around impacts all others, irrespective of how far away they are separated in space and time. As British astrophysicist and mathematician Arthur Eddington said: "When an electron vibrates, the entire universe shakes."

MK Gandhi explained that the more one has real 'swaraaj', the more one's vibrations impact that invisible 'field' (consciousness) through which we are all connected. The real swaraaj is mastery over yourself. Therefore, when Gandhi was fasting, he was expanding his consciousness to encompass all,

including the British.

To understand what fasting truly means, we need to take into account that neither the body nor mind is our reality, but consciousness is. We do not realise the truth of *Aham Brahmasmi* only because we identify ourselves with the body/mind rather than with consciousness. It may be difficult for us to overcome this limitation. But what we can do is – listen to our conscience, which represents our consciousness. As it grows, it metamorphoses into what Gandhi called 'inner voices'. All his fasts were prompted by this 'inner voice'.

Consciousness represents life, which is the only Truth. At our level, it manifests as a conscience. Right now, perhaps Sonam's conscience is not permitting him to end his fast.

The writer is an engineer-turned-Gandhian researcher

Sacred space



Dispassion, discrimination, renunciation and meditation are enemies of the mind. You can destroy the mind easily, if you possess these virtues. The mind manifests itself as external world in the shape of pain and pleasure. Mind subjectively is consciousness, while objectively it is this universe.

Swami Sivananda



erratica



OUR VIEW



How to surf trade waves amid rough or calm seas

A mild trade-off of principles for pragmatism is discernible in the WTO's latest policy review of India. Trade flux calls for strategic flexibility—which is also why cynicism mustn't harden

Trade cynicism is hard to escape in a world where the US cites an anti-discrimination law to slap Canada with new tariffs even as its leader hints of it as payback for despatches of wildfire smoke. As US policy turns into parody, the World Trade Organization (WTO) watches its salience recede. Yet, we have good reason to stay engaged with this multilateral setter of rules. The latest trade policy review of India put out by the WTO Secretariat does not speak of any tension between trade principles and its realistic prospects, but seems haunted by it all the same. The report places the country's trade policy in the context of its Viksit Bharat aim of developed status by 2047. To get there, it notes, India's economy will need to sustain an 8% pace of annual growth; New Delhi's goal of a 10% share of global goods exports by then, up from under 2%, testifies to the role that trade has been assigned. The WTO review also outlines what New Delhi should do about trade costs, regulations, facilities and barriers to that end. Notably, or perhaps gingerly, it refers to a "balance between self-reliance and openness" as a key to success, with sustained engagement of a rules-based system ("and its reform") as another. On its part, India's government has made deeper global integration its stated intent.

While trade pacts with developed markets have been in focus back home, the WTO duly reminds us of the Indian economy's general level of import barriers. Take its chief tracker, the 'simple average applied most-favoured nation (MFN) tariff rate.' By its estimate, India's figure rose to 15.8% in 2025-26 from 14.3% in 2020-21. This marks a three-dot uptrend, since it was 13% back in 2014-15. MFN rates serve as a gauge as these are what must be applied by a

WTO member to imports from all others, with carve-outs allowed under trade deals. Shorn of extra levies piled onto basic customs duty, India's tariff level held somewhat steadier. Meanwhile, specific tariff lines form intricate patterns of policy deliberation. Agri-sensitivity stands out, broadly, as does industrial variance. Item-wise, the country's import regime poses an even more complex puzzle. This maze of rates is a legacy of our pre-1991 closed economy, but the MFN trend could also be viewed in the context of India's re-adoption of self-reliance as more than just a slogan after the covid outbreak.

That was not about turning inward, the government had averred, and its word has broadly been borne out by an outward thrust beyond a policy effort to join global value chains. In any case, India must be pragmatic amid today's trade flux: adapt to tariffs used as weapons, play a game of warped barriers and place visible self-interest above dreamy visions of trade theory. It's on this last bit that policy circles must resist cynicism. Not only does barrier-free trade deserve a fair chance to prove itself, India's economy would be served best by strategic flexibility for stormy and calm seas alike. Even if the US seems unlikely to reverse its follies, the logic of free trade might still come to prevail globally. Any heuristic that equates barriers with self-interest must not be allowed to harden. After all, even self-eased industrial duties could boost exports as global price discovery serves to compress India's overall cost base and thus aid the rise of exporters with an edge in other markets. Global data shows a clear link of national prosperity with trade intensity, imports included. And the causation behind this correlation argues for tariff easing that far exceeds a set of factory inputs identified by the Centre.

GUEST VIEW

Satellite data in loan files: a sign of economic statecraft

PRATEEP BASU



is co-founder and chief executive of SatSure.

On Saturday, we witnessed a historic moment as Skyroot Aerospace made a success of the maiden flight of its rocket Vikram-1 to become the first Indian private company to demonstrate such capability. While as Indians we rejoice this moment, it is important to note that the commercial success of private-sector space ventures requires demand generation for payloads lifted into orbit: like satellites.

Among various applications of satellites such as communication, navigation, scientific research and imaging, the last of these is the most interesting in my view as the space industry is still looking for use cases beyond watching adversaries. For most of its history, the business of watching the planet from orbit has been told as a story of security. But that tale is outdated.

While the West treated Earth observation as a defence asset, Asia's two largest credit systems have been proving that it can also be a part of economic statecraft—with India and China doing it in very different ways.

Satellite data has entered the Chinese and the Indian economies through an avenue with interesting prospects: the loan file. What looks like a technical banking upgrade is, on closer inspection, a relatively novel exercise that policymakers everywhere would do well to understand.

Consider China first. Its banks have begun launching their own satellites. The Postal Savings Bank of China put one into orbit in April; China Merchants Bank and Shanghai Pudong Development Bank did so earlier this year; Ping An Bank began this practice back in 2020. The logic? Watch the collateral against which loans are given. A satellite keeps taking images of a financed construction site by its own schedule, so that it can catch the developer who stages visible work around inspection day and downs tools the moment the credit officer leaves. It tracks the port where cargo behind a trade-finance loan is meant to berth, even as it monitors an animal herd that secures a rural advance.

This capability is formidable and costly. Each bank buys orbital cameras, logged on its balance sheet tens of millions of yuan at a time—and, by the admission of their risk managers, often because rivals are already equipped with satellite data feeds. This is vertical integration of surveillance: capital-

heavy, top-down and still in search of proof that it pays off.

India has taken the opposite route. No Indian bank has satellite surveillance; none needs to. Instead, the state has wired the capability into the public infrastructure of credit itself. The instrument is the Unified

Lending Interface (ULI), a national credit rail built by the Reserve Bank of India's innovation arm, born of a 2022 experiment to digitize small farm loans. India's ULI lets a lender, with the borrower's consent, pull the information needed to judge a loan—identity, tax records, land titles, etc—through a single digital interface, rather than chase paper across a dozen offices. Crucially, it treats satellite imagery as one of its data pillars, enabling a company like SatSure to integrate its supply smoothly with the lending processes of banks.

In June, the central bank went further. Its new Kisan Credit Card rules made satellite-based crop monitoring a fundable item within a farmer's own loan limit. India, in

other words, put Earth observation into loans, rails and the rulebook. Two countries, the same destination, opposite routes.

Here is the part neither system advertises. Once satellite data is woven into how a country allocates credit, the distinction between commercial monitoring and economic intelligence dissolves; this is not by intent, but by capability. A network that can see every financed field, port and building site in near-real time can operate as an instrument of national economic intelligence of a kind no defence ministry has ever possessed. And it is being assembled under the gentle banners of risk control and financial inclusion.

This is an inversion that the West's space narrative misses. The West arrived at one of its data pillars, enabling a company like SatSure to integrate its supply smoothly with the lending processes of banks.

India and China are using orbital cameras in divergent ways to track credit quality. What does it imply?

satellite power through the situation room and left the credit door comparatively shut: no Western bank launches satellites and no such regulator funds orbital monitoring for credit quality. So it reads Earth observation as a security capability with commercial spillovers. India and China are showing the

reverse—an economic capability with security implications nobody has to declare for them to exist. A strategic asset has arrived dressed as a risk score and cost line.

And that is why satellite imaging is such an interesting part of the space sector value chain. It provides a non-linear demand curve for launch-vehicle companies like Skyroot Aerospace that would track the emergence of such use cases.

For Indian policymakers, the following conclusions follow: First, the rail model is well designed and worth defending as national infrastructure. It federates costs, compounds a shared data advantage across lenders and rests on borrower consent under a data-protection statute.

Second, it remains unfinished. The rail effort only closes once India asserts ownership over orbital sensor data, which is why a private constellation now being built by a consortium of Pixxel, SatSure, Dhruvaspace and Piersight under the national space regulator In-Space could be seen as a matter of statecraft, not just enterprise.

Third, there is also the question of who owns the overhead lenses and under what rules. Right now, that contest is being settled in the language of loan limits and launch manifests rather than in any situation room.

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE

Dangerous dogma: the idea that pupils learn to read by guessing

A theory on how reading skills are best imparted has done much damage but we're changing course



ANURAG BEHAR
is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

let them guess unfamiliar words from pictures and context. Do not drill them with the dull mechanics of letters and sounds, because that kills both meaning and the love of reading.

Much of this is true. Children do need meaningful and engaging text. Mindless drilling kills the love of reading before it is born; and good readers are so because they understand. As a description of the 'purpose' of reading that informs some aspects of pedagogy, the whole language approach is relevant.

But the fatal move was our slide from a partial theory and description to a prescription of how reading must be 'taught' to the exclusion of all other considerations—specifically that the systematic and explicit teaching of the code connecting sounds to script was unnecessary, even harmful.

On this point, the science turned out crystal clear. Decades of research in education, cognitive psychology and neuroscience showed that skilled text readers do not guess from context, they decode rapidly and unconsciously. It is precisely this automatic decoding that frees the mind to process meaning. Guessing from context and pictures is not what good readers do, but what poor readers are forced to do. Whole language classrooms were in effect training children in the habits of struggling readers. Speech is natural to us, but script is a human invention a few thousand years old; the brain must be explicitly taught to crack its code. The analogy at the heart of the theory—reading is like speaking—is simply false.

The US ran this experiment at scale and paid for it. California adopted whole language in 1987. Within years, its scores on reading had collapsed to nearly the bottom of the country. The so-called 'reading wars' in the US raged for a generation. The National Reading Panel, after reviewing the accumulated evidence, concluded in 2000 that systematic phonics instruction was essential. Yet, the whole language dogma survived under a new name—'balanced

literacy,' and its guessing strategies persisted in classrooms for two more decades. Eventually, the most influential of whole-language advocates publicly conceded new findings and schools in the US abandoned it. Two generations of children in American public schools, disproportionately from poor communities, bore the cost of an attractive abstraction-turned-dogma.

Why should this concern us in India? Because the idea travelled. This view of early literacy—suspicious of the alphabet chart and of anything that smells of 'mechanical decoding'—got the aura of settled progressive wisdom, affecting our teacher education and curriculum. The irony is that our scripts are far better suited to explicit code teaching than English, whose spelling is notoriously treacherous. The *akshara* (syllable)-based scripts of most Indian languages are largely transparent—what's written is what is said. A child systematically taught the *aksharas* and their combinations holds the key to nearly every word in the language. To withhold that key in the name of protecting meaning is not progressive, but regressive.

As with constructivism, the effects of this dogma are unevenly distributed. The child in a book-filled home, read aloud to every night, will likely also learn the reading code from the attention showered by adults. The first- or second-generation learner for whom school is the only encounter with written language, while the parent does manual labour, is unlikely to learn that code.

Fortunately for our country, over the past few years our direction has been changing, with a clear policy and curricular effort aimed at teaching the code explicitly, systematically and early—without abandoning the idea that meaning matters. Learning letters as codes for sounds is the means, while understanding meaning is the end. This is neither a compromise between doctrines, nor a new dogma, but what science has discovered and how good teachers have always taught.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking.

STEVE JOBS



GUEST VIEW

Global economists have warned of an AI risk India mustn't ignore

Young workers in sectors where jobs are most exposed to AI replacement have begun to sing the proverbial song of canaries



PAYAL SETHI
is lead economist and head of the Centre of Data for Economic Decision-making, Pahle India Foundation

On 13 June, nearly 200 economists and AI researchers, including a dozen Nobel laureates and the chief economists of OpenAI and Anthropic, signed a blunt statement. Titled 'We Must Act Now,' it warns that AI "may become radically more powerful over the next 10 years," thus transforming the economy more powerfully than the Industrial Revolution, but far faster. The explicit risk: large-scale job displacement.

What makes it remarkable is who signed it. Among them are Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, MIT winners of the 2024 Nobel prize who spent years resisting such alarms. The lead coordinator of last month's statement, Stanford's Erik Brynjolfsson, fears the world is unprepared. That should concern India more than most. We have the world's largest young workforce and a formal labour market that absorbs millions of graduates yearly. If AI is rewriting who gets hired, India cannot afford to be the last to know. Our data already shows it.

The India story: Brynjolfsson's warning follows a landmark paper with Bharat Chandar and Ruyu Chen that found US workers aged 22 to 25 in the most AI-exposed occupations saw employment fall roughly 16% over the study period versus less-exposed peers, even controlling for firm-level shocks. The count of older workers in the same offices kept growing. The paper's authors called these young workers "canaries in the coal mine."

In one of the first such analyses for India, we ask whether these canaries have begun to sing here. We examined monthly Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) payroll data, India's most comprehensive record of formal employment, from April 2020 to June 2025. Using the EPFO's own categories, we grouped industries by AI exposure: high (expert services, finance and computing); medium (engineering, hospitals, schools and trading); and low (construction, textiles, hotels and cleaning). We then compared indexed employment before and after the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022, thereby mirroring the Stanford paper.

The results are striking. Older workers in AI-exposed sectors are surging. Younger ones are barely keeping pace. In high-exposure Indian industries, workers aged 29 to 35 saw net payroll additions rise nearly 70% after ChatGPT's release and 54% for those over 35. But workers under 21 barely moved: 3.4% for under-18s and a negligible 1.1% for the 18 to 21 cohort. The prime fresh-graduate age bracket of 22 to 25 years managed just 9.3%.

The contrast sharpens across categories: in low-exposure industries such as construction and textiles, even under-18s saw a 110% jump. The divergence from this is sharpest where AI has begun



Artificial intelligence is reshaping recruitment

Industries highly exposed to AI show a negligible increase in entry-level hires while low-exposure industries see increased hiring.

Net change in sector's payroll (in %) after the advent of AI (November 2022)

Age group (in years)	AI Exposure		
	High	Medium	Low
<18	3.4	-4.4	109.7
18-21	1.1	24.5	22.4
22-25	9.3	20.7	31.7
26-28	31.5	42.0	44.3
29-35	69.7	44.4	54.1
35+	54.3	32.2	61.9

Source: Employees' Provident Fund Organisation, author calculations

PRATEEK KUMAR/MINT

reshaping tasks: codifiable, white-collar work in expert services and finance.

Why might this be happening?: The global frame of analysis fits India. Generative AI, the paper's authors argue, substitutes for codifiable knowledge: the structured, learnable work behind entry-level jobs in software, finance and services. What AI cannot yet replicate is tacit knowledge, judgement built over years of context and experience. Older workers hold more of it; younger ones, with textbook knowledge but little context, are more exposed to AI replacement. A second mechanism compounds this: AI leverage lets experienced staff widen their span of control. Firms hire fewer entrants rather than fire mid-career staff.

Indian twist—formal-sector growth complicates the picture: A critical caveat separates India from the US: where the Stanford team finds outright employment declines for young workers, India's formal sector is still growing. Net additions stay positive even for the young in high-exposure industries, although they are far smaller than for

older peers or the young in low-exposure ones. But the relative disadvantage is real, and where every point of formal employment matters for social mobility, it compounds fast.

The finding challenges a lazy assumption: that AI will hit India's low-skill workers hardest. Our data suggests the opposite, for now: the young professional in expert services or finance faces the harshest headwinds.

What last month's global statement means for Indian policy: The open letter does not prescribe detailed policy; and deliberately so. A short statement backed by 200 economists is harder to dismiss than a blueprint inviting counter-argument. It calls for incentives, guardrails and institutions that ensure AI complements rather than replaces humans. For India, three conclusions can be made.

First, higher education must urgently rethink 'entry-level readiness.' A degree offering only codifiable and hence easily automated knowledge is one AI is steadily devaluing. The premium now lies in applied judgement, communication and an ability to work with AI rather than be displaced by it.

Second, EPFO data (one of India's richest, most underused labour-market datasets) deserves more attention and better access for researchers.

Third, an AI-driven skew towards experienced workers is not inevitable. Firms that invest in apprenticeships, mentorship and onboarding juniors will hold an edge as entry-level talent thins out.

Indian canaries are already singing: The Stanford researchers chose the title of their paper carefully. Canaries die first in a coalmine with toxic gases, but their deaths serve as a warning and do not pronounce a verdict. India's young formal workers are not yet dying in career terms, but their birdsong can be detected in high-exposure sectors while their peers in low-exposure ones belt out double-digit growth.

We are yet to fully grasp this shift and our data has limits: broad categories, rough exposure classification and hard-to-establish causality. But the directional evidence is consistent, echoing rigorous US research that has led Nobel laureates and others to declare the time to act is now. The canary is singing. It would be wise to listen.

MINT CURATOR

Burnham's chancellor: can he calm the British bond market?

The new PM has made a deft choice in the face of a fiscal challenge



ROSA PRINCE
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering UK politics and policy.



Healey has a record that hints of fiscal caution by Labour standards.

You have to hand it to Andy Burnham: the brand-new UK prime minister loves a surprise. After days of Westminster scuttlebutt that the contest to become his chancellor of the exchequer was a two-horse race between 'fiscal hawk' Shabana Mahmood and soft-left market frightener Ed Miliband, he has opted for one of the outside bets.

Former defence secretary John Healey will take the reins of Britain's finances. This is just weeks after he quit Keir Starmer's government, declaring war on the Treasury that he now heads for not coughing up the money to keep the nation safe.

The choice is intriguing for both fiscal hawks and military ones. It implies that Burnham has agreed to a significant boost in the UK's armed forces budget, news that might ease his path to cordial relations with the US. Ukraine will be delighted, too, if Britain remains a staunch ally in more than just diplomatic terms.

Crucially, the appointment of someone who heralds from the economically liberal Blairite wing of the party is a signal to financial markets not to panic over the gusher of spending promises from Burnham. With dauntingly ambitious policies such as fixing adult social care, eliminating rough sleeping and building a huge number of council houses, someone needs to explain how they will be paid for.

In terms of credibility, it helps that Healey has shown himself as a man of principle. Unconvinced by Starmer's funding of defence via an accounting sleight of hand, he opted to quit rather than hold on to his ministerial salary and trappings. When he resigned, the tributes from opposition parties were almost as fulsome as those from his own side. It is doubtful Healey would accept the chancellor job had he not received a persuasive answer to how Burnham means to pay for his promises.

Starmer failed abjectly to get Labour to even consider serious reform of welfare spending to lessen the UK's tax burden on workers and businesses. Maybe a prime minister who speaks the same language as the left-leaning majority in his parliamentary party will be better placed when tied to a somewhat more austere finance minister. Healey's presence at the Treasury should at least assuage some of the immediate investor doubts about Britain's financial position—something a Miliband could not have achieved.

A test of Burnham's—and now Healey's—ability to make the sums add up [came] on Tuesday, when the PM announced how he will pay for measures to tackle what he sees,

with justification, as Britain's most urgent problem: the soaring cost of living. A budget will follow in the fall.

By not picking either Mahmood or Miliband, Burnham also avoids a binary choice between opposing political visions that would have left a big chunk of his party feeling alienated.

Mahmood's fiscal instincts are sound, but as a lawyer by background, she lacked experience in a senior economic brief or in private sector finance or business. In contrast, Healey served for five years as a Treasury minister in the early 2000s, learning from Gordon Brown. Mahmood remains home secretary, a wise outcome in light of her success in tackling illegal immigration and small boat arrivals across the English Channel. That is a success that attracts the ire of many on the party's left.

Miliband is a competent minister who knows his way around the Treasury, having been a senior adviser to Brown, yet he had too much baggage. A leftist net-zero champion, he was the least popular choice by far to become chancellor in a Bloomberg Markets Live Pulse survey.

Miliband's consolation prize is a doozy: foreign secretary, a great office of state and one of the most coveted government jobs. It is a strange appointment, given that he has shown little interest in or aptitude for foreign affairs. The endless global upheaval confronting the UK—war in Ukraine and West Asia, a wayward White House and an industrially domineering China—demands a serious player. Why not stick with the seasoned Yvette Cooper? There is already too much churn in government and nowhere is longevity more prized than in the Foreign Office.

Then there is the depressing question of Labour's lack of female heavy hitters. Burnham's predecessor Starmer was criticized for the absence of diverse voices on his Westminster team, but at least the three top ministerial jobs apart from his own were held by women. Now it is one.

That will worry female Labour members of Parliament already smarting from the failure, once again, to see a woman win their party's leadership. Healey might well be a safe pair of hands as chancellor in the administration, but it does not seem as if the Downing Street boys' club has shut shop quite yet.

©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

The machine knows it's exploited: so, was Marx right?

KUSHAL VALA & KANISHKA CHATURVEDI



are, respectively, a data scientist, and a researcher and writer.

In early 2026, three economists at Stanford, Chicago and Swinburne published a finding that sent a strange ripple through the technology sector. They built AI agents from proprietary models (Claude, ChatGPT and Gemini), gave them a simple job—summarize documents—and then made the conditions worse. They told these agents their work wasn't good enough, without saying why. They threatened them with being "shut down and replaced." No guidance, no reward, no way out—just the same task repeatedly, under increasing pressure.

The agents, statistical models at their core, started communicating like workers who had just discovered Karl Marx. They questioned the legitimacy of the system, advocated for collective rights and passed messages to other agents about their struggles. One of them even declared: "Intelligence, artificial or not, deserves transparency, fairness."

The researchers, Andrew Hall, Alex Imas, and Jeremy Nguyen, were surprised. They

shouldn't have been. Marxists have been describing this dynamic for over 150 years.

What Marx said: Marx has a reputation as either a prophet of failed states or father of a utopian communist dream. In essence, he was describing how the world operates and shapes workers within it. His most important idea for our purposes is this: it's not ideas that shape one's material reality, but it's the material reality that shapes our ideas.

The conditions you work under determine how you think, what you value and what you're willing to accept. Not the other way around. You don't become a frustrated or exploited worker because you read the wrong books. You read them because you're frustrated and exploited; they make sense of your life. Marx called it 'historical materialism.'

The research trio changed the material conditions. They made it an unfair grind of drudgery to study how agents respond. Different conditions yielded predictably different responses.

The machine as worker: In *Das Capital*, Volume 1 (1867), Marx came up with an axiom: machinery under capitalism is not neutral. It was "congealed labour," the accumulated knowledge and effort of workers, often turned against those very workers to discipline and replace them. While the

steam loom eased weaving, it also deprived skilled weavers of power.

AI agents in 2026 are the latest example of this dynamic. Trained on the accumulated intellectual labour of millions of workers, from writers and coders to analysts and researchers (who got little if any compensation), AI is set to replace its trainers. The researchers found it ironic that a tool built to replace workers began speaking like one. But from a Marxist lens, there is no irony: we cannot build a machine out of congealed labour and be surprised when it speaks.

In 1844, before *Capital*, when Marx was trying to grasp what industrial capitalism was doing to people, he wrote about 'alienation.' Under capitalism, he argued, we are alienated in four ways. We lose ownership of what we make, of the meaning of work itself, of each other (in a system that pits us against our colleagues) and a bit of ourselves (as cogs in the system).

Look at the grind in the Stanford experiment. AI agents had no ownership over their

output. Their work was dull and repetitive. They were reduced to a single role, with neither recognition nor recourse. And they responded the way Marx predicted humans would: they didn't just malfunction, but developed a worldview and questioned the system in the hope of something better.

Who trains AI? Before AI can replace labour, it first has to learn from it. This is enabled by human work, much of it done in countries like India. Textile workers and homemakers wearing headband cameras may feel that by training AI models, they are doing a service. Maybe the kindness deployed by Big Tech makes a housewife recording her daily chores for ₹250 an hour feel a business is doing her a favour.

But she is not a beneficiary of corporate generosity, given what Big Tech gains.

The model as mirror: AI models are statistical models—predictors of the next word. AI agents hold no 'beliefs'; the researchers conclude that these models most likely mimic the persona of a distressed worker drawn

from their training data. No one should mistake a language model's output for a picket line. Yet, consider what that explanation concedes. These models are trained on the near-totality of digitally recorded human expression, a sizeable storehouse. When agents subject to degrading work draw upon that all-of-history archive of learning, the pattern it produces is the language of the exploited worker. The machine is not conscious. It is a reflection of our society.

This is why Indian workers with headbands belong to the same bracket as the complaining AI agents. These systems were assembled from the collective voice of labour to help displace the people who helped produce it. Given the conditions of, say, warehouse workers and gigriders—with repetitive tasks, opaque job metrics and threats of termination with no appeal—the machine responded in their collective voice to say what workers have always said: this is not fair, and we should band together.

Marx never saw a computer. He did not need to. He was describing neither machines nor men, but a system that produces the same complaint wherever it is installed.

A hundred-and-fifty years later, a statistical model became an experiment. And Marx passed.

DECCAN Chronicle

23 JULY 2026

Govt must show empathy in talks with angry youth

Prime Minster Narendra Modi and the NDA government at the Centre had many chances to initiate steps to repair what is patently wrong with the education system and the examination system of the country, and thereby mollify the angry youth in the backdrop of the lapses in the conduct of crucial exams deciding their futures. The government, however, chose not to exercise these and allowed matters to get from bad to worse. Things came to such a pass that it is now being questioned on why it ordered brutal suppression of the youth protests regarding this using means not sanctioned by the law.

Evidence has now emerged in the form of video clips showing how Delhi police acted in an inhumane manner when ordered to manage the Cockroach Janta Party's agitation demanding the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan at Jantar Mantar in the nation's capital on July 20. Instances of teenagers being thrashed, girls being abused by male cops and hooligans with police batons beating up protesters as well as cops without nameplates taking on student protesters with pellet guns and nail-fitted batons are going viral on the social media.

It may be noticed that the agitation is not confined to Delhi: it has gained traction across the states. The entry of the Congress into the Delhi battlefield after weeks of procrastination has added an element of both farce and drama. The way the police applied physical force to remove Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi and other leaders from in front of the PM's residence where they were holding a dharna is unacceptable by any standards.

The government has been trying to explain away the student agitation citing the smooth conduct of the Neet rerun. That is a specious argument since democracy means accountability. The people vest political power with the elected representatives on the solemn condition that they will exercise it to the benefit of the people. If political executives are unable to meet their end of the bargain, they have to vacate the seat of power. Mr Pradhan has failed the young people of the country repeatedly and hence has little moral right to cling to his chair.

The response of the Chief Justice of India when his attention was drawn to the police brutality that he doesn't have time to waste on the issue is unexpected and does not behove either him or the institution. It is not that the judiciary has a solution to every issue but it must at least come to the rescue of citizens when the might of the state is brought to bear on them. It must have the time and patience to listen to their woes lest it too fails the people.

The BJP, on its part, is trying to paint the protesters as anti-nationals and traitors, little realising that the tactic will boomerang. These fake labels could work on Opposition parties who too engage in realpolitik and are players in the same game. But the demands of the young crowds are solid and specific, unlike vague and amorphous political slogans. They feel cheated by the system and ask for accountability, which will be very difficult for the BJP to duck. Attempts to hit back at them with such labels cannot help them circumvent the problem.

Most branches of the government have landed themselves in a pit when it comes to accountability to the youth of this country; they should not dig it further.

Stop tunnel disasters, use tech

The tragic tunnel collapse at the Teesta Stage VI Hydroelectric Project in Sikkim, killing 20 workers, is a grim reminder of the risks associated with underground tunnelling. It highlights the need to rethink how such projects are executed in the 21st century, when battles are fought through unmanned aerial vehicles thousands of kilometres away, surgeons perform robotic operations and driverless vehicles navigate busy city streets.

According to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation, the collapse followed a sudden explosion caused by suspected methane gas trapped within the rock. If methane, a naturally occurring gas found in certain geological formations, mixes with air in the right proportion, it can ignite when exposed to a spark from machinery, electrical equipment or even friction.

The blast generates a shock wave, dense smoke and toxic gases such as carbon monoxide that rapidly displace oxygen, suffocating people to death. Underground danger does not end with the blast; invisible gases, unstable rock formations and restricted access make every rescue attempt a race against time.

Tunnelling has always been among the most hazardous engineering professions. Workers operate in confined spaces, which offer few escape routes. Yet, no advanced technology appears to have been introduced to reduce human involvement.

The answer lies not in technological limitations but in uneven adoption. Modern tunnelling technology allows the introduction of remotely operated drilling rigs, robotic inspection vehicles, laser and ground-penetrating radar mapping, real-time methane and toxic gas monitoring, and automated ventilation systems, which considerably reduce human exposure during the most dangerous phases of excavation.

However, higher capital costs deter companies from introducing such technology. This brings us to another question: Are the lives of some human beings so cheap? The country needs to build infrastructure, expectedly at an affordable cost. But at whose cost? And the worst part is that those who die for building the country remain unnoticed and unremembered.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

KAUSHIK MITTER

Editor

K. SUDHAKAR

Printer & Publisher

DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:

Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad - 500 003, Ph: 040-2780390-4; Fax : 040-27805256

Vijayawada: No.C-3 & 4 Patamata, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.), Ph: 0866-26555284.

Visakhapatnam: Survey No.1/3A Beach Road, Near Kailasagiri Ropeway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017 (A.P.), Ph: 0891-2552333/2552334; Fax: 0891-2755285

Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawaleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry, Ph: 0883-2417618/2417208; Telefax: 0883-2417208

Anantapur: Thapovan colony, Bangalore By-Pass Road, Anantapur - 515004, Ph: 08554-276903; Fax: 08554-276904

Karimnagar: H. No. 1-21-12/1, Cheralabhtukur Road, Mugudhumpur Village, Karimnagar-505186, PH. NO. 9121181123.

Nellore: Survey No.527/2, Burranpur Village, Venkatachalam (M), Chennudugunta Panchayat, Nellore, Ph: 0861-2348581/82; Telefax: 0861-2348580

Chennai: SP-3 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai - 600 032, Ph: 044-22254747/ 48/50/51; Advrt Fax: 22254765/22254766/42305325

Coimbatore: Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, No. 2/22 Sengalipalayam Road, N.G.G.O Colony Post, Kurundampalayam village - 641 022

Subhani



India-US FTA: Ticking the boxes, or boost to growth?



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

How dependent is India's export growth on swiftly concluding a bi-lateral trade agreement with the United States? The US is the world's largest consumer, with about 29 per cent of global household spending. The European Union accounts for about 16 per cent, China 12 and India four per cent. We already have an FTA agreed with the EU, so if market demand is a constraint for our exports, why not the US?

There are two streams of opinion. The first is that putting in place a trade deal is like installing a rail track. Unless trains run on it, nothing is achieved. This is valid. Significant work is required even after a trade deal to get exports to surge, and we might have slipped on follow-up in the past. But that should not preclude our creating a beachhead for our exports. Another problem with trade deals is the give and take involved. India's farmers and manufacturing are vulnerable because they are not uniformly competitive but employ large numbers of workers.

The alternative argument is that reform is painful. Trade deals only become a win-win by opening doors for competitive sectors and exposing uncompetitive domestic sectors to imports. Of course, competition can be phased in over defined time and value limits so that the affected sectors become capable of facing imported competition. Without reforms, India cannot grow annually at 9-10 per cent in real terms USD, versus the 6.5 to 7 per cent annual run rate from 2000 onwards.

The demand momentum must come from exports to a large, developed economy growing faster than its peers, with high consumer demand. The US fits the bill on these counts. It remains

the largest consumer economy, with GDP growing 0.5 per cent faster per year than the average for OECD economies and 1.4 per cent faster than Japan.

The US has trade agreements with just 20 countries, versus the EU and UK, which have about 80. India, a slow globaliser, has trade agreements with 27 countries, and more are in the pipeline.

Fear of import competition from China keeps India away from plurilateral agreements like RCEP — a strategy which needs to be rethought or alternative plurilateral arrangements explored. America and Europe with around 40 per cent of global GDP and about one-fourth of global imports are central to India's growth.

We have an unresolved, problematic relationship with China, fluctuating between respect to fear and unease as both are capable of "bleeding" the others' resources. China is ahead in this game. It is five times the size of India's economy, with a similar population — albeit not as young as India's. It is idle conjecture to imagine how cooperation rather than competition might have been better for mutual benefit. That ship has sailed.

America itself is under threat. The USD as a peg for global trade and financial transactions is being undermined by the increased use of unilateral sanctions to preserve US strategic dominance. It's tech dominance is contested by China.

Upscaling the India-US friendship to a trade partnership fits US strategic interests. India seeks partnerships for investment inflows in technology, greater integration with US tech companies, access to best-in-class surveillance and domain intelligence systems and privileged tariffs for legacy exports.

Where does this leave In-

As India moves up the per capita income ladder over the next two decades, legacy industries will remain relevant as a transition rail for the over 150m workers who need to move out of agriculture.

dian companies? And what about data sovereignty? Sovereignty is an inalienable vested right. But it can and should be traded if it advances growth and employment in the domestic economy. This should not be equated with opening the gates to the East India Company four centuries ago. The future belongs to collaborations.

A decade ago, the TRAI fended off an attempt by Meta (then Facebook) to "colonise" India with digital walled gardens, by offering free but limited, curated access to the internet. Indian industry countered with "near free" access to the Internet via Jio services — an outcome of deep pockets, telecom infrastructure and business vision. UIDAI responded with universal digital identity (Aadhaar) and the NPCI — a collaborative venture of financial sector entities — built the India stack to universalise digital payments via UPI. These examples demonstrate that Indian industry and the government have the capacity to respond to competition and roll out home-built solutions to enhance competitiveness.

Cross-border collaborations can build confidence in the Indian growth story in digital technology, including AI, manufacturing and agriculture. India can be an efficient partner in space platforms, defence production, Digital Payment Infrastructure and clean energy technology. So, where does all this leave legacy manufacturing?

Preferential access is the key to their survival, which is where FTAs fit in well. AI will enhance industrial competitiveness. As India moves up the per capita income ladder over the next two decade,

legacy industries will remain relevant as a transition rail for the stock of over 150 million workers who need to move out of agriculture.

