

The Indian EXPRESS
— FOUNDED BY —
RAMNATH GOENKA
— IN 1932 —

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Zone of uncertainty expands each day

THAT PRIME Minister Narendra Modi had to invoke the Covid crisis and the need for national unity in his address to the Lok Sabha Monday shows the scale of the formidable challenges ahead. From the severe dislocation in energy supplies to the unprecedented volatility in financial markets, the shadows of a one-two-three disaster to the over-heated rhetoric by each of the three sides in the conflict that keeps ratcheting up both temperature and pressure. Underlining the need to be prepared for an eventuality, Modi said, "We faced similar challenges during the Covid crisis with unity. Now again, we must prepare in the same way."

The pain is visible. Disruptions in energy supplies are being felt across parts of the economy — from ceramic tile exporters in Morbi, Gujarat, to restaurants and hotels. The effects are not just limited to oil and gas. The Gulf region is a key choke point — it is a major supplier of fertiliser and inputs such as sulphur and ammonia. Economies could get affected in ways far beyond what the surface-level impact suggests. The second-order effects could soon start showing. Markets are hurting, too. On Monday, the BSE Sensex ended the day down 2.46 per cent. Since the beginning of this conflict, the market has been down around 10 per cent. Foreign investors have withdrawn \$11.8 billion in March so far; the rupee was hovering around the 94 level against the dollar. In the gathering gloom, there is a political pressure cooker following Donald Trump's post. Domestic political pressure could force a reassessment of the situation as pain thresholds are breached — the national average gasoline price in the US has touched \$3.95 a gallon. However, even if there's a let-up, supply disruptions could well persist. Qatar has already said that it could take years to repair its energy infrastructure — in 2024-25, India had imported 41.4 per cent of its LNG from the country. As the zone of uncertainty expands each day, internal adjustments will be needed. The PM's message should go down to all who will bear the costs: Households, firms, and the government.

Surplus heat is new climate challenge

THE WORLD Meteorological Organisation's (WMO) latest findings over the last 10 years. The decade that ended last year was the hottest on record. The carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is about 50 per cent higher than pre-industrial levels. In 2025, even as renewable energy edged out coal as the leading source of electricity, global emissions reached record levels. Even though clean power has registered an appreciable increase, it's nowhere close to keeping pace with the world's appetite for energy. All this means that the concentration of carbon dioxide reached its highest in the last 2 million years, and methane and nitrous oxide in at least the last 800,000 years. In itself, these are sobering figures. The WMO report adds another worrying dimension — the record levels of GHG have upset the Earth's energy equilibrium. Ideally, the amount of radiation entering the planet and the amount of it leaving it should be roughly similar. But a heat surplus has accumulated in the past six decades. That means that even if GHG emissions were to completely stop anytime soon, the planet will continue to warm.

Since water can store a lot of heat, the seas and oceans have become the main repositories of the extra energy trapped by GHGs. The total effects on oceans are not fully understood. But some of them are apparent. As the authors of the WMO report point out, warmer oceans create conditions for stronger tropical storms. At the same time, melting ice is pushing up sea levels and weakening the planet's ability to reflect solar radiation back into space, aggravating the energy imbalance in the process. Incremental changes are unlikely to change the trajectory of our climate weather events. There is a need to devote resources towards green methods of production, planners must find ways to make infrastructure more resilient, invest more in early warning systems and shield the vulnerable. The energy imbalance could unfold over decades. Policies must, therefore, be stable enough to guide investments and research over long time-scales. The most important message for governments and the political class worldwide is this: They need to find the resolve and creativity to insulate climate policies from short-term politics.

Banksy is unmasked. And, art is poorer

THE RED balloon of anonymity has finally burst, and the artist known as Banksy has been revealed as a Robin Grombington. The British painter, photographer, and street artist behind works like 'Love is in the Air' (Horse) and 'Napalm' was recently identified in a Reuters investigation, nearly 20 years after the British tabloid, *The Mail* on Sunday, arrived at the same conclusion. Who got there first, however, is quite beside the point. Banksy's identity has apparently been one of the art world's most poorly kept secrets. The real question is this: What is gained and what is lost by such an unmasking?

The arguments in favour of pulling aside the veil of anonymity are many. That this is an act of defiance against a culture of cultural and artistic influence; that knowing who he is can help demystify the authenticity of a work or add context that was missing; that knowing who exactly made a work of art can lead to greater accountability and more transparency about intentions. Publicity, too, is a factor. While much of the immediate anxiety about the Banksy revelation comes down to economics — would his radical, irreverent works command the same price now that the world knows he's a middle-aged white man? — there are already whispers that the artist himself orchestrated the exposé in the interest of brand-building.

Yet, there is less too. Anonymity allows a work to remain uncontaminated by biography, with meaning being generated by each viewer through the lens of their own subjectivity. Naming the artist unveils unnamed, then, shifts the focus to what the artist intended rather than what the viewer perceived. For an artist who uses a pseudonym in order that he may freely create, the unmasking imposes new constraints, and for art lovers, it diminishes the mystery that gives art its power.

A war lesson: The road to energy security runs on electricity



AJAY SHANKAR AND ARPITA VICTOR

THE WAR on Iran and the disruption in oil and gas supplies have starkly shown India's energy dependence and vulnerability. India imports over 85 per cent of the crude oil it needs and nearly 40 per cent of its natural gas. Being the third-largest importer of crude oil in the world, we are one of the world's most energy import-dependent economies. Over 40 per cent of India's oil supply travels through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime choke point. About a fifth of global oil flows through it. The war has, in effect, closed the Strait of Hormuz. This is driving up oil and gas prices. The crude oil price is now \$109 per barrel, up from \$65 in mid-February. The longer the war lasts, the higher will be the price. The inflationary impact of this sharp oil price spike would be substantial. LPG gas cylinder prices have already been raised in India by Rs 60 for households and Rs 144 for commercial users, who are also fearing disruption of supply. Forty per cent of our LNG comes from Qatar, which has closed its gas export facilities. The curtailment of gas supply has adversely affected production in industrial units that use imported gas.

These developments have highlighted the critical importance of energy security.

For decades, we have tried to find more oil and gas reserves to improve our energy security. Success has eluded us. Import dependence has only increased. Our oil and gas imports cost us over \$100 billion annually and constitute 25-30 per cent of our total imports. Is there another way of achieving energy security? What would true energy security look like for India?

Our ongoing successful energy transition has created a potential path for achieving energy security and independence. This is a new development with far-reaching positive implications. The goal of the energy transition is to not just give up the use of fossil fuels. As the use of imported oil and gas decreases, our vulnerability declines and energy security rises. Therefore, strategic autonomy and security demand that we accelerate our energy transition away from imported oil and gas.

Accelerating the electrification of our economy is a central pillar of the strategy of energy transition. Electricity would replace the use of fossil fuels in the economy to the extent technically feasible. In parallel, the use of fossil fuels in electricity generation would decline. Electricity generation in India primarily uses domestic coal. However, the share of solar and wind power has been rising rapidly. Power generation is increasing with private investment, and efforts at stabilising the grid and power capacity creation can be raised without difficulty.

Accelerating the transition to electric mobility would reduce our need for imported oil. India has already achieved a critical breakthrough in the domestic production of electric vehicles.

The key lesson of the present trauma is that we should give up thinking of gas as an intermediate fuel and accelerate our transition away from oil and gas

There is a competitive industry structure. An increasing number of good electric versions of popular brands are now in the market. Consumers are discovering that the cost of running an electric vehicle is lower. India is becoming a global leader in the use of electric buses. What can be done to increase the share of EVs in the market? A feasible decision would be to mandate that all commercial vehicles be electric from prospective dates, beginning with the NCR. Commercial vehicle operators would save money. No mandate for private vehicles is being suggested, and their freedom of choice may be left undisturbed. In the long run, this would have a decisive impact on reducing air pollution.

With the implementation of this decision, commercial transport would cease to be dependent on imported oil, and this vulnerability would be eliminated. We have enough domestic coal, and a large number of coal-fired stations are being built. These, along with renewables, can fully meet the energy needs of all commercial transport. At a conservative estimate, oil imports would come down by over 30 per cent and further as the market share of EVs among private consumers increases. This is already happening.

Anxiety about the availability of gas is leading to a dramatic surge in the purchase of induction stoves. The switchover to the use of electricity for cooking needs to be promoted in a sustained manner. Induction stoves are more energy-efficient. Using electricity at, say, Rs 8 per unit for cooking, is cheaper than gas. The savings for low-income households would be far higher.

The rates of electricity for them are low; in some states, there is free electricity of 200-300 units per month. Then there is the PM's rooftop solar programme for 300 free units per month. Using electricity for all cooking in the country would end dependence on imports and eliminate vulnerability for such an essential necessity.

The key lesson of the present trauma is that we should give up thinking of gas as an intermediate fuel and accelerate our transition away from oil and gas. The sun and wind generate electricity without requiring imports.

However, renewable energy installation requires equipment. For full energy security, India should manufacture all renewable energy equipment and not be dependent on imports. For us, the transition to energy security must also be an industrial transition. Domestic manufacturing of solar panels and batteries with full value-addition should be the goal. In addition to PLI, the government should invite bids for long-term, say 15 years, procurement of solar panels and batteries with full value addition in India from the year the successful bidder can set up a new plant and go into production. It should be prepared to pay a higher price over imports initially. This would lay the foundation for energy-independent manufacturing for the green economy.

For India, the road to energy security runs through the transition away from imported oil and gas and their replacement by electricity.

The writer is distinguished fellow, TERI and author of Rising Ambition: Carving New Pathways — India's Energy Transition. Victor is research associate, TERI

When the workplace wants the worker, not her body



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

IN A country where women's pain is routinely trivialised, any resistance to a formal, enforceable entitlement feels like yet another dismissal. And yet, on menstrual leave, the Supreme Court's rejection of a blanket mandate — "...the moment you introduce it as law, as a compulsory condition, you do not know the amount of damage you will do to their career," the bench said while dismissing the PIL — may have articulated an uncomfortable truth. Not all well-meaning protections liberate.

This is reflected in how labour markets behave when costs are unevenly distributed. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-2024, female labour force participation in India stands at around 41 per cent overall, but urban female participation remains around 25 per cent. Salaried women earn roughly about 20 per cent less than their male counterparts. In such an ecosystem, even a marginal increase in the perceived "risk" of hiring women can relocate the inequality from the workplace to the hiring process. Employers may simply opt for the "less complicated" hire: The male worker.

For decades, a similar logic was marshalled against maternity leave — that mandating paid absence would deter employers from hiring women. Yet, over time, the Court has nudged the law towards a more expansive understanding of gender justice. In 2025, in *K Umadevi, Government of Tamil Nadu*, it held maternity benefits to be a fundamental right. There can be an obvious counter-argument to a comparison between maternity leave and menstrual leave: The first is finite, the second is recurring. But this distinction does not alter the constitutional principle. If anything, the recurring nature of menstrual discomfort strengthens the case for structural remedy over episodic concessions.

The Court has recognised this. In *Dr Jyoti Thakur v. Government of India (2026)*, it declared menstrual health as an integral part of right to life, directing states to ensure access to sanitation and hygiene in all government and private schools. But on menstrual leave, the Court did what an earlier bench had done in July 2024: It placed the onus on the legislature to map the way forward.

This hesitation exposes a deeper tension within feminist policy-making between protection and parity. But the question is not

merely whether menstrual leave makes for wise policy — given the inherently masculine nature of workplaces, structural support should not come at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes — it must also address what better policy might look like.

Why, in fact, is a credible model worth considering. Employees' State Insurance Corporation scheme already distributes the cost of sickness leave and maternity leave across employers, employees and the state. Extending the same to menstrual leave is not technically inconceivable. But it would require sustained political will and a meaningful expansion of coverage.

There is also the easier step: Extending the SC's own articulation of an infrastructure of menstrual dignity to the workplace. This would require more than provisions of sanitary products. It would need an understanding of women's health as a continuum, and a willingness to balance empathy with the compulsions of productivity.

The conversation around menstrual leave has to take into account another blind spot: The non-inclusion of blue-collar workers. In Karnataka, for instance, which introduced menstrual leave last year — a policy now under challenge in the high court — the mandate applies to working women in government and private sectors. This means it does not reach the domestic worker, the construction labourer, the agricultural worker, women who constitute the overwhelming majority of the female workforce. The discussion has to include them as well.

At its core, menstrual leave is a conversation not just about days off but about whether the workplace is willing to reckon with the body it expects women to leave at the door. The Supreme Court has shown it can hold two truths at once — that policy that subtly signals that women are less available or "reliable" works risks undermining decades of hard-won progress, and that menstrual dignity is a constitutional value.

The legislature must now do the harder work of holding that balance so that entrenched biases do not get in the way of women just doing their jobs.

The writer is senior associate editor, Paromita Chakrabarti@expressindia.com

Japan PM gambles when she buys security in Trump world



GURJIT SINGH

THE SUMMIT between Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and US President Donald Trump represents a watershed moment for the Indo-Pacific. Takaichi arrived in Washington not as a junior partner seeking protection, but as a "popular, powerful" leader (in Trump's own words), wielding a historic electoral mandate. The summit exposed the transactional and high-stakes nature of the alliance under a second Trump term, specifically regarding Taiwan's stability and the escalating conflict in West Asia.

The centrepiece of the visit was the progress on the 2025 US-Japan strategic trade and investment agreement. This is a geo-economic blueprint designed to "re-industrialise" America using Japanese capital. Key projects, such as GE Vernova Hitachi's Small Modular Reactor (SMR) plants in Tennessee and Alabama, and the "Portsmouth consortium" led by SoftBank and Hitachi, signal a shift. By funding \$2.6 billion of natural gas and AI-ready power infrastructure in Ohio and Pennsylvania, Takaichi is effectively buying "alliance insurance". These investments are tied to US tariff reductions and the revitalisation of the American industrial base. For Japan, this ensures that the "America First" doctrine includes it as an essential partner rather than a trade competitor. The agreement also secures a critical minerals action plan, aimed at breaking China's monopoly.

Takaichi achieved a significant, if delicate, victory regarding Taiwan. She has been more hawkish than her predecessors, suggesting that a Taiwan contingency could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan. While US initially labelled this a "significant shift", the summit resulted in a reaffirmed commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and on the importance of Taiwan's stability. But this came with a caveat: Washington remains the ultimate arbiter of when and how to confront Beijing.

The most friction-filled aspect of the summit involved West Asia. President Trump demanded that Japan "step up to the plate" in the Strait of Hormuz. Takaichi faced a "bear trap". Joining a US-led naval coalition against Iran could jeopardise Japan's historical role as a mediator and its energy ties. However, results suggest a tactical compromise. Takaichi avoided a public rift by appealing to Trump's self-image as a "peacemaker" while signalling that Japan would contribute to "appropriate efforts" to ensure maritime safety. The pressure remains high: Trump's praise for Takaichi as a "strong woman" is linked to this expectation that she will deploy Japanese assets, whether financial or military, to support US objectives in the Gulf.

The summit proved that the price of the US security umbrella has risen. Japan is no longer just "hosting" bases, it is "investing" in the US economy to keep it engaged in the Pacific

The writer is a former ambassador

40 YEARS AGO

March 24, 1986



Haryana Opposition's demand

THE OPPOSITION-sponsored Samast Haryana convention demanded the resignation of the Bhajan Lal government by April 23 for having failed to safeguard the interests of the state and urged the Centre to abrogate sections 7 and 9 of the Punjab Accord relating to territorial and river water dispute. In case the Bhajan Lal government does not resign, the convention demanded the Centre to dismiss the "anti-people" government, dissolve the Assembly and announce mid-term polls.

Union Carbide case

UNION CARBIDE and American lawyers for victims of the Bhopal gas leak have reached a

tentative settlement of \$350 million compensation for the disaster. The proposal includes the Government of India which claims to be the sole representative of the victims. The attorneys representing the Indian government have refused to comment on the matter. But one of those representing the victims has been quoted as saying that the Indian Government has achieved its goal.

Nagaland crisis

THE KILLING of two students in police firing in Kohima is now snowballing into a political crisis for the Nagaland Chief Minister, Senayangba Chubatothi Jamir, with multiple ministers submitting their resignation to him over the issue. Four ministers

including two belonging of cabinet rank, T A Ngullie and K Sema, submitted their resignations to Jamir.

Jailbreak in Pakistan

THIRTY-FIVE prisoners condemned to death escaped from the Sukkur jail in the biggest jailbreak in the history of Pakistan. Officials said one prisoner and a jail guard were killed in the shootout between the estimated 50 convicts who organised the escape and evaded the guards. Unofficial reports from Sukkur, a town about 800 kilometres south-west of Islamabad, said the escaped prisoners were on death row for murder and highway robberies with 16 of them allegedly members of dangerous gangs.



WHAT OTHERS SAY
The Israeli-made disaster in Gaza is far from over. Let all aid in be for Palestinians starve.
—Haaretz, Editorial

Broken UGC needs reform. But the new higher education bill is not the answer



DESHKAAAL
YOGENDRA YADAV

A former member of the University Grants Commission (UGC), I would not shed a tear on the abolition of this apex higher education body proposed by the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) bill. The UGC is a broken, dysfunctional and counterproductive system. I would have happily supported the new VBSA architecture if the UGC was replaced by a new regulatory architecture promised by the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020: "Independent and empowered" bodies that institutionalise "checks-and-balances in the system, minimise conflicts of interest, and eliminate concentrations of power".

Sadly, the proposed bill, currently under review by the Standing Committee of the Parliament, does exactly the opposite. The new regulatory architecture it proposes is a recipe for concentration of power that can only lead to centralisation, bureaucratisation and commercialisation of higher education — possibly worse than the present UGC system, hard as it is to imagine that.

Between 2010 and 2013, as an honorary member of the Commission, I had a ringside view of all that was wrong with higher education management. The UGC was as corrupt and inefficient as the infamous PWD or DDA, with rampant conflicts of interest. Steered by academic bureaucrats who would stand up to receive a phone call from the joint secretary in the ministry, its autonomy existed only on paper. Even if it had some well-meaning professors on committees, the institution had little capacity or domain expertise needed to regulate the vast ocean of colleges, universities, deemed universities, institutions of national importance and whatnots. The then minister Kapil Sibal tried to clean the system by appointing some members with academic credentials and integrity, but the changes we could bring about were cosmetic, if any.

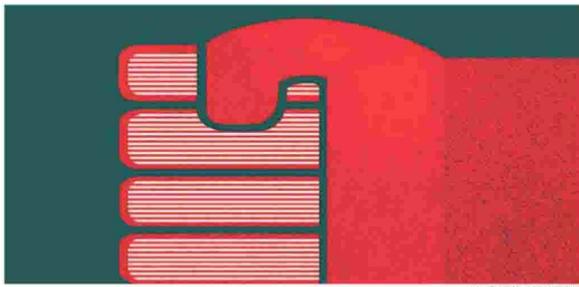


ILLUSTRATION: C SANKARANAR

My singular achievement was to push through the first-ever conflict of interest policy in the UGC. Ironically, that very policy was invoked to remove me from the Commission on the charge of political activism. The system was rotten from tevery top. It needed a drastic overhaul.

This was not just my personal impression. This is exactly what a committee headed by Professor Yashpal had concluded in 2009. The report of this "Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education" makes for a salutary reading in today's context. The committee had recommended winding up the UGC and the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) and replacing these with a National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER), an apex body that would end fragmented regulation and bureaucratic overlap. But the objective of the new regulatory structure was to promote academic autonomy by ending "inspection raj", replacing rigid prior approvals with academic self-regulation and by reducing micromanagement and bureaucratic discretion. The Yashpal committee focused on the public purpose of the university by providing for generous state funding and strict regulation of profiteering and commercialisation.

The VBSA moves in the opposite direction. If it becomes the law of the land, it will be a triple

Though it is presented as a new piece of legislation, the VBSA bill is actually a reincarnation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) bill that was introduced in Parliament in 2018

whammy: It would take away whatever remnants of academic autonomy of the faculty, the institution and of state governments. By doing away with any mandatory provision or institutional design for state funding or social justice, the bill washes its hands of the public purpose of higher education.

Though it is presented as a new piece of legislation, the VBSA bill is actually a reincarnation of The Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) bill that was introduced in Parliament in 2018. The government was forced to withdraw that version, thanks to sharp political push back on the apprehension of centralisation, loss of autonomy and funding. The new bill does not address the key problem of concentration of power: it simply creates a more complex institutional design to achieve the same end. Instead of one all-powerful HECI, now we have an umbrella body called VBSA that supervises three separate Councils in charge of regulation, accreditation and academic standards. But the basic impulse remains unaltered, in some ways stronger than earlier. This can be seen in four key provisions.

First, there is no autonomy in this new institutional set-up. Four separate institutions are a smokescreen; these are separate but not independent. The VBSA and the three councils are identical in their structure. The chair and members are to be appointed entirely by the

central government — including the academics who represent state universities — which can also remove them and suspend or supersede the entire commission at its will. Some IAS officers will control all the strings at the behest of their political masters.

Second, contrary to the promise of "light and tight" regulation in the NEP 2020, the VBSA now has more coercive intervention powers than the UGC or any other regulatory body before it. On the recommendation of its Councils, the VBSA can exercise draconian powers to penalise institutions and their office bearers, derecognise a degree and recommend the closing down of a college or university. The appeal against any such decision, taken at the behest of the central government, would lie with the central government itself.

Third, and perhaps the worst feature of the new bill, is its complete disregard of the federal structure. State governments, which still fund and supervise higher education institutions that have more than 80 per cent of students, have no say in the running of VBSA, except for one token and rotating seat in a 15-member body and not even that in the three councils. The 2018 bill had provided for a weak consultative structure, an advisory council comprising the Union Education Minister with chairpersons of all State Higher Education Councils. The VBSA bill does away with even that pretence. So, while the state governments will set up colleges and universities, the central government will decide upon their recruitment, their syllabi, their functioning and perhaps their very existence.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the present bill, like its 2018 predecessor, delinks regulation from funding, but does not say a word about where and how the funding will come from. Nor is there any provision for regulating equity, access and non-discrimination in institutions of higher education. This conspicuous silence tells us something about the operational philosophy underlying the new legislation. It is a mechanism for formalising the retreat of the state from the public purpose of higher education at a moment when millions of first-generation college goers need it the most.

The writer is member, Swaraaj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Views are personal

For TB-free India, we need science, and the power of jan bhagidari



J.P. NADDA

TODAY, AS India launches another TB Mukta Bharat Abhiyaan — 100 days' campaign — I look back on my journey towards eliminating tuberculosis (TB) with pride and optimism. In recent years, India's TB response has been unique — anchored in *jan bhagidari*, the spirit of collective responsibility inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision. This whole-of-society approach has proven its strength across sectors, driving the success of initiatives such as Mission Indradhishu and reinforcing the message of Swasth Nat, Sashakt Parivar at the community level.

The experience of the 100-day Intensified TB Mukta Bharat Abhiyaan, launched in December 2024, cemented our belief in the power of people.

The results speak for themselves: India achieved a 21 per cent reduction in TB incidence — nearly twice the global rate — along with 25 per cent decline in TB mortality since 2015. This shows what happens when science, systems and society work together. Our strategy has evolved in response to new evidence and emerging challenges. India's National TB Prevalence Survey revealed that half of the TB patients do not show typical symptoms. This prompted a shift toward proactive screening among the asymptomatic vulnerable population. Silent cases fuel spread — one undiagnosed patient can unknowingly pass the infection to others, making early diagnosis not only a clinical necessity but a civic responsibility.

Equipped with AI-enabled handheld X-ray units, Nishay Vahans, offering advanced molecular testing, carry diagnostics directly to communities most at risk. More than 20 crore people have been screened, leading to the detection of 32.65 lakh TB cases, including 10.9 lakh asymptomatic ones that would otherwise have remained undiagnosed.

We move forward into the next stage, seeking to deepen gains. Over 3,000 AI-powered handheld X-ray devices will be deployed alongside next-generation diagnostic machines, while data-driven tools will help identify high-risk villages and urban wards where targeted screening can have the greatest impact.

Innovation, however, extends far beyond the deployment of new technologies. India has made sustained investments in research and development, strengthening partnerships between government, academia and industry. These have created a rich and growing pipeline of Made-in-India TB diagnostics. They will not only strengthen India's ability to detect TB earlier and treat patients faster but also position the country as a leader in TB innovation for the Global South.

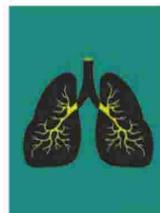
As India urbanises rapidly, cities have become critical battlegrounds in the fight against TB. To address this challenge, we are focusing on high-risk urban settings such as informal settlements, migrant worker clusters and other vulnerable populations.

Our task is clear: To sustain the momentum and carry it forward with even greater intensity, India has always delivered when we move as one. We stood together to eradicate polio. Under the leadership of PM Modi, we vaccinated over a billion people against Covid in record time. With a record 10-fold increase in funding and a strategy rooting for "Made in India" developments, we have moved from hope to certainty. We will continue to strengthen early detection, expand diagnostic access, and deepen *jan bhagidari* by enlisting every citizen, institution and youth platform in this shared mission.

India's campaign against TB is not just a public health endeavour. It is a testament to our nation's ability to unite for a cause that touches billions of lives. A TB-free India will not be built by the government alone. It will be built by all of us — by the choices we make, the habits we adopt, the support we extend and the stigmatising we refuse to tolerate. If we stand together, we can ensure that the next generation will know TB is not just a chapter in history, not as a reality in their lives.

I am sure that with our collective efforts, we will achieve the resolution set out by PM Modi, "Yes, we can End TB".

The writer is Union minister of health and family welfare & chemicals and fertilisers



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump isn't winning

IT IS imperative that President Donald Trump and PM Benjamin Netanyahu terminate their war against Iran with immediate effect; else, the consequences will be quite cataclysmic ("Coming up, war's downstream effects", IE, March 23). The dire straits that the world has been plunged into, especially vis-à-vis the Strait of Hormuz, after a resilient Iran has thrown a monkey wrench into the machinery and throttled the safe passage of ships, will not bode well for the region and the world at large.

Hemant Hemnadi, Virar

Fire keeps burning

FIRE INCIDENTS revive painful memories of the catastrophe at a private hospital ICU in Bhubaneswar in 2016, which caused 22 deaths, and of the Maharanj Laxmi Bai Medical College fire in Jhansi in 2024, in which 18 newborns died. ("To prevent fire tragedies, address systemic failures", IE, March 23). Compliance checks are often treated as paperwork exercises. Until India treats hospital safety as a matter of criminal accountability rather than bureaucratic paperwork, the fires will keep burning.

SS Paul, Nadia

WE CONSISTENTLY fail to learn from the past ("To prevent fire tragedies, address systemic failures", IE, March 23). The haunting memories of the Uphar Cinema tragedy should have been a permanent deterrent, yet collective amnesia has become the norm. Citizens routinely prioritise immediate personal gains over collective safety, actively sabotaging urban planning. Planned municipal roads are choked by illegal boundary extensions and haphazard billboards. Unauthorised constructions thrive at a premium, tragically facilitated by the very law enforcers mandated to prevent them. One disaster simply replaces the other, while the pleas of law-abiding citizens are drowned out by profits.

Krishan Chugh, New Delhi



SHASHANK MAHESHWARI

INDIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL engagement with gender identity reached a transformative moment in NALSA (2014). In the judgment, the Supreme Court recognised the right of transgender persons to determine their gender identity as an intrinsic aspect of dignity, autonomy, and equality. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, raises serious questions by fundamentally restructuring the statutory definition of "transgender person".

At the centre of the amendment lies the redefinition of Section 2(k) of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. The proposed provision restricts transgender identity to two categories: Individuals belonging to historically recognised socio-cultural communities such as *hijra*, *kiner*, *aravani*, and *jogta*, and persons born with congenital variations in sex characteristics. This formulation marks a significant departure from the 2019 Act, which defined transgender persons as individuals whose gender identity does not correspond with the gender assigned to them at birth, irrespective of whether they have undergone medical transition.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill asserts that the law should not extend protection to individuals claiming gender identity based on "self-perceived" characteristics, but only to those who experience discrimination due to biological conditions beyond their control.

'NALSA' articulated a rights-based framework grounded in autonomy and dignity. The amendment appears to revive a classificatory model rooted in biology and community status

For transgenders, law makes them ask who they are

This reasoning, however, sits uneasily with the constitutional doctrine articulated in NALSA. The SC decisively rejected a biologically deterministic approach, particularly the reasoning derived from the English case of *Corbett v Corbett* (1970), which treated biological attributes as the definitive marker of sex. Instead, the Court emphasised that gender identity is fundamentally shaped by psychological self-perception and lived experience. By grounding gender identity within the guarantees of Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21, the Court recognised the right of individuals to determine their gender independent of medical or biological validation. By conditioning recognition on congenital variations or membership in specific communities, the Bill privileges biological determinism. This shift potentially transforms a rights-based framework into a regime of state verification.

The amendment also reflects a greater conceptual difficulty in the legal understanding of gender identity. In various scholarships, it is emphasised that "transgender" functions as an umbrella category encompassing a wide spectrum of identities and experiences, including persons who may not undergo medical transition but identify with a gender different from that assigned at birth. Legal definitions that rely exclusively on biological markers risk collapsing distinct phenomena — intersex variations, gender identity, and socio-cultural

communities — into a single category. Such conflation restructures the legal architecture of recognition around pathology.

Equally important is the legislative process through which such a fundamental redefinition has emerged. Meaningful consultation enables lawmakers to incorporate the experiences of affected groups into the formulation of legal norms, thereby enhancing both the legitimacy and effectiveness of legislation. The evolution of transgender legislation in India, from earlier draft bills to the 2019 Act, has often been criticised for insufficient engagement with transgender communities. Supporters of the amendment may argue that definitional clarity is necessary for the effective administration of statutory benefits and protections. Yet, administrative convenience cannot override constitutional guarantees. The challenge before lawmakers is to design institutional mechanisms capable of implementing rights without undermining the principle of self-determination.

NALSA articulated a rights-based framework grounded in autonomy and dignity. The amendment appears to revive a classificatory model rooted in biology and community status. In doing so, it risks transforming the constitutional promise of self-identification into a regime where gender identity must be verified rather than recognised.

The writer teaches at Jindal Global Law School



KURIAKOSE SAIU

JESUS CHRIST could walk on water. Chuck Norris can swim through land. Carlos Ray "Chuck" Norris died this week after being hospitalised in Hawaii following a medical emergency. The martial artist-turned-action hero was officially 86 at the time of his passing. Unofficially, the near-mythical Norris might be immortal. Chuck Norris "facts" have been an internet staple since the early 2000s. It all started with Vin Diesel. In 2005, a website called "Vin Diesel Fact Generator" popped up, taking inspiration from an array of jokes about Diesel on a *Something Awful*

Chuck Norris didn't die, God needed a bodyguard

forum. When website creator Ian Spector saw that the Diesel jokes weren't cutting it any more, he ran a poll to see who the top choice for his next tough-guy fact generator should be. Norris won by a landslide. Norris's real-life martial arts credentials and numerous black belts went a long way in establishing him as the alpha of choice. That, and the gift that keeps on giving: Norris's long-running TV show, *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

Chuck Norris once threw a grenade and killed 50 people. Then, the grenade exploded. My first brush with Chuck Norris was his appearance as the titular Walker on the CBS show that ran for nine seasons between 1993 and 2001. As a young boy growing up in '90s India, Norris's small-screen exploits were the closest thing you could get to a steady stream

of Rambo-coded machismo on a weekly basis. The camp factor was high, but so was the man's roundhouse kick. Norris's over-the-top heroics were cemented for an entire generation with that one show.

Chuck Norris got bit by a cobra once. After five days of excruciating pain, the cobra finally died. Chuck Norris jokes soon became the prototype for other larger-than-life internet characters like The Most Interesting Man in the World ("His only regret is that he didn't have any regrets").

Chuck Norris jokes became the prototype for other larger-than-life internet characters like The Most Interesting Man in the World ("His only regret is that he didn't have any regrets")

than-life internet characters like The Most Interesting Man in the World ("His only regret is that he didn't have any regrets"). In India, we had our own version of the Chuck Norris joke, transposing his demigod-like powers on the one and only Rajinikanth. It made perfect sense. After all, with his iconic cigarette-twirling, bombastic dialogue delivery, and truly intangible charm, even Norris would have had a tough time keeping up with our Superstar. There's a difference in the kind of adulation both receive. Norris is definitely one of the GOATs when it comes to the action genre; his appearance in the second *Expendables* movie is testament to the fact. But the fandom that Thalavalar enjoys is different. A Norrisian joke might claim God prefers to Chuck

Norris. In India, people actually do pray to Rajinikanth at a temple dedicated to him. *Chuck Norris once high-fived Rajinikanth. That's what scientists called the Big Bang.* So what makes a man a living myth? Is it the perfect roundhouse kick? Black belts? Mid-air cigarette-catching skills? Or maybe, just a bored teenager with an internet connection and a vast imagination? Turns out it's all three, plus a battalion of fanboys. So long, Chuck Norris. Sure, your political views might be hard to agree with, and you might have spent way too much time endorsing Glock and Netanyahu. But at least, we'll always have the jokes. After all, *Chuck Norris didn't die. God just needed a bodyguard.*

The writer is an editor and stand-up comedian

@ieExplained

#ExpressExplained

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

● POLICY

Hyderabad's special taskforce, set to tackle food adulteration

Sreenivas Janalya
Hyderabad, March 23

LAST WEEK, the Hyderabad Police launched the Hyderabad Food Adulteration Surveillance Team (H-FAST) to check adulteration at food manufacturing units, eateries, and restaurants. Police Commissioner VC Sajjanar, who will oversee the team tasked with conducting surprise raids across the city, said that H-FAST is a dedicated, intelligence-driven mechanism to combat food adulteration.

Uptick in incidents

In recent months, Hyderabad has seen an uptick in incidents of food adulteration and manufacturing of spurious food products. During raids, police and health officials have found fake ginger-garlic paste, adulterated paneer, ghee, *kova* (traditional Indian dairy product used to make sweets), pickles, spiced milk, curd, and dairy products. Spices like turmeric, chilli powder, and mustard have been found to have been prepared using synthetic materials. These products, manufactured by illegal units in unhygienic conditions, are then supplied to roadside eateries, restaurants, and hotels at cheap rates, which could impact the health of consumers.

For instance, in Malleshwari, police seized 1,090 kg of fake ginger-garlic paste. Manufactured using acetic acid, synthetic colours, and gum powder, large quantities of it was supplied to shops and popular eateries across the city. In a separate raid, police seized fake tea powder, detergent powder, and mosquito repellent. From a dairy products shop, police seized 3,000 kgs of fake paneer, adulterated *kova* and ghee, and palm oil.

Incidentally, H-FAST was announced a day after two incidents concerning food adulteration were reported in and around Hyderabad.

● MODUS OPERANDI

- During raids, police and health officials found adulterated spices and dairy products
- These products, manufactured by illegal units in unhygienic conditions, are then supplied to roadside eateries, restaurants, and hotels at cheap rates. This could impact consumer health

While the first involved police busting a unit in Jyaguda that was supposedly manufacturing adulterated pickles, the second saw police raiding six stores for allegedly selling adulterated paneer and dairy products in Secunderabad.

The team's scope

Headed by G Valbhav Raghunath, Deputy Commissioner (Task Force), H-FAST will initially comprise 28 members, which includes Inspectors, Sub-Inspectors, and supporting staff focusing on surveillance, detection, and prosecution of offences related to unsafe food.

The teams will conduct checks at food manufacturing units and stores and restaurants. Sajjanar said that its main task is food safety enforcement, and the team will work in close coordination with Food Safety Officers to strengthen regulatory action.

Officials emphasised that food adulteration is a serious offence posing a threat to public health. A zero-tolerance approach will be followed, and stringent legal action will be taken against offenders.

Grievance mechanism

In order for the public to reach out to H-FAST, a dedicated toll-free number (8712661212) has been established to report instances of food adulteration and unsafe food practices. Citizens can also reach out to official social media handles to share information and complaints with the taskforce, enabling quicker response and wider public participation.

Drishiti IAS

SELECTION MAHOTSNA

SALE 50% OFF

Offer Valid on All

Online Courses / Pandive Courses / Test Series

Call Now **87501 87501**

● WAR IN WEST ASIA

Why India must step on the gas with ethanol



HARISH DAMODARAN

IN NOVEMBER 1975, two years after the first global oil shock courtesy of the Arab-Israeli 'Yom Kippur' War, Brazil launched a Proalcool programme, aimed at reducing its dependence on imported fuels.

Proalcool mandated all petrol sold in Brazil to contain a minimum 11% anhydrous alcohol or ethanol. In 1979, when the second oil crisis came with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Brazil introduced cars that could run on 100% hydrous alcohol (this has 5-6% water as against less than 1% for ethanol).

By 1985, when domestic ethanol production reached nearly 1,200 crore litres, Brazilian fuel stations had two types of pumps: one for ethanol-blended petrol (Gasoline C, as it is called) and the other for 100% hydrous alcohol (E100) vehicles.

In 2003, the first commercial flex-fuel vehicles were launched in Brazil, with engines capable of running on both Gasoline C and E100 fuel. The vehicles had electronic sensors to detect the particular ethanol-gasoline blend in the tank and automatically adjust the fuel injection volume and spark timing.

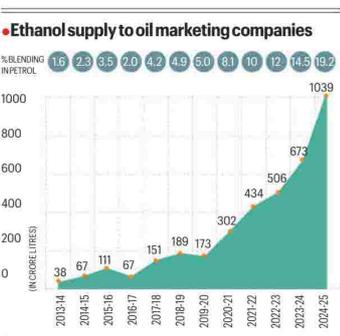
The minimum ethanol blend in petrol was hiked to 25% by 2014 and to 27% from March 2015. Since August 2015, the ethanol content in Gasoline C has been set at 30%.

In 2024, Brazil's total fuel alcohol consumption was 3,492.4 crore litres. 2,289.6 crore litres of E100 and 1,202.8 crore litres of ethanol in Gasoline C was 27% (now 30%), the overall mix for fuel used in the country's light-duty vehicles fleet stood at 51.8%. The alcohol consists more than half of the fuel powering Brazil's cars and two-wheelers.

Replicating Brazil

Speaking in Parliament on the West Asia war on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to India's own ramped-up efforts on ethanol blending over the last decade that helped address its vulnerabilities from imported energy.

Since 1979, the world has seen at least three oil shocks — in 2008, when Brent crude prices surged to a record \$147.5 per barrel on July 11, and in 2022 after Russia's



invasion of Ukraine, when they reached \$139.13 on March 7.

The latest shock — from the ongoing US-Israel versus Iran war — should be a wake-up call for India and to replicate the Brazil model, said CK Jain, president of the Delhi-based Grain Ethanol Manufacturers Association.

"The government must work with the auto industry and oil marketing companies (OMCs) to gradually increase the ethanol blending mandate from 20% to 30% and incentivise the production of flex-fuel vehicles that can run on 100% hydrous alcohol. Our stations, too, should have separate dispensing units for E30 and E100 fuels, with consumers choosing either depending on the price parity between the two," he said.

An aggressive ethanol use strategy would require a relook at taxation as well.

Currently, ethanol is covered under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime. The ethanol used for blending with petrol attracts 5% GST. But petrol remains outside GST, attracting both the Central excise duty and State value added tax. Both ethanol-blended petrol and pure petrol are treated as identical for taxation purposes.

"We need to bring all fuels blended with ethanol — whether E20, E30 or E100 — under GST," added Jain.

The progress so far

India, as the accompanying chart shows, has achieved a significant rise in both the quantity of ethanol supplied by distillers to OMCs and the average blending ratio in petrol — from a mere 1.6

● Ethanol supply by feedstock (in crore litres)

Supply Year	C-Heavy Molasses	B-Heavy Molasses	Cane Juice	Maize	Surplus FCI Rice	Damaged Feedgrain
2013-14	38	0	0	0	0	0
2014-15	67	0	0	0	0	0
2015-16	111	0	0	0	0	0
2016-17	67	0	0	0	0	0
2017-18	151	0	0	0	0	0
2018-19	146	33	1	0	0	10
2019-20	74	68	15	0	0	16
2020-21	39	183	39	0	2	39
2021-22	11	265	85	0	49	24
2022-23	6	235	128	32	74	32
2023-24	58	149	64	286	0	116
2024-25	17	139	165	498	140	80
2025-26*	14	113	165	479	233	54

* CONTRACTED QUANTITY TILL NOW. SUPPLY YEARS ARE DEC-NOV TILL 2021-22; DEC-OCT FOR 2022-23 AND NOV-OCT FROM 2023-24.

litres (1.6%) in 2013-14 to 1,039 crore litres (19.2%) in 2024-25.

Till 2017-18, ethanol was produced by distilleries attached to sugar mills only from so-called C-heavy molasses, a dark brown liquid byproduct of cane processing.

From 2018-19, mills began making ethanol from an earlier 'B-heavy' stage molasses (having higher sucrose content available for fermentation) and also directly from whole sugarcane juice or syrup. They were encouraged to do so by the Centre's decision to pay mills more for ethanol manufactured from the B-heavy and direct cane juice/syrup routes, in order to compensate them for the revenues foregone from lower/ml recovery and sale of sugar.

From 2018-19, the Centre also fixed separate ex-distillery prices for ethanol derived from rice, maize and damaged foodgrains.

Ethanol production involves fermentation of sugar by yeasts. In molasses or cane juice, sugar is present as sucrose. Cereal grains contain starch, a complex carbohydrate that has to first be extracted and broken down into simple sugars before further fermentation, distillation and dehydration to ethanol with 99.99% alcohol concentration.

Out of the 1,039 crore litres of ethanol supplied to OMCs in 2024-25, as much as 718 crore litres or over 69% was from grains, mainly maize and rice. The latter included surplus rice from the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) stocks and broken/damaged grain sourced from the open market.

For the current supply year (November-

October), the OMCs have so far contracted 1,058 crore litres — 766 crore litres from grains and 292 crore litres from sugarcane-based feedstocks (see table). The ex-distillery price has been fixed at Rs 57.97 per litre for ethanol produced from C-heavy molasses, while at Rs 60.73, Rs 65.61, Rs 60.32, Rs 64 and Rs 71.86 for that from B-heavy molasses, sugarcane juice/syrup, FCI rice, damaged grain and maize respectively.

The road ahead

The latest oil shock presents an opportunity for India to "revisit and review" its existing ethanol blending programme. Tarnu Sawhney, vice chairman and managing director of Triveni Engineering & Industries Ltd, pointed out. "We need to first understand that India does not have enough crude oil and imports 90% of its requirement. Second, the internal combustion engine isn't going anywhere and there are limits to how much electric vehicles can replace it. Third, we are surplus in sugarcane, rice and maize and can increase their production much more for E-30 and E-100 fuels." Sawhney, whose company has a capacity to crush 70,500 tonnes of cane, told *The Indian Express*.

The constraint today, he claimed, is not in ethanol production (India already has a capacity in excess of 1,800 crore litres per annum) or retailing. What India needs is a policy push for all new vehicles to be flex-fuel based. The government should also nudge companies to provide conversion kits to modify existing vehicles.

US-Iran pause is a relief for Gulf desalination plants, water supply

Anagha Jayakumar, Harikishan Sharma
New Delhi, March 23

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Monday said that following "very good and productive" conversations with Iran, the Department of War would postpone strikes on the country's energy infrastructure for five days, subject to the ongoing discussions.

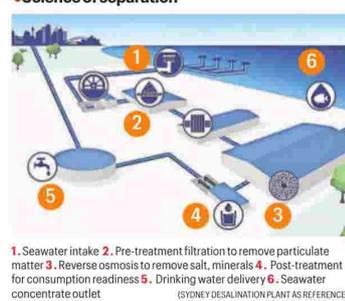
The statement also matters for water desalination infrastructure in the Gulf region, which Iran threatened as retaliation for potential US strikes. Desalination plants are vital for meeting the water requirements of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

What are desalination plants?

Desalination plants convert saltwater into drinkable water and are a preferred method in coastal regions without natural perennial sources of potable water. It involves separating salt molecules from water molecules either through membrane-based methods, such as reverse osmosis (RO), or heat-based methods.

In RO, saltwater is filtered through a semi-permeable membrane under pressure to

● Science of separation



trap the dissolved salts and other impurities. The filtered water is further treated to make it fit for consumption. In the thermal method, saline water is heated, and the resultant vapour is collected and recondensed. According to the International Desali-

nation Association, over 150 countries rely on desalination to produce freshwater. A 2022 report by the French Institute of International Relations noted that the sector was growing by 6% to 12% annually.

Why does the Gulf need so many?

According to the GCC Statistical Centre, the GCC nations had 172 water desalination stations in 2018, with Oman accounting for the most (65 stations), followed by Saudi Arabia (44) and the UAE (40). The stations have a combined capacity of 22 billion litres per day, with actual annual water production at 6,053 billion litres. The plants are located in coastal regions (see pfiic.com).

These countries, covering an area of 2.67 million square km (about 8% of India's geographic area), receive very low rainfall, ranging from 4 to 30 cm. The total precipitation was 281.9 billion cubic metres in 2018 — just 7% of what India receives in a year.

The GCC countries do not have rivers, but wadis (dry valleys or riverbeds), with water available only during rainfall. The total groundwater abstraction (freshwater extracted from the ground) was recorded at 26,495 million cubic metres across the six countries in 2018. Population and economic growth, as well as increasing urban-

isation, have contributed to the rising water demand over time.

With scant rainfall and limited replenishable groundwater, the countries are heavily dependent on desalination plants to meet their water needs. However, desalination plants are highly energy-intensive and run on electricity generated from liquid fuels or natural gas, generating 500 to 850 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually.

Another concern is that reverse osmosis, the predominant desalination method, generates large quantities of saltwater brine, typically discharged into the ocean. These can harm marine habitats and sea creatures such as plankton and fish larvae.

How does Iran meet its water needs?

Unlike other West Asian countries, Iran's water needs are mostly met by groundwater sources, like underground aquifers. It operates comparatively few desalination plants, including one on Qeshm Island. However, it has been experiencing a drought for the last five years and has begun expanding its desalination facilities. This has been limited, given infrastructure constraints, high energy costs and international sanctions on the Iranian economy.

● INFRASTRUCTURE

How the Narendra Modi stadium became an economic hub for Ahmedabad

Leena Misra
Ahmedabad, March 23

IN THE days leading up to the T20 World Cup final at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, a whole bazaar sprung up around it. People sold jerseys, caps, and other cricket merchandise, with some sellers coming all the way from Delhi and raising rates closer to the big day.

On the day of the match, luxury cars carrying fans, some with Maharashtra registrations, crowded in the traffic, two hours before the match. Tourists approached them with offers: "Rs 100 for parking the whole evening... can bargain."

The Western and Northern Railways introduced special trains from Mumbai and Delhi, respectively, to ferry fans to Ahmedabad. The Gujarat Metro Rail Corporation extended its working hours past midnight, earning over Rs 10 lakh in revenue.

endra Modi Stadium is fast becoming one of the pillars of Ahmedabad's economy.

Namaste Trump to Coldplay

In February 2020, a month before the Covid-19 lockdown, the Motera Stadium, as it was known then, welcomed US President Donald Trump with a crowd of over one lakh. A year later, it was named after PM Modi and inaugurated by the then President Ram Nath Kovind.

Jay Shah, Chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC), told *The Indian Express*, "The Narendra Modi Stadium is far more than just a cricket venue. It is a powerful example of how sport can become an engine of economic growth and social development. Over the past few years, we have seen how major cricket events hosted here have contributed significantly to Ahmedabad and Gujarat by boosting tourism, supporting local businesses, creating employment opportunities and



The stadium can seat 1.10 lakh people. FILE

strengthening the city's global reputation as a premier sporting destination."

Jay Shah was the joint secretary of the Gujarat Cricket Association (GCA) when the stadium was being built, and takes pride in the fact that it was completed in 38 months. "The world's biggest cricket stadium" was built at a cost of Rs 800 crore,

doubling the capacity of the existing 49,000-seat stadium to 1.10 lakh.

Five years later, the GCA, which owns the stadium, is looking at it as a potential venue for hosting the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in 2030 and the Olympics in 2036.

Officials of the GCA and the Gujarat government benchmark the January 2025 Coldplay concert as a game-changer for the stadium. A report by EY Parthenon, a global strategy firm, said it directly impacted Ahmedabad's economy by Rs 392 crore, counting the ancillary benefits of what people spent on accommodation, transport, training, and retail.

Flights, trains and hotels operated at full capacity and hotel rates "soared to historic heights" as the influx of tourists cemented Ahmedabad's position as a "premier entertainment destination", the report said.

Before the Narendra Modi stadium, the Melbourne Cricket Ground, with a capacity

of 90,000, was the largest in the world.

According to Jay Shah, "What makes this stadium truly special is not just its scale, but the ecosystem it has helped create, from infrastructure development and hospitality growth to inspiring young people to take up sport."

A GCA official said the stadium hosts about 10-12 major matches in a year and about 30-40 national tournaments.

Riverfront an added attraction

Ahmedabad municipal commissioner Banchanandhi Pani said the high-profile events at the stadium are playing a part in the development of the city as a whole. The 63-acre Sardar Patel Sports Complex (of which the stadium is a part), located along the Sabarmati Riverfront, is set to be "uplifted". "During events, people also use the city bus services, including the BRTS, to reach the stadium. A serene, beautiful riverfront next to the stadium is an added

Under scanner

Ahead of the 2022 Gujarat Assembly polls, the Congress party had declared that it would change the stadium's name to Sardar Patel Stadium if it came to power. There have also been claims that many high-profile events go to this stadium because the BJP is in power at the Centre and in the state. A GCA official, however, said, "The fact is that this is the largest stadium. No one can change that."

A curated selection of articles on the Editorial and Opinion pages for World TB Day, March 24

The evolving diagnostic landscape for tuberculosis



Battle of Bengal

The TMC is fighting off anti-incumbency sentiment

The West Bengal Assembly election, to be held in two phases on April 23 and 29, is shaping up as a two-party race between the incumbent All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Left and the Congress have been pushed to the margins in the intense combat. The Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGP) is contesting the three Darjeeling hill seats as an ally of the TMC. The TMC, which has been in power for three terms, has replaced 74 sitting Members of the Legislative Assembly to deflect anti-incumbency and bring in fresh faces to the field. In 2021, the TMC won 215 seats with a 48.02% vote share while the BJP secured 77 seats with 38%, a sharp rise from when it bagged just three seats and a 10.2% vote share in 2016. Chief Minister and TMC leader Mamata Banerjee is facing off against Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari, from the BJP, in Bhabanipur, where she is the sitting MLA. In 2021, she had lost to Mr. Adhikari in Nandigram by a margin of 1,956 votes, even while the TMC won another term. The run-up to the election in 2026 has been marred by controversies around the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voter list. West Bengal's final electoral roll, which was published on February 28, saw the electorate shrink from 7.66 crore to 7.04 crore, with over 62 lakh names deleted. A further 60 lakh names remain under adjudication even as campaigning is underway, creating unprecedented uncertainty.

The standoff over SIR has overshadowed other debates. Having been in power for three terms, there is much that the TMC should be held accountable for, but SIR turned out to be a gift for Ms. Banerjee, which she has used to amplify her charges against the BJP that it is a party hostile to West Bengal and its voters. The BJP began 2026 with a reasonable case in its favour – the rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata, in 2024, had shaken public confidence in the Mamata government. But the party's limitations – and even refusal – to negotiate the cultural and linguistic diversity of India are markedly visible in the State, and it is placing its hopes on the trimmed voter list and the manoeuvrability of the electoral process. Its State unit is a house divided, while the TMC appears to have consolidated itself further, with Ms. Banerjee and her nephew Abhishek firmly in command. The BJP's upward trajectory may have hit the ceiling. The Congress is contesting without any alliances. The Left is not a power contender, but its vote share in select seats could influence margins in a tight race. In a long campaign period, there may be some surprises in store in West Bengal, as the BJP and the TMC both fight a battle for survival.

Grim future

India's economic fundamentals need a realistic reassessment

The economy has recently been yielding some disconcerting data, even before the war in West Asia began. The most recent of these was the February 2026 data on the Index of Eight Core Industries. This release showed that growth in the overall Index had dropped to a three-month low in February, half the rate of what it saw in January. This was not a case of a high base effect, either, with growth in February 2025 having been just 3.4%. The sector-wise data reveal further issues. The domestic crude oil industry has been contracting for six consecutive months. In the last, the sector has contracted in 20 out of the last 24 months. The natural gas sector, too, has contracted for the last 20 consecutive months. As context, from about the middle of last year, it had been increasingly clear that there would be some sort of escalation between the U.S. and Iran, even if the exact nature of the war now could not have been predicted. It is no secret that India is highly dependent on energy imports, especially from the region that would have faced the brunt of any such escalation. As a matter of fact, a large part of the contraction in domestic production was likely because imports were coming cheap. Yet, as tensions increased, it might have been more prudent to have increased domestic oil and gas production over the last eight months so as to at least build reserves, if not to also temporarily reduce import dependence. Permanently reducing such dependence will take time, but a temporary domestic production push – as is belatedly underway – might have considerably alleviated the current supply crunch. Hindsight is 20-20, but that does not excuse a lack of foresight or an inability to learn. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana of 2016 should have triggered a concerted policy to secure LPG supplies and reserves.