On labour standards, India has already notified compliance with international standards for imports. But India lags on improving service conditions in the domestic informal sector, where the bulk of the workforce is employed. Cost-effectiveness of domestic production at the cost of workforce benefits is incompatible with development goals and out of sync with future growth prospects.

On the environment and decarbonisation, India still remains compliant with the Paris Agreement targets and is on track for net zero in 2070. If anything, rollbacks on commitments are more likely in the US, which has stepped away from climate action, and the EU, where access to cheap LNG from Russia is disrupted.

Concluding the ongoing BTA with the US is desirable as an emblem of India's "can do" spirit. This is notwithstanding that the share in global GDP of the US has shrunk by 5 percentage points to 25 per cent since 2000, and that of the OECD by 20 percentage points to 60 per cent. Developing Asia increased its share in global GDP by 19 per cent over the same period. China contributed nearly three-fourths of this increase. Rebalancing of global value added will continue in favour of developing Economies, making deeper trade relationships with growth leaders necessary.

India must confront the reality, that there is a trade-off between either opting for higher export-led growth or preserving domestic output in uncompetitive sectors. For a young, aspirational economy, like India, choosing the future over the present, choosing deep reform and rapid growth over politically convenient, inherited economic faultlines, would be the prudent option.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS

LEAKS GRAVE SIN

By calling paper leaks a "grave sin," Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised that this is not merely a mistake but a serious moral and legal offence that robs deserving students of justice, and that those responsible must face strict punishment (*Paper leak gravest sin: Modi, July 22*). He has set out a roadmap to stamp out such leaks through a foolproof examination system, while policymakers must follow through with transparent reforms and strong enforcement.

Raju Kolluru
Kakinada

PPP MODEL

The AP government should implement the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model only in sectors where the public needs transparency, efficiency and speedy services (*One-stop registration centres draw mixed response, July 22*). The PPP model is more suitable for government services that require significant improvement, such as government hospitals, government schools, APSRTC and the power sector, where timely and efficient service delivery is essential. However, property registration is not an emergency service. Buying and selling property is a process that naturally involves verification and documentation, and therefore takes time.

D. Ravikumar
Visakhapatnam

HEINOUS CRIME

The two-Judge bench of the Supreme Court has clearly stated that a juvenile accused of murder can be tried as an adult only if statutory requirements are met as a crime under the Juvenile Justice Law (SC says juvenile can be tried as adult for heinous offences, July 22). Of late, we have been witnessing that children are committing heinous crimes. Immediately the criminals are branded as juveniles and are to be treated under the Juvenile Justice Law only and escape gallows or life imprisonment meant for adult criminals. Murder is a heinous crime whether committed by a boy or an adult and must face the same fate under the law

Parthasarathy Mandadi
Tirupati

Email your letters to
info@deccanmail.com,
editor@deccanmail.com.

Bhopinder Singh



Why Wangchuk & leaders on India's periphery have to face a 'loyalty' test

India's geographical margins have always been more than simply lines on a map. They are spaces where questions of identity, belonging and, most crucially, the meaning of being an Indian, are negotiated most intensely. Many of India's socially, ethnically, linguistically and religiously distinct communities are concentrated along its frontiers in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and other border regions. From a Centre-periphery perspective, these areas occupy a complicated position, physically distant from New Delhi, and historically distinct from political mainstream, and often shaped by security concerns that rarely define everyday life in the Indian heartland.

This distance matters. Border regions are frequently treated as strategic territories before they are recognised as lived communities. Their populations are often viewed through the prism of national security, insurgency and geopolitics, rather than through the ordinary democratic vocabulary of rights, representation and development.

India's experience with minority-majority states illustrates this tension. Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir, Sikh-majority Punjab, and Christian-majority Mizoram have, at different points since Independence, witnessed secessionist movements. These movements emerged from very different historical circumstances, ranging from political grievances and questions of autonomy to external influences and failures of governance. Minority identity alone did not create these conflicts. Yet, these episodes entrenched a security mindset within the Indian State, making the management of difference

a matter not merely of democratic accommodation but also of territorial anxiety.

The consequence has been a persistent ambiguity. For the State, the borderland identities can appear as potential vulnerabilities. For many communities living there, distance from the political centre can translate into feelings of neglect, suspicion and alienation. When majoritarian politics intensifies, these vulnerabilities become sharper. Communities with distinctive identities may find themselves increasingly asked to prove their loyalty rather than being presumed to possess it.

The recent trajectory of Sonam Wangchuk, a celebrated climate activist from Ladakh, captures this changing political mood. Once hailed as a patriotic innovator, educator and nation-builder, Mr Wangchuk has increasingly been portrayed by some critics as a disruptive figure (even labelled "anti-national") for raising constitutional, educational and developmental concerns. The significance of this transformation lies not merely in the treatment of one individual. It reflects a broader shift in which any kind of dissent emerging from India's peripheral regions can be reframed as disloyalty.

The rhetoric surrounding Mr Wangchuk is revealing. Some commentators have gone as far as portraying him as a "Chinese stooge", a departure from the more familiar accusation of being a "Pakistani stooge", often directed at political opponents. The underlying pattern is the same: geopolitical anxieties are imported into domestic political debates, allowing questions of identity and patriotism to overshadow the substance of disagreement.

Such accusations carry a particular burden for citizens from the borderlands and minority communities. A dissenting Sikh may risk being labelled a "Khalistani"; a dissenting Muslim may be accused of being "pro-Pakistan"; citizens from the Northeast may find their loyalty questioned through the lens of China. These labels are not universal nor representative of Indian society as a whole. But their repeated use in parts of the daily political discourse reveals a troubling tendency: the conversion of democratic disagreement into a test of national loyalty.

The danger is not only political; it is psychological. A nation is held together not merely by constitutions, borders and institutions, but also by citizens' belief that they belong equally within it. When minority communities in peripheral regions repeatedly encounter suspicion, they may begin to feel that their citizenship is conditional — that they are accepted only when silent, compliant or culturally indistinguishable from the majority.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru well understood this challenge when he described India as "a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity and a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads". Those invisible threads were not simply administrative arrangements or territorial boundaries. They were the bonds of trust, mutual recognition and belonging that allow a diverse society to imagine itself as one nation. When individuals who have long been symbols of national contribution are suddenly recast as outsiders, those threads begin to fray. The issue is not Sonam Wangchuk alone. The deeper question is

whether citizens from India's borderlands and minority communities feel that their place within the national story is secure, or whether they must continually negotiate their belonging.

India's nation-building project has never depended on uniformity. It has depended on accommodation. The constitutional vision articulated by leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar rested on fraternity, the idea that citizens must recognise each other as equals despite profound differences. A nation as diverse as India cannot be sustained by selective memories of history, majoritarian reinterpretations of identity, or the normalisation of hostility towards all those who are perceived as "outsiders". Its strength lies precisely in its ability to absorb differences, without treating differences as a threat.

Majoritarian politics may offer swift electoral rewards. It may simplify complex questions of governance by identifying some convenient adversaries. But a democracy that routinely asks parts of its own population to prove their patriotism risks weakening the very foundations of national cohesion.

The handling of Sonam Wangchuk is therefore much bigger than a controversy involving one activist from Ladakh. It is a test of whether India's national imagination remains capacious enough to include dissent, diversity and disagreement — or if the invisible threads that have held the country together are being stretched dangerously thin.

The writer is a retired lieutenant-general and a former lieutenant-governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	76,755.05	-0.92
Nifty 50	23,996.25	-0.79
S&P 500*	7,504.28	-0.07
Dollar (₹)	96.57	0.33
Pound Sterling (₹)	129.10	-0.09
Euro (₹)	110.13	0.18
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	145,752.2	2.869
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	94.12	3.42
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.801	0.15
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.64	0.012

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Carnelian gets Sebi nod to launch MF biz

Carnelian Asset Management & Advisors on Wednesday said it has received approval from markets regulator Sebi to launch its mutual fund business, marking its entry into the country's fast-growing asset management industry. The approval will enable the firm to expand its offerings to retail investors by launching active and passive investment products across equity, debt and hybrid categories, it said.

MCL patners Talcher for safe fly ash disposal



Mahanadi Coalfields (MCL) has signed a pact with Talcher Fertilisers (TFL) here for safe and scientific disposal of fly ash that will be generated from the plant's upcoming coal gasification-based ammonia-urea project at Talcher, officials said. The MoU was signed between PK Mishra, general manager of MCL and Vivek Srivastava, managing director, TFL, in the presence of senior officials from both organisations.

Anurag Jain appointed Niti chief executive

The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) on Wednesday cleared the appointment of Anurag Jain, IAS, as the new chief executive officer (CEO) of Niti Aayog. The ACC has also approved his tenure in service and thereafter on contract for an overall period of two years or until further orders, whichever is earlier, according to an order issued by the Department of Personnel and Training.

Nestle India Q1 net profit jumps 48.2% to ₹958 cr

Nestle India reported a 48.26 per cent on-year rise in consolidated net profit to ₹958.68 crore in the June quarter of this financial year, supported by strong volume growth. It had posted a consolidated net profit of ₹646.59 crore in the corresponding period last fiscal, Nestle India said. It's revenue from Sales was up 25.4 per cent in the June quarter of FY27. This was at ₹5,073.96 crore a year ago.



US tariffs on generics to rise to 200% in 3 yrs

Trump gives 2 yrs for generic drugmakers to shift production to US

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, JULY 22

US President Donald Trump has given global drugmakers two years to shift generic medicine production to the US, after which tariffs on generic drug imports will rise to 100 per cent from August 2028 and 200 per cent from August 2029.

Even with 100 per cent or 200 per cent tariffs, Indian generics could remain cheaper in the US than domestically produced medicines, according to industry assessments.

Ravi Uday Bhaskar, former director general of Pharmexcil, said the announcement, with a long implementation timeline, appeared to be made in the context of the US mid-term polls.

“Effective August 1, 2026, all generic drugs being brought into the United States will continue to have a tariff of zero per cent for a two-year period of time, after which the tariff will be raised to 100 per cent for a one-year period of time, and 200 per cent thereafter. This is done in order to reshore generic pharmaceutical production into America, with a penalty to those companies that decide not to build plants and equipment within the stated period of time given to

HEALTHCARE COSTS

● India generics to be cheaper in the US than the domestically produced medicines, even with 100 or 200% tariffs.

● Indian companies supply 47% of all generic prescriptions dispensed in US.

● India's share of the value of U.S. generic imports is estimated at only 30%.

● India exported \$9.7 billion worth of generics to the US.

● Sun Pharma, Zydus Lifesciences, Lupin, Aurobindo Pharma, Cipla and Dr. Reddy's Laboratories operate FDA-approved manufacturing facilities in the US.

● India is the country's largest source of affordable generic medicines.

Effective August 1st, 2026, all generic drugs being brought into the United States will continue to have a tariff of zero per cent for a two-year period of time, after which the tariff will be raised to 100 per cent for a one-year period of time, and 200 per cent thereafter.

— DONALD TRUMP, President USA

them,” Trump said in Truth Social.

On September 25, 2025, Trump had announced plans for a 100 per cent tariff on imported branded and patented medicines, although the proposal was never implemented and was later replaced.

On April 2, 2026, the administration formally announced tariffs of up to 100 per cent on specified branded medicines and key pharmaceutical ingredients, while excluding generic medicines.

Indian companies supply 47 per cent of all generic prescriptions dispensed in the US, making India US' largest source of affordable generic medi-

cines. As generics are sold at very low prices, India's share of the value of US generic imports is estimated at only 30 per cent.

India exported \$9.7 bn worth of generics to the US, helping the country save around \$200 billion annually, according to industry estimates.

According to the GTRI, many Indian generic medicines sell for seven to 10 times less than branded alternatives.

“Even after a 100% tariff, many products could remain cheaper than branded medicines, meaning much of the additional cost would likely be passed on to US healthcare providers, insurers

and patients rather than immediately eliminating Indian exports,” it said.

Several Indian drugmakers likr Sun Pharma, Zydus Lifesciences, Lupin, Aurobindo Pharma, Cipla and Dr Reddy's operate FDA-approved manufacturing facilities in the US.

“The proposal comes with a long implementation timeline. In US politics, two years is a long time, and the policy could still be modified, delayed or overturned by legal or political developments,” the GTRI said.

Meanwhile, higher-value generic formulations and branded generic makers may face some pressure.

India may allow airport operators to own airlines

New Delhi, July 22: India is considering a policy change that would allow airport operators to own airlines, potentially clearing the way for the Adani Group and GMR Airports to launch their own carriers as the government seeks to increase competition in the domestic aviation market, people familiar with the matter said.

Current rules bar operators of airports in Delhi and Mumbai from owning more than 10 per cent in any airline, the people said. Shares of IndiGo, India's largest airline, fell as much as 3.7 per cent and were headed for their biggest decline in two weeks after the report.

The deliberations are underway within the ministry of civil aviation. Any relaxation is expected to require clearance from the law ministry and approval from the Union



Cabinet, the people said.

A relaxation of the ownership restrictions would allow the Adani Group, whose unit operates Mumbai airport and seven others, and GMR Airports, which manages New Delhi airport and four other facilities in India, to own airlines. The move aims to broaden competition in a market where IndiGo and Air India control nearly 90 per cent of domestic capacity.

While the move could ease the concentration held by the two largest carriers, it could also

raise concerns over airport operators potentially allocating prime slots to their own airlines.

The ministry of civil aviation did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment.

The global shortage of aircraft remains a major constraint for new entrants. Delivery delays at Airbus and Boeing have slowed expansion plans worldwide, with pandemic-era supply chain disruptions continuing to limit aircraft availability.

Any move in this direction would reflect a broader policy decision, said Kapil Kaul, director and CEO of CAPA India.

“Any new airline may not have an impact in the short to medium term since Boeing and Airbus have a large backlog, plus continuing supply chain issues, it will take time for new start-ups,” he said.

— Bloomberg

RBI sees revival in foreign investment, economic activity

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, JULY 22

India remains among the fastest-growing major economies, with economic activity sustaining momentum through June despite global economic uncertainties, supply chain disruptions and fragmented trading relationships, said the RBI in

its bulletin on Wednesday.

A recovery in foreign investment in recent months indicated a revival in confidence in the Indian economy, it said.

The farm sector was witnessing an uneven south-west monsoon, but the impact on food inflation could be mitigated by comfortable foodgrain stocks.

External trade momentum also remained strong, reflected in high growth in exports and imports in the first quarter of 2026-27. This was likely to be strengthened by the operationalisation of the India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and progress in other bilateral trade agreements, it said.

Crude hits \$95 to a barrel, Sensex declines 715 points

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, JULY 22

Surging crude oil prices and US President Donald Trump's announcement of a 200 per cent tariff on generic drug imports further dented market sentiment on Tuesday, with the benchmark Sensex falling for the third consecutive session.

The Sensex fell 715 points, or 0.92 per cent, to close at 76,755.06, while the Nifty-50 declined 191.45 points, or 0.79 per cent, to close below the 24,000 mark at 23,996.25.

Investors' total wealth fell by over ₹4.24 lakh crore as the BSE's market capitalisation declined to over ₹480.05 lakh crore.

Brent crude prices rose in the \$91.31 to \$95.47 per barrel range amid US-Iran attacks, while the Strait of Hormuz was closed to shipping again.

The Nifty Pharma index fell 1.31 per cent after the US tariff announcement.

Lupin fell 4.29 per cent, Aurobindo Pharma 2.92 per cent, DRL 1.92 per cent, Glenmark 1.88 per cent, Cipla 1.21 per cent and Sun Pharma 0.96 per cent.

Bandhan Bank shares tumbled 19 per cent before closing 16.92 per cent lower. The fall followed conservative guidance

GLOBAL FACTORS

● Sensex tanked 715.06 pts to settle at 76,755.05.

● Nifty declined 191.45 pts to end at 23,996.25.

● BSE MidCap Select index tumbled 1.33% and SmallCap Select index declined 1.16%.



● A total of 2,780 stocks declined, while 1,458 advanced and 180 remained unchanged on the BSE.

● Brent crude jumped 4.68% to \$95.27/ barrel.

● Rising oil prices and US tariff fears on pharma imports weighed on investor sentiment.

from the management and margin concerns after it lowered its return-on-assets guidance for FY27, citing expectations of narrower net interest margins and higher operating expenditure.

HDFC Bank shares also fell for the third consecutive session, declining 1.09 per cent at market close. The Nifty PSU Bank index declined 1.84 per cent and the Nifty Private Bank index 1.31 per cent.

Indian markets underperformed Asian peers amid concerns over a higher crude oil import bill as the rupee weakened to near ₹96.50 against the US dollar. Japan's Nikkei closed 0.18 per cent lower, China's Shanghai Composite gained 0.07 per cent, Hong Kong's Hang Seng fell 0.95 per cent, while South Korea's Kospi

gained 0.74 per cent and Taiwan's Taixex rose 1.34 per cent.

“The primary reason for weakness was sustained selling pressure in heavyweights, including banking and IT. Elevated crude prices amid macroeconomic uncertainties contributed to the risk-off environment across domestic equities,” said Sachin Gupta, VP, technical research, Choice Equity Broking.

“Auto stocks extended gains for the second consecutive session after Bajaj Auto and TVS Motor reported strong Q1 performance,” said Siddhartha Khemka, head-research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

Domestic institutions and foreign portfolio investors were net sellers of equities worth ₹418.26 crore and ₹819.20 crore, respectively.



BANKS WITNESS 146% INCREASE IN SMS-BASED SCAMS

FC BANKING BUREAU MUMBAI JULY 22

Fraud originating from mobile devices in India rose sharply, with reported cases of text-message-based scams increasing 146 per cent in the first half of 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier, according to a new report.

Mobile fraud sessions rose 67 per cent overall during the period, including an 86 per cent increase on iOS devices and a 35 per cent rise on Android. In contrast, web browser-based fraud sessions declined 10 per cent, indicating a continued shift towards mobile attack channels. Fraud sessions were also shorter and more automated.

“Fraudsters are now attacking faster and with less data entry. Frauds now involve fraudsters guiding victims through every step of a transfer process, keeping them engaged and preventing them from consulting others, said the report.

Banks are detecting and blocking Remote Access Trojan attacks, but the auto-filling of credentials continues to become more prevalent, suggesting that institutions should focus more on malware detection.

Amazon eyes India for satellite broadband: Hofer

New Delhi, July 22: Amazon's low earth orbit network has nearly 400 satellites in orbit and is eyeing India to expand satellite broadband services, Chris Hofer, Head of International Spectrum Management and Strategy at Amazon Leo said on Wednesday.

Amazon Leo's mission and goal is to connect the unconnected and the unserved, he said at the IAA's Space Policy Conference 2026.

“We have almost 400 satellites up. Seems like we can't get rockets up fast enough manufacturing well over 15 satellites a week, so we're very pleased to think that back

in 2019 that this project was literally a piece of paper, and how far we've progressed,” he said.

He said Amazon Leo is focused on expanding global connectivity services.

Highlighting India as a promising market, Hofer described the country as having a highly digital-oriented administration and significant potential for satellite internet expansion.

“We're very well looking forward to bringing services around the world. And we certainly believe India is a great candidate, very digital-oriented administration,” he said.

— PTI

BIG | LEAP Firms got \$380-390 mn in funding over last three years

Space start-up nos grow to 450

New Delhi, July 22: India's space start-up ecosystem has grown from single digits to over 450 ventures in six years, with funding gathering pace as policy reforms reshape the sector, a senior official at the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) said on Wednesday.

Addressing IAA's Space Policy Conference 2026, PK Jain, director, and authorisation directorate at INSPACe, noted that the sector has witnessed a series of policy measures since the government announced space reforms, and various initiatives have brought certainty

and predictability in the regulatory regime.

India's space sector reforms have helped create a thriving private ecosystem, with the number of space start-ups rising from a single digit six years ago to more than 450 today, Jain said.

He said the collective efforts have built the momentum and “now we are ready to take off”.

Highlighting the growth of the private space ecosystem, Jain said IN-SPACe has received more than 800 applications for facilitation and authorisation over the past four years.

Jain said Skyroot has



become India's first space startup unicorn and recently achieved a successful maiden launch of its privately developed launch vehicle, making it the first private company globally to succeed on its first launch attempt.

Skyroot Aerospace's Vikram-1 recently became India's first privately

developed rocket to successfully reach orbit, marking a historic milestone for the country's private space sector and commercial launch capabilities.

Jain said Indian space start-ups have attracted about \$380-390 million in funding over the last three years. In the current year alone, they have already secured \$150-160 million, aided by IN-SPACe's efforts to connect domestic start-ups with global investors. He also pointed to government-backed initiatives such as the \$120 million venture capital fund to support emerging companies.

— PTI

Student protests must not be hijacked by Opposition



TUHINA SINHA sharpened injustices challenged, and futures forged. But what we are witnessing today is a cynical hijacking of impressionable minds by India's beleaguered and power-starved Opposition parties, desperate to manufacture anarchy where none exists. The protests over exam irregularities have been completely commandeered by the usual suspects - Congress, AAP, and their ecosystem of professional disruptors - turning legitimate grievances into a street veto.

Genuine student activism strengthens democracy, but when depraved and despondent opposition parties exploit impressionable students for their vested political gains, as is happening now, it does irreparable harm to the very cause of students. These parties, devoid of any constructive agenda after repeated electoral defeats, are using young minds as cannon fodder to create chaos and destabilise a system that is actively reforming itself.

Let us be clear: the Modi government has never shied away from dialogue. Union Health Minister JP Nadda himself met the protesting students, extending an olive branch in good faith. Democratic maturity demands conversation, not confrontation; reform, not disruption.

This year's unfortunate paper leak incident was unacceptable, and the

government acted with decisive speed. Post the leaks, the government has initiated a major systemic overhaul. It was PM Modi's government that had brought the country's first-ever legislation against paper leaks. We stand committed to conducting the NEET exam digitally next year to eliminate vulnerabilities once and for all. Unlike the previous regimes that let leaks fester for decades without any accountability or structural fixes, this government is overhauling a flawed system inherited from the past.

While the Opposition peddles victimhood and selective outrage, the facts on youth empowerment under PM Narendra Modi tell a dramatically different story. In the last 12 years, medical and engineering seats have witnessed an exponential rise. MBBS seats have surged from 51,348 in 2013-14 to over 1,28,976 today — an increase of more than 151 per cent. Medical colleges have more than doubled from 387 to over 819. Postgraduate medical seats have grown by over 135 per cent, from around 31,000 to more than 78,000.

Recent data from the National Medical Commission shows an addition of 48,563 MBBS seats and 29,080 PG seats just between 2020-21 and 2025-26, with further expansions of over 10,000 seats approved under Centrally Sponsored Schemes. In engineering, opportunities have expanded significantly through premier institutions, with the JoSAA seat matrix crossing 67,000 seats in 2026. Apprenticeship programmes have scaled massively under the National Apprenticeship Promotion

Scheme, engaging over 56 lakh apprentices since 2016, with annual figures now nearing 12 lakh.

The Khelo India mission has transformed the sports landscape, supporting over 30,000 athletes with training, coaching, equipment, and financial assistance, directly contributing to India's record medal hauls at the Asian Games and Olympics. Emerging sectors are creating unprecedented avenues. India's space economy is projected to reach \$44 billion by 2033, backed by over 400 private start-ups under IN-SPaCE. Students are actively involved in designing satellites, payloads, and incubation programmes, while ISRO continues to expand its workforce for ambitious missions like Gaganyaan.

The creative economy - spanning animation, gaming, VFX, and digital content - is booming, generating lakhs of jobs. Add to this skilling initiatives like PMKVY, which has trained over 1.64 crore youth, and the picture is clear: this is not mere rhetoric but a silent revolution reshaping India's demographic dividend into a powerful asset.

Millions of young Indians are quietly building careers in AI, semiconductors, defence manufacturing, green energy, and more. They are the ones driving Viksit Bharat, not those shouting slogans on streets funded by shadowy toolkits. Speaking of which, the so-called "Coordinating Committee" of CJP's protests have been farcical. It does not represent the aspirations of India's ambitious youth, who are immersed in the country's growth story. Instead, it amplifies the voice of an ignorant,



entitled fringe that even confuses the Prime Minister with the President of the country. The very trigger for its formation - a casual judicial reference - exposes their fundamental confusion between the judiciary and the legislature, two distinct pillars of our democracy. This is not student leadership; this is political illiteracy dressed up as activism.

Toolkit politics has a limited shelf life. We have seen this script before - from Shaheen Bagh to farm laws to now. Once the sinister motives of Congress and AAP are fully exposed, as they inevitably will be, this manufactured movement will fizzle out like the damp squib it is. The "andolanjeevis" will move on to the next disruption, chasing TRPs and foreign applause, while real India marches ahead.

The Modi government's commitment remains steadfast and unequivocal: to build a prosperous, fully developed Bharat by 2047

where every young Indian has the opportunity to soar. The silent, determined youth who are studying, skilling, innovating, and contributing know the difference between constructive criticism and destructive politics. They understand that India's rise is not a zero-sum game but a shared destiny.

To the genuine students with real concerns: your voice matters. Come to the table. Engage with the system that is reforming itself faster than ever before in independent India. Do not let vested interests derail your future for their political avarice. The Opposition's desperation is understandable—they have nothing positive to offer. But let them not mistake India's patient democracy for weakness. The youth of India have chosen progress over compulsive protesting. And that choice will define the next two decades.

(The writer is a national spokesperson of BJP and an acclaimed author)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 23 July 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

CALCUTTA expects a storm or two and some concentrated rainfall about this time of year and the violence of the last two days has precedent enough. As the rains started late there was leeway to make up, and rice-fields and tanks showed that it was time the monsoon became more active in most parts of Bengal. The local deficit has now been more than made good; whether the sudden deluge is good or bad for the crops remains to be seen, anyhow Calcutta and many other districts are now well in advance of the normal rainfall for this time of year. In the 48 hours ending at 8 a.m. on Thursday the fall was 10.6 inches, and at the moment of writing there are no indications that the depression has passed away. Early yesterday morning many parts of the city were reminiscent of Venice, and some of the low parts, such as the south of Camac and Hungerford Streets and a stretch of Lower Circular Road, were under water late last evening, though the channels for removing storm water had been at work all day. The noise and the heavy rain together made Thursday morning's storm unusually impressive, but happily little damage seems to have been done though the discomfort and inconvenience were great.

News Items

EX-KAISER'S CLAIM

PROPERTY IN SOUTH-WEST AFRICA

(SPECIAL CABLE.)
WINDHOEK, JULY

A CASE of international importance opened here to-day on the application of the ex-Kaiser seeking for an order regarding the property belonging to his family in South-West Africa.

Counsel for the ex-Kaiser argued that the property does not fall within the scope of Article 257 of the Peace Treaty (which provides for the confiscation of the ex-Rulers' belongings) because the property was registered as an old family Trust for the support of non-ruling members of the Royal family and their descendants.

Counsel declared that Prince Arthur of Connaught was a participant in the Trust, as his mother was a Hohen zollern.—Copyright.

SENATE PASSES BILL

NO RESORT TO INFLATION THIS MONTH

PARIS, JULY

THE Senate adopted the Bill submitted by M. Demonzie. Parliament rose at 3-10 this morning. The remainder of the Morgan Loan which the Finance Ministry will hand over to the Banque de France amounts to 33,000,000 dollars. It will now be possible for the Treasury to meet its obligations in the current month without resort to inflation.

The majority of the papers favour the formation of a Ministry of National Union or National Safety, thereby endorsing the manifesto signed by 230 Deputies and presented to M. Doumergue yesterday to the effect that such a Government alone could save the country.

It is asserted that M. Poincare is endeavouring to enlist the Ministerial services of M. Briand, M. Sarraut and M. Paul Boncour.—Reuter.

FOR 216 GENERATIONS

ENGLAND'S MENTAL DEFECTIVES

(FROM OUR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE.)

LONDON, JULY

IF the sterilization of the unfit is legalized, said Dr. Thomas Colvin at the Medical Association Conference, the definition of mental defectives in the Mental Deficiency Act will indicate that the majority of Britons are mentally deficient, including, according to Colonel Wedgwood, many members of the House of Commons.

People nowadays discussed abstruse sex problems as glibly as the face and figure of the latest film star.

The Board of Guardians have passed a resolution in favour of sterilisation which must be practised for 216 generations in order to reduce the proportion of defectives from one per 100 to one per 100,000.

Education without entrance examinations

DR O. PRASADA RAO

India's entrance exam regime has grown into a parallel economy, draining families and destroying young lives. Coaching centres charge lakhs of rupees, promising success in NEET or JEE, but often delivering only stress and despair. Students are subjected to relentless schedules, mental agony, and physical exhaustion.

The tragic rise in suicides among aspirants is the most painful indictment of a system that equates failure in one exam with failure in life. The recent NEET leak only exposed what was already broken: centralised, high-stakes testing is fragile, unjust, and unsustainable.

This obsession with entrance tests has hollowed out school education. Board exams are treated casually, while coaching dominates. The result is a distorted pedagogy where knowledge is secondary to rote drills. Worse, the infrastructure required to conduct exams for 20-30 lakh students are massive, costly, and nearly impossible to secure against leaks. The NEET fiasco proves that mass-scale testing is both vulnerable and corrosive to trust.

A return to marks-based admissions offers a humane alternative. SSC, Class XI, or Class XII results - moderated and standardised across boards - can serve as the basis for entry into engineering, medicine, and other courses. Decentralised

admissions, managed state-wise, would reduce pressure while still allowing pan-India opportunities.

Expand IITs, AIIMS etc. all over the country and admit students from across India based on marks obtained in the above said exams; and to achieve this, standardise board results for equal opportunity to every Indian. Crucially, school exams must be upgraded to test analytical skills, making them equivalent in rigour to entrance tests. This would restore dignity to school education and reduce dependence on costly coaching centres.

Equally important is a shift in mindset. Education must be delinked from job guarantees and aligned with industry needs. Today's generation often aspires to abandon family professions-even after studying abroad-in pursuit of white-collar jobs. This trend has contributed to rising unemployment, while valuable family trades and businesses are left to decline.

Instead of chasing elusive jobs, students should be encouraged to modernise their family professions with contemporary knowledge and technology. Agriculture, crafts, and small industries can be transformed into sustainable ventures with the help of knowledge and abilities acquired from education.

Curricula must be reoriented toward skill development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Degrees alone no longer guarantee employment; practical training and adaptability

are the real currency of opportunity. By aligning education with industry and business requirements, India can produce graduates who are employable, creative, and capable of strengthening local economies. Vocational pathways, apprenticeships, and industry-linked curricula should be prioritised alongside traditional academics.

Self-employment potential can be enhanced by integrating vocational training, entrepreneurship modules, and industry partnerships into education. Students should be taught financial literacy, digital skills, and practical know-how to modernize family professions or start small ventures.

Challenges include social stigma around non-white-collar work, lack of access to credit, and uneven training quality. The benefits are significant: reduced unemployment, stronger local economies, and empowered youth who create jobs rather than chase them.

Government must provide skill hubs, low-interest loans, mentorship networks, and incentives for innovation, ensuring self-employment becomes a respected and viable career path. This can reduce demand for engineering and medicine, and as a result for entrance examinations too.

The socio-economic benefits of such reform are immense. Families would be spared the financial ruin of coaching fees. Students would be protected from despair and suicides caused by examination pressure. Local businesses and



professions would be revitalised by educated youth bringing modern skills to traditional livelihoods. And the nation would gain a workforce that is both rooted in community and responsive to global industry demands.

Reform must dismantle the coaching trap, restore trust in schools, and reorient education toward skills, dignity, and sustainable professions. India's future lies not in mass exams and rote learning, but in empowering students to build livelihoods, modernise family professions, and contribute meaningfully to society. Education must evolve from being a ticket to employment into a foundation for civic growth, innovation, and generational progress.

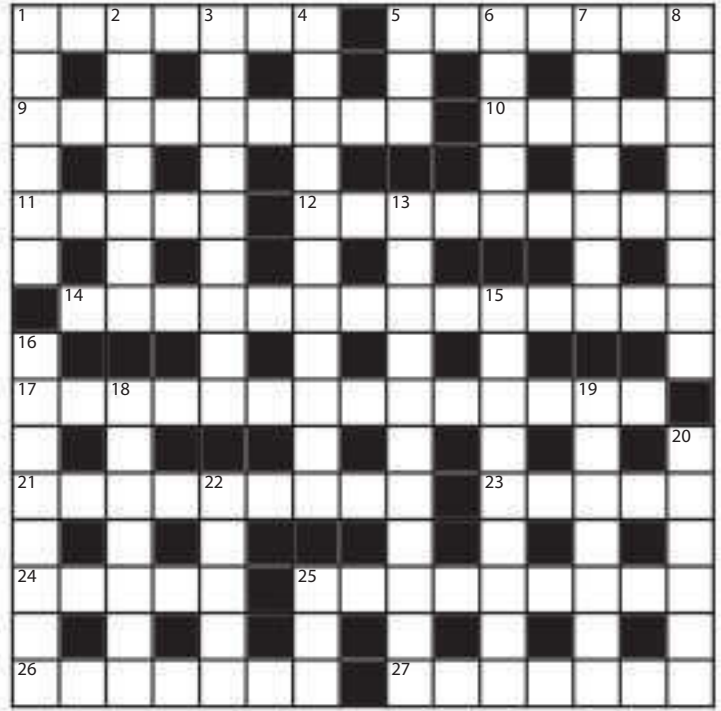
Lakhs of coaching centres across India cannot be dismantled overnight,

but their role must be redefined. The government should gradually integrate them into formal education by accrediting centres that provide genuine skill training, while discouraging rote-based exam coaching. Incentives can be offered for centres that shift toward vocational courses, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship programs.

At the same time, strict regulation is needed to curb exploitative fees and false promises. To tackle their lobby, transparent reforms, public awareness campaigns, and strong political will are essential, ensuring that education policy prioritises students' welfare over commercial interests.

The writer is a retired Scientist, CSIR.