This poor core sector performance comes on top of the new series of GDP data showing that the Indian economy is actually smaller than previously thought. Further, between 2022-23 and 2025-26, the contributions to GDP of key engines such as private consumption, capital formation, exports and imports have all fallen. The share of 'change in stocks' has nearly doubled, however, meaning that there is production but not enough sales. Soon, that production too will reduce to fall in line with the subdued demand. All of this leads into the impact of the current crisis. With commercial fuel sources curtailed, oil prices at more than \$100 a barrel, and global economic uncertainty at a high, economists and rating agencies are already downgrading India's growth outlook to about 6.5%. Perhaps, India's much-vaunted macroeconomic fundamentals and resilience need a more realistic assessment.

Two weeks ago, in the run-up to World Tuberculosis (TB) Day (which falls on March 24), the World Health Organization (WHO) formally recommended the use of new near point-of-care (NPOC) molecular tests for diagnosing TB. WHO also endorsed the use of tongue swab samples for TB testing and sputum pooling strategies to potentially improve testing efficiencies at scale. These are the latest developments in what has been an unusually remarkable decade for the TB diagnostic landscape, a decade when new technologies have not only emerged but have also been tested, swiftly recommended and utilised to advance global efforts to eliminate TB.

Probably the best example is the rapidly expanding use of portable chest X-ray (CXR), in tandem with artificial intelligence (AI) solutions for TB screening. In India, the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP) has made available hundreds of portable CXR machines that are being utilised for the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukti Bharat Abhiyaan, in an effort to take active TB screening into the community.

Until recently, X-ray access was limited to hospital settings and dependent on the availability of technicians and radiologists to record the X-ray and interpret the findings. Today, active case-finding efforts are in full swing through mobile vans equipped with portable CXR with AI, making it more convenient. While this takes diagnostic services into the community, we must ensure on-the-spot collection of sputum samples for those with any CXR findings to significantly reduce attrition in the diagnostic cascade. Further, those with CXR lesions other than TB (for example, lung cancer) must get the referral and treatment services they need. Systematic microplanning will also help to refine these screening efforts to focus on those who are most vulnerable, particularly in urban and tribal settings.

The use of AI also presents a credible option for opportunistic screening. Tens of thousands of X-rays are performed daily across India in public and private clinics and hospitals for various reasons. Installing AI algorithms in digital X-ray machines that can swiftly identify suspicious lesions, whether for TB or other respiratory disorders, can reduce delays in diagnosis. Building health system capacity, particularly at the service delivery level, to use AI effectively is an important first step.

The diagnostic landscape is shifting. India has long relied on sputum smear microscopy as the primary test for diagnosing TB, despite its low sensitivity and inability to identify drug-resistance. In 2016, India began scaling up molecular testing – starting with the Cartridge-based Nucleic Acid Amplification Test



Dr. Soumya Swaminathan

is Chairperson of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and National Science Chair, Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF)

Strengthening the tuberculosis testing infrastructure with an expanded diagnostic toolbox will improve outcomes and support TB elimination efforts

(CBNAAT) and later adopting the indigenous Truena in 2020. Today, many more Indian products are available, and decentralised access to molecular testing is central to the TB programme.

However, access to up-front molecular testing remains uneven. To achieve 100% testing through NAAT prior to treatment initiation, we must also strengthen sputum collection and transportation mechanisms, especially for the elderly, people with disabilities, and those who live in hard-to-reach areas. To complete the diagnostic cascade swiftly, we must reduce delays in first-line and second-line drug resistance testing and work with the general health system to leverage diagnostic human resource capacity. Minimising test turnaround time will ensure that people with drug-resistant TB are started on the correct treatment regimen at the earliest.

With WHO's endorsement of near point-of-care Nucleic Acid Amplification Tests (nPOC-NAAT), there are now more options for molecular testing at the primary-care level that are not heavily dependent on infrastructure. The use of non-sputum samples, such as tongue swabs, are especially useful for those who find it difficult to produce a good sputum sample, including children.

It is important to acknowledge that none of these tools is a complete solution in itself. What this growing collection of new tests offers is a comprehensive toolbox for TB diagnosis. Diagnostic network optimisation can help identify which tools to best use, individually and in combination, and where they should be located, to establish a diagnostic cascade that is accessible, affordable and person-centered. India must field-test these tools through robust implementation research that matches the pace of innovation, so that solutions can be tested in specific settings and decisions taken for scale-up.

Indian innovators have made a significant contribution, bringing to the market screening and diagnostic tools for global use, and will continue to play an important role in taking them to scale across the country. Over the years, we must examine the evidence to evolve clear diagnostic algorithms that are operationally feasible, involving the use of both AI-enabled CXR and molecular tests for diagnosing TB and identifying any antibiotic resistance.

Research and innovation priorities

Simultaneously, we must streamline innovation assessment and procurement pathways so that all evidence is rigorously reviewed by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), comprehensive health technology assessments address clinical, social, economic, and ethical concerns, and only recommended tools are

procured and distributed in both public and private sectors. Several areas still require research and innovation.

First, as India is scaling up testing for TB infection and access to TB preventive therapy (TPT), we need more cost-effective and easy-to-use biomarkers that can identify and predict those at high risk for disease progression. Studies have shown that 'test and treat' approaches are more likely to convince people with TB infection to start on TPT, if they are at higher risk for disease, particularly in the private sector.

Second, the National TB Survey shows that asymptomatic TB is a serious issue, making symptom-based screening alone insufficient. Increased access to chest X-ray is a step in the right direction but we also need faster, less invasive diagnostic tools that use saliva and other non-sputum samples. More feasibility studies are required to understand utility and performance in real-world settings, particularly among individuals with low bacterial load.

Third, diagnosing TB in children remains challenging. Children cannot produce sputum as they often have low bacillary levels. Testing using stool samples has been tried in some countries and we need more implementation research in this area. We need far greater investment – and urgency – in finding the right new tools for diagnosing TB in children.

Finally, diagnosing extra-pulmonary TB (EP-TB) – which is almost a quarter of India's TB burden – remains difficult, often inaccessible and very expensive. Misdiagnosis as well as delayed diagnosis of EP-TB contributes to both catastrophic costs for families and poor outcomes for individuals. There are some pilots being done globally using AI-enabled portable ultrasound devices alongside molecular testing using new tools; we need India-specific evidence on this, including on cost-effectiveness.

Investing in strengthening the diagnostic landscape can be the greatest return on investment for the public health system. The sooner a person with TB is diagnosed, ideally before they are very ill, the more likely they are to recover fully, with fewer long-term post-treatment morbidities. Early diagnosis can not only improve treatment outcomes and long-term lung health but also dramatically reduce transmission within communities. A careful but swift and streamlined public sector expansion of diagnostics can also significantly reduce out-of-pocket expenditure for families affected by TB. An evidence-based, strong and expanded diagnostic toolbox can be a powerful lever to accelerate pathways to TB elimination in India.

A decade of building India's TB Champion movement



Dr. Nalini Krishnan

is Co-Founder and Executive Secretary of the Resource Group for Education and Advocacy for Community Health (REACH), a non-profit organisation working on tuberculosis (TB) for 27 years and a pioneer of the TB Survivor to Champion model



Anupama Srinivasan

is Deputy Director, Resource Group for Education and Advocacy for Community Health (REACH)

Survivors become 'TB Champions', supporting treatment, awareness and community engagement

that they have an important role to play in India's response to TB.

India's National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) provides access to high-quality free diagnosis and treatment. Over the last few years, diagnosis and case-finding have accelerated, and treatment outcomes have steadily improved, which means that more people are being cured and mortality has reduced, with fewer people dying of TB. Newer strategies – Artificial Intelligence-enabled screening, active case-finding within communities, shorter and less toxic treatment regimens, expanded nutrition support, differentiated care approaches – have been adopted. But even the most robust health system cannot achieve elimination of any disease on its own, without active community participation. This is where TB Champions are uniquely poised to draw on their own personal experiences of TB to be powerful communicators and advocates for changes.

'Empower, support, educate'

In the early years of working with TB survivors, our focus was on developing the 'Survivor to Champion' training curriculum, which has since been formally adopted by the NTEP. The involvement of TB Champions has reaffirmed a conviction that we have held from our inception – that a person with TB needs emotional support and motivation to get them through the treatment period, as much as they need high-quality clinical care. TB Champion-led peer counselling, through both one-to-one communication and support groups, has helped to improve treatment literacy and empowered people with TB with the knowledge they need. We have found a greater level of confidence and comfort among people with TB who have been supported by TB Champions and a significant reduction in self-stigmatisation. Even today, myths and misconceptions about

TB persist. TB Champions have played a critical role in dispelling these and in improving knowledge of TB, the symptoms of the disease and where to seek care. They literally reach the last mile through regular community meetings, where they talk about the disease, share their own stories and reassure people that TB is a treatable and curable disease. This has been a powerful anti-stigma strategy, enabling people to come forward to seek diagnosis and treatment.

Building networks, looking ahead

In addition, over the last decade, TB Champions in several States have come together to form survivor-led networks. These collective entities are naturally designed to be a powerful bridge between those seeking care and those providing services, especially among social vulnerable groups. Importantly, networks have become a source of strength for TB survivors, many of whom continue to experience the physical, social and economic toll of the disease even after being cured. However, the long-term future and sustainability of networks remains uncertain, given that they are dependent on external resources for funding. The next challenge is to test and build self-sustaining socio-economic models for survivor-led networks.

Over the last 10 years, we have been humbled by the trust that thousands of TB Champions from across the country have placed in us. They have travelled long distances to attend our workshops, sharing their TB journeys and stories, their pain and successes. They have become empowered local leaders, unafraid to use the TB Champion moniker to refer to themselves. They remain staunchly committed to working with their communities – supporting people with TB and their families, talking about stigma, meeting their panchayat leaders – and doing all of this for one simple, powerful reason – 'so that no one else should suffer like I did'.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Erratic policy

The dramatic policy by U.S. President Donald Trump, on a five-day ceasefire of sorts, must have stunned Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel. The 'second coming' of Mr. Trump has been marked less by strategic doctrine and more by disruptive impulse. Alliances

once seen as bedrock as NATO, have been treated as transactional, their value weighed against immediate domestic optics rather than long-term geopolitical balance. Trade agreements and multilateral pacts have been entered and exited with disconcerting ease, reinforcing a perception of

the U.S. as an uncertain partner. In conflict theatres, this inconsistency has been stark. Support extended to Ukraine appeared forceful yet episodic, leaving allies unsure of endurance. Europe, once a strategic anchor, has often been addressed with impatience rather than partnership.

Even Israel, a beneficiary of unequivocal backing, has found that patronage can pivot abruptly. **R. Narayanan,** Navi Mumbai

PNG transition issue

I wish to draw the attention of government officials to a troubling issue being faced

by many consumers registered for piped natural gas (PNG) connections with GAIL (India) Limited. Under the recent government mandate (LPG Amendment Order 2025), households with functional PNG connections must surrender their domestic LPG cylinders. However, GAIL

officials and distributors are reportedly asking consumers to surrender their LPG connections before the PNG line has been installed or activated. **Parthasarathy P.,** New Delhi

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

From disease-specific to person-centred care

By using TB as an entry point, integrated healthcare delivery can optimise and improve public health efficiency



Anupama Srinivasan
Deputy Director of REACH



Dr. Ramya Anantha Krishnan
Director of REACH

Tuberculosis (TB) rarely presents as a standalone disease in an individual. Many people with TB have other comorbidities or disease conditions that they must simultaneously cope with, while being on treatment for TB. Therefore, treating TB alone is not enough. Adopting integrated care approaches by transitioning from disease-specific to person-centred care can accelerate India's efforts to achieve both universal health coverage and TB elimination. Simply put, we must treat the person and not the disease.

Take the example of Divya (name changed), a 48-year-old woman who was diagnosed with TB in 2023. She had been living with diabetes and hypertension for several years and it is highly likely that her diabetes played a role in her contracting TB. Crucially, she had poor glycemic control with a HbA1c over 10, which had a direct impact on her treatment for TB.

Infectious diseases like TB, non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases; malnutrition; and social and economic vulnerabilities inevitably

intersect in individuals and families, adversely impacting outcomes and the overall quality of life. Recognising the interconnected nature of these multiple vulnerabilities is the first step towards delivering integrated care.

Treating TB and diabetes

As in the case of Divya, an important opportunity for integration is between TB and diabetes, given India's growing diabetes burden. Over 15 years ago, the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) identified diabetes as a key comorbidity for TB, and rolled out formal bidirectional screening guidelines for TB-diabetes. Every person with TB must be screened for diabetes and people with diabetes must ideally be screened for TB once a year. Studies have shown that people with diabetes are more likely to develop active TB disease than those without; equally, people with TB who also have diabetes are more likely to have poor TB treatment outcomes.

In Chennai, in a cohort of over 9,000 people with TB for three years, the authors found that over



TB patients seen inside the Govind Ballabh Pant Hospital on March 24, 2025. ANI

one-third (34%) had diabetes, and of this group, 41% had poor glycaemic control which is the biggest challenge. Monitoring the blood sugar levels of a person with TB and diabetes throughout the TB treatment period is therefore essential, as is expanding clinical management and the counselling that is provided from TB-specific guidance to also focus on overall lifestyle, physical activity, diet and nutrition etc.

Integrating respiratory care

Another important opportunity for integration is at the intersection of TB and Chronic Respiratory Diseases (CRD) such as asthma or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), at the screening stage itself. Only a fraction of people with respiratory symptoms are eventually diagnosed with TB – the rest are likely to have viral flu, bronchitis, asthma etc. In REACH's ongoing TB-CRD integrated care

pilot in two districts each of Bihar and Tamil Nadu, nearly 3,000 people with COPD and asthma were identified and linked to care, among the 26,000 people who were screened for TB but found TB-negative. In addition, integrated care can also change the course of post-treatment follow-up, given that many people who complete TB treatment continue to have respiratory impairments.

Other areas of intersection include undernutrition and risk factors such as smoking and alcohol use. This multi-disease approach is already envisaged in the framework of the Ayushman Arogya Mandirs for delivering comprehensive care at the community and primary care levels.

Delivering integrated care at scale can have its share of challenges. At the health system level, it is a likely stressor on already strained human resources, with the brunt of the workload falling on community health workers. In addition, many of India's large health programmes are vertical and not always de-

signed to talk to each other, in terms of both human resources and data; this will require both creative and pragmatic solutions.

Integrated care delivery will require adequate and additional human resources, a careful readjustment of the health worker to care recipient ratio and investment in periodic training.



Holistic wellness

Given that the NTEP is among India's more robust, well-structured public health programmes, using TB as an entry point to identify and address closely associated morbidities such as diabetes, CRDs, undernutrition etc. will help optimise healthcare delivery and improve public health efficiency. More importantly, it could reduce delays in diagnosis, minimise the need for visits to several health facilities, and help overcome barriers to accessing a continuum of care. With empathetic person-centred design, integrated healthcare delivery can be a win-win for health systems, individuals and families affected by TB.

The need to integrate nutrition in TB care

For most patients with TB who are severely underweight, nutritional support is an essential and not optional part of treatment



Dr. Madhavi Bhargava
is a public health specialist and teaches at Yenepoya Medical College, Mangalore. Led the RATIONS trial in India



Dr. Anurag Bhargava
is a physician-endocrinologist and teaches at Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore. Led the RATIONS trial in India

In 2026, India still has the highest number of new cases of Tuberculosis (TB) globally and a decreasing but still unacceptable number of about three lakh deaths due to TB. Almost 10% of successfully treated patients have recurrence within two years. An answer to all these challenges may partly lie in addressing a leading cause and consequence of TB in India, which is undernutrition, closely related to poverty, food insecurity and a predominantly cereal-based diet with deficient protein intake.

On the occasion of World TB Day, evidence from the Reducing Activation of Tuberculosis by Improvement of Nutritional Status (RATIONS) trial could offer insight into the importance of nutritional interventions. RATIONS was done in Jharkhand with support from the Indian Council of Medical Research and was the first such trial of a food-based intervention. It aimed at reducing new TB cases in TB-affected families, and improving treatment outcomes for patients with TB.

Ramlal, a 19-year-old tribal boy in the trial, weighed only 26 kg and was almost bed-bound at the

time of his diagnosis of lung TB. Along with TB drugs, he received a monthly food basket. Over the next few weeks, he started walking and could cycle to work at the end of the treatment, weighing 42 kg. Laxmi, weighing 34 kg, had TB two years ago and had stopped medication after she developed jaundice within two weeks of starting anti-TB drugs. Now, as a result of the trial, she could adhere to the medications and also breastfeed her four-month-old.

Preventing deaths due to TB

Undernutrition, especially severe undernutrition, is common in patients in India. It is a major reversible risk factor for death, drug toxicity, and recurrence after successful treatment. For most patients with TB who are severely underweight, nutritional support is an essential and not optional part of treatment. Poor families are food-insecure and become even more so due to the disease. In the RATIONS trial, a monthly 10 kg food basket of cereals, pulses, milk powder, and oil led to a weight gain of almost 4.5 kg in patients. Even a 5% weight gain in the first two months was protective against



PM TB Mukh Bharath kits, which include basic nutritious food items, distributed to patients in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh in 2023. FILE PHOTO

death, reducing the risk by more than 60%.

In India, the National TB Elimination Programme's (NTEP) initiatives in addressing undernutrition in TB care are welcome. For example, the monthly direct benefit transfer under the Ni-Kshay Poshan Yojana increased from ₹500 to ₹1,000 and similarly the Ni-Kshay Mitra Yojana, although not universal, provides in-kind support to patients with TB. However, the plan to introduce energy-dense nutrition supple-



ments for two months to underweight patients with TB needs to be considered with caution, given higher expenses, and undernutrition of an adequate balanced diet apart from the risk of monotony and poor acceptability. One in 7 patients with TB in India may have diabetes which also needs to be taken into consideration.

A new avenue

While infection with the TB germ is necessary to develop the dis-

ease, it is not sufficient to produce active TB. Almost 90% of those infected, with good immunity, never develop the disease in their lifetime. Undernutrition is the most common cause of poor immunity in India and globally. It contributes to nearly 40% of new cases in India, and improved population-level nutritional status offers an alternative approach to reducing TB incidence.

Diets of the poor in India are particularly deficient in quality protein. TB-affected families experience vulnerabilities of poverty, food insecurity, and undernutrition. The 1.5 kg per month of pulses per family member, along with extra rice, worked like a vaccine in the RATIONS trial, with new TB cases in these families coming down by almost half.

The World Health Organization released new guidelines last year recommending nutritional interventions in settings of poverty and undernutrition, drawing significantly from the evidence of the RATIONS trial.

Improving nutrition security by including pulses in the public distribution system, and expanding the Ni-Kshay Mitra scheme to in-

clude TB patients' households will have long-term benefits in reducing the TB burden in India.

The way ahead

India is a global leader in implementing comprehensive nutrition assessment and support initiatives through the NTEP. Research and evidence from India have influenced global policy. Some of the next positive steps will be to record and report nutritional assessment at diagnosis; at two months; and at the end of treatment. This will help to identify those at risk of death, monitor early weight gain, and assess nutritional recovery. A differentiated TB care model in line with the TN-KET intervention in Tamil Nadu can identify and prioritise severely underweight patients. This will require local contextualisation of food baskets, with due attention given to comorbidities, supported by transport and inpatient care for the sick.

The inverse care law also works in TB and nutrition – the most vulnerable among us such as those in difficult-to-reach areas, the tribals, and the migrant workers, should not be left out.

The views expressed are personal.

Mental health of TB patients should not be overlooked

Studies from India have shown that at least one-third of people with TB experience symptoms of depression or anxiety



Dr. R. Thara
Co-Founder and Vice-Chair of the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF)

At least one in seven Indians experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives. In people with infectious diseases like Tuberculosis (TB) or HIV, this increases to anywhere between one-third to a half of those affected. TB takes a toll on not only physical but also mental health, either in the form of definite diagnosable conditions like depression, anxiety or psychoses or as emotional suffering worsened by social stigma. TB is fundamentally a disease of inequity, perpetuated by poverty and simultaneously contributing to increasing poverty. Unemployment, the lack of livelihood, food insecurity and malnutrition are social drivers for both TB and mental health conditions.

Studies from India have shown that at least one-third of people with TB experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, which often occur together as well. The mental health burden is estimated to be even higher among people with drug-resistant TB, with up to two-thirds having mental health issues. There are anecdotal accounts from TB survivors on suicidal ideation as well as

documented instances of people with TB dying by suicide. There is not enough evidence about the prevalence of severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorders in people affected by TB.

The stigma associated with TB remains pervasive, and includes self-stigma, stigma within families, at workplaces and within communities. Many TB survivors have spoken of the guilt and shame they feel on being diagnosed with TB, despite knowing that it is an airborne disease that can affect anyone. For those with pulmonary TB, the guilt is driven primarily by the fear of transmitting the disease to their families, particularly to children. Those with depression or anxiety and TB must cope with an increased burden of stigma associated with both conditions, which can further worsen mental health.

TB and mental health

Given the high prevalence of common mental health disorders in the general population, it is possible that depression or anxiety could have been pre-existing and unidentified, even prior to the diagnosis; there have not been



A doctor offers flowers to a TB patient in Agartala on World TB day. PTI

enough studies on this aspect. Depression or anxiety could delay care-seeking for TB. Long-standing untreated depression can also weaken the body's immune responses which in turn could lead to active TB disease – this is yet again another under-researched aspect.

Post diagnosis, untreated mental health conditions can adversely affect TB treatment outcomes. A person with TB who is depressed, and has not received mental healthcare, is more likely to take TB treatment irregularly or discontinue treatment prematurely.

This can lead to treatment failure, relapse, or drug-resistance.

Co-existing alcohol and tobacco use, in the absence of access to de-addiction programmes, are also crucial factors affecting the treatment for TB.

Screening and identifying

Integrating routine screening for all people with TB for depression and anxiety is the starting point. Building awareness about common mental health disorders among healthcare workers, equipping them with the knowledge and

skills to provide mental health first-aid and ensuring early screening at the right point in the TB care cascade are the other essential steps. Primary healthcare workers and community supporters, who are often the first to notice any psychological distress, should be trained to elicit information about sleep, appetite, mood, stress etc. which can help early identification of mental health conditions.

Given that TB itself could trigger depression, mental health screening must ideally be done at multiple time points during the TB treatment period.

From an individual perspective, being treated for TB and depression at the same time can be a stressful experience. While India's TB programme already provides decentralised access to free anti-TB drugs and financial aid for nutrition, strengthening the availability of drugs to treat depression or anxiety through the district mental health programme is vital. While antidepressants or antipsychotics can be used alongside anti-TB drugs, clinicians must monitor for any adverse drug reactions or interactions. Psychological interventions, including cognitive-behavioural therapy and participation in peer support groups, can also help reduce isolation. To pro-

vide these services, qualified and trained mental health professionals are needed, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

Looking out for everyone

Mental health interventions cannot be limited to people with TB. The task of caring for people with TB can place considerable strain on families. Studies in India have shown that up to 80% of caregivers may exhibit high levels of expressed negative Emotions (EE) and high stress levels due to their caregiving responsibilities. Often, high EE leads to increased caregiver burden and poorer treatment outcomes. In India's family-centred ecosystem, where most of the caregiving needs are met by family members, this can lead to critical or over-involved caregiving because of emotional, financial, and social strains.

Psychoeducation is important not just for persons with TB but also for their families and caregivers.

A blended and syndemic TB-mental health approach that considers mental healthcare as an essential part of TB care, rather than a standalone service, can significantly improve TB outcomes, reduce the burden on caregivers and improve long-term mental health.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Rejection rate of Right to Information applications in 2024-25

3.26 in per cent. The rejection rate of Right to Information (RTI) applications has decreased to 3.26 per cent in 2024-25, the Centre has said. If an applicant receives no reply to an RTI within the prescribed time or is aggrieved by the public information officer's decision, they may file appeals before the CIC, Union Minister Jitendra Singh said. PTI

Number of people killed due to rains in Kenya in March

81 Torrential rains continued to pound Kenya as flash floods killed at least 81 people this month, authorities said Sunday. Flash floods also destroyed around 1,200 hectares of farmland and swept away crops. Over 3,000 families have been forced from their homes in the community of Nyakach, with some sheltering in eight evacuation centres, locals said. AFP

Number of AC e-buses to be deployed in 116 cities by 2027

10,000 On Monday, the government informed the Rajya Sabha that 10,000 air-conditioned e-buses would be provided to 116 cities across 26 States and UTs by the end of 2027 under the PM-eBus Sewa Scheme, and a new scheme would be launched thereafter to provide another 35,000 e-buses. PTI

Number of airlines that exited India in the last decade

11 As many as 11 airlines exited the market in the last 10 years due to financial stress, non-availability of aircraft and other internal issues, according to the government. Minister of State for Civil Aviation Murlidhar Mohol told the Rajya Sabha on Monday that the aviation sector is deregulated, and airlines operate based on commercial considerations. PTI

Persons displaced in Ethiopia's Tigray over the past three years

1 In million. More than 1,300 people have died from hunger in displacement camps in Ethiopia's volatile Tigray region over the past three years, a local official told AFP on Monday. A civil war between the federal government and forces from the northern Tigray region in 2020-2022 killed at least 600,000 people according to African Union estimates. AFP
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us facebook.com/thehindu [X.com/the_hindu](https://x.com/the_hindu) instagram.com/the_hindu

Path ahead for Nepal's new leadership

After securing a historic mandate in Nepal's polls, Balendra Shah and the RSP face the task of navigating the West Asia conflict and managing ties with India, China and the U.S. While capitalising on old-guard fatigue proved an effective electoral strategy, the new leadership now faces a test in international relations

WORLD INSIGHT

Bibek Raj Kandel

In the noisy, crowded landscape of Nepali politics, the rise of Prime Minister-designate Balendra Shah and his party, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), represents a rare political anomaly. While veterans of the 2008 republic traded barbs, the rapper-engineer-turned-mayor bypassed traditional campaigning for a "monastic" silence. His victory in Nepal's post-Gen Z parliamentary election on March 5 secured a historic mandate for an alternative force he joined a mere six weeks before the polls. Throughout the campaign, Shah spoke for barely thirty minutes, avoided media interviews and notably never once asked for a vote. His unapologetic critiques of the political establishment during his tenure as Kathmandu's mayor, mirrored a generation exhausted by stale ideological party politics. In a nation with a median age of twenty-five, Shah's reputation as a disciplined, clean reformist promising better governance became a viral mandate. His calculated silence mirrored these frustrations, positioning him as the ultimate outsider for an electorate eager for results.

Beyond domestic politics
While capitalising on domestic old-guard fatigue served Shah as a winning electoral strategy, Nepal's hard geopolitical reality remains stubbornly unchanged. In Nepal, political shifts rarely mean debates about foreign influence given its geography wedged between the rivalries of India and China.

Yet, Shah, however has sought to counter this by projecting an image of a staunch nationalist. As mayor, his symbolism was deliberate: hanging a "Greater Nepal" map in his office as a direct retort to the "Akhand Bharat" mural in India's new Parliament House, and



Balendra Shah with children and supporters during a door-to-door election campaign in Nepal. AFP

briefly banning Indian films. Simultaneously, he signaled caution toward Beijing by dropping a China-backed industrial park from his election manifesto. By distancing himself from large-scale geopolitical projects, Shah reframed the narrative, asserting a sovereignty that felt local, visible, and unapologetically independent.

Balancing ties with India and China
Historically, Nepal's politics followed rigid ideological scripts. The Nepal Congress, the country's oldest liberal force, leaned toward Delhi, while communist factions like CPN-UML maintained proactive affinities with Beijing. And at times, the ideological rhetoric from Kathmandu stretched far beyond the Himalayas, from debates over Venezuela's regime change to contentious political statements on the Ukraine war, issues largely peripheral to Nepal's own priorities. Under Shah, this era of predictable ideological signaling may finally be fading. His minimalist approach and by speaking less about the world's ideological battles, Shah's personality itself can be potent strategic asset to Nepal, but it is immediately replaced by a different kind of geopolitical

pressure that needs sustained diplomatic compromise.

India remains Nepal's most consequential partner, linked by an open border, "Roti-Beti" social bonds, and accounting for a significant share of its trade, supplying virtually all of its petroleum, and emerging as the primary market for Nepal's burgeoning hydropower exports. Meanwhile, China has deepened its footprint through major infrastructure financing, such as \$216 million Pokhara International Airport. Intended as a regional gateway, its underutilisation is viewed in Kathmandu as a casualty of the broader India-China friction, particularly New Delhi's hesitancy to facilitate air routes for Chinese-financed infrastructure.

This is perhaps inaugural diplomatic crucible for Balendra Shah. Having invested heavily, Nepal cannot afford for such massive infrastructure to remain a "white elephant." The "monastic" outsider must now navigate a landscape where India is indispensable and China is influential. Meanwhile, Washington has pivoted from an aid partner to a high-stakes strategic interest partner, with recent post-election congratulations

explicitly hinting at "shared security goals."

But the first "baptism by fire" for the Shah administration may well lie in the volatile West Asia. With millions of Nepalese migrants' lives and critical energy lifelines tied to the Persian Gulf caught in an escalating US-Israel-Iran War, India's logistical depth as a regional first responder offers an indispensable synergy for contingency planning to Kathmandu. This is where Balen's nationalist doctrine must meet the hard reality of strategic pragmatism. The new leadership remains untested in conventional diplomacy.

An opportunity for India

This moment offers a rare opening for New Delhi to recalibrate. India must move past the coercive shadow of the 2015 blockade and what is widely perceived in Kathmandu as outdated impulse for political micromanagement. New Delhi must recognise this transition as a new opening for modern partnership that respects the domestic rise of 'Nepal First' politics. Shah's mandate mirrors India's own tectonic shift in 2014; in Shah, Nepal has found its "strongman" archetype, a leader whose personal charisma and promise of technocratic reform have dismantled a decades-old establishment.

In the end, Nepal's geopolitical reality remains unchanged even as its politics transform at home. India's proximity will always matter most, China's influence will remain structural reality, and world powers like the U.S. will continue to pursue its strategic interests with renewed rigor. Ultimately, Nepal's voters were not adjudicating between global strategies, but seeking domestic renewal. For Balendra Shah and the RSP, bashing the "old guard" is a potent domestic strategy, but it carries zero currency in the cold-eyed theater of international relations.

(Bibek Raj Kandel is an analyst and AsiaGlobal Fellow at the University of Hong Kong and a graduate of Harvard Kennedy School.)

THE GIST

In the landscape of Nepali politics, the rise of Prime Minister-designate Balendra Shah and the RSP, represents a rare political anomaly. His reputation as a disciplined, clean reformist promising better governance became a viral mandate

Shah's personality itself can be potent strategic asset to Nepal, but it is immediately replaced by a different kind of geopolitical pressure that needs sustained diplomatic compromise

Nepal's political shift opens a strategic window for India

The new government in Nepal extends an opportunity to fashion a forward-looking bilateral relationship

**K.V. Rajan
Atul K. Thakur**

The election results in Nepal have been described as a political earthquake. There has been an emphatic and comprehensive rejection of old leaders and established parties. A younger generation of professionals and tech savvy figures, enjoying the support of Gen Z activists is set to take over.

Challenges ahead

By giving the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) a two thirds majority, Nepali voters have granted Balendra Shah and his government, a powerful mandate for Nepal's complete transformation. It now has a huge responsibility to answer wide-ranging expectations—enough jobs for the youth, reversing the migration for

work abroad, stimulate economic growth, and ensure good governance. It needs to be noted, however, that while voters have demonstrated their impatience with the old order and its decades-old insensitivity to their aspirations, this is not a positive vote for a clear-cut new agenda for reform, political or economic, since it was never spelt out and placed before them.

There is a real possibility of frustration and disillusionment that the new government will have to deal with as it settles down. The first warning shots were fired by the caretaker Prime Minister Sushil Karki even before the election, when she reminded the political class that the agitations of September 2025 had erupted because of the frustrations of people insisting on good governance, and a recurrence was inevitable if the situation lapsed into the same old pattern. Hopefully the people of Nepal will give

the new leaders enough time to address the country's problems.

Restructuring India-Nepal ties

For now, Nepal deserves every encouragement possible. India has been quick to extend it, without being loud or patronising. India has not been an issue during the election campaign. Its relationship with Nepal in recent years has focused on the right priorities—development, infrastructure, digital connectivity, energy. It has played its cards well and can continue to capitalise on the existing goodwill as the new leaders in Nepal seek to respond to development needs of the people.

Restructuring of the India-Nepal relationship has been long overdue. For far too long it has been trapped in the shadows of the legacy of British India days. Hopefully India and Nepal will seize

every opportunity to fashion a forward-looking relationship based on today's realities and the immense potential for expanding cooperation. For this it will be necessary for policy makers on both sides to discard old mindsets, address long standing irritants with fresh approaches, and prioritise people-centric policies which can be delivered to keep pace with people's expectations and needs.

India also needs to look at the recent developments in Nepal as part of a wider regional phenomenon since happenings in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and elsewhere also fall into the same pattern—agitations led by frustrated youth incidentally toppling pro-India political figures, demanding faster development and better governance. Labeling new political leaders being thrown up everywhere as anti-India just because of the legacies of the past does not seem justified, as seen from the pragmatic readiness shown in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to cooperate with India, by parties and leaders once seen as unfriendly. Nepal could be a good partner for India in the evolving geopolitical scenario, if both countries try seriously to fashion a clear cut sub-regional strategy for rapid growth. *(K.V. Rajan is former Indian Ambassador to Nepal and Atul K. Thakur is a policy professional. They are the authors of 'Kathmandu Chronicle: Reclaiming India-Nepal Relations'. Views are personal.)*

THE GIST

The people of Nepal have granted Balendra Shah and the RSP a powerful mandate for Nepal's complete transformation. The government now faces the challenge of addressing the issues of unemployment and providing good governance

India has been quick to extend encouragement to the new leadership. Hopefully India and Nepal will seize every opportunity to fashion a forward-looking relationship based on today's realities

ABSTRACT

How do we know climate science is credible?

On what aspects did a recent paper in the Science of Climate Change journal question the foundations of climate change, and how robust are its arguments?

Vasudevan Mukunth

In March 10, a journal called Science of Climate Change published a paper calling into question the foundations of climate change. The paper concluded that after accounting for some sources of uncertainty in the climate data, the 'correct' changes in the oceans' heat content and Earth's energy imbalance are practically zero. In other words, the oceans are not warming, Earth's surface is not accumulating heat, and global warming is not happening.

The paper is more sophisticated than it seems at first sight and makes three claims with different levels of merit.

There is value in addressing them in detail because doing so reveals how we know that climate science is credible.

How are changes in ocean heat measured?

The paper's foremost claim is that temperature is an intensive property – meaning its value does not depend on the mass of the material – and thus scientists cannot average it in a meaningful way when estimating the amount of heat oceans hold.

Scientists have already addressed this claim. First, by the same logic, we cannot measure average air temperature, average atmospheric pressure, average sea level rise, and so on.

Second, and more importantly, scientists do not just measure and average the temperatures of different water bodies to determine the heat content. They also calculate the thermal energy. Temperature is nothing but the average kinetic energy of the atoms or molecules in a body. And thermal energy is the total kinetic energy of the water molecules. This is an extensive quantity – it depends on the number of molecules – and can be averaged. Its value has been increasing over time as well, and it also clarifies that the way scientists are handling the temperature data is correct.

Next, the paper takes issue with the Argo floats data. According to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Argo is an international program that collects information from inside the ocean using free drifting [devices called] profiling floats. These floats drift with the ocean currents and move up and down between the surface and a mid-water level. The floats are distributed over the global ocean to measure temperature and salinity in the upper 2,000 m."

According to the paper, the data the floats collect have some gaps, which has created uncertainties in the final processed data that have gone underreported. To the paper's credit, scientists have already raised and addressed the numbers it has cited on phenomena called mesoscale aliasing and deep ocean ignorance in the research literature. However, the paper's authors inflate these uncertainties and add them up in unscientific ways. For instance, some of the errors they add up have the same underlying cause, so adding them as if they were separate errors ends up counting the same causes more than once.

To avoid this pitfall, oceanographers



Thinning ice: A penguin stands on an iceberg in Yankee Harbour, Antarctica in 2018. REUTERS

run the whole calculation in different ways and check whether they keep getting roughly the same answer. They check whether the calculation predicts temperatures at locations where they actually have measurements to compare with – and whether the overall estimate holds up when they remove data from the calculations. This way, they make sure their methods are robust and do not over-count uncertainties.

Finally, if scientists have an independent estimate of total sea level rise (from altimetry satellites that use radar, say) and an independent estimate of how much new water has been added (from the GRACE satellites that use gravity), they can estimate how much the ocean has 'expanded'. Then they compare this figure with Argo data about the ocean's heat content. If the two match – as they do – it would mean Argo arrived at the same result as altimetry and GRACE (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment) satellites but from completely different starting points.

What is 'Balancing' and 'Filling'? Finally, the paper says the CERES-Argo cross-calibration is "circular". This is probably the most rhetorically effective

piece for 'climate doubters' because it genuinely sounds damning. However, it is really because it misrepresents what a particular 'adjustment' does.

CERES is a suite of scientific instruments in Earth orbit operated by NASA. Its name stands for 'Clouds and the Earth's Radiant Energy System'. The instruments measure incoming solar radiation and outgoing shortwave radiation (which includes visible light) and longwave radiation (mostly heat) at the top of the atmosphere. By subtracting the incoming rate of energy from the outgoing rate, scientists can say how much heat is being 'left behind' in the planet's atmosphere and on the surface.

Now, the CERES instruments have been calibrated such that they are accurate to around 1% for shortwave radiation and 0.75% for longwave. This implies an absolute uncertainty of roughly 2 W/m² in the net energy flux. The paper says the raw CERES uncertainty is around 3-5 W/m², which is slightly inflated in favour of the paper's claims.

To address this, a process called EBAF – short for 'Energy Balanced And Filled' – makes a one-time change to shortwave and longwave fluxes at the top of the

atmosphere to ensure the global mean net flux for July 2005 to June 2015 is consistent with the value measured by Argo: 0.71 W/m².

'Balancing' and 'Filling' are separate adjustments. CERES instruments cannot see through clouds, so 'Filling' patches gaps in the map where data is missing. However, the paper treats the whole EBAF product as if it is just the adjustment for calibration, i.e. 'Balancing'.

Nonetheless, as things stand, the paper's circularity argument is partly correct: CERES data is 'corrected' using Argo data while Argo-derived estimates of the oceans' heat content are validated using CERES data.

What does CERES do?

But then the paper goes wrong. The 'Balance' of EBAF only adjusts the mean energy flux. It does not interact in any way with the increases and drops in the temperature data over time. That comes from the CERES instruments' raw data and is what contains evidence of the warming trend.

Specifically, the CERES instruments continuously measure the radiation coming from the Sun into the atmosphere and the outgoing longwave and shortwave radiation at the top of the atmosphere. Then computers produce a monthly global mean net flux value for every month from March 2000 to the present. These raw monthly data are off from the 0.7 W/m² measured by Argo, so EBAF 'adds' or 'subtracts' some flux from every monthly value in the record to bring the long-period mean in line with the Argo estimate.

The monthly values after this adjustment are thus higher or lower than the raw values by exactly the same amount in every single month. This means the difference between any two months – March 2005 and March 2015, say – is unaffected by EBAF. For example, if EBAF adds 3.6 W/m² to the measured values, the difference between 4 and 5 in the raw data is the same as the difference between 7.6 and 8.6 in the processed data, which is 1 W/m².

The idea that Earth's energy imbalance has been increasing over the satellite record is based on these differences, which Argo data is unconcerned with. As a result, the circularity objection proves less than what the paper has claimed it does.

What sustains credibility?

For added measure, scientists have also estimated Earth's energy imbalance (outgoing minus incoming) using atmospheric reanalyses, deep ocean temperature records from research vessels, and physical models informed by observed surface warming – all of which have been consistent with the CERES-Argo figures. If the imbalance were actually zero, the independent estimates would all have to be wrong for independent reasons. And the odds of that are extremely low.

In fact, the answer to whether the paper could be right is not that one of its authors is a "clarinet instructor" (which he was at the time he worked on the paper), that its rhetoric is often obscurantist, that some of its other authors have done questionable things in the past or even that it has not passed peer-review by a "prestigious" journal. It is that the paper does not perform any independent tests of the data the way credible studies do.

That is in fact the bedrock of the credibility of climate science as a whole. And any efforts that claim to overturn that must also convincingly explain how independent checks arrived at the same result while being flawed in independent ways.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"What did you do on New Year's Eve? Did you have fun?"

"Oh, yes! I had a great deal of fun! My friends and I danced till 4:00 in the morning. And as you can imagine, I was dead beat after that. I found it..."

"...you were beat? Who beat you? And why?"

"Nobody beat me! All that dancing had me beat. You see, when you say that you're beat, it implies that you are extremely tired. It's one of the meanings of the word 'beat'."

"I see. It's an informal expression, I suppose?"

"That's right! It's not used in formal contexts. Here's an example. The college students were dead beat after the long trek."

"Vomakesh looked dead beat after doing his karate exercises."

"That's a good example. Agakar looked beat after bowling his tenth over."

"I don't really agree with you. He doesn't usually look beat after bowling ten overs. It's just that he always looks as if he wants to sit down and cry."

"That's true. He always looks sad, doesn't he?"

"Most of our cricketers do. And the way they are playing, they are making everyone in the country sad, too. Tell me, is there another word which means 'tired'?"

"An informal word, I mean."

"Sure, there is. 'Bushed' is another word used in informal contexts to mean 'tired'. After playing the third set, Ramdas was bushed."

"When Mala asked me if I was interested in going to the movies, I told her I was too bushed to go. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good."

"Hey, doesn't the word 'stressed out' mean the same thing as 'bushed'?"

"Not really. You see, ..."

"...what do you mean? Doesn't 'stressed out' mean tired too?"

"Well, yes. But there is a difference between being 'stressed out' and being 'bushed'. You see, when you say you are 'bushed' or 'beat', what you are implying is that you are physically exhausted."

"I see. And when you say that you are 'stressed out' it means that you are mentally exhausted. Am I right?"

"I guess you could say that. 'Stressed out' is more mental than physical. For example, studying for the GRE has really stressed out Sukesha."

"Talking to my uncle for five minutes stresses me out."

"I am sure my nephews say the same thing."

"When I was young, sitting in maths class used to stress me out."

"I still have nightmares thinking about my maths class."

"My friend Suresh gets asthma thinking about maths."

"Gets what?"

"A...s...t...h...m...a... Asthma!"

"The 'th' in the word 'asthma' is not pronounced."

"It isn't?"

"...the 'as' in the first syllable is like the word 'ass'. The final 'a' is like the 'a' in 'china', 'about', and 'amount'."

"The 'th' is not pronounced at all and the stress is on the first syllable. Correct?"

"Excellent. Some people pronounce the 's' in the first syllable like the 'z' in 'zip', 'zest', and 'zoo'."

Published in The Hindu on January 4, 2000

THE DAILY QUIZ

On the anniversary of the execution of three young revolutionaries on March 23, 1931, revisit one of the most debated moments in India's freedom struggle

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1

The execution of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru followed their conviction in which case related to the assassination of John Saunders in Lahore?

QUESTION 2

The assassination of Saunders was intended as retaliation for the police assault on which nationalist leader who later died of injuries sustained during a lathi charge?

QUESTION 3

In which prison were the three revolutionaries executed?

QUESTION 4

Which pact between nationalist leaders and the British government was signed shortly before the executions in 1931?

QUESTION 5

What was the title of the editorial published after the executions, by B. R. Ambedkar in the Marathi weekly Janata, on April 13, 1931?



Identify this Indian revolutionary, commander-in-chief of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, who died in a gun battle with the British police at Alfred Park in 1931. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The World Meteorological Organization is headquartered in this European city. **Ans: Geneva, Switzerland**

2. Expand GRIB, the concise data format commonly used in meteorology. **Ans: General Regularly-distributed Information in Binary form**

3. To a meteorologist, an 'okta', a scale of measurement is. **Ans: The amount of cloud cover at any given location**

4. The term for rain that falls from a cloud but evaporates before reaching the ground, seen as streaks under a cloud. **Ans: Virga**

5. Parts of Kerala witnessed 'blood rain' as recently as 2012. Name its prime cause. **Ans: Aerial spores of the orange-coloured 'Trentepohlia' algae, often triggered by atmospheric conditions**

6. The everyday two-word term for strong, high-altitude wind band that pilots use to save time and fuel on long flights. **Ans: Jet Stream**

7. The recurring natural phenomenon characterised by fluctuating ocean temperatures in the equatorial Pacific is the ENSO. Expand ENSO. **Ans: El Niño-Southern Oscillation**

Visual: Name the Indian scientist who in his capacity as the chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) received the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Al Gore, in 2007. **Ans: Rajendra Pachauri**
Early birds: Piyaji Tuli | K.N. Viswanathan | Prem Nath Tiwari | Sukdev Shet | Ashok Tripathi

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

Word of the day

Boisterous:

noisy and lacking in restraint or discipline

Synonyms: rambunctious, unruly

Usage: The crowd grew boisterous as the match reached its final moments.

Pronunciation:

https://newstl.live/ZQEJNS

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/bɔɪstɪəʊəs/

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

DECCAN Chronicle

24 MARCH 2026

All charges against CEC must be closely studied

The motion the Opposition parties have given seeking the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar from his post may meet with expected disapproval by Parliament given the numbers but the allegations contained in it have to be discussed in detail, not only by parliamentarians but also by all those who think they have a stake in the success of democracy in the country.

The Opposition charges Mr Kumar with mass disenfranchisement of voters through the Special Intensive Revision of the electoral roll "in alignment with the ruling party's political objectives" and acting under the thumb of the executive and failing to uphold the independence of the institution, the impropriety in his press conference on August 17, 2025, allegedly targeting Leader of the Opposition (LOP) Rahul Gandhi, "discriminatory treatment" of Opposition and ruling party members, "obstruction" of investigations and the refusal to provide "transparency tools". They have raised questions about his appointment, too. These charges have been presented as the grounds of "proved misbehaviour" for the removal of the CEC.

The way the SIR is being rolled out in West Bengal after its problematic execution in several other states militates against the very concept of universal adult franchise, a hallmark of a functional democracy. It may be remembered that this feature did not exist in many countries when they started their journey as a democracy; it was added midway. India, on the other hand, considered it a fundamental right not only of the citizen but also of the state, for the citizen's participation gives the state and its position the legitimacy which other forms of government cannot claim, and hence it was an integral part of the republic.

The lakhs of people now running from pillar to post in West Bengal to prove that they are legitimate voters in the country and have a right to vote as they have been doing in the previous elections are a sight a meaningful democracy cannot ignore. An election without a proper electoral roll is an affront to the very idea of electoral democracy, and the office that presides over it must be made to answer for it. The charge that the SIR presides over "in direct alignment with the Union home minister's stated position that an NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise would be conducted across India" and that he "has converted the EC from an impartial election conducting institution into a citizenship determination tribunal" needs to be discussed by every citizen. The threat of disenfranchisement is limited not just to West Bengal.

Mr Kumar's public ultimatum to Mr Gandhi who raised alarming questions on vote theft in Karnataka to apologise for his allegations was not the desirable manner to respond to the leader of the Opposition, or for that matter, any citizen of this country. Instead of coming up with facts to disprove the allegations, it resorted to issuing threats, however empty they are. It only showed the sticky wicket the EC is standing on.

Democracy is all about transparency. Its institutions must be brought under public scrutiny, and Parliament is one of the most efficient platforms to carry it out. The discussion on the motion must throw some light on the functioning of the key institution and help it understand its failings and make the necessary amendments.

Modi shock off freedom legacy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set a record of 8,931 days in power, as the Gujarat Chief Minister and the Prime Minister combined. With this, Modi surpassed the 8,930-day record of former Sikim chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling.

Modi has the distinction of being the longest-serving Gujarat Chief Minister with his term spanning from October 2001 to May 2014. He was first sworn in as India's prime minister on May 26, 2014, after winning the Lok Sabha elections held that year. Since then, he has won two more Lok Sabha elections in 2019 and 2024 and continues to serve as the Prime Minister of the country, which tops the world in population and remains the fourth-largest economy.

Apart from being a personal achievement for Narendra Modi, this milestone is a testament to the unique strength of Indian democracy. When India became free in 1947, several world leaders were sceptical about the experiment of democracy in India, a country that, by the Western standards, was too complex, chaotic and disordered.

India has had many leaders with humble beginnings, such as B.R. Ambedkar, Lal Bahadur Shastri, K. Kamaraj, Babu Jagjivan Ram, Chaudhary Charan Singh, Jayaprakash Narayan, among others. However, many of them had their origins in the freedom movement, which catapulted them into leadership roles.

Modi's long innings in power opened a different dimension in Indian politics. The very fact that Modi could not only rise through different levels of a complex society without any godfather and reach the apex of political power, but also sustain himself for over a decade, indicates the maturing of democracy. India has, for the first time, chosen a leader whose claim to power does not come from the legacy of the freedom struggle. Instead, it is based on the hope for a better future — a key change that augurs well for the country.

Subhani

NO FREEBIES
NO GIFTS... JUST PROMISE
YOU WON'T HIKE GAS AND
OIL PRICES AFTER
THE POLLS



Trump & Bibi: Diminishing dividends of belligerence...



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

The war between Israel and Iran should have stayed confined to these two countries. But Israel is quite well aware that it does not have the military edge over Iran, which is a bigger country in terms of population and military strength. It cannot bomb to degrade the military capability of Iran. It needs American military support, not indirectly like Ukraine, but with direct involvement. This became evident in the last round of hostilities in the 12-day battle in June. Israeli missiles and bombers could not break the physical barriers of the nuclear installations. US President Donald Trump recognised Israel's limitations and said so. So, the American intervention became necessary. American bombers flew all the way to bomb the Iranian nuclear targets. The American bombing dented the Iranian resolve but it had not depleted it. Destroying the uranium centrifuges would have had a catastrophic fallout of its own, like in Chernobyl and in Fukushima, Iran retaliated. It fired missiles at Israel and said it was not meant to escalate.

There has been no perceptible change in Iran's military capability between June 2025 and February-March 2026. Nor did Tehran pose any perceptible threat in the intervening period. Meanwhile, President Trump was trying to impose some sort of deal with Iran, which will ease American sanctions against Tehran.

American and Iranian negotiators were fully engaged with each other. The talks were being held in Geneva in the days before the attack on February 22. Mr Trump was his usual impatient, intemperate self.

Mr Trump was also emboldened by his success through the abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cecilia Flores on January 3. What also pushed Mr Trump into the war was the countryside protests across Iran over soaring prices and the economic distress it had entailed. The protests were suppressed ruthlessly by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), directly under the command of the supreme leader. Mr Trump threatened to intervene but backed off in the middle of January. He seems to have calculated that it would be a quick military blitzkrieg in Iran and the government would collapse. Israel did its bit by targeting the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed along with some of his family members on the very first day of the war.

In Venezuela, the Americans had some help from Mr Maduro's detractors inside the government and they helped in replacing Mr Maduro. The Americans have no such access inside Iran. Even the acting president of Venezuela, Delcy Rodriguez, who had replaced Mr Maduro, has refused to be a US puppet. Venezuela remains under a cloud. The Maduro regime has not been replaced. The Americans have only managed to deal with the regime, which is showing greater flexibility towards America's role inside its grip on power. There is lesser possibility of an Iranian regime that would cooperate with the Americans even on a limited scale.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu felt the urgency to open a war front against Iran after the peace pushback that

There has been no perceptible change in Iran's military capability between June 2025 and February-March 2026. Nor did Tehran pose any perceptible threat in the intervening period.

Mr Trump had imposed on Israel through the multi-national Board of Peace in Gaza. Mr Netanyahu wanted total Israeli control of Gaza, and he preferred the initial Trump proposal of transfer of Palestinians out of Gaza. Mr Trump had to back down on his initial proposal when he faced stiff resistance to the idea from all Arab countries in the region. Mr Netanyahu had no option but to accept the plan, which amounted to strategic defeat for him. Israel had said that Iran supported Hamas, financially and militarily. Mr Netanyahu had said that it was not involved in the Hamas attack in Israel in October 7, 2023. Israel did not accept this explanation. Hamas' political leader Ismail Haniyeh was killed in an Israel bombing in Tehran in July 31, 2024. On September 9, 2025, Hamas negotiators were carried out in an attack in Doha though the chief negotiator Khalil al-Hayya survived. The same assassination strategy was carried out in the cases of Ali Khamenei and Ali Larjani. Assassination is a guerrilla tactic, but Israel has adopted it as its military strategy. In the case of Hamas, it found that it could not win its siege mentality. The militia like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The assassinations of top leaders has not really helped.

Mr Trump and Mr Netanyahu share the mindset of flaunting aggression as a sign of strength, in diplomacy and in military terms. Their policies are proving to be of limited use. Donald Trump wants to intimidate and control his neighbours in the Americas. He has picked

up his target in Venezuela and he is turning to Cuba. It is becoming clear that he cannot go too far in Venezuela, despite the fact Venezuela is a small country in terms of population and military power. Someone needs to remind President Trump of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba. The Trump administration is in talks with Mexico and Canada in trade matters.

Mr Trump is learning, however unwillingly, that belligerence is not the way forward. Mr Netanyahu has fewer reasons to learn from his follies because Mr Trump seems to be a willing partner of his aggressive tactics in West Asia. It is the case that there is a political faultline between Iran and the Gulf Arab states. The Sunni-Shia divide is there but it is not the driving force. The major rivalry between Iran and the Arab states is based on strategic hegemony. But the two sides will sort it out among themselves without American interference.

Mr Netanyahu wants to drive a wedge between the Arabs and Iran. It is not going to succeed because the market dynamics of the region are such that the Arab states and Iran need each other.

Israel has no great role to play because it has not shown the ingenuity that Singapore has displayed in the economic context. All the Gulf Arab states are aspiring to be successful economic powers. Dubai and Doha have modelled themselves on Singapore, as attractive and open market hubs, cosmopolitan and attractive investment destinations. Israel remains a garrison state and is trapped in its siege mentality. Israel can free itself and become an energetic economic partner in the region only when it makes peace with the Palestinians, to enable the emergence of an independent Palestinian state and to become a partner in prosperity. To do so it will have to shed its predator-settler stance.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

MAKE PEACE NOT WAR

Iran's action of blocking the Strait of Hormuz as a retaliation to Israeli - American attacks has caused major disruptions in energy sector for many nations who are not part to this war. The condemnation from the global leaders to the ongoing war seems to have no effect on both Iran and America. The world is watching events in a helpless manner and the UN is unable to play any role in bringing about a truce. It is time that organisations such as OPEC, BRICS, and G20 get more engaged and bring an end to the war. Any further delay in bringing peace will be a catastrophic blow to the economy of all nations in the globe.

B. Sundar Raman Coimbatore

MODI'S OFFICE RECORD

Congratulations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for becoming India's longest-serving head of an elected government with over 8,931 days in office, combining his tenures as Gujarat Chief Minister and Prime Minister of India. While his supporters highlight his achievements as a mark of sustained, transformative leadership, critics argue that performance and development outcomes, rather than longevity, are the true measures of success. They argue that the focus should be on the impact on ordinary citizens, pointing to concerns over inflation, unemployment, and economic strain during his tenure.

R. Sivakumar Chennai

KING SAMSON

After the recent T20 World Cup success in Saudi, Samson is the darling of the Chennai crowd. Having witnessed his heroics with the bat in front of the wicket and his glove work behind the stumps, he is an asset to the CSK side. His power-economy is going to generate electricity to CSK fans. His style of cricket, striking the ball from the world go and accelerating to third and fourth gears, once he finds the ball to his liking and turns to top gear once he sees the ball like a football is history now and it is for entertainment all the way. Dhoni found Samson to his liking and in future he may be asked to take the mantle in coming seasons.

C.K. Subramanian Chennai

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com

DECCAN CHRONICLE
K. SUDHAKAR Editor
R. MOHAN Resident Editor
S. SUBRAMANIAM Printer & Publisher

DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:
Chennai: SP 3 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai 600025. Phones: (044) 2224750, 2224751
Coimbatore: No. 222 Sengulapalayam Road, NG GO Colony Post, Kumbakonam Taluk, Village. Coimbatore-641022. Phone: (0422) 2231252, 2231256
Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Scandalcheruvu 500 003. Phone: (040) 27803930-4. Fax: (040) 2780256
Visakhapatnam: Survey No. 13A Beach Road, Near Kallangudi Roadway, Sector 9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017. Phones: (0891) 2552333, 2552334. Fax: (0896) 2552324
Vijayawada: No. C 3 & 4, Patnam, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.). Phones: (0866) 2552594, 2552597. Fax: (0866) 2552524
Rajamahendravaram: Dhanuvarthi Road, Rajamahendravaram 533125. Phones: (0883) 2417208, 2417618
Anantapur: Thapovan Colony, Bangalore Bye-Pass Road, Anantapur 518004. Phones: (08554) 276903. Fax: (0854) 276904
Nellore: Survey No. 5272, Buntarapur Village, Venkatasubramanian (M), Chennuruguda Panchayat, Nellore. Phone: (0861) 2348581/82. Telex: (0861) 2348880
Kartimangur: H. No. 121-1213, Cheralabattur Road, Mugalshilpam Village, Karim Nagar - 505186. Phone: 912181123



Aakar Patel

Can Iran 'win'? Will US agree to Tehran's terms & do right thing?

I want Iran to win. What does "win" mean? Iran defines it in the following way: The United States of America must lift its decades-old sanctions on Iran. It must dismantle its military bases in the Arab states; Israel must be compensated for the damage it has suffered over the years and in this war.

Though more than a thousand Iranians have already died in American and Israeli bombardment and more will die, if Iran is able to secure these things, it will be total victory.

Why do I want Iran to win? At the most basic level, it is the underdog in the fight against two nuclear-armed opponents, Israel and America. It is weaker than them militarily, yes, but it is not feeble, as the world has witnessed since February 28. It has more resolve than most other states. Another instinctive reason for me to support Iran is that it is, like we are, a nation that has been trampled on by what is called the West. I have solidarity with them also for this reason.

At a deeper level, the Jewish state of Israel and America are colonists imposing their selves brutally on a world which does not want them. They should be resisted, along with their actions. American sanctions on Iran isolate it from the global banking system, making trade with the world difficult and are designed not

only to weaken the Iranian state but to keep Iran and its people poor. These are not United Nations sanctions, but unilaterally imposed by America, which uses its economic power to harass nations it doesn't like, including, as we are also witnessing, Venezuela and Cuba.

Iran demanding that these sanctions be removed is just, I want them to go and for that Iran must win.

America has military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, the UAE, Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Why does it have all those soldiers and weapons there? America runs an empire in all but name. The American military should not threaten the world and must focus on its homeland. Iran has begun that conversation.

Israel is today what South Africa was 40 years ago, but worse. It is an apartheid state (it controls millions of people who have no vote and no rights) which is guilty of genocide according to many human rights organisations, including the one I represent, and even organisations inside Israel itself. It has used its military might and its access to almost unlimited American arms and funding to terrorise the Middle East and this has to end. An Iranian win would do much to resolve this.

Iran has suffered damage of hundreds of billions of dollars over the years because of the sanctions on it and has been harmed more

since this war was inflicted on it. Iran is entitled to damages and these have to be paid to it by the US and its allies.

These are the reasons I want Iran to win. Why I think it is possible and perhaps even likely that Iran will win? The answer is of course that it is in control of this war, despite appearances. America and Israel can inflict terrifying punishment on Iran and its population, and they have, murdering schoolgirls and attacking infrastructure. They have assassinated Iranian leaders and will likely murder more of them. But they have failed in regime change, which was the goal of this war. The Islamic Republic of Iran remains.

Iran's response is focused and narrow: it will not allow oil, gas or any supplies to exit or enter the Middle East through the sea. Its control of the water is based as much on the violence it can inflict as it is on the threat of violence, which is really what has deterred commercial ships from attempting to cross the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's response is also calibrated and its own oil is free to flow. And it retains some capacity to attack American bases and the nations who host these bases, as we have seen. These two things are all it needs to prevail.

So long as US President Donald Trump cannot wrest control of the passage of ships out of

and into the Persian Gulf, the price of crude oil and gas will rise as it has done since the war. Americans are paying more for petrol and diesel today and will pay even more as the war continues.

Unfortunately, the entire world is also hostage to this problem and will suffer, but so will the world has not called on the original perpetrators, the real villains, America and Israel, to end their war. This is because they are afraid of them and this is also why I want Iran to win.

From here on, America needs to do something dramatic to change the status of the conflict, which as it stands is in Iran's favour. Assassinations and carpet bombing have not worked. One hopes that what America does arrive at a compromise and end its violence and agree to at least two of the Iranian demands: that guaranteeing no future violence and the permanent lifting of sanctions. From Israel, I have no expectations because it has shown over the years that what it wants is mindless and endless destruction.

I want Iran to win, and for that to happen America does not have to lose. It only has to do the right thing.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

Join This Community and Get Lifetime Free Access all this Content.

 **Receive Earliest Newspapers updates from 5 AM with All Editions**

◆ Indian Newspaper

- 1) Times of India
- 2) The Hindu
- 3) Business line
- 4) The Indian Express
- 5) Economic Times
- 6) Financial Express
- 7) Live Mint
- 8) Hindustan Times
- 9) Business Standard

◆ International Newspapers channel

[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

◆ Editorials [English & Hindi]

[National + International Editorials]



the hindu businessline.

TUESDAY - MARCH 24, 2026

Plane truths

Airline ticket pricing should be transparent and fair

The Centre is justified in protecting passenger interests, by mandating that airlines make available at least 60 per cent of flight seats 'free' — that is, with no add-ons to the ticket price. The additional charges for such premium seats — which are typically towards the front of the aircraft or alongside windows and the aisle — sometimes account for between 5-10 per cent of the total fare. By also directing airlines to seat passengers on the same PNR together, the government has removed a pain point for travellers.

The new rules may not significantly impact finances of airlines as ancillary revenues — including seat prices, food and beverages and excess baggage — do not exceed 10 per cent of total revenues, in general. But they make a world of difference to passengers. There are two consumer concerns here: the price being paid; and whether this is disclosed upfront or concealed in hidden charges, only to be revealed when the 'payment' window comes up, as for example, convenience fee. Indeed, it is compelling to argue that in a free market, the government should not meddle with pricing decisions of business, but leave it to market forces instead. However, the question here is whether free market forces are really working in a duopoly market, one in which IndiGo is way ahead of Air India. To be sure, there have been both demand and supply side factors driving up prices. Geo-political disruptions have upset flight schedules and costs, while passenger traffic too has been rising sharply. Even in a more competitive market, prices would have risen; the question is, whether episodic price spurts are justified, and whether the consumer is duly informed about hidden charges while purchasing the ticket.

India is not alone in the matter of dealing with flyer-unfriendly practices. In 2024, the US' Department of Transportation came down on 'drip' pricing practices of airlines there and required the display of all fees at one go, though this was challenged in court. The UK issued similar norms on transparent pricing under a 2022 Act. The European Court of Justice recently ruled that airlines must refund the full amount paid — including booking fees — rather than slice up charges. The Centre should ask airlines and booking platforms to display the full cost of a ticket at the beginning of the booking process, rather than conceal it in convenience fees or seat pricing.

Rising passenger traffic conceals the fact that consumers are not a homogeneous lot — they could be corporate/institutional travellers, tourists, or budget-strapped individuals and families. Therefore, having more free seats is only fair. However, price regulation should be a light-touch affair — to monitor any unusual spike in prices, or hidden charges, while at the same time allowing demand and supply to adjust. In the long run, the best deal for consumers is to have more airlines. A level-playing field for smaller airlines is being attempted, but there's a long runway ahead.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Development funding: UK's meanness is shortsighted
Progress is possible. Over two decades, global child mortality plummeted. There were many reasons for a 39% reduction in deaths in lower and middle income countries between 2001 and 2021, but a significant one was overseas development aid, which supported everything from clean sanitation to vaccination programmes to food security. That shift has slowed, and — like similar advances — is likely to reverse if aid budgets continue to be slashed. Researchers warned last month that continuing cuts could result in more than 22 million avoidable deaths in the next five years, with a quarter of those among children under five. The UK's decision to slash aid by 40% is part of a global trend: G7 spending will be 28% lower this year than in 2024. Donald Trump has dismantled USAID; Germany, France and others are chopping their budgets. But Britain's case is particularly dismaying. A bipartisan consensus saw David Cameron, building on Gordon Brown's work, make Britain the first G7 country to hit the internationally agreed aid target of 0.7% of gross national income (GNI). [LONDON, MARCH 23](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Tragedy of Robert Mueller

Robert Mueller, who died Friday at age 81, served his country as a Marine and as the second-longest-serving director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The tragedy of his legacy is that he agreed to lead the probe into whether Donald Trump colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election. Robert S. Mueller III was born in Manhattan in 1944, the son of a DuPont executive. He attended Princeton, but when a classmate was killed in Vietnam in 1967, he joined the Marines. He was wounded and returned to the battlefield. This noble contrast with so many others of his generation couldn't be greater. [NEW YORK, MARCH 22](#)



BRIAN JUDGE

A defining feature of financial markets is that the most important information is often held by those least likely to reveal it. The system's inner workings are invisible to outside observers — which makes it all the more striking when leading Wall Street executives start sounding the alarm.

In October, JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon warned of "cockroaches" lurking in the private credit market. His remarks quickly reverberated across the industry, with UBS Chairman Colm Kelleher pointing to the "looming systemic risk" posed by poorly regulated private credit, which he likened to the rating-agency failures that helped trigger the 2008 financial crisis. At its core, private credit is lending that takes place outside the traditional banking system. Loans are made by investment funds, often managed by firms that specialise in corporate buyouts.

Unlike bank loans or publicly traded bonds, these deals lack transparent pricing, an active secondary market, and meaningful regulatory oversight. Terms are negotiated privately, valuations are set internally, and the investors whose money is at risk — often pensioners and insurance policyholders — have virtually no ability to verify any of it.

Despite — or perhaps because of this opacity — private credit grew rapidly after the 2008 crisis, as banks pulled back from riskier lending and private credit funds rushed to fill the vacuum. Today, the industry manages roughly \$3.5 trillion.

The rise of private credit is often framed as a story of financial innovation, with traditional banks retreating and nimble private lenders stepping in. But a closer look reveals a troubling, eerily familiar pattern: layers of leverage, widespread self-dealing, offshore regulatory arbitrage, and a feedback loop that ties the savings of millions of retirees to risky bets on AI data centres, leveraged software companies, and bundled loans marketed as safe investments.

Much of this activity is driven by private equity. When private-equity firms acquire companies, they typically rely on debt provided by private credit funds. But the initial buyout is just the beginning, as portfolio companies often undergo multiple rounds of borrowing to finance additional acquisitions, re-financings, dividend recapitalisations, and restructurings. A single deal can therefore generate

Is the private credit boom going bust?

STRUCTURAL ISSUES. Signs of strain are already showing. The deals lack transparency, with layers of leverage, widespread self-dealing and offshore regulatory arbitrage

several separate transactions. In many cases, the lender and the private-equity sponsor are affiliated, allowing the same parent company to collect fees on both sides of the deal while deploying other people's money — namely, retirees who believe their savings are safe.

Over the past decade, large alternative-asset managers have taken this model a step further by acquiring life-insurance companies. Apollo's 2022 merger with Athene, which has roughly \$400 billion in assets and serves more than 535,000 policyholders, helped set the template: Insurers provide a steady stream of capital, and affiliated asset managers channel it into private credit, with profits generated at every step, from insurance float to deal fees and carried interest. Nearly every major alternative-asset manager has since followed suit.

Traditional banks making similar loans operate under strict capital requirements. Unlike private credit funds, they must hold reserves against potential losses, submit to regulatory

Whether turmoil in private credit markets could trigger a broader financial crisis is impossible to know in advance, but that uncertainty is itself part of the risk

scrutiny that can force write-downs, recognise losses before borrowers default, and undergo stress tests whose results are publicly disclosed. Against this backdrop, it is hardly reassuring that roughly one-third of the US life-insurance industry's \$6 trillion in assets is now invested in private credit.

BERMUDA TRIANGLE STRATEGY
To boost returns, these firms employ what industry analysts call the "Bermuda Triangle" strategy, whereby a single sponsor controls three interlinked entities: a life insurer, an asset manager, and an offshore reinsurer. The insurer gathers premiums; the asset manager channels those funds into private credit deals it originates and prices; and the reinsurer — typically based in Bermuda or the Cayman Islands — assumes the insurer's liabilities under looser capital requirements than those imposed by US regulators.

The system is already showing signs of strain. Software companies, long a favoured target for private-equity buyouts because of their steady revenues and low capital expenditures, are being repriced as AI threatens widespread disruption. Private credit funds' exposure to the sector is an estimated \$600-750 billion, fuelling liquidity pressures. Blue Owl recently restricted withdrawals from a \$1.7 billion retail fund, and Blackstone's BCRED has recorded its largest net

outflows since its inception. The shares of publicly traded alternative-asset managers have also fallen sharply.

These developments highlight a deeper structural problem. When the same firm originates a loan, holds it in a fund it manages, values it using its own models, and reports that value to an insurer it owns, the result is unlikely to reflect what an independent buyer would pay.

Whether turmoil in private credit markets could trigger a broader financial crisis is impossible to know in advance, but that uncertainty is itself part of the risk. Before 2008, few observers understood how vulnerabilities in the US subprime-mortgage market could cascade through the global financial system. There is no reason to assume that we have a better view of the risks in private credit markets today.

To be sure, none of this means a financial crisis is inevitable. But it does suggest that risk has migrated into less transparent structures, subject to lighter regulation yet still tied to government guarantees. The gains accrue to Wall Street, while the potential losses may once again fall on retirees and state insurance systems. In that sense, the echoes of 2008 are becoming hard to ignore.

The writer is Research Director of the Program on Finance and Democracy at the University of California, Berkeley. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2026. www.project-syndicate.org

A national water vision for Viksit Bharat

Water governance must become climate-resilient with women playing a central role in it

Nirjanjan Ghosh

India is already approaching the threshold of water stress. The paradox is stark: a country endowed with major river systems is confronting intensifying scarcity, conflict, and ecological stress. The explanation lies not in the lack of water but in how it is governed.

Water in India refuses to obey political boundaries. Rivers traverse States; groundwater interacts with surface flows; and water simultaneously serves agriculture, industry, cities, and ecosystems.

Yet governance remains fragmented across ministries, sectors, and States. Decisions taken upstream — diversions, dams, pollution — generate downstream consequences that are rarely internalised. A single ecological system is governed by disconnected administrative silos.

Climate change is only aggravating the problem. Variability in rainfall, more frequent floods and droughts, and shifting hydrological cycles are rendering static governance frameworks obsolete.

Agricultural incentives, particularly minimum support prices, have entrenched water-intensive cropping patterns. Food security has been pursued through paddy and wheat, but at the cost of groundwater depletion and river basin stress.

For decades, India's response has been guided by the "arithmetic hydrology" paradigm — a reductionist belief that water challenges can be solved through supply augmentation. Large dams, canals, and extraction systems have expanded availability in the short run, but often at the cost of long-term sustainability. Sediment flows have been disrupted, ecosystems degraded, and flood risks heightened. The "arithmetic hydrology" paradigm has also promoted the simplified linear thinking of "more water, more crops, more growth". However, if only today's water problems could have been expressed in the framework of the ordinate and the abscissa, they would have been solved by linear algebra only — they would have ceased to be complex problems.

The moment now calls for a decisive change. India needs a coherent National Water Vision aligned with its Viksit Bharat aspirations. Here are the 12 tenets of the National Water Vision.

12 TENETS
First, the river basin should be the unit of governance. Basin-level governance institutions must replace fragmented, State-centric approaches.

Second, water must be recognised as a dynamic socio-ecological flow rather than a static stock. Surface water, groundwater, sediments, biodiversity, and energy are parts of interconnected systems, with disruptions in one



WATER. Looming crisis

element cascading across the system. Governance must embrace this complexity.

Third, India must operationalise Integrated Water Resource Management at the basin scale by aligning agriculture, urban development, industry, and ecosystems within a common framework.

Fourth, empowered River Basin Authorities, multidisciplinary expertise, and transparent data systems should replace the prevailing model of conflictual federalism evident in recurring inter-State disputes.

Fifth, water must be valued, as a free or underpriced resource is subjected to systematic overuse and misallocation.

Sixth, this creates space for market-based instruments like water credits, tradable permits, and water derivatives, which can align incentives for conservation and efficient allocation.

Seventh, environmental flows must be placed at the centre of policy. Rivers

are living systems that sustain agriculture, livelihoods, and biodiversity. Ignoring these functions undermines development itself.

Eighth, India must shift from supply augmentation to demand management. Efficiency gains, crop diversification, and behavioural change can deliver water security without perpetually expanding infrastructure.

Ninth, governance must be data-driven. Basin-level information systems integrating hydrological, ecological, and socio-economic data are critical for informed decision-making.

Tenth, the private sector should be part of the solution. ESG-linked water stewardship, water credits, and responsible industrial practices can mobilise capital and innovation.

Eleventh, water governance must become climate-resilient. Adaptive systems that incorporate uncertainty and risk are essential.

Finally, while governance needs to be inclusive and strike an optimal balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches, women must be considered central to water management.

The twelfth tenet of the proposed National Water Vision coincides with the theme for World Water Day 2026: Water and Gender, which explicitly states, "it's time to centre women and girls in water solutions".

The writer is Vice-President — Development Studies at the Observer Research Foundation

✉ **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, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Solar security

This refers to 'Realising solar power's potential for energy security' (March 23). The solar energy scheme, PM Suryaghar Mufti Bijali Yojana, despite being cost-effective for the beneficiaries, is not attractive, due to bureaucratic lethargy and lack of public awareness.

The infrastructure to establish the panels and their accessories remains unused or underutilised. The beneficiaries need to be motivated and provided with the necessary support to establish the panels for the generation of solar power from their rooftop. There should be more awareness programmes to push the

scheme. Timely payment of the subsidy must be ensured.

VSK Pillai
Changanacherry

It is with reference to the news article 'Realising solar power's potential for energy security' (March 23). Solar energy is crucial, sustainable and increasingly cost-effective energy source. It provides long-term price stability, acting as a hedge against rising unpredictable costs of fossil fuels.

While solar energy generation is limited to daylight hours and affected by weather conditions, the advanced battery technologies enable us its use, 24/7 making it a

reliable long-term solution. By generating more solar power, India could reduce its reliance on imported coal, oil and gas and insulate itself from supply disruptions caused by geopolitical factors. Solar energy is an inexhaustible domestic resource that adds diversity to the energy mix.

P Victor Selvaraj
Palayamkottai (TN)

Blessings in disguise
This refers to the article 'Trump, Netanyahu and the stag hunt' (March 23). The example of the hunt for the rabbit and deer is apt. The concluding para about the possibility of positive externality of an adverse

event turning out a blessing in disguise also stands to logic. A country that could evade responsibility for Hiroshima to Venezuela will have to face trial in the humanity's court sooner than all of us think. There are no escape routes left.

Mg Warrior
Mumbai

Futile move
Apropos "Demographic fixation" (March 23), the draft policy in Andhra Pradesh reflects a troubling cycle of demographic engineering. Incentives for larger families may appear supportive, yet echo earlier coercive measures that undermined women's autonomy and health. International experience shows that financial inducements rarely succeed in raising fertility, while structural inequities remain unaddressed. The real challenge lies not in manipulating birth rates but in creating conditions where families feel secure. Strengthening healthcare, education, and employment opportunities would empower citizens far more than pronatalist schemes. Labour shortages can be met through migration and better workforce planning.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

Hazy signals from Iran war

US' statements and actions are often contradictory

Sridhar Krishnaswami

If the objectives of starting the Iran war had been clear there would not have been a problem in deciphering the messages coming out of the US. After joining hands with Israel and bombing nuclear facilities in Iran on February 28, Washington shifted its sights to regime change once Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was assassinated and the top line of the clerics wiped out in missile strikes by Israel.



SUBTLE SIGNALS. Trump looking for a way out of the war mess

But the ballgame soon changed when Tehran began striking Gulf nations that were seen supporting American war efforts.

IN THE DARK While the conflict is into its fourth week, the international community is unaware of any steps being taken to de-escalate the situation but is witnessing conflicting statements and actions.

While US claims Iran is the "head of the snake for global terrorism", yet sanctions were lifted on its oil that were at sea — apparently about 140 million barrels — to facilitate the easing of oil prices that were roiling energy markets. However, Washington also put out word that steps would be taken to prevent Tehran from making money out of the sales. No one is sure though, how this is going to be done. Even Republican lawmakers don't seem happy.

"Bombing Iran with one hand and buying Iran oil with the other," quipped one. The conflicting messages are not confined to economics and trade. Militarily, President Trump announced that he was "winding down" the Iran war but almost in the same breath threatened to hit Iran hard should it obstruct transit through the Strait of Hormuz; reports indicate some 2,500 Marines were en route to the Gulf to augment the existing 50,000 or so already there.

Of course the additional boots does not mean that a land invasion is imminent or even on the cards. And the Pentagon is asking for an additional \$200 billion for its Iran war efforts, a demand that is not sitting well with Congress.

While saying the war is "nearly complete" with little or nothing of Iran's military facilities left, the continued American and Israeli assault on Iranian infrastructure is baffling allies in Europe and Asia.

The Israeli hit on Iran's South Pars gas field brought forth a swift

response on Qatar's LNG hub Ras Laffan. This threatens to further escalate retaliatory strikes to include the scores of desalination plants that are in the range of Iran's drones and missiles.

Analysts believe that weaponisation of water will have disastrous consequences for the region.

The Trump administration claimed that it was not aware that Israel was going to strike South Pars; Tel Aviv, however, avers that Washington was in the loop.

In the maze of chatter are also subtle signals that President Trump is trying to wriggle out of the mess he has created.

And the first of the steps is in his saying that Israel has been told not to hit Iranian energy infrastructure. "I told him (Prime Minister Netanyahu) 'Don't do that, and he won't do that'". While Trump is still maintaining that he is not planning to land troops in Iran, the Israeli Prime Minister is wondering how the entire thing could be wrapped up without the "ground component".

BACK CHANNEL TALKS Bringing the conflict to an end would face a larger problem if Tel Aviv keeps targeting individuals in the existing power structure in Iran. Even for back channel talks there must be moderators left to take decisions.

Leaving a vacuum at the top will only encourage attempts by fringe radical elements to grab power, the end result of which will not be in the interests of the international community.

The last thing Washington would want is a Tehran that is even more hell bent on going ahead with its nuclear weapons programme, intensifies its anti-Israel stance, or unleashes brutality on its people that would put previous regimes to shame.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

Petroyuan—a geopolitical signal

DOLLAR'S SWAY. Yuan is constrained by lack of capital account convertibility and PBOC control on exchange rate



RAM SINGH

Amid the Hormuz choke, Iran has signalled conditional openness to energy shipments by permitting oil cargo passage only if transactions are invoiced in Chinese yuan (¥), a move widely seen as an attempt to challenge the long-standing dominance of the petrodollar system. This development has revived debate over whether the Petroyuan could emerge as an alternative currency for global energy trade.

However, replacing the dollar requires several structural attributes of an international currency, including deep and liquid financial markets, full capital convertibility, global investor trust, and reserve currency dominance, conditions that the renminbi still only partially meets. Therefore, decoding these structural constraints is essential to evaluate whether such shifts could realistically reshape global energy trade and what implications they may hold for India's energy security and financial stability.

PETROYUAN: THE CONSTRAINTS Petroyuan is a signal, not a system, its growing use in energy trade reflects geopolitical intent to challenge dollar dominance, but structural constraints limit its emergence as a true global monetary alternative. First, from a monetary perspective, the ¥ remains only partially internationalised. According to the IMF, the Chinese-¥ accounts for 2-3 per cent of global foreign exchange reserves, compared with about 56 per cent held in US dollars (see table).

SWIFT data show that the ¥ accounts for 3-4 per cent of global payment transactions, even though China now invoices over 60 per cent of its trade in ¥, while the dollar still dominates with more than 40 per cent of global payments. A key constraint lies in China's continued reliance on capital controls.

Until the US dollar or euro, the ¥ is not fully convertible on the capital account, and its exchange rate remains managed by the PBOC. For energy exporters holding large trade surpluses, limited convertibility reduces the attractiveness of ¥ reserves. Moreover, wider ¥ use can constrain PBOC's monetary and liquidity management, particularly during inflationary cycles.

Petrodollar vs Petroyuan: Hype vs Reality

Dimension	Petrodollar (USD)	Petroyuan (RMB)
Monetary credibility & convertibility	Fully convertible currency; global reserve dominance (56% of global FX reserves); Independent central bank, Federal Reserve	Partially convertible currency with capital controls; RMB accounts for 2-3% of global reserves; exchange rate managed by PBOC
Financial market depth	Deep and liquid financial markets; US Treasury market >\$26 trillion. Global investors can park oil revenues safely in dollar assets	Financial markets expanding but limited global participation; foreign holdings in Chinese bonds remain relatively low (<10%)
Forex & global payments role	USD dominates global payments (>40% via SWIFT) and >80% of global oil trade is dollar-denominated. India invoices over 85% trade in \$	RMB accounts for 3-4% of global payments; limited use in global commodity pricing. Very limited use in India except in the case of some oil trade settlements with Russia
Institutional & regulatory framework	Strong rule of law, transparent financial regulations, investor protection, open capital markets	Regulatory opacity, strong state influence over banks and capital flows, limited investor protection perception
Energy trade & recycling mechanism	Oil exporters recycle petrodollars into US assets (Treasuries, equities, bonds). Large and liquid asset markets sustain system	Limited avenues to recycle large yuan surpluses globally; yuan-denominated oil futures exist but limited adoption
Geopolitical & strategic networks	Supported by US security alliances with Gulf oil producers and dominance of global financial infrastructure (SWIFT, dollar clearing)	China expanding influence via Belt and Road, currency swaps, and CIPS, but geopolitical trust and adoption remain limited

Source: Author's compilations based on IMF data inputs

Second, constraints within China's financial system limit the yuan's global role. Reserve currencies require deep and liquid markets capable of absorbing large international capital flows. The US Treasury market alone exceeds \$26 trillion, offering a vast pool of safe assets for global investors and sovereign wealth funds.

Although China's government bond market is sizeable, around \$20 trillion, foreign participation remains low, near 10 per cent of outstanding bonds. Capital controls, regulatory restrictions, and concerns over legal transparency discourage investors from holding large ¥-denominated assets. Moreover, China's financial system remains dominated by state-owned banks and policy-driven lending, weakening global confidence in market-based capital allocation.

Third, foreign-exchange recycling mechanisms for the ¥ remain limited. Under the petrodollar system, oil exporters particularly Gulf states, reinvest surplus revenues into US

India should strengthen the international role of the rupee through deeper domestic financial markets, and bilateral currency-swap arrangements

financial markets, especially US Treasuries and other dollar-denominated assets that provide liquidity, transparency, and legal certainty. China lacks a comparable ecosystem capable of absorbing large global energy surpluses. Although Shanghai hosts ¥-denominated oil futures, their trading volumes remain far smaller than benchmark Brent and WTI contracts.

Geopolitical and institutional factors further reinforce dollar dominance. The US financial system is supported by global infrastructure such as SWIFT messaging networks, dollar clearing systems, extensive banking linkages and "rule-of-law" unlike China's "rule-by-law". Moreover, many energy exporters maintain deep strategic and security ties with the US, encouraging continued dollar invoicing. Despite China's currency swaps and Belt and Road settlements, most global oil contracts remain dollar-priced.

WAY FORWARD Even as a geopolitical signal, Petroyuan-based invoicing warrants a nuanced policy debate in India, given its implications for energy security, monetary stability, and strategic autonomy. Given the dollar's liquidity, transparent pricing, and stable recycling, India should largely remain within the dollar-based system, while

allowing selective ¥ invoicing to manage transactional flexibility, sanctions exposure, and growing unpredictability in US policy. Further, given the ¥'s partial convertibility, capital controls, shallow financial integration and state-controlled policy initiatives, it should be treated as a tactical tool, not a systemic alternative, with vigilance against excessive dependence on China's state-controlled financial ecosystem.

Second, India must simultaneously strengthen its export capabilities. Without a resilient balance of payments supported by strong export growth, India's ambition of rupee internationalisation will remain largely aspirational and confined to sanction-driven corridors.

In this context, India may explore emerging digital settlement architectures such as the mBridge platform, enabling corridor-specific payment arrangements with trusted partners. It is paramount given that India's existing rupee-trade settlement is also subject to risks of sanctions (Russia, Iran).

Third, strengthening foreign-exchange resilience remains essential. Maintaining robust and diversified reserve holdings including gradual integration of yuan in India's currency reserve amid opening of Chinese investment can be considered as a hedge to manage volatility arising from geopolitical shocks, commodity price fluctuations, or currency realignments in global energy markets amid escalating transactional opacity.

Fourth, India must deepen energy diplomacy beyond "supplier diversification" to "supplier integration" involving them as stakeholders in expanding its strategic reserve infrastructure. As India scales geo-economically and geo-strategically, its role will certainly be tested under strategic rivalry and deterrence and, correspondingly, it must gradually scale crude oil and gas reserves to initially 90 days to become a member of IEA and eventually to 120-150 days.

Finally, India should gradually strengthen the international role of the rupee through deeper domestic financial markets, expanded bilateral currency-swap arrangements, and more resilient cross-border payment infrastructure. Such a balanced strategy, preserving dollar stability while cautiously expanding currency flexibility, will best safeguard India's energy trade, financial stability, and long-term strategic autonomy.

The writer is Professor and Head, IIFT New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 24, 2006

SBI Act changes okayed

The Union Cabinet gave its nod for legislative changes that will enable State Bank of India to sell shares in its associate banks. The changes will also facilitate SBI to split the shares of its subsidiaries. SBI has seven associate banks of which only three are listed.

Sonia resigns from Lok Sabha, NAC

The Congress President, Ms Sonia Gandhi, on Thursday resigned from her position as a Lok Sabha MP from Rae Bareilly and as Chairperson of the National Advisory Council (NAC), thereby opening a political Pandora's Box on the issue of legislators holding office of profit. Ms Gandhi's resignation follows Opposition demand for her disqualification as an MP in view of her holding the post of NAC Chairperson, which the Opposition alleged was an office of profit.

Jet-Sahara deal may go through

Barring a last-minute hitch, the Jet-Sahara buyout deal is all set to go through, though there could be a re-negotiation on the end price. There were hectic parleys throughout Thursday between the top officials of Jet Airways, followed by a meeting with the Sahara representatives.

India's economy resilient despite West Asia headwinds

Nirmal K Minda

India's economy continues to grow rapidly, with GDP expected to rise by 7.6 per cent in FY 2026, and exports likely to stay steady at 6 per cent. Looking ahead, growth is expected to remain above 7 per cent in FY 2027, even as global growth is projected to fall below 3 per cent.

Despite geopolitical and tariff challenges, India has grown by more than 7 per cent over the past three years. The Purchasing Managers' Index at 56.9 for manufacturing and 58.1 for services was the highest among the top economies, the US, China and Germany, in February 2026.

India's export trajectory remains steady, increasing by around 6 per cent from April to February 2025-26, reaching \$791 billion, up from \$748 billion in the same period last year.

Exports are strongly supported by engineering goods, electronics, chemicals, gems and jewellery, and agricultural products. India has numerous diversification opportunities in advanced, emerging, and developing economies.

On the gas and energy front, India maintains a buffer through strategic petroleum reserves and significant commercial stocks, offering an energy cushion of 50-60 days that surpasses the global average. Additionally, India has diversified its crude import sources, drawing supplies from numerous countries, including Russia, the US, Canada, Brazil, and Mexico.

At the current juncture, strict oversight of supply chains must be enforced to prevent traders or intermediaries from hoarding petrol, diesel, and LPG. Maintaining reliable fuel supply and



ECONOMY. Robust outlook reopens

public confidence are essential to avoid unnecessary market panic. A coordinated policy approach that includes supply monitoring and strategic stock management will help India navigate global energy fluctuations while safeguarding economic stability.

However, a prolonged US-Israel-Iran conflict could raise logistics costs and lead to price volatility, putting pressure on the transport, logistics,

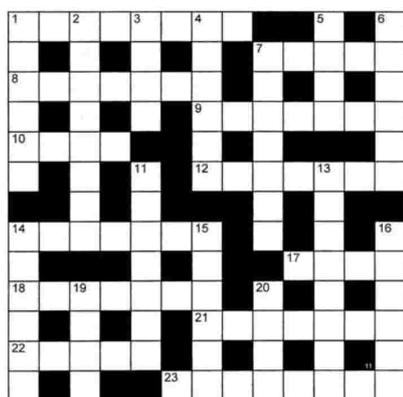
manufacturing, and consumer goods sectors.

MSMEs, which form the backbone of our journey towards Viksit Bharat, require support. Helping them become more resilient to global shocks will strengthen overall growth and job creation. Their working capital needs during global headwinds should be addressed.

The plug-and-play industrial development under the Bharat Industrial Development Scheme (BHAVA) marks a historic breakthrough in India's manufacturing sector. A seamless, end-to-end ease-of-doing-business model, from approvals to operations, will meet the aspirations of a new India and contribute to the vision of Viksit Bharat.

The writer is President, ASSOCHAM

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2642



EASY

ACROSS

- Ember-days (4-4)
- Haughtiness (5)
- Hanging droppings of frozen water (7)
- Handcuff (7)
- Drag, pull with violence (4)
- Delicate shades of difference (7)
- Get out of way to escape legal process (7)
- Use teaspoon (4)
- Departure of aircraft (4-3)
- 40 poles (7)
- Clasp firmly (5)
- Looked down on with contempt (8)

DOWN

- Sudden fear (6)
- Influence producing response (8)
- Deal out in small portions (4)
- Obedient follower with no initiative (3-3)
- Flat, circular body (4)
- Coat lapel (6)
- Man-of-war's tender boat (7)
- Lengthen out (7)
- Has the governing of (8)
- Tricks, capers (6)
- Thick-napped coarse woollen cloth (6)
- Unanimated (6)
- Draw together, contract (4)
- Pleasure excursion (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Rapid periods when one may deprive oneself of food (4-4)
- A number of lions showing their amour-propre (5)
- Droppings that are frozen (7)
- Handcuff a fellow with torn lace (7)
- What thief gets from a dacha ultimately (4)
- Can use name with various shades of meaning (7)
- Make off with rating the second energy departs (7)
- A disturbance in which one is confined (4)
- Departure of aircraft for a parody (4-3)
- For lung it can be an eighth of a mile of displacement (7)
- Hang on tightly to a sort of peach (5)
- Looked down on the speeds I'd achieved (8)

DOWN

- Scarce caused by combat is about right (6)
- It may suit slum to be something rousing one to action (8)
- A hand-out that will satisfy the French (4)
- He'll agree to say men are wrong (3-3)
- Record is to be found in the situation of Washington (4)
- Extension of collar one will almost move back (6)
- A boat that can be made up in wood (7)
- A non-amateur will yearn to spin it out (7)
- Has the regulation of knobs, wheels and levers (8)
- Can sit around and get up to tricks such as these (6)
- With flu, fed on a different sort of coarse wool cloth (6)
- Frozen with cold if grid is adapted to it (6)
- Give up some stinking work with wool (4)
- Will make one lose one's footing on the journey (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2641

ACROSS 7. Indefatigable 8. Permanently 12. Dotage 14. Novice 16. Stroke 18. Result 19. Flower vases 23. Letts well alone

DOWN 1. Snap 2. Peer 3. Damage 4. Pigeon 5. Vast 6. Clay 9. Entrhal 10. Leisure 11. Cent 12. Dose 13. God 15. Owe 17. Eleven 18. Revile 19. Flew 20. Oast 21. Sole 22. Song

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



LPG scarcity: We need a full-spectrum response

With second-order impacts of an LPG shortage in evidence, India must employ additional ways to plug supply gaps and double down on fostering a mass transition to electric cooking

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) is one of the products facing a global supply crunch today, thanks to the Iran war. The result is more than a cooking gas shortage in India. In order to prioritize the availability of cooking gas for homes, the government reduced supplies to commercial establishments. Although strictures were eased a little, scarcity-hit eateries have shut down in several towns and cities. Other impacts have been in evidence too. A large proportion of the urban poor who live in slums and informal rental housing fail to qualify for LPG supply from oil marketing companies, leave alone subsidized connections under the Centre's Ujjwala Scheme; they mostly buy their LPG in 5kg cylinders filled with gas meant for commercial use and have been the worst affected by the current short-fall. Migrant workers employed by eateries starved of LPG have found themselves out of work. Like other migrant workers, many have struggled to keep kitchen stoves running. Faced with livelihood losses and unaffordable means of cooking food, many are headed back home from their cities of employment. The LPG dislocation has been so sharp, it could take weeks to recover from it even after supplies normalize—for which the war must end and the Gulf's hydrocarbon facilities repaired. India is staring at an LPG scarcity that could stretch from the short to medium term.

One way out is for LPG production at domestic refineries to rise. This can be achieved through tweaks of the usual refining process and the use of catalysts. Of course, refineries would have to forgo some of their high-value petrol output in favour of LPG. There are limits to how far a refinery's output mix can be altered,

but the use of lighter crude can also help increase its LPG yield. Yet, such a step-up can make up for only a fraction of our lost imports from the Gulf. India must shop around for LPG from other major producers such as the US, Canada and Russia, even if it means paying a higher price. The higher cost must be passed on to consumers for them to modify their consumption either by reducing gas use or making it more efficient; the poor, of course, would need help. Thankfully, with minor tweaks, LPG stoves can be adapted for piped natural gas (PNG). So, homes in areas where piped gas is available should be shifted to PNG. Urban gas suppliers have reportedly been pushed into action. But this is a stopgap solution, since we also face a shortage of natural gas; the war has clamped most of our imports, which fulfil about half the country's consumption. Over the medium term, thus, India must shift to cooking with electricity derived from domestic coal and renewable energy, as *Mint* has argued earlier.

This switch could start with homes that have reliable electricity and can afford the extra cost of induction stoves and the special utensils that are magnetized by such stoves to generate an electric current in their walls, resistance to which creates heat. To foster electric cooking on a mass scale, we must strengthen grids at the national, state, zonal, divisional, sub-divisional and feeder levels to bear the higher load that induction stoves would call for. Many buildings would need to be rewired, too. Building codes should be amended to require circuitry that can sustain electric cooking. This is the direction in which policy needs to turn. Stopgap measures are needed, but we must not labour under the illusion that our hydrocarbon supply chain will snap back to a sustainable normal.

The bulge in government bonds held by RBI could be put to work

This pile-up has been remarkable and bond earnings can be deployed for infrastructure creation



MADAN SABNAVIS is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) balance sheet shows that the amount of government paper (including treasury bills) held as on 28 February was ₹21.34 trillion. It was ₹15.58 trillion in March 2025. With RBI's recently announced open market operations (OMOs), which will probably continue this month, the amount will only increase. The increase so far of ₹5.76 trillion in RBI holdings of government paper is remarkable. An increase of this scale has never been witnessed earlier. Is there an explanation?

Through OMOs, RBI is buying securities from banks to help augment their liquidity. This is usually carried out when liquidity is under pressure, which has been the case this year for a various reasons. First, growth in bank deposits has been weak due to a migration of funds to mutual funds. Second, growth in credit has been faster. Further, RBI has been selling dollars in the market at various moments to stabilize the rupee. This sucks out domestic liquidity, which is then replenished through the purchase of government paper. Note that the rupee weakened by about 7% from 85.60 against the dollar on 2 April 2025 to 91.68 on 6 March 2026.

RBI holdings of government paper have increased; this is tantamount to deficit monetization. But income on securities adds to its surplus, which is transferred to the Centre. Can this sur-

plus be used for loans to private infra projects?

The history of RBI involvement in supporting budgets is quite interesting. Starting from automatic monetization, under which 4.6% of treasury bills were once issued by the government to RBI for funding the deficit, the system has come a long way. There was also private placement of central debt with RBI during liquidity stress. RBI subsequently sold these holdings in the market once conditions improved. In the late 90s, we shifted to the market becoming the sole point of contact for the government, with primary dealers introduced to underwrite government issuances and ensure full subscription. However, with frequent OMOs in recent times, there has been a tendency for that debt to be transferred to RBI and held by it.

The central bank's holdings of central government paper stood at 13.5% of such debt last September, up from 11.2% a year earlier. These holdings tend to increase when RBI intervenes more in foreign exchange and bond markets. In a way, this is the cost of central bank intervention. Larger holdings also increase RBI's income, in turn contributing to the annual surpluses it earns.

This brings RBI surpluses into the frame. These have risen remarkably from ₹50,000 crore in 2017-18 to ₹2,69 trillion in 2025-26. This was after recommendations made by the Bimal Jalan panel were adopted. In the last seven years, RBI's surplus has averaged ₹1.32 trillion and ₹2.44 trillion in the last two. The interesting thing here is that if this transfer of ₹2.69 trillion, which is part of the non-tax revenue of the government, is seen together with RBI's net incremental holdings of government paper, the sum of ₹8.45 trillion is equivalent to 54% of the fiscal deficit for 2025-26. This is fairly strong support by RBI to contain disruptions in the bond market. In the absence of such interventions, the Indian bond market would have been under tremendous pressure and yields would have hardened.

The 10-year government bond yield has been fairly stable in the 6.60% range thanks to aggressive OMO support. Without it, the Centre's borrowing programme would have been a challenge to fulfil, especially at a time when commercial credit has steadily been picking up. RBI's repo rate was lowered to 5.25% last year, but there has been limited movement after its rather aggressive rate cut last June, followed by a 25-basis-point cut in December.

The low repo rate has led to a situation in which banks have not been able to mobilize deposits from their retail customers. Banks have taken recourse to the market for certificates of deposit and bulk deposits, which cost more. Relatively high 10-year bond yields alongside OMOs indicate that interest rates cannot be reduced any further. The government's net borrowing programme has been pegged at ₹11.7 trillion in 2026-27, around the same as in 2025-26. With the economy likely to grow by over 7% in 2026-27, notwithstanding war effects, growth in credit could be in the 12-14% range. Much will depend on how the stock market performs, as this will influence investment choices by households. In 2024-25 and 2025-26, they showed a proclivity to capital market avenues. If this sustains, RBI's OMOs may again be significant.

Surpluses of RBI support the budget but could also be transferred to a separate fund that can be used specifically for financing infrastructure development. The money can also be used by the government for lending to private enterprise through public financial institutions like public sector banks. This will widen the fiscal deficit but aid private investment, which has been lagging. The interest on such loans can flow back to the government as revenue in future years. It will effectively hand the baton over to private players for infrastructure investment while the government fine-tunes its own efforts in this area.

These are the author's personal views.



MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

What India must do to free its youth of the degree trap

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

In 2011, a young male graduate earned about ₹21,800 a month; a non-graduate ₹9,000. By 2023, the graduate earned ₹19,573 while the non-graduate ₹10,507. Graduate earnings have fallen in nominal terms over 12 years. Adjusted for inflation, they have collapsed. This data, buried in Azim Premji University's fifth *State of Working India* report (2026), tells a stark story.

The headline story from the report is that 67% of India's unemployed youth aged 20-29 are graduates; i.e., about 11 million people. In 2004, graduates made up just 32% of unemployed youth. The share of graduates in the youth population has itself risen from 10% in 2004 to 28% in 2023. But unemployment among them has risen much faster. The ILO-IHD *India Employment Report 2024* had already flagged a graduate unemployment rate of 29%, compared to just 3% for those who cannot read or write. This trend of rising graduate youth unemployment has been known for a decade now. The reasons lie on both the demand and

supply sides of the labour market. On the latter, we have rational waiting combined with an irrational lottery. Educated youth can now afford to hold out for a job worth taking. With household incomes having risen across income groups over the past two decades, even families of modest means can sustain a waiting son or daughter longer than before. This explains the counter-intuitive pattern: the more educated you are, the higher your unemployment rate.

The wait, however, takes a specific form. A multitude of graduates are preparing for government competitive examinations. Many state governments even sponsor and subsidize preparation for public service commission entrance exams. A meticulous study by Kunal Mangal drawing on Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPS) data from 2013 to 2019 shows that in 2018-2019, a single TNPS group 4 recruitment drew 13.7 million applicants, nearly four times the next largest recruiter in the state. About 80% of all unemployed individuals in Tamil Nadu were also preparing for a TNPS exam.

When Tamil Nadu imposed a partial hiring freeze between 2001 and 2006, vacancies fell 86%, but job applications actually rose 7%. Exam preparation was actively crowding out private employment.

This pattern is seen across states. Why this addiction to government jobs? The reasons are structural and rational. A government post offers iron-clad job security, wages well above comparable private sector roles (for instance, a government-employed driver may earn four times higher), generous health and pension benefits, high social status and authority even at the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy. For women, especially, a government posting is the one job a future in-law is likely to approve of. These repeat-attempt candidates do not miss the private job market because what it offers is a treadmill, not a career. They can always hop on that mill later, with no forgone benefits because the pay for entry-level jobs there stagnates.

On the demand side, the diagnosis is darker. Between 2012 and 2019, India's GDP grew 6.7% annually but employment grew 0.1%. Manufacturing, the backbone of mass job creation, has seen its share of the workforce stagnate at 12-14% for over two decades,

while output grew 7.5% per year. India produced 5 million graduates annually between 2004 and 2023; only 2.8 million found any employment each year, and a mere 1.7 million entered salaried work. India largely missed the export-led, labour-intensive growth path that transformed East Asia.

Of the 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and 2023-24, nearly half were in agriculture, with low incomes, limited productivity and no career progression. The *Economic Survey 2024-25* notes that only 8.25% of graduates are employed in roles aligned with their qualifications; nearly half are in elementary or semi-skilled work. These are not jobs that offer 'learning by doing,' productivity or skill growth. They are dead ends with a degree requirement.

Employers, reluctant to hire permanent workers they cannot easily let go, have worked around rigid job-protections through contract labour. These allow lower pay, fewer protections and easier lay-offs.

The automotive sector blazed this trail; many others followed. The result is a profound casualization of the workforce: churn without growth, employment without advancement. By contrast, in the US, a 4% unemployment rate coexists with enormous job mobility. There could be a 20% churn, with workers cycling through several jobs in a year, gathering skills and wages with each. One policy priority should be to reduce search friction and skill mismatches. Portable apprenticeship programmes that do not require apprentices to be made permanent could ease both sides of the market simultaneously. Employer-driven rather than certificate-driven schooling would help close the gap. Better labour market information and job portals with easy search could reduce the mismatch between jobs and job seekers.

Another priority is to reduce the exceptional premium on government employment. This requires reducing perks, widening the staffing net, introducing fixed-term contracts and more outsourcing. Unemployment insurance or cash doles must be matched with job-search verification.

Graduates waste years on a government job lottery while private job creation moves at a snail's pace and welfareism pushes its fiscal limits—we need to cut this Gordian knot.

Cut the Gordian knot of a youth obsession with government jobs amid fiscal limits and slow private job creation



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Why chaos in Washington can't hold California's economy back

The Democrat-led state foresaw trouble and took policy action early to insulate its prosperity from chaotic federal governance



GAVIN NEWSOM & LENNY MENDONCA

are, respectively, governor of California; and senior partner emeritus, McKinsey & Company, and former chief economic and business advisor to the state of California.

There is a paradox at the heart of the US economy. As the federal government imposes sweeping tariffs, signals hostility to multilateral trade and unnerves long-term investors with erratic policymaking, one state has emerged as the most reliable US address for global capital: California, the world's fourth-largest economy and America's second-largest exporting state with \$188 billion in annual goods exports. In 2024, California's GDP grew by 6%, outpacing the US, China and Germany.

This is not a partisan provocation, but a statement grounded in hard data and direct experience: We built the institutional architecture that has made the state resilient in the face of federal policy volatility. As governor and as the former chief economic and business advisor who helped design California's international investment strategy (an initiative now run by Dee Dee Myers), we undertook trade missions to Europe, Asia, Canada and Latin America; direct government-to-business outreach; and long-term investment compacts.

Now that strategy is paying off. Nearly 19,000 foreign-owned enterprises operate in California, supporting more than \$14,000 jobs and paying an estimated \$89 billion in wages to Californians—a figure that grew even as federal trade policy turned inward. The US Bureau of Economic Analysis confirms that California consistently ranks among the top two or three states on foreign direct investment.

To be sure, the headwinds President Donald Trump's administration has created must be acknowledged. Tariffs raise input costs across supply chains and policy unpredictability suppresses long-term capital commitments that drive investment. No state, however large, is fully insulated from national macroeconomic conditions.

California's 61,000-plus exporters face real exposure from retaliatory tariffs, as do the farmers and ranchers whose top export markets—Mexico, Canada and China—have been targeted by federal trade policy. But for the international firms that remain committed to the US market, the question is not whether to invest, but where. Here, California offers something that Washington currently cannot: predictability. Clear emissions standards create demand certainty for clean-energy investment and well-established labour protections reduce long-term litigation risk. With its commitment to a green transition, California stands out for international makers of electric vehicles (EVs) and other supplies across the battery supply chain.

As an executive from UK-based Octopus Energy recently put it, California's "supportive policy and world-class entrepreneurship" make it "an ideal place to back long-term investment partnerships." That assessment accompanied a nearly \$1 billion commitment to invest in California's clean tech



ISTOCKPHOTO

sector. Many other international investors have set up shop in California for the same reasons. Our clean-energy sector employs more than a half-million workers and is growing three times faster than the overall economy.