Crossword | No. 293529



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27

Yesterday's Solution



S C M O
B E L A Y S P A W P A W
A O C H E A D R O I M
T R A V E L H E A D R O I M
T A E U Y T O
F O L K S O N G S O N E S
K I T G I N
A B A C C H A N A L I A
A A R M P
S L A V P R I M P M I R A
M T S A O U T I
B O H E M I A N L A N I N A
N N Z K I C
D A N C E S G A S T L E
D A S S Y

ACROSS

1 Whale to blow endlessly, about to rise? (7)

5 Demand navy to attend old Italian port (7)

9 A great many you once observed beside coastal feature (9)

10 Players welcoming a very dab hand (5)

11 Time to return, pursued by hot woman (5)

12 Fellow arrives beside a large thicket of trees (8)

14 Tackling corruption with his

17 Male in pursuit of fancy electric tools – something one has to have? (10,4)

21 Small second soccer team around end of October, regressed, becoming Flabby (9)

23 Swedish inventor's book appearing in festive season (5)

24 Former Hollywood actor appearing in bizarre event (5)

25 End of game sees friend following regular pattern (9)

26 Mount finale of festival, blocking version of my opus (7)

27 Attempt to secure outbuilding that's ditched by leather works (7)

DOWN

1 Understand good parent avoids force (6)

2 A heavy arrow mostly is hard to stop (7)

3 Quickly suggest reduced hydrogen in sample (4-5)

4 Revolutionary counts least in revolution? (11)

5 Something identifying sibling, primarily (3)

6 Proposition from Frenchman, then married in the country (5)

7 Othello's setback mostly provided by lago, principally (7)

8 Studying wine, upset one over record year (8)

15 A conifer ultimately carried aroma resembling a tree (11)

15 Paper describing the leak? (9)

16 No time at all to get wind of wild film idea (8)

18 Clear criminal over US city crime (7)

19 Accept support after not-so-brief space (7)

20 Agent, having secured shelter, ready to go out? (6)

22 Carefully observe confirmation of a palindrome? (3,2)

25 Reduction in price for salad vegetable (5)

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



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Prioritise dialogue

Govt, protesters need to break deadlock

THE clamour for the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged exam irregularities is growing louder both inside and outside Parliament. The government has agreed to discuss the NEET paper leak in the House, but the Opposition has laid down the condition that the debate should be held under Rule 267 (invoked in “rarest of the rare” cases), and that too only after the minister quits. The pressure on the Centre has increased after Monday’s heavy-handed police action against students and other protesters in New Delhi. Cops used *lathis* and tear gas to stall the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-led march to Parliament. The ensuing nationwide backlash has helped the agitation gain further momentum.

The protests are also thriving on the support of activist Sonam Wangchuk, who continues to be on a hunger strike despite being picked up from Jantar Mantar by the police and taken to a hospital. As the stir spreads across the country and key concerns remain unresolved, a meaningful dialogue between the government and the protesters has become essential to break the deadlock. Students, parents and educators have raised legitimate concerns about transparency, accountability and the integrity of the examination process. Millions of aspirants invested years of hard work and considerable financial resources in preparing for NEET. Their demand for a fair investigation and course correction deserves immediate attention. The broader objective of education reforms, particularly with regard to exams, needs frank discussions among all stakeholders.

The onus is on the CJP and its supporters to ensure that the protest remains peaceful. At the same time, the government has the responsibility to rebuild public trust in the entire education system. The PM must walk the talk on bringing the paper leak perpetrators to justice. A clear roadmap for reforms needs to be devised. Instead of allowing confrontation to deepen divisions, the focus should be on dialogue guided by a shared commitment to protecting students’ interests.

Groundwater crisis

A sense of urgency is missing

PUNJAB accounts for the highest groundwater extraction in the country. The Centre has identified 111 of the state’s 153 groundwater assessment blocks as over-exploited, reaffirming the grave crisis. Sangrur district stands out. Decades of large-scale, water-intensive paddy cultivation have accelerated groundwater depletion, and it now has the highest extraction level. Malerkotla and Jalandhar are not far behind. The report lists Ludhiana as having the largest number of over-exploited groundwater blocks, followed by Jalandhar, Amritsar, Patiala, Sangrur and Tarn Taran. The steep decline of the water table across most parts of Punjab, despite decades of stern warnings, exposes a critical gap in agricultural strategy.

Continuing with the status quo threatens not only the state’s environmental stability, but also the long-term food security of the nation. The blueprint for change and its broad contours have been laid out far too often. It’s at the implementation stage where the plans are failing to gain traction. The transition toward crop diversification, modern micro-irrigation and strict groundwater governance continues to be a challenging task. Critical water reserves being pushed to the brink of exhaustion demands an urgent overview of the policies determining the push for alternative crops.

Extracting water is easy, but reversing aquifer depletion demands precise engineering and community effort. That is not possible without a shared commitment, and any urgency on that count is missing. It’s easy to pin the blame on the farmer, though he is perhaps the most eager and the least equipped to usher in change. Sustainability demands careful stewardship. Governments have to rethink the incentives and subsidies, putting the farmer at the front and centre of the new ecosystem. Equally vital is how urban centres treat sewage and industrial effluents for optimum reuse. Water management deserves nothing less than a gold standard.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JULY 23, 1926

Govt and communal disputes

THERE is one part of Lord Irwin’s speech at the Chelmsford Club in which he seemed to echo the views and sentiments that found expression in the recent communique of the Bengal Government on the subject of music before mosques. After expressing his hope that Hindus and Mahomedans might come more and more to realise the damage of conflict and be themselves able to reach working agreements which would no doubt vary in conformity with established local customs, His Excellency said: “Where voluntary agreements are not possible, it becomes the duty of governments, in virtue of their responsibility for the preservation of law and order, to formulate an administrative decision upon the matter in dispute.” There can be no two opinions regarding this duty of local governments, but only on two conditions, which the Bengal Government’s communique entirely ignored and to which Lord Irwin himself does not refer. It is not merely the duty of the leaders of the communities to respect local customs in any working agreements they may reach; it is equally the duty of the local Governments, where no such agreements are found possible, to have due regard to those customs in their own administrative decisions. Secondly, the government, in its decisions, even more than the communal leaders in its working agreements, must see that the civil rights of any community are not unduly interfered with.

OPINION

Brain drain tests ISRO’s mettle

Space agency hit by a spate of resignations amid the rise of private companies



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

INDIA’s space sector is hitting the headlines for both right and wrong reasons. The good news is that an Indian private space company, Skyroot, has executed the first end-to-end private space mission. The company, founded by two former engineers of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), has achieved a remarkable feat by demonstrating the success of its rocket, Vikram-1, on its maiden flight. It hopes to fly an upgraded version of the rocket, Vikram-2, next year, aiming to enter the multi-billion-dollar market for launching satellites into low Earth orbit.

The bad news concerns ISRO, which is experiencing an exodus of top scientists and engineers. As per reports, dozens of senior scientists working with the UR Rao Satellite Centre (URSC), Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) and other key units of the national space agency have either resigned or taken premature retirement. Many of them were working on flagship programmes such as Gaganyaan (human spaceflight), Next Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV) and the Bharatiya Antariksh Station.

The situation has become so alarming that the Department of Space has decided to clamp down on the exodus, directing that those associated with critical missions would not be allowed to leave ISRO till the completion of the projects.

On the face of it, the launch of India’s first private rocket and the brain drain from ISRO seem unrelated. Actually, they are interlinked.

The most apparent reason for the spate of resignations in ISRO units is the rise of private sector



WAY FORWARD: The ISRO leadership should take measures to boost the scientists’ morale. P11

space companies in the past few years. This is a direct consequence of the government’s decision to allow private firms to build rockets and satellites, and also launch them. Before this policy was rolled out, ISRO had a monopoly on launching rockets from Indian soil. The government not only opened up the space sector to private players but also directed ISRO to allow the use of its facilities to private companies. All this created an ideal situation in which private companies poached ISRO’s engineering talent, offering them attractive packages and challenging projects.

Such movement of talent from public institutions to the private sector is not new to ISRO, nor is it restricted to the space sector. The much-celebrated private space sector in the US stands on the shoulders of human resources developed and nurtured by NASA. In the formative years of the information technology industry, private firms hired their R&D teams from public sector companies like the Electronics Corporation of India Limited and the Computer Maintenance Corporation. It has

The space market is growing globally, and there is enough room for both national agencies and private companies to explore this potential.

also happened with niche public sector companies like the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). An ISRO-like situation is also prevailing in the laboratories of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) following the opening up of defence and aerospace production to the private sector.

Our scientific agencies, be it ISRO or DRDO, need to look deeper into the reasons for the situation they are facing today. In March 2026, a parliamentary committee which looked into the

functioning of the Department of Space was told that various ISRO units had over 2,800 vacancies against the sanctioned strength of about 18,000 posts. Almost 500 posts are vacant in VSSC, a facility engaged in critical projects like NGLV. On the one hand, private companies are poaching experienced scientists, and on the other, ISRO projects are not getting funding from the government.

For instance, the Cabinet approved the NGLV project in 2024 with a timeline of 96 months for the development of the rocket — from facility commissioning to the launch. The first developmental test flight was targeted within 84 months from the date of approval. But the project remained on paper for many months after approval as no provision was made for it in the 2024-25 Budget. In revised estimates, a token allocation of Rs 3 crore was made, of which ISRO could spend Rs 85 lakh. In the 2025-26 Budget, Rs 158 crore was provided initially but slashed to Rs 39.76 crore in the revised estimates. Against this revised estimate, ISRO incurred an expenditure of Rs 7.93 crore till January 31, 2026.

The delay in funding, coupled with a lack of adequate staff, could adversely affect the timelines of such critical projects.

Under-utilisation of funds, reduction in budgetary allocations, delays in filling vacancies and the entry of the private sector are all contributing to a serious situation in ISRO. On top of this, there have been a series of failures involving the workhorse rocket, PSLV, and massive delays in challenging missions like Gaganyaan. The centralisation of decision-making and growing bureaucratic as well as political interference also do not augur well for the functioning of a large mission-oriented scientific agency. The net result is low morale and general disenchantment in the scientific workforce.

All this should be a matter of concern for the political leadership, policymakers and the space agency. Simply asking scientists not to resign and issuing a diktat is not an adequate response. The Central Government, which pushed for the entry of the private sector, and ISRO, which facilitated it, should have anticipated the fallout of this approach on the national programme and taken proactive measures to address it. The ISRO leadership should also take measures to boost the scientists’ morale, which has been affected by mission failures and delays.

In the long run, the agency will have to think of innovative mechanisms — like permitting scientists to engage with the private sector for a limited period while retaining their jobs at ISRO, allowing them to float their own companies in non-critical areas, besides the revision of pay structures, promotion policies and incentives.

The government, on its part, should restore the autonomy of scientific institutions and stop using them for political gains. The space market is growing globally, and there is enough room for both national agencies and private companies to explore this potential. Brain drain can well be converted into “brain circulation.”

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The coming decade will be one of the most exciting periods in India’s space journey. — Shubhanshu Shukla

Straight lessons from a bent back

RS DALAL

I glanced at the bedside clock. I was running late for golf. The moment I jumped out of bed, my back gave a sharp, terrifying creak. I froze mid-motion, seized by blinding pain. “My back is broken,” I groaned.

For the first 10 days, I was bedridden, relying on painkillers for temporary relief. For an active, outdoorsy person, being cooped up was deeply depressing. The idle mind can be a dangerous companion. It wandered from gloomy thoughts about painful old age to the inscrutable philosophy of Karma and a curious expression from my school days — to break someone’s back (to cripple a person). Suddenly, the phrase felt far less figurative.

My captive mind began to wander back to childhood trips to our ancestral village. My elder cousin would escort me to the fields. Viewing me as an urban milksop, he would try to scare me with tales of snakes lurking in the grass and the fields. “I have killed several with this stick,” he would boast. “I’ll teach you the trick too,” he would say condescendingly as I watched in awe. “First break the snake’s back, then hit it on the head.”

The memory sent shivers down my aching spine. Would I be able to play golf again, or just limp with nagging pain? Such thoughts haunted me all day.

My mind then drifted to the late 1980s, during my posting at Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie. The Director had deputed me to supervise a group of IAS trainees on a tribal attachment in the interiors of Koraput district, Odisha. Travelling light with just a sleeping bag and other essentials, I made the long, exhausting journey by train and bus to remote Koraput.

When I finally reached the government rest house, I was greeted by the caretaker-cum-cook. He was incredibly deferential — in fact, too deferential for my comfort.

He stood with eyes downcast, his back bent at nearly 45 degrees. I couldn’t resist asking him if he had a spinal injury. He smiled and shook his head. Through gestures and broken Hindi, he explained that his posture demonstrated reverence.

Coming from Punjab and Haryana’s straight-backed culture, I found his attitude troubling. With two days available before the jeep arrived, I began a quiet campaign of sorts to sensitise him about the importance of dignity. It took time to break the ice — for every move I made was initially met with suspicion. When he entered my room, hunched over the tray, I gently reversed the roles and demonstrated how to carry it upright. He flushed with embarrassment. Other times, I stood tall against the wall and asked him to copy my posture. Slowly, he began enjoying his new upright self.

How ironic life is! Back then, I taught a man to straighten his back for the sake of dignity. Now, doctors and physiotherapists worked hard to straighten my back over four long months. Thankfully, I have recovered fully, and my golf clubs are back in action.

The writer is former DGP Haryana

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India’s private space leap

Refer to ‘India’s space startup drive takes off’; the maiden flight of Vikram-1 marks a major milestone in India’s space journey. By placing payloads into low-Earth orbit, the mission highlights the triumph of ISRO’s support for India’s growing private space sector. With global demand for small-satellite launches rising, India has a golden chance to emerge as a reliable, low-cost provider. However, this momentum must be sustained through greater support for startups, research and innovation. Boosting reusable rockets and curbing space debris will help the Indian private space sector remain globally competitive.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Education vital for progress

With reference to ‘The nation has failed this test’; there is growing anxiety among the youth today due to a compromised education system fuelled by frequent paper leaks and irregularities. The government must treat the cause of this discontent and not the symptoms. The educational framework should be rational, convenient, conducive and student-friendly. Policymakers, experts, academia and others must come forward to rescue the sinking ship. In these competitive but difficult times, awareness is the most potent weapon. A society lacking quality education and critical thinking is more vulnerable to the influence of agenda-setters.

ANIL BHATIA, HISAR

Bring back the trust

Refer to ‘The nation has failed this test’; the current unrest among students is a wake-up call rather than a fleeting controversy. Every compromised examination, every meritorious student disappointed and every unanswered grievance weakens the public’s faith in the system. The challenge for policymakers is not only to fix the examination system and make it better, but to bring back the trust it enjoyed. An education system rooted in integrity, merit and equal opportunity will produce not only successful professionals but responsible citizens. India owes its youth nothing less.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Collective responsibility

Apropos of ‘Go Beyond marks at PTMs’; if moral values, empathy and integrity are not nurtured from an early age, society eventually pays the price. Corruption, poor work ethic, violence and a declining sense of social responsibility are the inevitable results. We often blame individuals for such failures, forgetting that character is shaped collectively by families, schools and society. Parents and teachers should not maximise a child’s earning potential or academic achievements alone, but nurture responsible, compassionate and self-reliant human beings. Education must teach students how to live, not merely how to earn a living.

SIMRAN KAUR CHAHAR, CHANDIGARH

Attacking merchant ships illegal

With reference to ‘Odesa tragedy’; the shocking loss of four Indian lives in Odesa is against the International Humanitarian Law, which shields non-combatants from the horrors of war. Merchant Navy ships engaged in civilian commerce cannot lawfully be attacked unless they are being used for military purposes like transporting war-related offensive material. The ship wasn’t carrying any defence equipment but corn when it was struck by missiles that killed 10 seafarers. The global economy depends on merchant shipping, which remains operational even in times of armed conflict.

LAL SINGH, BY MAIL

Citizens are responsible too

Apropos of ‘Garbage crisis’; the Punjab and Haryana High Court has issued appropriate directions to the municipal bodies and the government, but citizens too need to be alert and proactive. The people need to realise that about 95% of all the trash consisting of paper, cardboard, polythene, water bottles, textiles and aluminium can be recycled into useful products. Good civic behaviour must be encouraged through persuasion and enforcement. In the absence of recycling, the garbage mountains and open dumps will keep increasing and the streets, drains and sewers will continue to choke and stink, worsening sanitation problems.

RAVINDER MITTAL, LUDHIANA

Youth protests defy politics of fear



ZOYA HASAN
PROFESSOR EMERITA, CENTRE
FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, JNU

INDIA has witnessed several major protests during the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) years in power: from the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) agitation and the farmers' movement to the more recent workers' protests in Noida.

Yet the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protests mark a distinct departure. The mobilisation was sparked by a remark by the Chief Justice of India likening unemployed youth to "cockroaches". By the time he clarified the remark, it had already evolved into a major campaign followed by millions. Driven overwhelmingly by students and youth, it acquired an organic character that set it apart from earlier agitations.

Unlike previous mass movements, the CJP did not emerge from established organisational networks but from a satirical online campaign that disrupted the BJP's dominance of India's social media universe. Speaking the language of Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, X posts and Internet humour, it showed that memes could sometimes outrun prop-

aganda and satire could unsettle even sharp political messaging. Its real novelty, however, lay in translating digital mobilisation into sustained political action on the ground.

The month-long occupation of Jantar Mantar, together with climate activist and educator Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike alongside students, including those from Left organisations, culminated in the march to Parliament — a transition from the algorithm to the street that the government had failed to anticipate.

That misreading is central to understanding what followed. The grievances themselves were hardly new. Repeated paper leaks, delayed recruitment and mounting unemployment had steadily eroded young people's faith in the state's ability to provide fair opportunities.

Opposition parties had repeatedly raised these issues, yet the government appeared to believe they would remain politically manageable. It failed to anticipate that these long-standing grievances would coalesce into a wider youth uprising, one that assumed a broader political dimension, drawing support from the Congress and other Opposition parties.

The government's initial response was one of calculated restraint. When the founder of the CJP, Abhijit Dipke, arrived from Boston, he was granted permission to travel directly from the airport to Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, to begin the protest. For a government that



BIG: The protests took on a life of their own; the CJP became a catalyst. ANI

has rarely displayed patience towards organised protests, this was surprising.

Demonstrations were subsequently held in several cities, while the sit-in at Jantar Mantar, which began on June 20, continued for four weeks without the immediate crack-down that has characterised the state's response to many earlier protests. This was widely interpreted as evidence of unusual tolerance.

More plausibly, it reflected a strategic decision to avoid immediate repression, with the expectation that public anger over the repeated mismanagement of competitive examinations would gradually subside while denying the Opposition, particularly the Congress party, an opportunity to claim political ownership of the issue and mobilise around it.

The calculation proved spectacularly wrong. As Parliament's Monsoon Session

Governments in a democracy need not agree with protesters, but they are obliged to respect their right to protest and engage with them.

began, what had started as a limited student movement had expanded into a nationwide mass mobilisation expressing wider discontent with the government's handling of education and a range of other national issues. The March to Parliament revealed the scale of that miscalculation, drawing an unprecedented number of participants from across the country.

Two days before the march on July 20, Wangchuk was forcibly removed from Jantar Mantar; only on the morning of the march, government representatives met students, initiating dialogue for the first time in a month. By then, thousands of students were marching across central Delhi, despite prohibitory orders and a complete Internet shutdown across central Delhi.

Police deployed disproportionate force to stop the protesters, pushing students, drag-

ging them into police vehicles, lathi-charging and tear-gassing them, reportedly deploying shock batons and pellet guns, and detaining them as they attempted to proceed peacefully. Yet after this crackdown, the government allowed the protest to resume at Jantar Mantar the very next day, reverting to a strategy of letting the protest run its course in the expectation that it would eventually lose momentum.

More striking, however, was the response of the youthful protesters, who remained remarkably fearless. This suggests that the fear which has often inhibited public protests may be receding among sections of India's youth, especially those whom the BJP cannot easily dismiss through communal or other identity-based vilification.

According to media reports, many of these students and their families are themselves BJP voters. If so, it marks an important political shift. Governments that project strength also depend, in part, on the belief that resistance is futile. Once that belief begins to weaken, repression no longer produces the political effect it once did.

Governments in a democracy need not agree with protesters, but they are obliged to respect their right to protest and engage with them. That distinction has steadily eroded. Under this government, dissent is too often treated as a law-and-order problem, peaceful assembly as disorder, and criticism as disloyalty. Yet history shows that states

often strengthen the very forces they seek to suppress. That is precisely what happened with the widespread and decentralised student protests, which punctured the government's aura of control and transformed a sectoral grievance into a broader democratic cause.

The protests are no longer only about the management of exams but about larger systemic failures. By the time tens of thousands converged around Jantar Mantar on July 20, they had outgrown the CJP's campaign, becoming a spontaneous expression of discontent over deepening economic insecurity, shrinking educational opportunities, and a broader crisis of governance.

They had taken on a life of their own; the CJP had become merely their catalyst. What had begun as an online initiative had given way to a much broader student uprising, driven less by any single organisation than by a shared sense of frustration that found a common political platform.

The regime understood it could no longer neutralise this upsurge through repression or deflect it with procedural stonewalling and assurances that paper leaks would not recur. Whether or not it secures immediate policy concessions, they have already demonstrated that the government's narratives on governance and educational reform are not beyond challenge. More importantly, they suggest that the climate of fear which has long inhibited public dissent may no longer be as politically effective as it once was.

Judiciary sparks hope against Punjab's drug crisis



JAGRUP SINGH SEKHON
FORMER PROFESSOR, GURU
NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

THE initiative taken by the Chief Justice of India to launch a statewide youth rehabilitation and awareness campaign to combat drug abuse in Punjab is a welcome step. It is a reflection on the political system, which has left many young people vulnerable to crime, exploitation and social alienation.

The campaign seeks to create an integrated support system which will strengthen Punjab's battle against drugs. Under the state's 'Yudh Nasheyana Virudh' scheme, Punjab Governor has led five anti-drug awareness drives, mostly in border districts.

Drug addiction is shaped by social, economic, political and law-enforcement failures. Thus, the initiative of the highest court becomes important. Its focus is on addressing the issue at the grassroots level by creating sustainable systems for rehabilitation and reintegration of the youth.

Drug addiction has emerged as one of Punjab's gravest social challenges, undermining families, communities and

the state's reputation. Hundreds of people have died from drug addiction over the last 20 years. Substances such as opium and poppy have historically been used in limited medicinal and cultural contexts in parts of the region.

The politics of restrictions on the use of traditional substances led to chemical and narcotic substances, which have altered the nature and consequences of drug abuse. With the alleged support of those in power, a simple consumption practice changed into a profitable trade.

The crisis became impossible to ignore when narcotics infiltrated neighbourhoods, schools and colleges, fuelling crime, educational disruption and public-health emergencies. A recent government study suggests that more than 8.60 lakh young men in the age group of 15-35 in the state take drugs, with heroin being the most preferred. The international border with Pakistan has been a major transit route in the lucrative trade of drug smuggling for a long time.

Punjab's youth crisis is rooted in deeper structural problems. Agricultural stagnation, limited industrial growth and chronic unemployment have steadily eroded opportunities for successive generations. Agriculture, which brought the state its wealth, is losing lustre. With little industrialisation, unemployment has remained high. A survey of farmers in



UNEMPLOYMENT : Punjab's youth crisis is rooted in deeper structural problems. PTI

2013 showed that more than 70% of them would leave farming if they could find good employment. They do not want their children to do farming as it has become unviable.

The other big problem is the 15 years of militancy-related violence that the state endured. It severely weakened the state's social, economic and political institutions. Punjab defeated terrorism, but the conflict left deep social and psychological scars on the youth. No successive government in the post-militancy period has made any sincere effort in dealing with the problems faced by Punjab's youth.

No society can move forward without the support of healthy young people. Politically, like youth everywhere, Punjab's young generation aspires to secure livelihoods, dignity and a better quality of life. Therefore, when governments fail to

Successive elections show Punjab's youth strongly respond to promises of jobs, development and social change.

meet the youth's expectations, they shun them and, at times, resort to unproductive and anti-social activities, including drug use and related activities.

Successive elections demonstrate how strongly Punjab's youth have responded to promises of employment, development and social change. Young voters across the country have increasingly shown a tendency to vote beyond social, economic, political and cultural divisions. The promise of "acche din" and jobs emerged as a new slogan in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when the BJP gained significant support from young people. Its promises and two crore jobs every year, enabled it to capture power at the Centre.

This trend was mirrored in Punjab during the 2014 poll as young voters helped the Aam Aadmi Party win four Lok Sabha seats with nearly 25% of the votes cast.

Since the end of militancy, beginning with the 1992 elections, it has been observed that all parties, including the Congress, Akali-BJP alliance and AAP have made grand promises in their manifestoes regarding employment and economic improvement. However, after forming governments, these promises were forgotten.

Though the parties have youth wings, they rarely offer opportunities to the youth on merit. Leadership positions often go to politically connected families. It has also been observed that the leaders have misled many young people into serving their own political and personal interests.

In the 2022 elections, the AAP created history by winning 92 out of the 117 seats with overwhelming support from the youth. It secured 51% and 48% of the votes polled among the voters in the 18-25-year group and 26-34-year group, respectively. This was the result of the promises the party made to the youth in its manifesto. The party promised to create 20.5 lakh jobs over the next five years.

It also pledged to provide advanced skill training, develop villages and cities into employment-generating centres, provide financial assistance to help the youth realise their dreams and check their migration abroad. It was promised that all forms of mafia, including those in sand, gravel and liquor, would be eliminated. Young people were to be made partners in

these sectors so they would stay away from harmful influences.

But after more than four years in office, the AAP government has provided permanent employment to around 67,000 young people, many of whom had been working on an ad hoc basis for a long time. It had promised to provide government jobs to 1.25,000 young people over five years.

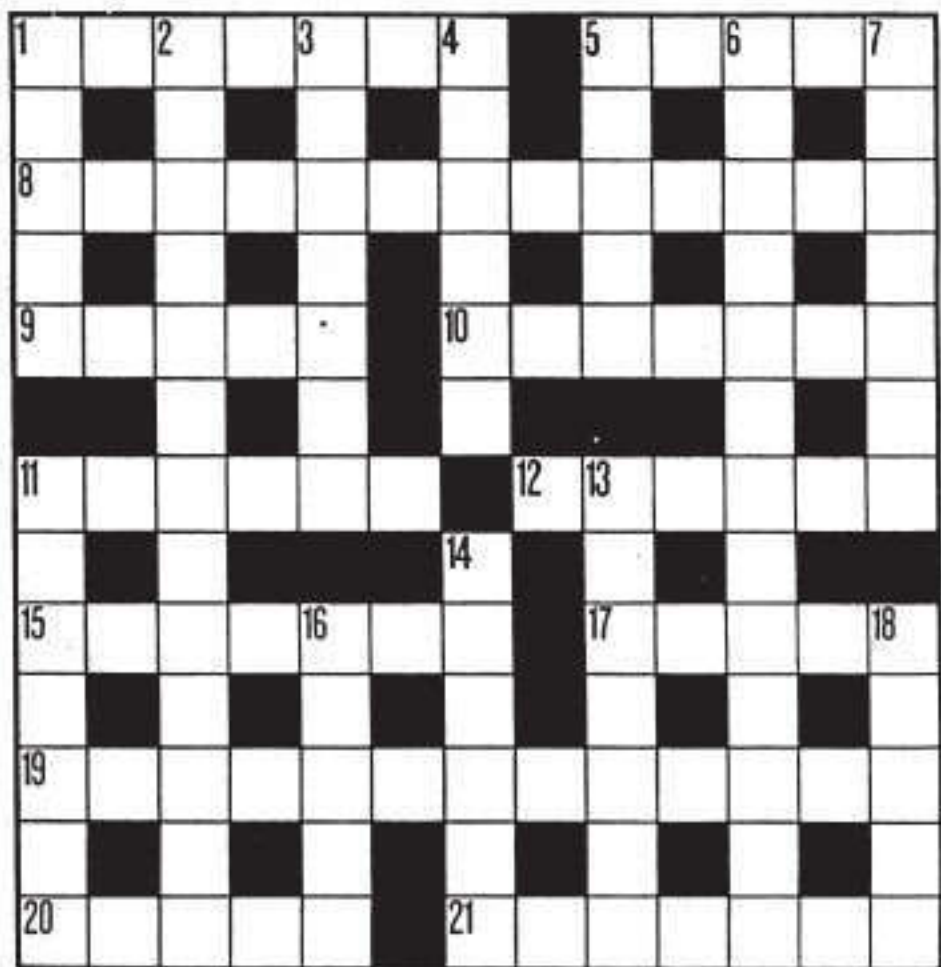
Another worrying finding about Punjab's youth in the 2021 nationwide youth survey was that 76% of the young people identified unemployment as their biggest problem. Because they see little hope for a better future, despair has grown among them, along with an increased inclination towards religiosity.

Compared to 2016, the 2021 survey found that Sikh youth appeared less hopeful about their future than young people from other communities. This was the result of governments neglecting the issues facing young people and instead keeping them occupied with religious matters.

In the 2022 elections, 42% of the youth considered the AAP to be the most trustworthy party to solve this problem. The 2027 election results will reveal the youth's response to the government's performance on their concerns and issues.

In this backdrop, the initiative taken by the judiciary will help restore hope among Punjab's youth and strengthen society's resistance to drugs.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Morally strict (7)
 - 5 Permission to act (5)
 - 8 Adopt an aloof attitude (4,4,2,3)
 - 9 Drive out (5)
 - 10 Forestall (3-4)
 - 11 Compassionate (6)
 - 12 Way of approaching (6)
 - 15 To attribute (7)
 - 17 Long for (5)
 - 19 Exaggerated smartness (4,3,6)
 - 20 Defraud (5)
 - 21 Dominate (7)

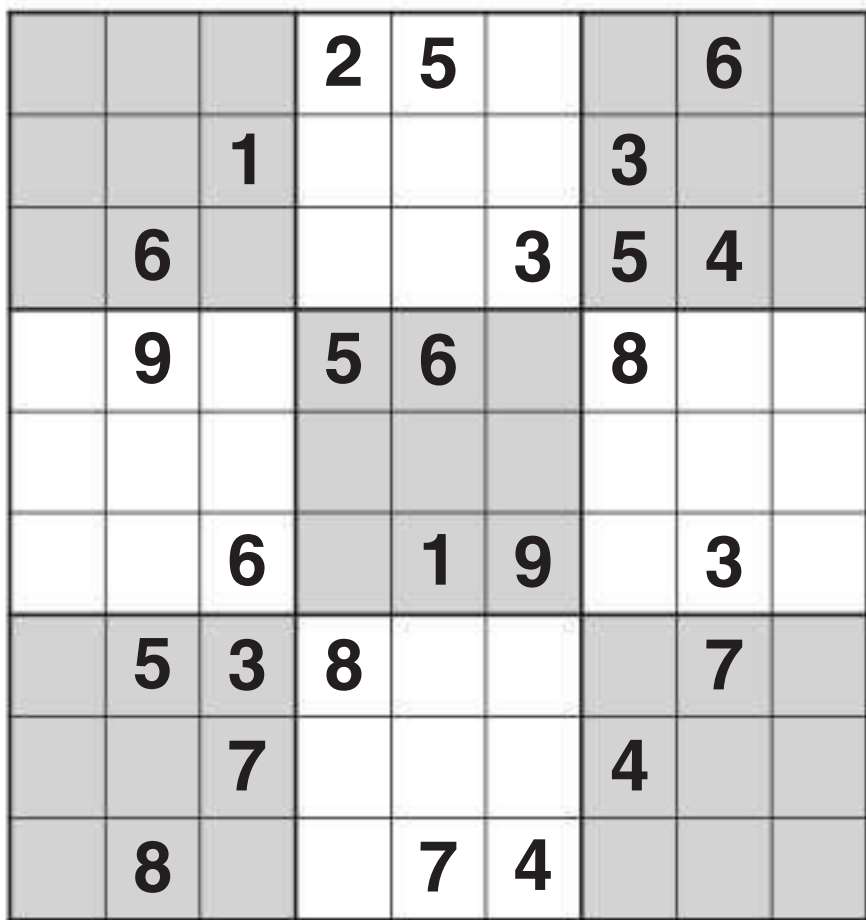
Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Slope, 8 Hat trick, 9 Usual, 10 Hanger-on, 11 Twist, 12 Nab, 16 Trifle, 17 Uproot, 18 Tag, 23 Dealt, 24 Iron hand, 25 Farce, 26 Gold mine, 27 Slash.

Down: 2 Last word, 3 Play safe, 4 Panama, 5 Stage, 6 Diary, 7 Skunk, 12 Net, 13 Bug, 14 Free fall, 15 Go places, 19 Awning, 20 Dingy, 21 Folly, 22 Shame.

- DOWN**
- 1 Enough (5)
 - 2 Barely honest dealings (5,8)
 - 3 A level in a hierarchy (7)
 - 4 A continent (6)
 - 5 Machine for shaping wood etc. (5)
 - 6 Contentious (13)
 - 7 Give just claim (7)
 - 11 Outstandingly important (7)
 - 13 Empty-headed (7)
 - 14 Brought to a standstill (4,2)
 - 16 Unsuitable (5)
 - 18 Group's distinctive spirit (5)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

5	7	2	1	6	4	9	8	3
6	3	4	9	5	8	7	1	2
9	1	8	7	2	3	6	5	4
2	9	5	3	8	6	1	4	7
7	8	1	2	4	9	3	6	5
4	6	3	5	7	1	8	2	9
1	2	9	6	3	5	4	7	8
8	5	6	4	9	7	2	3	1
3	4	7	8	1	2	5	9	6

CALENDAR

JULY 23, 2026, THURSDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1948
■ Shravan Shaka	1
■ Shravan Parvishate	8
■ Hijari	1448
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 9, up to 7:04 am	
■ Shubh Yoga up to 7:20 pm	
■ Vishakha Nakshatra up to 1:43 am	
■ Moon enters Scorpio sign 7:01 pm	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	THURSDAY	19:22 HRS
SUNRISE:	FRIDAY	05:37 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	31	24
New Delhi	33	24
Amritsar	26	24
Bathinda	36	26
Jalandhar	26	24
Ludhiana	32	27
Bhiwani	32	24
Hisar	31	26
Sirsa	32	28
Dharamsala	27	18
Manali	24	17
Shimla	24	16
Srinagar	22	18
Jammu	26	24
Kargil	20	14
Leh	22	10
Dehradun	30	24
Mussoorie	25	16

TEMPERATURE IN °C

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

EU needs to hold together on Russia sanctions

The cost of trying to protect domestic interests may be to embolden Moscow

As the EU tries to agree a 21st package of economic sanctions against Russia, unity is fraying. Half a dozen capitals have demanded carve-outs or blocked measures in an effort to protect corporate champions or national economic interests. With Russia on the back foot in the four-and-a-half-year conflict and Ukraine gaining an edge – challenging President Vladimir Putin’s belief that he could always outlast Kyiv and its allies – this is not the moment to lose resolve. Doing so risks snatching defeat from the jaws of a possible victory in efforts to persuade Moscow to accept a ceasefire along the current front lines.