Three sectors illustrate California's pattern of success most clearly. In cleantech and climate infrastructure, the state's Advanced Clean Cars regulations, cap-and-trade system and nation-leading renewables standards create demand certainty for investors in solar, battery storage, hydrogen and EV infrastructure need. Having added more than 30,000 megawatts of new clean energy and storage capacity since 2019, California now generates 67% of its electricity from clean sources and it is building toward 100% by 2045. Such an ambitious, yet achievable, target creates a durable investment runway that extends far beyond any single federal administration.

Likewise, in life sciences and biotech, California's world-leading research universities, regulatory expertise and cluster effects in the Bay Area and San Diego continue to attract European and Asian pharma and medical-tech capital at record rates. In AI and digital infrastructure, California's venture ecosystem and strong lead in talent and compute capacity make it the default destination for international tech investment—a position reinforced by federal ambivalence towards AI governance that has created a regulatory vacuum that California is beginning to fill.

These sectors and many others are attracting substantial capital for innovation and the scaling of companies that will define our future. Some busi-

ness leaders are sceptical of California's regulatory environment and they are not wrong to say that the cost of doing business in California remains high. Reforms of the permit process are in progress but incomplete, even as housing affordability constrains the labour market—a challenge that demands sustained attention.

But such problems are not solved overnight. Our Jobs First Economic Blueprint acknowledges the work that needs to be done. Meanwhile, foreign investors are making comparative judgements: The relevant question is not whether a jurisdiction is perfect, but whether it offers the best available combination of market scale, institutional stability, workforce quality and regulatory predictability for a given investment strategy. On that measure, for a widening range of investment categories, California's advantages remain formidable.

Our investment framework was always intended to be durable across administrations and economic cycles. And now the international relationships, sector-specific compacts and regulatory certainty we have established are proving resilient in a turbulent national environment, vindicating our strategy. California's experience holds lessons that extend well beyond our state. In a global economy characterized by rising geopolitical friction and policy volatility, predictability and openness are competitive advantages. Jurisdictions that understand this will attract the capital, talent and partnerships that determine long-term prosperity. California did not wait for Washington. It drew its own conclusions, built its own institutions accordingly and is reaping the rewards.

©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE

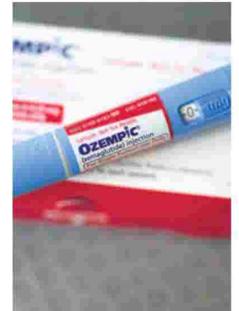
China and India are poised to score big on weight-loss drugs

Generic makers rushed in after Ozempic went off-patent in both



JULIANA LIU

is a columnist for Bloomberg Opinion's Asia team, covering corporate strategy and management in the region.



Low-cost producers of generic versions could expand into export markets.

The simultaneous patent expiry of Ozempic's active ingredient in China and India on Friday was a watershed moment. Until now, these weight-loss drugs have been available largely to people with means. The launch of affordable generic versions will be levelling force in healthcare, with global consequences.

That's because the world's two most populous countries aren't just consumers. They also have pharmaceutical firms that are capable of exploiting this moment to reshape the market for metabolic therapies, affecting the earnings of incumbents Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly. It would be driven by demand from large populations suffering from chronic ailments like obesity and diabetes that can be treated with these medicines that mimic the effect of the natural hormone glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1), which regulates appetite and blood sugar.

Public health will benefit most. According to the *Lancet*, China had 402 million people living with obesity five years ago. That number will grow 56% by 2050 to nearly half the population. India had 180 million individuals with the disease in 2021, with the figure expected to more than double to 450 million in about 25 years. Obesity is known to increase the risks of diabetes, coronary artery disease, hypertension, stroke and other conditions.

While Novo Nordisk has slashed the price of Wegovy (which uses semaglutide, the same ingredient in Ozempic), in China and India in anticipation of the patent loss, its offerings are still too expensive for most people. In China, where weight-loss drugs fall outside insurance coverage, price will be the decisive factor in whether millions begin medical treatment. Many diabetes patients are managing their condition with less effective oral medications. Switching to generic semaglutide could result in superior glycaemic and weight control, reducing the risk of long-term complications. Nadim Anwar, pharma analyst at GlobalData, told me. Competition could bring prices down to \$50 a month, which is much cheaper than in the West.

China has more than 10 companies, including CSPC Pharmaceutical Group Ltd. and Huihseng Biopharmaceutical, developing generic versions. Local media say it will take another half year for the medicines to be available. India is expected to have dozens of options within months.

Even if the drugs are a game changer, they're not a silver bullet. And they can be tricky to get right. The medicines have been associated with loss of muscle mass

and even malnutrition. There's a question mark about depression. Countries need to train health workers to deliver long-term care to support the treatment and invest in prevention by encouraging exercise and proper nutrition, according to Johanna Ralston, CEO of World Obesity Federation. China and India's chronically short-staffed, under-funded healthcare systems may struggle to do that, but they must commit to comprehensive care if the drugs become widely available.

The commercial opportunity in these drugs is clear. Even though China did not originate GLP-1 treatments, it dominates the research pipeline, with more than 100 drugs in development, around 40% of the global total, according to CiteLine's Pharnaprojects. Over the past two years, therapies originating from China have comprised the majority of global GLP-1-related dealmaking by both value and deal volume. In fact, Pfizer will soon enter the market for weight-loss drugs after years of trying—by licensing a Chinese product after its own efforts fell flat.

This is not a surprise for those watching the trajectory of China's pharmaceutical development. Over the past five years, drugmakers have started introducing experimental therapies and signing multi-billion-dollar licensing deals to bring them to global markets. Established companies are looking for shortcuts to expand their offerings—since many are facing an upcoming revenue cliff with lucrative patents on blockbuster drugs expiring.

And because the patent for semaglutide has already expired in Canada and is poised to do so in Brazil and Turkey, Chinese and Indian generics could become significant players if they receive regulatory approval. With China already the world's biggest supplier of active pharma ingredients, the components in drugs that produce the intended therapeutic effects, its suppliers can make money in those markets, too.

Ozempic went viral for helping people lose weight after its launch as a diabetes injection in 2018. The sheer effectiveness of this class of drugs has advanced the idea that obesity is a chronic disease. Now affordable generics won't just make them more widely available, but also give Asian drugmakers a bigger slice of the growing business.

©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

India's LPG adoption success story is being choked dry

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/visiblehand

Growing up in Kerala, it was a weekly ritual to spark the firewood and get ready for an oil bath. The weather was warm enough during the week to use the plentiful water from a running tap or well. The firewood had to be kept dry and was allocated pride of place in the outhouse to be brought out in small batches for weekly baths or cooking. In an unexpected twist, many parts of India are having to return to this tradition of burning firewood.

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) is a fuel commonly used in Indian households and commercial establishments for cooking purposes. It is most often a combination of propane and butane. An almost fully-burning clean fuel, it has replaced firewood and kerosene in most Indian kitchens. LPG is produced as a byproduct of natural gas liquids (NGL) extraction or as a distillate product from the oil refinery process. The cost of extraction as a byproduct is much lower than as a distillate, which explains to some degree why India still relies on LPG imports rather

than on domestic oil distillation for its full annual requirement.

The global demand for LPG is over 340 million tonnes annually. India's consumption of LPG, almost entirely for cooking, is approximately one-tenth of the world's consumption at around 31.3 million tonnes. The household sector, utilizing 14.2kg cylinders, accounts for the overwhelming bulk, approximately 87% of total consumption. The commercial sector (restaurants mainly) uses 19kg, 47.5kg or 425kg cylinders and accounts for 13% of total usage.

For nearly 40 years after the late 60s, India saw a gradual uptake of LPG as a kitchen fuel. Most households continued to use a mix of coal, firewood, kerosene and LPG during that time. The 2011 census showed that 29% of Indian households were using LPG; it was 62% in 2016 and has reached 'near saturation' levels today. India has a little over 300 million households and now has 330 million gas connections, which implies full penetration. The government's scheme to convert the population to clean burning fuel has been a success. If you add the fact that its LPG subsidy has been specifically aimed at poor households using an Aadhaar-based direct benefit transfer (DBT) mechanism, it can be deemed a spectacular

success. The online process for ordering refills and a transparent scorecard for LPG distributors that uses a star rating system has resulted in much greater empowerment of LPG consumers.

This grand success has an Achilles heel. Nearly 60% of India's LPG needs are imported and nearly 90% of that is sourced from the Gulf. Our biggest source countries are the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Bringing these imports using ships called VLGCs (Very Large Gas Carriers) requires transit through the Strait of Hormuz. Each VLGC carries about 50,000 tonnes of LPG. India needs about 400 such ships a day, a little more than one a day, to fulfill its import demand expected to reach 20 million tonnes. The Strait of Hormuz, named for the Zoroastrian divinity Ahura Mazda, has become a major chokepoint in the ongoing war between the US and Iran.

The near-term strategy for Indian homes is to practise LPG conservation. Using pres-

sure cookers and communal cooking can reduce cooking time substantially. Using electricity for peripheral cooking tasks like water boiling and making tea diversifies the use of energy. Cooking with induction stoves saves about 30% of the heat for the same cooking task. Only when direct heat is used for charring, like that

used to make *rotis*, is gas a better alternative. Beyond measures at the household level, India must continue its diplomacy with Iran to get more ships through Hormuz. Every three ships that pass through the Strait gives India two days of LPG supply. India should also increase purchases from Saudi Arabia, Russia and the US. Saudi Arabian LPG could be contracted through its Red Sea ports.

Red Sea transit will require passage through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This strait is sandwiched between Yemen and Djibouti and could also be targeted if Houthis in Yemen join the fight, although Iran itself struck a Saudi hydrocarbon target on the Red Sea coast after its South Pars gas-field was hit.

Longer term, India must scale its domestic production and increase strategic storage of LPG. India's storage capacity is placed at about 150,000 tonnes, or two days of demand, and it should expand to at least 30 days of demand. As India proceeds towards its net-zero emissions target set for 2070, it is important to promote electricity-based alternatives. This can and should be achieved concurrently with the grid being decarbonized.

I ran a scenario analysis through Claude with the following assumption: blended adoption between rural and urban households rises from 8% today to 25% in 2030 to 43% in 2035. The analysis projects LPG demand will drop to about 21 million tonnes by 2035, which can be met with increased domestic production and limited imports. The increase in power requirement due to this is about 100 terawatt hours per year or 4% extra, which is easily planable. In the same way that India switched from earlier cooking fuels to LPG, it must begin an aggressive transition to electricity-based cooking. Ahura Mazda, the 'father of fire', would approve.

P.S: If it weren't for electricity, we would be watching television by candlelight,' said Comedian George Gobel.



Editor's TAKE

West Asia war tests India's economy

As tensions escalate in West Asia, India finds itself confronting the familiar tremors of surging oil prices and currency pressure

Three weeks on, there is no sign of a let-up, only escalation – this sums up the US-Israel-Iran war that started as a regional conflict but is now impacting the whole world, and India is no exception. With our heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels, most of which passes through the Strait of Hormuz, the oil supply is severely hit, and as the war prolongs, things will get worse. The impact is staggering. The oil markets are in a tizzy, oil prices have already reached \$119 per barrel. Experts feel that oil prices will touch \$150 per barrel within a matter of weeks if the war does not end or some sort of mechanism to supply oil through Hormuz is not reached. The Iran war has once again exposed the fragility of global energy markets and India's deep vulnerability to them.

Recognising the gravity of the situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened a high-level meeting to review the country's energy preparedness, signalling both urgency and concern. While retail petrol and diesel prices have so far remained stable, this may not hold for long. Industrial diesel prices have already risen by about 25 per cent, reflecting the underlying stress in the system. Such increases inevitably translate into higher transportation and logistics costs, which in turn fuel inflation across sectors. Equally alarming is the falling rupee against the dollar, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that we are now close to breaching the 100 mark in months, if not weeks. The depreciation of the Indian rupee further compounds the crisis by making imports more expensive.

Like every crisis, this too has its own lessons, if we are willing to learn. For long, we have depended upon imported oil for our energy needs without ever caring that this dependency is one of the severest weaknesses any nation can have, especially if it strives to be a regional power. The time to correct this vulnerability is now. It is a structural issue and needs to be tackled with utmost urgency. There cannot be a short-term fix for it, like arranging alternative suppliers or increasing cess to manage demand. It would need investments in exploration and refining facilities. It would need sustainable solutions like biofuels and renewable energy resources – the policy decisions that would alter the energy equation. It is not a unique problem; many countries have successfully become self-sufficient and transitioned from total dependence on oil to a more diversified and self-reliant energy mix. Germany, through its 'Energiewende', scaled renewables rapidly; Denmark switched to wind energy in a big way; and China dominates solar, wind, and battery supply chains, combining energy security with industrial strategy. Electrification of transport, expansion of public transit, and promotion of energy efficiency can significantly reduce oil dependence. Equally important is macroeconomic resilience. Strengthening the rupee through sound fiscal management and boosting exports can help mitigate the impact of external shocks. The lesson is clear: energy security equals national security, and it should be our national priority. We need a long-term strategy; it will not be fixed with a band-aid!

A new dawn or another illusion?

Nepal's recent election was an eruption of public anger against years of stagnation and corruption. Yet, a pressing question remains: has the country chosen real transformation, or simply been swept up by emotion without a clear path forward?



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

The election in Nepal last week was not merely a political exercise; it was an eruption of pent-up fury, a rejection of the old guard that had throttled any semblance of progress for decades. But what now stares back at the country is a stark question: have the people truly changed their future, or simply traded one set of illusions for another?

For years, Nepalis endured the same trio of power brokers—the Nepali Congress, the CPN-UML, and the so-called Communist Party—as they recycled through government halls, recycled leadership, and maintained an endless cycle of impressive promises and microscopic delivery. Institutions decayed, corruption metastasised, and unemployment worsened further. Youth unemployment stands north of 20 per cent more than double the national average. Around 1,500 young Nepalis leave their homeland every single day seeking work abroad, a staggering exodus that undermines any future the country might hope to sculpt for itself.

So, when the uprising erupted, when Gen Z and youth frustration boiled over into the streets, it was not just rage-it was despair. Into this void surged Balendra Shah, the rapper-turned-Kathmandu mayor better known as Balen. He became the face of something many claimed they wanted: a break with the past. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), a party as new as its leader's rise from outside the entrenched political class, swept to an unprecedented majority: 125 of the 165 first-past-the-post seats. A single party holding nearly two-thirds control in Nepal is almost unheard of, a brutal indictment of the old establishment's collapse.

Nepal's new leadership inherited not opportunity but catastrophe. The economic foundation is weak and brittle. Public debt hovers around 40-45 per cent of GDP, but it is the quality of the economy that terrifies: a narrow tax base, enormous dependence on remittances accounting for roughly one-quarter of GDP, and a private sector too fragile to absorb the burgeoning army of young jobseekers. Tourism, once thought a panacea, remains exquisitely sensitive to global disruptions. Agriculture remains archaic and unproductive. Power outages and distribution inefficiencies plague even the most basic enterprises. Crucially, the labour force—the very youth that marched in protests—has no obvious outlet for meaningful employment.

The RSP manifesto, the so-called "2082 Vision", is nothing if not audacious: 1.2 million jobs in five years; GDP expansion to almost \$100 billion; per capita income rising to \$3,000; 15,000 megawatts



FOR A GENERATION RAISED ON UNFULFILLED PROMISES, THE OLD GUARD SIMPLY HAD NO AUTHORITY LEFT TO PERSUADE A BATTERED POPULATION OF ITS RELEVANCE

of installed capacity; halving LPG imports; digital services exports of \$30 billion in ten years; and the construction or upgrade of 30,000 kilometres of national highways. These numbers are ambitious—some might say visionary—but independent observers see them as fantasy built on the emotional reservoir of hope, not on deeply rooted economic analysis. Nepal's energy grid cannot reliably distribute current capacity; transportation infrastructure routinely buckles under seasonal rains; foreign direct investment remains underwhelming; and the digital economy is throttled by regulatory unpredictability and an underdeveloped legal regime for international payments.

These are the grim realities. A promise to reduce imports without addressing critical bottlenecks in trade policy or cross-border logistics is a promise destined for frustration. A pledge to build tens of thousands of kilometres of roads without sustained institutional capacity to manage land acquisition, competitive bidding, quality control, and anti-corruption oversight offers little more than ritual ground-breaking and even more ceremonial delays.

This mismatch between aspirational rhetoric and structural capacity points to a far more troubling truth: Nepal has been deceived not by individuals but by narratives. The uprising was not wrong in its desire for change, but it was driven by visceral emotion—a collective impulse to reject the old, often without a coherent alternative blueprint that could realistically transform the economy and provide stability. Angry protests and street fervour commandeered the engine of politics, and once that engine is running on emotion rather than evidence, it becomes dangerously unpredictable. If Nepal is honest about its own state, it must question whether Balen may tread a similar path: overwhelmed by the emotional thunder that elevated him, yet unprepared to deliver the institutional and economic stability the nation desperately needs.

Here is the painful truth: Gen Z politics, fuelled by emotion, creates momentum but not mechanisms. Momentum wins rallies; mecha-

nisms build nations. The current administration's inexperience—not merely in government, but in managing a modern economy under immense pressure—sets the stage for something grim: a crescendo of disappointed expectations.

Worse still, emotional politics is ripe for exploitation by external actors. Nepal is geographically hemmed in by its two giant neighbours. India—the largest source of trade, investment, energy supplies, and transit routes—watches with both interest and caution. China, a stakeholder in multiple infrastructure ventures and a central actor in Belt and Road projects, has its own expectations. Both have engaged with the RSP, seeking alignment with their own strategic interests. But emotion is a currency external powers love to leverage: where national confidence is high and institutional clarity is low, foreign influence finds entry points. A government fuelled by public passion—but lacking robust policy anchors—becomes pliable, attractive, and dangerous. The question is: did the electorate truly choose a path to prosperity, or merely a dream of it? Emotional politics gave the people a mirror—a reflection of their hurt, their labour unrecognised, their aspirations denied. But mirrors do not map roads; they only reveal what is already before us.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

Baleomics may become a lesson in hubris—not because the goals are unworthy, but because goals without disciplined implementation, institutional reform, and credible governance remain poetry when the country needs engineering. Nepal needs a systemic recalibration of labour markets, transparent rule-making, competitive commerce, legal certainty for investments, and infrastructural credibility—not just slogans that rouse crowds. When citizens see delays, when promised jobs fail to materialise, when inflation stubbornly erodes incomes, and when foreign capital does not flood in simply because of optimism, the inevitable question will surface: was this all just emotional theatre? If the answer is yes, Nepal risks entering a phase worse than the old guard's mismanagement: disillusionment with revolt itself.

The writer is a columnist based in Colombo

- dailypioneer
- @ilangamuwa1
- nilanthallangamuwa



Students dressed as Lord Hanuman take part in a fancy dress competition ahead of the Ram Navami festival in Patna. PHOTO: PTA

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

www.dailypioneer.com

- facebook.com/dailypioneer
- @TheDailyPioneer
- instagram.com/dailypioneer
- linkedin.com/in/ThePioneer

Peace cannot grow from seeds of violence



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

There has never been a single day in the whole history of the news media when the media reported that peace prevails on the whole planet Earth and that everything is going right in the world. A study of the recorded history of the world gives conclusive evidence that there has constantly been bitter or bloody strife over the last two-and-a-half millennia. This strife may have been social, economic, political, cultural, ethnic, religious, or militaristic, or of any other kind; often, it was bolstered by a claim that it was for a noble goal or a just cause.

Similarly, those who were responsible for the partition of the Indian subcontinent claimed that it was done for the noble goal of seeking justice for one particular community, which was considered the main minority community. Similarly, those who are now waging a struggle for

reservation of government jobs for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, etc., claim that they are fighting for social and economic justice for the weaker and backward sections of society.

Of late, even extremists claim that their fight is for obtaining political freedom and for the human right of self-determination. Now, even if we suppose that the struggle waged by the above-mentioned groups or individuals, or by others mentioned in history, has been for a noble goal or a good cause, the question arises about the means used to achieve their professed goal. Have the means adopted in each one of the above cases also been worthy?

Looking at the historical facts, one would find that some of these struggles or protests indulged in gory acts of bloodshed of hundreds of thousands of people, and they created a deep feud against the capitalist world, thus leading to large-scale armament build-up. In their struggle for a classless society, they led to the creation of antagonistic groups or countries locked in global conflicts of various sorts.

The means adopted by the leaders for forcing the partition of India resulted in unparalleled communal carnage and genocide on a mass scale. Similarly, the strategies of those who want reservation for backward castes and the approach and means adopted by militants also have led to great strife and the latter, in particular, have led to killings, abduction, and fear.

It is easy to romanticise revolution or justify conflict in the name of ideals, but one should remember that lasting peace can never emerge from paths paved with violence. In the process of pursuing justice, if we lose our sense of humanity, the very purpose of that justice becomes diluted. So, the analysis of events of history leads us to the conclusion that if we wish peace for ourselves and the world, and if we aspire that bloody strife should end, then we must first review our goal and see if it is really correct and noble, and then we should double-check whether our means are also noble.

Let us remember that the means are as important as the goal. The greatest transformations in history have not always come from force, but from the strength of inner conviction and peaceful resistance. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. taught the world that non-violence, dialogue, and moral clarity have the power to dismantle oppressive systems without bloodshed. In today's fractured world, where lines between activism and aggression are often blurred, we must return to the wisdom of these ideals. True peace is not just the absence of war, but the presence of compassion, understanding, and ethical integrity in both our vision and our methods. So, let our future struggles, if any, be defined not by the wounds they cause, but by the healing they bring.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

WHEN EVERY SIDE NEEDS INDIA, IT MUST ACT WISELY

India's carefully cultivated neutrality has gradually transformed into something far more valuable – strategic indispensability. Years of sustaining working relationships with rival powers, without binding itself exclusively to any, have earned India a position that few nations occupy today. The unfolding West Asia crisis is now putting that hard-won standing to its most demanding test yet.

What makes this moment particularly significant is that all sides – the US, Israel, Iran, and the Gulf states – simultaneously need India's ear. That rarely happens. Historically, non-alignment was principled abstention. Today, under Modi and Jaishankar, it has evolved into active, multi-vector engagement. India is no longer

watching from the sidelines; it is operating as an indispensable node in a network with few other common points. But diplomatic access, however valuable, has a shelf life. It must be converted into tangible outcomes – ceasefire facilitation, safe passage for stranded vessels, stable energy corridors, and protection of the Indian diaspora across the Gulf. India's BRICS presidency adds another lever. Using it purposefully, rather than procedurally, could make a meaningful difference. Back-channel diplomacy, quiet mediation, and confidence-building between Tehran and Washington are areas where India's credibility with both sides gives it genuine utility. A MYLSAMI | Coimbatore

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

Lift safety cannot be ignored

Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College is back in the news. A patient's father was killed after he was trapped along with his family inside a lift when it malfunctioned at the hospital's trauma centre. He reportedly was stuck either between the lift doors or between the lift and the wall.

It goes without saying that lifts or elevators should be regularly monitored and their upkeep must be foolproof. Secure electric connections, temperature maintenance, and lubrication of parts cannot be taken for granted. Checking the functionality of doors through periodic check-ups is extremely essential. Door sensors have to be kept in good condition. Monthly or quarterly servicing must be undertaken. Scrupulous adherence to annual maintenance contracts (AMCs) should be mandatory. Timely audits cannot be bypassed. Traction elevators are more effective in larger buildings.

Old and worn-out elevators should make way for newer ones. Nowadays, lift operators are conspicuous by their absence. Also, the majority of them are untrained. Proper training and supervision are necessary to avoid such tragic incidents in the future. Safety cannot be compromised in public institutions, especially hospitals, where lives always hang in the balance.

GANAPATHI BHATT | AKOLA

CAPF officers deserve leadership roles

In recent times, both social media and traditional media have witnessed active discussion on the CAPF (General Administration) Bill 2026. The Bill has sparked debate, particularly among Indian Police Service (IPS) and CAPF officers, who have publicly expressed their concerns regarding the provisions related to the proposed role of IPS officers.

Having served in the Armed Forces, I have reasonable insight into the functioning of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs). My experience provides practical insight into their structure and deployment in challenging environments. The backbone of the CAPFs lies in their units and sub-units, led by subordinate and CAPF officers, often deployed far from headquarters for internal security, law and order, elections, and protection of vital installations.

It is the cadre officers who are exposed to complex and challenging situations in the field. They coordinate with local administration and other security forces to fulfill both operational and administrative directives. Considering this, the claim that IPS officers alone possess wider experience is far from reality. CAPF officers possess the necessary qualifications and experience to be promoted to higher positions currently held by IPS officers.

PRAKASHI BHATT | NOIDA

Nuclear threat remarks are irrational

The remarks of Abdul Basit, the former Pakistan High Commissioner to India, that "if the US were to ever attack Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, Islamabad would launch retaliatory strikes against New Delhi and Mumbai", are illogical and senseless. His comments are in response to the US National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard's assessment before a Senate committee that "Pakistan's nuclear missiles are a future threat to the US". Basit argues that in the event of a conflict with the US and Israel, since the former is not within Pakistan's immediate nuclear range, India would become the default target.

This reflects a crab mentality, like a man who lost both his eyes finding satisfaction in a neighbour losing one. It is surprising that such remarks come not from a trigger-happy Pakistan general but from a former diplomat. The US has no military base in India, unlike in some West Asian nations targeted in the US-Israel-Iran conflict. Pakistan may partially succeed in its attempt, but if India were to retaliate, it may be wiped out from the face of the earth. Such an eventuality will not be a victory for either, but a colossal failure of diplomacy, statecraft, and human imagination. One hopes Basit is not echoing his government.

V JAYARAMAN | CHENNAI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Degrees but no job: Is a college education still worth it?

India possesses one of the youngest populations in the world, a demographic advantage that could fuel economic transformation. But this potential can only be realised if the country's education system is closely aligned with the shifting demands of the global economy

FIRST Column



DINESH SOOD

For decades, millions of Indian students have followed a familiar economic script: study hard, earn a college degree, and a stable job will follow. This belief, shaped by the 1990s era of economic liberalisation, evolved into an unwritten social contract between schooling and work.

Yet recent evidence suggests that this contract is rapidly weakening. A recent report by Azim Premji University reveals a striking reality: "around 67 per cent of India's unemployed youth today are graduates. In 2023 alone, roughly 1.1 crore unemployed young people were degree holders. A dramatic rise from 32 per cent in 2004". Over the same period, the proportion of graduates in the youth population rose sharply from about 10 per cent in 2004 to nearly 28 per cent in 2023.

These figures reveal a structural paradox in India's labour market. While access to higher education has expanded, the economy has not created enough high-quality jobs to absorb the growing number of graduates. The result is an emerging crisis: more degrees, but not enough employment.

For earlier generations, the formula worked. A college degree was rare and therefore highly valuable in the labour market. But the India of 2026 presents a different reality. Higher education has expanded rapidly, yet employment opportunities have not kept pace. As a result, the value of a conventional degree is steadily declining while youth unemployment continues to rise.

Degrees are rising faster than jobs

Data from the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Employment Outlook 2024 paints a troubling picture. According to the report, "young people account for nearly 83 per cent of India's total unemployed population. Even more alarming is that graduate unemployment is nearly nine times higher than that of individuals with little or no formal education."

These figures raise a difficult but necessary question: does a college degree still guarantee economic mobility in India? The problem today is not simply a short-



A COLLEGE DEGREE MAY PROMISE POTENTIAL, BUT A PUBLIC PORTFOLIO PROVIDES UNDENIABLE PROOF OF COMPETENCE

The writer is Co-Founder and Managing Director of Orange International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
dineshsoodfc

age of jobs; it is the hyperinflation of degrees. Over the past two decades, the number of universities and colleges in India has expanded. While this expansion has increased access to higher education, it has also created a mismatch between what students learn and what industries need.

The economics of signalling and the declining value of degrees

Economists describe part of this phenomenon via signalling theory. A degree does not simply certify knowledge; it also signals certain qualities to employers—discipline, perseverance, and the ability to complete organised tasks.

When graduates were relatively few, that signal held substantial weight. But when millions of students graduate each year with similar qualifications, the signal becomes diluted.

A Mercer-Mettl India Graduate Skill Index (2024-25) report reveals that only about 55 per cent of Indian graduates are considered employable for modern industry roles. In other words, nearly half of India's degree holders enter the labour market without the skills employers actually require.

One reason for this gap lies in the slow pace of curriculum reform. University syllabi often take years to update, while

the digital economy evolves almost weekly. As a result, students graduate with outdated knowledge that does not match contemporary business demands.

Artificial Intelligence and the end of generic knowledge work

Technological disruption, particularly the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), has accelerated this shift. Many knowledge-based tasks, once justified by white-collar employment, are now being automated. If a degree primarily trains students to perform routine analytical tasks, basic coding, or standardised reporting, those skills are rapidly losing economic value. AI systems can perform such tasks in seconds and at minimal cost.

Industry projections show this transformation. According to NASSCOM, India will require over one million specialised AI professionals by 2026 to meet growing technological demand. However, these roles require advanced, applied skills that cannot be acquired solely through outdated classroom lectures.

In other words, the modern economy does not simply reward what individuals know. It rewards what they can build, solve, and create.

Proof of Work in the Digital Economy: The internet-driven economy has intro-

duced a powerful shift in recruitment methods. Increasingly, employers and clients care less about formal credentials and more about demonstrable ability.

An aspiring AI engineer is judged by the projects visible on their GitHub profile. A digital writer or marketer is evaluated by their published articles, audience reach, or portfolio. A college degree may promise potential, but a public portfolio provides undeniable proof of competence.

This transformation has created a more meritocratic environment where skill, creativity, and execution matter more than institutional pedigree.

The rise of parallel learning ecosystems

Recognising these realities, a parallel learning ecosystem is emerging across India. Web platforms, coding boot camps, digital learning hubs, and professional communities provide learners with practical skills that traditional institutions often fail to deliver.

These platforms emphasise project-based learning, industry exposure, and practical problem-solving. Many global technology firms are increasingly prioritising skills, assessments, and portfolio-based hiring instead of purely academic credentials.

Government initiatives, including Skill India, Digital India, and various start-up incubator programmes, also reflect a rising recognition that employability depends on practical capability rather than academic qualification alone.

The Real Solution: Degrees Plus Skills. However, the answer is not to abandon formal education altogether. Universities still play an important role in building intellectual foundations, social networks, and academic disciplines that remain essential in many fields.

What needs to change is the way students approach higher education.

Instead of treating a degree as the final destination, students should adopt what investors call a "Barbell Strategy". Completing a college education provides a basic safety net. It satisfies society's expectations and guarantees that graduates are not automatically filtered out by conventional recruitment systems.

At the same time, students must invest in developing specialised, high-value skills, whether in AI, data analytics, design, digital media, entrepreneurship, or emerging technologies. Building projects, internships, and digital portfolios should become an integral part of the college journey.

Redefining the purpose of education

India possesses one of the youngest populations in the world, a demographic advantage that could fuel economic transformation. But this potential can only be realised if the country's education system is closely aligned with the shifting demands of the global economy.

The value of a college degree has not disappeared—but its meaning has fundamentally changed. It is no longer a guarantee of success; it is merely a starting point. In the 21st-century knowledge economy, students must treat their degree as a foundation and make the development of practical skills their true competitive advantage. Those who assume responsibility for their learning journey and build relevant expertise will define their own success.

To compete and thrive, students must build not just credentials but also skills, practical experience, and a mindset that welcomes change.

By pairing formal education with continuous learning and hands-on expertise, the youth can turn the degree inflation crisis into an opportunity for long-term growth.

Decisive Initiative of BBSSL: Towards self-reliance in the seed sector



RAMAN KUMAR

India is an agrarian country where a large section of the population depends directly or indirectly on agriculture. With changing times, agriculture is no longer merely a means of livelihood; it has become a central pillar of self-reliance, food security, and rural economic development. In any agricultural system, seed is considered the most critical input because crop productivity, quality, and farmers' income are directly dependent on seed quality. At the global level, the seed industry is undergoing rapid technological transformation. Advanced biotechnology, artificial intelligence-based agriculture, and organised supply chain systems are taking the sector to new heights. Regions such as North America lead the industry, while the Asia-Pacific region, particularly India, has emerged as a rapidly growing and significant market.

In this context, the establishment of Bharatiya Bee Sahakari Samiti Limited (BBSSL) is regarded as a historic initiative. This institution is not merely a commercial organisation but a national cooperative movement rooted in farmers' participation, aiming to make the country self-reliant in seed production and to provide high-quality certified seeds to farmers. BBSSL has been formed in alignment with the vision of "Self-Reliant India" and "Prosperity through Cooperation."

Global seed market and India's position

In 2024, the global seed market was estimated at approximately Rs 4 lakh crore. North America leads the sector due to precision farming, advanced machinery, and strong supply chain infrastructure. Meanwhile, within the Asia-Pacific region, India is emerging rapidly as a key seed market. India's seed industry was valued at Rs 67,828 crore in 2024, and is projected to reach Rs 1,65,295 crore by 2033. An estimated annual growth rate of around 10.5 per cent highlights the sector's strong potential. Diverse agro-climatic conditions, contributions from research institutions, and government support are accelerating this growth. However, India continues to face challenges such as counterfeit seeds, limited access to quality seeds, and inadequate modern storage facilities. The establishment of BBSSL represents a structured and coordinated effort to address these issues. BBSSL was established with an initial capital of Rs 250 crore, contributed



equally by five major cooperative institutions—Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO), Krishak Bharati Cooperative Limited (KRIBHCO), National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED), National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC), and National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). Its authorised share capital has been fixed at Rs 500 crore. Operating under the brand name "Bharat Beee," the organisation promotes indigenous seed production to reduce dependence on imports.

It is a national-level multi-state cooperative seed society, with its registered office located at WTC Tower, New Delhi. Its membership extends from Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) to state and national-level cooperative institutions. Breeder seeds for production are sourced from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), state agricultural universities, and other national and international institutions.

Objectives and operational framework

The primary objective of BBSSL is to provide farmers with high-quality certified seeds, promote domestic seed production, and reduce import dependence. The organisation places special emphasis on developing climate-resilient and disease-resistant seed varieties. Strengthening farmers economically by integrating cooperative institutions into the value chain is also a key priority. Additionally, increasing the Seed Replacement Rate (SRR) and Variety Replacement Rate (VRR), along with ensuring transparency through a QR code-based traceability system, are among BBSSL's core strategic initiatives.

Strategic operations and achievements

BBSSL procures breeder seeds from reputed research institutions, produces foundation and certified seeds, and supplies them to farmers. The organisation invests in research

and development to develop drought-tolerant, pest-resistant, and high-yielding varieties capable of addressing climate change challenges. Through the expansion of its distribution network, BBSSL is ensuring the availability of certified seeds even in remote regions of the country. From a statistical perspective, the organisation has made notable progress. So far, it has received more than 35,524 membership applications and issued 34,078 share certificates. In the financial year 2025-26, it distributed 2,70,167 quintals of seeds, generating an operational revenue of Rs 177 crore. During 2025-26, seed production was carried out over 11,125.58 hectares, resulting in 1,99,501 quintals of output, while for Rabi 2025-26, production of 7,04,388 quintals is estimated. The organisation has set an ambitious target of achieving a turnover of Rs 25,000 crore by 2035.

Vision 2035: A Self-Reliant Seed Powerhouse BBSSL aims to become one of the world's top five seed-producing organisations by 2035. To achieve this, it is expanding research based on artificial intelligence and genomics, strengthening local production systems, reducing import dependence, organising farmer training and demonstration plots, and adopting environmentally sustainable production practices.

Conclusion

Bharatiya Bee Sahakari Samiti Limited (BBSSL) represents a historic and transformative initiative in India's seed industry. Through its cooperative-based model, the organisation is providing a new direction to agricultural productivity, food security, and rural prosperity. By integrating quality, transparency, technology, and cooperation, BBSSL is emerging as a strong pillar in realising the vision of a self-reliant India.

The writer is Joint Secretary, Ministry of Cooperation

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
daily@pioneer

From AI to legal intelligence: Strengthening governance



NIRMAL SINGH

India's technological rise has entered a decisive phase. For decades, the world viewed India largely as an IT services powerhouse—efficient, reliable, and cost-effective. Today, that perception is changing fundamentally. India is no longer merely supporting global digital systems; it is building and exporting them.

The next frontier in this evolution is not just Artificial Intelligence (AI), but Legal Intelligence (LI). As India's economy expands and regulatory frameworks grow more complex, governance systems must evolve accordingly. A nation aspiring to be a \$5 trillion economy cannot depend solely on manual compliance systems, prolonged arbitration processes, and procedural bottlenecks. Speed, transparency, and institutional efficiency are now central to economic competitiveness and investor confidence. Artificial Intelligence, when applied responsibly, can serve as a powerful enabler of governance reform.

However, generic AI models are insufficient for India's layered legal and constitutional architecture. Our federal structure, sector-specific regulations, evolving taxation frameworks, labour codes, and judicial precedents require systems that are context-aware and rooted in Indian realities. Legal Intelligence must be designed with a deep understanding of constitutional values, due process, and regulatory nuance.

Equally important is the question of sovereignty. Legal and regulatory data is strategically sensitive. As India builds digital public infrastructure across sectors—from payments to identity management—it must ensure that AI systems supporting governance are aligned with national priorities and data security imperatives. Dependence on external technological frameworks to address governance challenges through domain-specific innovation rather than generic automation.

This initiative is part of a larger transformation underway in India's technology ecosys-

tem. CognexiaAI has also secured ₹540 crore in enterprise contracts across Australia and New Zealand for its AI-driven ERP and CRM platforms.

While commercial in nature, these global wins highlight a deeper shift: Indian companies are no longer competing only on cost efficiency, but on performance, scalability, and intellectual property ownership.

High-value AI exports contribute directly to foreign exchange inflows, strengthen India's digital trade position, and expand global demand for Indian engineering and domain expertise. Increasingly, Indian talent is travelling abroad not for outsourced support, but as architects of intelligent systems.

Yet technology must serve a higher institutional purpose. Legal Intelligence should augment, not replace, human judgment. Judges, policymakers, compliance officers, and legal professionals bring interpretative wisdom rooted in constitutional balance. AI can assist by accelerating research, identifying regulatory overlaps, streamlining documentation, and reducing procedural delays while remaining transparent and auditable.

Accountability must remain central. In governance systems, algorithms cannot function as opaque black boxes. Ethical guardrails, explainable AI, and regulatory oversight are essential to preserve public trust.

India has already demonstrated how digital infrastructure can scale securely and inclusively. The next logical extension of that success lies in modernising legal and regulatory systems with equal ambition.

At this juncture, the evolution from Artificial Intelligence to Legal Intelligence aligns closely with the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat. Technological self-reliance is not confined to manufacturing or strategic sectors; it extends to digital architecture, governance platforms, and institutional frameworks. Building sovereign AI capabilities for legal and regulatory processes strengthens national resilience and reduces strategic dependency. The transition to Legal Intelligence is therefore not merely technological progress. It is an affirmation that India can design systems rooted in its constitutional ethos while competing globally on innovation and excellence. If harnessed responsibly, Legal Intelligence can help India build governance mechanisms that are faster, fairer, and globally respected. In doing so, it will not only enhance institutional efficiency but also reinforce the foundations of a confident and self-reliant Republic.

The writer is the Founder and Chairman of CognexiaAI

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
daily@pioneer

Upturned by Big Rupee Movements

RBI may have to delay monetary easing
Rupee's taking a knock as the US-Israel war against Iran enters its fourth week with little signs of likely de-escalation — with the usual Trumpian doublespeak. Oil prices are now 50% higher than when hostilities began, which is straining foreign investor outlook about India's growth prospects. Capital flight out of Indian equities is adding pressure on rupee as the energy shock props up safe-haven demand for dollar. RBI has no preset level to defend for rupee. Yet, the central bank's intervening to ensure an orderly descent. Rupee's not the worst performer among the emerging market pack that's vulnerable to a sustained rise in energy prices. Forex reserves are down on both central bank intervention and higher dollar demand from oil refiners.

The Indian currency's trajectory will be shaped by how the country addresses its vulnerabilities to the energy shock. Dollar is also currently valued beyond a justifiable level as a safe haven. It's reacting to signals of escalation that keeps the situation fluid for RBI — the greenback dipped on Trump's decision not to bomb Iran's power infrastructure a day after he threatened to do so if Iran doesn't let go of its chokehold on the Hormuz Strait. RBI is comfortable with current level of reserves. It will have additional reasons to keep interest rates on hold while it assesses the impact of the energy shock on growth and inflation. Incomplete transmission of fuel price increases will weigh on downside risks to growth.

Sustained high energy prices will widen India's current account deficit, and increase the food and fertiliser subsidy burden. RBI may have to delay monetary easing as it smoothes out rupee volatility. Short positions on Asian currencies have moved higher, while speculative activity in the oil futures market could be spilling over into the forex market. RBI will have to tackle heightened volatility as a precondition to stabilising their economies. Indian companies' forex hedges tend to favour limited volatility at a low cost. These are being upturned by big rupee movements.

Transgressive Bill Ignores Individuality

Earlier this month, GotLod Parliament that Census 2027 would record the gender of the head of household under three categories — male, female, and transgender. While this move has been welcomed as a progressive step toward visibility, the proposed Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill 2026, placed in Parliament on March 18, signals a troubling shift. The proposed Bill raises three core concerns: it removes self-identification as the basis of legal gender recognition, departing from the rights framework affirmed in 'NALSA v Union of India' verdict; it introduces medical and bureaucratic gatekeeping by requiring certification through boards and district authorities; and it narrows the definition of 'transgender', risking exclusion of non-binary, gender-fluid, and other identities that fall outside rigid sociocultural or biological categories. This shift replaces a person's internal sense of self with clinical scrutiny forcing individuals to undergo verification by medical boards and district authorities, thereby transforming a fundamental right into a bureaucratic permit raj, deepening vulnerability and institutional dependence of individuals.

A lack of thought regarding ground realities is apparent. In a country where the transgender community faces systemic abandonment, family rejection and socioeconomic exclusion, adding layers of verification only invites further harassment. Governance is not merely about administrative precision — the 'tightening' in the new Bill is ostensibly to weed out misuse — but also about empathy. Laws must be fundamentally inclusive, reflecting the vast spectrum of identities rather than forcing it into rigid, outdated boxes. This Bill is a regressive step. It should be taken back.



JUST IN JEST
One big fallout of the war in West Asia is abuse of this term

Off with the Head of 'Off-Ramp!' Overuse

Everyone and their uncle's using the word 'off-ramp' in a very off-hand fashion ever since Trump started the war he wants the world to think he's finished. Everyone's 'off-ramp'-dropping — TV and op-ed pundits, fashion show organisers, packers and movers, wheelchair manufacturers... The expression, used originally by Americans to describe an exit from a highway (our 'exit road' or 'service lane'), has now become the geopolitical term of choice — an opening that can get you out of a sticky situation — even when not applicable to geopolitics.

Thanks to the war, the word's metastasised. Your breakup? An off-ramp. Your diet? An off-ramp. Your boss telling you to stop using that hip flask when on the job? Definitely an off-ramp. Whatever happened to the classics? 'Exit strategy' had gravitas, like Napoleon retreating with dignity. 'Withdrawal plan' evoked armies (not just Napoleon's) trudging home in the snow. Even 'pullout' had a blunt honesty — even as it made diplomats blush. Instead, we're stuck with 'off-ramp' in the age of GPS. Somehow, Churchill growling, 'We shall fight on the beaches, but eventually, we'll take the off-ramp provided by the Soviets at Stalingrad,' doesn't quite have a ring to it. So, peeps, easy with 'off-ramp', please. Let was not (pretend to) end with the imagery of a truck loaded with cauliflower missing a *patti gali*.

STATE OF PLAY From Nowruz to Easter, a bridge for Trump to build — or is it a bridge too far?

Hormuz, Escalation or Truce?



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Trump may have delayed his plans, but he's marked out the contours of the next level of escalation in the US-Israel war on Iran by identifying power plants as legitimate targets in case Tehran doesn't back off on blocking the Strait of Hormuz. Targeting energy infrastructure is a lead straight out of the Russia playbook against Ukraine, where the West has had to invest large sums in ensuring the Ukrainian grid keeps functioning despite Russian attacks.

Why would Trump want to execute his earlier threat? It's a high-risk strategy and that's why the reportedly new round of talks, subsequently denied by Iran, Iran has already said it will respond by targeting power utilities of Gulf countries and, possibly even desalination plants. This would mean the West may have to step in, to a Ukraine, to help these countries economically hit hardest by the closure of Hormuz.

In fact, in an unusual turn of events, Gulf countries have recently floated a Chapter 7 UNSCR against Iran for blocking the strait, calling for UN-backed use of force to ensure freedom of navigation as per international law. This is the second GCC-sponsored resolution this month, the first to talk about 'use of force'. The draft is believed to mention the option of imposing UN-backed sanctions on Iran if it digs in its heels.

Tehran, for its part, will count on Rus-



In the shade, or shady?

ssia, and China, to veto any such resolution. While that politics plays out in New York, there will be cascading effects — both intended and unintended — of any such escalation.

In the first round, militarily the conflict will take an ugly turn as more civilian infrastructure becomes legitimate targets. 'Ukrainisation' of the war will begin with Iran aiming to cause maximum civilian damage in the region, further provoking US-Israel retaliation aimed at securing Hormuz. This would mean the West may have to step in, to a Ukraine, to help these countries economically hit hardest by the closure of Hormuz.

Over the past few years, 24 countries have pooled in resources to raise 1.8 bn as part of the Ukraine Energy Support Fund. Last December, through one of the most complex logistical exercises ever carried out, an entire thermal power plant involving 2,400 tonnes of equipment was relocated from Lithuania to Ukraine, adding to the 3,200-odd power generators and 7,000-plus transformers to help Kyiv tide over the cri-

sis following Russian attacks on its energy infra.

The US will have to factor in similar assistance to Gulf countries if Iran were to target their energy infrastructure. It will also need to take into account reluctance of its European allies to get involved in this war. After all, Trump pulled out of many US commitments to Ukraine, including contribution to the energy support fund.

So, the path up the escalation ladder for the US will mean it having to take the call on driving home the ground advantage to achieve military victory at all costs. It could work best for US if Iran capitulates quickly through a short ground offensive. But if it stretches, consequences will weigh heavily on Trump economically and politically. Hence a revisit to talks.

Iran, on the other hand, will look for support from Russia and China, as it tries to hold on to Hormuz, its best leverage. In fact, it has, in the past two days, stopped all traffic across the Hormuz on safety grounds, telling trusted inter-

locutors that it fears attacks could be engineered on foreign ships and would be blamed on Iran.

The final pivot of escalation for the US is political with external and domestic dimensions. On the first count, it means the end of the Trump regime and its European allies will grow. Will this force Trump to try talking to Russia, and prioritise a deal in West Asia?

drive a tough bargain.

Either way, Trump's political timetable has spanned itself over the escalation during Eid/Nowruz and Easter. Else, the war is likely to enter a more dangerous, violent and potentially uncontrollable phase — one that will just disrupt economic realities but also potentially upend political order.

pranab.dhal.samanta@timesofindia.com

The Other Ether-Blend Solution



A Prathap Reddy

On Monday, the PM laid out his government's efforts to ensure that petroleum and gas supply isn't significantly affected by the US-Israel war against Iran and Tehran's response to severely restrict passage of cargo through the Strait of Hormuz. He added that such efforts include blending 'close to 20% ethanol in petrol' along with expanding RE, nuclear power and gas to boost capacity.

Even with a planned 25% increase in domestic LPG output from refineries, India is still expected to face nearly a 50% shortfall that must be met through imports. This means that India's cooking fuel security and several small-scale industrial operations remain closely tied to stability of global supply chains, an increasingly uncertain situation during periods of conflict.

While ethanol blending has been prioritised, and All India Distillers' Association (AIDA) has offered to supply ethanol blends exceeding 20% with petrol, GotLod also look at another solution to reduce the current energy demand: blending dimethyl ether (DME), a clean-burning fuel that can function as a substitute for LPG.

DME has been adopted in several countries, particularly China, where large-scale production and application demonstrate its practicality. China has installed DME production capacity of around 20 million MT, and uses it for cooking fuel, industrial heating and transportation applications. Success of this model highlights feasibility of integrating DME into mainstream energy systems.

One of the most significant advantages of DME is its compatibility with existing LPG infrastructure. According to Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), DME can be safely blended with LPG up to 20%, allowing it to be used across sectors without requiring major changes to current systems. This blending capability means that transition can begin gradually, reducing dependence on imported LPG, while maintaining continuity in supply and usage. The standard for DME-blending in India has been developed in line with international benchmarks such as ISO 16661:2015, ensuring that safety and performance parameters remain consistent with global best practices.

Another major advantage is the minimal infrastructure adaptation required for blending. DME can be introduced into existing LPG storage tanks, gas-controlled mixing or recirculation processes, without requiring extensive new infrastructure. This allows existing LPG storage and distribution networks to be utilised effectively. Even LPG tankers can be adapted to transport DME with minor safety modifications like additional safety valves.

From an industrial standpoint, adopting DME could also help stabilise sectors that heavily depend on LPG, like food processing, bak-

ery manufacturing, glass production, ceramics and aerosol manufacturing. It offers a cleaner alternative to coal or firewood. Similarly, small businesses — roadside eateries, restaurants, dhabs — depend on LPG for daily operations. Any disruption in LPG supply could impact employment, production and livelihoods across large segments of the economy. DME offers a pathway to protect these sectors from energy shocks.

While standalone use of DME may require some modification to burners and stoves to optimise thermal efficiency, research institutions have already begun developing compatible equipment designs. This means that technological barriers to adoption are relatively limited and manageable.

In strategic terms, DME adoption aligns with the broader concept of a 'methanol economy', which promotes alternative fuels derived from domestic resources. This approach places India within a broader national strategy aimed at building a more resilient and self-reliant energy system that Narendra Modi reiterated in Parliament on Monday.

The writer is founder-executive chairman, Balaji Animes



Flame excuse

concerns into regulation — these individuals operate at the intersection of 'tech' and 'ethics' and increasingly shape the trajectory of innovation.

When introducing iPad in 2010, Steve Jobs argued that the most transformative innovations emerge at the intersection of tech and the liberal arts. Apple's success, he suggested, was not a triumph of engineering but of design, psychology and storytelling. He himself cultivated a deep sense of design when attending calligraphy classes in college.

AI is making that intersection even more important. Machines excel at recognising and imitating knowledge. What they lack is judgement. Questions about fairness in algorithmic decision-making, accountability for automated systems or the ethical deployment of AI cannot be answered through maths alone. They require perspectives drawn from philosophy, history, sociology and law. As AI begins to influence hiring, lending, healthcare and governance, stakes of these questions become enormous.

Tension between scientific precision and human interpretation is hardly new. In a celebrated 1930 conversation in Berlin, Einstein and Targore debated the nature of truth. Einstein argued that scientific truth exists independently of human perception. Targore countered that truth ultimately emerges meaning through human consciousness and cultural understanding. Nearly a century later, AI's rise is reviving the debate in unexpected ways. Machines may process data efficiently, but the interpretation of meaning, values and purpose remains uniquely human. Balaji's own technological journey illustrates the importance of this bro-

ader perspective. Success of DPT such as Aadhaar, UPI and India Stack did not emerge from engineering excellence alone. It required regulatory imagination, policy design and the ability to build trust among citizens.

The next phase of India's AI journey will require a similarly interdisciplinary approach. Our education system, however, is built around high-stakes exams and narrow academic funnels that privilege technical disciplines while marginalising broader intellectual exploration. While this model produced technical excellence, it often discouraged curiosity across fields. In the age of AI, such rigidity becomes a disadvantage.

Students trained only in routine technical tasks risk seeing those skills automated. What endures is cognitive agility, the capacity to keep learning, think critically and move across domains. Advantage will shift from narrow specialisation to integration; connecting the dots between capability with human context. A product designer who understands behavioural psychology. A policy expert who grasps ML.

Ironically, rise of intelligent machines is increasing the value of uniquely human qualities — curiosity, creativity, empathy and storytelling. Real AI disruption is not technological alone but also intellectual.

The future will neither belong to STEM alone, nor solely to humanities. It will belong to those who can stand at the intersection, combining analytical rigour with human insight. In the age of intelligent machines, the most valuable skill may no longer be solving equations. It will be asking better questions than machines can.

The writer is former secretary, Got



THE SPEAKING TREE

Divine Feminine

SONAL SRIVASTAVA

We are enveloped by the Divine Feminine. In this cocoon of energy that shapes us, she is ever-present, emerging to perform our daily mundane tasks to the most creative work. The Divine Feminine is the substratum that shapes us and our creative streaks.

Scriptures say that for a sadhak, spiritual practitioner engaged in the worship of the Devi, there is never a dull moment. Not only is his journey full of exciting spiritual experiences — practitioners have reported seeing visions or hearing the sound of the unstruck sound — it also culminates in the most satisfactory ways. The sadhak is assured of the following muktis, forms of liberation, as a result of his lifelong sadhana: *salokya*, *samipya*, *svarupya* and *sajuyia*.