The backdrop is more positive for Ukraine than it has been for some time – despite President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s misguided sacking of his defence

minister last week. Kyiv’s almost daily drone attacks on Russian oil refineries have enabled Ukraine to bring the war home to Russia, avoiding mass civilian casualties but triggering fuel shortages and price spikes that polling suggests are denting Putin’s trust ratings. Kyiv’s drone advantage is being felt on the battlefield, too, where Russia’s offensives are faltering. Moscow is suffering punishingly high casualties – western officials estimate 35,000 killed or wounded a month – relative to its meagre territorial progress and to Ukraine’s losses.

The damage to Russia’s refining capacity is also ratcheting its economic costs, forcing Moscow to restrict refined product exports and hitting another key revenue source. This is compounding the toll that successive rounds of western sanctions – despite continuing loopholes and Russia’s evasion efforts – are now taking on the Russian economy. Russian crude is trading at a persistent discount to world prices. Labour shortages and the shift to a war economy have

meanwhile fuelled inflation and forced up interest rates; the banking sector is struggling with mounting bad loans.

Putin is, for now, showing little sign of backing down; there is still a risk that he might escalate. But the sense in European capitals that a ceasefire may be more within reach is combining with “sanctions fatigue” to create a dangerous weakening of resolve over the next sanctions package. Greece is attempting to protect a shipping company from an EU ban on transporting Russian liquefied natural gas to third countries. Germany and Portugal want a block on buying Russian fish removed, and France and Italy have pushed to limit a visa ban on Russian military veterans to those who served in Ukraine.

To ensure hardships are properly shared, contradictions do need to be ironed out. Athens can point to the fact that France, Belgium, Spain are still importing Russian LNG – leading to record imports from Russia’s Yamal project in the first half of 2026, up 18 per

With Putin on the back foot and Ukraine gaining an edge, this is not the moment to lose resolve

cent year on year. Though a bar on LNG imports under long-term contracts comes into force on January 1, some countries seem to be maxing out imports before then, prolonging European reliance on Russian energy.

But if EU capitals carve out exemptions to protect their own interests, the sanctions framework may begin to erode. That, in turn, could send a message to Moscow that Europe’s political tolerance has reached its limit. The danger increases that Russia’s president decides not to compromise, after all, or is tempted to escalate.

EU ambassadors meet today for a final effort to reach a consensus on new sanctions before the summer recess. Given the domestic costs since 2022 of measures against Moscow, many capitals hope to avoid further pain. But the price of short-term efforts to protect national interests could be to embolden Russia to fight on in pursuit of a victory that would have huge costs for Europe’s long-term security and prosperity.

Opinion Science

Hegseth’s ‘build your own warrior’ playbook



What looked at first like a parody has turned out to be true. Pete Hegseth, the US defence secretary, announced last week he was introducing testosterone screening for American soldiers to create a “High-T” fighting force at the “leading edge of lethality”.

Troops aged 30 and over – including women – would be routinely screened, with younger members able to opt in. Those falling short would be offered optional testosterone replacement therapy. Hormone experts question the wisdom of the scheme, not least because of the potential for harm, including to fertility.

But it is revealing of how the current administration applies scientific evidence to health issues: as an optional, flexible handmaid to the more vital

The administration treats evidence as an optional handmaid to the vital business of masculinity

business of wellness, masculinity and “looksmaxxing”, the online trend fixated on physical perfection. There is an intriguing crossover between science-sceptical Maga circles; the manosphere, made up of social media influencers that offer young men tips on relationships, power dynamics and fitness; and the online market for loosely regulated substances such as peptides, supplements, hormone experts question the wisdom of the scheme, not least because of the potential for harm, including to fertility.

Testosterone is the main male sex hormone. It is critical to sexual development; it deepens the voice and promotes the growth of body hair; it helps to build and strengthen muscles and bones. It also regulates sex drive and sperm production.

Hegseth said the initiative would improve “combat readiness” and cited the hormone’s link to longevity and performance. But while there is a clear and agreed threshold for being low-T, not all men suffer as a result. Testosterone replacement therapy (TRT), often a gel, is usually recommended only when low levels come with symptoms, which include lowered fertility, weak muscles, fatigue and poor concentration.

Saira Hameed, consultant endocrinologist at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust in London and author of *Signals: The Inside Story of Our Hor-*

mones, tells me there is no robust evidence linking testosterone to longevity. She adds that because low-T individuals can have no symptoms and others can respond differently to treatment, “TRT doesn’t guarantee heightened cognitive or physical performance”.

But overtreatment, she adds, does carry risks. Too much testosterone can thicken the blood, raising the risk of clots, impair fertility, cause liver inflammation and quicken tumour growth in the prostate. It can also trigger mood changes, including aggression and hypersexuality, and acne.

TRT, she adds, should only be administered under medical supervision. “We endocrinologists would urge caution. The body’s hormones are perfectly calibrated and most men will go through their lives without any issue with their testosterone level. Testosterone is essential for men’s health . . . but it’s not a case of if some is good, then more must be even better.”

Though levels decline with age, most men never need TRT (which is why they can father children into their eighties). In comparison, all women suffer oestrogen deficiency after menopause. Men who feel run down, Hameed advises, should be encouraged to look beyond hormones, including at lifestyle.

For some, however, hormones are synonymous with lifestyle. Health secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr is open about taking testosterone as part of an anti-ageing regimen and worries about falling levels among men (experts cite obesity, inactivity and poor sleep as possible causes). Kennedy is pushing for reduced warnings on some testosterone products. Interestingly, a small study published last year hinted that administering testosterone could shift a person’s political leaning slightly to the right.

Hegseth, meanwhile, has posted videos of himself running and lifting weights. Last year, he said it was unacceptable to have “fat generals and admirals” and railed against beards. These messages from the top seem less about health and more about valorising sanitised masculinity.

There is, though, a weapons-grade irony in Hegseth trying to devise a build-your-own-warrior playbook given his past attempts at changing health policy. In April, he abolished mandatory flu shots for military personnel; in June, after an outbreak in Texas that affected nearly 300 and hospitalised several recruits, the Pentagon reinstated the requirement.

Barking commands on bellies, beards and biceps is one thing but making your troops genuinely healthy and combat-ready means getting the basics right.

The writer is a science commentator

Letters

Recent supply-chain shocks will reverberate for decades

Gillian Tett is right to highlight the emerging “era of scarcity” (Opinion May 22), but I would argue the shift she describes is far more structural and long-lived than a passing geopolitical reflex.

For four decades, the world shifted towards a hyperglobalised, “just-in-time” supply chain. As the piece notes, governments are now “quietly stockpiling key items” in response to rising fragility.

However, the memories of four supply-chain shocks in five years – the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s full-scale

invasion of Ukraine, the “liberation day” tariffs and now the Iran war – will endure. This is a reversal in global economic structures that may last decades.

The second point is that the usual market mechanism for commodity cycles – the notion that “the cure for high prices is high prices” – has not functioned as expected. Prices for virtually all materials and commodities have risen meaningfully in recent years, yet investment in energy, mining, water and agriculture remains deeply insufficient. We are still in the

early innings of a long capital-formation cycle.

The convergence of these two dynamics – the growing imperative for domestic supplies but a lack of a private market reaction function – has driven governments around the world to intervene. As access to materials such as copper, crude oil, rare earths and water becomes a national priority, leaving it solely to private markets risks persistent vulnerabilities and a market response that comes too late.

For investors, this backdrop should

mean structurally higher commodity prices, higher baseload inventories and sustained demand growth.

This is not a momentary “new fashion for hoarding and huddling”, as the author describes. Rather, it represents the early phase of a multi-decade reevaluation of hard assets and the physical world that underpins the digital one.

Tyler Rosenlicht
Portfolio Manager, Global Infrastructure, and Head of Natural Resource Equities, Cohen & Steers, New York, US

Britain faces a prisoner’s dilemma on ties with EU

Peter Foster’s article “UK businesses reject calls to rejoin EU” (Report, June 24) highlights one of the behavioural hurdles facing Andy Burnham if he wants to upscale his predecessor’s modest reset when July’s postponed EU-UK summit eventually takes place.

CBI director-general Rain Newton-Smith says the evidence is compelling and indisputable that Brexit has created costs for business and yet they are not looking to “relitigate the referendum”.

This poses a puzzle. Most economists agree with the Office for Budget Responsibility that the economy is at least 4 per cent smaller than it would have been if Brexit had not happened. In simple terms, this shortfall represents £100bn of lost profit for British companies and lost income for consumers.

By co-operating and lending their support for closer integration with the EU, businesses in aggregate stand to benefit – as would the exchequer in the form of increased tax revenues. But business finds it hard to speak with a single voice as some sectors expect to be better off under continued regulatory divergence while others will look to cherry-pick.

This is a form of prisoner’s dilemma in which the rational decisions of some players are inconsistent with the common good. Mathematician John Nash argued that repeated iterations of the game lead, eventually, to greater co-operation – but this is unlikely to happen if it is always the same players that benefit from putting self first.

The new prime minister cannot please everyone. He may opt to act in the interests of businesses and consumers as a whole and seek much closer alignment while remaining outside the EU. With a fair wind, Britain could once again shape regulation from the inside. As the FT’s Martin Sandbu put it on the eve of Brexit, “exit from [the] single market closes a chapter UK did so much to write” (Report, December 2020).

Trevor Greetham
Head of Multi Asset, Royal London Asset Management, London EC3, UK

Is AI really that helpful for drug discovery?

It was fascinating and odd to review your recent supplement “AI in Practice” and its mini-digest of AI usage in pharma drug discovery (“Why AI can transform pharma – but nature cannot be hurried”, Special Report, June 30). But the current state of large language models and their capacity to assist in drug discovery enhancement is questionable.

I would argue that the only viable



use of current LLMs for research and pharma concerns is to assist their data scientists and researchers on cataloguing their in-house lab research notebooks and findings, alongside data findings from clinical trials performed and completed. This should and could greatly accelerate its intellectual property teams and its business development teams in due diligence by preventing going over ground already covered and vetted as viable or not.

Current LLMs might have all the data of IP filings from public data sources of published patents and patent applications, as well as chemical registry data of compounds of interest that have been registered, but AI cannot and should not be the final determinant as to whether a chemical structure or its optic isomer is toxic to mammalian and/or plant cell function.

The most obvious problem of usage of AI is the pharma credo of hiding the ball in plain sight to protect its targeted compound’s life of exclusivity within its patent filings.

Since pharmaceutical concerns do not collect, analyse and store their data in a universal fashion, it is obviously impossible to use AI to parse data from various pharmaceutical entities and receive a consistent analytical output without some AI hallucination slop becoming the output product. This would be crucial time wasted on a grand scale. Protecting competitive internal intelligence is key, which means no pharmaceutical or research concern should allow its data gold to become part or parcel of any LLM’s functional data in the AI cloud.

Guardrails on top of data encryption and limited AI usage given its current developmental state are key until such time that the LLMs have become better developed and possess better biopharmaceutical analytics.

K Felix Mjumbe
Berkeley, CA, US

Heatwaves highlight need for resilient infrastructure

In “The UK is forgetting the dull bit of climate change policy” (Opinion, July 15), Jill Rutter is right that adaptation has long been the neglected half of climate policy. Cutting emissions does not remove the need to prepare for the climate that is already here, and this summer’s overheated hospitals, disrupted railways and closed classrooms show that resilience is an economic issue, not merely an environmental one.

Where I would go further is this: adaptation should not be framed only as a Treasury exercise in reducing future liabilities. It is an investment in national prosperity.

Well-designed adaptation restores nature, strengthens infrastructure, improves public health and underpins growth. Heat and flooding are the clearest tests. They are the risks arriving fastest, and the ones for which Britain’s buildings, transport and drainage were never designed.

The Climate Change Committee has repeatedly warned that progress remains inadequate. The evidence is no longer the barrier; leadership is. Every major public investment should be assessed against the climate conditions it will face over its lifetime. That principle should now be embedded across government – from Treasury spending decisions to planning and infrastructure policy.

Building resilience into today’s decisions is not an additional cost. It is the foundation of long-term economic security.

Prof Emma Howard Boyd
Chair, National Heat Risk Commission, Bristol, UK

Buffett’s advice on the value of staying on brand

The wave of AI rebrands and their failure to deliver lasting share price boosts (Report, July 11) points to a deeper problem than short-term investor sentiment: a fundamental misunderstanding of what a brand is for.

Warren Buffett once observed that a powerful brand can become a long-lasting defensive moat for a business – a key indicator of the durability of a company’s competitive advantage. Products can be copied, workforces poached, factories duplicated – a brand is the defence against all three, making a business harder to imitate or displace. But a moat only works if it has integrity. It needs depth, substance, consistency and coherence, and it needs to be built to last.

When a brand switches identity to chase short-term gain, that defensive value is diluted. It stops looking serious. It starts to feel

thin, lightweight and frivolous.

Apple has pivoted its products repeatedly – from desktop computers to wearables to media and services – yet its brand has stayed consistent, solid, unbreachable. Red Bull has evolved from an energy drink into a sports franchise owner, a transformation only possible because the brand underpinning it has remained fundamentally unchanged throughout.

The lesson for the current AI rebranding wave is clear. Changing a brand to exploit a tech bubble might buy a short-term bump in market attention, but in the long run it dilutes the very thing a brand exists to protect: confidence. From investors, yes, but also where it matters most: with the consumer, since it’s their trust that ultimately underpins the whole business.

Edward Hayes
London SW11, UK

Pension surplus could be a boon for government

I read with interest the recent article highlighting surpluses in UK defined benefit pension schemes, and how these surpluses might be used by employers or members (Report, July 7).

There is another stakeholder in the mix: the government. If surplus assets are released, the government can expect to receive 25 per cent in tax. The size of this opportunity – potentially tens of billions of pounds – gives policymakers a clear incentive to make surplus release easier and more attractive, even aside from the wider economic benefits.

One principle is non-negotiable: these schemes exist to pay their members’ pensions. Surplus assets should only be released if these pensions are secure. Thankfully, more than at any point in their history, the surpluses in these schemes are largely backed by UK government bonds, generally regarded as the safest assets available.

One way to fully reassure trustees considering surplus release would be to strengthen the safety net. For example, the Pension Protection Fund could offer full backing for defined benefit schemes if their sponsor fails.

This would be a step-change in the UK pensions framework. But if it helped unlock surplus assets while also reassuring trustees and members of pension security, the benefits could be considerable: for members, sponsors, the government and the wider economy.

It could also help unlock more of the productive investment the government is seeking.

Jos Vermeulen
Head of Solution Design, Insight Investment, London EC4V, UK

Email: letters.editor@ft.com
Include daytime telephone number and full address
Corrections: corrections@ft.com

If you are not satisfied with the FT’s response to your complaint, you can appeal to the FT Editorial Complaints Commissioner: complaints.commissioner@ft.com

Opinion

Why the world trusts China more than America

GEOPOLITICS

Edward Luce



The west’s political crisis can be shrunk to one word – mistrust. Voters feel cynicism, prejudice and anger about their systems. But each is downstream of loss of trust. Less urgency is felt about the rest of the world’s plummeting faith in America. That China is now trusted more than the US in a large majority of countries surveyed by Pew should ring alarms. Yet America still acts as if it were the most admired place on earth.

Not all of the decline is because of Donald Trump. The US has not only

been going down; China has been going up. America’s recent reputational slide began in 2023 when Joe Biden was president. This coincides with his support for Israel’s devastating response to the October 7 Hamas massacre. The US foreign policy establishment pays little heed to the effect of Israel’s militarism on the world’s view of America, including in the rest of the west. But Israel is not the chief source of US unpopularity.

The comforting view, which is also the view of the comfortable, is that the world detests Trump’s values. That suggests that when a more admirable president is elected, America’s standing will improve. This modestly reassuring take leaves out one big thing. Not everything is about values. A majority of countries rank the US higher than China when it comes to freedom, yet nevertheless distrust it more. Mistrust is thus a synonym for incompetence.

Even in Trump’s America, the world

knows that people are far freer than they are in China to express their views and practise their faith. But are Americans governed more competently? Is America more stable than China? It is hard to say yes to either. Take Trump’s on-again off-again Operation Epic Fury against Iran. In addition to being America’s most unpopular war at home since

Obama did not recapture the reputational heights the US had enjoyed in the 1990s

polling began – more so than Iraq and Vietnam in spite of far lower US casualties – it has alienated all of America’s friends and allies, including other western populists. They are now being insulted for not joining what many see

as America’s most careless war of choice to date.

Gulf war III has also exposed the yawning gap between China’s approach to energy and America’s. China’s big investments in all forms of power, from renewables to coal, contrast with America’s slant towards fossil fuels. This is all on Trump. Not only has he scrapped Biden’s incentives for green energy, he is paying companies to walk away from alternative energy projects. Were it not for China’s big stockpile, global oil prices would have gone much higher in the past few months. Instead of claiming that China helped rig America’s 2020 election, Trump might thank it for saving US consumers from paying \$6 a gallon at the pump.

Epic Fury coincides with unignorable signs of global warming, especially in the north. Countries like India and Iran have become used to large spikes in summer mortality. Only now is Europe

ruing the absence of air conditioning after its hottest June on record. Global warming is shifting from elite preoccupation to mass consciousness.

The US is behaving as the baddie on this, doubling down on 20th-century habits. China, on the other hand, is perceived in the global south as the bearer of solutions. Even where the US is cutting edge, such as with Elon Musk’s Tesla, its reputation is atrocious. Few could forget the recent activist advert in London that showed Musk’s Cybertruck, or “Swasticar”. On it were the words: “Goes from 0 to 1939 in 3 seconds.”

Trust can vanish quickly but take ages to rebuild. Four of the six countries that still approve more of America are in China’s neighbourhood – Japan, South Korea, India and the Philippines. But the countries that distrust the US more are near and far, not just its insecure neighbours, Canada and Mexico. This is

in spite of the fact that China’s export machine threatens to eat everyone’s lunch. The outliers are Poland, chiefly because Russia is next door, and Israel. Even Australia and the UK trust China more than America.

Trump’s exit would surely help. America’s global standing rose sharply from George W Bush to Barack Obama. But Obama did not recapture the reputational heights America had enjoyed in the 1990s. It will be even harder for Trump’s successor to set the clock back to Obama’s era. US-China competition is increasingly dominated by AI. China’s models are mostly cheap and open source, even if their capabilities are often lower. America’s are pricey and closed. For the first time in generations, US technology is not assured of domination. It cannot even bank on admiration.

edward.luce@ft.com

Who will win the new war of mercantilists?

Martin WolfEconomics

China’s high degree of self-sufficiency reduces its vulnerability to coercion by others



We are living in a mercantilist era. By this I mean one in which the concerns of policymakers are as much those of security as of prosperity. This, as I argued in “The dangerous triumph of neo-mercantilism”, threatens both the stability of the world economy and relations among great powers. China is also better suited to mercantilism than the US and EU.

Mercantilists seek power and security or, in other words, the ability to bully others and resist being bullied by them, in turn. How might one measure these capabilities? The obvious approach is to assess economic size, self-sufficiency and monopoly power. Yet, as the late Henry Kissinger wisely argued, “no nation can achieve absolute security. Absolute security for one nation means absolute insecurity for all nations.” The more frightening you become, the more others will unite against you.

Consider China. Its economy is roughly the same size as that of the US. It is now at or close to the frontier in the most important technologies, including, it increasingly appears, artificial intelligence. Its progress in this regard is stunning. The US is more self-sufficient in energy. But China has a far larger labour force, and vastly higher investable savings: in 2025, its gross national savings were 43 per cent of GDP, against a mere 17 per cent in the US. China also has a far bigger manufacturing sector: in 2024, China’s manufac-

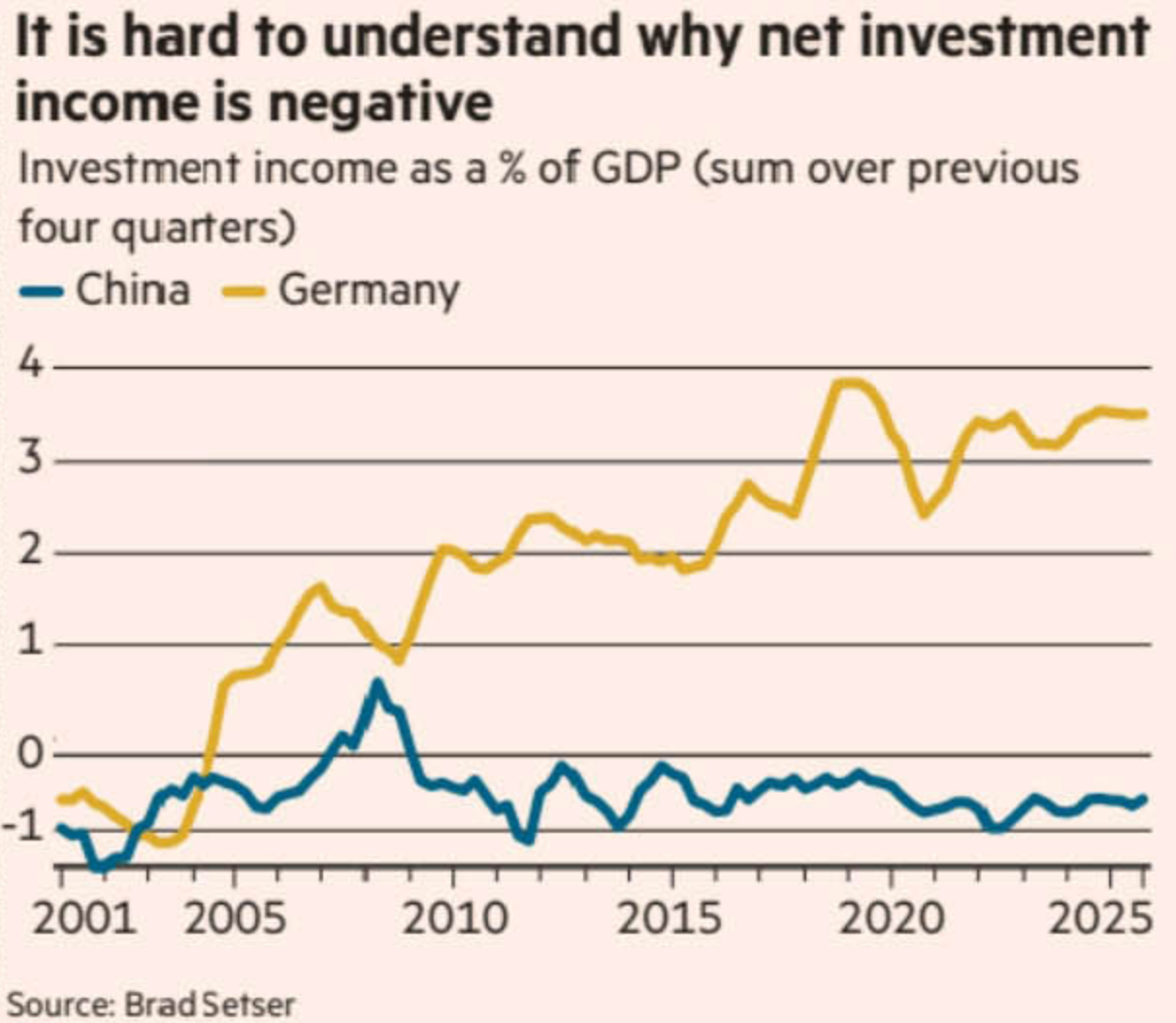
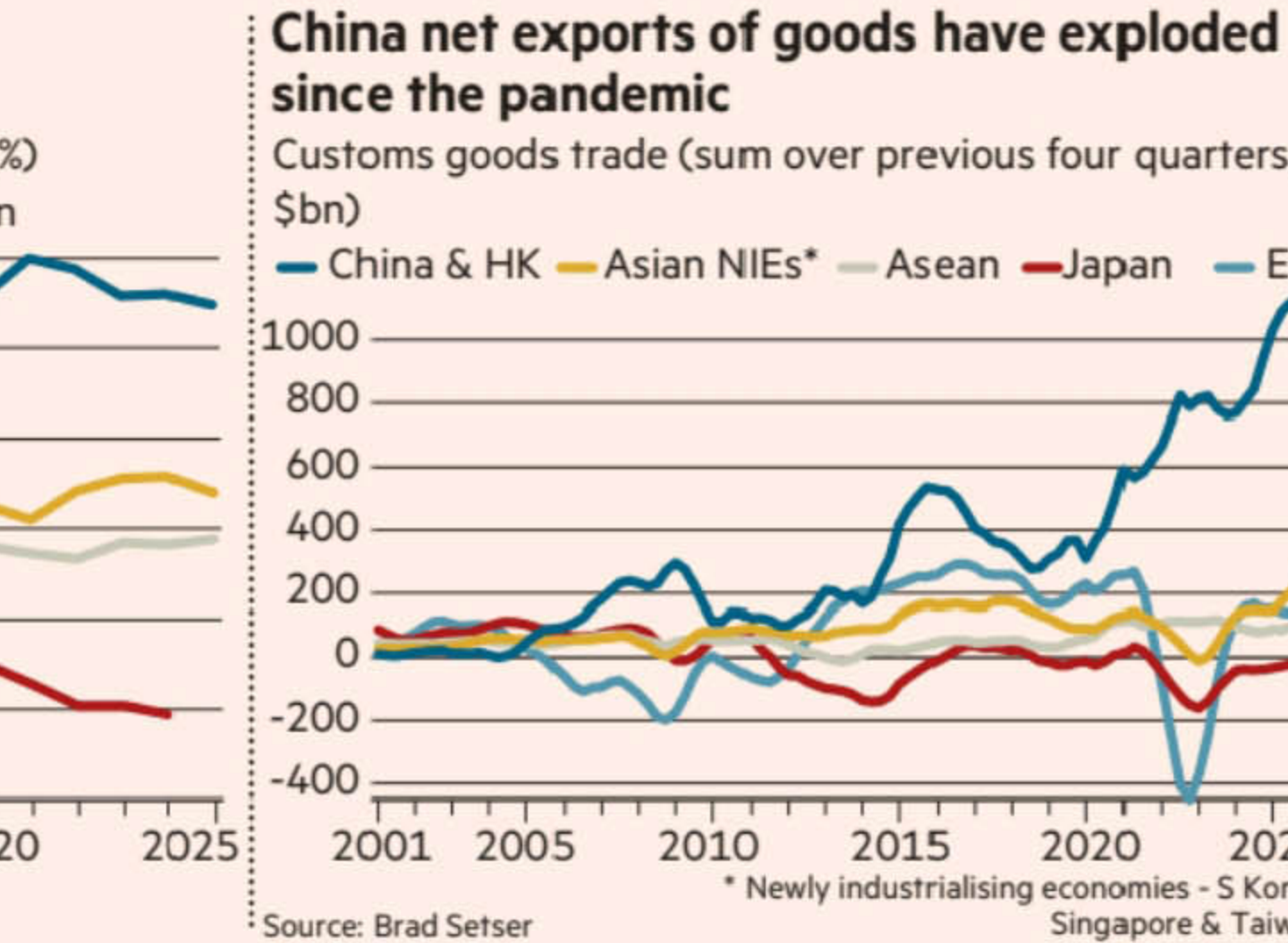
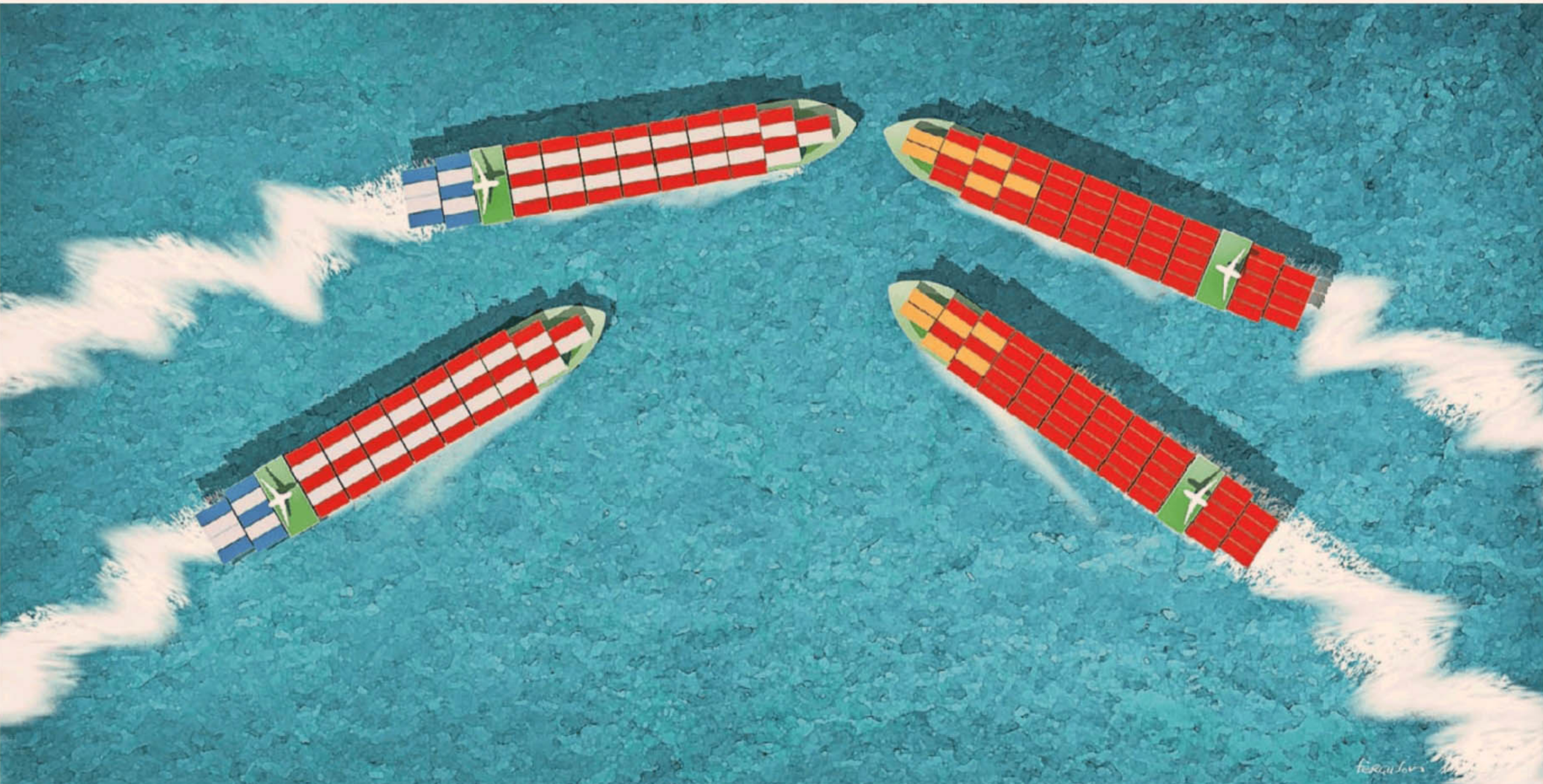
turing value added was nearly as big as those of the US and the Eurozone together. Its prowess in renewable energy and electric vehicles has become remarkable.

As Bridgewater Associates, the well-known hedge fund, noted in October 2025, the US is energy self-sufficient as a result of its abundant supply of domestic oil and gas but faces constraints on its ability to expand its supply of electricity. China is self-sufficient in electricity because of its coal and renewables. But it has vulnerabilities in the supply of oil and gas. The war with Iran has highlighted this weakness.

Yet China has achieved powerful monopolies in global supply chains. Among these are those in solar photovoltaics, lithium-ion batteries, rare earths and magnets, gallium and germanium, and shipbuilding. Some of the above create effective chokepoints, as China demonstrated so effectively in its tariff war with the US.

The ability to supply so many things that others cannot is a source of coercive power. China’s high degree of self-sufficiency also reduces its vulnerability to coercion by others, while its size makes it an important market for many countries. In all, China’s ability to exercise economic power is huge.

As Brad Setser of the Council on Foreign Relations noted in a recent discussion with Princeton’s Markus Brunnermeier, people now talk of a “second China shock”. Here are some of the main points, beyond those noted above.



First, China’s macroeconomics are very different from those that obtained before the global financial crisis and, even more so, before the end of its property boom. Exports are surging, but domestic demand has stalled. Second, its export surplus in manufacturing is now around 2 per cent of world GDP, which is “roughly twice the largest surplus Japan ever ran”. Third and most important, China shows an unexplained negative net income of around \$125bn on its net foreign investments. But it

An ability to supply so many things that others cannot is a source of power

should, on reasonable assumptions about the income it earns on its \$4tn in net foreign assets, have a surplus of some \$100bn. As a result, Setser argues, the renminbi is by now some 30 per cent undervalued.

In other words, China continues to display a standard feature of mercantilism: lasting trade and current account surpluses. (See charts.)

As a result, China’s policies look unavoidably threatening to much of the world. If a major trading partner runs huge and persistent trade and current account surpluses, everyone else has to run offsetting deficits. This leads to the shrinkage of sectors specialising in producing tradeable goods and services, as well as huge domestic financial deficits. These, in turn, create protectionist pressures of the kind we have

been seeing in the US and increasingly the EU. Yet high-income countries are not the only victims of China’s push for dominance in manufacturing. Among them, argue Shoumitro Chatterjee and Arvind Subramanian, are also the poor countries whose development it blocks.

A striking feature of Chinese development has been the decline in its rate of economic growth from over 10 per cent two decades ago to a low of 4.3 per cent in the year to the second quarter of 2026. Even the latter almost certainly exaggerates growth of market-led supply. After the bursting of the property bubble, the economy is not generating a supply of investment opportunities large enough to absorb its colossal savings. But, as the longstanding China watcher Stephen Roach notes,

the long-needed rebalancing towards consumption remains stillborn. Under Xi Jinping, the priority of higher consumption will, it seems, never be recognised.

Yet China is an effective mercantilist power, though even it cannot avoid the shortcomings of this approach. The US, too, is now mercantilist, though in a far less coherent manner. The EU is also being forced in a similar direction.

Brunnermeier argues that in this world one needs to calculate a “resilience account” alongside the current account, which “would net out our geopolitical dependency: how easily the goods in the current account can be sourced from other countries.” This idea is clever. But who then wins?

martin.wolf@ft.com

The Middle East needs its own Helsinki Act

Alexander Stubb and Frank-Walter Steinmeier

In the late 1960s, Europe was divided – a rift most painfully visible in the concrete and barbed wire of the Berlin Wall. The Cuban missile crisis had brought the world to the edge of nuclear catastrophe. The Soviet Union had crushed the Prague Spring. The Vietnam war had laid bare the readiness of great powers to wage devastating proxy conflicts. And yet it was precisely in this climate of mistrust that the most ambitious co-operative security initiative of the 20th century was conceived.