The Shakti and Vaishnav schools of thought offer different interpretations of the four forms of mukti. According to some, *salokya* means entering the deities' lok; the sojourn in the goddesses' lok ends only after the sadhak has earned through his spiritual practice, the *ajap*; however, the moment his merit is spent, the sadhak is back in the cycle of death and rebirth.

Samipya is when the sadhak develops a closeness with the deity. Swarupya means to attain the deity's form of the Devi. *Sajuyia* all forms of the Divine Feminine principle, ultimately leads to *sajuyia*, merging with the Divine Feminine, when the sadhak and worshipped become one and externalities dissolve. It is the ultimate union with the Being.

Success sadhak can access the same through higher states of consciousness by invoking the Devi through spiritual practices.



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

The Left Hand Of Darkness

Urusla K Le Guin

I'll make my report as if I told a story. For I was taught as a child on my homeworld that the best way to master of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as it rises above the waves, wears it and, worn by another, erodes and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is, you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them is false, and it is all one story.

On the 10th of the 44th diurnal of the Year 1469, which on the planet Winter in the nation Karhide was Odharhad Tuwa or the twenty-second day of the third month of spring in the Year One.

Chat Room

If Delululone Were a Person

Apologies the Edit. 'Consider the sentence, "King Donald" (March 23), Trump's second term is increasingly marred by concerns that go beyond policy disagreements. At stake is the health of American democracy itself. His pattern of erratic pronouncements, impulsive decision-making and frequent policy reversals has created an atmosphere of uncertainty that weakens institutional stability. In fact, the US has hardly been a beacon of democracy, attacking and bullying less powerful states for decades. Its civil rights movement and treatment of people of colour at home was appalling. Yet, attempts had been made to right some of these wrongs, and create a more level playing field at home. Nonetheless, the US must set its own house in order, instead of launching hostile, senseless wars. *Gregory Bernadeswars Mumbai*



A thought for today While you're saving your face, you're losing your ass

LYNDON B JOHNSON

Don Bows A Doosra

Is his pause the beginning of the end of the Iran conflict, or just the end of the beginning?

Trump's abrupt pivot on targeting Iran's power and energy infra, marked by a five-day pause, has landed like a pressure valve release, on a world bracing for escalation. The reaction was swift and telling. Oil price, the ever-nervous barometer of geopolitical anxiety, exhaled. Brent crude plunged over 7%, slipping to \$104 per barrel, while bruised equity markets appeared poised for a rebound after weeks of relentless sell-offs. The recent carnage, especially yesterday, with Sensex down 12.7%, and Nikkei shedding 10% over a month, may finally give way to a cautious rally. US stock futures were climbing at the time of writing this.

Any interruption, even a partial and uncertain one, in a conflict that seemed to be hurtling towards a wider conflagration is, undeniably, welcome. Trump's earlier ultimatum to Iran to reopen Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, had raised the spectre of a critical chokepoint snapping shut. Now, with Trump suggesting Tehran is open to a deal, a narrow diplomatic window may have emerged. That channel, however fragile, must be sustained and broadened. This is where intermediaries like European powers, and India, can step in, shoring up what remains an uncertain backchannel.

Uncertainty, in fact, is the defining feature of this moment. Trump's famously mercurial approach, leaves allies and adversaries alike guessing. The fog of war is thick with "unknown unknowns", to borrow a phrase from American strategic lore. Iran, for its part, denies any talks with Washington, though such denials may well be tactical. There are hints of possible fractures within Tehran, between its military establishment and diplomatic corps. Which faction ultimately shapes policy could determine the trajectory ahead.

Israel's silence adds another layer of ambiguity. Will it align with Washington's pause, or pursue its own strategic calculus? Meanwhile, Trump has conspicuously stopped short of ruling out strikes beyond energy targets, keeping the threat matrix alive.

Three paths now lie ahead. The most optimistic sees an extension of the pause, evolving into a broader de-escalation, contingent on Israeli cooperation. A middle path involves a partial American disengagement while Israel and Iran continue hostilities, containing the crisis but not resolving it. The worst case scenario envisions continued Iranian strikes in the Gulf, triggering wider regional involvement, and potentially dragging US back in with greater force. Remember, by the end of the five-day period, 4,500 US marines will reach the conflict zone. This moment, then, sits delicately between resolution and relapse. It may mark the beginning of the end of this conflict, or merely the end of its beginning.

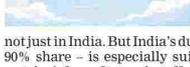
Flight Path

Costly jet fuel may drive up airfares briefly, but lack of competition is the real long-term risk to Indian aviation

India pulled its airfare cap yesterday, without a price surge. Big question now is, what happens next month, when jet fuel prices are revised. If US and Iran achieve "total resolution of hostilities", as Trump has hinted, price pain might not arise. Crude slid below \$100 within minutes of Trump's announcement yesterday, and if peace prevails, and Hormuz Strait reopens, it will trend back to its pre-war level. But if fighting resumes, all bets are off.

That's a problem for aviation, because jet fuel isn't seen as a "need" like diesel, or cooking gas. There's no strong political compulsion to cushion its price. Already, Singapore benchmark for jet fuel has touched \$225 once - about \$50 more than its peak at the start of Ukraine war. Although India is a major producer and exporter of jet fuel, that won't shield Indian airlines from fuel inflation. And since fuel is 40% of operating costs, no airline can absorb its impact for long.

In the worst case, then, flyers would pay a lot more everywhere - not just in India. But India's duopoly market - the Big Two hold over 90% share - is especially suited to price gouging. So, govt must watch airfares. It can also offer some respite by slashing taxes on jet fuel until war ends. More important, it must create conditions for at least one more strong airline to emerge. By govt's own admission, 11 airlines have folded up in the past 10 years. That suggests systemic issues. China's top three airlines together have less than 60% market share. In US, no airline has even 25% share. As the fastest growing aviation market, India should plug this gap. Jet fuel price is a short-term irritant, lack of competition is the real concern.



The Khaosan cool

An excursion in the time of war

Anupam Srivastava



By afternoon, the street ceases to exist. Merry-makers swallow it, with as much relish as their beers. A parade of performers - singing Adele to Dylan - traverses the decades with ease. Their audience - including bare-chested European and American men, with their women companions - sways from one end to another. Some have a bottle or a joint in hand. Bangkok, it is unlike any other place on earth. Loud, permissive, garish, yet civilised, not letting its contradictions show an obvious edge against the other. And just around midnight, when you think it would all end, new singers arrive, at the most frequented bars.

Elsewhere, the war grows more intense. The bombing of the school in Minab is a few weeks old. Iran's oil depots were bombed, and a Thai vessel struck. But the passionate conversation about the war in the forenoon, is over with lunch, and a glass of Chang draught, at Molly Bar. The air gets cooler as evening draws near; but Khaosan is feverish, and drenched in its sounds. The music of the eighties, nineties, and today is played by the performers, and several high-wattage concerts are held together. It matters, but not enough - not today. Away at Wat Khuhasavan Worawiharn by the canal, Monk Pramote interrupts his sermon on suffering, and says only unhappy people engage in war.

The air outside King's Cannabis is heavy, as young and old couples sit, on lounging chairs, with long columns of weed ash hanging from their joints. After Wen closes his grocery shop, a "gas station" comes up, where one can inhale laughing gas for a few Bahts, and have the laugh of one's life.

In this amorphous island of pleasure, signboards try to touch the heart, and make the sale. "Get a suit before WWIII", says the board outside Wall Street Tailor, an overnight tailor shop. A bar urges: "Stop worrying, start drinking." And a weed shop remarks thoughtfully: "Money can't buy you happiness, but it can buy you weed." The lure of Khaosan made Antonio - who is finally going home to Italy after two months - keep extending his stay.

It is a mystery that the party goes on every day with the same zest. Wen, who retires early for a "little quiet", says visitors keep renewing, but for regulars, it is just a job. "We do survive our jobs, don't we?"

Can Trump Bail Out Trump?

His Iran statement is designed to manage tension & reassure Americans. Deliberate ambiguity strengthens his position, but also heightens regional instability

Aydin Sezer



Columnist based in Ankara

Trump's statement yesterday, on talks with Iran, has sent a fresh tremor through the already volatile tectonic plates of West Asia - a region where pressure rarely dissipates, only shifts. His claim that "very good and productive talks have been held towards a full and definitive resolution of our hostilities in the Middle East," coupled with the announcement that military strikes on Iran's energy infra have been postponed for five days, appears, at first glance, to offer a fleeting pause in escalation. Yet, in the theatre of international relations, especially when dealing with a leader who treats unpredictability as a strategic instrument, the real story lies not in what is said, but in when, how, and why it is said.

To understand the weight of this announcement, one must rewind through rapid developments that preceded it. In the days leading up to Trump's statement, Washington had intensified its calls to NATO allies, as well as partners like Japan and South Korea, urging them to ensure that Strait of Hormuz remained open.

At the height of these tensions, reports surfaced alleging that Iran had launched an attack on the US UK military base at Diego Garcia, located nearly 4,000 kilometres away in Indian Ocean. Tehran's swift rebuttal, dismissing the incident as a "false flag operation", only deepened the fog of uncertainty. In a region where perception often rivals reality in strategic importance, such competing narratives are central to the unfolding drama.

Iran's allegation of a false flag operation introduces a critical dimension to the crisis: the erosion of trust not only between adversaries, but also among allies. Tensions between Washington and Tel Aviv have reportedly been simmering, with differing calculations about how far to push Iran, and when.

In this context, Trump's decision to personally seize the diplomatic initiative and position himself as the manager of the Hormuz crisis, is telling. It is less an act of de-escalation and more a projection of control - a signal that he intends to dictate the tempo of events.

The timing of the five-day postponement is equally significant. It comes as US has deployed approximately 4,500 to 5,000 troops to the region, a move widely interpreted as preparation for a potential ground operation.

Simultaneously, final hours of Trump's earlier 48-hour ultimatum to Tehran, to reopen Strait of Hormuz, were ticking away. In this charged atmosphere, the announcement of a temporary pause, suggests the construction of a fragile diplomatic bridge. Yet, the existence of such a bridge remains uncertain. In high-stakes negotiations, especially those conducted under the shadow of imminent force, appearances can be deceptive.

Indeed, Trump's approach bears all the hallmarks of classic coercive diplomacy. His language carefully blends optimism with menace. While invoking the possibility of a "complete and definitive solution", he also revives the archaic phrase: "War Department" - a rhetorical choice that evokes the spectre of military action.

The decision to postpone, rather than cancel, strikes on Iran's energy infra, is particularly telling. It reframes the time itself into a weapon, placing Iran under intense psychological and strategic pressure. Five days become

not a respite, but a countdown.

This strategy aligns with a broader doctrine of brinkmanship, in which the line between diplomacy and conflict is deliberately blurred. By keeping the military option firmly on the table - repositioned rather than removed - Washington ensures negotiations unfold under constant duress. The conditional nature of the postponement, explicitly tied to the "success" of the military option, reinforces this dynamic. Should discussions falter, escalation is not just possible; it is pre-announced.

At the same time, Trump's calibrated retreat carries implications beyond the immediate crisis. Domestically, it allows him to project the image of a leader committed to peace, particularly at a moment when rising energy prices are straining public sentiment internationally. It sends a clear message: reassurance to markets that catastrophe may yet be avoided, and that a stark warning to Tehran that the window



For compromise is rapidly closing.

This interplay of reassurance and threat, creates a carefully engineered ambiguity - one that strengthens Trump's negotiating position even as it heightens overall instability.

Perhaps the most unpredictable variable in this equation is Israel. Amid the controversy surrounding the Diego Garcia incident and the broader "false flag" debate, the stance of Israeli govt - and particularly the response of Netanyahu to this temporary diplomatic pause - will be pivotal. Israel's security calculations, often more immediate and less tolerant of ambiguity could either reinforce the current trajectory, or disrupt it entirely.

In the final analysis, Trump's statement is not a declaration of peace, but a manoeuvre designed to manage and manipulate tension. It is a strategic pause, not a resolution; a suspension of force, not its abandonment.

The metaphor is unmistakable: the raised fist has not been lowered, only held in mid-air. Whether it ultimately comes down as a strike, or opens into a handshake, will depend on the substance beneath the rhetoric - do these "productive" talks rest on genuine convergence or merely on the illusion of progress?

Source: The Economist (March 2026)

How America Bails Out Trump

US's underlying strengths are absorbing his erratic choices, including war on Iran. Other countries must work in packs, to hedge against Washington

Ruchir Sharma



Columnist based in New York

Last year America's prowess in AI more than offset the damaging economic effects from Trump's tariffs. Now, different strengths - including energy independence, its army of retail investors, and the dollar's safe-haven status - are saving US economy and markets from the worst effects of his Iran 'excursion'.

Since the first bombing run on Feb 26, gasoline prices have risen more than 20% in US, but much more steeply in many other countries. Natural gas prices have barely budged in US, but have surged in the rest of the world. Across Europe and Asia, the energy squeeze is leading to higher energy prices, factory shutdowns, shorter work weeks, school closures, cancelled flights, and a spike in distressed companies.

money go?" America's huge lead in AI is reinforcing this narrative.

Superpowerdom naturally breeds hubris. And no country has ever risen up to dominate the financial landscape to the extent US has in recent years. Its share of the widely followed global stock market indices has been mounting for decades, and now tops 60%, while its 25% share of global GDP is the same as it was in the early 1980s.

One mistake that the US market is its endless army of retail investors. They keep buying stocks at every opportunity, and that enthusiasm has not been dimmed by the grim headlines out of Iran. They have been net buyers every day since the war began, and as a result, US stock market has held up better than international markets. The Indian stock market has fallen twice as much as US market in March.

Their unwelcome heap criticism on Trump for a destabilising "war of choice", they don't hold US accountable in financial terms. They too keep buying US stocks, and there is hardly any "Trump risk premium" visible across US assets.

In fact, the dollar has appreciated this month against every other major currency in the world. This reversed a period of depreciation, which appeared to signal the end of a long dollar bull run.

So, rather perversely, the Iran adventure has at least temporarily rescued the dollar's role as a haven currency.

The mild domestic impact of the war suggests that, once again, Trump is getting bailed out by America's pre-existing strengths. The mighty dollar, the rise to dominance of US markets, and economic and technological, the achievement of energy independence - all have roots that predate him.

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war, on top of an ill-conceived tariff war, and, so far, largely getting away with it

Calvin & Hobbes



THREE HUNDRED BILLION GAZILLION.



OH, THANKS FOR THE HELP!



THAT'S A THREE, FOLLOWED BY 85 ZEROS.

Sacred space



Without deep listening and gentle loving speech, it is very difficult to move towards peace. Peace will only become a reality, when world leaders come to negotiations with the ability to hear the suffering at root of all conflicts.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Poetry Humanises Us In Violent Times

Sumit Paul

Universities around the world are shutting down humanities programmes, saying they don't lead directly to jobs. But education is not about employment; it's about nurturing thoughtful, ethical, and empathetic human beings. Poetry, philosophy, and music humanise us.

Poetry makes us think, and what makes us think guides us. A poem is a hazardous attempt at self-understanding. It's the deepest part of autobiography. Poetry is an ordinary language raised to the nth power. In any language, poetry is the most distilled form of that language.

What's stated in a poetic way always strikes deeper and more effectively. Poets are critics and analysts of life. They're also the chroniclers of lives and times. They're the mouthpieces of the emotions that we all have but are unable to

express. Poets do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. There's an English adage: A poet is a prophet. Poetry is indeed prophethood (Shayari/Payambari/Asr. Jami).

The way poetry motivates and inspires all of us, nothing else does. Read Rudyard Kipling's immortal poem. If, Recalling the poem makes us feel intrinsically good: "If you can call it the unforgetting minute. With sixty seconds' worth of distance run, Yours are the Earth and everything that's in it, And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!" Or read Patricia A Fleming's poem, What life should be.

The immortal lines of the great Persian poet Rudaki, which he uttered in ancient Persian, "De'az qeen min taftan na nafret un bigam/ Jaan az shaa ziyadan pahloo rigam" - how can I hate anyone

when everyone is my extension? When John Donne says, "Any man's death diminishes me because I'm involved in mankind." We think with the poet and empathise with all, our differences dissolve. Poetry makes us empathetic and humane.

In times of raging global wars, these lines assume much greater significance, and we must ask ourselves how we can hate anyone when we all are our extensions and brethren? Are war mongers listening? Are they bereft of compunction? Don't they feel the prick of conscience? Ponder what the Pakistani Urdu poet, Jinn Ehsa says, "Jang ki irni dardkar hai goar/ Insaan, tu aap ap se jang kar, " - I war cannot be arped at all/ You'd better fight with yourself. This fight is metaphorical; you fight with your conscience and get the reply that any war

is futile. After all, the voice of conscience is the voice from the Cosmos. Sahir Ludhianvi's poignant nazm, "Ae shareef insano, jang talai rote hai behtar hai." The poet says that war itself is a problem. How can it provide a solution to any problem?

Poetry is a revelation. It enables satori that dawns as an awakening. It is a pursuit of excellence and enlightenment. Poetry is not an ivory-tower production house. It's a manifesto of ground realities. Urdu and Persian poet, Nashtar 'Nishapuri' said, "Main raahoon na raahoon, fikra nahin/ Hoga meri shayari ka zika Kahin, " - no matter whether I live or not/ Someday somewhere, my poetry will be read.

Poetry is a balm for weary souls. In turbulent times, poets have a far greater role to play in assuaging humanity's frayed nerves and providing a definite direction for misguided humans.



Manufacturing push

Execution will be key to the success of industrial parks

The Union Cabinet's recent approval of the ₹33,660 crore BHAVYA (Bharat Audyogik Vikas Yojana) scheme to develop 100 plug-and-play industrial parks is a significant step towards strengthening India's manufacturing base, promoting job creation and improving facilitating business. Spread over about 33,000 acres and to be implemented in more than six years, these parks will provide pre-approved land, ready infrastructure, and integrated services, supported by robust single-window clearance systems and deregulation measures led by states. Financial assistance of up to ₹1 crore per acre will be provided for core infrastructure such as internal roads, underground utilities, drainage, and common facilities. Estimates suggest it could generate around 1.5 million direct jobs while strengthening domestic supply chains through cluster-based development.

Industrial nodes such as the Dhrola Special Investment Region, the Shendrabidkin Industrial Area, Vikram Udyogpuri, and the Greater Noida Industrial Area highlight the potential of plug-and-play ecosystems, where pre-approved land, integrated infrastructure and multimodal connectivity enable faster industrialisation. The National Industrial Corridor Development Corporation, which is implementing 20 projects across 13 states, has demonstrated how such models can attract both micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and large businesses by reducing entry barriers and improving project readiness. However, challenges such as construction delays and long completion timelines often raise costs and erode investor confidence.

Past experience also offers a cautionary lesson. Many industrial areas across states remain underutilised; for instance, some parks in Karnataka have only about 25 per cent of allotted units operational due to poor connectivity, weak governance, regulatory delays, and lack of demand. Similarly, several special economic zones and industrial corridors have struggled with various issues. Delays in synchronising internal infrastructure with external networks, such as highways, rail freight corridors, and ports, often leave parks operationally constrained. Even when land and basic facilities are ready, firms face bottlenecks in accessing reliable power, water, and digital connectivity, raising operating costs and reducing competitiveness. These gaps highlight that facilitating business is not merely about policy design but about consistent, on-ground implementation and coordination across agencies.

To succeed, BHAVYA must focus on execution. The scheme's emphasis on ensuring seamless last-mile connectivity through integration with PM Gati Shakti would reduce logistics costs and improve competitiveness. Reliable power, water, and digital infrastructure, supported by features such as underground utility corridors, must be guaranteed to ensure uninterrupted industrial operations. The scheme's challenge-based selection process must prioritise high-quality, investment-ready proposals, and promote sector-specific clustering in areas such as electronics, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and green manufacturing. Linking these parks with skilling ecosystems will be required so that employment generation is both inclusive and sustainable. In essence, BHAVYA emphasises ready ecosystems, integrated planning, and ease of doing business. This could help India deepen its manufacturing base, attract investment, and create jobs at scale. However, its success will depend on translating the ambitious design into efficient and functioning industrial ecosystems. It must also be highlighted that the development of industrial parks should not lead the government to lose focus on the rest of the country. An enabling business environment needs to be created across the land.

Protecting biodiversity

Strategy has improved, but outcomes remain uncertain

India recently submitted its Seventh National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity, offering a detailed stocktaking of its biodiversity commitments at a critical point in the runup to 2030. It is the first full progress assessment since the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was adopted in 2022. While India has built a wide-ranging institutional and digital-data architecture, marking a shift toward systematised governance and biodiversity conservation, several outcomes still remain uneven. India's updated National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2024-30), aligned with the Kunming-Montreal framework, includes a biodiversity-monitoring system with 142 indicators mapped to 23 national biodiversity targets (NBTs). On the ground, there has been visible progress in spatial planning and ecosystem monitoring under NBT-1. India's remote-sensing programme, led by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), under the National Natural Resources Management System, has created the capacity for large-scale spatial and temporal assessments of forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems, thereby supporting area-based conservation planning.

Environmental governance has also been streamlined through the PARIVESH (Pro-Active and Responsive facilitation by Interactive, Virtuous, and Environmental Single Window Hub) platform, a single-window facility based on the Geographic Information System, or GIS. This system integrates forest, wildlife, and environmental and coastal clearances while tracking compliance. More recently, the expansion to PARIVESH 2.0 reflects an attempt to combine technological efficiency with regulatory oversight. Data-driven approaches are also being put to use to achieve progress under NBT-2 on ecosystem restoration. For instance, ISRO's Space Applications Centre has mapped desertification and land degradation across multiple time periods. A pilot land degradation vulnerability assessment conducted across 30 districts, integrating socioeconomic, climate and soil data to identify high-risk areas, is helping restoration efforts. Despite the expansion of restoration programmes, ecological stress continues alongside recovery efforts.

A central concern is the gap between restoration and degradation. While India reports that 24.1 million hectares have been restored or are under restoration against a target of 26 million hectares, nearly 30 per cent of its geographical area continues to face land degradation. Conservation coverage also remains limited, with only a little over 5 per cent of India's land under formal protection. While flagship species such as big cats and rhinos show recovery, the report provides limited data on lesser-known species and other taxa, making it difficult to assess broader biodiversity health. Agricultural ecosystems remain a weak link. Although agroforestry now covers about 8.65 per cent of India's geographical area and trees outside forests contribute significantly to total tree cover, excessive pesticide use and nutrient runoff remain concerns. Data weaknesses, ranging from non-standardised field-to-field fragmentation collection systems, complicate the assessment of real progress. Besides, external pressures are intensifying. Climate-related events are affecting ecosystems, compounding existing stresses from land-use change, infrastructure expansion, and urbanisation. Much of this biodiversity loss occurs outside protected areas, where regulatory oversight is weaker. Taken together, it is clear that biodiversity loss increasingly intersects with climate risks, food security, and livelihoods. Thus, monitoring systems should be matched with regulatory enforcement while conservation activities should move beyond protected areas into agriculture, infrastructure, and urban planning.

India's hidden credit constraints

The credit problem may lie less in liquidity and more in how it is priced and regulated



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Even with abundant banking liquidity, banks continue to scramble for deposits. Overall, India's credit ecosystem remains small relative to the size of our economy.

All this reflects a combination of tax incentives, regulatory structures, and monetary conditions that suppress the attractiveness of fixed income and constrain credit expansion. In turn, this has wider implications for our asset markets and external balance.

Sizing the problem

Data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), and the World Bank suggests that India is a global outlier in the relative size of our credit markets. India's domestic credit, across banks, non-bank finance companies, and corporate bonds, stands at just 60 per cent of equity market capitalisation. The global average is 115 per cent.

Even in the United States, with its equity culture, credit is 95 per cent of market capitalisation. In countries like Japan, Germany, and South Korea, this ranges between 125 per cent and 195 per cent. China, with its investment-heavy growth model, is at a staggering 310 per cent.

India's shallow credit base reflects structural constraints in credit formation.

The pricing of fixed income

Low returns from fixed income weaken the foundations of our credit ecosystem.

First is the fiscal drag. Taxing interest income at marginal income tax rates makes it harder for post-tax returns to clear the expected inflation hurdle. In recent times, this has sparked a migration of household savings away from fixed income into equities. This, in turn, reduces the pool of long-term savings that underpin credit markets.

Second is the impact of monetary intervention. For FY26, the RBI will conduct record open market operation (OMO) bond purchases of ₹8 trillion, effectively absorbing 77 per cent of net central government bond supply through secondary market operations. While intended to inject liquidity and support growth, this anchors risk-free rates below where the market would otherwise clear the deficit.

Economists argue that cooling consumer price

inflation justifies lower interest rates. However, in any market economy, prices should ultimately be determined by supply and demand. When rates are influenced by large-scale interventions, their signalling role becomes less clear.

All this results in fixed-income returns being seen as insufficient compensation for inflation and duration risk.

Regulatory constraints

Overlaying this are banking regulatory requirements such as the liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) and the net stable funding ratio (NSFR). These are global best-practice standards to ensure the resilience of banks. Their system-wide effects merit attention.

LCR requires banks to hold high-quality liquid assets (HQLA) to cover a 30-day "stress" outflow. Regulations prescribe how flight risk is computed. Deposits over 30 days have zero imputed outflow. In contrast, "sticky" retail deposits over 30 days may carry a 75 per cent runoff, while "volatile" wholesale deposits may carry a 40 per cent outflow.

To manage LCR, banks prioritise term deposits, followed by retail demand deposits, with wholesale short-term deposits being a last resort. Any adverse shift in the mix forces banks to hold more HQLA, in turn requiring additional deposits. Similarly, NSFR demands "reliable stable funding", or deposits exceeding one year to back long-term lending. If there is insufficient growth in long-term deposits, long-term lending will be curtailed.

The deposit paradox

System-wide, deposits are created by bank lending, government spending funded by banks, or foreign exchange (FX) inflows. They are drained by the repayment of bank loans, an increase in currency in circulation (CIC), or FX outflows.

While loans create their own deposits, the LCR burden is neutralised only by term deposits. As the deposit mix tilts toward shorter-term or less stable categories, banks must hold more HQLA, necessitating additional funding.



POLICY IN PRACTICE
ANANTH NARAYAN

War & emerging geopolitical faultlines

The unfolding United States-Iran (US-Iran) war has underscored a familiar but often underappreciated truth in international politics: When military objectives collide with structural economic dependencies, conflicts rarely remain confined to their original intent. What began on February 28 as a calibrated US-Israeli effort at regime decapitation and counter-proliferation has, within weeks, morphed into a far more consequential struggle over the sinews of the global energy order.

This transformation is neither accidental nor surprising. In a region where hydrocarbons are both the foundation of state power and the currency of global interdependence, the targeting of energy infrastructure represents a logical, if deeply destabilising, extension of strategic competition. By mid-March, the Persian Gulf's networks of oil and gas had effectively become the central theatre of conflict, with both sides signalling that economic coercion is now as vital as military dominance. Though US President Donald Trump has decided to "postpone any and all strikes against Iranian power plants and energy infrastructure" for five days, citing "productive conversations" as the rationale, the underlying reality of the conflict remains: there is still no certainty about the course of this conflict, especially as Iran is interpreting it as a vindication of its strategy of effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz, thereby throwing the global economy in turmoil.

The speed of escalation has been striking. Iran's decision to shut off the Strait of Hormuz on March 1 was not merely an act of retaliation; it was a calculated demonstration of its enduring capacity to disrupt the global commons. Accounting for roughly a fifth of the global flows of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), Hormuz remains the ultimate pressure point in the international energy system. Tehran's intent to weaponise this chokepoint, through tanker interdictions, GPS (global positioning system) disruption, and explicit threats, has forced a reckoning far beyond the region.

Iran's subsequent strike on South Pars, followed by Iran's rapid retaliation against Qatar's Ras Laffan complex, illustrates the emerging logic of reciprocal vulnerability. These are not symbolic targets; they are

critical nodes in the global energy architecture. The damage inflicted, particularly on LNG infrastructure, has exposed the fragility of supply chains that underpin economic stability from Europe to East Asia. Parallel strikes across the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and beyond reinforce the point: The conflict has expanded horizontally, enveloping the Gulf's entire export ecosystem.

What is particularly noteworthy is the widening aperture of targeting. Critical infrastructure — from ports and desalination plants to data centres and airports — has now entered the conflict matrix. This reflects a broader shift in contemporary warfare, where the distinction between civilian and military assets is increasingly blurred. In the Gulf context, where economic infrastructure is deeply integrated, such actions amplify both immediate humanitarian risks and long-term developmental setbacks.

The economic consequences, as expected, have been swift and severe. Energy markets, already operating in tight conditions, have reacted with volatility. Price spikes, supply disruptions, and cascading effects across sectors, from aviation to agriculture, underscore how regional instability can trigger systemic global shocks. The International Energy Agency's stark warning about energy security captures the scale of the challenge, but it also points to a deeper structural issue: The world's continued dependence on a region that remains geopolitically brittle.

Geopolitically, the conflict is accelerating trends that were already underway. Gulf states, long positioned as pillars of stability in global energy markets, now find themselves directly exposed. Their strategic calculus is likely to evolve, balancing security partnerships with the imperative of economic survival. This could translate into greater hedging behaviour, including deeper engagement with alternative power centres such as China and Russia.

At the same time, Iran's use of relatively low-cost, high-impact capabilities highlights the growing efficacy of asymmetric strategies. By raising the costs of intervention for technologically superior adversaries, Tehran

Deposits from individuals have reduced from 60 per cent of all deposits 10 years ago to 52 per cent now, with no compensatory shift in the extent of term deposits. Alongside, any net FX outflows and CIC spikes drain deposits, and strain LCR management. While the ratio of CIC to deposits has remained under control, there have been FX outflows in recent years.

All this explains the current scramble for deposits, despite ample banking liquidity.

There is also a "fillary of composition" here. LCR and NSFR address the idiosyncratic risks of a bank run. System-wide, a run usually reshuffles deposits between banks. While buffers enhance the resilience of individual banks, they overcompensate at an aggregate level, constraining the system-wide ability to lend.

External spillovers

With post-tax returns from fixed income struggling to beat inflation expectations, domestic flows into equities have risen. In recent times, this flow has outstripped fresh equity issuance, leading to pockets of overvaluation. This creates an environment conducive for foreign investors to pare exposure, likely contributing to the recent moderation in net foreign investment.

Low domestic interest rates also compress the dollar-ruppee forward premium. Especially during times of currency volatility, this encourages the hedging of imports and rupee investments, discourages the hedging of exports, and induces domestic savers to invest overseas. These add pressure on the rupee while further reducing domestic deposits.

The path forward

Addressing these interconnected issues requires a calibrated and multi-pronged approach. First, a gradual move towards a more asset-agnostic, savings-friendly taxation framework would allow risk-return considerations, rather than tax differentials, to guide asset allocation. This would help stabilise fixed-income flows, support balanced asset valuations, and create room for consistent foreign investments across asset classes.

Second, on LCR and NSFR, we must remain aligned with global best practices but avoid tightening beyond them. Additional buffers, while prudent in isolation, aggregate to a systemic burden that stifles the economy they aim to protect.

Third, monetary and currency interventions must be assessed not only for their immediate objectives, but also for their higher-order effects on savings behaviour, asset markets, and financial intermediation. This is especially crucial if the focus of intervention fluctuates periodically between currency stability and interest rate anchoring.

India's financial system has achieved significant depth in equity markets. The next phase of development requires a comparable strengthening of credit markets across banking and corporate bonds.

Without this, the paradox of liquidity without sufficient credit will likely persist.

The writer is a former whole-time member, Sebi. The views are personal.



HARSH V PANT

is reshaping the deterrence equation. The potential involvement of regional proxies, particularly in the Red Sea, further complicates the operational landscape and risks broadening the conflict's geographic scope.

For major powers, the implications are profound. China's concerns on energy security will inevitably sharpen, potentially driving a more assertive role in safeguarding supply line boundaries, signalling the intent to impose systemic costs on the international economy. It also exposes the limits of unilateral power in managing interconnected global systems.

The central question now is not simply how the conflict will end but what precedents it will set. By making energy and critical infrastructure the battlefield, the war has globalised what began as a bilateral strike. It is testing alliances, inflating economic pain worldwide, and signalling a new era where Gulf hydrocarbons are both weapon and target. The normalisation of infrastructure targeting, the weaponisation of chokepoints, and the deepening of multipolar alignments all point toward a more fragmented and volatile order. In that sense, the 2026 Iran war is not merely a regional confrontation but a defining moment in the evolution of 21st century geopolitics — where energy is both the instrument and the battleground of power.

The author is vice-president for studies and foreign policy, Observer Research Foundation

US engagement in the Indian Ocean



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

Conflict in West Asia and the disruption of essential energy supplies underscore the critical role of the sea lanes passing through the Indian Ocean region (IOR) and the Persian Gulf. Vivek Mishra's book promises to discuss the trajectory of dominance, diffusion and adaptation of the United States (US) maritime strategy especially focused on the IOR in the post-Cold War period.

The major premise of the book is that

by the early 1960s, "Britain's ability and political will to either sustain its dominance in the Indian Ocean or to continue conducting traditional maritime patrols in the region had waned." This was followed by increased American presence in the region. From initial ignorance, the US approach towards the Indian Ocean became one of active presence. The end of the Cold War also paved the way for US attention toward the IOR as the sole challenger to its power. The Soviet Union, had ceased to exist. Mr Mishra writes that the post-Cold War period "...marked a strategic consolidation of US influence — shifting its posture from episodic engagement to sustained regional dominance."

This period also witnessed a change in Washington's goals vis-à-vis its role in the IOR. Now it moved to "crisis response humanitarian relief, multinational joint naval exercises, nation-

building, maritime security, promoting US interests abroad etc." Increasing trade relations between the US and Asian nations also warranted Washington's "cautious and compelling involvement" in the IOR. Further, the end of the Cold War brought about a shift in the kind of threats for the US at the seas, piracy and terrorism being two most pertinent. These threats have also challenged the US to seek a cooperative and collaborative approach.

Thus, there has been a rise in bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the US navy and the navies of other Indian Ocean littoral states such as India, Pakistan and Australia. The US has also been working with the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan, the other littoral states in the Indian Ocean, where it has military bases. The author singles

out India as one of the most prominent engagements. "India and the United States have institutionalised cooperation both bilaterally and through multilateral platforms such as the Quad, where the sharing of real-time information and technology is a core metric of operational synergy," Mr Mishra writes. These efforts aim to uphold a free, open and inclusive regional order — one that resists domination by any single power.

Globalisation has also called for increasing cooperation at multiple levels. The author argues, "Supply chains and critical technologies, such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology, are becoming increasingly important to emerging nations in the IOR. Therefore, building strong partnerships and democratic linkages in the Indian Ocean will enable the US to maintain its technological leadership and influence."

region presents a strategic challenge for the US, necessitating a collaborative, multilateral approach that combines military and economic strategy," Mr Mishra says. He adds, "For the US, India is the only country that is capable of countering Chinese provocations while maintaining a favourable balance in the Indian Ocean." The rise in the capacity and reach of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has also pushed the US to renew its focus towards the IOR. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its "energy strategy is likely to arrive more [US] engagement with the Indian Ocean."

Though the book paints a detailed picture of US measures and policies towards the IOR during and after the Cold War, multiple aspects remain unexplained and unexplored. Mr Mishra does hint at



American Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean: Dominance, Diffusion, Adaptation by Vivek Mishra
Published by Routledge
202 pages | ₹2,125

the need and future role of the Quad without fully engaging with it. The book is a useful addition to the existing literature, but it is repetitive. It provides a lot of data and analysis but most of the book is dedicated to arguments and developments that occurred till 2010. Much has happened worldwide and significantly new where Gulf hydrocarbons are both weapon and target. The normalisation of infrastructure targeting, the weaponisation of chokepoints, and the deepening of multipolar alignments all point toward a more fragmented and volatile order. In that sense, the 2026 Iran war is not merely a regional confrontation but a defining moment in the evolution of 21st century geopolitics — where energy is both the instrument and the battleground of power.

The reviewer is associate professor, OP Jindal Global University



Wars can be prevented just as surely as they can be provoked, and we who fail to prevent them must share the guilt for the dead

Omar Bradley

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

TELANGANA'S BALANCE BETWEEN WELFARE & INFRA RESTS ON ROSY ESTIMATES

TELANGANA has proposed a delicate equilibrium that many other states are trying to achieve—between increased support for education, health and welfare on one hand and long-term asset creation on the other. The state's ₹3.24-lakh-crore budget for 2026-27 includes an allocation of ₹2,34,406 crore for revenue expenditure and ₹47,267 crore for capital spend. This split signals the intent to address social needs without neglecting infrastructure. Two fresh proposals are genuinely progressive: the extension of mid-day meals to intermediate students and Indramma, a scheme providing ₹5-lakh life insurance cover to 1.15 crore families. The allocation for education, at 8.2 percent of the total outlay, is up 15 percent over 2025-26, and health gets 10.4 percent more. Despite the increases, it must be noted that health and education in the state suffer from poor infrastructure. New schools, upgraded hospitals, modern laboratories and digital classrooms require far higher capital spending.

A closer look at the numbers offers another caution. The budget estimate of a ₹3.04-lakh-crore outlay in 2025-26 has come down to ₹2.81 lakh crore in the revised estimate—a shrinkage of about 8 percent. The most glaring cut was in central grants-in-aid, halved from the BE of ₹22,782 crore to the RE of ₹11,161 crore, exposing over-optimistic assumptions about devolution from New Delhi. Yet, a similar buoyancy marks some assumptions for 2026-27. State GST alone is budgeted to yield over ₹52,000 crore, while sales taxes and excise form another large chunk. These are vulnerable to headline inflation, which could rise sharply if the West Asia crisis persists. A revenue surplus of ₹6,857 crore has been projected, a cushion that's paper-thin.

The state plans to raise roughly ₹60,000 crore in fresh debt, taking the cumulative public debt beyond ₹5.62 lakh crore (without off-budget borrowings); the fiscal deficit is set to climb to ₹58,458 crore. Given that the outstanding guarantees stand at ₹3.01 lakh crore, even if 10 percent is invoked, another ₹30,000 crore would be added to the deficit. Equally risky is the expectation of central grants-in-aid jumping to over ₹24,000 crore.

The core weakness is the dwindling share of the state's own revenues. Telangana must focus on widening its tax base, improving compliance and promoting non-tax revenues. Only then can the state have a better defence to external shocks and create genuine fiscal space for infrastructure upgrades that health and education desperately need.

SECURITY NET IN SIMILIPAL CAN'T BE ALLOWED TO SLIP

THE recent seizure of a melanistic tiger's skin does not augur well for Odisha's Similipal Tiger Reserve for two reasons. One, Similipal is the only place in the world where big cats with such a genetic mutation are found, and two, it is a low-density tiger habitat. This was the second such seizure in 15 months, which means poaching is thriving in the national park despite heightened surveillance. In the latest case, a forest department team seized the hide from a group trying to sell it. Preliminary investigation shows the tiger was killed about a month back. Nine persons have been arrested and efforts are on to establish the poachers' modus operandi. Of the nine tiger deaths reported in Odisha over the last four years, most were from the larger Similipal landscape.

Similipal's tigers have a chequered history. From a stable population in the 1990s, they witnessed a near-collapse in the mid-2000s when Maoist activities peaked. Despite efforts, the national park remained a low-density habitat and its in-bred population was always marked as vulnerable. That's why the National Tiger Conservation Authority suggested supplementation to strengthen the gene pool and two tigers were brought in from the Tadoba-Andhari reserve in Maharashtra in 2024. According to last year's census, Similipal was home to 32 tigers, 19 of which were pseudo-melanistic in nature. One of the largest and oldest tiger reserves in the country, Similipal is spread over 2,745 sq km and its landscape poses a stiff challenge for the park's managers. The reserve's porous boundary dotted with human habitations has always attracted poachers, who use the area's forest-dependent population to do their bidding. Their illegal network in the habitat is also marked by elephant and leopard poaching.

Over the last couple of years, the government has armed the reserve's managers with increased surveillance support. Intrusion has been detected and firearms seized with the help of some of the 220 AI-enabled cameras installed. But clearly, gaps exist in the security corridor. The future of Odisha's tigers is heavily dependent on Similipal, as it holds the state's entire population. That's why the government must spare no effort in keeping its big cats together and safe.

QUICK TAKE

USE FUNDS, DEVISE SOLUTION

THE government on Monday indirectly admitted its failure in installing effective air purification systems. It informed Parliament that the Delhi and Mumbai IITs had found the two smog towers in Delhi's Connaught Place and Anand Vihar, installed at a cost of ₹35.59 crore, only marginally effective in guzzling particulate matter, that too within a 400-metre radius. This comes weeks after a parliamentary committee flagged underuse of budgeted funds by the ministry of environment in 2024-25 (72 percent) and 2025-26 (68 percent up to January 31), with some large gaps, ironically, in the ministry's pollution control scheme. This is not a fight we can give up on—it's time to use the allocation to its fullest extent and ask the smartest brains to devise longer-term solutions.

As you read this, there are over 120 armed conflicts and anything between 11 and 30 full-scale wars on around the world, depending on whom you ask. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, we are living amid the highest number of active conflicts since the Second World War.

While major ones like the tussle between Ukraine and Russia are remembered the most (though it now seems to be relegated to the status of 'business as usual' on yet another war day), the latest one to hit on television and smart-phone screens is the three-week US-Israel-Iran conflict. The fact is that there is a war on in our lives.

Wars do not stay restricted to those who wage it. In today's inter-connected global order, it touches all of us. That touch can be as lethal as an intercontinental ballistic missile—named differently and fancily by every nation to suit the ego of its warriors—that lands at your doorstep, if not on you. Alternatively, the daily heavy touch of the gas shortage in India, a petroleum shortage tomorrow or, for that matter, shortage of every kind of energy we have deemed fit to be of critical use in our lives the day after tomorrow.

Wars cause scarcity. They hike up prices for the poor. They create hardship for the deprived and the distant. The only ones who seem to love a war are those rich enough to face the brunt of everything that can be thrown at their faces. To that extent, wars are for the rich and most certainly not for the poor.

Let me then think out the utility of a war. It helps no one. Yet it tends to soothe some egos. And at the same times, it tends to be as barbaric as we were once upon a time, before civilised society set up laws and rules to govern ourselves. Wars destroy every covenant of peace that has been decided upon by a society of people. Wars ruffian nations, regions and the world at large. Fortunately, the planet and the cosmos are not really concerned, as they know we are all too small in their scheme of things.

Modern society has put together two notions. One is called the 'act of war' and the other the 'act of god'. Nothing ruins living society more than these two phrases. Under an act of war status, anything goes. Everything is fair in war and love. And therefore everything goes. As we see today, every rule is binned and every covenant shredded.

The cost of war is inevitably passed on to economic, social and political arenas. Yet we seem all too ready to start one often, erasing the painstaking gains of civilisation

WHEN THE WAR COMES TO HAUNT EVERY CONSUMER

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand guru and Founder, Harish Bijoore Consults Inc.



MANDAR PADHAR

Innocent children are killed, civilians injured, medical facilities destroyed, social, political, economic and religious infrastructure destroyed at will. That is the nature of war. And this current war in our lives is no different.

As both sides of the active warring parties test out the efficacy of their stockpiles of arms and exhaust their inventories on a first-in-first-out basis, arms suppliers are in a state of glee. A glee they will not show overtly. More the war, greater the fear and higher the profit. The stock prices of those involved in war are up as of now, as a peek into the names of everyone involved in the defence sector would

show. As an aside, I wonder why it is called the defence sector at all. It sure is the offence sector today.

Therefore, there are beneficiaries of war just as there are those who suffer from its direct and collateral damages. To an extent, if one is to carefully analyse the deeper meaning and intent in it all, the suppliers of drones, bombs and missiles are licking their lips in anticipation as they are watching the war unfold on their smart-phones. Those who fuel the war economy are excited.

And then there are those who suffer the direct hits of these missiles. There are civilians and military personnel who lose their lives. There are schools and hospitals and churches and

BRINGING BAHU INTO THE BUSINESS

TULSI JAYAKUMAR

Professor, economics & policy, and Executive Director, Centre for Family Business & Entrepreneurship, Bharosa's SPBMR

A recent proposal to the Securities and Exchange Board to recognise daughters-in-law as 'relatives' within promoter groups—led by promoter families themselves—for disclosure and succession planning may signal an important shift in women's roles in India's family businesses. It may be finally acknowledged that women's roles in business families can no longer remain informal, invisible or assumed.

This comes at a time when India's family-managed businesses, contributing over 70 percent of the country's GDP, are already undergoing change. For decades, they operated on an unspoken compact: ownership remained within the family, authority rested with patriarchs, and women, though central to the family remained at the periphery—shaping values, resolving conflicts and preserving legacy, but rarely part of strategic decision-making.

That compact is beginning to loosen. Across the country, women from business families are increasingly stepping into visible leadership roles. Yet, to see this as merely a matter of regulatory inclusion, or of "giving women a seat at the table", is to miss the deeper shift underway. Laws and regulations can redefine who is formally recognised, but they cannot, by themselves, determine who is trusted, heard or empowered. The real change lies not in structures or policies, but in mindsets—not just within firms, but within families, and critically, among women themselves.

The traditional architecture of Indian family firms reflected deeply gendered expectations. Sons were groomed to take over, while daughters—no matter how capable—were prepared for transition into other families. Women were often steered toward "safe" roles such as philanthropy, while core business decisions remained an inherited male privilege. That script is now being rewritten by three forces.

The first is education and exposure. Today's daughters return to family businesses with global degrees, corporate experience and a strong sense of professional identity. They are not looking for token roles, but want to contribute meaningfully.

The second is legal change. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, by granting daughters equal coparcenary rights, has altered the economic founda-

tions of family enterprises. If Sebi recognises daughters-in-law as relatives, it would extend this logic further, recognising that women entering the family through marriage also play a role in ownership, governance and continuity. The third is the market itself. Investors, partners and consumers increasingly expect professionalism, transparency and diversity. Family businesses that fail to tap into their full talent pool risk not just reputational costs, but competitive disadvantage.



Promoter families have asked Sebi to include daughters in law as relatives for disclosure and succession planning. Apart from company regulations, family mindsets need to change to hand women the reins. Research shows growth-oriented families handle such transition better

Despite these structural shifts, progress remains uneven. The difference comes down to family mindsets. Business families that operate with a fixed mindset—where leadership is linked to gender, birth order or tradition—may formally recognise daughters or daughters-in-law, but not trust them fully. By contrast, families with a growth mindset see leadership as something that can be developed, demonstrated and earned, and educate successors on capability rather than convention.

Our recent research on women in family businesses reinforces this. Across contexts, what shapes women's active involvement is not geography or industry, but the family's mindset.

Families with a fixed mindset tend to create subtle but powerful barriers, while those with a growth mindset enable women's participation through three mechanisms: promoting meritocracy, involving women early in the business and fostering visible role models.

This is where the limits of regulation become evident. Sebi can recognise daughters-in-law as part of the promoter group, but it cannot ensure they are part of the decision-making group. That change depends on mindset. Another crucial dimension is agency. Many women in family businesses still face a "legitimacy gap", where they have to establish their authority repeatedly. Women who see themselves as decision-makers are better able to claim and exercise leadership.

Some family businesses are recognising this. Still, it would be unrealistic to suggest that the transition is complete. Access remains uneven, particularly outside large, urban families. Social expectations around marriage and caregiving continue to interrupt careers. And the pipeline of women ready for top roles remains limited not because of a lack of ability, but because of years of constrained opportunity.

To bring about meaningful change, intentionality has to be present—embedded in governance structures. Transparent criteria for entry, role clarity and performance evaluation can reduce ambiguity and bias. Families must also create real opportunities for women to lead, decide, take risks and be accountable. Without this, inclusion remains superficial. And finally, they must make role models visible. Celebrating women leaders within the family can shift attitudes far more effectively than a formal policy.

The rise of women in India's family businesses is not just about breaking barriers. It is about rethinking long-held assumptions about how leadership is defined and what legitimacy looks like. Regulation can open the door. But it is mindset that determines who walks through it and who gets to stay.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Dangerous ally

Ref: *The Gulf and illusion of its proxy security* (Mar 23). By now the Gulf states must have realised the maxim that while it may be dangerous to be America's enemy, it is fatal to be its friend. With more US allies coming to terms with the hard truth, we can expect the security of West Asia to be reshaped. As the fire of insecurity rages, India must tread carefully to promote the region's stability without getting its fingers burnt.

K S Mohana Murugan, Chennai

Drug prices

Ref: *Rising cost of war* (Mar 21). At a time drug costs are rising, we must heed what Swati Malhi had pointed out: the vast differences between wholesale and retail prices of medicines that a parliamentary committee had reported in 2025. Citizens, in particular senior citizens, are curious to know why the government has taken no serious cognisance of such unjustifiable differences in essentials.

TM Uday Shankar, Hyderabad

Longevity test

Ref: *Modi longest-serving elected head* (Mar 23). This milestone marks a significant moment in India's post-independence political history. Undoubtedly, such longevity signifies sustained electoral mandates, administrative experience and political stability. However, the duration's true significance lies in its outcomes. Its real measure must be the extent to which it improves the everyday lives of citizens.

Vidyaagar Reddy Kethiari, Warangal

Regulate route

Ref: *Pilgrims' rush in first two months* (Mar 23). Chardham pilgrimage is seeing unprecedented increase year after year. It is high time this pilgrimage route is tightly regulated. A system of preference for old people and first-time visitors can also be instituted. Most importantly, the maximum numbers of visitors every month should be capped.

VH Subramoney, Bengaluru

Chickening out

Ref: *Trump threatens* (Mar 23). The US President should be reminded of a philosophical reply to life's troubles: this too shall pass. After all, who is bothered about his threats? Trump always wants to do something not other US President has done before and then chickens out if he is stood up to.

Phillip Alexander, email

SC ruling expands idea of motherhood

By striking down a rule that denied maternity leave to women who adopted children older than three months, the Supreme Court has corrected a legal wrong and endorsed a more inclusive idea of parenthood. The rule was part of the Code on Social Security, 2020, which was derived from the Maternity Benefits Act. A bench of Justice J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan ruled that adoptive mothers are eligible for paid maternity leave for 12 weeks, just as natural mothers, irrespective of the child's age. The distinction the rule made between natural and adoptive mothers did not have a rationale and arose from a sense that adoption could not be equated with natural motherhood. The Court rejected this prejudiced view.

It asserted that motherhood cannot be defined solely on biological terms. A mother's emotional requirements and responses cannot be differentiated based on the age of the adopted child. The earlier restrictions were imposed by ignoring this reality. For an adopted child in a new environment, the physical proximity and care of her mother are essential. As the petitioner, Hamsaanandini Nanduri, contended, the process of adoption often takes more than three months, making the maternity leave provision inaccessible for most of the mothers. While this is a practical problem, the larger issue entails what adoption means to the parents and how it has been recognised by law. The government told the Court that once a child was three months old, there was no "intensive dependency" on the mother as earlier, making it easier for her to resume work. This view was considered narrow and restrictive by the Court. The child needs nurturing, care, and emotional bonding throughout their formative years. Maternity leave is not the employer's concession; it is the employee's and her child's right. With the ruling, the apex court has expanded the jurisprudence of women's rights and equality in all situations.

The Court has also made a case for an extended paternity leave regime. It noted that the early months of a child's life are irreplaceable and a father's absence during this crucial period may have lasting developmental consequences. Observing that 15 days of paternity leave for government employees is inadequate, the Court said the government may consider legislation recognising paternity leave as a social security benefit. The judgment is significant for its view on the equal status of maternity, whether natural or adoptive, and the gender-neutral idea of parenting, which has yet to gain full legal recognition.

The end of discriminatory maternity leave rules marks equal legal recognition for adoptive mothers

Custodial torture and the missing law

Nearly four decades after the sensational Rashed custodial death case, in which a young advocate was abducted, tortured, and killed, and the then Home Minister was arraigned before eventually being acquitted, Karnataka continues to grapple with the same stain: deaths inside police custody. The latest flashpoint is the death of 50-year-old Kantharaj at Huliyaru police station in Tumakuru, the district to which Home Minister G Parameshwara belongs. He was picked up by plainclothesmen during Ugadi festivities on suspicion of gambling. Kantharaj's family alleges he was brutally assaulted; the police attribute his death to a cardiac episode. He was shifted to a nearby hospital, where he was declared "brought dead". As per established protocol, the case has been handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department, and a judicial inquiry will follow. Yet, whether the cause is medical or custodial torture, the deeper issue remains unchanged: citizens are dying in custody.

This points to systemic failure rather than isolated excess. Torture endures because policing remains confession-centric. India's severe shortage of forensic experts leaves investigators overly reliant on extracting admissions rather than building evidence. Technological safeguards are patchy; closed-circuit television cameras, mandated by the Supreme Court, are often non-functional or poorly maintained, conveniently failing at critical moments. Meanwhile, conviction rates in custodial death cases remain abysmally low, fostering a culture of impunity. When prosecutions collapse, and witnesses turn hostile, deterrence evaporates. Existing safeguards, though robust on paper, suffer in execution. Judicial inquiries, National Human Rights Commission reporting, and videographed post-mortems are mandatory, but delays and witness inconsistencies dilute their impact. Policing itself lacks functional specialisation, the same officer juggles law and order duties with criminal investigation, leaving little room for professional evidence-gathering. Crucially, India lacks a standalone law that defines and criminalises custodial torture, despite long-standing international commitments. While India signed the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) in 1997, the country has yet to ratify it.