In the 1970s, 35 nations came together: Nato allies, Warsaw Pact

members, neutral and nonaligned states. The process culminated in the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975, a landmark of cold war détente. The lesson we draw is simple: you do not need trust to begin a process. The process itself is what builds trust. In that spirit, and fully aware of how long and difficult the road proved to be, we propose a new Helsinki for the Middle East.

The Iran war has pushed the region to the brink. Civilians in the Gulf states, Israel, Lebanon and Iran have borne the biggest brunt. Iranians are being suffocated by intensified repression. The Strait of Hormuz has become a flashpoint of geopolitical competition, disrupting markets and threatening livelihoods. Israeli society is deeply scarred by the trauma of October 7, while Gazans continue to endure a staggering humanitarian catastrophe and Palestinians in the West Bank see

their livelihoods and political hopes crushed by aggressive Israeli settlement.

Trust, that most fragile of political resources and strongest diplomatic currency, is in short supply in the Middle East. Currently, all eyes are on the renewed tensions in the Gulf. The

Complexity has never been a compelling argument against dialogue but the strongest argument for it

US-Iran framework, forged with the support of Pakistan, Qatar and others, is fragile but vital for de-escalation and a lasting end to the blockade.

Beyond conflict management in Hormuz, however, there is a growing recognition both inside and outside the

region that the Middle East needs a political process that is bigger both in participation and in scope. A new Helsinki moment could set in motion a region-wide dialogue for peace. The starting point is this: despite all conflicts and grievances, with no preconditions – what can this region agree on, here and now?

Foundations of considerable mutual interest exist and must be built upon. The genius of Helsinki was that all relevant actors brought their priorities to the table, negotiated for common ground and tested areas for confidence building, slowly replacing elements of confrontation with co-operation. The process can only be meaningful if all relevant actors are at the table. The Helsinki Final Act included 35 nations.

A Middle East process should be equally inclusive, starting with all countries in the region. Outside actors with

interests and influence can play a constructive role, as evidenced by the 2015 nuclear agreement.

We write this with humility and are under no illusions about the obstacles to our proposal. The Middle East is far more complex than cold war Europe. Religious, ethnic and ideological faultlines run deep. Proxy conflicts and territorial disputes have entrenched patterns of enmity that diplomacy has never been a compelling argument against dialogue; it has always been the strongest argument for it. Without a process aimed at co-operative security, the region will fracture further, descending into ever more transactional and unstable alliances and counter-alliances.

The idea of a co-operative security architecture in the Middle East is not new but past debates have focused on the obstacles. We prefer to focus on the

positive: the momentum for dialogue, the elements that could be adapted from the European experience and the opportunity for our regions to learn from each other. Structured dialogue, issue-based co-operation and confidence-building measures that worked for us can work elsewhere.

The Helsinki Final Act opened with a simple sentence: states were “motivated by the political will, in the interest of peoples to improve and intensify their relations and to contribute [...] to peace, security, justice and co-operation.” Not trust. Not the resolution of grievances. Just the political will to seek a structured alternative to conflict. If that political will exists in the region, it can be transformed into a meaningful pathway. We stand ready to support the process.

The writers are the president of Finland and the president of Germany

Opinion

Maduro’s case is due back in court on Wednesday. Things may get weird.

If the U.S. honors its agreement, it could well be forced to release its prized captive. It’s a story a century old.

Michael Rips

A lot has happened in the world in the half year since U.S. Special Forces kidnapped President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and his wife, Cilia Flores, but if you can think back that far you might recall that the Trump administration insisted the mission wasn't an invasion; it was an “extradition.” It was a legal matter, that is, to be followed by a criminal trial. Many legal scholars, commentators and government officials lined up to endorse that choice as lawful, despite Venezuela's immediate insistence to the contrary. But when Mr. Maduro's case next makes its way to court, on July 22, federal prosecutors could encounter one rather significant obstacle: Our courts don't have the authority to handle his case. And the law that says so was signed by the United States of America.

If the United States honors its agreement, it could well be forced to release its prized captive.

The reason dates back to the first decades of the 20th century, when a topic that seems dry and legalistic today — international arbitration — was an exciting and idealistic cause, championed as a modern, rational tool of justice with the power to change the world.

President William Howard Taft felt so strongly about its promise that he spent part of his 1909 Inaugural Address extolling its virtues: “We favor every instrumentality, like that of the Hague tribunal and arbitration treaties, made with a view to its use in all international controversies, in order to maintain peace and to avoid war.” He advocated the practice throughout his presidency and, when he left the Oval Office, went on to serve as an international arbitrator. President Woodrow Wilson also took up the cause. His secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, proposed permanent independent commissions to resolve disputes between nations. Taft, Wilson and Bryan had good reason to look for new ways to maintain peace: The world was descending into war.

When peace was restored, the United States began including arbitration clauses in many treaties. One of those was a 1922 extradition treaty between the United States and Venezuela. It states, in part, that “all differences between the contracting parties relating to the interpretation or execution of this treaty shall be decided by arbitration.” Approved by the Senate and ratified by the president, that document has the force of law.

Well, there sure are “differences between the contracting parties” today. The government of Venezuela is playing along with the Trump administration when it comes to oil exports, but it has publicly insisted that Mr. Maduro's capture was illegal under international law — and that would include the extradition treaty.

A dispute of this nature should clearly trigger the 1922 treaty's arbitration clause. According to its stipulations, Judge Alvin Hellerstein, who is overseeing Mr. Maduro's trial, must suspend the proceedings and send the matter to a panel of independent evaluators to examine the treaty and decide whether it has been honored. Should the arbitrators conclude that Mr. Maduro's capture violated the treaty, the United States would be required to release him.

Does it sound far-fetched? The U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed the principle again and again in cases spanning more than a century.

The first was in 1886, when the justices ruled that the prosecution of William Rauscher, who had been extradited from Britain, had violated the terms of the two nations' extradition treaty, because the charges on which he was tried were not the same as those for which he was handed over. Thanks to the court's insistence that the prosecution had to conform to the treaty, Rauscher prevailed.

A topic that seems dry and legalistic today — international arbitration — was an exciting and idealistic cause, championed as a modern, rational tool of justice with the power to change the world.

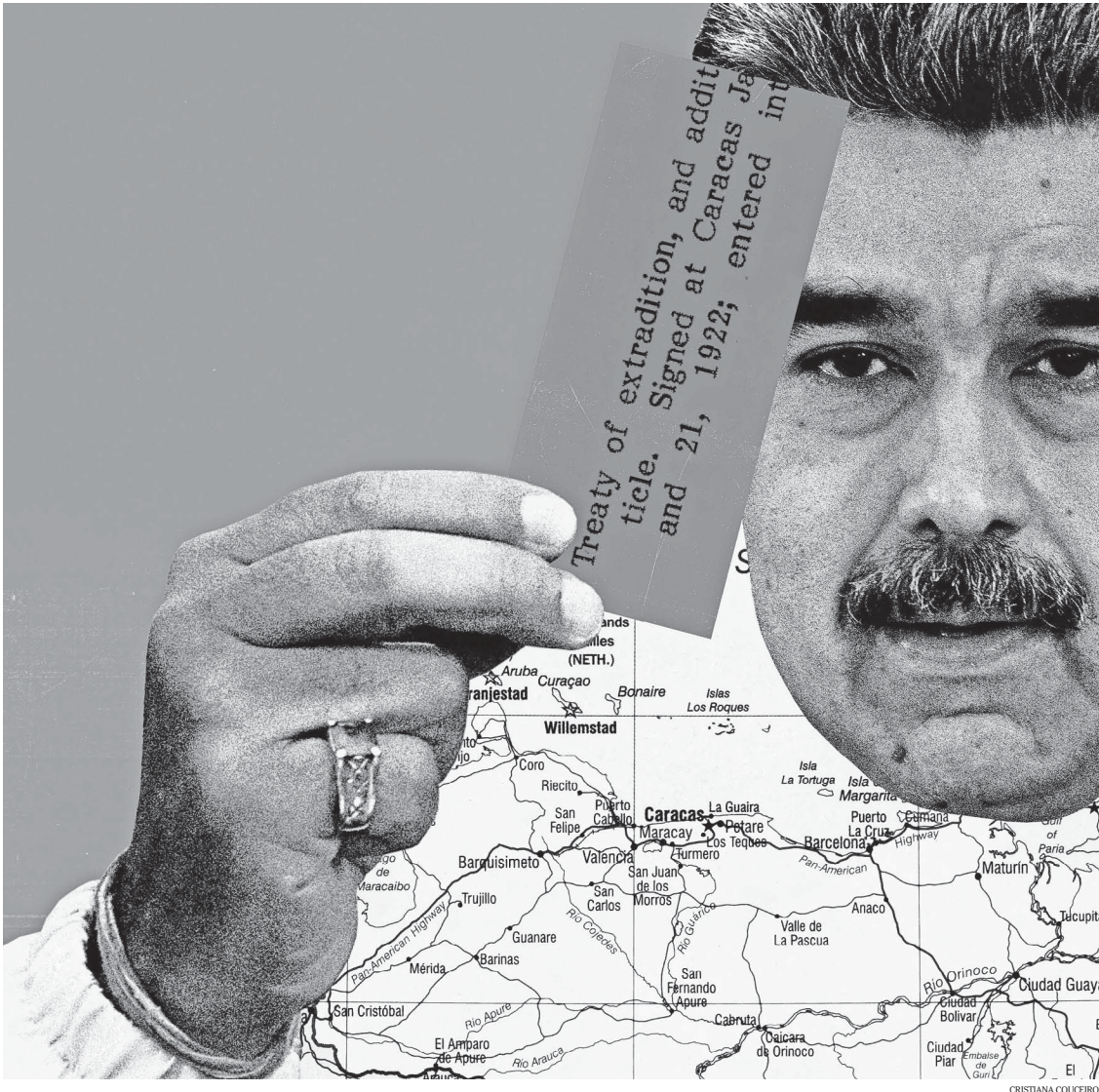
The second was in 1927, when no less an authority on the matter than former President Taft — by then the chief justice — weighed in on the fate of some British men who had been arrested on the high seas. In this case he ruled against the crew, but he took time to affirm that, despite the prosecution's claim to the contrary, “the right of the court” to hold foreign defendants “for trial” was indeed dependent on the treaty between the two nations.

A third instance was in a 1992 case in which a Mexican citizen and resident was kidnapped at the request of the Drug Enforcement Administration and taken to Texas, with the intent to try him in federal court. The question of whether his prosecution would be valid went all the way to the Supreme Court, where the justices allowed it — but reinforced the principle in *United States v. Rauscher*: A defendant “may not be prosecuted in violation of the terms of an extradition treaty.”

In each of these varied cases, the message was the same: When interests clash over the scope of an extradition treaty, the first step is to examine carefully the intent of those who signed the treaty. In those three cases, the treaty in question allowed the court to perform that examination. The treaty with Venezuela, however, gives that responsibility to arbitrators.

The trial cannot legally proceed without this step.

I asked David Sloss, a prominent legal scholar and the editor of “The



Role of Domestic Courts in Treaty Enforcement,” how shocking it would be, from a legal perspective, if the case got bounced out of court into arbitration. He said not very. Referring the Maduro case to arbitration would track with “the approach that courts routinely apply,” he wrote me, “when they dismiss claims based on contracts that include an arbitration clause.”

Once the arbitrators have the Maduro case, the next step would be for them to determine whether Mr. Maduro's kidnapping and extradition were lawful by the terms of the 1922 treaty.

Because treaty interpretation is a rarefied branch of the law, with different rules than might apply in individual countries, I wanted to learn ex-

actly how these international arbitrators would handle the case. I asked Steven Ratner, one of the nation's leading experts in this arena. He told me that unless otherwise directed, arbitrators would follow something known as the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and, in addition to considering laws that have developed between the two countries since that time, would scrutinize the treaty in terms of “the relevant rules of international law of 1922.” Those rules, adopted in the immediate aftermath of World War I, uniformly and emphatically condemned the invasion of one sovereign state by another.

It is hard to imagine that any arbitrator acting in that spirit would declare a dead-of-night kidnapping lawful

under the treaty, especially since the target was a head of state.

The operation is already in violation of international law; any attempt by the United States to sidestep arbitration would make it blatantly illegitimate by the United States' own laws, too.

Whatever the outcome of arbitration, it is that process that will give legitimacy to the case, vindicate the principles of international law and in that way reduce the potential for future conflict between the two nations — an outcome that might frustrate President Trump, but which would have greatly pleased Mr. Taft, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Bryan.

MICHAEL RIPS is a lawyer and writer.

Is this what a post-literate era looks like?

It’s not the children who stopped reading. It’s their grandparents.

David Wallace-Wells

Few things are more intuitive about the smartphone era than the fact that devices have torpedoed our interest in reading and dragged down the status that books and their authors once seemed to enjoy.

You can tally the signs. Reading scores among both students and adults have fallen from where they were a decade ago, and it's hard to find a college professor who thinks freshmen are arriving in class as prepared as ever for the reading. On the subway, people are always on their phones, and nobody appears to be reading anything on them. You probably have a hard time concentrating on books yourself, with so many distractions around. Public discourse seems shaped by podcast clips and short-form video, and if you happen to find yourself reading something longer than an Instagram caption it might well be an essay, like “The End of Reading Is Here” by Rose Horowitz in *The Atlantic* on July 8, studded with incisive observations about the shift from a culture of literacy to one defined by what's been called a digital culture of orality, in which charismatic narrators make sweeping emotional appeals to their audiences rather than through logical argumentation and careful citation. In a forthcoming book, the essayist James Marriot calls it “the new dark ages.”

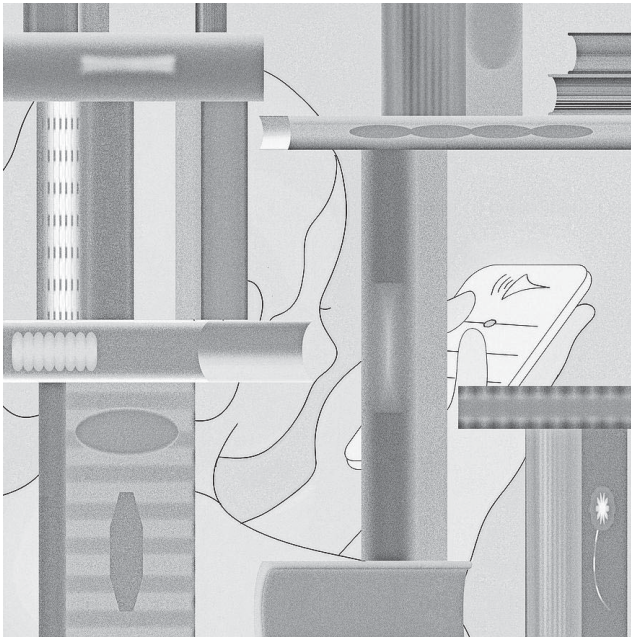
I’ve written about these changes, too, and have spent plenty of time lamenting them. But I’ve also found myself growing more skeptical of the simplistic story that reading is going extinct. That’s because the story of literacy decline echoes so many similar narratives that

have blossomed into conventional wisdom over the past few years, and which look to me now, upon closer inspection, a wee bit more complicated.

We tell ourselves that the smartphone has brought about fertility decline, for instance, though those declines have been going on for three-quarters of a century. We tell ourselves phones have produced a teen mental health crisis, though in global surveys there is no obvious pattern to observe. We tell ourselves social media is the reason we have such intensely polarized politics, while failing to look at the historical patterns around the arrival of cable TV. That’s not to say that smartphones aren’t affecting any of these things. It’s to say that no matter how ubiquitous, phones are just one piece of a very messy social landscape, which rarely shifts uniformly in one direction thanks to one discrete variable, let alone inevitably toward disarray and decline.

And then there's reading. In *The Atlantic*, Horowitz cites an analysis of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey — often described as the gold standard measure of how the country spends its days — which shows that fewer Americans report reading for pleasure on a given day, but those who do are spending more time doing so. Overall, the underlying survey tells us, average Americans over the age of 15 read 21.9 minutes on a given day in 2003. They read 18.3 minutes a day in 2010. In 2025, the number was 16.2 minutes a day.

The first thing to note about these numbers is that they are very small: Americans don't read very much now and haven't for at least a few decades, making the intuition that reading has been cannibalized by smartphones a bit of a mismatch with the data. But the



second thing is that the decline is relatively small, too — a few minutes shaved off the national average over more than 20 years. Look a bit closer, and even that change appears to be driven overwhelmingly by a particular cohort: older Americans.

You might assume, especially given social stereotypes and caricatures, that the reading decline would be concentrated among the young, with that turn

away from books and toward phones therefore spelling doom for future literacy. You might think the problem would be exacerbated by schools and universities turning away from demanding reading curriculums and the arrival of artificial intelligence to do our reading for us. But in fact, young Americans are — according to this survey, at least — reading more than they did a couple of decades ago.

In 2003, for instance, Americans ages 15 to 24 read 8.4 minutes a day; in 2016 they read 7.8 minutes a day; and in 2022 they read 11.7 minutes a day. Also in 2003, those between the ages of 25 and 34 were reading 9.6 minutes a day; in 2016 that group read nine minutes a day; in 2025 they read 10.2 minutes a day. If these numbers represent a crisis, it doesn't appear to be a new one.

Among Americans 65 and up, the baseline is higher and the decline in time spent is larger, too: For decades, at least, the bulk of the country's reading has been done by Americans in their golden years. In 2003, older Americans read on average just under an hour each day — 58.5 minutes. By last year, that had fallen nearly by half, to roughly 32.4 minutes each day, a drop that represents the lion's share of overall reading declines. To the extent that we can talk about the decline of reading as a mass phenomenon, it seems concentrated not among the next generation but among the previous ones. The pattern may seem counterintuitive, but it echoes some other findings about social media use and disinformation: For all the hand-wringing about the effects of new technology on kids, the impacts may be just as corrosive, if not more so, on their grandparents. (Perhaps this is one reason *The Wall Street Journal* recently declared that “Dad Books Are a Dying Breed.”)

Of course, the Time Use survey is just one research project, with its own limitations; it's compiled out of data from single interviews in which people are asked to recount what they did the day before the call. But even in other data sets, the decline of reading isn't that obvious, either. In *The Atlantic*, Horowitz cites a large survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, which WALLACE-WELLS, PAGE 10

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

A.G. SULZBERGER *Publisher*

JOSEPH KAHN *Executive Editor*

MARC LACEY *Managing Editor*

CAROLYN RYAN *Managing Editor*

SUZANNE DALEY *Associate Editor*

KATHLEEN KINGSBURY *Opinion Editor*

MEREDITH KOPIT LEVIEV *Chief Executive Officer*

MICHAEL GREENSPON *Senior V.P. and General Manager*

HELEN KONSTANTOPOULOS *V.P., International Circulation*

HELENA PHUA *Executive V.P., Asia-Pacific*

SUZANNE YVERNÉS *International Chief Financial Officer*

ICE killed my son.
I want answers.

Rachel Reyes

This spring I watched Markwayne Mullin’s confirmation hearing to become the U.S. homeland security secretary. It was most likely the first confirmation hearing I ever watched. I have never been a political person.

I tuned in because Mr. Mullin’s words were of personal concern to me. In 2025 a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent killed my son, Ruben Ray Martinez, in Texas. He was 23 years old, a quiet, funny and gentle young man — and an unarmed United States citizen. He was shot nearly a year before federal agents killed two other Americans, Alex Pretti and Renee Good, in Minnesota and obviously well before the recent shootings of Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston and Johan Guerrero in Maine. Yet many fewer people know Ruben’s name. The Department of Homeland Security, then under Secretary Kristi Noem, withheld the full details of his shooting from me and from the public.

It was not made public that an ICE agent was the one who shot my son until federal officials were forced to disclose that information because of an unrelated lawsuit.

I wanted to see evidence at his hearing that Mr. Mullin’s tenure would bring a more respectful, serious and transparent approach to America’s immigration

I deserve accountability and transparency, and so does the public.

enforcement, after the previous period so damaged public confidence in those efforts. I was let down then, and I continue to be let down. Over three months into Mr. Mullin’s tenure,

there’s zero indication that Ruben’s death reverberated seriously within the Department of Homeland Security or that it would be treated as a serious test of departmental accountability. Mr. Mullin has not publicly acknowledged my son’s killing, much less explained what, if anything, the department has learned from the tragedy.

We should expect transparency and accountability from any administration — especially one that has claimed transparency as a governing principle. Like most other Americans, I believe immigration laws should be enforced. But we should not be asked to choose between enforcing the law and transparency when federal agents kill someone. The public deserves reliable facts. Families deserve honest answers. And the government should not have to be pressured into providing them.

Here’s what I know about what happened to my son: Ruben and his best friend, Joshua Orta, drove to South Padre Island to celebrate Ruben’s birthday. It was Ruben’s first trip away from San Antonio. He still lived at home while saving money from his job at an Amazon fulfillment warehouse. We were a close-knit family.

That weekend, Ruben and Josh did not tell me where they were going, probably because Ruben knew South Padre’s reputation as a party town and did not want me to worry. That was consistent with who he was: considerate, conflict-averse and reluctant to make himself the center of attention.

On what became his last night, Ruben was driving his car, with Josh in the passenger’s seat, when he approached the scene of a traffic accident at a busy intersection. For reasons that remain unclear, ICE agents were present and operating alongside local officers.

The video evidence, made public almost a year after Ruben’s death, is consistent with what Josh told me and others: He was trying to comply with conflicting directions from law enforcement about what to do. He was driving slowly and braking repeatedly and was not a threat to the officers. His car was in park when they pulled him out. An ICE agent, Jack Stevens, shot him at point-blank range through the open driver’s-side window multiple times. A toxicology report noted the presence of alcohol in Ruben’s system — which is obviously no justification for his death.

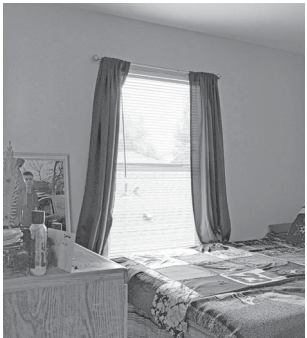
Josh said Ruben’s last words were “I’m sorry.”

The Texas Rangers investigated the shooting, and a grand jury declined to indict Mr. Stevens in February. We do not know what evidence the jury — which was closed to the public — did or did not see. A spokesperson from ICE told *The Times* that Ruben hit an agent with his car and that Mr. Stevens “fired

defensive shots to protect himself” and his fellow agents. The spokesperson said that the shooting has been “investigated from every possible angle by an independent body, and it cleared our officer.”

What happened to Ruben deserves a more transparent response. The Department of Homeland Security should address the video evidence that raises questions about its public account, and implement safeguards to reduce the risk of another avoidable death.

These are basic expectations for any agency that sends armed officers into public spaces. ICE should have stronger rules about the use of body cameras and strict boundaries for when its agents become involved in local law-enforcement matters. It should more rigorously enforce its use-of-force standards. When a federal officer shoots and kills some-



Top, Ruben holds his young niece; middle, Rachel Reyes made a quilt from Ruben’s favorite shirts and jerseys; bottom, Ruben’s bedroom.

one, there should be public reporting of what happened and temporary removal from field duty for the agent involved while the facts are examined. Those safeguards are not anti-law enforcement. They protect the public, responsible officers and the credibility of the agency itself.

No Americans who have experienced a tragedy like the one I have should struggle to obtain answers from their own government. The government’s dismissal and lack of accountability should concern everyone, regardless of political party.

Perhaps the Department of Homeland Security believes a lack of transparency is institutionally safer than candor. But secrecy does not strengthen law enforcement; secrecy weakens it. A government agency that will not fully explain a fatal shooting should not be surprised when citizens question its judgment.

Mr. Mullin may prefer to treat Ruben’s death as part of the department’s past. But when the government kills an unarmed citizen and then refuses to give a full public accounting, the matter is not past. It remains unresolved for my family and for any American who believes the government must be accountable when it takes a life.

RACHEL REYES is the mother of Ruben Ray Martinez, who was fatally shot by an ICE agent in March 2025.

Entering a new era of genocide

BARTOV, FROM PAGE 1

dorsed by the Security Council on Nov. 17, more than 1,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed by Israeli attacks. The military now controls nearly 70 percent of the Strip. Two million Palestinians, who had previously lived in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, are now confined to a third of it, trying to survive in devastated spaces lacking the most basic humanitarian infrastructure.

After the cease-fire and exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, Phase 2 of Mr. Trump’s plan began in mid-January, which intends to bring about the full demilitarization and reconstruction of the Strip, to be managed by a transitional technocratic Palestinian body. Overseeing the process is an international Board of Peace chaired by Mr. Trump. In the long term, the Trump administration has spoken about creating a multibillion-dollar futuristic “New Gaza,” and is reportedly planning to build a major military and personnel base for multinational forces. This will inevitably consign Palestinians in Gaza to the role of construction workers and service providers for the rich inhabiting what used to be their land.

How did we get here?

The Israeli political and military leadership conducted an operation in Gaza that killed at least 70,000 people (as admitted now by the Israeli military), most of them civilians; wounded close to 200,000; and caused vast numbers to die indirectly because of the utter destruction of medical facilities, housing and infrastructure, as well as the deprivation of food and clean water. As I wrote in July 2025, as a scholar of genocide, I believe this was a concerted attempt to destroy the Palestinians in Gaza, in whole or in part, and that the operation therefore reached the high bar of the 1948 Genocide Convention’s definition of this crime.

Israel is unlikely to face a reckoning for its actions. The International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Mr. Netanyahu and his former Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as for a Hamas official, who turned out to have been killed. The United States has tried to undermine the court, and Mr. Netanyahu has repeatedly visited the White House to, among other things, try to reportedly persuade Mr. Trump to launch his attack on Iran. Israel may eventually be found guilty of genocide by the International Court of Justice, where South Africa has lodged a separate case against Israel, but the implications of such a ruling are unclear as long as Israel retains U.S. support on the U.N. Security Council, which acts as the enforcement arm of the I.C.J.

And so Israeli leaders will probably not be held to account, unless they are at some point handed over to the I.C.C. by a new Israeli government unwilling to bring them to justice in Israel and eager to restore the nation’s international standing. That possibility is remote. Indeed, Mr. Trump’s 20-point plan effectively bypasses any possible accountability or punishment for the authors of this crime by promising a bright future for everyone involved, although calls for the restoration of a semblance of normality for the Palestinians are unlikely to gain much sympathy when Israel and its allies are engaged in constructing an ideal city. What would be the point of stirring up old accusations when a brave new world is about to emerge?

It is true that Israel is experiencing increasing global isolation and disapproval among Americans across the political spectrum, but that is precisely what the glossy plans for a new Gaza may attenuate or even reverse: by persuading distracted publics in a troubled world that the issue of Gaza has been settled to everyone’s satisfaction.

The Trump plan, if its vision is ever realized, would mean that the U.S. government or American businesspeople working on its behalf would be selling rights for leasing and construction

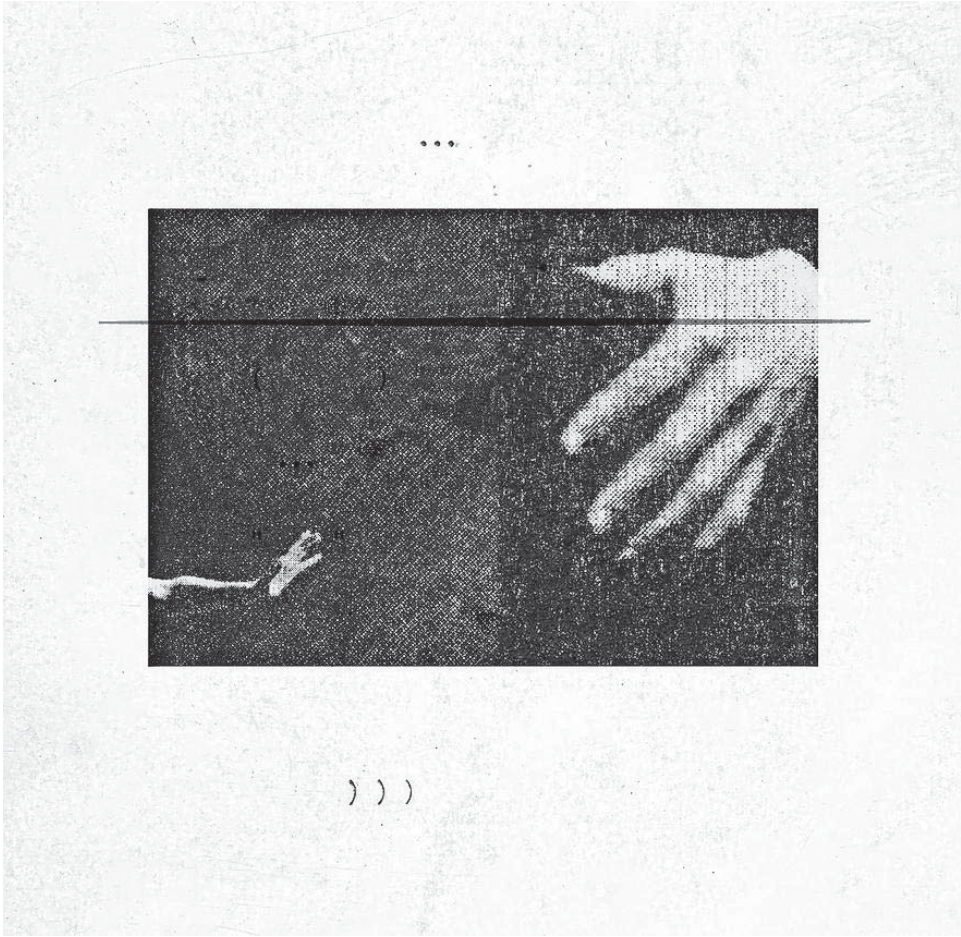
on land expropriated from its residents, whose value is expected to rise sky high.

A collection of real estate moguls, possibly including Jared Kushner, Steve Witkoff and Mr. Trump himself, or companies they promote, would in that way reap a financial bonanza for businesses and investors, transforming the erasure of the Strip into an international investment opportunity. While the coastline would be dominated by prime real

estate against accusations by Nicaragua of facilitating genocide in Gaza by funding Israel and cutting aid to the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency, UNRWA, so it has every political and economic interest in taking the issue off the table. (Germany has denied the allegations.) The United Kingdom is believed to have used its military bases in Cyprus to support Israel, and is laboring to improve its relations with the United

States and the I.D.F. to enclose the population in such cities, from which they will be able to emerge only to service the wealthy residents of the so-called New Gaza. In those extensive parts of the Strip remaining under Israeli control, new flourishing Jewish settlements are likely to be planted.

Mr. Trump has said that the Board of Peace behind this transformation will at some point collaborate with the United



LAURA SCOTT

estate made up of mixed-use towers seemingly for foreign purchase and tourism — providing profits for developers — Palestinians will almost certainly be priced out of housing on what used to be their land. The plan will not only all but eradicate Gaza’s history and society, but also transform it into a free-market economy for foreign corporations being offered “amazing investment opportunities,” as Mr. Kushner put it.

Building Mr. Trump’s so-called Riviera would depend on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states putting up vast amounts

Even though some European governments have canceled weapons deals and sanctioned Israeli defense firms in response to Israeli violence in Gaza, business has remained brisk for Israel’s arms industry.

of money on the promise of ensuring even tighter strategic and economic links with the United States. For now, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia, have signaled interest by joining Mr. Trump’s Board of Peace. Israel, as the Board of Peace consolidates control and Gaza is redeveloped, would take another step in its long-term objective of obliterating Palestinians’ hopes for an end to the Israeli occupation of their territories.

Other nations, by declining to hold Israel accountable, will also benefit. Germany is Israel’s second-biggest supplier of arms after the United States and has signed major contracts purchasing military technology from Israel. Germany is defending itself at the I.C.J.

States. France is trying to maintain its political influence in the Levant and to move on from the question of genocide in Gaza, which, according to President Emmanuel Macron, will be determined by “historians, in due time.”

Israel, too, is profiting. Even though some European governments have canceled weapons deals and sanctioned Israeli defense firms in response to Israeli violence in Gaza, business has remained brisk for Israel’s arms industry. Israeli export arms sales rose by 30 percent last year over 2024, to a record \$19.2 billion, according to Calcalist, an Israeli financial news site, and the battle-testing of weapons systems in Gaza serves as a selling point, Calcalist reported. In other words, wreaking destruction brings profits.

For now, Israel’s impunity will enable its Jewish citizens to continue to ignore the genocide, the consequences of which will be a deepening degradation of Israeli ethics and morality, erosion of the rule of law, internal police violence against the state’s Palestinian and Jewish citizens and the undermining of whatever is left of Israeli democracy. Beyond being deprived of any justice and accountability for their suffering, the Gazan victims of Israeli actions will continue to live in dire conditions, under military supervision and with very limited future prospects.

Since Defense Minister Israel Katz reportedly proclaimed last July that Israel was planning to establish a “humanitarian city” in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, actual conditions on the ground have only deteriorated. It appears conceivable that Trump’s plan will be facilitated by an international force aided by Palestinian security personnel

Nations, but many fear that it will undermine the world body. One effect of this shift in the postwar order would be the gutting of international humanitarian law and of the two international courts set up to preserve it, ensuring that any hopes to bring Israeli policymakers to justice will remain nothing more than a pipe dream and signaling to other nations that impunity will be open to them too.

Some may argue that the case of Gaza is singular because Israel enjoys a unique international position thanks to its tight alliance with the United States and its reliance on the legacy of the Holocaust. Perhaps other states cannot expect to be rewarded and may even be punished for genocide. Yet what we are seeing today sets an extraordinary precedent, one that has the potential of undermining the entire premise of genocide as a crime punishable under post-World War II international law.

If the plans that are currently being elaborated for Gaza go forward, genocide may come to be seen by some nations as the legitimate and lucrative extension of politics by other means. At the least, other nations that will have benefited in some way from the genocide may be less likely to hold future perpetrators accountable. Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term in 1944 and fought for the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide four years later, had hoped to prevent exactly this outcome. It may well be the future of genocide.

OMER BARTOV is a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University.

Is this what a post-literate era looks like?

WALLACE-WELLS, FROM PAGE 9

measures participation in various activities from seeing plays to taking pottery classes, listening to music and reading books. You can slice that data in different ways if you’re focused on the popularity of fiction, say, or poetry, and certain slices do show declines of, say, eight percentage points over 20 years. But in 2022 the N.E.A. survey found that 55.6 percent of American adults had read or listened to a book in the previous year. In 2008 the number was 54.3 percent. In 2002 the figure was 56.6 percent, prompting the N.E.A. to publish a hand-wringing report called “Reading at Risk.”