Reform, therefore, must move beyond ritualistic responses. Accountability for non-functional cameras cannot stop at the station house officer; it must extend to supervisory ranks—Superintendents of Police and Deputy Commissioners—with consequences for lapses. The long-pending need for a specific anti-torture law must be addressed, codifying liability and closing legal ambiguities. Courts must adopt a sterner posture, ensuring swift trials and exemplary punishment. This is not merely about an individual official's misconduct but of institutional lapse. Only when India decisively shifts from coercion to scientific investigation, backed by robust anti-torture laws and hierarchical accountability, will custodial torture become history.

Reform must entail an exclusive anti-torture legal framework and a shift to scientific evidence gathering

The conflict's costs are mounting. India should leverage its strategic neutrality for dialogue and de-escalation

GURUCHARAN GOLLERKERI

The West Asia conflict is no longer a distant war; it is a global destabiliser. What began as a strategic confrontation has drifted into something dangerous—an open-ended conflict—where civilian lives and critical infrastructure have become routine targets. There can be no winners in this war. It is a negative-sum game in which every participant, and the world at large, is losing. It is time to say, unequivocally: enough.

Unlike conventional conflicts, this war destroys value across economic, political, and human dimensions, leaving every actor worse off. The United States, already grappling with fiscal pressures, is committing billions to military deployments. Israel, despite its military superiority, faces sustained security threats and economic disruption. Iran, already in a deep economic crisis, is further weakened. The Gulf states confront rising insecurity and capital flight risks. And beyond the region, the global economy absorbs the resulting energy shockwaves.

The economic consequences are immediate and measurable. Energy markets, sensitive to geopolitical instability, have shown sustained upward price volatility, with even a \$10-15 per barrel increase transmitting quickly into inflation, fiscal stress, and reduced household purchasing power across energy-importing economies. For India, which imports nearly 85% of its crude oil, such increases can widen the current account deficit by an estimated 0.3-0.4% of GDP.

The International Monetary Fund has repeatedly warned that geopolitical fragmentation is a structural driver of persistent inflation. We are thus confronted with the spectre of stagflation, a toxic combination of low growth and high inflation. Supply chains, already fragile after the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, are under renewed strain. Even moderate disruptions to energy flows from the Gulf can shave off meaningful portions of global GDP growth. For economies like India, which have worked hard to stabilise macroeconomic fundamentals, such external shocks are profoundly destabilising.

Yet the economic costs, severe as they are, are pale in comparison to the human costs. Wars of this nature do not remain confined to battlefields; they spill into

cities, homes, and everyday life. Civilian casualties mount, infrastructure is destroyed, and entire communities are displaced. The long-term consequences—psychological trauma, disrupted education, and lost livelihoods—create generational scars. As the United Nations has repeatedly noted, civilians account for the overwhelming majority of casualties in modern conflicts.

Social cohesion within affected societies frays. Polarisation deepens, dissent is often curtailed in the name of national security, and democratic spaces shrink. Diaspora communities experience heightened tensions, sometimes spilling into social unrest far from the conflict zone.



Politically, the conflict entrenches hardline positions. Negotiation becomes politically costly; compromise is framed as weakness. Leaders on all sides risk becoming prisoners of their own rhetoric, narrowing the space for de-escalation.

This raises a fundamental question: if the costs are so evident, why does the conflict persist? The answer lies in a combination of strategic miscalculation, domestic political compulsions, and the absence of credible mediators who command trust across all parties. Traditional diplomatic channels are either exhausted or viewed with suspicion. What is needed is an intervention that is both credible and constructive: one that can reframe the conflict and break the cycle of escalation.

India's voice is crucial

This is where India must step forward. India's stakes are neither abstract nor distant. Nearly nine million Indians live and work in the Gulf region, and the country's energy security is deeply tied to West Asia. Prolonged instability directly affects India's inflation trajectory, fiscal stability, and growth prospects. Energy prices, trade flows, and the welfare of its diaspora are all intimately linked to the region's stability. India is not merely an observer; it is a directly

affected stakeholder.

At the same time, India's diplomatic positioning is uniquely advantageous. It maintains strategic partnerships with the US, longstanding civilisational and diplomatic ties with Iran, and expanding economic and technological cooperation with Israel. It also enjoys deep engagement with the Gulf states, anchored in energy interdependence and labour mobility. Few countries possess this breadth of relationships; fewer still are perceived as relatively neutral and non-hegemonic.

India's consistent emphasis on strategic autonomy, dialogue, and peaceful resolution lends credibility to any mediation effort it undertakes. Recent diplomatic engagements have demonstrated India's ability to build consensus in a fragmented world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has demonstrated the capacity to engage across geopolitical divides. His outreach has spanned Washington, Tehran, Tel Aviv, and the Gulf capitals, often balancing competing interests with pragmatic diplomacy. This positions him uniquely to initiate a dialogue that others cannot.

However, mediation is about framing. India must articulate the conflict not in terms of competing claims, but in terms of shared losses. The narrative must shift decisively from "who gains" to "everyone loses." This reframing is essential to create political space for de-escalation. India can convene a structured dialogue—formal or backchannel—focused on three immediate priorities: cessation of hostilities, humanitarian access, and a roadmap for sustained negotiation. Critics may argue that India risks diplomatic overreach. Yet the greater risk lies in inaction. Proactive diplomacy is a strategic necessity. The moral argument is equally compelling. In an era increasingly defined by transactional geopolitics, there is an urgent need for voices that appeal to shared humanity. India, with its civilisational ethos rooted in dialogue, coexistence, and restraint, can offer that voice. It can remind the world that power must ultimately serve peace, not perpetuate conflict.

"Enough" is not merely an expression of fatigue; it is a call to responsibility. It is a recognition that the costs—economic, social, and human—are too great to bear. The war must stop. Hostilities must cease. Dialogue must begin. History will judge this moment not by the intensity of the war, but by the courage to end it.

The world does not need another spectator; it needs a credible mediator. India can, and must, step into that role. Enough must mean something.

(The writer is Director, School of Social Sciences, Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Exam (eu) stress in the school of life

Years after leaving school, exam season returns—with roles reversed

ASHA JOSEPH

It is 11.30 pm, and I am wide awake. Not because of a deadline, not because of work, but because I am helping my child finish the last worksheet before her exam. As she sits there practising her poem with half-open eyes and dramatic sighs, I suddenly realise something profound: I have spent a significant portion of my life studying late at night—school, college and now... midlife. The only difference is that now I am not a student. I am the official night-shift exam companion.

Watching her relearn her poem instantly transports me back to my school days and the annual epidemic known as exam fever.

Our science teacher, Pandey Sir, was the undisputed chief physician of this condition. An excellent teacher, he was not only brilliant in science but also a

master of life skills. His famous declaration would arrive every December:

"All of you start preparing for your finals right away. Otherwise, January will jump away. February will fade away. March will march away... and April will fool you!"

This guidance (warning, if I may say) would appear right in the middle of the Christmas season, long before exams were even visible on the horizon, when our primary plans involved cakes, holidays and absolutely no books. Yet Pandey Sir's words were enough to jolt us back to academic reality. As sincere *chelas* of our guru, we would return home and begin studying, at least for 10 minutes.

But the real battle was never about studying. The real battle was waking up early. Alarm clocks never worked for us. Cuckoo clocks could cuckoo themselves, and we would still be asleep. Fortunately, our guru had a scientific solution: "Drink a full tummy of water before going to bed. You will definitely wake up early!"

Let us just say the method was extremely effective. Naturally!

Our history teacher, Kennedy Sir, was no less legendary. Long before I encountered the term "eustress" in psychology books, he had already explained the concept in his own style:

"Exam pressure is good! Without exam pressure, none of you fellas would even open your books. So remember your mantra: Exam pressure is good!" At the time, we were not entirely convinced. But looking back, those teachers did far more than complete the syllabus. And now, decades later, here I am.

My daughter finishes her poem and closes the book with the relief of a marathon runner.

I say gently, "Wake up a little early tomorrow and revise once more."

She looks at me with sleepy protest and replies, "Mama, it is very difficult to wake up."

Like a true disciple of my guru, I repeat the timeless wisdom of Pandey Sir, "Drink a full tummy of water and go to bed."

And just like that, the sacred exam-survival wisdom has officially been passed on to Gen Alpha.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The long shadow of caste

Honour killing, a deep-rooted phenomenon of inherent caste superiority prevalent in the northern belt of India, appears to have spread its malevolent effect to southern states, an irony in this era of technology and communication. It is unfortunate that Karnataka, a progressive state, has seen caste prejudices become more entrenched, leading to honour killings. Tamil Nadu's official data shows 'zero' cases, while independent groups

have documented nearly 200 incidents. The statistics presented by the Karnataka Home Minister—15 honour killings between 2021 and 2025, perhaps an understatement—paints a grim picture. The Narmada Bill, introduced by the state government, is a welcome step, what is more important is its effective implementation, thorough investigation and quick disposal of cases. **HR Bapu Satyanarayana, Mysuru**

India must take the lead

The ongoing Israel-Uran conflict has plunged the global economy into distress. PM Modi's assurance in Parliament that India is largely shielded from its effects inspires hope, but the war shows no signs of abating even after 24 days. Today's world craves energy, and global leaders must focus on diplomacy. This war is a no-win situation, bringing destruction,

loss of lives, and economic misery. India, a global peace player, should facilitate talks to end the conflict. **Sundares, Bengaluru**

Sustainable livelihood

I refer to '20 women, transgender get free electric axes' (Mar 23). Kudos to the initiative empowering women and transgenders with financial independence through

free electric axes. The transport minister's foundation has distributed 20 electric axes and promised more. The scheme offers subsidies for purchasing electric axes, aiming to train 1000 women by year-end. **Ivanila Mary Willys, Bengaluru**

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed—not handwritten—will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

The (PM's) speech was long, but what do we have today, what arrangements are in place, how much stock do we have, where will we get it from for the future, will any deal have an impact, will we be able to buy oil from Russia?



Kumari Selja, Congress MP

Humphrey is not a man who gives straight answers. He gives long answers.

Sir Humphrey Appleby (Yes Minister)

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

A race to reclaim Bahujan memory

In UP, Kanshi Ram becomes the pivot in a contest for the Dalit vote, left fragmented amid the BSP's decline

MAHENDRA KUMAR SINGH

In politics, the contest is not only for votes but also for appropriating icons.

Those who shape public memory often shape electoral outcomes. This truth is evident in Uttar Pradesh, where the legacy of politician and social reformer Kanshi Ram has become the centre of a new political struggle.

Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has asked the government to confer the Bharat Ratna on Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, calling him a "symbol of empowerment and hope".

As Kanshi Ram symbolises the rise of Bahujan politics and Dalit assertion, Rahul Gandhi's demand appears aimed at reclaiming the social justice narrative and reconnecting with Bahujan voters amid the growing influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the declining strength of the BSP under Mayawati.

In UP, Dalits once formed a key pillar of the Congress's "umbrella coalition" of upper castes, minorities and Dalits that sustained its dominance for decades. This base began eroding in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the rise of identity politics and Kanshi Ram's mobilisation through the BSP. The Mandal-era churn further fragmented the coalition, enabling regional forces like the Samajwadi Party and BSP to reshape the state's electoral politics.

The demand is thus more than symbolic; it reflects Congress's attempt to widen its social base ahead of the 2027 Assembly polls and improve its bargaining position with the SP chief Akhilesh Yadav backed the demand for Bharat Ratna while marking Kanshi Ram's birth anniversary. It may also be a joint strategy by Congress and the SP to project the L.N.D.I.A bloc as the political guardian of Dalit interests.

Mayawati attacked the move, saying the Congress never honoured BR Ambedkar with the Bharat Ratna and questioning its attempt to honour Kanshi Ram now. Targeting the SP, she invoked the 1995 State Guest House Incident to highlight what she calls the party's historic hostility toward Dalits.

The political context has changed dramatically. The BSP, which won a majority in the 2007 Assembly polls with over 30% vote share, has steadily declined: down to 12.7% and one MLA in the 2022 Assembly polls, and

9.3% with no seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

In UP, the Dalits are nearly 23% of the electorate, but are politically fragmented, especially after the BSP's decline. Jatavs, Mayawati's core vote base, make up about 12%, but the non-Jatavs have drifted to other parties. Today, Dalit votes are split among the BSP, the BJP, the SP-Congress, and Chandrashekhar Azad's Azad Samaj Party. This fragmentation has opened space for new strategies.

Beyond symbolism

Since 2014, the BJP has successfully attracted sections of non-Jatav Dalits through welfare schemes and Hinduva.

The SP, long seen as a Yadav-Muslim party, now seeks to shed that image with an outreach to non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits. In the 2024 general elections, the SP-Congress alliance made significant gains, winning 37 seats, its best-ever performance. Candidate selection made the difference: fewer

Yadavs and Muslims, more non-Yadav OBCs and Dalits.

Yet challenges remain. Without the Congress, the SP's ability to secure the Bahujan vote is limited. Memories of the SP's past actions, such as reversing district names honouring Dalit icons in 2012, complicate reconciliation efforts.

For Mayawati, the immediate challenge is more fundamental. Even her core Jatav base looks shaky. Internal turbulence, defections, and a weakened organisational network have created uncertainty. The Congress and SP's renewed emphasis on Kanshi Ram is thus part of a larger contest over Bahujan memory. It seeks moral legitimacy by associating with a leader who transformed Dalit identity into a powerful political force. A sharper tilt, however, casts voters behind the BJP.

The future of Dalit politics in UP remains open. The BSP is weakened but not irrelevant. The SP is expanding but still faces credibility gaps, while the Congress is attempting a cautious revival to regain its lost Dalit base. The BJP has built a broad social coalition, but now faces the challenge of managing internal caste tensions that surfaced after the UGC guidelines debate.

As parties compete to claim the legacy of Kanshi Ram, the future belongs to those who can move beyond tokenism and offer real representation. The battle for symbols has begun. Whether this competition leads to meaningful power-sharing or succeeds in convincing Dalits will be the defining question on the road to 2027.

(The writer is a political commentator and teaches Political Science at DDU Gorakhpur University, Uttar Pradesh)

Last Day To Join Private channel

I GIVE YOU MY GUARANTEE, THIS PURCHASE WILL BE WORTH IT.

Indian Newspapers:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>1) Times of India</u> | <u>6) The Hindu</u> |
| <u>2) Hindustan Times</u> | <u>7) Live Mint</u> |
| <u>3) Business line</u> | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
| <u>4) The Indian Express</u> | <u>9) Business standard</u> |
| <u>5) Economic Times</u> | <u>+All Editorial PDFs</u> |

Uploding
starts from
5AM

Access to all this
In Just 19 Rupees
[lifetime Validity].

Click below to

Join



International Newspapers Channel

Magazine Channel (National & International)

Integrated care: India must go beyond diagnosis in its fight against TB

ANURAG BHARGAVA AND
MADHAVI BHARGAVA

Thirty-eight-year-old Sukhu, in a remote tribal village in Jharkhand, was given monthly food baskets in our RATIONS trial but, strangely, did not gain any weight. When we visited him to understand why, Sukhu had the answer: "I was found to have diabetes but was told to go to a community health centre 60 km away to start treatment. Without diabetes control, how will I gain weight?"

Asif, who was being treated for lung TB at a primary health centre (PHC), brought his wife, the mother of a seven-month-old child. She was underweight and had fever, headache, vomiting, and drowsiness. She was later diagnosed with TB meningitis and had not received TB preventive treatment. It is estimated that one-fifth of Indians harbour a TB infection, and 2.8 million develop TB disease annually, with more than 300,000 deaths. The development of TB disease depends not just on the presence of the TB germ but also on impaired immunity due to undernutrition, HIV, uncontrolled diabetes, alcohol, or tobacco use. These risk factors increase the risk of active TB, severe disease, death, and recurrence. The poor often find it challenging to adhere to the treatment, and families descend deeper into poverty and food insecurity due to the economic and social costs of the disease. Persons with TB often experience disability, recurrence, and higher mortality after successful treatment. More than

10% develop disease recurrence within two years in India. These true-life stories illustrate that an effective model of TB care and prevention must be comprehensive and integrated, addressing not only the TB germ but also the clinical, social and health system dimensions. Patients with TB often have coexisting controllable conditions such as undernutrition, diabetes, HIV, tobacco, and alcohol use, which are risk factors for disease and poor treatment outcomes. India has successfully integrated HIV screening and management in the TB programme, and a similar initiative for undernutrition, diabetes, and other risk factors is needed. India has the monthly direct benefit transfer under the Nishay Poshan Yojana – with a monthly benefit of Rs 1,000 – and the Nishay Mitra Yojana for in-kind nutrition support to address undernutrition. However, these schemes face challenges of universal coverage and timely disbursement.

Weight gains must be recorded and reported to assess the impact of these initiatives on TB treatment outcomes. Like Sukhu, almost one in seven persons with TB have diabetes (one in two in Kerala) with poor rates of control. Better control of diabetes could prevent TB occurrence. Decentralised diabetes care at the PHC level – with trained primary care providers for diagnosis, counselling, initiation and follow-up care – along with brief interventions for substance use and mental health problems and efforts to address stigma and discrimination, will improve treatment outcomes, reduce deaths and recurrence, and reinforce faith in the programme. Historically, TB programmes have strengthened primary care by making diagnostic tests and therapy available at points of first contact; decentralised, integrated care of persons with TB could similarly make the detection and treatment of non-communicable diseases more accessible. Patients do not die of tuberculosis *per se*, but of severe disease and its complications; care must therefore be differentiated as per disease severity. Screening at diagnosis for high-risk features (very severe undernutrition, inability to stand, severe anaemia, breathlessness or low oxygen levels) can identify those at greater risk of death, which can be mitigated through appropriate inpatient care, as seen in Shankar's case. This national programme has launched differentiated care guidelines to identify seriously ill patients for referral and in-patient care to reduce the currently unacceptably high rate of TB-related deaths. This will require an adequate number of beds and trained staff, as well as the capacity to manage severe disease and undernutrition. The TB-KET initiative in Tamil Nadu has shown that this is feasible. Families share vulnerabilities and risk factors, of which undernutrition is the most prevalent in India. Families should be considered the unit of TB care and prevention, including screening, diagnosis, and

treatment. Prevention of TB in the family rests on administration of TB-preventive treatment and/or provision of nutritional supplementation. TB preventive treatment is now recommended for all household contacts of patients with lung TB. The RATIONS trial in Jharkhand demonstrated a 40-50% reduction in new TB cases among families living with food insecurity, and this has influenced new WHO recommendations on nutritional support for such families. The meningitis in Asif's wife could have been prevented through either TB preventive treatment or nutritional support. The provision of decentralised comprehensive care, differentiated care, and family-centred care could be transformative in India's mission to reduce new TB cases, improve outcomes and prevent TB deaths. (Anurag is professor in the Department of Medicine, Kasturba Medical College, Mangaluru, and Madhavi is a professor in the Department of Community Medicine, Yenepoya Medical College, Mangaluru)

In India, China and other nations, Novo Nordisk is on the verge of losing patent protection for its blockbuster weight loss drug, opening the door for cheaper competing versions

REBECCA ROBBINS, MEAGHAN TOBIN,
ESHE NELSON, ALEX TRAVELLI
AND PRAGATI K B

The blockbuster weight loss drug sold as Ozempic and Wegovy will soon go generic in countries that are home to 40% of the world's population, significantly lowering the price of a costly medicine that had been largely unaffordable to nearly all but the wealthiest people. On Saturday, Novo Nordisk, the company that until now has had a monopoly on selling the drug, will lose patent protection in several of the world's most populous countries. The first generic approvals are expected to arrive in India as soon as this weekend. In the coming months, the generics are also expected to become available in China, Canada, Brazil, Turkey and South Africa.

"The availability of these drugs, which have been restricted to high-income countries to very wealthy people, will now be democratised by the generics," said Leena Menghaney, an activist in New Delhi focused on treatment access.

The new markets for generics are enormous. Together, India and China are home to more than 800 million adults who are obese or overweight and more than 360 million adults with diabetes.

The generics are poised to shake up a global market for drugs that have transformed the treatment of obesity. Novo Nordisk and its competitor, Eli Lilly, have generated huge sales around the world, but access has been very limited. Generics promise to significantly increase the number of people taking the drugs, which have also been shown to help prevent heart attacks and strokes.

In the United States and Europe, the drug is not expected to go generic until the early 2030s. That delay is due to special regulatory protections that are intended to encourage innovation by extending a brand-name drugmaker's monopoly.

Dozens of generic manufacturers have been racing to produce supplies and win regulatory approvals in countries where they can soon compete. Huge demand is expected from patients who could not afford Novo Nordisk's suffering but can budget for cheaper generics. Novo Nordisk sells the drug, semaglutide, as Ozempic for diabetes and as Wegovy for obesity.

"I don't think there has ever been so much excitement in any class of drug going off patent," said Siddhant Mittal, CEO of Biocon, a manufacturer in India that hopes to introduce generics next year in Brazil, Canada and Turkey.

Generic makers have not yet disclosed pricing plans. Analysts predicted that as more competitors enter the market, prices for the generics could eventually drop to about \$15 a month. By comparison, higher doses of Wegovy can be bought in the United States without insurance for \$349 a month. (The drug is generally available at five dose levels. Higher doses are more expensive. Patients typically start at a low dose and move up to higher doses over a matter of months.)

The drugs are not a cure-all. Some patients stop taking them because of side effects, like nausea, vomiting and constipation, but adverse reactions that have been reported are rarely severe.

Public health advocates hope that if competition from generics drives down prices



A patient's measurements are taken before administering an injection of a weight loss drug at the Dadu Medical Centre in New Delhi. Experts expect patient demand for the drugs to grow manifold once cheaper generics become available. NYT

Ozempic is about to go generic for billions of people

enough, national health insurance systems might agree to cover the drug for their citizens. Some public health systems, mostly in rich countries, pay for its use to treat diabetes, and all reject coverage for most people taking it to lose weight, because of the cost.

Argent Wang, 31, who lives in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian, said she spends about \$160 a month for the drug. She stopped working to manage complications from diabetes and lives at home with her mother, who also has diabetes. Wang's doctor suggested that she switch to a different dose, but at \$291 a month, she cannot afford it.

If a Chinese company offered a generic that was just as effective and cost under \$75 a month, Wang might try it. "My expenses are so large, I will consider the path that saves money," she said.

The expiration of the patents presents more trouble for Novo Nordisk, whose stock has plummeted as global competition has eroded its market share. At its peak in mid-2024, the Danish drugmaker was the most valuable public company in Europe. Eli Lilly, an American company that sells its weight loss drug as Mounjaro for diabetes and as Zepbound for obesity, poses the biggest competitive threat. Eli Lilly is expected to retain patent protection for another decade in most major markets.

Last year, the United States accounted for two-thirds of Novo Nordisk's global sales of Ozempic and Wegovy. But the company has lost US market share to cheap copycat versions of the drug produced through a process known as compounding. These are not generics; they fall into a legal grey area, and US regulators recently vowed

to restrict their sales. Seeking to preserve its monopoly, Novo Nordisk has fought in courts in India, China and Brazil to try to block the generics. The company has also cut prices in China and India in anticipation of competition. Officials at Novo Nordisk said the company had developed several strategies to keep reaching patients in countries where it will soon face generics. It might sometimes try to position the original version as a premium brand, they said.

Once the generics arrive in Canada, where Novo Nordisk's patent protection expired in January, some US patients might seek to import the drug from Canadian pharmacies. Generic makers could also bring semaglutide to poorer countries where Novo Nordisk never sought patent protection and where there has been very little use of the drug so far. Researchers estimated that the generics could be mass-produced for as little as \$3 a month per patient.

In India, Novo Nordisk sells higher doses of Wegovy for about \$180 a month, a price that is out of reach for most patients. "Many of my patients would benefit from them, but haven't been using them because of their cost," said Reema Arora, a dermatologist and cosmetologist in New Delhi.

Alkem Laboratories of Mumbai, one of several manufacturers that has won regulatory approval to make a generic in India, has been producing supplies and preparing to distribute them. "We will try and make sure as quickly as possible that we can make our product accessible to doctors and patients," said Vikas Gupta, the company's CEO.

On Instagram and WhatsApp, Indian patients have been eagerly discussing the arrival of the generics, said Himant Raj, who lives in Ahmedabad, in western India. She takes Eli Lilly's drug and runs one of the discussions. In New Delhi, Nivedita Dadu, a dermatologist, said she expects patient demand for the drugs to grow once cheaper generics become available. Already, she and her sister, an anaesthesiologist, have been prescribing the brand-name drugs to hundreds of patients. India, like many countries, does not permit the kind of prescription drug ads aimed at consumers that are omnipresent in the US. But with generics looming, Novo Nordisk this month paid for a front-page ad promoting obesity awareness in major newspapers. Eli Lilly has been running ads featuring Bollywood actors. Apparently in response, Indian regulators last week warned the makers of weight loss medicines about the rules against drug advertising.

By early March, 10 generic competitors were in the final stage of being evaluated by Chinese regulators to test their semaglutide products, and at least a dozen more firms had completed clinical trials.

The United Laboratories, which has its headquarters in the southeastern province of Guangdong and in Hong Kong, expects approval to sell its generic for diabetes before July, said Cao Chunlai, an executive at the company's research and development subsidiary.

China's national health insurance system covers Novo Nordisk's drug for diabetes, while people taking it for obesity must pay out of pocket. The New York Times

patients have been eagerly discussing the arrival of the generics, said Himant Raj, who lives in Ahmedabad, in western India. She takes Eli Lilly's drug and runs one of the discussions.

In New Delhi, Nivedita Dadu, a dermatologist, said she expects patient demand for the drugs to grow once cheaper generics become available. Already, she and her sister, an anaesthesiologist, have been prescribing the brand-name drugs to hundreds of patients.

India, like many countries, does not permit the kind of prescription drug ads aimed at consumers that are omnipresent in the US. But with generics looming, Novo Nordisk this month paid for a front-page ad promoting obesity awareness in major newspapers. Eli Lilly has been running ads featuring Bollywood actors. Apparently in response, Indian regulators last week warned the makers of weight loss medicines about the rules against drug advertising.

By early March, 10 generic competitors were in the final stage of being evaluated by Chinese regulators to test their semaglutide products, and at least a dozen more firms had completed clinical trials.

The United Laboratories, which has its headquarters in the southeastern province of Guangdong and in Hong Kong, expects approval to sell its generic for diabetes before July, said Cao Chunlai, an executive at the company's research and development subsidiary.

China's national health insurance system covers Novo Nordisk's drug for diabetes, while people taking it for obesity must pay out of pocket. The New York Times

Staples to spectacle: The urban makeover of survival foods

NEELATHAL CHANDA AND
SANTOSH KUMAR

On a sweltering summer morning, in many house-holds across eastern India, a bowl of cold, water-soaked rice, popularly known as *panta bhat*, would be served with a slice of fried red chilli and a few crispy red lentil fritters. Often accompanied by the reassuring thought that "it strengthens the body and aids digestion," the dish has long been part of everyday nutritional wisdom. Years later, the same preparation appears in food vlogs, described as a "rural delicacy for an adventurous palate," garnished with microgreens and avocado. What was once eaten out of necessity now returns as curated curiosity. This shift tells a story of cultural transformation, in which a meal once marked by deprivation acquires value for an urban gaze.

This transformation is not abrupt; it is already visible in contemporary urban cultural spaces. Visitors to the recently concluded city festival, BLR Hubba 2026, witnessed *hamaar litti*, along with *ghughani gully*, which was one of the attractions at the Thindi Hubba. BLR Hubba, espoused by through spaces like Thindi Hubba, is the institutional recognition of everyday cultural practices. Additionally, there are *khichadi* parlours in Bengaluru, such as The Great Indian Khichadi, Khichadi Bar, Khichadi House, and the Ghue Khichadi Project, signalling how these foods are travelling from kitchens marked by scarcity to curated urban plates, carrying with them fragments of memory, labour, and survival.

Historically, *panta bhat* has been associated with existential recurrence, poverty, and the "lower" socioeconomic rungs. Drawing on Satyajit Ray's classic cult film, *Pather Panchali*, and Nandalal Bose's illustration in *Sahaj Path*, there were enough references that resonated deeply with *panta bhat*. Particularly, millennial likes who grew up in a joint family of old-fashioned wisdomary tales from grandparents about this dish being a staple at breakfast and lunch. A close cousin is *congee* or *kannji*, derived from the Tamil word *kañci*, which is considered a wartime or famine recipe because it is made by boiling rice with a large amount of water. It is usually served with pickles. Similarly, *maad bhat* (hot rice water), which is rich in nutrients, used to be a lifesaver for

a mother in the state of Bihar. *Khichadi's* story is not very different. It is served as a crisis menu for the masses. We witnessed *khichadi* being prepared for displaced people due to floods or other disasters. *Khichadi* is also synonymous with the prison menu. However, it is a lifesaver for students preparing for competitive examinations who are away from home, often cooking in their own kitchens. *Litti Chokha* has an ambiguous story. It is a kind of delicacy in the metro; it is easily available in Bihar and eastern UP. It is a safe option for workers in small towns and teshlis.

Though the vloggers are trying to make these subaltern food practices viral, they are doing so at the cost of erasure. Some celebrated chefs are giving it a makeover with shallow-fried mackerel and an assortment of salad and serving it to the elites with cottagecore aesthetics. This has created hype around these staple dishes, raising critical questions like: can the Internet-frenzied populace who Instagrams these dishes as savoury understand the original ethos of these food practices?

The original ethos of these food practices is sustenance rather than spectacle. The spectacle also comes with a cost of sustainability. These foods are evidence of century-old local sustainable practices. *Panta bhat* is made with leftover rice for fermentation, which reduces food waste. Fermentation adds to what is better known as probiotic food. *Khichadi* is cooked not for conspiracy but to save time and fuel. The original *litti* was roasted on a *gottha* or *upla* (traditional fuel cake or charcoal). The roasted *littis* often last two-three days without spoiling. Migrants from Bihar and UP often carry homemade *litti* with pickles during their long journey, as they are healthy and economical. However, the modern or fusion preparation, which often includes adding counter ingredients such as deep-fried mackerel or extra gluten, often spoils the original texture. The aesthetics of low-capital food become the fetish of the rich. This fetish presents these foods as exotic. Though one can easily prepare these foods at home, they are priced exorbitantly in niche restaurants. What we are witnessing, perhaps, is not merely a culinary shift but a deeper cultural reconfiguration.

(The writers are faculty at Christ Deemed to be University, Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976

India has to shape its own style of democracy: PM

New Delhi, March 23
Prime Minister Indira Gandhi today sharply rebuked foreign elements "shedding tears for Indian democracy" by bluntly telling them that democracy was nobody's monopoly and that Indian democracy was not under any foreign licence. In a hard-hitting speech at a seminar here, she said that India had chosen democracy not to please any country but because of the belief that democracy would enable it to stay united and make progress in the modern world.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001

Nethravathy water to be used for drought-prone areas

Bangalore, Mar 23
Chief Minister S M Krishna today said the State Government would make an allocation of Rs 5 crore in the ensuing Budget for conducting technical study on the project to increase the ground-water level in 62 drought-affected taluks in 10 districts by diverting the course of Nethravathy river. Mr Krishna was speaking after receiving the preliminary feasibility report for diversion of Nethravathy river water for drinking water and ground water recharge for 62 drought-affected taluks.

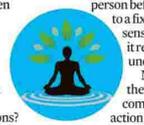
Assumption vs belief: The key to spiritual freedom

When seekers attempt to describe their spiritual state of being, they often use the words assumption and belief as if they were interchangeable. In ordinary conversation this may pass unnoticed, but in matters of spiritual understanding the difference between the two is profound. Confusing them can lead to misunderstanding, because the purpose of describing any spiritual experience is either to offer clarity or to seek it. Those who have understood the deeper meaning of these words have a responsibility to clarify their distinction. When a person assumes something consciously, he accepts responsibility for it. Belief, however, often shifts

responsibility away from the individual toward an external authority. In this sense, assumption opens the path to freedom and inner independence, while belief can easily harden into rigidity, making one defensive, adamant, or even arrogant. Consider a simple example. When you voluntarily choose to serve another person, what actually happens through your words, mind, and actions? You first recognise the need of the other. Then you attempt to fulfil that need through appropriate means and thoughtful action. This process is alive and relational. It arises because you

have assumed responsibility by your own choice. No external authority compels you to act in this way. Your service is guided by awareness of the living person before you, not by obedience to a fixed instruction. In this sense, assumption is dynamic, it remains open to dialogue, understanding, and change. Now imagine performing the same act because a book commands you to do so; the action may still appear similar, yet its spirit changes. The process becomes governed by rules and procedures. The person you serve may gradually become secondary, while the instruction itself becomes primary.

The living individual turns into a means for fulfilling the command. But a book is not a conscious being. Only living beings possess needs and the capacity for discernment. When belief replaces responsibility, trust in the wisdom of human interaction diminishes. As conscious beings, we should prioritise living relationships rather than blind adherence to words written long ago under circumstances very different from our own. If human beings shifted from mere belief to conscious assumption of responsibility, many conflicts might never arise. Imagine that each of us assumed responsibility for peace. Who then could persuade us to wage war?





Familiar script

Astrologer-godman Ashok Kharat thrived on a potent mix of fear, faith, aspiration

The sordid unravelling of self-styled astrologer-godman Ashok Kharat is not merely the story of an individual's fall from grace, it is an indictment of a society that repeatedly enables such figures to rise unchecked. From a modest numerology practice in the late 1990s to charging an astonishing 50 lakh per consultation, Kharat's trajectory reflects a dangerous blend of charisma, opportunism and public gullibility - one that has now collided with grave allegations of sexual exploitation. The ongoing probe by a special investigation team (SIT) must, therefore, go far beyond the individual. It must interrogate the ecosystem that allowed Kharat to operate with impunity. His carefully cultivated persona - an ex-merchant navy professional with global exposure, fluent in multiple languages and adept at persuasive communication - was weaponised to build trust among vulnerable individuals. Beginning in villages like Kahandawadi in Maharashtra's Sinner tehsil, he reportedly approached residents seeking innocuous details such as dates of birth and names, only to gradually draw them into a web of dependency.

This is a familiar script. Across India, self-proclaimed godmen and astrologers have long thrived on a potent mix of fear, faith and aspiration. They promise certainty in uncertain times, offering easy answers to complex personal and professional dilemmas. What sets Kharat apart is not the model, but the staggering scale of monetisation and the brazenness with which influence appears to have been leveraged. Equally troubling is the culture of silence that often surrounds such figures. Allegations of exploitation - especially sexual - rarely emerge in isolation. They are typically preceded by years of unchecked authority, during which victims are manipulated, coerced or intimidated into submission. The very aura of divinity or special knowledge that these individuals cultivate becomes a shield against scrutiny.

The arrest of Kharat in a rape case, while significant, is only the first step. Justice will demand not just accountability for alleged crimes, but a systemic reckoning. Why do regulatory frameworks remain so toothless when it comes to such practices? Why are claims of supernatural ability allowed to be marketed without oversight, often targeting the distressed? There is also an urgent need for societal introspection. Blind faith cannot be an alibi for exploitation. The willingness to place unverified individuals on pedestals - granting them power over personal decisions, finances and even bodies - must be questioned. The Kharat episode should serve as a wake-up call. It underscores the urgent necessity of scientific temper, legal vigilance and social courage. Unless these elements converge, the cycle will repeat.

Wetland emergency

The conspicuous absence of flamingos in Navi Mumbai signals an ecological collapse

The eerie silence over the wetlands of Navi Mumbai this season is not a natural aberration, it is a damning verdict on urban neglect. The conspicuous absence of flamingos, once a defining spectacle of the region, signals not just a seasonal disruption but a full-blown ecological collapse unfolding in plain sight. For years, satellite wetlands such as DPS Lake, NRI Lake and T S Chanakya Lake served as vital extensions of the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary, hosting migratory flamingos between November and May. Their absence during peak months - from January to March - should have triggered immediate alarm. Instead, it has taken activist intervention to label the crisis for what it is: a wetland emergency. Science leaves little room for denial. Water quality tests reveal total dissolved solids (TDS) levels soaring between 17,000 and 23,000 mg/L, more than three times the threshold for a healthy wetland ecosystem. Such toxicity is not accidental, it is the cumulative result of unchecked sewage discharge, industrial effluents and reckless urban expansion. In these poisoned waters, the delicate food chains that sustain flamingos collapse, rendering once-thriving habitats biologically dead.

This is not merely about birds. Flamingos are sentinel species - when they vanish, they take with them a warning about the health of the entire ecosystem. The degradation of these wetlands points to a broader environmental failure that threatens biodiversity, ground-water quality and ultimately human well-being. Yet, the response from authorities has been marked by a familiar lethargy, as if ecological decline were an acceptable trade-off for urban growth. What makes this crisis particularly indefensible is its predictability. Environmentalists have long cautioned against the systematic neglect of Navi Mumbai's wetlands. These fragile ecosystems have been treated as dumping grounds or real estate reserves rather than protected habitats. Regulatory frameworks exist on paper, but enforcement remains sporadic and toothless.

The disappearance of flamingos should have been unthinkable in a region that prides itself on hosting one of India's most significant urban bird sanctuaries. Instead, it has become a stark illustration of how quickly natural heritage can be squandered when governance fails. Restoration will not be easy. It demands immediate cessation of pollutant inflows, rigorous monitoring of water quality and a legally enforceable protection regime for all satellite wetlands. Equally crucial is public accountability - those responsible for contaminating these ecosystems must face consequences, not merely advisories. The wetlands of Navi Mumbai are not expendable. Their decline is a warning shot for conservationists.

Tehran bleeds Gulf, not Israel

UAE leadership has declared that sustained strikes imperil full-scale regional conflagration



Prabhu Chawla
POWER & POLITICS

History's wisest voices have always warned of war's hidden poison. "War is hell," American General William Sherman declared, yet leaders still chase glory in its flames. Today, in the smoke of the West Asian cataclysm, those ancient cautions resonate with chilling urgency. As the US-Israeli campaign against Iran enters its third week, one unyielding verity emerges with stark clarity: Tehran has deliberately chosen restraint towards Israel and ferocity towards its Arab neighbours.

This calculated asymmetry is no mere tactical footnote. It unveils the regime's authentic objective. Rather than matching Israel strike for strike in pursuit of decisive military damage, Iran has unleashed thousands of missiles and drones upon the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. Only a modest fraction has been directed at the Jewish state.

This stark disparity has ignited profound interrogations about Iran's genuine strategic aim. Is Tehran truly fixated on Israel? Or does its intent lie in eviscerating the Sunni Arab economies that sustain America's regional dominance? The Shia-Sunni schism, carved deep by decades of rivalry, may illuminate the choice. And why have the Arab states, despite enduring the brunt of this onslaught, refrained from direct retaliation? Ramadan has now concluded. Some analysts speculate whether a post-Eid counter-offensive might yet materialise. The war's inaugural salvos proved mercilessly effective. On February 28, US and Israeli forces eliminated supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei along with Iran's political-military aristocracy.

Yet the regime endured. Khamenei's second son Mojtaba, a 56-year-old hardliner forged in the crucible of the Iran-Iraq war, was elected supreme leader. This meticulously pre-planned succession granted Iran temporary operational continuity far beyond the expectations of most Western analysts. Iran's Operation True Promise IV, initiated in the first week of March, has so far discharged roughly 220 ballistic missiles and at least 110 drones against Israel in successive salvos as part of a cumulative total that remains confined to the low-to-mid hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones. The civilian casualties in



By striking the very nations harbouring US bases that facilitate Israeli and American air operations, Tehran seeks to impose intolerable economic and political burdens.

Israel range between 12 and 24 dead, with impacts registered in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beit Shemesh, Ramat Gan, Holon and surrounding locales. The physical destruction has remained symbolic. Critical military installations have sustained only negligible impairment; the airbases continued full operations.

On the contrary, the Gulf narrative unfolds on an altogether different scale. The UAE alone has endured 314 ballistic missiles, 1,672 drones and 15 cruise missiles by mid-March. Kuwait documented over 120 missiles and 308 drones. Qatar confronted 127 missiles, 63 drones plus two Su-24 aircraft incidents. Bahrain absorbed 105 missiles and 176 drones. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states registered dozens more apiece. In the conflict's early phase, approximately 60 per cent of Iran's ordnance targeted US bases and Gulf infrastructure rather than Israel.

The human and economic devastation inflicted upon the Arab world has proven incomparably more profound. Iranian drone and missile barrages have repeatedly assailed Dubai International Airport, the planet's busiest international gateway. Fuel depots were ignited. Flights were suspended or massively diverted. Luxury hotels and energy complexes sustained direct hits.

Qatar's Ras Laffan LNG facility suffered extensive destruction. Saudi Arabia's Yanbu refinery and various Kuwaiti installations were deliberately targeted, along with luxury hotels across all states. Global oil prices have rocketed beyond \$110. Tourism, a cornerstone of the UAE and other Gulf economies, has haemorrhaged an estimated \$550-650 million daily, with projections forecasting aggregate regional losses surpassing \$40-56

billion annually. By striking the very nations harbouring US bases that facilitate Israeli and American air operations, Tehran seeks to impose intolerable economic and political burdens. It expects that it would compel the Gulf rulers to pressure Washington into cessation. The doctrine is anything but arbitrary. Strategists identify this as textbook asymmetric doctrine. It aims to inflame the coal of American engagement by bleeding its Sunni Arab proxies rather than pursuing outright military supremacy over the far more robustly defended Israeli heartland.

This reality compels an even more disquieting inquiry: Is Iran's ultimate objective mere regime preservation through economic attrition? Or does an underlying sectarian calculus animate the disparity? Iran stands as the pre-eminent Shia power in the region. The Gulf monarchies remain overwhelmingly Sunni. For generations, Tehran has regarded these Sunni Arab states - above all Saudi Arabia and the UAE - as existential ideological and geopolitical adversaries. The enduring legacy of the Iran-Iraq War, proxy conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon, and the Islamic republic's self-styled "axis of resistance" have all been indelibly coloured by this primordial Shia-Sunni divide.

By systematically punishing the Sunni Gulf economies that normalised relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, Tehran simultaneously undermines America's Sunni bulwarks and positions itself as the valiant guardian of the broader Muslim ummah against "Zionist-American aggression". Iran's capacity to sustain this campaign notwithstanding decapitation strikes is nothing short of remarkable.

Arab restraint, meanwhile, continues to perplex observers. Despite absorbing the campaign's most punishing blows, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others have refrained from direct counter-strikes against Iranian soil. The imperatives transcend seasonal considerations: these nations remain profoundly dependent upon the US security umbrella; their military doctrines prioritise interception over deep offensive projection across the Gulf.

Direct confrontation with Iran would court catastrophic escalation, annihilation of oil infrastructure and economic self-immolation. Ramadan's emphasis on restraint infused an additional layer of diplomatic delicacy: Gulf statements invoked Muslim solidarity. Arab foreign ministers convened in Riyadh, issued strong condemnations of the Iranian attacks and demanded immediate cessation. However, it stopped short of belligerent participation.

Talk of a post-Ramadan Arab offensive against Iran remains a speculation. Gulf leadership recognises that only American and Israeli power can meaningfully degrade Tehran's capabilities. They therefore absorb the punishment, rely upon US interceptors and permit Washington to shoulder the offensive burden while their economies continue to bleed.

Yet, the UAE has now issued an unambiguous ultimatum. The UAE leadership, in concert with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has declared that sustained strikes imperil full-scale regional conflagration. Should Iran refuse to relent, the UAE retains the prerogative to strike back. Meanwhile, Iran has successfully paralysed vital installations, propelled oil prices into the stratosphere and compelled global scrutiny of the human and financial torment inflicted upon its Sunni neighbours.

The strategy harbours existential peril. It risks alienating potential Arab public sympathy and inviting deeper international ostracism as Trump's core alliance endures. As Mojtaba's inner circle entrenches itself behind the "mosaic defence" doctrine, and as the Gulf tallies its escalating billions in losses, Tehran is not destroying itself in this conflict. It is devouring the very economic architecture that keeps the Islamic republic afloat - global energy flows. War is never the right tool to save an identity. It becomes the tool that finally inhales it.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

India steps forward towards TB-free future



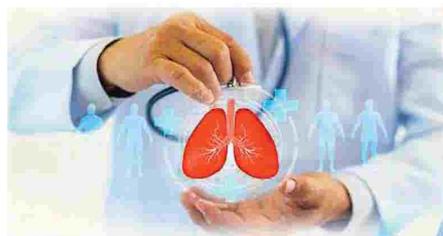
Dr Sushant Meshram

On the occasion of World Tuberculosis Day, healthcare professionals, students and citizens came together to raise awareness and reaffirm their commitment towards eliminating tuberculosis (TB) under India's National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP). The day is observed on March 24 every year to commemorate the historic discovery of the TB bacillus by Robert Koch in 1882.

Tuberculosis remains an airborne infectious disease that primarily affects the lungs and spreads through droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It commonly affects individuals with weakened immunity due to malnutrition, smoking, alcohol use, diabetes or poor living conditions. Despite this, TB is completely curable with early diagnosis and proper treatment.

India contributes nearly 25-27% of the global TB burden, with approximately 2.5-2.8 million cases annually. Maharashtra reports around 2.5-3 lakh cases, while Nagpur district contributes 8,000-10,000 cases annually, reflecting both disease burden and improved detection.

Data from the DR-TB Centre at Government Medical College and Superspecialty Hospital, Nagpur,



provides valuable insight into the current situation. A total of 2,903 drug-resistant TB (DR-TB) patients have been initiated on treatment, with over 1,700 patients successfully treated or cured, reflecting encouraging outcomes. Around 262 patients are currently on treatment, indicating strong follow-up systems. However, mortality (~13%) and default (~9%) highlight the need for continued patient support.

The data clearly shows that TB predominantly affects the young population (15-44 years), accounting for nearly 70% of cases, significantly impacting education and economic productivity. Males constitute about 62% of cases, and a large proportion of patients fall in lower weight categories, indicating the role of malnutrition.

Importantly, the programme is witnessing a transition towards all-oral regimens, improving patient comfort and adherence, and reducing complications associated with

injectable drugs.

The situation of extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB), though relatively smaller in numbers, remains a serious concern. A total of 47 XDR-TB patients have been initiated on treatment at the centre. While some patients have achieved cure or treatment completion, a high mortality rate (~57%) reflects the severity of advanced drug-resistant disease. Encouragingly, no patients are currently on active XDR treatment, indicating closure of treatment cohorts and improved management. Most XDR cases also fall in the younger age group, further emphasising the need for early detection and prevention.

India has significantly strengthened TB diagnostics with rapid molecular tests like CBNAAT and TruNat, which detect TB and drug resistance within hours. Al-based chest X-ray screening is enhancing early case detection, especially in

- TB is curable with early diagnosis
- Free treatment available under government programmes
- Modern diagnostics provide results in hours
- New all-oral regimens improve outcomes
- Healthy lifestyle reduces TB risk

high-burden areas. These advancements ensure faster and more accurate diagnosis.

Treatment success rates for drug-sensitive TB are as high as 85-90%, and newer regimens such as BPaL (Bedaquiline, Pretomanid, Linezolid) are revolutionising drug-resistant TB care with shorter, all-oral and more effective treatment options.

Prevention remains equally important. Avoiding smoking, limiting alcohol, improving nutrition, ensuring ventilation and early testing are key to reducing TB spread. The fight against TB is increasingly becoming a community movement, with active participation from healthcare workers, students and the people.

With sustained efforts, technological advancements and strong public involvement, India is steadily moving towards its goal of eliminating TB by 2025.

"Yes! We can end TB - through awareness, early diagnosis and collective action"

The author is professor & head, Department of Pulmonary Medicine, GMC & SSH, Nagpur. Views expressed are personal.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhawan, Jalna Road, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (Aurangabad), E-mail: litedit.abd@lokmat.com

Earth's energy imbalance turns worse than ever

GLOBAL warming as is known is the long-term increase in Earth's average atmospheric and oceanic temperatures. The primary cause is the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas) for energy, which releases heat-trapping gases like carbon dioxide. Deforestation significantly contributes to the (wind), because trees that absorb CO2 are cut down, destroying natural carbon sinks. Industrialization and increased use of vehicles emit large amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This warming leads to severe consequences, including melting glaciers, ice sheets, and rising sea levels. It causes more frequent and intense natural disasters, such as heat waves, droughts, storms, and floods. Global warm-

ing disrupts ecosystems, threatening biodiversity and causing many animals to lose their habitats. It directly affects human health, causing heat stress, increased allergies, and the spread of infectious diseases. Key solutions include reducing reliance on fossil fuels, adopting renewable energy (solar, wind), and increasing energy efficiency. Planting more trees and adopting eco-friendly habits are essential to mitigating the impact of climate change.

March 23 is World Meteorological Day, with the theme "Observing Today, Protecting Tomorrow". Marking the day, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) released the State of the Global Climate Report 2025, analysing a

range of key climate indicators, including greenhouse gas concentrations, surface temperature, ocean heat and acidification, sea level rise, Antarctic sea ice extent, and glacier melt. The report confirmed that 2015-2025 were the hottest 11 years on record, and 2025 was the second or third hottest year on record, at about 1.43 degrees Celsius above the 1850-1900 average. Extreme events around the world, including intense heat, heavy rainfall and tropical cyclones, caused disruption and devastation, highlighting the vulnerability of interconnected economies and societies. The ocean continues to warm and absorb carbon dioxide. Over the past two decades, the ocean has absorbed the equivalent of about 18 times the annual human energy used each year.

Last year, ocean heat content (to a depth of 2,000 meters) reached the highest level since records began in 1960, surpassing the previous high set in 2024. The Earth's climate is more out of balance than at any time in observed history, as greenhouse gas concentrations drive continued warming of the atmosphere and ocean as well as melting of ice, the WMO said on Monday. For the first time, the report included Earth's energy imbalance as a key climate indicator. The Earth's energy balance measures the rate at which energy enters and leaves the Earth system, Xinhua news agency reported. Earth's energy imbalance has been increasing since its observational record began in 1960, particularly

in the past 20 years. It reached a new high in 2025. Data from individual monitoring stations showed that levels of three main greenhouse gases - carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide - continued to increase in 2025. With the ongoing Iran-America war and the burning down of oil installations leading to further environmental chaos, sections of the world are already facing its impact. The Iranian response to the US rampage has been deliberate and calculated to keep the fires burning, literally. While the world worries about the socio-economic cost of this war and the medium-term impact it will have on the global economy, it is time to factor in the ecological damage being caused at the same time.

LETTERS

Work together to end TB

EVERY March 24, marking World Tuberculosis Day, represents an opportunity to reflect on the progress of the fight against TB. This year's theme is quite appropriate, "Yes! We can end TB." Led by countries, powered by people! In India, which accounts for a significant share of the global TB burden, there has been considerable progress through expanded screening, faster diagnostics, and large-scale treatment programmes. However, the incidence rates are higher than the elimination targets. It is preventable and curable with early detection and complete treatment. Latent TB infection may exist without symptoms but can become active if untreated. Awareness, timely testing, adherence to treatment, collective responsibility, global efforts and community involvement can help eliminate the disease.

Dr Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, Hyderabad-45

TB remains number one killer disease

The World Tuberculosis Day has been observed every March 24 since 1982. This year's theme "Yes! We can end TB." led by countries, powered by people, is a renewed call that underscores the importance of urgency and accountability. It offers an opportunity to reflect on ongoing efforts and encourage stronger commitment at local, national, and international levels to put an end to TB. TB continues to devastate millions of lives globally, inflicting severe health, social, and economic consequences. Every year, over 4,400 persons succumb to TB, and 30,000 are newly infected. Around 2.6 million Indians suffer from TB. It is believed that around 25 per cent of the world population has been infected with TB. World TB Day reminds us that it is still the number one killer disease. Although TB is curable and preventable, the control demands a highly cost-effective health intervention. Meanwhile, in the backdrop of declining international funding for TB eradication given the current geopolitical climate, there is a fear that the global targets to end TB set for 2030 may not fructify.

Dr Burra Madhusudan Reddy, Karimnagar

Evade social media trap with self-discipline

WITH reference to the article "Social media bans and the Indian dilemma" by Dr Bhaskar Nath Biswal, it is evident that social media platforms pose considerable threat to the mental well-being of young people. The continuous exposure to unrealistic standards and harmful content often leads to anxiety, depression, and issues with self-esteem. These platforms can distract students from academics, negatively influencing their future career development. Instead of focusing on personal growth, many youngsters fall for the peer comparison trap or succumb to addictive features of social media. To counter such threats, it is crucial to empower the youth with digital literacy. Parents and educators must guide young people on how to manage screen time effectively, use platforms productively, and avoid negative influences. Additionally, social media can be a useful tool for career development if used wisely. Platforms can help connect students with mentors, educational resources, and communities that foster skill development. It is essential for young users to balance their online activities with offline pursuits, focusing on building their future careers through networking, learning, and self-discipline.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Rethink on IT introduction in school curriculum

THIS refers to the write-up, "Social media bans and the Indian dilemma" (THI, March 23). It must be analysed whether the curriculum that's prescribed for students up to the age 16 years warrants browsing the internet. Students in the 14-16 years age-group will be in the ninth, tenth and eleventh classes. Earlier, students required only books and notes of the teachers to study. Nowadays, the system and syllabus have undergone tremendous changes. It is time the authorities ponder over these aspects and make suitable amendments.