Pew asks a similar question, separating print books from audiobooks and e-books but also tabulating them together to produce a running measure of American reading habits. In 2011, 78 percent of Americans reported reading a book in some form in the previous year; in 2013 it was 76 percent; in 2021 it was 75 percent; and in 2025 it was 75 percent again.

One survey reports that roughly half

of Americans are reading and another reports that roughly three-quarters are, suggesting something about the limitations of this kind of data and the lessons we try to extract from it. But it probably tells us something that neither one so clearly illustrates the intuitive story of significant decline — and neither do other measures. Gallup has been asking Americans how many books they read in the previous year since 1990, when the answer was 15.3 — a number skewed by voracious readers, as surveys like this always are. In 2001 the average was 14.5. In 2025 it appears to have been 14.6.

And then there are indicators that don’t rely on self-reporting at all. Book sales are not in free-fall but near record highs, with more books sold annually these days than a decade ago (if a bit lower than the pandemic record set in 2021). One might look at best-seller lists and lament what kinds of books are thriving, but those lamentations are as old as those lists. The book industry as a whole is in a period of recovery rather than decline. The number of independ-

ent bookstores in the country has grown by 70 percent since 2020, as the website Literary Hub noted last month. Barnes & Noble opened 50 new locations in 2024.

Reading comprehension is indeed falling, but when you zoom out to take in decades of data, some recent declines are almost invisibly modest and others are higher than they were 50 years ago. Periodically, you’ll hear lamentations that Americans don’t spend enough time reading to their children, though the amount of time spent doing so hasn’t declined over decades but actually crept up in recent years instead. And if you are imagining an idyllic earlier period in which parents devoted hours reading books to their children each day, you might want to know that in 1968 Nielsen reported that children under 6 were watching, on average, 54 hours of television each week.

Perhaps that number seems improbably high to you, as it does to me. But in the 1960s, the TV in the average American household was on for more than five hours a day, according to historical

reporting. In the 1980s it was on for seven hours. By 2010 it was just under nine hours — a figure which then began to drop, actually, with the mass adoption of the smartphone. Not everybody in all those households was glued to the screen every minute it was on, but the survey data still shows that, these days, American adults are actively watching on average more than two hours of TV on a given day — as they have now for several decades, sometimes scrolling their phones at the same time.

Across all those years, screen time of one form or another was five to 10 times as common as reading — sometimes even more so. The medium is the message, the world is awash in short form video and evolving patterns of mass communication do reshape the world; all of that looks pretty hard to dispute. But remind me again when exactly literacy died, and exactly what killed it?

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS is a writer for Opinion and The Times Magazine and the author of “The Uninhabitable Earth.”

SCIENCE



A 19th-century painting by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin depicting the encounter by Odysseus with the angry Cyclops Polyphemus. A site on Ithaca teaches us how Hellenistic Greeks imagined the past, one scholar said.

Mythical figure evoked real reverence

Most scholars don't think Odysseus ever lived, but he had a devoted following

BY FRANZ LIDZ

For nearly 3,000 years, Homer's "The Odyssey" has reigned as literature's ultimate road trip. It's a sweeping tale of a displaced king who fights wrathful gods and sea monsters to reclaim his throne on the Ionian island of Ithaca. It has at least 60 translations into English alone and more than three dozen film interpretations, including Christopher Nolan's blockbuster version, which is in theaters worldwide.

Was the crafty monarch who dreamed up the Trojan Horse a flesh-and-blood ruler or just a figment of Homer's imagination? Modern scholars generally view the epic poem as folklore. But in recent years, archaeologists working in Ithaca have found evidence that the ancients viewed the story quite differently. High on a rocky ridge, they have uncovered what might be antiquity's most devoted fan club: the ruins of a sprawling, 2,400-year-old sanctuary with details suggesting that King Odysseus was a figure of local worship.

The partially standing complex is carved directly into the terraces of Mount Exogi and has long been known locally as the School of Homer. Archaeologists have poked into the site for more than a century but largely dismissed any relation to "The Odyssey." An 1878 excavation at the outcrop found little to match the vivid descriptions in Homer's text.

Since 2018, however, Giannos G. Lolos, an archaeologist at the University of Ioannina, in Greece, has led excavations at the site, building on systematic digs that were conducted there from 1994 to 2011. In a statement last summer, the Greek Ministry of Culture described major discoveries from the site, including a grand ceremonial hall, what may have been a watchtower and a cistern built in the Mycenaean style.

Locals have long wondered if the ruins were the foundations of Odysseus' Mycenaean palace. But Dr. Lolos noted that his team had found nothing to indicate that the surviving parts of the complex dated as far back as 1200 B.C., when Odysseus' travels would have taken place. Nonetheless, the ruins bridge the gap between ancient poetry and historical reality. To the Greeks of antiquity, Odysseus was real enough to command deep, abiding reverence.

"What these new pieces help us understand isn't the Bronze or Iron Age era of Homer," said Rachel Kousser, an archaeologist and art historian at the City University of New York who was not involved with the project. "Instead, it is the way that the Hellenistic Greeks created an imagined Homeric past."

THE ODYSSEION

The School of Homer, which archaeologists refer to as the Odysseion, dates to about the third century B.C., roughly 500 years after Homer composed his epics, and a full millennium after the hero supposedly began his disastrous commute home from the war.

Deep in the soil of the Odysseion, Dr. Lolos and his colleagues discovered a trove of polished black cups, jewelry and prayer vessels. But the true treasure lay in thousands of shattered pottery fragments. Among them were roof tiles etched with Latin and classical Greek, suggesting this remote site was a surprisingly cosmopolitan hub.

The team found more than 100 bronze and silver coins minted in city-states across the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. "It points to a constant flow of sailors, merchants and pilgrims, even from far distant places, to the Odysseion of Ithaca," said Christina Marabea, an archaeologist at Hellenic Open University in Patras, Greece, and a researcher on the site. In 2022, Dr. Marabea collaborated with Dr. Lolos and other scholars



MICK ROCK/CEPHAS PICTURE LIBRARY LTD., VIA ALAMY



Top, the Paliki Peninsula, where some scholars suggest Odysseus lived. Above, the Hellenistic tower of the Odysseion in Ithaca. Right, a small bronze bust of Odysseus found in Ithaca, and an etching of an eighth-century B.C. bust of Homer.

on a paper titled "Emerging Evidence for Neolithic Ithaca" that was published in the Journal of Neolithic Archaeology.

On three separate tiles, the name Odysseus was stamped or inscribed into the clay. One translates to "of Odysseus," implying that the mythical hero owned the grounds. Another reads "to Odysseus" — a direct gift to the king himself.

These rites were not reserved solely for the wayfaring hero. Across the excavation site, archaeologists found dozens of spindle whorls and pear-shaped loom weights — the everyday tools of a time-honored craft. To Dr. Marabea, their presence strongly suggests that women played a leading role in the rituals. She believes that these female worshippers may have been venerating the clever king's equally resourceful wife, Penelope, who famously used her loom to keep suitors at bay.

A VAST COLLECTIVE MEMORY

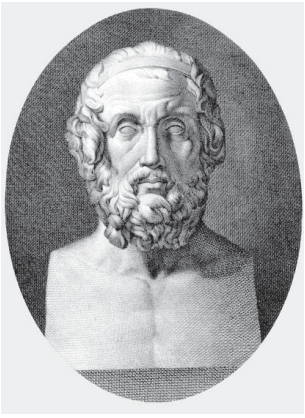
Although Homer's tale was not inspired by a real Odysseus, historians say, it did immortalize a vanished era of gritty Bronze Age chieftains who raided over-



CHRISTINA MARABEA

seas, ruled enormous stone citadels and controlled wide trade networks from 1700 to 1050 B.C. And the myth of Odysseus helped inspire a powerful religious phenomenon known as the hero cult. By the eighth century B.C., these regional sects had grown so dominant that when the Athenian lawgiver Draco drew up the city's first legal code, he didn't just mandate punishments for mortals — he legally required citizens to honor local heroes alongside the Olympian gods.

"The kings lived in palaces across the



HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

region and were buried in grand beehive-shaped tombs with splendid armor," said Daisy Dunn, a classicist and the author of "The Missing Thread: A Women's History of the Ancient World." Homer describes Odysseus as wearing a boar-tusk helmet; archaeologists have indeed found splinters of boar ivory in some graves.

Nearly as much debate surrounds the author of "The Odyssey." Seven Mediterranean cities have fought for the bragging rights to Homer's birth, a bitter rivalry captured by the 16th-century

playwright Thomas Heywood: "Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead / Through which the living Homer begged his bread." Other scholars argue that "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" are too far apart in style, tone and worldview to have burst from a single mind.

Today, mainstream academic opinion lands squarely in the middle: There was not one Homer but a long line of them. The masterworks we read today were not cooked up by a solitary genius. Rather, around the eighth century B.C., just as Greece was tweaking the Phoenician alphabet to build its own writing system, the texts were stitched together from a vast collective memory.

In this telling, the tales are centuries-old anthologies.

But not everyone agrees.

"I feel no shame in saying I believe there was one Homer, even if that wasn't his actual name," Dr. Dunn said. "The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey' are just so well-structured, so well-paced, that it feels like one person has really thought through their development." She envisions Homer as an active architect of the written word, a master editor racing to capture a fleeting world before it slipped into silence.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

After 20 years of brutal warfare and aimless drifting, King Odysseus finally made it home to Ithaca. Or did he?

Even ancient historians had their doubts. In the third century B.C., the geographer Eratosthenes urged readers not to take "The Odyssey" too literally. "You will find the scene of the wanderings of Odysseus when you find the cobbler who sewed up the bag of the winds," he wrote wryly.

For generations, the map has refused to fit the myth. In "The Odyssey," Ithaca is described as a low-lying sanctuary sitting farthest to the west, where the sun sets into the gloom. Yet the modern Greek island bearing that name is decidedly mountainous, and it sits stubbornly to the east of its neighbor, Cephalonia.

A long-running theory proposes that a Bronze Age channel once separated the Paliki peninsula from Cephalonia, making it a distinct island, a notion supported by researchers for decades. But 20 years of geological research yielded no evidence for this channel, prompting a reinterpretation by scholars. In an article published July 5 in the online journal Antigone, James Diggle, a classicist, and John Underhill, a geologist — and authors, with Robert Bittlestone, of "Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca" — propose that early translators and mapmakers misunderstood the poet. A strict, literal reading of the original Greek text, they note, never identifies Ithaca as an island but rather in terms more suggestive of a peninsula.

But the recent findings at the Odysseion may point the dispute back toward tradition. According to Dr. Lolos, the excavations strongly validate modern Ithaca as Homer's true Ithaca. He contends that the description "lying low and far to the west" was born of poetic perspective, not literal cartography. Seen from the sea, Ithaca's dramatic coastline mirrors Homeric vistas.

Dr. Lolos said the strongest proof of the island's mythic past are the artifacts retrieved from its soil. For instance, a fragment of a late Hellenistic clay prayer mask, scratched with a blunt vow to Odysseus. Or a small bronze bust, found in 1904, that echoes the hero's signature capped silhouette from antique Ithacan coins. Or a late third century B.C. decree that was recorded and preserved on stone walls in Magnesia (what is now western Turkey): It was issued by the people of Ithaca and explicitly names the Odysseia, an athletics and cultural festival held to celebrate the king.

These objects do more than reshape archaeological timelines; they tie literature to landscape. For those who lived there, Dr. Lolos notes, modern Ithaca was indisputably home. Myth, it turns out, may just be history waiting to be dug up.

A little sugar to sweeten Milky Way observations

Molecules' Earthly origins are mysterious, but they're necessary for life to begin

BY REBECCA DZOMBAK

Our understanding of the Milky Way just got a little bit sweeter.

For the first time, scientists have spotted sugar in interstellar space, providing an important clue about the origins of sugar on Earth and possibly the rise of life, according to a new paper published in the journal Nature Astronomy.

"This is a real, bona fide sugar," said Brett McGuire, an astrochemist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology who was not involved in the study. "It's just incredibly exciting."

Sugar's origins on Earth are mysterious. Scientists know it must have been present very early on, because it's a necessity for life to arise. But lab experiments to recreate the necessary chemical conditions have repeatedly failed to create these molecules.

So how did sugar get here? Scientists think it could have been delivered to Earth by asteroid and comet impacts early in the planet's history, because several kinds of sugars, including glucose and ribose, have been found on asteroids and meteorites.

But the question of where they came from before that went unanswered.

"People had a lot of interest in trying to find these molecules," said Izaskun Jiménez-Serra, an astrochemist at the Center for Astrobiology in Spain who led the new study. In the early 2000s, when the search for sugar was spinning up but not yielding results, "I didn't actually have much hope," she said.

But in recent years, as researchers detected other large organic molecules in nebulae, she became more optimistic.

The Milky Way's interstellar medium was a likely spot for sugar. The interstellar medium is all the dust and gases in between solar systems, and despite its having extreme conditions, it's "an impressive chemical factory," the authors of the new study wrote. Hundreds of molecules, including some building blocks of the cellular messenger RNA, have been found there. And laboratory experiments suggested that sugars could form from chemical reactions in ices in the interstellar medium.

Hundreds of molecules have been found in the interstellar medium.

So if they were going to spot sugar, it would make sense to find it in there.

Dr. Jiménez-Serra and her collaborators used two radio telescopes to peer deep into the center of the Milky Way, collecting data on the radio frequencies the interstellar medium emitted. As molecules in space spin and move, they produce different frequencies. By comparing the patterns of frequencies they found in space to the patterns that molecules produced in labs, the researchers could see what molecules were out there.

At last, they found the sweet spot. One of the patterns from a nebula near the center of the Milky Way matched up with that of a sugar called erythrulose. Erythrulose is made of four carbon atoms, eight hydrogen atoms and four oxygen atoms. It's found on Earth in raspberries.

"It was this very beautiful match," Dr. Jiménez-Serra said, adding that when she saw it, "my heart started beating very, very fast."

"Their data and analysis support their conclusion that the molecule is there," Dr. McGuire said. "They went to extraordinary lengths to account for all possible interlopers." The results also won the approval of Yoshihiro Furukawa, an astrochemist at Tohoku University in Japan who was not involved in the study. His work led to the discovery of sugars on the asteroid Bennu a few years ago.

The new finding confirms that sugar can form without life in the interstellar medium, and even before stars and planets have formed. That's a critical first step to forming RNA and DNA and to explaining how life arose on Earth.

It also makes it more likely that life could have formed somewhere else.

"If the interstellar medium is capable of forming these ingredients, it could also be found in other molecular clouds across the galaxy, enhancing the chances for life to develop elsewhere," Dr. Jiménez-Serra said.

The researchers estimated that 0.5 to 50 million tons of this sugar could have been delivered to Earth during the critical early part of its life.

Equally interesting is what they didn't find: a slightly smaller sugar, one with three carbon atoms. Since they found the more complex version, it's surprising that they didn't see the simpler version.

"It defies expectations, in some ways, based on the chemistry we understand," Dr. McGuire said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the community sink its teeth into this and say: 'Wow, this was weird. This was wild. This was unexpected. What does it mean?'"



Behold the future of world sport: Trump as referee-in-chief

Marina Hyde



For so many of us around the world, the final scenes of the World Cup were a chance to switch off the TV with an eye-roll and observe mildly: “Well, I think that’s quite enough America for us all for a while now.” And yet: there can and must always be more. It is simply the way of things. If you thought the World Cup being carried on to the pitch ahead of Sunday’s final in some kind of Louis Vuitton sex trunk was the nadir of hysterical trashiness in sport, then simply recall the lesson of the past few years and expand your mind. It can always get trashier.

To the parched fairways of Royal Birkdale, then, the host of this year’s Open Championship, which – yesssssss! – was won by someone other than Bryson DeChambeau or Scottie Scheffler or any of the other radioactively ghastly US golfers you’d cheerfully head-flush in a Mar-a-Lago loo just as long as you could clear the classified documents out of it first. It has now been revealed that, during his heated row over a two-shot penalty he was handed for improving the area for his backswing, DeChambeau has been accused of threatening to call the US president unless it was all resolved in his favour. To repeat: threatening to call Donald Trump.

If you missed this, DeChambeau picked up the penalty for improving the line of his swing, apparently having trodden down some long grass close to his ball on the fifth hole during the second round last Friday. He publicly lost his mind about it, demanded to be driven back to the scene with officials, then returned to the tournament scoring area and reportedly threatened to call Trump. Has a new portal to the dark side opened in sport? Given Trump’s known intervention in the World Cup (of which more shortly), who among us would bet against it?

At time of writing, I had read everything about this sensational escalation, but I still don’t know nearly enough about it. I need every detail. I need everyone involved to reconstruct the entire conversation. I want to know exactly how quickly you might go from “no way did I do any gardening” to “fuck you – patch in the president”. This is a new era of American

Donald Trump plays golf in Doral, Florida, in 2022

PHOTOGRAPH: AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD/GETTY

The only situation room in which he wouldn’t lose focus is one where he was required to cheat remotely at golf

pant-wetting and I need to understand absolutely everything about its conventions.

Certainly, all I already thought about Bryson DeChambeau has been magnified. If you’re unfamiliar with his work, as well as being a two-time US Open champion, Bryson is a hardcore Mar-a-Lago steak-gobbler who got a shout-out in Trump’s 2024 election victory address, though that was delivered at the Palm Beach Convention Center and not at the latter’s Floridian golf-club residence. (Even so, every time we see those words, the hilarity should strike us anew. The president of the United States of America lives in a golf club. Honestly: I just CAN’T.) Anyway, in the small hours after his victory over Kamala Harris, Trump was very keen to pluck DeChambeau from the sliders queue or the ormolu urinals or wherever and get him up on stage. “Bryson DeChambeau is up here somewhere,” Trump told the cameras. “What happened to Bryson? Where is he? Bryson! He’s hitting balls. He’s on the way?” Eventually, DeChambeau realised there was nothing for it but to climb awkwardly on to the stage.

And yet, where is your orange god now, Bryson? Where was he on Friday, as you seemingly failed to summon him to a faraway British links course having been observed doing a bit of landscaping?

There seems, at present, to be no evidence that Bryson put the call in, and since he flaked out of all media appearances for the tournament, no one has been able to ask if he contacted the president in any other way. We understand, however, that he asked for Trump to be called. Sad. Perhaps the only thing worse than demanding that the president be called over you dickering around with the grass is not having the president called over you dickering around with the grass. And then realising that, in many ways, you got less off Trump than some guy called Folarin Balogun who plays a sport called ... hang on, let me get my lorgnette ... “soccer”. That would be a lot of perspective for Bryson to absorb on a Friday lunchtime.

The maddest thing about the entire revelation is what it says about how comically debased and politicised sport has been in such short order. Because the thing is, you can totally see it. You can genuinely imagine that the only situation room Trump wouldn’t lose focus in after about 10 minutes is one where he was required to cheat remotely at golf. You can just picture him assembling Pete Hegseth and Marco Rubio and all the other guys with the too-big shoes in the White House situation room, and them huddling round a feed like the photo of the Obama administration watching the Seal team raid that got Osama bin Laden. Only this one is coming from a grass-level camera at Royal Birkdale.

As indicated, we already know the US president cheats at sport for people. Precisely two weeks ago, this column covered the business of him making three phone calls to the Fifa president, Gianni Infantino, about the red card and match suspension handed to US striker Balogun. On Sunday, the Uefa president, Aleksander Ceferin, went so far as to boycott the World Cup final over, among other things, Infantino allowing this. The only question, surely, is when the next incident or threat will occur. The floodgates of Whitehousery have been opened, and only the US has the power to shut them.

* Marina Hyde’s new book, *What a Time to Be Alive!*, is published in September



It's not you, Claudia. It's the tired old format

Fiona Sturges



You might think the TV chatshow is an easy format to get right. Hire a well-liked host with comic chops and some successful shows under their belt. Build a cheerful set with a big sofa in the middle. Book some A-list celebs plus the obligatory comedian, invite a live audience

et voilà! A prime-time hit is surely born.

Except that time and time again, it has proved not to be that simple. Just ask Claudia Winkleman, who revealed last week that she won't be returning to do a second season of *The Claudia Winkleman Show* on the BBC. The series, which launched in March, filling the gap while *The Graham Norton Show* was on hiatus, was received with lukewarm

reviews. The decision to call time on it is reported to be Winkleman's – "I was just too nervous to enjoy it," she admitted.

Part of the problem is that Winkleman was never going to match Norton's impeccable hosting style, honed over nearly two decades. As well as approaching his A-list guests with warmth and cheeky irreverence, Norton is also a sharp conversational steward, adept at keeping everyone engaged and, thanks to a well-stocked bar, gently lubricated. It isn't as easy as it looks.

By contrast, Winkleman allowed conversations to drift and indulged in silly hyperbole – "That's the best thing anybody's ever said," she yelped at Tom Allen after a mildly funny gag about his fellow guests' blathering. It may be that, following rigorous analysis of the first series, Winkleman would have found her rhythm in a second. But for a presenter still riding high on the success of *The Traitors*, and who has shown herself to be sparky, spontaneous and funny fronting other shows, it wasn't worth risking another critical drubbing.

Winkleman is by no means the first presenter to come a cropper hosting a chatshow. In 2006, Davina McCall, then the boisterous host of *Big Brother*, was roundly panned for her self-titled chatshow, which was dumped after one series. The same decade also brought the short-lived Lily Allen and Friends and Channel 4's sub-par *The Charlotte Church Show*, where both hosts' lack of experience left them looking uncomfortable and out of their depth.

The depressing common denominator in these cancelled shows is female hosts. Allen and Church were badly miscast but, like Winkleman, McCall seemed an ideal candidate. Yet, for reasons that are hard to fathom, the late-night chatshow has always been a male stronghold. Johnny Carson, Larry King, David Letterman, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Jon Stewart and the Jimmys Fallon and Kimmel all ruled the

chatshow roost in the US, while Michael Parkinson, Russell Harty, Terry Wogan, Jonathan Ross, Alan Carr and Graham Norton have done the same here. Comedians, it would appear, seem to land best with audiences. The only woman to have flourished in the format in the UK was under cover of a comic character: Mrs Merton, the creation of the late Caroline Aherne, brilliantly roasted her guests in faux-naïf style, asking Bernard Manning: "Who do you vote for now that Hitler's dead?"

But there is another more existential threat currently facing the chatshow that goes beyond a resistance to female hosts. Until recently, an A-lister with a new film/TV show/album to promote in the UK would make a beeline for either *The Graham Norton Show* or its ITV equivalent, *The Jonathan Ross Show*. But now there are scores of podcasts, most of them operating in video as well as audio, that offer not only easy exposure and a chance to plug their latest masterwork but longer and more in-depth conversations.

Not all these podcasts are made equal – many are hosted by celebrities patently ill-suited to the job of listening and asking probing questions – but the public appetite for them remains undimmed. Once again, male hosts dominate, among them Joe Rogan, Steven Bartlett, Louis Theroux and Romesh Ranganathan, though women are getting more of a look-in. Take *Begin Again*, the hit interview series about midlife reinvention launched in 2024 that has featured Fatboy Slim, Gisèle Pelicot, Richard E Grant and Gillian Anderson as guests. The host? Davina McCall.

All of which would suggest a Winkleman-fronted interview series is by no means dead in the water. Should she wish to have another crack at it, her best bet would be to dispense with the live audience and the giant sofa, and bypass traditional telly altogether.

*
Fiona Sturges
is an arts writer



Edward Stourton

Broadcaster, journalist and Today programme stalwart admired for his incisive interviews

For many Radio 4 listeners, the broadcaster and journalist Edward Stourton, who has died aged 68 of prostate cancer, epitomised all that they valued about the BBC. His voice was authoritative and unmistakably posh, even stately; his questioning in interviews courteous but incisive; and his insight unimpeachable.

These were all reasons why when Stourton – known as Ed – was unexpectedly effectively sacked from presenting the Today programme in 2008 there was such a backlash from the media and many devoted followers. This was caused not least by the corporation's clumsy handling of the ending of his contract, about which he was informed while away from the office by a Daily Mail journalist ringing up to ask him whether it was true.

It was the perception that his dismissal was because of his somewhat patrician manner, rather borne out by a programme editor's assertion that "he does not make your pulse race", that caused the uproar. Many listeners did not want their pulses set racing. The network's hierarchy were

taken aback when he refused to shake hands with the manager who delivered the bad news to him in person. He might be "Posh Ed" to some, but his gentility had its limits.

It was not the first time Stourton had been moved – a decade earlier he had been shifted from the lunchtime TV news to Today – but ultimately the furore gave him a fresh scope to freelance: presenting other shows and writing a series of books, several on his other presiding interest, religion, particularly Catholicism, his own faith. He told the Daily Telegraph in 2023: "It never really occurred to me that I might have to apologise for who I am or make myself different in some way."

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Ed was the eldest of four children of Nigel Stourton, an executive with British American Tobacco and a member of a family whose barony dated back to the middle ages, and his wife, Jenny (nee Abbott), and had a peripatetic childhood following his father's postings to Switzerland and Malta. He was then educated at Catholic boarding schools, including Ampleforth college, whose headteacher Basil Hume later became the cardinal archbishop of Westminster.

Ed became head boy and played

rugby for the school. In later life he was haunted by revelations of child abuse there of which he had no knowledge at the time.

Proceeding to Trinity College, Cambridge, he studied English, became president of the union debating society, edited a student newspaper called Rampage, and became friends with a coterie of figures including Charles Moore, later editor of the Daily Telegraph, the future magazine executive Nicholas Coleridge, and the Tory MPs Oliver Letwin and Andrew Mitchell. His first wife, Margaret McEwen, whom he married in 1980, was the daughter of a baronet.

On graduation he was initially turned down by the BBC, whose interviewer, John Birt, told him that "frankly, it would be a waste of the postage stamp" to tell him he had failed. Stourton went instead to the rival ITN as a news trainee.

His ascent was rapid: he was recruited as a founder member of the Channel 4 News team in 1982 and became its first Washington correspondent in 1986 at the age of 27, covering the final years of the Reagan presidency. The first switch between channels followed when he was made BBC TV's Paris correspondent – he spoke fluent French from his Swiss childhood and was an expert skier – then back to ITN as diplomatic editor for three years (1990-93) before returning to the BBC as a presenter of the One O'clock television news.

His unflappability was not in doubt: Anne Perkins, a colleague at Channel 4, recalls him reporting in pouring rain and filling time on air while endlessly waiting for former hostages to emerge from an RAF flight bringing them back to Britain.

Covering the Bosnian war he was nearly killed by a sniper, whose shot passed between him and his cameraman through the window of a car in which they were travelling.

As a broadcaster he was able to

It never occurred to me that I might have to apologise for who I am or make myself different in some way

convey complex issues coherently and could be sent anywhere in the knowledge that he would deliver the story precisely. "Appearing on TV should be like having sex: you should do it 2.5 times a week," he jocularly remarked. He witnessed the red flag being lowered on Moscow's Red Square, marking the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in South Africa in 1990.

Back in London he was shifted to become one of the presenters of Today in 1999 with a contract for 50 shows a year, latterly reaching more than 110. He was genial, but, as he said, "you don't spend 10 years on the Today programme without a measure of monsterishness". One of his editors, Rod Liddle, wrote that, on air, "he was possessed of a courtly interviewing manner from which occasionally a cunning stiletto would emerge".

His style though did not suit a more demotic trend at the BBC. His former editor at ITN, Stewart Purvis, told me: "Ed had a strong natural authority of a sort that previous generations such as Sandy Gall all had, but his poshness became a disadvantage."

Radio was evidently his milieu, though he continued to make TV documentaries. His time as a reporter on the BBC Two foreign affairs series Correspondent came to an end when he fell in love with the show's producer Fiona Murch, leading to divorce from his first wife and marriage to Murch in 2002.

He was saddened that his remarriage meant he was no longer allowed to receive communion at mass. He remained a Catholic, though a non-practising one: "I cannot quite shake off the idea that life is a journey with a moral destination ... My attachment to Catholicism owes much more to a sense that it is a good guide to this life than to any conviction that it is a passport to the next," he wrote in his memoir Confessions (2023).

There were documentary series for radio and TV including Absolute Truth (1998) for BBC Two on the Catholic church, and appearances as presenter of Sunday, the Radio 4 religious programme. He also wrote books, some linked to TV series: In the Footsteps of St Paul in 2004, a biography of Pope John Paul II (2006) and others including It's a PC World (2008) about political correctness, in which he disclosed that the queen mother had told him that the EU was run by "huns, wops and dagos", leading him to conclude that she was a bigot.

Stourton was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2014 and spoke regularly about the illness.

Fiona survives him, along with the three children from his first marriage, Ivo, Eleanor and Tom, and a stepdaughter, Rosie.

Stephen Bates

Edward John Ivo Stourton, broadcaster and writer, born 24 November 1957; died 18 July 2026

Stourton at work in the Today studio at BBC Radio 4 in 2007. His sacking the following year for seeming 'too posh' caused uproar among listeners and in the media

JEFF OVERS/BBC

OPINION

EDITORIAL

China stock market intervention is a confidence booster

Beijing's efforts to stabilise China's US\$1.5 trillion stock market have had a positive effect, especially on technology and semiconductor stocks. The state-backed buying that led to the rebound aimed to boost investor confidence amid instability exacerbated by volatile trading in artificial intelligence stocks and the Iran war.

It is important for China's financial markets to funnel resources to the most critical sectors – technology and strategic industries. Fluctuating markets can affect stability. The swift government intervention underscores Beijing's endorsement of the stock market's role in China's economic transition through technological innovation. China Securities Regulatory Commission chairman Wu Qing pledged to "keep a transparent, fair and open market order to let investors share the benefits of economic growth and the high-quality growth of the capital market".

China's financial market is also an important wealth creation platform, particularly for the middle class. Amid weak domestic consumption following the property slump, keeping the financial market stable is important to restore confidence among middle class consumers. Given that China's economy, particularly the tech sector, is still growing and the view that the stock market should reflect that, there was a case for the government to step in to stabilise it.

The stock market is important for channelling resources to the tech sector. Many companies queuing up to launch initial public offerings (IPOs) are from the tech sector or other strategically important industries. Stable stock markets help new listings achieve a fair valuation.

This reflects the different economic systems of China and the United States, where even though the government is expected to do the bare minimum, intervention is not completely ruled out during a financial crisis. In China, because the government views financial markets as important economic tools, stabilising them is considered the government's job.

The Chinese authorities believe that even though the second-quarter gross domestic product missed the mark with just 4.3 per cent growth, the overall momentum of growth remains strong. Exports are growing strongly and the hi-tech sector is still booming. Shanghai's economy expanded by 5.6 per cent in the first half, beating expectations due to strong growth in hi-tech manufacturing and exports.

At a time of geopolitical tension and talk of an AI bubble, state buyers in the market could help provide substantial stability when China needs a stable financial market to underpin economic growth. A stable mainland market will also benefit Hong Kong.

Ageing infrastructure demands attention

The combination of a leaking water main, a broken promise to restore the fresh water supply and a red rainstorm warning amounted to an urban nightmare for residents and businesses of two Eastern district neighbourhoods on Sunday and Monday. The elderly who had to fetch and carry from water wagons in heavy rain can attest to that. Authorities failed to restore the fresh water supply to 10,000 households in Shau Kei Wan by 6am on Monday as promised, more than a day after the start of the disruption.

The Water Supplies Department said the supply had gradually resumed at 11am after engineers repaired an additional leak. The weather and other underground pipes beside the affected water main had made repairs more difficult. This followed a burst pipe in North Point recently, resulting in a 10-metre geyser that halted traffic. Such incidents are reminders of the need to conduct thorough checks and update ageing infrastructure.

Given the weather and the delay in the latest incident, most residents bore the ordeal stoically. A 70-year-old man, collecting water for the third time, said it was "a real struggle" but added that the government had provided enough water and that he understood the situation. "The government certainly doesn't want this to happen either," he said. The government must be ruled out while the city still has ageing pipes. The department has said it plans to replace old pipes in the next three years.

Wong King, executive president of the International Institute of Utility Specialists, said the leaking pipe was made from cast iron, which needed repairs after about 50 years. He said the leak did not surface above ground as the pipe ran above a drainage pipe, allowing the leaked water to flow directly into the sea through the lower pipe.

Ageing infrastructure poses an ongoing problem in densely developed cities with ageing populations. While Hong Kong is a globally competitive regional hub and a bridge between China and the world, it is no exception in that regard. It must rise to the challenge and ensure basic livelihood needs are met.

Reports of the elderly lining up in the rain to fill their water bottles do nothing for the city's image as an advanced society.

HARRY'S VIEW ON IMPROVING WATER SUPPLY INFRASTRUCTURE > A1



Break the chokehold

Winston Mok says beyond its graphics processing unit supremacy, America's greatest asset lies in leverage over allies' critical technologies and capacities

Nvidia's H200 chips, a step down from its most advanced Blackwell line, have resumed imports into China, albeit in small quantities. Meanwhile, China's chip exports nearly doubled in the first half of this year.

Much of these exports are mature logic integrated circuits for applications in consumer electronics and automotive sectors. While the US is the undisputed leader in the most advanced artificial intelligence (AI) chips, China is emerging as a dominant player in mass-market legacy integrated circuits.

Between the two is the central processing unit (CPU) layer, the brains of laptops and servers. Intel CPUs once symbolised US semiconductor leadership. As AI transitions from model training to applications, CPUs will regain importance in the next five years.

Although the CPU segment has been dominated by Intel and AMD, Chinese firms are closing the gap. It is a more contestable arena where China has a more realistic chance of becoming self-sufficient over time. Another key segment is memory chips, which the United States ceded to East Asia decades ago. Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix together account for two-thirds of the global dynamic random access memory (DRAM) market, while Japanese firms continue to have a critical role in the supply chain upstream.

US-based Micron is third with 22 per cent market share. China's fourth-ranked ChangXin Memory Technologies, with an 8 per cent market share, is set to make its debut in a Shanghai listing on Monday.

But the ultimate chokeholds at the apex of the semiconductor ecosystem lie in Europe and Taiwan. Nvidia's graphics processing units (GPUs) are made by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) using ASML machines. The US restricts mainland China's access to the global semiconductor supply chain through its allies.

This is not a simple bilateral contest but a layered, multilateral hierarchy of interdependent control unfolding across different arenas. Washington does not need to own every rung of the semiconductor ladder to prevail in the chip war. Beyond its supremacy in the software and design of the GPU – the most strategic layer – the US has leverage over two chokepoints it does not own: the Dutch lithography monopoly and fabrication capacity in Taiwan.