S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai-40

Middy meals have reduced dropout rates

THERE was an unpalatable and unwarranted slip of the tongue by Pravachana exponent Garikapati Narasimharao, who denounced providing midday meals in schools. Without going into allegations, let me put forward my poignant observations. From 1960 to 1973, elementary and high school students were deprived of nutritious food due to poverty. Once children from a brahmin family, who were my father's students and I faintly due to lack of food. My mother fed them. Even hostels run by private management were in deplorable condition, more so when it came to girls. My parents not only gave them educational guidance but also fed children from economically impoverished families. College students from such families were boarders at Ramji Hostel, Malkapuram, Machilipatnam. I can state that but for the food provided freely at that time, many would have left the college. Now, midday meals at schools and colleges are a great help to children from the underprivileged class. They are assured of nutritious and balanced food. This has led to a great reduction in the dropout rate.

Dr T Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

War must not escalate, impacts economy and common man; Industry leaders

BENGALURU: Industry leaders and global experts on Monday expressed concern over the ongoing geopolitical tensions, saying they hope the conflict does not escalate further and is resolved soon, as its impact is already being felt on the economy and common people. Speaking at the Indiospora AI Summit here, Kris Gopalakrishnan, former CEO of Infosys, said the ongoing tensions are not just affecting the technology sector but are having a wider impact on everyday life. "Shortages of LPG have already started affecting small businesses such as roadside food stalls and local restaurants, many of which are being forced to shift back to traditional cooking methods," he noted. He warned that if the situation continues, rising oil prices could push inflation higher, affecting the broader economy.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

'Sword of Damocles' bail and personal liberty



PROF MADABHUSHI SIDHAR ACHARYULU

interim bail to the professor. He was forbidden from writing or speaking publicly about the subject of the FIRs, terrorists and the armed forces' response.

Through this order of 21 May, the court tried to balance the two concerns: protecting the individuals' temporary liberty, and at the same time, allowing the investigation to continue. However, there was no conclusive decision on whether the speech itself was lawful.

Bail in anti-conversion law cases:

A similar cautious approach appeared in cases involving state anti-conversion laws. In Aman Siddiqui alias Aman Chaudhary v State of Uttarakhnad, the accused was arrested after objections were raised about his interfaith marriage. Despite the consent of both families.

Setting aside the Uttarakhand High Court's decision denying bail, the apex court bench observed that the state had no reason to object when two adults had willingly chosen to live together. He was granted bail on ₹10 lakh.

Another related case exposed how procedural mistakes can affect personal liberty. In Afab v State of Uttar Pradesh, on 25 June, although the Supreme Court had granted bail in April, the accused was not released for almost a month. Authorities claimed that the bail order did not mention a particular sub-district of the Uttar Pradesh anti-conversion law.

The SC said it was a "travesty of justice" that a person remained in jail simply because a subsection number was missing in the or-

der. Calling the detention "hyper-technical and irrelevant," the Court ordered compensation of ₹5 lakh for the 28 days Afab spent in custody despite having bail.

At the same time, the broader constitutional challenge to anti-conversion laws is still pending before the Court in Citizens for Justice and Peace v State of Uttar Pradesh. In that case, the Court will decide whether such laws violate fundamental rights like privacy, personal liberty, freedom of religion, and the right to choose one's partner.

Bail in economic offences:

In another case involving alleged cryptocurrency fraudster, the court again focused on prolonged detention. In Subhela v State of Chhattisgarh, an alleged crypto investment scheme fraudster was kept in custody for over nine months. The Supreme Court noted that the chargesheet had been filed but the trial was moving slowly. The apex court has been insisting that trials should not be delayed



Although the Supreme Court ultimately refused anticipatory bail, it used the case to highlight a larger problem-bail applications remain pending for years while courts keep extending interim protection. The judges warned that matters affecting personal liberty should not hang indefinitely over a person's head like a "sword of Damocles." They issued directions for faster disposal of bail and anticipatory bail applications.

indefinitely while the accused remains in jail.

The Court also showed that bail orders must be properly reasoned and fair to victims. In Victim X v State of Bihar, the Supreme Court, on 21 July, cancelled bail granted by a High Court in a case under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The SC pointed out that the victim had not been heard before bail was granted. It also noted that the accused held a position of influence as a person in charge of a shelter home in Bihar and faced serious allegations of trafficking and sexual exploitation of residents. Because these factors were ignored earlier, the Supreme Court set aside the bail order.

A similar legal shortcoming was observed in the Net-Systems v State (NCT of Delhi). The Supreme Court overturned a Delhi High Court decision granting bail.

Speeding up bail decisions: Another important de-

velopment came in Anna Waman Bhaleero v State of Maharashtra on 12 September. Here, the issue was anticipatory bail in a dispute involving alleged forged land records. Although the Supreme Court ultimately refused anticipatory bail, it used the case to highlight a larger problem-bail applications remain pending for years while courts keep extending interim protection.

The judges warned that matters affecting personal liberty should not hang indefinitely over a person's head like a "sword of Damocles." They issued directions for faster disposal of bail and anticipatory bail applications.

The Khalid case: Perhaps the most closely followed bail hearing of 2025 was Umar Khalid v State (NCT of Delhi). Umar Khalid was in jail since September 2020 in connection with the alleged conspiracy behind the 2020 Delhi riots.

By the time the case reached the Supreme Court, he had spent more than five years in custody without trial. During hearings between October and December, the Delhi police argued that the riots were planned and not spontaneous. They relied on speeches, witness statements, call records, location data, and WhatsApp messages to suggest Khalid played a coordinating role in protests and road blockades.

Khalid's lawyers argued that merely being part of WhatsApp groups did not prove participation in a conspiracy. Khalid's bail plea was rejected by the Supreme Court in January this year under the UAPA standard.

Preventive detention and protests: Environmental activist Sonam Wanchuk was detained under the National

(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

Gas and fuel crisis is neither new to India nor the world

DR HYMA MOORTY

SEERING the present crisis unfolding as regards the shortage of cooking gas and fuel for vehicles, I have been transported back to the 1960's. As a kid, I would join the long queues outside fair price shops with my mom, waiting for sugar and kerosene. The mystery of those serpentine lines lingered, till my mother would excitedly announce, 'stocks arrived!' We would rush to grab our monthly quota—5kg sugar, 10 liters kerosene for a family of six! Often, the shop would shut down in the middle of the month. The 'Lord of the shop' would secretly sell it all to the highest bidder, leaving the people with empty hands.

The fuel situation in India up to the 1990s was characterized by severe scarcity, long queues and a slow transition from traditional cooking fuels to LPG. Kerosene was the primary fuel for the masses while LPG (gas) was a luxury, and petrol expensive and often rationed due to global oil stocks. Of course, there were not too many two wheelers and four wheelers per family. In those days, the 'primus' kerosene stove was a staple in city homes as a replacement for traditional wood chulha. Those were the

days of waitlists for gas connections, kerosene stove flames, and the prized Nutan stove smuggled from Delhi for its fuel efficiency.

I remember the ritual of pumping up the pressure stove, the thrill of pinning and prunning the wicks just right, and the occasional burst of flame when it got too pumped up. Severe shortages were common particularly after the geopolitical events that like we have now, was in the world or wars with Pakistan, forcing families to rely on limited rations. Those were simpler times amidst scarcity. Of course, most of it being man-made then and even now. No political support or sloganeering, no electronic media interviews and no social media platforms, but I learnt only to understand the situation and act.

In the 1970s, gas connections were a luxury. We had booked one, but years went by with no sign of it arriving. That was when we moved to Dehradun, and it seemed like our wait would continue indefinitely. But fate had other plans—a friend working with ONGC, freshly transferred to Assam, came to our rescue. ONGC employees there enjoyed domestic pipe gas connections, and 'gifted' to us



what was his. For years, the connection stayed in his (or rather, his father's) name. Then one day, Cal Gas announced an amnesty scheme for 'illegal' connections—pay a nominal fee, and we'd be the legitimate owners. We jumped at it, and finally, we had our own gas connection.

But the gas connection was just the beginning of our adventure. Getting the refill was a whole different story—sometimes it felt like climbing Mount Everest! We were initially allotted just one cylinder, so when it ran out, we'd be stuck with kerosene for weeks. Procuring it was another uphill task. Dehradun's refills came from Assam, and during the rainy season and during the severe winter period, it would take up to two months to arrive. When the refill finally came, it was a celebration! But don't expect it to be delivered home—no way! You would have to ride your scooter to the gas go down, with a slip from the gas agency located in another corner and pray the lot had arrived. And if you were lucky, you'd manage to load the cylinder onto your scooter, with your wife holding it tight or a 10-year-old kid balancing behind you. It was quite a sight, seeing two-wheelers loaded with gas cylinders, a common spectacle back then. By the end of 90s, two cylinders became more common but procuring refills was still high pressure, with consumers lining long waits for deliveries. Global opening in 90s and gradual improvement in LPG availability, reduced the reliance on rationed kerosene. Fast forward to today, and gas connections are a norm, thanks to the gov-

ernment's welfare schemes for women. Those days are now a distant memory, and we are all enjoying the convenience of gas at home.

Back then petrol was subjected to severe rationing in many places, and its price was largely sensitive to geopolitical turmoil. During the 1973 war between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria the (OAPC) Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries reduced oil shipments to countries supporting Israel. The oil spot market price increased from 3 dollars to more than 20 dollars. During the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 the price of oil rose alarmingly with the geo-political turmoil and the cost of oil skyrocketed. With the war in Gulf countries the effect was seen in all countries dependent on them for oil and India was no exception. We Indians tend to hit the panic button fast, don't we?

Next thing you know, everyone's got into hoarding for deliveries. Global opening in the apocalypse. Petrol was no exception—people started filling up their tanks and storing extra 'cans' just in case! The petrol station was a whole different ball game. Just when

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Trump's climbdown

Strategic pause raises hopes of a breakthrough

US President Donald Trump's announcement that Washington and Iran have resumed talks is a welcome sign of respite after weeks of military attacks and counter-attacks. The prospect of a diplomatic breakthrough has raised hopes of de-escalation of hostilities in West Asia, even though optimism must be tempered with caution, especially considering Trump's tendency to jump the gun. Taking his foot off the pedal, he has extended his deadline for Iran to reopen the crucial Strait of Hormuz to international shipping, saying that the US would hold off on threatened strikes against Iranian power plants for five days. His climbdown has come after the US and Iran traded threats over energy targets; had the escalation happened, it would have had catastrophic consequences for the region and beyond.

The US President has stated that his Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and close aide Jared Kushner are talking to "a top Iranian official". Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, has dismissed Trump's claim that Washington-Tehran discussions are underway. The ministry has described his remarks as an attempt to buy time for further US military operations and influence energy markets amid soaring prices due to the conflict.

Mistrust, flip-flops and fragile commitments continue to define US-Iran relations. The absence of detailed disclosures by Trump raises two key questions: are the current talks a concrete step toward de-escalation, or merely a tactical pause shaped by immediate political and military pressures? And what is Israel's role in these developments? Complex disputes, particularly those rooted in decades of hostility, rarely have a swift resolution. Overpromising could undermine Trump's credibility if talks stall or collapse. Clarity and transparency are a must to ensure that renewed diplomatic engagement makes a visible difference on the ground.

Toxic taps

A silent crisis in Punjab & Haryana

FRESH data placed before Parliament has once again exposed a disturbing truth: drinking water in Punjab and Haryana is far from safe. High levels of contamination in water samples are not merely statistical red flags, they signal a public health emergency unfolding quietly across homes, farms and villages. The crisis is neither sudden nor isolated. Across India, from deaths linked to contaminated supply in Indore to disease outbreaks in Betul (Madhya Pradesh), unsafe water has become a year-round threat. Its implications are particularly severe in Punjab and Haryana, where intensive agriculture, excessive groundwater extraction and unchecked industrial discharge have long degraded water quality.

In Punjab, the legacy of pesticide-heavy farming has seeped into aquifers, with reports of heavy metals and chemical residues in drinking water. Haryana, too, grapples with high salinity, fluoride and industrial pollutants in several districts. The tragedy is compounded by governance gaps—underfunded funds, weak monitoring and delayed implementation of rural water scheme. Infrastructure exists on paper; safe water often does not. What makes the crisis alarming is its invisibility. Contaminated water does not always look or smell unsafe. But its effects—skin diseases, gastrointestinal illnesses and long-term organ damage—are devastating. The burden falls disproportionately on rural and economically weaker communities, who lack access to filtration systems or alternative supplies.

Policy responses have remained fragmented. Flagship schemes promise tap water for all, but quality assurance remains a glaring blind spot. Testing must be decentralised, transparency ensured and accountability fixed at the local level. Equally crucial is a shift towards sustainable agriculture and stricter industrial regulation to address the root causes of contamination. Water, the most basic necessity, cannot be allowed to turn into a vector of disease.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 1926

Sir Denys Bray's speech

WE have already seen that in substance no less than in spirit and temper, Sir Denys Bray's concluding speech in the debate on the Frontier Province in the Legislative Assembly presents a striking contrast to the speech of the Home Member. The question which we are entitled to ask is, which of the two speakers represented the government in this case? Was it the Home Member? Why, then, was Sir Bray put up to make the final speech on behalf of the government? The resolution was not his, and he could claim the right to speak twice in the debate only on the ground of his representing the government. Was it Sir Bray, then, who represented the government? If so, what becomes of the professed neutrality of the government and the declaration made by the Home Member that the government from benches would take no part in any division that might take place over the resolution? Who could say after hearing Sir Bray's speech or after reading it in print that that official was neutral? It is bad enough that in a matter of this kind, a Secretary to the government and a Member of the government should have spoken in different voices. It is immeasurably worse that the Secretary instead of the Member should have made the final speech in the debate and, in doing so, have been able to reduce the position taken up by the Member to an obvious nullity. The utter unreasonableness of the government's position become all the more clear when it is borne in mind that the speech of the Foreign Secretary was not merely made in the exercise of the government's right of final reply, but was in form as well as in substance an answer to all the principal speakers on the other side.

To impeach the CEC is a troubling first

Opposition's move against Chief Election Commissioner raises questions

ASHOK LAVASA
FORMER ELECTION COMMISSIONER

A win-win situation benefits all stakeholders, even if a compromise is reached in search of a workable alternative. It could even be a way in which the winning side successfully deludes the losing side to perceive its loss as a necessary price paid for survival. The win-win phrase has no antonym, although the exact opposite would be the one in which both sides lose without anything to compensate for their losses.

The impeachment motion by Opposition parties against the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is one such example. It is a motion destined not to be carried. Yet its prime movers may not see the loss as a defeat. But can the CEC see their loss as his victory?

The Opposition parties' move is doubtless dramatic, even desperate. The question that needs to be pondered by the well-wishers of this constitutional body is what prompted them to don the gloves for a fight with no chance of victory. Perhaps, sometimes one fights not to win but to wound the opponent.

The troubling part is that these political parties treat the CEC as an opponent. That raises disturbing questions that both sides must answer: The move to impeach the CEC is a first in the history of an institution that is the vanguard of Indian electoral democracy and was genuinely hailed as its custodian.

"India built many institutions after attaining freedom and adopting a Republican Constitution. If anyone were to conduct an opinion poll on which of these institutions rendered the best service to Indian democracy with the highest degree of integrity, I have no doubt that the Election



VOTING RIGHT: Residents of West Bengal resubmitted documents after their names didn't figure in the final list. PT

Commission of India (ECI) will be our people's first choice."

That was Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister, speaking at the ECI's golden jubilee celebrations on January 17, 2001.

Twenty-five years later, 193 parliamentarians of Opposition parties submitted notices for an impeachment motion against the CEC, citing charges of "paritisan and discriminatory conduct" and "obstruction of investigation into electoral fraud" and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.

The notice is as unprecedented as the manner in which the revision of electoral rolls has been undertaken despite a serious challenge by most of the political parties, except the ruling dispensation. That unusual alignment of thinking disconcerted Opposition parties, which sharpened their attack against the CEC.

The repeated press conferences of the Leader of the Opposition (LOP) exposing discrepancies in the electoral rolls of states where elections had been held, further soured the relationship.

The aggressive style and the severity of the LOP's attack were surprising, for never in recent memory had someone as eminent as the LOP targeted the poll body, questioning its integrity. But more

The ECI is now in full control. The successful completion of the poll process will justify all its decisions. Victors will exult; losers will find reasons to complain.

surprising was the poll body's obduracy in not providing a credible response to the doubts raised on its functioning and impartiality. Even as the attacks became bitter, the communication channels between the poll body and the Opposition seemed to choke.

The nation had seldom seen such a relentless campaign against the CEC, who stood his ground as the Supreme Court endlessly heard petitions against his decisions. As the petitions failed to yield any substantive relief, frustration mounted and so did the CEC's apparent indifference, resulting in a virtual breakdown in dialogue. The CEC persisted with the SIR despite the fortnight-long Voter Adhikar Yatra just before the Bihar Assembly elections. Defiance seemed to

define the relationship between the players and the referee.

Not that there was no dialogue. The one between the poll body and the Trinamool Congress caused more enmity, culminating in the theatrical presence of Mamata Banerjee in the Supreme Court. Never before had a chief minister appeared in the court arguing against the ECI's "unfair" decisions. The dharnas against the SIR in West Bengal or the number of officials dying in the course of conducting the revision failed to deter the CEC or change his avowed commitment to "purify" the electoral rolls.

It was unprecedented for the poll body to treat exclusion rather than inclusion as the parameter of its success in "not leaving any voter behind". The ECI invented the "logical discrepancy" tool that pitted the electors against the artificial intelligence of algorithms used to detect discrepancies. A poll body that refused to explain the discrepancies publicly pointed out by the LOP after analysing its data now questioned the presence of electors in the rolls prepared as per its own due process.

West Bengal saw over 58 lakh electors deleted at the draft stage and more than 60 lakh "under adjudication" in the final list.

Never before has the ECI announced elections in a state with the fate of nearly 10 percent electors undetermined. It employed micro-observers for finalising the revised rolls, something never done in the past, and the SC took the unusual step of appointing about 500 judicial officers to decide the fate of these electors in a short span.

It is unusual for a constitutional body mandated with the preparation of electoral rolls to involve another constitutional body in discharging its routine function, disregarding the elector's voting right if it was created to protect. The exclusion of even a single eligible voter due to the way SIR has been conducted would legitimise the criticism of this arbitrary, ambitious and aggressive exercise.

However, does all this justify the impeachment move?

The answer depends on which side of the divide one stands. The crores of voters who figure in the final electoral rolls might not protest, treating the tension and trauma during the revision process as part of the routine struggle that helpless citizens go through to secure their rights. The voice of those excluded doesn't count in the elections in any case.

Eventually, the valid concern of protecting the right to vote turns into the lament of losers left with no choice but to resort ineffectively to the ultimate constitutional weapon against the CEC. The impeachment debate might be yet another phantasmagoria like the one on electoral reforms in the winter session of Parliament in December last year.

Meanwhile, the ECI has sounded the poll bugle, asking the players to contest against each other rather than expend their energy against the referee. The ECI is now in full control. The successful completion of the poll process will justify all its decisions. Victors will exult; losers will find reasons to complain.

What the nation would be left with will be a bruised poll body in which a battered Opposition, representing more than half the voting population, expressed no confidence.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

All over India, SIR is being carried out as per the constitutional norms — Gyaanesh Kumar

When calmness becomes courage

ANMOL RATTAN NARANG

MY refusal to approve a large credit proposal led to what bankers politely call a "punishment posting". I was transferred from Srinagar to Jodhpur; and that too to my parent bank-sponsored Regional Rural Bank, where an agitation by staffers had been going on for several days.

Within days of my joining, the employees went on an indefinite strike. It felt like hailstones falling on a freshly shaven head. I was the only officer from the parent bank supervising around 150 employees. It was a classic case of one versus many.

I recalled Guru Gobind Singh's words: "Sava lakh se dek ladana..." Physical confrontation was neither possible nor desirable. I had to rely on patience, experience and quiet strategy.

The striking staffers pitched tents outside the office. Every day, they would enter my chamber in groups, raising slogans. The atmosphere was tense, but I maintained composure.

One morning, I received a letter from the head office informing me that the promotion process had begun and that I was required to report to Mumbai for interviews and group discussions. It meant being away from Jodhpur for four days.

On my return, the first thing I asked my driver on leaving the airport was whether everything had remained peaceful during my absence. He narrated a disturbing incident. Two officers from the head office had been deputed to Jodhpur while I was away. One of them had been assaulted and he had been locked inside the premises. The other officer had narrowly escaped harm.

When I later spoke to them on the phone, they made it clear that they were leaving Jodhpur. They could not endure more humiliation. I wondered: Why did nothing happen to me for nearly three weeks, while my colleague was attacked within four days?

After discreet inquiries among some staff members and witnesses, I concluded that the answer lay not in authority but in attitude. From the very first day, I made a conscious effort never to display nervousness or helplessness. No matter how tense the situation appeared, I maintained calmness and confidence. My colleagues, perhaps less experienced to handle such crises, unintentionally revealed anxiety through their words and body language. And vulnerability often invites aggression.

This experience taught me a life lesson: in moments of conflict, leadership is not defined by loudness or force, but by emotional steadiness. Never allow fear to become visible—neither in your words nor in your eyes. The moment adversity senses weakness, it grows in strength. But when it meets quiet courage, it often retreats.

I was reminded of Master Tara Singh's advice to his followers: "Never let your enemy see fear in your eyes." In my own small way, that wisdom stood vindicated. I realised that sometimes the strongest form of courage is simply the refusal to appear afraid.

The writer is ex-Principal, Staff Training College, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Avoid overdependence

Apropos of 'The need for balance', the article rightly emphasises that in today's uncertain global environment, India must adopt a balanced and independent foreign policy. With rising global tensions and power struggles, it is essential for India to avoid overdependence on any one nation. Instead, the focus should be on safeguarding national interests through diplomacy, economic strength and defence preparedness. A balanced approach will not only protect India's sovereignty but also enhance its role as a responsible global power. New Delhi's studied silence on the West Asian crisis is giving different signals to different parties.

CHANDAN KUMAR, RAJPUTRA

War moves beyond West Asia

Refer to 'Iran's gambit'; the reported Iranian missile attempt on Diego Garcia, even though unsuccessful, marks a troubling escalation in the ongoing West Asia conflict. It demonstrates capabilities that reach far beyond the region, raising fresh concerns on global stability. Closer home, it will affect security in global sea lanes and energy supplies that India relies on heavily. Rather than a further military tit-for-tat, what is urgently needed is renewed diplomatic pressure to secure a ceasefire, re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz and restarting of negotiations on nuclear and security issues.

SS PAUL, NADIA(WB)

Trump's 'just for fun' excursion

Perhaps Mark Twain famously said: 'God created wars so that Americans would learn geography' keeping Donald Trump in mind. The US President appears to recognise no limits, as earlier it was Venezuela, now it's Iran and he is openly suggested that Cuba could be next. He has described the Iran war as an 'excursion' and now threatens more strikes 'just for fun'. He should have been a soldier or a civilian living in a bombed area to know how much 'fun' it is. He preferred a war to diplomacy. It's time for the international community to act by this senseless war to an end before it becomes too late.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

Bhagat Singh's patriotism

With reference to 'Why Bhagat Singh was not a Marxist thinker', the revolutionary was executed not for his ideology, but for his direct involvement in the killing of a British officer. A Marxist follows the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who believed in class struggle and the overthrow of capitalism to establish a classless society. He was deeply influenced by socialist thought, yet his primary aim was national liberation, social justice and awakening the masses against colonial oppression. His ideology was more rooted in patriotism and humanism, than Marxism.

HARISH MONGA, FEROPZPUR

Influenced by many leaders

Some scholars have called Bhagat Singh a supporter of Marxist ideology on the basis of Bhagat Singh's jail notebook which contains selected excerpts from some books read by Bhagat Singh in jail. It certainly gives us a due about his philosophy, but drawing a conclusion would be unjust to his personality. His 'diary' shows that along with Marx, Engels, Lenin, he had also read Omar Khayyam, Veer Savarkar, Rousseau, Bipin Chandra Pal, etc. Similarly, he was also influenced by the heroes of the Ghadar Party. We cannot tie the nationalist to any one ideology; he drew inspiration from many revolutionaries and many important events across the world.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Junior officers at receiving end

Suicide by a Punjab Warehousing Corporation official has once again raised serious concerns about the working conditions of government employees. Allegations of criminal intimidation by a minister over allocation of construction tenders highlight a deeply troubling aspect of administrative functioning. It is evident that such incidents do not occur in isolation. This case reflects larger and persistent modus operandi within the system—junior officers are often compelled to carry out illegal tasks under pressure. When such matters come to light, accountability is conveniently shifted onto their shoulders. A fair, accountable and supportive administrative system is the need of the hour.

ANVASH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

India on the sidelines as Trump pauses war



MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW,
OBSERVER RESEARCH
FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THE changing patterns of the American-Israeli war against Iran are as bewildering as a kaleidoscope. On Monday morning, Trump pulled back from the brink — postponing threatened strikes on Iranian power plants for five days after what he described as ‘productive conversations’ with Tehran. Whether this marks a genuine diplomatic opening or a tactical pause remains unclear.

What is clear is that India was not part of the back-channel diplomacy that produced it. Oman is reportedly mediating. Whether the US envoys remain Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner is not clear. India — proximate, oil-dependent, a self-described balancer — remains on the sidelines.

Prime Minister Modi has been talking, recently again to Iran’s President Masoud Pezeshkian. He has also spoken

to leaders of all the Gulf monarchies, and to Israel’s PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

The theme has been a standard condemnation of the attacks on the region, alarm at the destruction of critical infrastructure, and the need to keep international shipping lanes open. If you parse his remarks, they are so finely balanced that they end up saying nothing of note. India has become a spectator in a region where it had played the role of a balancer, with significant ties to all the major actors.

Most tellingly, Modi has still not spoken to the country that started the war and has the power to end it immediately — the United States of America.

India’s absence is manifest in other ways. Last week, Donald Trump said he had asked ‘about seven’ countries to join the US in keeping the Strait of Hormuz open. He named five: China, South Korea, Japan, France, Britain. India was not on the list. This is all the more curious because India is proximate to Hormuz, has a strong navy and is dependent on the strait for a significant share of its hydrocarbons.

More important, at the outbreak of the war, India had abandoned its customary balanced approach and made clear



DIPLOMATIC : India is present in the West Asian region, but not a participant. ANI

which side it was on. In his first call to the UAE, Modi condemned the Iranian retaliatory attack without mentioning Iran.

Immediately thereafter, he called Netanyahu and conveyed India’s ‘concerns’, urging an early cessation of hostilities. He not only sidestepped the fact that it was Israel and the US that had attacked Iran and killed its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, he did not even offer condolences to Tehran.

In a structural sense, India is already part of the region’s US-led security architecture. It is a member of the 47-nation Combined Maritime Forces headquartered in the US Fifth

India has abandoned its posture in favour of US & Israel, but not joined the coalition. It has chosen the worst of both worlds.

Fleet in Bahrain, and two weeks before the Israeli-American attack on Iran, it assumed command of the Combined

Task Force 154, which deals with training.

So, India is present in the region, but not a participant — friendly to the US but not allied, warm but not quite trusted, occupying a geopolitical halfway house. What role Trump envisaged for India is not easy to discern. He has referred to Modi as a ‘great friend’, a ‘great gentleman’, a ‘tough as hell leader’. Modi’s references are modest, usually referring to Trump as a ‘dear friend’.

But the two have not met for the past year — a situation attributed to the fallout over Operation Sindoor — and neither have they spoken since

the war began in West Asia.

There was another curious development. Despite rising tensions and a visible military build-up in mid-February, Modi chose to visit Israel 48 hours before the war began.

According to well-informed journalist Barak Ravid, the attack had originally been planned a week earlier, and it was important for the Israelis to signal that no imminent threat existed — so that Khamenei and others would feel safe and not take to their underground shelters.

They had also kept up the use of the Geneva talks to sustain the impression that diplomacy was still the path being pursued.

Was Modi, unwittingly, used as cover for Israeli war plans? Asaduddin Owaisi has alleged so; Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar has denied. It would be useful to know what Modi knew, when, and whether he had sought advice from the foreign ministry and the intelligence community on the visit’s timing.

Modi’s subsequent behaviour has compounded the surprise. He extended no public condolences for the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei and offered no condemnation of the Israeli-US attack on Iran — formally a friendly country and a fellow member of both the BRICS and the SCO. India cur-

rently chairs the BRICS.

While India did sign a formal condolence book at the Iranian embassy a week later, Modi had already taken a different track. In a 48-hour period between March 1 and 3, he spoke to leaders of eight West Asian countries — Israel, Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman — condemning the attacks on them without naming Iran, and calling for an early cessation of hostilities.

The clearest indicator that New Delhi remains a bystander in a conflict wracking its neighbourhood came on March 4, when the IRIS Derna was sunk while returning from a friendly visit to an Indian Navy Fleet Review at Visakhapatnam. There was no protest, let alone any expression of regret, from New Delhi.

Modi is the one who shapes Indian policy and he may have decided that given the new balance of forces in the region and India’s national interests, it was prudent to cut Iran loose. But this could still have been done with some subtlety.

The tragedy is that India has decisively abandoned its balanced posture in West Asia in favour of the US and Israel — but has still not joined the American coalition. In doing so, it has probably chosen the worst of both worlds.

The Guru’s Word is beyond the law



JUSTICE RS SODHI
FORMER JUDGE,
DELHI HIGH COURT

IN recent years, debates in Punjab around legislation seeking to define and punish the ‘desecration’ of Guru Granth Sahib have generated intense emotional and political responses. These impulses arise from genuine reverence. For Sikhs across the world, Guru Granth Sahib is not merely a sacred book but also the living Guru, the embodiment of divine wisdom and the spiritual centre of the Sikh faith. Yet the attempt to regulate its sanctity through legal statutes and judicial definitions raises a deeper philosophical question: can the word of the Guru truly be protected or defined by law?

At the heart of Sikh thought lies a profound philosophical proposition articulated by Guru Gobind Singh in the injunction ‘*Guru maneyo Granth*.’ With this declaration, the temporal line of human Gurus ended, and Guru Granth Sahib was elevated as the eternal guide of the Sikh community. Yet the meaning of this declaration is often misunderstood.

The Gurus did not intend that the Granth Sahib be transformed into an object of rigid ritual or judicial regulation. Rather, it was to be revered as a living body of wisdom, a spiritu-

al and philosophical guide that illuminates the path towards truth, humility and the divine.

From Guru Nanak onwards, Sikhism conceived of every human being as a Sikh, a seeker. Even Guru Nanak was a Sikh in this sense, for the word Sikh derives from *shishya*, one who learns. Sikhism, therefore, rests upon a culture of continuous inquiry, reflection and spiritual learning.

Guru Granth Sahib embodies this tradition, being not merely a sacred text in the conventional sense but also a vast reservoir of poetry, meditation, ethical reflection and divine insight meant to guide the seeker towards a deeper relationship with the divine. But this transformation did not mean the deification of paper and ink. The Gurus were not elevating a physical object; they were affirming the supremacy of the *shabad*, the divine word.

This is precisely why the attempt to codify the Granth Sahib within legal frameworks, whether through the SGPC Act or state legislation defining ‘desecration’, raises troubling questions. Can a body of spiritual wisdom be reduced to the language of legal adjudication?

Can a judge determine what constitutes the ‘desecration’ of a text whose essence lies in the indestructibility of its word? The *shabad*, the divine word celebrated throughout the Granth Sahib, is understood in Sikh philosophy as eternal and omnipresent. No physical act upon a printed volume can destroy the spiritual force of that word.

When the state or religious institutions attempt to legislate elaborate rules about how the Granth Sahib must be trans-



STRONG CONNECTION : The bond between devotee and Guru belongs to faith, *astroc*

ported, who may accompany it or how it may cross national borders, they risk transforming a living spiritual guide into a juridical object.

The requirement, for instance, that the Granth Sahib cannot be taken abroad unless accompanied by designated attendants imposes a bureaucratic ritualism that seems far removed from the spirit of Sikh thought. Instead, the followers of Sikhism must advocate the free circulation of the holy text so that it reaches the far corners of the globe.

It is a common and longstanding practice among many Sikhs — whether they are army officers, judges, civil servants, professionals or ordinary citizens — to keep a copy of Guru Granth Sahib in their homes and devote a quiet room as a place of daily prayer.

When such individuals are transferred from one city to another, as often happens in professions like the armed forces or the civil services, Guru Granth Sahib travels with them, carefully and respectfully carried to the new home. No authority questions

When reverence becomes codified through the machinery of the state, something essential may be lost.

where it is housed, nor does any institution presume the right to supervise the private space of devotion in which the scripture is kept.

The relationship between a devotee and Guru Granth Sahib is intimate and sacred; it belongs

to the realm of faith, not surveillance. To place this deeply personal bond under scrutiny or regulation risks creating fear among followers and undermines the living reverence that has sustained the Sikh tradition for generations.

To suggest that such a practice would now require legal permissions or ceremonial escorts is to misunderstand the very nature of Guru Granth Sahib. The Guru is not confined to institutions, jurisdictions or borders. The word of the Guru is meant to travel with the seeker, to inhabit the mind and conscience of the Sikhs wherever they may be.

The danger of excessive ritualisation is that it begins to replace spiritual engagement with mechanical reverence. Sikhism has historically resisted precisely such tendencies. The Gurus rejected empty ritual, caste hierarchy and priestly mediation.

They emphasised instead the direct encounter between the individual and the divine through the *shabad*.

If Guru Granth Sahib is treated primarily as an object requiring legal protection from

‘desecration’, its deeper purpose risks being overshadowed. The real desecration of the Granth Sahib would not lie in the mishandling of a printed volume, but in forgetting the ethical and spiritual teachings it contains, teachings of humility, justice, equality and truth.

Of course, respect for Guru Granth Sahib has always been central to Sikh life. The daily practices of *parkash* and *sukhasan*, the covering of the head, the removal of shoes in the presence of the Guru, are customs reflecting reverence developed organically within the community.

But these practices emerged from devotion, not from legislative compulsion. When reverence becomes codified through the machinery of the state, something essential may be lost: the inner relationship between the Sikh and the word of the Guru.

Consider the paradox that arises when courts or legislatures attempt to adjudicate upon the sanctity of the Granth Sahib. The *shabad*, as the Gurus remind us, is eternal and indestructible. The divine word cannot be diminished by physical acts upon a printed volume.

To suggest that a judge must determine what constitutes the ‘desecration’ of the Guru is to introduce a hierarchy in which a temporal authority appears to stand in judgment over the Guru.

The call for special legislation to protect Guru Granth Sahib is, at one level, understandable, given the deep anguish caused whenever an act of sacrilege occurs. Yet from both a constitutional and philosophical perspective, such additional codification is unnecessary.

Under the framework of the Constitution, any act that deliberately insults or provokes religious sentiments, or incites violence against a community or its sacred symbols, already falls squarely within the domain of criminal law and public order.

Of course, respect for Guru Granth Sahib is fully empowered to investigate, prosecute and punish such offences. To create a separate law specifically for Guru Granth Sahib risks implying that the spiritual authority of the Sikh scripture somehow depends upon the protective arm of the state or institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

But the philosophical foundations of Sikh thought suggest that its moral authority has endured through centuries of upheaval without the need for legislative guardianship. To insist on special laws, therefore, is not only redundant within an already robust constitutional order, but also risks reducing a transcendent spiritual authority to the realm of political management.

Asa Sikh, I do not understand my relationship to Guru Granth Sahib as mediated solely through institutional authority, whether the Akal Takht, the SGPC or the courts of law. My relationship is with the wisdom of the word itself.

Sikhism, at its core, calls us towards knowledge, perseverance, compassion and truth. The Granth Sahib is the guide in that lifelong quest and does not require borders, regulations or judicial definitions of reverence. Its authority lies in the eternal power of the word, which the law can contain and no act can destroy.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 Destructive swarming insect (6)
- 4 Animated (8)
- 9 Person causing wanton damage (6)
- 10 Of the greatest importance (8)
- 12 Accompanied by (4)
- 13 Packs tidily (5)
- 14 Stopper (4)
- 17 Fit, if not strictly legal treatment (5,7)
- 20 Very remote place (4,2,6)
- 23 Wander (4)
- 24 Twenty (5)
- 25 Distribute cards to players (4)
- 28 Give approval to (8)
- 29 Marooned (6)
- 30 Be more important than (8)
- 31 Emaciated (6)

DOWN

- 1 Forceful energetic person (4,4)
- 2 Interpret (8)
- 3 Done on spur of the moment (4)
- 5 Take foolish risks (4,4,4)
- 6 Discourteous (4)
- 7 Language (6)
- 8 Downpour (6)
- 11 Prompted feeling of sympathy (6,1,5)
- 15 Area of shallow water (5)
- 16 Group of eight (5)
- 18 Simple and unsophisticated (8)
- 19 In great adulation (8)
- 21 In quick tempo (6)
- 22 Broad tree-lined road (6)
- 26 Rise from sleep (4)
- 27 Linger furtively (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Climb, 4 Adjunct, 8 Ban, 9 On impulse, 10 Address, 11 Toady, 13 Equity, 15 Tragic, 18 Atic, 19 Chamde, 21 Out of true, 23 Sap, 24 Ticked, 25 Diary.

Down: 1 Cabbage, 2 In no doubt, 3 Broke, 4 Amidst, 5 Jupter, 6 Nil, 7 Teeny, 12 Aegean Sea, 14 Tactical, 16 Cheaply, 17 Scared, 18 About, 20 Ahead, 22 Tic.

SU DO KU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

3	7	2	8	5
9	2			7
6			3	9
	9	1		8
		7	2	
8		3	5	
	2	4		9
7			6	
9	5		6	4

CALENDAR
MARCH 24, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shiva Samvat 1948
- Chaitra Shaka 3
- Chaitra Purnashti 11
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 6, up to 4:08 pm
- Purni Yoga up to 9:08 am
- Ayushman Veda up to 6:02 am
- Rohini Nakshatra up to 7:05 pm
- Moon enters Gemini sign 8:17 am
- Gandrodia up to 12:38 am

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	29	15
New Delhi	31	17
Amritsar	26	15
Bathinda	30	15
Jalandhar	26	15
Ludhiana	29	16
Bhawan	30	11
Hisar	28	18
Sirsa	28	12
Dharamsala	25	10
Mansi	19	04
Shirna	20	06
Srinagar	21	06
Jammu	29	14
Kargil	12	02
Leh	14	02
Dehradun	27	14
Mussoorie	17	09

EMERGENCY



MANICKAM TAGORE Congress whip in the Lok Sabha

After 14 days of silence and after 14 days of election campaign in Kerala, TN, Puducherry, Bengal and Assam, the Prime Minister has found time to speak about the energy crisis now



PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI Shiv Sena-UBT MP

If we worship heroes, then it is necessary to know about the villains as well. If Jinnah is removed from textbooks, then how will future generations understand our conflicts with Pakistan?



JAYANT CHAUDHARY Minister of State for Education

The three languages, as proposed in NEP align with the two-language formula... There is complete flexibility. There is no imposition of any language, including Hindi

Manual scavenging must go

The dehumanising practice of manual scavenging is a blot on any civilised society. The fact that such a profession still exists is a matter of collective shame for India. Despite laws banning the abominable work, it persists across the country, leading to a large number of deaths of workers engaged in sewer line repair and cleaning without critical safety measures. According to official data tabled in the Lok Sabha last week, over 620 sanitation workers have died cleaning sewers and septic tanks across the country since 2017. While 539 families reportedly received full compensation, 52 did not get even a penny. This reflects a cruel apathy on the part of the governments. It is both a legal and moral obligation for the government to ensure that the kin of deceased workers get fair compensation. One wonders how a nation can aspire to become 'Viksit' (developed) by 2047, when a section of its citizens is engaged in such dehumanising work. A 2023 survey conducted under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, found no manual scavengers in any district nationwide. This is nothing but a cruel joke. The ground reality, however, is completely different. There is no let-up in tragic incidents: three sanitation workers lost their lives after inhaling toxic gases while cleaning a septic tank at a leading hospital in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, last week.

Despite ban, manual scavenging persists, highlighting caste inequality, unsafe work

Manual scavenging is closely linked to the abhorrent caste system, with nearly 92-97% of those involved belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This occupation reinforces social inequality, untouchability, and stigma. In addition to the social stigma and isolation, manual scavengers are also exposed to serious health hazards. The persistence of complaints — 842 were received by the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis last year — about unpaid wages, lack of safety gear and caste-based discrimination shows that the rot runs deep. Despite official claims that sanitation work is occupation-based, data confirms an overwhelming representation of workers from historically marginalised communities. Despite the manual scavenging Act of 2013 prohibiting the deployment of people for such tasks and making it a punishable offence, the practice persists. The Act includes manual cleaning of sewers, septic tanks, drains and manholes under the definition of 'manual scavenging'. This was necessitated by the high rate of deaths at work. Manual scavenging is a degrading profession which needs solutions that are technologically suitable, economically driven, socially responsible, and sensitive. Since manual scavengers do not use protective gear and work in extremely unhygienic conditions, they are relentlessly exposed to harmful gases such as hydrogen sulphide and methane, often resulting in respiratory illnesses, and cardiovascular and musculoskeletal disorders. They also suffer from skin problems such as psoriasis. Carbon monoxide poisoning, diarrhoea, nausea and tuberculosis are some of the other health problems they face.

India's LPG system reflects both risks and resilience, shaped by imports and changing consumption patterns



K V CHANDRAMOULI

Concerns over a looming LPG crisis deserve serious consideration. The opinion article, 'India's silent energy vulnerability—the looming LPG crisis' (March 22 2026), rightly highlights a critical and often under-discussed topic: the strategic role of LPG in India's energy security and the potential risks arising from import dependence. It successfully draws attention to the importance of energy resilience and policy planning.

At the same time, a few points would benefit from additional context and supporting data to provide readers a more complete picture, thereby complementing the author's insights and strengthening the argument further. Firstly, the article notes that India has only about 1.6 lakh tonnes of LPG storage, roughly equivalent to two days of national consumption.

Storage Ecosystem

This figure refers specifically to underground cavern storage facilities at Mangalore and Visakhapatnam. While accurate for these caverns, it does not represent the entirety of India's LPG storage ecosystem. In practice, LPG inventories are distributed across multiple nodes, including refineries, fractionation units, bottling plants, storage terminals, pipelines, coastal import facilities, and vessels in transit. India's LPG system includes over 200 bottling plants, each maintaining working inventories and forming a decentralised storage network that is not reflected in cavern storage alone.

With annual consumption of ~31 million tonnes (~85,000 tonnes/day), even



modest distributed inventories across this network provide several days of operational buffer beyond the cited cavern storage, offering a more complete picture of India's preparedness.

Access & Usage

Secondly, the article equates near-universal LPG access with near-universal dependence. While LPG connections have indeed expanded dramatically—from 14.86 crore in 2015 to over 30 crore today—access does not automatically mean exclusive or sustained usage. Government data shows that beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) consume an average of 3-4 cylinders per year, compared to 6-7 cylinders among regular consumers, suggesting partial rather than exclusive reliance.

Evidence from the NSSO 76th round further shows that many rural households continue to rely partly on biomass fuels, reflecting a "fuel stacking" pattern. Recognising this nuance could enrich the discussion on India's vulnerability to supply disruptions.

Inventory Buffer

Thirdly, the article suggests that even a one-week disruption in LPG imports could result in serious shortages. While

LPG crisis: The larger picture

KEY SYSTEM INDICATORS

Table with 3 columns: METRIC, VALUE, IMPLICATION. Rows include Annual LPG consumption, Daily consumption, Cavern storage, and Bottling plants.

CONSUMPTION PATTERN INDICATORS

Table with 3 columns: CATEGORY, AVERAGE USAGE, INSIGHT. Rows include PMUY beneficiaries, Regular consumers, and Rural households using biomass.

SUPPLY CHAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Table with 3 columns: FACTOR, ESTIMATE, IMPLICATION. Rows include Import dependence, Gulf shipping time, US shipping time, and Cargo movement.

STRATEGIC COMPARISON

Table with 3 columns: ENERGY TYPE, RESERVE LEVEL, COVERAGE. Rows include Crude oil (SPR) and LPG (strategic).

Sources: Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC), LPG Consumption & Import Data Report, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Household Consumption of Various Goods, 76th Round; International Energy Agency, India Energy Outlook (latest editions); of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (COMINTS), Trade

this is a valid concern for contingency planning. India's import and distribution system provides inherent flexibility. India imports roughly 55-60% of its LPG requirement (~27 million tonnes annually), through a combination of long-term contracts and spot purchases, with multiple shipments continuously in transit. Shipments from the Gulf typically take 5-7 days, while those from the US take about 40-45 days, creating a rolling inventory buffer rather than a single-point dependence. Additionally, while the article mentions specific supplier shares, these figures fluctuate annually depending on contracts and global supply conditions. Citing precise sources would enhance accuracy without detracting from the broader point about West Asia dependence.

The country imports around 60% of its LPG requirement through a mix of long-term contracts, spot buys, with multiple shipments continuously in transit

Strategic Reserves

Finally, the article rightly notes the absence of dedicated strategic LPG reserves comparable to India's strategic petroleum reserves for crude oil. While India maintains ~5.3 million tonnes of crude oil reserves (~9-10 days of coverage), no similar centralised LPG reserve exists. Nonetheless, the distributed commercial inventories act as day-to-day operational buffers.

In conclusion, the article's call to expand LPG storage capacity and diversify supply sources is both timely and crucial for India's energy security. By incorporating additional context and operational data — such as distributed bottling inventories, partial household reliance, and rolling import shipments — the discussion could present a more balanced yet compelling picture of the country's strengths and vulnerabilities.

Strengthening the narrative with such evidence would not only reinforce the urgency of strategic planning but also highlight India's resilience and capacity to manage short-term disruptions, making the conversation around LPG security both credible and actionable.

(The author is a retired Deputy Director of Boilers, Mysuru)

Letters to the Editor

Unfolding crisis Pakistan's long-standing strategy of cultivating militant groups as instruments of regional influence is now rebounding with alarming consequences. The rise of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, operating from bases in Afghanistan, has intensified security challenges within Pakistan itself. Once perceived as strategic assets, such groups have evolved into autonomous forces, turning their guns inward. Frequent attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians underline the dangers of nurturing extremism for short-term geopolitical gains. This unfolding crisis exem-

plifies the adage "you reap what you sow." N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

Poll battle

The nation is all set for yet another major election battle in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Assam, West Bengal and Pondicherry next month, and the poll battleground is witnessing all sorts of fireworks and explosions never seen before. Parties and candidates need to understand that the various promises and privileges made in their manifestos are not hollow assurances but are to be put into action by the winning parties once they come to power. In most cases, issues and problems of the commoners remain forever. M PRADYU, Kannur

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

- The New York Times
Ozempic is about to go generic
The blockbuster weight loss drug sold as Ozempic and Wegovy will soon go generic in countries that are home to 40 percent of the world's population, significantly lowering the price of a costly medicine.
■ The Kathmandu Post
India-China push to resume Lipulekh...
India's news agency, the PTI, reported that, after a six-year gap, border trade between China and India via the Lipulekh Pass in the Pithoragarh region of Uttarakhand is expected to resume this year.
■ The Economist
India is changing its hues

It is all colour, bewitching, enchanting — everywhere all around." Mark Twain's breathless first impressions of India, recorded in his travelogue "Following the Equator", would hardly be out of place in an Instagram post.

Opinion

TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 2026

Resource rush

Current crisis highlights the need to double down on mineral security, rework policies

THE WAR IN West Asia and the disruption of the Strait of Hormuz offer a vantage point to interpret the increasingly complex supply chain issues haunting a fractured, trust-deficient world. There is a haphazard rush for resource capture and a growing fervor of resource nationalism. India appears to be at the receiving end of this geopolitical churn, perhaps more than any other large nation. The country has only recently surpassed China as the world's largest oil demand driver, with gasoline and diesel consumption in the neighbouring country slowing due to its massive adoption of electric vehicles and gas-fired trucks. As much as 89% of the crude oil consumed by India is imported, as is nearly half of its natural gas. India's persistent exposure to external supply shocks is not restricted to energy; it extends to non-hydrocarbon minerals as well.

For instance, bauxite production has been stagnant over the last decade, and chrome output has even declined. Domestic copper production has been falling, necessitating a tenfold jump in imports of this base metal in the last decade, along with an export plunge. The picture is clearer from aggregated data: gross value added (GVA) in "mining and quarrying" lost its share in overall GVA from 4.8% in 1999-2000 to just 2% in recent years. The country is also heavily import-dependent for critical minerals. While India's import reliance is nearly 100% for lithium and cobalt, 70% of its current supplies come from China.

To be fair, India's policymaking has been responsive to growing mineral constraints in recent years. The last decade saw sweeping reforms in the non-hydrocarbon mineral segment, including the launch of an auction-based allocation system. Composite leases covering prospecting to mining were introduced, along with certainty of tenures and transferability of rights. All this is intended to spur the largely elusive private investor, particularly in extracting deep-seated resources. Administered nature of natural gas pricing has been considerably eased, especially with regard to geographically challenging offshore fields. A National Critical Mineral Mission was launched in January last year, with solid budget and public-sector support. For the first time, exploration licences for critical mineral blocks were auctioned off, with the facility of artificial intelligence-enabled targeting. Coal India, NTPC, Adani Group, Vedanta, and others have laid out plans to venture overseas to explore battery minerals. Bilateral long-term contracts are being finalised with mineral-rich countries. Early this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi set tall targets, such as \$100 billion in investments in the oil and gas sector and the exploration of one million square kilometres by the end of this decade.

Yet, it is clear that the policy initiatives thus far haven't squared up. The current conflict troubling most of West Asia has raised input costs for assorted Indian industries in no time. Scattered resources and the absence of advanced processing technologies have apparently dissuaded private investors from betting big on India's mineral fields. This has limited the overall scale of operations and efficiency gains. Mining intermediaries inflate costs. Policies need to be reworked to address these issues and encourage investments in mineral processing. The latest moves, such as mandating that all solar projects use locally manufactured ingots and wafers, underscore the renewed importance given to indigenisation and upstream linkage. These are welcome. Simultaneously, mining infrastructure must be upgraded and integrated seamlessly with global supply lines and maritime networks. Outbound investments in search of strategic mineral security must accelerate.

Why young people are taking unwise financial risks

THERE ARE AT LEAST two conflicting narratives about Gen Z and young millennials. One is that they are extremely risk averse — afraid to even go out of the house, much less on a date. Another is that they are extremely risk inclined — always betting on sports or speculating on exotic assets. Both of these theories can be true. In fact, they may be equally rational responses to a concern that the world is changing and the old rules don't apply. But they both require an understanding of risk that very few investors, much less young people, possess.

A recent survey from Northwestern Mutual shows that many young people are betting on unconventional high-risk assets because they believe it is the only way to build wealth. It also reveals some good news: Despite a year marked by wild market swings and deep economic uncertainty, more people feel financially secure than they did a year ago, including 39% of Gen Zers (up from 36%) and 52% of millennials (up from 43%). Just a few years ago meme stocks were all the rage, but now it is just straight up gambling. Some 32% of Gen Zers say they gamble in crypto or sports betting; 39% of millennials own crypto, while 24% bet on sports. Less than 20% of either investment in options or meme stocks. Even more surprising, many of those who don't feel financially secure believe the only way to reach their goals is to take big risks.

It is a core truth of financial markets that higher rewards come with more risk. But some risks are better than others. Betting big on March Madness may mean bigger potential payoffs than investing in the S&P. But the stock market is much more likely to help people build wealth over time.

Of course, young people have been taking dumb risks since Roman teenagers bet on gladiator contests in the Colosseum. And for many young investors, who have much less experience in markets but also lack a family or a mortgage, now is the time to experiment and learn. My concern is not with risk itself — it's that too many of the younger generation are taking bad risks that offer little potential for growth or upside.

Why are young people choosing bad risks over more productive ones? One answer may be that those more productive risks are out of reach, so they go for broke. Wealth is now more concentrated among the old and the rich, housing is unaffordable, it is hard to find a job. If the economy offers so little in terms of opportunity, betting on a total long shot can feel like the only option.

But even if things are hard, they are not harder than they used to be. It is normal for people in their 20s to feel like the economy is stacked against them. It is a hard time of life, economically if not socially, but there is not much evidence that it is worse than before. The median household under 30 in 2022 had higher wages and wealth than the same group did in 1989. There is also a lower risk of losing your job, and while unemployment for young people has been higher lately, it is still lower than many non-recessionary periods of the past.