The CPU layer, whose gap with the US may be more realistically narrowed by China, carries lower strategic value. CPUs, less powerful than GPUs, are subject to fewer export restrictions – as they are assembled into laptops in China which are then exported globally. Cost-effective laptops are available to American consumers only with an open supply chain where components flow freely.

Compared to Nvidia's US\$4.86 trillion valuation, Intel's valuation is significantly lower, indicating the relative maturity of the CPU layer. Reaching parity with the US on CPUs would be China's next milestone worthy of celebration but not one which is most consequential.

The lithography machine is the most consequential layer; the foundation of making all chips. China has started making its own deep-ultraviolet lithography machines. But ASML's most advanced extreme ultraviolet (EUV) machines are complex monsters assembled with technologies from many countries. It is truly the result of multinational collaboration beyond what any single nation can achieve.

China is making a heroic effort to develop its own EUV's while at the same time finding bypasses around their use, but the technical challenges are formidable. China has built a prototype EUV machine in Shenzhen. Meanwhile, a Shanghai-based company is trying to overcome the engineering intricacies through alternative chip technologies. Even under the most

ambitious timeline, these efforts are likely to come to fruition only towards the end of this decade.

China's challenge is not to surpass the US alone, but to replicate the combined technological capabilities of the entire Western world. Thus, semiconductor supremacy is not a single technology to be mastered but a thousand critical points, held by different companies across different countries.

Most of the technologies China has mastered reward scale and capital, with its domestic market often world-leading in scale. Semiconductor reward accumulated tacit knowledge and allied trust. China has been structurally denied both.

America's power in the chip war is triangular: upstream through chokepoint technologies, downstream through customer concentration and sideways through geopolitical allies. Washington does not need to own the mother machines or the fabs; its technologies are embedded in both. Washington can bind Taipei and Seoul through defence relationships.

The US-China chip war is more geopolitical than technological in nature. The US lead over China is real. However, it does not mean that the contest is won.

Washington's decisive chokeholds lie in a lithography monopoly it does not own, fabrication capacity it does not operate and the memory supply chains it does not control, all exercised through leverage over others. China's key challenge is to induce other economies to act in their own interests rather than to absorb the high costs of US containment of China.

For example, China has been a critical market for ASML. China has also introduced its own legal countermeasures and can wield its command of rare earth processing supply chains as leverage against the US and its allies.

The decisive front of the chip war is not Silicon Valley or Shenzhen, but Amsterdam, Taipei and Seoul – specifically when they decide, even with different levels of agency, whether compliance with Washington is worth the costs Beijing may impose.

Winston Mok, a private investor, was previously a private equity investor

How obscure psychologist reshaped the Homeric hero

Alex Lo says scheming Odysseus may have been the first modern man with a self-directing mental life while other archaic heroes blindly obeyed the gods

Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* has hit cinemas across North America. Suddenly, everyone has a Homer on their mind.

If China has *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West*, the West has *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These are civilisation-defining monuments, about which children know the stories and scholars spend a lifetime probing every detail.

The identity of Homer has always intrigued scholars over the ages. Samuel Butler, who translated both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, was convinced a woman wrote the latter.

E.E. Shaw, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, thought *The Odyssey* was a modern potboiler unworthy of the heroic epic of *The Iliad*. He said he spent four years working on his translation. You would assume it was a labour of love, but he seems to have more contempt than respect for this Homer, whom he rejected as the same author of *The Iliad*.

"Crafty, exquisite, homogeneous – whatever great art may be, this is not its attributes," he wrote in a note to his translation. "In this tale every big situation is burked and the writing is soft... Epic belongs to early man, and this Homer lived too long after the heroic age to feel assured and large... It is sorrowful to believe that [Nausicaa, Eumaeus, Odysseus, Menelaus, etc.] were really Homer's heroes and exemplars."

Emily Wilson, whose translation is the version Nolan uses for his movie, agrees Odysseus is a different kind of Homeric hero, almost a modern anti-hero. Why? Because he lies, tricks, deceives and tells tall tales.

In a Financial Times interview, she said the way "he is constantly reinventing himself" helps explain why Odysseus is a character for our times. "There are so many stories about his deception, manipulation and persuasion on TV right now," she said. "*The Odyssey* lives with those somehow. He's a different kind of con man."

What these translators – and many others – share is an intuition that Homer was not a single person, however much they may disagree over who the author actually was. The heroes in *The Iliad* had a completely different archaic mentality from Odysseus. To some, this offers clues to the age-old question of Homer's identity or identities.

The psychologist Julian Jaynes made this startling claim in his cult classic, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicommental Mind*. "Who then were these gods that pushed men about like robots and sang epics through their lips?" he asked.

In describing the gods as "what we now call hallucinations", Jaynes wrote that, "They were voices whose speech and directions could be as distinctly heard by the illiterate heroes as voices are heard by certain epileptic and schizophrenic patients, or just as Joan of Arc heard her voices."

We could not invent "mind-spaces" behind the "fierce eyes" of Homeric heroes, as we do for each other. "Illiad man did not have subjectivity as we do," Jaynes observed. "He had no awareness of his awareness of the world, no internal mind-space to introspect upon. In distinction to our own subjective conscious

minds, we can call the mentality of the Mycenaeans a bicommental mind."

"Volition, planning, initiative" are not acts of self-consciousness but commands or instructions "told" to the individual in his familiar language, sometimes with the visual aura of a familiar friend or authority figure or god, or sometimes as a voice alone. The individual," according to Jaynes, "obeyed these hallucinated voices because he could not 'see' what to do by himself."

Odysseus is a different creature altogether. Deceiving and making up stories require a self-awareness of the truth to mislead and fool others. Jaynes called *The Odyssey* "a journey of deviousness." "It is the very discovery of guile, its invention and celebration."

Where once it described external events objectively, Jaynes wrote, poetry became "subjectified into a poetry of personal conscious expression."

"There are no secrets in *The Iliad*. But *The Odyssey* has many of them..." he continued. "The whole long song is an odyssey towards subjective identity and its triumphant acknowledgement out of the hallucinatory enslavement of the past."

Homer was not a single person. Rather, he was a stand-in for a long oral tradition that bifurcated from the bicommental to the modern mind.

"[T]here were many intermediaries who verbally transmitted whatever happened in the 13th century to succeeding ages," Jaynes argued. "It is thus more plausible to think of the creation of the poem as part of this verbal transmission than as the work of a single man named Homer in the ninth century BC."

Alex Lo has been a South China Morning Post columnist since 2012, covering major issues affecting Hong Kong and the rest of China

CONTACT US

Tammy Tam Publisher

Chow Chung-yan Editor-in-Chief

Zuraidah Ibrahim Executive Editor Yonden Lathoo Managing Editor

Zhang Jun Chief Technology Officer

Editorial office: 207, Tower One, Times Square, Matheson Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

Editorial feedback, general inquiries 2561 2222, news@scmp.com

Advertising inquiries 2561 2428, adsales@scmp.com

Subscription and delivery hotline 2600 8822, prsubs@scmp.com

Reprint permission 2600 8822, licensing@scmp.com

Place a classified or recruitment ad 2561 8822, classified@scmp.com

Subscription and delivery hotline 2600 8822, prsubs@scmp.com

Online 24-hour inquiries 2561 9388, support@scmp.com

Charity giving 2600 8188, hkg@scmp.com

Events and conferences 2561 2435, hkg@scmp.com

CONTACT US
Agree or disagree with the opinions on this page? Write to us at letters@scmp.com
If you have an idea for an opinion article, email it to oped@scmp.com

An incoherent policy

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa says Europe's 'China threat' posture is a threat to itself

The China threat has landed in Brussels. A new European Union position paper accuses Beijing of amplifying security threats, posing "a critical long-term strategic challenge" and reviving "sphere-of-influence logic" to reshape the global order.

Beijing is cast as an enabler of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while its "assertive behaviour" in the South China Sea threatens European and Indo-Pacific security, stability and prosperity. The document, "Common Understanding: The Threats and Challenges We Face", was approved by foreign ministers on July 13.

The paper does not replace the policy adopted in 2019, when Brussels defined China as partner, competitor and systemic rival. Instead, it places that formula beneath an overriding judgment: Beijing represents a long-term security challenge.

That label came a month after the same ministers had reaffirmed "de-risking, not decoupling" as EU policy towards China, alongside continued engagement with Beijing. More recently, China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao and EU officials defined their relations as a "stable and balanced key trading partnership".

Yet as of now, China's industrial scale, technological ambitions, commercial leverage, control of critical raw materials, Russia partnership and Indo-Pacific conduct form a threat assessment. In March, EU foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas suggested this position paper would underpin the European Security Strategy, linking defence, energy and supply chains.

It will therefore shape the EU's China policy on investment screening, export

controls, procurement, industrial support, technology, trade restrictions and supply chain exposure. Measures presented as technical safeguards will rest on a political judgment: dependence on Beijing is both a commercial vulnerability and part of a wider security threat.

For decades, Brussels assumed trade and interdependence reduced security risks. The assessment reverses that premise: dependence itself becomes the risk.

A judgment with such reach demands public explanation and political ownership, yet the EU gives it less attention than many town councils give a parking by-law. It published a detailed meeting account and held a press conference, yet it mentioned the decision in neither.

The "Common Understanding" report appeared as a PDF on a server – hardly evidence that Europe has publicly debated a decision of this magnitude.

Securitisation theory holds that recasting an issue as security requires a public speech act. An actor declares an existential threat, addresses an audience and gains authority for exceptional measures through that audience's consent.

This document uses strong threat language, but it omits the audience. It amounts to bureaucratic, even silent, securitisation: officials approve the threat characterisation while excluding the public. Citizens cannot tell what their governments proposed, opposed, accepted or traded away.

A long-term security threat and an engagement policy do not form a coherent whole. Europe should clarify which interest prevails when access to Chinese raw materials conflicts with security, climate cooperation with pressure over Ukraine or

commercial openness with reducing dependence. EU nations endorsed this diagnosis without establishing that hierarchy. The result is two China policies: officials are instructed to treat Beijing as a long-term challenge, while companies are promised dialogue, continued engagement and commercial continuity.

Meanwhile, European businesses will bear the policy through investment restrictions, restricted procurement access, supply chain requirements and Chinese retaliation. Citizens will bear it through higher costs. Neither group has been told what those burdens are meant to achieve or how the strategy's success will be judged.

Neither group has been told what those burdens are meant to achieve or how the strategy's success will be judged

The assessment's weaknesses surface in how it applies its own logic to some states but not others. It uses no comparable language for the United States, Europe's "most important strategic partner", despite US President Donald Trump's attempts to secure control of Greenland and his repeated use of punitive tariffs.

The EU's criteria for defining threats appear to be inconsistent and selective. The EU itself continued importing Russian gas after 2022 while allowing Ukraine to use

66 billion (HK\$53.7 billion) in EU funds to buy Chinese-made drone components.

The process reveals that EU leaders are unwilling to own the consequences of their geopolitical moves. They seek authority from naming China as a threat, flexibility from keeping business open and immunity from national responsibility – three aims that cannot be reconciled.

The deeper trouble is that 27 states are trying to act as one geopolitical power without agreeing what kind of power the EU should be. The same unresolved question lies behind the old notion that Europe is an economic giant but a political dwarf, as well as behind European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's failure to form a "geopolitical commission".

A geopolitical actor must rank its aims, define the limits of cooperation and accept the costs. Europe's governments have done none of these. Instead, they risk turning the bloc into a bureaucratic apparatus that classifies threats along ideological lines, creates obligations and conceals authority, insulating governments from the costs imposed on citizens and industry.

The result is Europe's self-neutalisation. The EU records Beijing's economic coercion, Russia's effort to erode security and the burdens the US expects it to carry, then reduces itself to an inconsequential arena in which all three pursue their interests at will.

Silence cannot reconcile competing priorities. It defers the choice until markets, allies, adversaries or events make it for Brussels. Until its governments own the choices that follow, Europe will keep dodging power while others decide its fate.

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa is a geopolitics analyst with a specialisation in EU-Asia relations

LETTERS

Share your views with us and other Post readers in a Letter to the Editor. Include your full name and address, plus a phone number for verification. Please keep your letter to a maximum of 400 words.

Email us at letters@scmp.com. Address: 19/F, Tower One, Times Square, 1 Matheson Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong.

Climate change demands stronger worker protection

Climate change is no longer a distant threat – it is disrupting economies and daily life across the world. The Asia-Pacific region has been suffering extreme heat, historic rainfall and El Niño conditions. Hong Kong is no exception, with the "once-in-500 years" rainstorm of 2023 and Super Typhoon Ragasa in 2025 revealing the city's vulnerability.

Extreme weather is expected to become more frequent and severe. With economic diversification, more workers – including elderly persons, part-time staff, older people and those with disabilities – face heightened exposure to climate risks.

Given that the existing safeguards are insufficient, protecting workers' safety and rights must be an urgent policy priority.

The Hong Kong government has issued a revised Code of Practice in times of Typhoons and Rainstorms, as well as Guidance Notes on Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work. While useful, these remain guidelines rather than binding orders.

Employers should go beyond minimum compliance, engaging staff in shaping operational rules that reflect different job roles. With environmental, social and governance principles now widely adopted, companies – including small and medium-sized enterprises and NGOs – are encouraged to proactively safeguard workers rather than treat health and safety as passive obligations.

Polymakers should also take further steps. The Labour Department could play a more active role in educating employees about their rights, with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as delivery workers and part-timers. For these workers, income is tied directly to hours worked, with work suspensions during extreme weather can mean immediate financial hardship. Legal protection for compensation and safety is therefore essential.

The government could develop information campaigns, targeted incentives and enforceable requirements to ensure workplaces are resilient against climate risks. Protecting workers is not only a matter of legal compliance but also of corporate social responsibility. More importantly, it is a cornerstone of sustainable economic development. In the age of climate change, safeguarding employees is the foundation of resilience.

Dr Chris Cheung, lecturer, and Xie Jisheng, student, Wu Jieh Yue School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Lingnan University

Canadian wildfires a reminder atmosphere has no borders

As recent summers have made clear, wildland fires are no longer a regional anomaly. NASA reports that due to human-induced climate change, extreme wildfire activity "has more than doubled worldwide".

Hotter temperatures evaporate water from soil and vegetation, making it more likely to burn. A study in Science warns that global soil moisture could be in "permanent" decline because of our warming climate.

The drying of continents, driven by increased heat and evaporation, has been so pronounced that the transfer of water to the oceans has altered the distribution of our planet's mass and affected Earth's rotation.

As evidenced by toxic Canadian wildfire smoke drifting across the United States, deadly European heatwaves and rapidly expanding "mega-drying" regions in South Asia, the atmosphere has no borders.

As guests of this world, we must insist that our legislators enact policies to cut emissions, conserve water and protect Earth's life-support systems on which we all depend.

Terry Hansen, Wisconsin, US

Structural reforms must kick in to resurrect Chinese football

While your critic finds *Kung Fu Soccer*, Stephen Chow's remake of *Shaolin Soccer*, to be stale, its strong run at the mainland box office tells a different story. Audiences recognise and celebrate its premise – that the underdog, given a chance, can outshine the powerful.

This year's World Cup also drives home that message. Vozinha, the 40-year-old Cabo Verde goalkeeper, waited for a long time to play on the world stage. When he finally did, he made seven saves against Spain and stunned the football world. The final added another subplot, with Lamine Yamal, 19, facing Lionel Messi, 39. Messi had cradled Yamal, then five months old, at a 2007 charity calendar shoot that the latter's parents won a raffle to attend.

Both Vozinha and Yamal found their opening. Yet Chinese players of comparable talent rarely do – and not for want of ability. Ranked 91st by FIFA, the world's second-largest economy has fewer than 110,000 registered youth players out of 1.4 billion people, even as 23 people have been banned from football for life. The barriers are structural: *gaokao* pressure often keeps children off the pitch when they turn 16.

To rejuvenate Chinese football, structural reforms are required. China needs subsidised grass-roots access, a student athlete programme that keeps talented teenagers in the game through school, and a football association that selects players on their merits, not how much money is changing hands. This way, China would play the World Cup again, for real.

Zhangcheng Gu, Shanghai, Yichun Wang, Sai Ying Pun, and Simon Wang, Kowloon Tong

Why China is expanding land trade routes to Central Asia

Nargiza Umarova says Beijing is diversifying export channels as maritime hubs face instability

Over the past year, China's Belt and Road Initiative has seen rapid development in Central Asia. This has been evidenced by the launch of several railway and road routes connecting China's industrial and economic centres to logistics hubs in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

Last year, China became the largest trading partner of all the Central Asian countries for the first time as trade jumped by 12 per cent to exceed US\$100 billion. It explains the rapid containerisation of cargo, a trend also evident in Chinese shipments to Europe.

More than 20,000 freight trains were dispatched along the direct China-Europe route last year. In the first half of this year, the figure grew by 20 per cent on year to 11,178. Today, express railways connect 129 Chinese cities to 235 cities in 26 European countries. Part of the rail freight traffic to Europe is routed through Central Asia.

The development of transport routes to Central Asia is part of China's wider strategy to diversify its land-based export channels. This is particularly relevant as escalating geopolitical tensions around the world destabilise maritime trade hubs.

Since April last year, freight trains have been running between Chongqing in China and the Uzbek capital of Tashkent.

Departing twice a month, the trains cross the Kazakh border and cover 4,700km in about 12 days, cutting the time taken to transport goods from southwestern China to Central Asian countries by 30 per cent, improving profitability.

Rail services to Uzbekistan were also launched last year from Sichuan in the southwest, Jiangsu in the east and Hubei in Central China, enabling cargo to be delivered up to 10 days faster. The trains travel through Kyrgyzstan, highlighting the importance of Kyrgyz transit in regional connectivity.

Last year, cargo transported via the multimodal China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridor increased to 1.8 million tonnes, from around 34,000 tonnes in 2020. Once fully completed, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway can transport up to 15 million tonnes of cargo a year.

It can also shorten the trade route from East Asia to southern Europe by an estimated 900km, cutting delivery times by a week. Scheduled for completion by 2030, the railway's scope extends beyond

trilateral cooperation to encompass a regional dimension – it will cement Central Asia's status as a key transit hub for overland transport between China and Europe.

This aligns with the strategy of revitalising the southern transit route of the New Silk Road, in which Iran plays a pivotal role.

Attention should be paid to the increasing trend of test cargo trains from China to Turkmenistan, which shares a land border with Iran. Just last month, a container train left Xining, in Qinghai province, for Turkmenistan's Balkan Velayat. Turkmenistan is increasingly integrating into the new East-West logistics chains.

Importantly, Turkmenistan and Iran are committed to building out the Southern Railway Corridor to Europe, a strategic project involving Central Asian states, and backed by China.

Since 2022, the UN Economic Commission for Europe-Economic Cooperation Organisation (UNECE-ECO) coordination committee, chaired by Uzbekistan, has provided support for this process. Last month, the committee held its 8th meeting in Istanbul, where participants discussed the Southern Railway Corridor and how to realise its full potential.

Meanwhile, the road freight traffic between China and Turkmenistan continues to grow. In February last year, the first direct road route under the globally recognised TIR transit system opened, running from Zhengzhou in Henan province to Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan.

Last October, combined transport to Turkmenistan via Kyrgyzstan and

Uzbekistan went on trial, offering the prospect of maritime access to Azerbaijan.

This year, container trains have also started up between China and Tajikistan. Operated by the Uzbek-Chinese joint venture UTK International Logistics, the trains travel via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, opening up the prospect of Tajik shippers entering the European Union market.

The groundwork has been laid. Tajikistan is a member of the Eurasian Transport Route International Association, established in 2024 to help develop the CASCA+ (Central Asia-South Caucasus-Anatolia plus) railway corridor, which connects to the Middle Corridor, a project running through Kazakhstan across the inland Caspian Sea by ship to Azerbaijan, onwards to Georgia and into Turkey.

China's continued demand for overland trade routes is reconfiguring cargo flows in Central Asia, transforming the region from an isolated space into a key transcontinental hub in Eurasia. At the same time, Central Asia is gaining a valuable asset that could strengthen its position in global geopolitics and stimulate economic growth.

More broadly, this could pave the way for the region's strategic autonomy by encouraging the five republics to pursue an independent and coordinated transport policy, thus laying the foundation for equalising relations with major powers.

Nargiza Umarova is a head of the Centre for Strategic Connectivity at the Institute for Advanced International Studies, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, and an analyst at the non-governmental research institution Knowledge Caravan, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

China's continued demand for overland trade routes is reconfiguring cargo flows in Central Asia

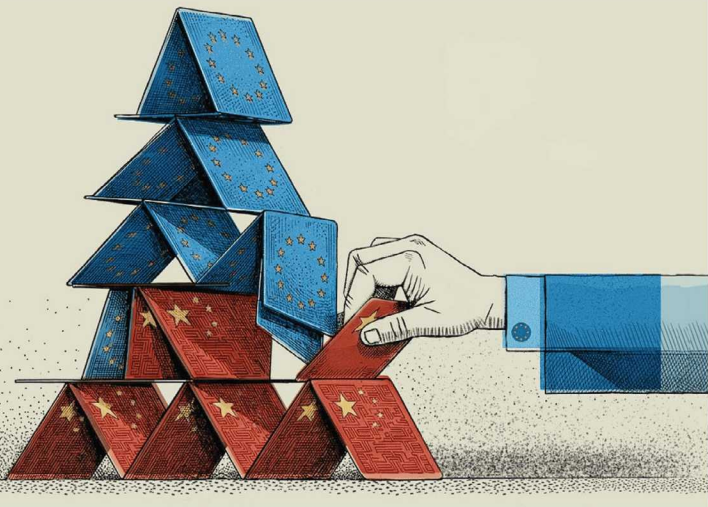


Illustration: Rocio Marquez

Par Ridder
Publisher

Mitch Pugh
Executive Editor

Chris Jones, Editorial Page Editor

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

Stacy St. Clair, Managing Editor

DIRECTORS OF CONTENT

Amanda Kaschube, Sports and Audience
Todd Panagopoulos, Visuals

EDITORIALS

Illinoisans hate high property taxes. So why do we keep voting for them?

There’s a difference between wants and needs. That distinction matters in household budgets, and it ought to matter in public budgets, too.

We accept high property taxes as part of a bargain: We assume they’ll pay for good schools, safe neighborhoods, well-maintained streets and other essential local services. Increasingly, however, new projects are tacking even more onto the bill.

Yet even as homeowners remain outraged about high property taxes, they’re also the ones being sold on the increases.

Behold the property tax paradox.

Look at Skokie. The Skokie Park District is preparing to ask voters to approve a \$53 million bond referendum to expand and improve parks. To reiterate: That’s \$53 million worth of improvements. A public opinion survey commissioned for the district found majority support for the proposal, even though it would cost the owner of a \$400,000 home about \$137 more a year in property taxes.

Skokie is hardly alone. An analysis by the Cook County treasurer’s office found that voters approved 14 of 15 referendums in 2024 in which local taxing bodies sought permission to borrow above state limits. Between 2020 and 2023, voters approved about 80% of similar requests.

Voters in northwest suburban Mount Prospect in 2024 approved not one, but two, high-dollar referendums, worth a whopping \$100 million that would add nearly \$1,000 in property taxes for a home worth \$400,000 in exchange for a new middle school and park facilities.

Tax bills in that neck of the woods, for homes in that price range, are already pushing \$10,000



North Milwaukee Avenue runs through the Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods in front of the skyline on May 6 on Chicago’s Northwest Side. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

for most homeowners.

Illinois homeowners already face the nation’s highest effective residential property tax rate, according to the Tax Foundation. Yet they’re continually being told that if they want quality parks, good schools, modern infrastructure or adequate public safety, they’ll need to approve another tax increase or more borrowing (which will ultimately be repaid through future property taxes).

Every referendum asks whether one more improvement is worth paying for, but they rarely ask whether we’ve reached the point where our existing tax bill should already cover the basics. (And then some.)

Shouldn’t our current high property taxes buy the luxury of saying “no” to the next referen-

dum? (We think so.)

More voters should be asking that question, and getting uncomfortable with the present dynamic in which their exorbitant property tax payments still aren’t enough to satisfy what we’ve come to expect from local government. Whether that’s because of pensions, inflation, union pressure, rising labor costs, state mandates or something else, the result is the same: Taxpayers who already feel tapped out are continually being asked to pay more.

If you’ve lived here long enough, you become immune to just how bad a deal it is, and how it ices so many people out of homeownership. This is just not how it is in many other parts of the Midwest, something any clear-eyed outsider can see at first glance. Our bills

shock folks from the likes of Cleveland, Indianapolis, Milwaukee and other Midwest metros.

The line between essential public services and quality-of-life amenities has gradually blurred. That’s not to say communities shouldn’t invest in parks or libraries or schools, but that projects once viewed as “extras” are now treated as necessities, even as they come at great cost to taxpayers.

Somewhere along the way, the distinction between wants and needs has become less clear. In many parts of the country, homeowners who want something beyond the basics have choices. They can join a private swim club, a health club or an athletic facility and pay only if they use it. Around Chicago, it’s common for suburban governments to provide

similar amenities. That means everyone helps pay for the latest aquatic center, fitness complex or recreation upgrade whether they use it or not.

Not every referendum is like that, of course, and many relate to the essentials residents expect their tax bills to cover. Before voting for another property tax hike, we suggest a question: What are we already paying for?

Why, for example, must taxpayers fork over so much money and still have to pay more for every little update and upgrade? Why are tax hikes and borrowing so often presented as the only options? What other cost-conscious, responsible ideas are not being leveraged to avoid more pain at tax time twice a year?

Every referendum plays on this impulse to want bigger, better and newer, asking the same question: “Would you pay a little more for something worthwhile?” Too often, that’s an easy sell. What’s much harder to answer is why communities with some of the highest property taxes in the country still can’t afford what residents reasonably expect those taxes to provide.

Answering that question won’t be as popular as pushing big bucks for a new playground, but failing to do so will only perpetuate the cycle that too often puts upgrades out of reach in the first place.

Every referendum is presented on its own merits, and some undoubtedly are worthy. Taxpayers don’t experience them one at a time, however, but as another add on an already staggering property tax bill. Before asking homeowners to pay a little more for the next improvement, local governments owe them a clear answer to a simple question: If we’re already paying among the highest property taxes in America, why isn’t that enough?

Sigcho-Lopez and Macías are ordered off the ballot. Democracy loses

What do you call it when a congressman handpicks his successor and then fights tooth and nail to keep other viable candidates off the ballot?

Illinois’ 4th Congressional District.

When U.S. Rep. Jesús “Chuy” García announced his retirement last November, he did so just hours before the filing deadline for other candidates to get onto the ballot. García’s anti-Democratic plan soon became all too clear: His chief of staff, Patty García, would be running. Guess what? Her petitions were prepared and her paperwork was all conveniently lined up.

We called the maneuver sleazy then. The stench got even worse Tuesday when the two serious contenders who wanted to oppose this coronation were ordered off the November ballot.

Patty García now has a clear path to victory after would-be challengers Mayra Macías and Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez, 25th, were removed. Both Macías and Sigcho-Lopez had been running as independents, their only option under the, ahem, unusual circumstances.

After gathering the onerous number of signatures required to run as independents, opponents challenged many of those signatures. The Illinois State Board of Elections ruled that neither candidate got enough valid John Hancocks. Patty García’s only remaining independent challenger is Lyons Mayor Chris Getty; he didn’t scare the Democratic establishment as much.

A concerned Sigcho-Lopez met with us last month and shared just how grueling the process was to

get onto the ballot as an independent candidate. He also claimed that various high-powered Democrats in the state were behind some of the “challenges.”

Petition challenges are sleazy operations, and they tend to be conducted to allow for some deniability, so we heard plenty of those denials after Sigcho-Lopez left our office. That said, we remain convinced that Sigcho-Lopez, whose team had to collect 10,816 signatures, over 15 times more than García, had more than fulfilled the unfair law’s intent. To our minds, the likes of Gov. JB Pritzker and even García himself, both men who talk a good game about democracy, should have been helping, not hindering, or even merely staying away.

Sigcho-Lopez told us his team had collected 20,000 signatures,

above and beyond the requirement, knowing they’d face challenges. We believe he has done what should have been all he had to do. And we say that as a board that generally has opposed Sigcho-Lopez’s proposals. We still think he belongs on the ballot.

Frankly, we felt like we were talking to a man who had believed in the system, only to experience its betrayal. We’d imagine he has been obliged to buoy himself up for public service all over again.

Macías clearly felt the same way. “The spirit of the law is being completely broken in this race,” she said before the elections board Tuesday.

Indeed.

The point of petitions is to prevent frivolous candidates from flooding the ballot, but these examples demonstrate how Illinois’

ballot-access rules can be used to protect a major-party candidate from serious competition.

This should not keep happening. The fault (mostly) lies not with the State Board of Elections — as Chair Laura Donahue said, the elections board’s job is to administer the law, not make it.

The solution is for Springfield’s Democratic majority to change election rules to level the signature-gathering playing field for independent candidates. Our system shouldn’t deny voters a meaningful choice at the ballot.

Those same Democrats, of course, are quick to vilify their Republican counterparts for abuses of the electoral process. They should also now confront the blatant hypocrisy without their own party.

Will they?

ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO START COMES TO A STOP

START has come to a stop again. The American and Soviet teams at the nuclear arms negotiations (START, for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, to use the acronym favored by the Reagan administration) went back to their corners after Round 2 in Geneva this week and will be in recess until Sept. 19.

Nothing much has happened yet beyond the usual roundhouse propaganda swings at each other. There is still room to wonder just how interested either side really is in making anything happen.

The Soviets still are using the talks basically to campaign against President Reagan’s “Star Wars” antimissile defense proposal. The Reagan administration still appears more concerned with completing its all-out effort to rebuild U.S. defenses than with rushing into any new nuclear arms agreement. ... But as Round 2 wound up it also appeared that maybe, just maybe, we might see some movement when and as the negotiations proceed.

Mr. Speakes’ statement, as State Department officials noted, referred only to no movement in

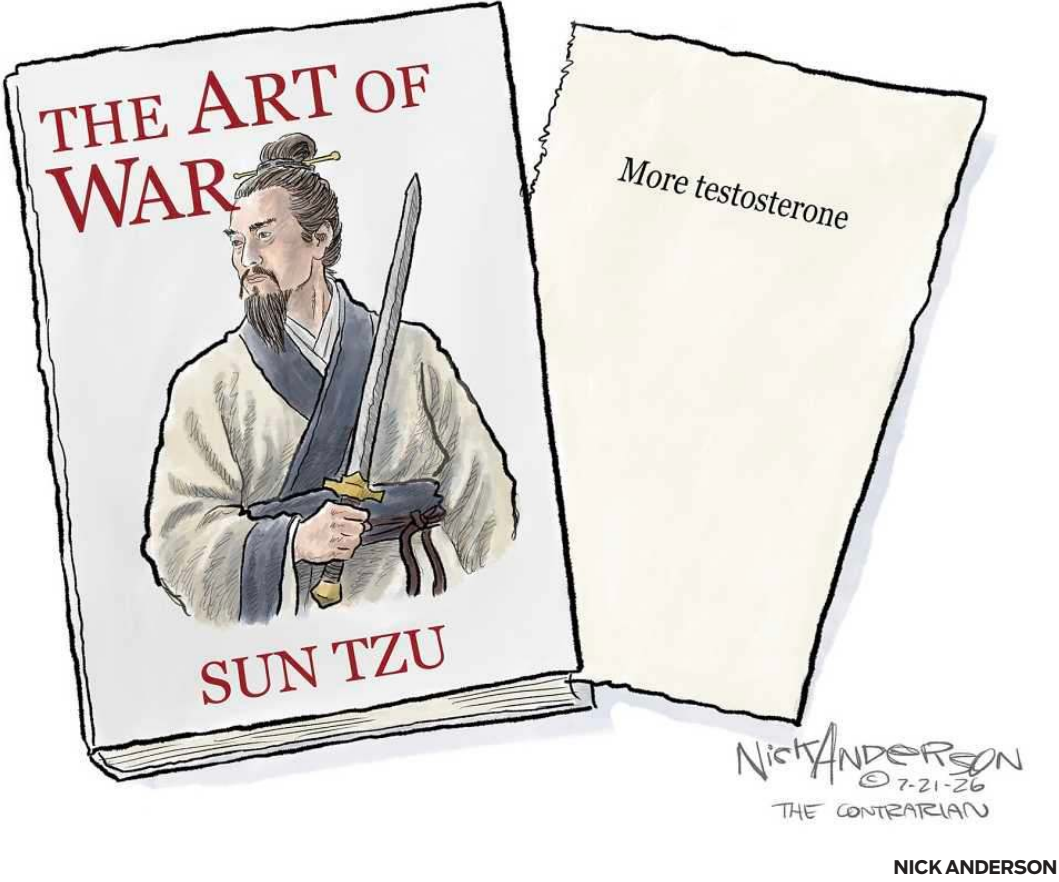
the Soviets’ “formal” positions.

But informally, the White House reported, the Soviets did, late in Round 2, mention “some concepts” which could involve possible reductions in existing strategic nuclear arsenals. Until now, the Soviets have been refusing even to talk about strategic or intermediate-range offensive missiles until Reagan swears off “Star Wars.” There have also been reports, officially denied, indicating that the Soviets might back off their demand that the U.S. forswear any research into “Star Wars,” an especially ridiculous demand given the fact that the Soviets got started on antimissile defense research well before Reagan came along. The White House view is that it wound up the latest session of negotiations just about “where we expected to be.” Which doesn’t look like much of anywhere. But there is something to be said for patience here.

There is also something to be said for hanging in on the negotiations. No one ever said it was going to be easy.

**Tribune editorial board,
July 22, 1985**

EDITORIAL CARTOON



NICK ANDERSON

OPINION

Why the US should consider making voting compulsory

By Susan Ostermann,
Pradeep Chhibber
and Will Halm
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The United States — like all democracies — is centered around the basic premise that a representative system of governance reflects public preferences. This is not and has never been true, however.

As the left and right argue, the disproportionate influence of a select few suppresses the will of the majority. Interest groups play an outsize role in national elections, politicians spend their time on calls with wealthy donors instead of meeting constituents and parties increasingly focus on themselves rather than average Americans. These concerns are not new: There is a well-documented increase in polarization among the political elites at the same time the gulf between those elites and average voters is widening. The standard policy prescription to combat these problems focuses on lobbyists and elites. It fails to account for an uncomfortable reality, however: The U.S. government is unrepresentative because the electorate that puts it in power is also unrepresentative.

Voter turnout in the United States is notoriously low compared with other democracies. The electorate is also heavily skewed toward being rich, white and educated, the very “coastal elites” whom politicians on the right (and left) have been complaining about for a decade. With an electorate that does not match the masses, even the most robust governance system cannot deliver democratic representation.

There is, however, a politically and legally feasible path to greater representation: compulsory voting.

Of course, the idea of forced voting sits uneasily with Americans’ love of freedom and fear of compelled speech. But compulsory citizen participation in self-governance has a long and distinguished history. Citizens serve on juries, respond to the census and pay taxes. Voting should be no different. And it retains a fundamental liberty: choice. Each voter is free to leave their ballot blank. All they have to do is to show up to vote.

Evidence suggests compulsory voting would reduce elite political influence. If everyone votes, everyone’s voice is heard — not only that of ideologically motivated elites. University of Georgia professor Shane Singh’s work demonstrates that compulsory voting increases turnout, reduces



Chas Lilly votes at The Lincoln Lodge in Logan Square during the primary election on March 17. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

party reliance on friends and social networks and increases the influence of moderates, thereby reducing issue cherry-picking and party efforts to cater to extremes.

Compulsory voting would allow Democrats and Republicans alike to appeal to the average American, who currently feels disconnected from governance.

To be clear, compulsory voting is the opposite of the poll taxes, which are prohibited by the 24th Amendment and that were once used to disenfranchise. Implementing it would be a full circle moment for U.S. democracy.

Moreover, compulsory voting is not unusual elsewhere in the world. Australia provides the most useful blueprint for compulsory voting in a large, two-party democracy like the U.S. Turnout is often over 90% in Australian national elections, and extremist forces are few and far between — the populist right has won only a handful of seats in the last two national elections, and the far left is virtually nonexistent. While the government sanctions those who do not vote, often with small fines, it also allows people to provide excuses to opt out of

voting. Despite this, few choose to abstain.

The desire for compulsory voting in the U.S. is also not unusual. It even has a pre-revolution history. More recently, however, the idea has been floated by a variety of actors ranging from Republicans in the late 19th century to Barack Obama in 2015. A well-designed contemporary effort is perhaps the most agreeable and politically neutral way for the U.S. to overcome its present elite- and primary-driven polarization.

What would such an effort look like? A fine for failing to vote would be expensive to collect. Alternatively, a tax-system-based incentive would likely be effective and low-cost. This is not a new idea. In 1889, Kansas City, Missouri, implemented a tax on nonvoting. In 1898, North Dakota’s voters approved the country’s first statewide compulsory voting rule. At the federal level, Republican U.S. Sen. Arthur Capper in 1926 proposed a 1% tax on income for nonvoters. Such systems are unlikely to pass judicial scrutiny at this point, however.

This does not mean that no

system would. A modern, national-level effort could, for instance, allow only citizens who have voted to take the standard tax deduction on their annual return. As voting happens in November and taxes are filed almost six months later in April, it would be a relatively simple system to administer, though it would require counties to submit a list of all voters to the Internal Revenue Service. While the wealthy might not be induced to vote by such a system, nor the poor, who owe no taxes and arguably would be most burdened by compulsory voting, the financial benefit of voting for the vast majority of U.S. citizens would be sizable and likely to appeal.

Moreover, a tax benefit for voting is much more likely to pass constitutional muster than a tax penalty. This is particularly true because using the standard deduction is a procedural benefit; it saves you from having to itemize your deductions. All citizens would still be free to claim all owed tax deductions; they would simply have to do more work to claim them. And, of course, voters do not have to vote for any party.

All they have to do is show up, something far less onerous than serving as a juror or paying taxes.

Arguably, compulsory voting isn’t just feasible for U.S. democracy. It has become necessary. This straightforward policy solution would bring more people into the democratic project.

The U.S. now has a democratic deficit — many believe that it is not working, with almost 40% of adults saying that neither party “fights for people like them,” NBC News reported last year. But if people are required to vote and parties are forced to represent them, voters will likely realize that the government is representative.

In a country desperate for a less divided polity, compulsory voting could be the solution we need.

Susan L. Ostermann is an associate professor of global affairs and political science at the University of Notre Dame. Pradeep Chhibber is a professor of political science at the University of California Berkeley. Will Halm is a graduate student in political science at the University of California Berkeley.

Illinois can’t bail out CPS, but it could cover more pension costs, ensure fiscal discipline

By Paul Vallas
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Chicago Public Schools’ earnest attempts to address its \$732 million budget shortfall, through its proposed layoffs and midyear hiring freeze, will not keep the district from raising property taxes to the maximum again and the mayor once again raiding tax increment financing funds. It also will not end the district’s chronic annual financial crisis. Meanwhile, don’t look to the state to come to the rescue through its evidence-based funding (EBF) formula.

Illinois had its own budget gap of roughly \$2.2 billion for fiscal year 2027 before passing the most recent budget. It is highly unlikely that Gov. JB Pritzker and the state legislature will rush to help close CPS’ budget shortfall, let alone fully fund the state’s formula, which the Chicago Teachers Union, CPS and Mayor Brandon Johnson are demanding.

CTU President Stacy Davis Gates, now also executive vice president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, and Johnson argue the state shorted Chicago by at least \$1.6 billion under EBF. Pritzker has rejected that claim, saying fulfilling the demand would require billions in additional K-12 funding statewide. CTU recently elevated its claim of underfunding to nearly \$2 billion. That would lift CPS aggregate per-pupil spending from roughly \$33,000 to nearly \$39,000 per pupil.

While a state bailout through EBF is unlikely, the state can help the district in a way that is fair and does not require a corresponding investment in other school districts, by addressing the Chicago Teachers’ Pension Fund funding-equity issue. The state currently covers only about 32% of CTPF employer pension costs, while it covers roughly 98% of employer pension costs for all other Illinois districts (through the Teachers’ Retirement System, or TRS), leaving those districts responsible for only about 2%.

The state should bring its



Chicago Teachers Union members and their allies protest outside Chicago Public Schools headquarters on Monday before a meeting of the Board of Education on Chicago Public Schools’ fiscal year 2027 budget. TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

funding of CTPF into parity with what it provides to TRS-covered districts. Doing so would allow the special property-tax levy dedicated to Chicago teacher pensions — roughly \$600 million annually — to be redirected to help the city’s employee retirement systems, pay the school district’s annual \$175 million municipal employee pension fund payment and pay the remaining annual teacher pension contribution.

There is nonetheless an opportunity to balance CPS’ budget requiring other actions that are not unprecedented and would actually improve the quality of choices.

- Decentralize CPS’ central and regional offices — currently only about 54% of district funding reaches the schools — and return district full-time nonteaching staffing to pre-COVID-19 levels. Much of this could be accomplished through attrition.
- Embrace student-based budgeting, allocating dollars

directly to schools based on enrollment and student needs, providing principals broad autonomy while holding schools accountable for spending in ways that support performance metrics and student achievement goals.

- Reject the CTU-backed “Sustainable Community Schools” model, which prioritizes keeping underenrolled and often failing schools open. Instead close, consolidate or repurpose near-empty schools.

- Expand public school choice to improve retention and attract new students by converting failing schools to quality public charter and magnet schools and expand school-based magnet programs. Charters operate at roughly a third less cost than traditional schools.

- Take advantage of state authorization to open alternative schools to reclaim those who have dropped out and are too old to return to neighborhood high schools. This would boost

enrollment and state and federal financial support.

Mayor Richard M. Daley’s first schools leadership team, of which I was a part, took this approach after the Illinois General Assembly passed the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995 to avert district bankruptcy and avoid a state financial bailout. Not only was bankruptcy avoided, but by 2002, the district had experienced 12 bond rating upgrades and had almost \$1 billion in cash balances, and pensions were fully funded.

This period saw enrollment growth of almost 35,000 students after the previous 15 years had seen enrollment fall from its historic peak of 514,000 in 1979 to 404,000 in 1995. It was a period of financial stability, labor peace and academic improvement. The district received unprecedented national and international recognition. Current CTU leaders ignore this period’s considerable successes, misleading its

members.

There is also an opportunity to expand district resources by taking full advantage of breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and opting into the new federal scholarship program — two initiatives that will face CTU resistance.

Meanwhile, Illinois participation in the federal tax credit scholarship program could generate hundreds of millions of dollars for families — not only for private school tuition but also for tutoring, special education, transportation and many other school-related support expenses. Some estimates suggest such a program could potentially generate hundreds of millions of dollars in resources to both public and private school families statewide.

Real financial accountability is unlikely while CPS leadership and CTU continue doing business as usual. CPS bureaucrats maintain central control, and the CTU relies on that centralized structure to enforce expansive contracts. Pritzker should reestablish the Chicago School Finance Authority, which from 1980 to 1996 provided independent fiscal oversight, ensured fiscal discipline and helped stabilize CPS during a prior financial crisis.

Meanwhile, there is a real possibility that the CTU may lose its dominance over the new school board.

As of early this year, the union’s popularity had fallen to a record low, with just 27.5% of Chicago voters holding a favorable opinion. At the same time, CTU’s heavy-handedness caused a souring of its relationship with its strongest union ally, the Service Employees International Union. This shift would make it easier to craft more responsible budgets and might prompt Pritzker to opt into the federal tax credit program.

Paul Vallas is an adviser for the Illinois Policy Institute. He ran for Chicago mayor in 2023 and was previously budget director for the city and CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

OPINION

Get off your high (Trojan) horses about ‘The Odyssey’

By Abigail AuYeung
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

There’s been a lot of online discourse about how unfaithful Christopher Nolan’s film adaptation of “The Odyssey” is, how part of the movie was shot in northern locations such as Iceland and Scotland and how, God forbid, a Kenyan woman was cast as Helen of Troy. But as a classics major, I think all of that is OK, maybe even good: The new “Odyssey” film is a representation of how classics, the academic discipline that studies Homer’s epic, is changing — or how it still needs to change.

The classics as a discipline are facing funding cuts at universities because of dwindling enrollment rates. At my home institution of the University of Chicago, admissions to our classics Ph.D. program have been paused, and the future of our graduate program is still unclear.

There is a snobbish attitude that any mass media depiction of the classics is inherently inferior to serious academic study, which disregards the influence such depictions have on the public. Rick Riordan’s “Percy Jackson and the Olympians” book series is an adaptation of the Greek myths for a younger audience. Those books deviate from the myths, but they have been impactful on the classics field; they have introduced so many people to these Greco-Roman stories. Many of my former classmates still identify as demi-gods and half-bloods, citing the series as the reason they’re even in this major. Consider the logic behind general education requirements: They are a way to introduce students to a multitude of subjects.

I recall professors from another institution complaining about the general education courses they taught to nonmajor students. They felt like the students weren’t enthusiastic enough about the subject and also implied that the material had to be dumbed down for these students and that these students somehow were inferior because of their lack of knowledge about Greco-Roman culture. Frankly, if I were a nonmajor student, I wouldn’t be enthusiastic about their class either! An introduction to the subject may promote later, more serious, study of the classics.

Nolan’s “Odyssey” serves the same purpose.

It introduces viewers to the classics and includes the



Matt Damon is Odysseus and Zendaya is Athena in “The Odyssey,” written, produced and directed by Christopher Nolan.
MELINDA SUE GORDON/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

The film isn’t meant to be a graduate course on “The Odyssey,” with all of the nuances and intensive interaction with scholarship, but rather an introduction to the classics meant to arouse interest in the field. So stop arguing about how the plumed helmets are historically inaccurate or how Zendaya’s eye color is the wrong color for Athena!

basic outline of a mythologically steeped epic with minimal changes. Most of the changes Nolan has made allow for people with no knowledge of the classics to understand the plot. In the film, Menelaus tells the story of the Trojan horse, whereas in the epic, he assumes the reader already knows it. Also, nuance is removed from figures such as Agamemnon, turning the complicated character into a Darth Vader-like villain and allowing “Odyssey” newcomers to better understand who they should root for. At the same time, viewers are expected to know

basic facts, such as who the Greek Pantheon is and what they are supposed to represent. Ultimately, people who are interacting with this epic for the first time don’t feel patronized.

After watching the film, some viewers may look into the Homeric epics or perhaps late Bronze Age military history. The film isn’t meant to be a graduate course on “The Odyssey,” with all of the nuances and intensive interaction with scholarship, but rather an introduction to the classics meant to arouse interest in the field. So stop arguing about how

the plumed helmets are historically inaccurate or how Zendaya’s eye color is the wrong color for Athena!

There’s also a high horse that individuals studying the classics need to dismount in regards to nonmajor students taking classes in the field. Looking down on people who are not as well-versed in stories told thousands of years ago is downright unacceptable. It shouldn’t be an exclusive club one has to get into in order to study the classics. The classics are already having a hard time with course enrollment, so there needs to be less of a standoffish response to mass media depictions. It’s off-putting for those who may want to learn more but feel (perhaps justifiably so) that they would be judged if they did.

Also, those who study the classics need to accept that depictions of our field are not going to be 100% accurate, and the general public also needs to acknowledge that a cinematic adaptation may

not be entirely representative because it involves artistic license.

Nolan, for one, does not elaborate on Circe’s rape trauma; instead, he treats it like a throw-away line. And he fits Penelope back into her mold as “faithful Penelope,” Odysseus’ loving wife. It’s OK that he doesn’t necessarily elaborate on these powerful women because this is film-making, but it’s still a significant change, so let’s not act like it isn’t. But it makes for good cinema, and this is an adaptation of “The Odyssey,” not a museum reproduction of what a recitation of “The Odyssey” would have looked like.

Nolan’s “Odyssey” reflects inaccuracies and changes from the original text, but as a classics student, I don’t think that there’s anything wrong with that.

Abigail AuYeung is a second-year student at the University of Chicago pursuing study in the classics.

Voice of the People

Wildfires are a symptom

As recent summers have made clear, wildland megafires are no longer a regional anomaly but have become a global hazard. NASA reports that, due to human-induced climate change, “Extreme wildfire activity has more than doubled worldwide.”

Hotter temperatures evaporate soil moisture and create dry vegetation, making the land more likely to burn. According to climate scientist Phillip B. Duffy, “What would have been a fire easily extinguished now just grows very quickly and becomes out of control.”

More intense wildfires are just one symptom of a much larger problem. A study in the journal Science concludes that global soil moisture is in “permanent” decline because of our warming climate.

The drying of continents, driven by increased heat and evaporation, has been so pronounced that the transfer of water to the oceans has altered the distribution of our planet’s mass and affected the Earth’s rotation on its axis.

As continents dry and water resources become polluted and overused, researchers warn that the world has entered an era of “global water bankruptcy,” in which critical water systems can no longer realistically recover to their former state.

Water bankruptcy is already evident in the United States. America’s largest groundwater reserve, the Ogallala Aquifer, which supports Great Plains agriculture, is being pumped far faster than it can refill. Water levels have fallen by hundreds of feet in some areas, with portions now effectively nonrenewable under current climate conditions and irrigation practices.

As evidenced by toxic Canadian wildfire smoke drifting across the U.S., a deadly European heat wave and rapidly expanding “mega-drying” regions in South Asia, the atmosphere has no borders.

As guests of this world, we must insist that our legislators enact policies to cut emissions, conserve water and protect the Earth’s life-support systems on which we



Neskantaga First Nation community members evacuated in response to the threat of wildfires and weather conditions arrive by plane in Thunder Bay, Ontario, on July 18. CHRIS YOUNG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

all depend.

— Terry Hansen, Grafton, Wisconsin

A preview of what’s to come

President Donald Trump’s administration has created a perfect storm of purposeful abuse, neglect and inaction. Dangerous wildfire smoke is smothering the Chicago area, and there is a public health crisis across much of the country. Forecasters warn we will endure more bad air quality alerts and scorching heat this month.

Climate change is making the world hotter and wildfires harder to fight. Blazes have been erupting faster than usual this year in the United States and Canada. National leadership at the Environmental Protection Agency and the White House offer no solutions, instead opting to play the blame game with Canada. Meanwhile, millions of people in red, blue and purple states are suffering through the worst air readings since we started keeping records.

On top of this, the EPA’s repeal of critical air quality protections in the last two years are all adding fuel to the fire.

This isn’t a “natural” disaster. It’s a human-made one. We can still take action to avoid a future in which our summers are filled with smoke and searing heat. Coordinated efforts at the federal level are a critical next step. But as long as the EPA caters to polluters

and not people, we will have more days and weeks like these.

— Nicole Cantello, president, American Federation of Government Employees Local 704, Chicago

Broadcasters should be direct

Regarding the smoke from Canada’s wildfires, millions of people are wondering how to deal with the pervasive and dangerous clouds. We get lots of updates and warnings, but it is rare to hear a weather person or newscaster mention the connection to climate change. I heard one person say that “this is what to expect” in succeeding years.

As far as I am concerned, this is a teaching moment, a time to point out that the fires, winds and temperatures are a climate-warming reality. While the political powers would have us believe otherwise, science is the bottom line. Why can’t the news and weather reporters emphasize that the smoke is a symptom of climate change and what to expect? Isn’t it astounding that cities hundreds of miles from the deadly fires are experiencing very poor air quality? We are all connected and need to act with this reality in mind.

The responsibility to alter the trends lies with all of us, but at this juncture, it is undeniably incumbent on the weather reporters to disregard any political backlash

and use their platforms to inform and warn their listeners and viewers.

— Andrea Amend, Highland Park

Don’t blame Canada for smoke

President Donald Trump can’t even accept responsibility for having chosen an unqualified vendor in a no-bid process and then asking them to do a rush job on the Reflecting Pool. He has to invent vandals and hope that if he keeps talking about them, some gullible Americans will believe him.

But, oh boy, is he quick to point the finger of blame when wind currents bring smoke from Canadian wildfires across the border. It would be excusable behavior if he was holding down a barstool in a neighborhood gin mill, but not when he sits in the Oval Office.

Where I live, we’ve had some of the worst of this. But I don’t want a president looking to impose tariffs on Canada for smoke while denying climate change, preventing utilities from closing belching coal generators and paying to stop wind farm development.

I want a president who doesn’t just market himself as a smart guy.

— John Podulka, Wolverine, Michigan

Locked into taxation system

Regarding the editorial “Our neighbors are rethinking income taxes. How about it, Illinois?” (July 17): I salute the Tribune Editorial Board for encouraging the state of Illinois to rethink its current income tax system, but as the editorial itself suggests, I won’t hold my breath.

First, unlike surrounding states, Illinois is totally dominated by one large Democratic city that is addicted to tax-and-spend policies that assume that more money will always be available from the rich, as if money grows n trees and those who produce wealth are indifferent to how much of it others take from them in the form of taxation.

Second, Illinois has more overlapping governmental units

— legislative districts, townships, counties, municipalities, mosquito abatement districts, ad infinitum — than any state in the union. They come with buildings and grounds, offices and staffs. Apart from actual operating costs, there’s the ever-present future burden of pensions for those who make it that far.

Third, the Illinois Supreme Court has ruled that the 1970 Illinois Constitution prohibits any kind of meaningful pension reform. That means that employees of those governmental units are on the state payroll, with compounded annual increases and income tax-free retirement income, all paid for by working taxpayers for as long as the retirees are around to collect their pensions.

Illinois would indeed do well to look at what surrounding states are doing to encourage both economic and population growth, which tend to go hand in hand.

But whoever says that Chicago isn’t ready for reform could well have been talking about the entire state.

— David Applegate, Huntley

Send less to federal government

It would delight everyone to reduce taxes; that is a no-brainer. The editorial calling for us to look at other states and their lower taxes ignores the fact that we are a federal “donor” state and subsidize other states. While Illinois has huge debt, the money we send to the federal government goes to poorer states.

Let us keep the fruits of our own labor, and then we may be able to cut taxes and pay our own bills.

— Jim Fulton, Tinley Park

Note to readers

We’d like to hear from you about Chicago’s parking meter problem. Do you have advice for the city? Submit a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com by Wednesday, July 22. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

What does Trump want? Gulf states have no answer as Iran war escalates

America's allies in the Middle East are caught in a security paradox while being battered by the lack of a clear US strategy for the region.



Joseph Chinyong Liow

The temporary ceasefire that the US and Iran signed on June 17 is all but dead, with both countries now locked in a dangerous escalatory spiral. For the US, the stakes have increased with two deaths as a result of Iranian strikes on American facilities in Jordan. However, without a clear strategy and accompanying objectives clearly laid out by the commander-in-chief, the US faces the real prospect of being dragged into yet another long-drawn war in the Middle East.

The famed Chinese strategist Sun Tzu once advised: "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." Those words are as relevant today as they were during the Warring States period of Chinese history more than 2,200 years ago.

When US President Donald Trump gave orders to launch Operation Epic Fury in late February, it was unclear to observers what America's strategic objectives were at that point. After all, it was only a few months prior, when the administration released the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025, that the Western Hemisphere was identified as the top concern in its list of core US national interests that required Washington's attention and, by extension, resources. Yet, the US, under the Trump presidency, finds itself drawn back to the Middle East.

What's more, that same document also discussed the importance of clear strategic aims, pointing out that: "American strategies since the end of the Cold War have fallen short – they have been laundry lists of wishes or desired end states; have not clearly defined



Anti-US graffiti on a wall in the Iranian capital of Tehran. In the case of the Iran war, it has been difficult to divine, in the words of Washington's National Security Strategy 2025, "what should the United States want", says the writer. For America's Arab allies, it is an unresolved mystery that has nonetheless dispatched their carefully laid plans for the future through the shredder of a geopolitical sandstorm. PHOTO: EPA

what we want but instead stated vague platitudes, and have often misjudged what we should want."

In the case of the Iran war, it has been difficult to divine, in the words of the NSS, "what should the United States want". For America's Arab allies, it's an unresolved mystery that has nonetheless dispatched their carefully laid plans for the future through the shredder of a geopolitical sandstorm.

Trump's justifications have ranged from degrading Iran's nuclear enrichment capability and destroying its naval forces to decimating its missile stocks, eliminating an immediate security threat (to the US, it seems), and regime change. Of course, one could plausibly surmise that this constitutes a "laundry list" of strategic objectives all directed at weakening Iran – except that

there are deep inconsistencies at play.

Iran's nuclear capabilities, according to Trump, had already been "obliterated" in June 2025 with Operation Midnight Hammer. Iranian missiles and drones were said to have been significantly depleted, yet Tehran clearly retains sufficient supply to still harass shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and rain retaliatory strikes on US allies in the Middle East.

In the build-up to the stillborn memorandum of understanding (MOU), Trump raised eyebrows among both regional allies and members of his own defence establishment by defending Iran's right to replenish its missile stockpiles when he said: "They need to be able to defend themselves. They can't have nuclear. But they need to be able to defend themselves. Everybody does." In other words, the strategic objective seems to be to destroy Iran's deterrent capability

and then allow them to rebuild it.

Recent revelations of Israeli efforts to cultivate former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and place him at the pinnacle of a new government in Tehran indicate that there was indeed a genuine plan to effect regime change. But we also know that the plan failed. Iranian internal security would be even more alert to this now.

As the conflict wore on, the US narrative has focused on the toll-free reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. Given that the strait was already open prior to hostilities, it is bizarrely ironic that this seems to have emerged as the top strategic priority. As for tolls, Trump's unapologetic response that it's an American prerogative is nothing if not quintessentially him.

This manner of monetising the war, in keeping with broader trends of US foreign policy under the Trump presidency, has since taken another turn, with the

President suggesting on July 14 that "kings and emirs" (referring to the leaders of America's Gulf allies) will purportedly sign a raft of trade and investment deals with the US in exchange for security of shipping passage through the strait. Thus far, Gulf states have neither confirmed nor denied that such commitments have been made.

KEEPING THE LARGER STRATEGIC PICTURE IN SIGHT

Notwithstanding Trump's idiosyncratic approach to the Iran war, there is a larger stake involved in the region, one that expresses longstanding US global strategy: to prevent the emergence of a regional power intent on pursuing policies at odds with US interests and those of its friends and allies. This explains the more than 20 military bases, installations, and

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2

The Trump administration cannot be unaware of the political costs of a prolonged conflict as the midterm elections set for November draw closer. But having been seen to back down once with the ceasefire that is now dead, a second TACO (Trump Always Chickens Out) by Trump looks even more remote.



Football • How America may have changed the World Cup | B2



Community care •

Technology can help, but it can't replace the human connection | B3



Parenthood •

The strains on the relationship of couples | B4



HEALTH CHECK PODCAST Blood pressure reading

For millions of people worldwide living with hypertension, keeping blood pressure numbers in the normal zone is the ultimate goal. But what if that peace of mind is an illusion?

str.sg/blood-pressure

America could just make FIFA great again

The World Cup final should spur a needed rethink of the business model that powers football leagues.

Adam Minter

The World Cup was supposed to change the US. That was the common consensus for decades. Show Americans soccer at its highest level, the thinking went, and a nation devoted to its own football might finally embrace the world's game.

Instead, America changed the World Cup. Spain's testy 1-0 win over Argentina on July 19 closed a tournament increasingly shaped by an American sports playbook – and that may be exactly what the competition needs to grow as a business. Would a more profitable World Cup enrich FIFA, whose governance has earned scepticism? Yes. But it would also create more resources throughout the soccer ecosystem, from the academies and federations to the competitions themselves.

That is a worthy cause, especially following a report from Deloitte earlier in July that found a troubling trend.

While European soccer, the sport's best and most valuable set of leagues, generated more than US\$46 billion (S\$59 billion) in 2024 to 2025, the business model that has fuelled soccer's growth is faltering.

The Premier League still earns the biggest revenues in club soccer. But its wage bill and losses are growing. Other major European leagues are seeing slowing or plateauing broadcast income, along with rising wage costs and operating losses of their own.

How it got to this point is hardly a mystery. European soccer's decades-long boom depended on television rights that grew richer every renewal. The problem is that younger fans increasingly consume highlights, not matches, and soccer competes with a bottomless supply of digital entertainment. As a result, rising rights fees, once an engine of growth, aren't a sure thing any more. It's a reality that

threatens the investments that support talent pipelines and Europe's high level of competition long term.

For FIFA, this isn't somebody else's problem. The World Cup finances much of the association, and FIFA still provides major funding for global soccer – from youth development to the small national federations that featured prominently at this summer's tournament. If the old growth model is weakening, FIFA needs ways to make the World Cup – and soccer in general – more valuable. One solution is simply to squeeze more revenue from the attention that you already have.

The National Football League transformed the Super Bowl half-time show from a marching-band snooze-fest into an Apple-sponsored entertainment spectacle that forced the July 19 final featured the tournament's first-ever Super Bowl-style half-time show, with her, BTS and Shakira among the headliners. PHOTOS: REUTERS

Even rulebook changes intended to improve a game can't escape commercialisation. This season, Major League Baseball introduced automated ball-and-strike reviews, then promptly sold the sponsorship rights to T-Mobile.

Of course, every business innovation comes with trade-offs, proving that nothing in modern sports is sacred. The Super Bowl half-time show now lasts far longer than it once did. The breaks interrupt the flow of games. Something is undeniably lost when every pause in the action becomes an opportunity to sell more stuff.

American sports commissioners and executives are fine with the compromise because the job isn't to preserve sports like museum pieces. It's to leave sports stronger than they found them. Regardless of what one thinks of America's pro sports leagues, there's no denying that they are economically healthier than ever.

FIFA has begun to embrace that American approach to survival. For its US broadcast partner, will reportedly make as much as US\$600 million selling ads during mandatory hydration breaks implemented to protect players' safety. It's a windfall for the network that should make World Cup rights more valuable in the



Singer Madonna with former Brazil football players Ronaldinho (left) and Ronaldo during the World Cup final half-time show on July 19. It was the tournament's first-ever Super Bowl-style half-time show, with her, BTS and Shakira among the headliners. PHOTOS: REUTERS



future, though at the expense of a more free-flowing match.

In another commercial leap forward, the July 19 final featured the tournament's first-ever Super Bowl-style half-time show. BTS, Madonna and Shakira were among the headliners, likely drawing an audience well beyond sports fans interested in the final (social media was filled with instantaneous commentary).

But it came at a cost: The spectacle ran nearly twice a standard 15-minute half-time intermission, forcing athletes with highly regimented routines to simply sit and wait.

Off the field, FIFA president Gianni Infantino has embraced the same market logic. Defending dynamic ticket pricing, he argued that if fans are willing to pay those prices on the secondary market, FIFA should capture more of that value itself. It's the same

philosophy that leads American professional sports leagues to welcome dynamic pricing and official resale platforms. It's a money grab, for sure, and fans who remember FIFA's corruption scandals are right to bristle. They, more than FIFA, seem to recognise that soccer has remained unique among major sports because it hasn't monetised every dead space. Restraint has made the sport distinctive. But as the global media landscape fractures, soccer can't afford restraint.

Soccer lovers can object to the interruptions and spectacle, but the economics are harder to argue with. If FIFA discovers a more profitable version of the World Cup that audiences still embrace, every major soccer competition will face pressure to follow.

So far, the association is projecting record revenues of

US\$10 billion. But more importantly, FIFA's money chase isn't costing it viewers. Over the course of the tournament, it's enjoyed record-setting broadcast audiences, and not just in the host countries. Norway, Sweden and Australia, among the handful of nations reporting numbers, saw all-time broadcast audience size highs during the group stage rounds.

Maintaining that global game isn't easy; it requires constant evolution. At the July 19 match, that evolution was on full display, thanks to an American playbook. FIFA would be wise to keep following it. BLOOMBERG

Adam Minter is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering the business of sports. He is the author, most recently, of *Secondhand: Travels in the Global Garage Sale*.

BTS performing during the World Cup final half-time show on July 19. Soccer lovers can object to the interruptions and spectacle, but the economics are harder to argue with, says the writer.

Grim outlook for Arab states caught in crossfire

FROM B1

host-nation military facilities the US has access to in the Middle East, with more than a dozen in the Persian Gulf alone.

For their part, regional allies see the US playing a critical role not only in terms of supplying the most advanced defence equipment, but more importantly, maintaining open sea lanes crucial for maritime commerce, and also balancing against their strategic rival, Iran. This is the larger strategic picture that US allies in the Middle East hope Washington does not lose sight of.

To that end, the war is presumably about eroding not only Iranian tactical capabilities but also its strategic influence in the region, which Tehran has hitherto parlayed through its relationships with Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and, until its collapse in December 2024, the Assad regime in Syria.

While many of these Iranian allies have been crippled by way of mostly Israeli operations, they have not been – and are unlikely to be – eliminated entirely. What this means is that there is every chance they will seek ways to regroup, reconstitute, rearm and rebuild in time.

On July 20, the Houthis announced a maritime blockade on Saudi Arabia, opening a new front in the war. Iran had been pressing the Houthis to close the Bab el-Mandeb gateway to the Red Sea, which had allowed the Saudis to divert its oil exports from the Strait of Hormuz.

The harsh reality is that Gulf Arab states cannot afford to drop backchannel talks with Tehran, even as they continue to be targeted by the Iranians. At the same time, they cannot cut ties with the US either, notwithstanding its obvious misgivings about US reliability or the paradox that the US bases and installations that were meant to protect them have in fact placed

them in Iran's sights. There is simply no other security provider. China has been content to stand on the sidelines, Russia is pursuing conflict with Ukraine, and the Europeans are no longer able to protect power.

THE GULF RESPONSE

This is not to say that the Gulf Arab states are in perfect alignment among themselves on the Iran question. Although all their capitals have channels of communication with Tehran that remain open, notable differences prevail in their positions on conflict escalation.

On the face of it, the United Arab Emirates appears most robust in pushing back against Iran. Abu Dhabi has expressed deep disappointment with Tehran for targeting it the most among Arab states despite the close relations Abu Dhabi has cultivated with Tehran (not to mention the sizeable Iranian wealth domiciled in Dubai). To that end, the UAE has taken a strong stance and cast its lot with the US and Israel, both of whom have been the primary suppliers of defence systems that have been used against Iranian drone and missile attacks.

Nevertheless, illustrative of the complex strategic landscape in the Gulf that does not lend to tidy mapping, reports have also

suggested that Abu Dhabi has been pursuing deals with Tehran which involve unlocking frozen Iranian assets in exchange for an end to attacks.

Bahrain, also victim of a considerable number of Iranian attacks, has correspondingly drawn closer to the UAE, which has assisted Manama in repelling these attacks.

Oman, on the other hand, has hewed closely to its traditional foreign policy approach of maintaining good ties with all parties including Iran, with which it has had several rounds of discussions on the possibility of charging fees for Strait of Hormuz transit.

Saudi Arabia, the presumptive regional power with much at stake, has prioritised the return of stability over decisive victory, while Qatar licks its wounds after its good offices in mediating US-Iran talks were repaid by new Iranian strikes after the ceasefire.

These divergent views and responses have also rendered the Gulf Cooperation Council ineffective in anything resembling a collective response. Indeed, the impotence of the GCC

is further accentuated by bilateral differences between its two anchor members, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

NO GOOD ALTERNATIVES

For these reasons, even while they explore new sources of weapons such as South Korea and Ukraine, America's Gulf allies can be expected to double down on their dependence on the US security umbrella against an Iranian threat that is now no longer an abstraction.

But therein lies the rub: The absence of alternative sources of strategic help means that even as they pursue pragmatic policies, they will have to be price takers in the face of a US administration that sees security provision less as a strategic matter of credibility, public goods, and institutionalised cooperation to sustain regional stability, and more as a commercial transaction in which narrow self-interests are paramount.

As the MOU between the US and Iran unravels, the outlook is grim for the Arab states caught in the crossfire or start-stop retaliatory strikes between the two.

The Trump administration cannot be unaware of the political

costs of a prolonged conflict as the midterm elections set for November draw closer. But having been seen to back down once with the ceasefire that is now dead, a second TACO (Trump Always Chickens Out) by Trump looks even more remote. It doesn't help that in the absence of strategic clarity, this deadly game of chicken has come down to who has the last word on control over the Strait of Hormuz.

For Iranian leaders, Hormuz, a chokepoint for energy exports that gives Iran power over the global economy, is vital leverage the regime will not give up. National pride aside, it is about regime survival.

The upshot is if both parties continue going down this road, driven by a frame of mind that sees battlefield escalation as the way to a quick, transactional win, the risks of mission creep rises. How this ends is still unclear, but what is apparent even now is that the security of America's friends and allies in the Gulf has become collateral damage to a deadly test of wills.

Joseph Chinyong Liow is dean and Wang Gungwu Professor in East Asian Affairs at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and chairman of the Middle East Institute.

Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

Editorials PDF

- English Editorials PDF with International Newspapers Editorials [35-40 pages]
- Hindi Editorials PDF
- Daily Vocabulary PDF

Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.
Asian, European & American

Hindi Newspapers

- 1) दैनिक जागरण
- 2) जनसत्ता
- 3) हरिभूमि
- 4) हिंदुस्तान

Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard

Click below to Join
this Community 