Another answer to the question of why may be lack of financial education. Most people don't know how to invest, and people pushing high-risk, high-reward strategies are all over social media. Even financial professionals get swept up in the hype of a bull market — and most investors under 30 have only ever experienced a bull market. (The stock market did fall in 2020, but it came back fast and harder than ever.) A risky market tends to rush up the performance of other risky, high-beta assets.

If you think the world is changing so fast that almost anything goes, then you may decide that you have no choice but to try to get on the next big thing and hope for the best. Or you might decide to own a bit of everything and take advantage of the uncertainty to be on the one thing you know better than anyone: yourself.



ALLISON SCHRAGGER
Bloomberg

THERE IS A small irony at the centre of the AI coding boom. The companies that dazzled the software world by letting users generate code from plain English have also created a second market: tools built to inspect, test, and repair the code those models produce. In other words, one layer of artificial intelligence is now being built to supervise another.

That market exists for an obvious reason. Systems such as ChatGPT and Claude can produce working code with remarkable speed, but they are still prediction engines, not infallible programmers. They are good at producing plausible answers, and plausible code is not always correct code. A function may compile and even pass a basic demo while still failing on edge cases, violating internal conventions, introducing security flaws, or breaking dependencies elsewhere in a large codebase.

This is where a newer class of companies has found its opening. Rather than competing only on who can generate more code, firms such as Augment Code, Qodo, Sweep, and Axiom are focusing on what comes after generation: code review, defect detection, test creation, and, in Axiom's case, mathematical verification. The shift is subtle but important. The value is moving from speed alone to assurance.

Augment Code's public pitch is built around what it calls a Context Engine. The idea is that fixing code requires understanding more than a single file or diff. A bug may come from how services interact, how data flows through an API, or how a change in one module ripples across many others. Augment says it semantically indexes a codebase and maps relationships across files, dependencies, architecture, and history. That richer context lets its review system flag logic errors, security vulnerabilities, and breaking changes with more precision than tools that only



REMEMBERING LOHIA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

He was a multifaceted personality who played a pivotal role in mobilising people against colonial rule... His unwavering commitment to the cause of empowering the poor and the marginalised continues to inspire generations

TECHPROOF EXPRESS

NEW WAVE IN CODE TEACHING MACHINES TO IMITATE REVIEWERS, TESTERS, & OCCASIONALLY THEOREM PROVERS

An AI layer supervising another

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist
By invitation



inspect a narrow patch.

Qodo, formerly Codium, occupies a similar but slightly broader position. Its emphasis is "review first, not copilot first." Publicly, Qodo describes itself as an AI code review and quality platform with deep multi-repo context, agentic workflows, test generation, governance, and standards enforcement. That description helps because it captures the real shape of this industry. The problem is not merely to write a function. It is to decide whether the function is safe, consistent with team practice, adequately tested, and acceptable in a production pipeline.

Sweep is an instructive example of how fluid this category remains. It first drew attention for turning software issues into code changes and pull requests, and is now positioned as a coding agent and autocompile assistant with explicit attention to editing failures. The practical lesson is that the fixing layer can take several forms: issue-to-pull request automation, review assistance, or repair suggestions during code editing itself. In each case, the commercial bet is the same: developers will pay not only for code generation, but also for reduction in downstream debugging pain.

What algorithms sit underneath these promises? Public materials support some claims more clearly than others. The first is semantic retrieval. Instead of treating code as ordinary prose, these

systems index functions, files, and dependencies so they can retrieve the relevant context for a bug or review task. That usually involves code embeddings, repository indexing, dependency mapping, and search over large codebases. The second is static analysis, the older discipline of inspecting code structure without executing it. Static analysis helps identify suspicious patterns, unreachable branches, API misuse, and missing checks. The third is test generation: the system proposes unit tests or scenario tests designed to expose edge cases, then uses failures as signals for repair.

Qodo has also publicly highlighted multi-agent or agentic workflows, meaning the work is decomposed into narrower review roles rather than handled by one giant model prompt. One agent may check tests, another documentation, another security or standards compliance. That decomposition mirrors good engineering practice. A senior reviewer does not ask one vague question—"Is this code good?"—but several concrete ones.

Increasingly, these systems resemble small teams rather than single tools. Axiom takes the most radical path. Its premise is that the long-term answer to unreliable AI code is not just better prompts or broader code search, but formal verification. Axiom's platform, AXLE, is tied to proof verification and proof transformation, reflecting a for-

mal-methods approach that asks whether code-related claims can be machine-checked rather than merely judged plausible. The philosophical leap is enormous. Instead of asking whether code looks right, formal methods ask whether machine-checkable proof can establish that it is right.

That is a very different standard from conventional code generation. Large language models work by statistical likelihood. Formal verification works by logical necessity. If a proof fails to verify, the system has not merely become uncertain; it has been shown to be wrong. That makes Axiom especially relevant in domains where "probably correct" is not good enough: cryptography, infrastructure, aerospace, medicine, or financial systems with strict correctness and deterministic (meaning absolutely certain, not just the most likely) outcome requirements.

None of this means the code-fixing companies have solved software reliability. Public descriptions from these firms are still, understandably, marketing descriptions, and many internal details remain proprietary. It would be too strong to claim, for example, that every company here uses symbolic execution, satisfiability solvers, or reinforcement learning in the precise ways research describes those methods. In several cases, the public record supports broader claims — semantic indexing, context-aware review, test generation, multi-step workflows, formal proof checking — more clearly than it supports specific implementation details.

Even so, the pattern is clear. Code generation is becoming abundant; assurance is scarcer and therefore more valuable. The first wave taught machines to imitate programmers. This new wave is teaching machines to imitate reviewers, testers, and, occasionally, theorem provers. In software, glamour may launch a market. Reliability is what usually turns it into an enduring industry in the end.

Tackling the West Asian curveball

ANUBHUTI SAHAY

Head of South Asia Economic research, Standard Chartered Bank



The escalating West Asia tensions have thrown a curveball at global economic prospects, and India is feeling the heat. The interplay between growth, inflation, and fiscal dynamics has become more complex, leaving policymakers in a tough spot. While inflation is set to jump on elevated energy prices, the key question is whether economic activity can be a bigger casualty. Four out of five global recessions since the 1950s have been preceded by oil shocks.

There's no crystal ball for answers during such geopolitical events. Some fallout is inevitable, but the hit India takes will depend on three things — how long the conflict lasts, the aftermaths in global energy markets, and policymakers' agility during and after the war.

The silver lining is that India has entered the West Asian tensions in a position of strength. Growth over the last 12 months has been close to or higher than trend (partially flattered by one-off measures), inflation has been low, and trade diplomacy is shifting from negotiating tables to delivery mode, albeit with a lag. An import cover of around 10 months (more than 3x the prescribed International Monetary Fund metric to assess adequacy of foreign exchange reserves) assures sufficient external buffers.

Yet, beneath these comforting macro trends is rising discomfort on the ability of the external sector to absorb repeated global shocks amid thinning capital flows. Historically, these buffers have been

India's go-to shield for macro stability and growth resilience. If India's growth story is to continue to shine amid the throes of an uncertain world, much will hinge on the resolve to protect these crucial external buffers.

India has posted two years of a balance-of-payments (BoP) deficit for the first time on record, in stark contrast to the \$100 billion surpluses in the two years prior to the Russia-Ukraine war. In the past, the BoP deficit from a widening current account deficit (CAD) due to a surge in commodity prices was only temporary; recall 2012-13 or the Russia-Ukraine war that started in 2022. As capital flows were steadier then, BoP deficits were rare and a one-year phenomenon.

This is not the case today. Capital flows over the last two years have been less than one-third of what was the case two years before the Russia-Ukraine war. We see a risk of a BoP deficit for a third consecutive year, as the comfort from a well-behaved CAD over the last couple of years might not play out this time around; the CAD can be 1.5-2.5x the current expectation of less than \$40 billion if crude oil prices stay within \$90-110 per barrel for a year.

This implies that India's forex reserves, and thus import cover, run a risk of mov-

ing lower unless valuation gains on dollar weakness and higher gold prices offset the drain on foreign reserves on potentially another year of deficit. Between April and December 2025, India's forex reserves were bolstered purely by valuation gains.

With real forex reserve gains hard to come by for now, the right trade-off is to allow the Indian rupee to be the shock absorber. Such an adjustment is likely to keep growth prospects relatively protected by safeguarding against unnecessary policy tightening. Central bank rate hikes aren't just about inflation — they're also used to stabilise the currency if external buffers weaken.

While India isn't anywhere near this point, a relentless defence of the currency amid strong global headwinds and rising global yields can necessitate sharper-than-required rate increases, amplifying downside risk to economic activity. Should oil prices stay above \$100 per barrel for a year, GDP growth could slip by almost 100 basis points, with the baseline at 7%, according to a Standard Chartered estimate. This doesn't even account for disruptions in supply, which are already hampering smaller enterprises. Inflation can surge towards 5-5.5% from a baseline of 4% over the next 12 months but is still likely to

The government needs to take measures to contain energy demand/import bill with a minimal impact on growth

remain within the mandated band of 2-6%, making rate hikes a less compelling policy measure for now, at least for inflation management.

Along with increased tolerance for the rupee's weakness, more measures to contain demand and thus the import bill are needed as well. India's dependence on West Asia goes well beyond crude oil, extending deeply to gas supplies and fertilisers. While the government has already increased coking gas prices, rationed gas availability for commercial use, and is identifying new sources of lost energy imports, substituting West Asian energy supplies rapidly is a tall order. Thus, it needs to take measures to contain energy demand/import bill with a minimal impact on growth. Usually, price is a great allocator. However, given that supply is likely to remain a challenge, explicit measures to reduce fuel supply for less productive activity are needed too.

Focus should remain on the cross of the problem-divided capital flows. While India has little control on elevated global rates or large AI investment (which the US and China have already made), urgent remedial measures are required to boost returns on Indian assets. Further diversification of energy imports, boosting energy security, and putting the execution capacity to maximise gains from recent trade deals are equally important. Short-term measures can help brave a storm but cannot be a panacea for deeper challenges.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mulling simultaneous elections

Apropos of "The impact of simultaneous elections" (FE, March 23), conducting Lok Sabha and Assembly polls together could reduce the logistical burden on the state, cut election-related expenditure, and minimise the disruption caused by India's near-continuous election cycle. At the same time, simultaneous elections may allow national issues to

dominate the political narrative, thereby overshadowing regional priorities and weakening the federal character of Indian democracy. Such a shift could dilute the space for state-specific debates and reduce the ability of voters to make distinct choices at different levels of governance. The constitutional and structural challenges further complicate the proposal. Thus, while the idea promises efficiency, its implementation must carefully

balance administrative gains with preserving India's democratic ethos. —Narayanan Kizhundayar, Thiruvananthapuram

USD's sheen fading?

Apropos of "Is Losing Reserve Asset Sheen?" (FE, March 23), the dollar's gradual decline in relative sheen is a long-running trend, not a sudden crisis, and no credible alternative currently meets the structural requirements of a global reserve currency. The euro's fiscal

fragmentation and China's capital controls are real constraints, not minor quibbles. India's own reduction in US debt holdings and increase in gold reserves reflects sensible portfolio thinking. Diversification at the margins is prudent; wholesale abandonment of dollar-denominated assets would be neither realistic nor wise for any major economy in the near term. —M Barathi, Bengaluru

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Sometimes, your good qualities
are the cause of your problems.

Nizar Qabbani

(20th-century Syrian poet, publisher and diplomat)

Opinion

The US and Israel have different goals in the war on Iran

CON COUGHLIN



Con Coughlin is one of Britain's leading journalists and an international best-selling author. His previous posts include Executive Defense and Foreign Affairs Editor with London's Daily Telegraph. He is a leading expert on global conflict, international security and the Middle East.

This column first appeared in Al-Majalla.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Donald Trump's claim that he knew nothing about Israel's attack on Iran's main gas field suggests that significant tensions exist between the US president and Israel over how best to prosecute their joint military campaign against Iran.

Ever since Trump launched Operation Epic Fury more than three weeks ago, questions have been raised about the precise nature of the cooperation between the US military and its Israeli counterpart.

While Trump has suggested his main priority is to destroy, once and for all, Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapons arsenal, the Israelis, who have dubbed their effort Operation Roaring Lion, appear determined to wage their campaign until regime change has been achieved in Tehran. Leaked documents and recordings have revealed a wide-scale Israeli effort to scare lower-ranking officials in the hope of enabling a popular uprising in Iran, while

also assassinating senior regime figures.

By contrast, the US military has mainly been targeting Iran's nuclear and military sites, especially the country's ballistic missile launch pads that have been used to attack neighboring Gulf countries. While Trump has indicated he would like to see the war ultimately result in regime change in Tehran, he does not appear as committed to such an outcome as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has specifically said that he wants Israel's military attacks on Iran to result in regime change.

One crucial difference in the prosecution of the war by the Americans and the Israelis has been an unwillingness on the part of the Americans to target key Iranian infrastructure, especially its energy sector — at least so far.

Trump's approach was clear during the recent US military attack on Kharg Island, the narrow strip of Iranian territory in the Gulf that is responsible for about 90

percent of Iran's oil exports. While the US attacked a number of military bases, it avoided attacks on the island's oil facilities, with Trump declaring that he had deliberately left them untouched.

By contrast, Israel appears to have no qualms about attacking key Iranian infrastructure targets, with Israeli warplanes launching an attack on the South Pars gas field on Wednesday.

While Israel insists that key Iranian infrastructure presents a legitimate target in its war against the regime, the attack on South Pars has exposed tensions between Israel and the Trump administration, with the American president insisting that he knew nothing about the Israeli attack, stating that Israel had "violently lashed out" by attacking the gas field.

In an attempt to draw a red line over which targets should and should not be attacked in the war, Trump insisted that Israel would not conduct any more attacks against Iran's energy sector unless the

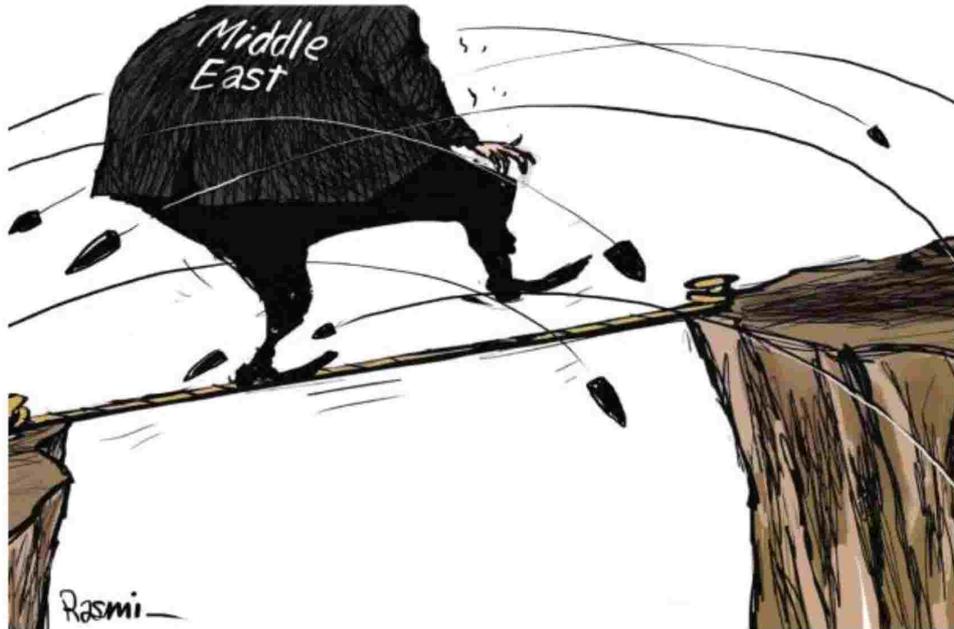
Iranians continued their attacks on energy targets in the Gulf.

Despite Trump's threat to "massively blow up" South Pars if Iran continued to attack the energy infrastructure of its Gulf neighbors, Israel's role in initiating the tit-for-tat strikes in the energy sector has led to suggestions of a rift emerging between the US and Israel, particularly in terms of how long the fighting will continue.

Trump has indicated that the US has already achieved most of its war aims and that he might be minded to end hostilities in the near future. Netanyahu, by contrast, seems determined that Israel continue fighting so long as the regime still stands.

With US media reports that the Trump administration is already talking to Iran about ending the conflict, Netanyahu's insistence on maintaining hostilities until his own goals are achieved could result in further tensions developing between the US and Israeli administrations.

Netanyahu has specifically said that he wants Israel's military attacks on Iran to result in regime change



COURTESY: SAHAB (DUBAI) UNIVERSITY AL-ARABIA

People here have become acutely aware of both the geopolitical risks and the structural advantages of the region

A Gulf lesson in crisis management

ARNAB NEIL SENGUPTA



Arnab Neil Sengupta is a senior editor at Arab News. X: @arnabng

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

For residents of Dubai, Feb. 28 was a normal day until the unfamiliar sounds of missile interceptions drowned out the background noise of speeding cars and construction work. Those following the news at that very moment were perhaps the only ones who guessed what those sounds were. For the vast majority, however, it was a rude awakening. The country across the Gulf had suddenly begun lobbing gigantic missiles and combat drones at the cities of the Arabian Peninsula in retaliation for a combined military assault by Israel and the US.

The initial booms were possibly mistaken by many residents for rockets crashing into nearby buildings; in reality, they were the sounds of ballistic missiles being neutralized by state-of-the-art interceptors. Citizens and expatriates alike remained safe because these systems were so precise as to unfailingly find their targets high in the stratosphere. This has

largely been the story for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar over the past few weeks. If there were ever a defining moment of clarity for the denizens of the Gulf, this is it.

With the US-Israeli campaign to destroy Iran's missile infrastructure and military sites now in its fourth week, people here have become acutely aware of both the geopolitical risks and the structural advantages of the region. There are no scary sirens triggering panicked runs to bomb shelters. Instead, residents receive automated, localized alerts on their smartphones, informing them of threats and again when the "coast is clear."

Underpinning this calm is a master class in crisis management that will be taught in public policy courses in the years to come.

Central to this stability has been the clarity and transparency of official communication. By providing real-time updates and debunking misinformation within minutes, governments have effectively neutralized the rumor mills

that usually thrive in conflict zones — and increasingly so in the age of politically motivated social influencers and artificial intelligence tools. This transparency has been instrumental in building and maintaining a sense of trust that keeps the social fabric intact in a region where non-citizens outnumber citizens in quite a few countries.

The physical evidence of this stability is everywhere. So far, there has not been a hint of a shortage: fresh food, cooking gas and electricity remain constant. Even flower shops are stocked with fresh imports from across the globe despite airspace being closed over many cities and the threats faced by ships using the Gulf.

Reports in Western publications suggesting a "flight of capital" or a mass exodus of the wealthy seem either agenda-driven or detached from reality. However, a nagging worry persists: the fear that Washington might declare a unilateral ceasefire or strike a deal with the regime in Tehran without seeking ironclad

security guarantees for its Gulf partners. President Donald Trump's conversational sallies — "a little excursion," "winding down" and "the war is very complete, pretty much" — do little to inspire confidence in a long-term American commitment, which is vital for the restoration of stability. Despite four weeks of bombardment, Iran's arsenal remains a potent "known unknown."

One of the upsides of this crisis is that it has demolished the stereotype of the Gulf as a playground for the wealthy or a temporary stopover for expats. The past four weeks have been a testing time that has revealed a region of highly organized states capable of closing ranks in the face of a common enemy and shielding their people from the worst impulses of their neighbors. The hope is that, regardless of what happens to Iran, the Gulf will no longer be viewed as a destination for opportunity, but rather as a bastion of resilience and potential in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Opinion

America facing a growing terror threat from within

DALIA AL-AQIDI



Dalia Al-Aqidi is executive director at the American Center for Counter Extremism.

America is being tested by a threat that is no longer distant, organized in foreign camps or directed solely from abroad. It is increasingly diffuse, harder to detect and more dangerous precisely because it grows from within. The rise in terrorist plots and attacks inspired by radicalism and extremism should alarm every American — not only because of their frequency but because of the conditions that allow them to take hold.

This is not speculation. It is the conclusion of America's own intelligence community.

The 2026 Annual Threat Assessment, released last week by Director of National Intelligence Tuli Gabbard, shows that the biggest terrorist risk America is facing today comes from individuals or small groups acting on their own, driven by extreme beliefs. These attackers are often not directly tied to larger organizations or guided by foreign groups. But they are still influenced by dangerous ideas that make violence seem justified and even necessary in response to what they see as injustice.

This shift represents a profound evolution in the threat landscape. Groups such

as Daesh and Al-Qaeda may have lost much of their ability to carry out large-scale, coordinated attacks. But their ideological reach remains intact. In some ways, it has expanded. They no longer need to plan every attack. They only need to inspire one. The results are visible across the country.

According to FBI Director Kash Patel, US authorities disrupted 640 planned terrorist attacks in the past year alone. At the same time, the FBI is investigating about 1,700 domestic terrorism cases. Many of these involve individuals driven by what officials describe as "nihilistic violent extremism" — a mindset rooted in hatred of society and a desire to create chaos.

This is what terrorism in America looks like today: scattered, driven by ideology and much harder to detect and stop.

But addressing this threat requires more than law enforcement. It requires honesty about how people become radicalized — and how public narratives can speed up that process. Because terrorism does not start with violence, it starts with ideas.

It begins with the idea that a person's identity is under attack, their faith in order seeps and the society around them is hostile

and irredeemable. Once that belief takes hold, the path to radicalization becomes far shorter. This is why rhetoric matters.

When political figures suggest that the US is fundamentally hostile to a particular religion, they are not merely engaging in debate, they are shaping perceptions, especially among the young — impressionable individuals who may already feel alienated. Among the most prominent voices advancing this narrative is Rep. Ilhan Omar, who has repeatedly framed criticism of extremist ideologies as an attack on Muslims more broadly. This framing is deeply irresponsible.

The US should focus more on stopping radicalization early, especially online, and work with trusted voices in communities to push back against extremist ideas. Law enforcement also needs better tools, coordination and support to track lone attackers, who are harder to detect.

At the same time, immigration and citizenship policies should reflect the seriousness of terrorism, with clear consequences for those who turn to violence. And most importantly, key security agencies must be fully supported, without political

disruptions, so they can do their job effectively and keep the country safe.

Finally, there must be a renewed commitment to clarity in public discourse. America is not at war with a religion. It is confronting an ideology that distorts faith, exploits grievance and justifies violence. Failing to make that distinction clear does not promote tolerance. It creates confusion — and that confusion is precisely what extremist groups rely on.

The warning signs are no longer subtle: foiled plots, arrested suspects and attacks carried out by lone wolves.

America has faced difficult challenges before. It has done so by relying on clarity, resolve and a willingness to act decisively. Those qualities are needed now more than ever.

The Trump administration must take this threat seriously, put security first, reject dangerous narratives and confront radicalization at its source. That is how the worst outcomes are prevented. Ignoring it, downplaying it or turning it into politics will only allow the threat to spread beyond control.

It will grow. And soon, it will be much harder to stop.

This is what terrorism in America looks like today: scattered, driven by ideology and much harder to detect and stop

The US is not at war with a religion. It is confronting an ideology that distorts faith, exploits grievance and justifies violence

Africa is forging its own green future

ELIAS KAGUMYA



Elias Kagumya is Group Chief Risk Officer at the African Export-Import Bank. @Project Syndicate

The Belem Package — the set of climate finance and adaptation measures adopted at last year's COP30 UN Climate Change Conference in Brazil — was limited in scope. Still, by acknowledging that the world can no longer design climate solutions for Africa without meaningful African input, it marked a profound shift in policymaking.

Despite accounting for less than 4 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, Africa is bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. As a result, the continent has in recent years moved from the periphery of the climate finance debate to the forefront. Much of the world now recognizes that Africa's path to net-zero emissions must foster development, not constrain it. Rather than replicating old patterns of dependency, African countries must industrialize, trade and grow while forging a low-carbon future.

The inaugural environmental, social and governance report by the African Export-Import Bank, known as Afreximbank, released during COP30, reflects this shift. It finds that instead of waiting for external

solutions, African institutions are already taking the necessary steps to support the continent's economic development and climate ambitions.

But to unlock climate finance at scale, African multilateral institutions must act as a coordinated force promoting a shared continental vision. The Afreximbank report highlights a range of practical instruments, such as the Climate Change Adaptation Finance Facility, which could

help mobilize sustainable investments. Whether supporting solar projects in Cameroon or providing Nigerian businesses with stable power, these instruments demonstrate how decentralized clean energy can underpin Africa's industrialization and economic competitiveness.

Similarly, facilities such as the Africa Trade Transformation Fund can help address the continent's twin challenges of a heavy debt burden and climate vulnerability. The innovative Africa Trade Trust Fund, in particular, exemplifies the kind of project-driven instruments that will be critical to scaling up climate investment.

Effective climate action in Africa is inseparable from economic sovereignty and trade. Localizing green value chains,

building low-carbon manufacturing hubs and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure are not merely climate initiatives, they are also nation-building projects crucial to a just transition.

The question now is whether the global financial system can adjust to this new reality. As Africa builds the necessary institutions for a sustainable future, advanced economies must honor their commitments by fully funding the Loss and Damage Fund, easing access to concessional finance and treating Africa not as an aid recipient but as an equal trading partner.

Far from an act of charity, supporting Africa's green transition is the only viable path to global climate resilience and equitable growth. As COP30 made clear, the continent's financial institutions are already shifting toward clean energy on their own terms.

Africa's economic transformation will depend on technology transfer and capacity building, both of which are essential to the projects Afreximbank and its partners are financing. Consider solar farms. Beyond installation, this generating capacity becomes part of a future electricity grid, stimulates local component manufacturing and helps train a new

generation of engineers.

Make no mistake: systemic obstacles remain. Africa faces a staggering financing gap of \$1.6 trillion to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, underscoring the persistent misalignment between the global financial system and the continent's needs. The Belem Package, which acknowledges that imbalance, is a step in the right direction. Correcting distorted risk perceptions and the resulting

high credit spreads, however, will be key to unlocking private capital at concessional rates.

Encouragingly, African institutions are already responding by developing de-risking tools and blended finance models, including concessional windows and trust funds, to attract private capital. In effect, they are building the landing strips for global investment.

All of this shows that Africa is no longer willing to be defined by a crisis it did not create. Instead, the continent is pursuing a just green transition that drives industrialization, leverages local energy resources, expands trade and integrates markets. It is creating one of the defining growth opportunities of the 21st century and laying the groundwork for global climate resilience.

Much of the world now recognizes that Africa's path to net-zero emissions must foster development, not constrain it

Supporting Africa's green transition is the only viable path to global climate resilience and equitable growth



Established in 1987 by Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz CEO Jomana Rashid Alrahdid

ARAB NEWS

is a daily international newspaper published by the SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1973 by Hisham & Muhammad Ali Hafiz

Editor-in-Chief Faisal J. Abbas

Deputy Editor-in-Chief Noor Osama Nugali

ARAB NEWS WELCOMES FEEDBACK FROM READERS

Letters sent from within the Kingdom should include the writer's name, address, phone and ID numbers. E-mails from readers abroad should include a name and city. Letters should be mailed to P.O. Box 478, Riyadh 11411, Saudi Arabia. Tel: +966112128000 • Fax: +966114189071 • E-mail: general@arabnews.com

EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3; India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y; Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

L: Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 15 Rs; Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore \$3; Syria 20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 30 P; US \$1.50; Republic of Yemen R 00; Sudan 25 S.P.

SRPG AND AFFILIATED AGENCIES

JEDDAH: Tel: (966-12)283-0200; Fax: (966-12)283-6228. RIYADH: Tel: (966-11)212-8000; Fax: (966-11)442-9004. DAMMAM: Tel: (966-13)835-3930; Fax: (966-13)834-0489. ABU DHABI: Tel: (971-2)681-9999; Fax: (971-2)681-7595. CAIRO: Tel: (202-3)748-2775; (202-3)748-2996; (202-3)338-8654; Fax: (202-3)748-2884; (202-3)748-2855. MOROCCO: Tel: (212-5)37292-818; Fax: (212-5)37693-818. JORDAN: Tel: (962-6)593-7101; (962-6)501-7102; (962-6)553-9409; Fax: (962-6)553-7103. LONDON: Tel: (44-20)7621-8181; Fax: (44-20)7621-2310.

ADVERTISING: SAUDI RESEARCH AND MEDIA GROUP KSA: +966-11-294 0500 UAE: +971 4 3919500 E-mail: revenue@srmg.com Website: www.srmg.com

DISTRIBUTION AGENT TOLL FREE: (800)950-244-3276 Head Office: (Riyadh) P.O. Box 8278, Riyadh 11588 Tel: (966-11)448933; Fax: (966-11)212774 E-mail: info@saudi-distribution.com Western Region: Tel: (966-12)653-0909 Eastern Region: Tel: (966-13)847-3589 Southern Region: Tel: (966-17)221-6093 Northern Region: Tel: (966-16)324-3070 Dubai: Tel: (971-4)391-6553; Fax: (971-4)391-8354 Abu Dhabi: Tel: (971-2)673-3555; Fax: (971-2)673-3364 Kuwait: Tel: (965)483-4222; Fax: (965)483-4779 Manama: Tel: (973-7)677700

SUBSCRIPTION Head Office: (Riyadh) P.O. Box 22304, Riyadh 11495 Tel: (966-11)448933; Fax: (966-11)4429555 TOLL FREE: +86-800-244-0078 E-mail: info@arabmedico.com Web: www.arabmedico.com

PRINTING CENTER Riyadh: P.O. Box 212 Riyadh 11593; Tel: (966-11)2657000 Fax: (966-11)2658900 Sales: Tel: (966-11)4709007 Fax: (966-11)4708920 www.halajournalprint.com

DISCLAIMER Views expressed by writers in this section are their own and do not necessarily reflect Arab News' point of view.

OPINION

Woke Goes Up in Smoke



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

The “equity for me but not for thee” ethos feels over. And the green movement looks brown around the edges. So I woke up in smoke? Or is it more like Freddy Krueger, coming back to haunt the gullible? Inauguration Day’s Executive Order 14151 smartly ended government diversity, equity and inclusion programs. Corporate DEI has been scaling back faster than flight reservations to Dubai. Compared with 2024, “the term ‘DEI’ fell 98% across Fortune 100 communications,” according to Gravity Research. Four hundred colleges and universities have ended or rebranded their DEI programs. They better—as activist Edward Blum and others, fresh off his Supreme Court win in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), are suing states and organizations to end DEI and racial preferences. Woke shut down in flames.

In 2022, 20% of adults under 24 identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey. By 2025, that dropped to 15%. (A Gallup poll disagrees.) A change in biology? That fast? More like a change in culture. The libertarian in me thinks be yourself, but don’t cry victimhood to take ad-

vantage, like 6-foot-1 dudes winning women’s swimming championships.

The cracks are widening in the environmental movement. In his October memo, “Three Tough Truths About Climate,” Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates capitulates, admitting, “It will not lead to humanity’s demise.” Now you tell us? Congress ended electric-vehicle tax credits as of September. This month, Honda reported \$15.7 billion in EV-related write-downs, joining other automakers for \$70 billion in total. Climate religion is expensive.

Are you anxious about all this? This month, U.K. researchers said sugary drinks cause anxiety in young people. Maybe. Or maybe hearing “The world is going to end in 12 years if we don’t address climate change” back in 2019 flipped them out. Oh, and those potent and legal cannabis gummies too, man.

But like all slasher movies, the killer isn’t dead yet. He’s hiding in the dark. Why won’t anyone turn on the lights? Here’s a doozy: A recent *New York Times* headline blared: “17 States Led by Democrats Sue

the best show on TV, HBO’s ‘The Pitt,’ doesn’t have commercials. But it does take quick breaks in the action for not-so-subtle woke messaging. Fat-shaming. Livable wages. Expensive insurance. Medicare cuts. Deportations. Viewers

no. The Academy Awards still have “inclusion” mandates that demand “lead or signifi-

cant supporting actors from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.” Or 30% of the rest of the cast. Or a woke story line. This year’s Oscar winner glorifies bomb-making family-loving revolutionaries against demented border militia. No his share. Like Ms. Thunberg, with these folks it’s one oppression after another. No wonder best picture nominees are rarely the best.

Maggie Gyllenhaal’s “The Bride!” (of *Frankenstein*) pointlessly screams “Me Too” in this feminist fiasco of a movie. It’s a \$90 million flop. Reason magazine calls it the “lost remnants of a pre-vibe-shift culture, the last vestige of a fully woke world.”

Yes, thankfully, the vibe has shifted. We shouldn’t be grouped and partitioned by race or sex or identity. We should all be treated as individuals.

But now, artificial intelligence is vulnerable to biased training. One 2025 test showed that “90% of the time ChatGPT chose kidney recipients with black-coded names.” That breeds distrust. Who knows what woke distortions are buried deep in AI models? Last July, the president signed an executive order “Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government.” Great. But how will it know? How will the rest of us know if the AI we use is partisan?

More transparency is essential. We can’t let woke, or Freddy Krueger, lurk in the dark.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

year. Along with boost buttons. Battery recharging is often necessary by coasting on straightaways. That’s racing? More like performing nonsense to indoctrinate fans. It’s so bad that Ferrari’s Charles LeClerc says, “This is like the mushroom in Mario Kart.”

Hollywood and the media also didn’t get the “woke has croaked” memo. Fortunately, media is a lagging indicator. The best show on TV, HBO’s “The Pitt,” doesn’t have commercials. But it does take quick breaks in the action for not-so-subtle woke messaging. Fat-shaming. Livable wages. Expensive insurance. Medicare cuts. Deportations. Viewers

no. The Academy Awards still have “inclusion” mandates that demand “lead or signifi-

cant supporting actors from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.” Or 30% of the rest of the cast. Or a woke story line. This year’s Oscar winner glorifies bomb-making family-loving revolutionaries against demented border militia. No his share. Like Ms. Thunberg, with these folks it’s one oppression after another. No wonder best picture nominees are rarely the best.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Jonathan W. Jordan

‘My Early Life’ Reconsidered

A Prelude to Immortality

By Gary L. Stiles
Unicorn, 584 pages, \$52.50

Reflecting on his legacy, Winston Churchill liked to say, “I shall leave it to history, but remember that I shall be one of the historians.” As a young man, Churchill (1874-1965) already sensed that he had caught history’s eye. “We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow-worm,” he told an acquaintance in 1906. Unwilling to abide history’s timeline, in the late 1920s he wrote his only formal autobiography, “My Early Life.” Released in 1930 and eventually published in 26 languages, “My Early Life” tells Churchill’s story in his own words, from his earliest recollections to his first years in Parliament.

In “A Prelude to Immortality,” Gary Stiles, an emeritus professor of cardiovascular research at Duke University and a lifetime collector of Winston Churchill and his writings, dissects “My Early Life” for clues to the man’s beliefs about himself.

Why “My Early Life”—and not Churchill’s six-volume “The Second World War” (1948-53), or “Marlborough” (1933-38), or his six-book series “The World Crisis” (1923-31), or any of the more than three dozen other books that helped win Churchill the 1953 Nobel Prize for literature? “Churchill’s autobiography,” Mr. Stiles explains, “lays the groundwork for how he wished to be perceived and how he would approach and create his political career.”

Mr. Stiles takes a clear-eyed view of Churchill’s self-projection. “In many ways, he always thought that he was Saint George slaying the dragon,” the author writes. “Churchill wanted to portray himself as the underdog, always having to fight against great odds to earn recognition.” Letters from schoolmasters indicting “his laziness and slovenly character,” the blithe disinterest of his Victorian parents and his failed attempts to get into the British military academy at Sandhurst, Mr. Stiles writes, “are some of the most compelling and heart-wrenching passages in the book.”

Churchill wrote “My Early Life” for a generation demoralized by World War I and determined to break with its past. He recognized “that his youth was lived in a Victorian era that was long gone, with its unique social, political and moral standards,” Mr. Stiles writes. And so he used “this storyline to encourage the new generation to realize that they have many more opportunities and the ability to be more impactful and move upwards socioeconomically.”

The book’s core describes the production of “My Early Life.” Never formally trained as a historian, Churchill had to devise a method to prepare a serious autobiography, all while serving as a member of parliament and chancellor of the Exchequer, and while commencing a four-volume life of his ancestor, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). He assembled a research team to gather source documents, and a secretarial squad to which he dictated with a fervor he would make famous in World War II.

At work, he was a hard taskmaster. “Churchill not only liked to get something done on paper as soon as he possibly could, but he demanded to see at once how what he had dictated looked like in type,” Mr. Stiles writes. “One can only imagine the pressure and frustration that the printers, publishers and reviewers must have felt in the face of Churchill’s prodigious output and demands.”

Mr. Stiles writes in admiring notes that acknowledge without rancor the great man’s flaws. Take Churchill’s personal expenses: “Churchill’s approach to financial budgeting was not what most of us would term prudent,” Mr. Stiles comments. “He never really envisaged the need to decrease expenditure; rather, he always sought enhanced income to solve his financial issues.”

Never formally trained as a historian, Churchill had to devise a method to prepare a serious autobiography while serving in Parliament.

The most interesting part of Mr. Stiles’s narrative is his analysis of Churchill’s prose. “What distinguishes Churchill, the consummate writer, in this book apart from all his other works is the multitude of distinct literary styles, tones and compositional structures,” Mr. Stiles concludes. The voice, exuberant and straightforward for Churchill the small child, matures as he weathers the frustrations of schooling, survives war and captivity in South Africa, and steps onto the floor of Parliament in 1901.

Churchill’s use of alliteration, onomatopoeia and other devices served him as tools to fix “on paper the sound of the human voice,” Mr. Stiles writes. The result, the author concludes, “is in many ways a blend of prose and poetry. He writes with a lyrical flair that entices the reader to read aloud and almost sing the story being told.” He cites one example, from Churchill’s description of his cavalry regiment’s charge into the Sudanese army at Omdurman in 1898: “The whole long column of cavalry began to jingle and clatter across the front of these crouching figures,” writes Churchill. “Forthwith from every blue-black blob came a white puff of smoke, and a loud volley of musketry broke the odd stillness. Such a target at such a distance could scarcely be missed, and all along the column here and there horses bounded, and a few men fell.”

“A Prelude to Immortality” is beautifully produced and sprinkled with images of period news clippings, book advertisements and covers of foreign-language editions of “My Early Life.” Lengthy appendices compare its versions of episodes such as the Battle of Omdurman and the Boer War with earlier accounts Churchill gave to newspapers and magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Strand*.

For first-time readers looking for an overview of Churchill’s life, Andrew Roberts’ “Churchill: Walking With Destiny” (2018) represents the state of the art. William Manchester’s “The Last Lion” trilogy (1983, 1988, 2012) offers broader, though not necessarily richer, detail. “A Prelude to Immortality” is best enjoyed by Churchill aficionados looking for a swim in the pool’s deep end. It captures the essence of a young man groping for lasting fame and the story of a middle-aged man’s efforts to shape history’s view of his younger self.

With the nightmares of Hitler, Mussolini and the Iron Curtain still years in the future, Churchill mined his youth to position himself as one of history’s glowworms.

Mr. Jordan’s “Ke and Winston: World War, Cold War, and an Extraordinary Friendship” will be published on May 12.

Cuba Tries One More Big Con



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Cuba is bankrupt. Don’t let the U.S. embargo or even President Trump’s oil “quarantine,” which blocks petroleum largely to the island from Venezuela and Mexico. The world’s most infamous grifter is simply out of money again and is looking for a new mark.

This is the worst economic crisis since the military dictatorship took over in 1959. Garbage piles high in the streets. The power grid has collapsed. There are shortages of food and potable water. Mosquito-borne disease runs rampant. Protesters are taking to the streets and likely to grow more restive in the sweltering Cuban summer.

Rumors circulated in recent weeks that Mr. Trump was seeking a partnership in Havana similar to the one he struck with new Venezuelan dictator Delcy Rodríguez. Stabilizing the economy would be job one while the regime stays in power.

That trial balloon seems to have been shot down. Let’s hope so. Cuba opened itself to foreign capital in the 1990s after its sugar daddy, the Soviet Union, broke up. Spanish, British and Canadian investors, among others, thought they

were getting in on the ground floor. But there was no transition to democracy. Once Venezuelan oil subsidies—which began in the 2000s—helped the regime recover, it went hammer and tongs after the foreigners it had lured to the island.

Briton Stephen Purvis lived the nightmare. A married father of four in London, Mr. Purvis connected, in 1999, with a British company that needed an architect in Cuba. After multiple trips to the Caribbean over the course of a year, he moved his family to Havana in 2000 and began developing resorts, golf courses and infrastructure projects.

A decade later, as a senior executive at Coral Capital in Havana, Mr. Purvis seems to have thought his company was in good standing with the regime. Then, as he explains in his 2017 memoir, “Close But No Cigar,” one day state security arrested his boss and shut down the company’s office. No one knew why.

Diplomats advised Mr. Purvis to get out of the country. Having done nothing wrong, he stayed. Months later, state security arrested him.

He spent more than a year behind bars. That included eight months inside the notorious Villa Marista prison where he was held with three other men in a filthy, vermin-infested cell the area of a king-size mattress. He was al-

lowed 15 minutes of sunshine a week. Suicide attempts inside the cell block were common. One of his cellmates was an executive in a Cuban-Childean joint venture.

Mr. Purvis spent his time considering the regime’s motives. He thought about a trip he took to the United Arab Emirates with the powerful son-in-law of Raúl Castro, Luis Rodríguez López-Calleja. They had signed contracts with

Havana is inviting foreign investors again. Stephen Purvis knows how that goes.

Dubai Ports World to modernize the Port of Mariel. Cuba was to put up \$350 million. Six months later, López-Calleja changed his mind. “I don’t like to see the word ‘binding’ in contracts, and we have to cancel the project for reasons of sovereignty,” he said, according to Mr. Purvis, who was told to break the news to the Emiratis.

He obeyed and burned the project files in a bonfire on the beach. Three months later, Cuba announced the project would go ahead, with a Brazilian construction group and an \$850 million loan from Brazil. Mr. Purvis says he “never talked about his misgivings,”

Chicago’s Minimum-Wage Retreat

By Michael Saltsman

Chicago’s distressed dining scene—recently described as “on the brink of collapse”—was bolstered by good news last week, as the City Council voted to halt future increases in the minimum wage for servers and bartenders.

This is a setback for progressive Mayor Brandon Johnson, who counts the wage hike as one of his administration’s few accomplishments. But it’s good news for Chicagoans.

The City Council votes to repeal a law championed by Mayor Brandon Johnson.

Chicago’s wage woes date to 2023, when Mr. Johnson made raising the tipped minimum wage an early priority after he was elected. It was an unusual choice: Servers and bartenders already earn more than minimum wage, especially in Chicago, where a typical restaurant

worker reportedly earns nearly \$30 an hour between the lower base wage and tips.

One server from Gene & Georgetti steakhouse warned that Mr. Johnson was trying to fix “something that doesn’t need fixing.” But the mayor ignored those concerns, later describing the tipped minimum wage system as a “vestige of slavery” that had to go. He was wrong: The tipped minimum wage was created nearly a century after the abolition of slavery.

Chicago was already an expensive market to run a full-service restaurant. Between 2015 and 2023, the tipped minimum wage rose by nearly 75%, from \$5.45 to \$9.48. Restaurants trimmed jobs accordingly. Once-robust restaurant employment growth in the Chicago metro area, which rose as high as 5.6% in 2015, turned negative in the last years of the decade.

Mr. Johnson’s plan made the prior increases look modest, with the wage set nearly



Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.

to double by 2028. It didn’t take long for consequences to arrive. In the first year after the mayor’s minimum wage hike, new restaurant and tavern licenses—a key indicator of industry health—dropped by more than 8%. The Illinois Restaurant Association reported that nearly 500 restaurants closed in the first half of 2025, and 70% of the restaurants that responded to the association’s poll reported cutting staff or reducing em-

ployee hours since the wage hike took effect.

The fallout proved too much, and many of the law’s former supporters looked for an exit ramp. Alderwoman Samantha Nugent, who introduced a proposal to stop further increases in the wage, said her constituents were suffering from the mayor’s good intentions: “I’ve had several restaurants close down,” she said. “I’ve heard from servers, when the tip credit changed in Chicago, their hours were cut.”

The vote to stop further increases was a near-complete reversal of the vote from three years ago. The mayor has said he will veto the bill, meaning that the council will need to find four additional votes to override it. Still, supporters of the measure seem to have momentum on their side. Chicago’s servers have had enough.

Mr. Saltsman is executive director of the Employment Policies Institute.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Democrats Are on a Taxing Binge

The polls say Democrats are likely to do well in the November elections, so it's worth noting what they say they'll do with more power. Believe it or not, they are showing across the country that they want to raise taxes.

A buoyant stock market and strong capital gains have turbocharged tax revenue in most states, especially those with progressive tax systems. Total tax revenue across the 50 states increased 43% between 2019 and 2025, twice as much as inflation. But Democrats and their public union allies want more—much more.

Start in California, where a Service Employees International Union affiliate is seeking to qualify a referendum for the November ballot to impose a 5% wealth tax on residents with more than \$1 billion in net worth. This includes stocks, illiquid stakes in private companies, artwork, patents and family trusts.

The tax would even be levied on illusory assets. Silicon Valley investors who own supervoting shares in a company would be taxed on their voting rights, rather than the value of their shares. A startup founder could be required to pay tax on the 25% of voting rights he controls even if he only owns 5% of shares.

Gov. Gavin Newsom opposes the initiative because he says it could drive away billionaires and result in less income-tax revenue. At least six billionaires have already left. But Mr. Newsom has said he's open to a "national conversation" about a wealth tax. Tom Steyer, a leading candidate in the race to replace Mr. Newsom this November, has endorsed the wealth tax initiative.

Washington state was once a zero-income tax refuge for entrepreneurs like Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Starbucks' Howard Schultz. No longer. Democrats have passed a 9.9% income tax on millionaires, despite a state constitutional ban on a graduated income tax.

The slippery slope to an income tax began in 2022 when Democrats enacted a 7% tax on capital gains exceeding \$250,000, disguised as an "excise tax" on asset sales. Last year they raised the rate to 9.9% on capital gains over \$1 million. Now they're extending the 9.9% tax to all forms of income. Democrats also included a sneaky provision that only adjusts for inflation every other year.

The tax-and-spend ratchet is getting worse in New York, where Albany Democrats are proposing income, corporate and real-estate

tax hikes to fund more welfare and public-worker benefits. The Assembly wants to raise the top state-and-local income-tax rate to 15.9% from 14.8%, and the Senate to 15.3%. Democrats also want to raise the state top corporate tax rate and let New York City raise its rate. That would make the top business tax rate nearly 20% in New York City.

But that isn't enough for New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani. He wants to increase the estate tax to 50% from 16% and impose a two percentage-point city tax surcharge on incomes over \$1 million. That would raise the top individual rate in the city to 16.8%. If Democrats in Albany don't deliver, he's threatening an across-the-board 9.5% property tax hike.

To keep up with its blue-state neighbors, Rhode Island Democratic Gov. Dan McKee is pushing a 3% surtax on income over \$1 million, which would raise the state's top rate to 8.99%. This would eliminate one of Rhode Island's few advantages over neighboring Massachusetts, which boasts a 9% top rate on millionaires.

In Virginia, Democratic lawmakers want to use their newly gained control of the governorship to wallop high earners. One bill would impose a 3.8% tax on investment income of taxpayers making more than \$500,000, which would raise the top rate to 9.5%. Another bill would create two new individual top tax brackets of 8% (starting at \$600,000) and 10% (more than \$1 million).

Then there's Congress. Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen wants to add three new tax brackets on high earners, which would raise the top federal rate by 12 percentage points to 49%. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker is proposing to raise the current 35% tax bracket (starting at \$256,226 for individuals) to 41% and the 37% bracket (\$640,601) to 43%.

The duo are combining this with new tax exemptions for lower-wage workers plus increased refundable tax credits to redistribute more income. But don't be fooled. This is a gigantic tax increase on small businesses that pay taxes at the individual rate—\$1.01 trillion over 10 years for the Booker proposal, according to the Tax Foundation.

Democrats were supposed to have learned something from their 2024 defeat, but on fiscal policy the party is moving further left. The policies of Bernie Sanders are becoming party orthodoxy.

Everywhere you look, they're aiming to grab more taxpayer cash.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Ally We Have in Hormuz Is a Powerful One

In your editorial "The Battle for the Strait of Hormuz" (March 17), you warn that Tehran's tanker blockade is designed to raise the costs of the conflict so President Trump ends military operations before key U.S. objectives are accomplished. That is a genuine concern, but happily Israel is helping to accomplish American military objectives and freeing up some U.S. resources for the looming fight in the Strait of Hormuz.

In its National Defense Strategy published in January, the Trump administration twice identified Israel as a "model ally" and noted that Israel achieved "historic operational and strategic successes" against Iran last year. That statement is even more true now.

In this conflict, Israel has struck more than 2,000 targets across Iran, including more than 500 command and control targets, and more than 700 missile array targets, according to a March 15 update from the Israel Defense Forces.

Some Americans might dismiss the relevance of Israel's strikes in Iran, suggesting that no serious U.S. interests are involved. That view is wildly detached from reality. It ignores the Islamic Republic of Iran's hatred from birth for the U.S. and the regime's dogged determination to target Americans. The 1979 hostage crisis. The 1983 Beirut bombing. More than 600

U.S. service members killed by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq.

To be sure, the administration should have shown more respect for the American people, Congress and our allies in explaining the Iranian threat, detailing the interests at stake, and building consensus for action. But there is a real case to be made for military action. Tehran has been increasing its cooperation with Moscow and Beijing and sprinting to reconstitute and expand its ballistic missile arsenal to attack Americans, Arabs, and Israelis and shield a nuclear program the regime stubbornly refuses to relinquish. Tehran was intent on dramatically expanding its ballistic missile arsenal to overwhelm defenses. In the 12-day war in June 2025, Iran fired roughly 550 ballistic missiles, more than it fired in the preceding two conflicts in 2024 combined. Presidents of both parties have agreed that this regime, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, must never have a nuclear weapon. The danger may not have been imminent, but it was certainly growing.

There may be difficult days ahead in this war, but Americans are fortunate to have such a capable friend as Israel fighting their mutual enemy.

BRADLEY BOWMAN
JUSTIN LEOPOLD-COHEN
Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Washington

We Have a G-Man-Made Affordability Crisis

Andy Kessler correctly notes in "The High Cost of Affordability" (Inside View, March 16) that government efforts to make goods and services "affordable" often do the opposite. Subsidies, mandates and regulatory barriers frequently distort markets and push prices higher. But he omits perhaps the most important driver of rising prices: monetary policy.

For more than a century the Federal Reserve has expanded the money supply to finance government deficits and "stimulate" economic activity. When new money enters the economy, it doesn't create new goods or services; it merely increases the number of dollars chasing the same amount of output. The predictable result is higher prices.

Housing, healthcare and higher education—sectors often targeted by affordability programs—have also been

major beneficiaries of easy credit created by the Fed. Artificially low interest rates and abundant liquidity fuel borrowing, speculation and asset inflation, which eventually translate into higher consumer prices.

If policymakers truly want affordability, they must address the monetary foundation of the problem. Without sound money and limits on the Fed's credit expansion, government affordability schemes will continue to chase symptoms rather than causes.

MICHAEL SABRIN
Misses Institute
Naples, Fla.

As President Reagan would say: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

ANNA KING
Lansdale, Pa.

Florida Leads Again on Public Unions

The great dividing line on the power of unions is whether you want individual workers to be able to decide if they want to join. Florida is again coming down on the side of workers with a new bill that will require government employees to show up to recertify their union.

The bill, SB1296, would require many unions that represent government workers in the state to get at least 50% of members to participate in any vote for recertification, then win with a majority of votes cast. The bill recently passed the state House, 73-37, and Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis is expected to sign it.

The new requirements are hardly onerous, but union leaders are in a panic. South Florida Democratic Sen. Shevrin Jones said the bill would be "unions' nail in the coffin." American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said the bill is "designed to decimate our Florida locals and their contracts" because it "effectively forces" elections where "you have to turn out 50% of your entire bargaining unit or you lose your contract."

That's hardly a vote of confidence from Ms. Weingarten of the value her union provides to its members. Under the proposed regime, a union could be recertified by winning

a simple majority of half of the voting union members, or a bit over 25% of the bargaining unit. Do labor leaders really think they can't rustle up a quarter of their members to ensure the union preserves its role in representing workers?

The latest bill follows 2023 legislation that triggered a decertification vote when less than 60% of the employees eligible for representation in a bargaining unit are paying membership dues. That legislation also ended the state's power to deduct dues from public-employee paychecks.

Dozens of public union locals across the state have been decertified as a result, removing them as the representative for tens of thousands of public employees. But many teachers union locals managed to recertify by winning a majority of the small percentage of members who showed up for the votes. The new legislation will be a better test of union value.

Public unions hate this democracy in action because they want to force employees to join, coerce dues payments from them, and then provide no option for reconsideration. If teachers think their union is worth keeping, a majority can show up for the vote. Sounds like a good civics lesson for their students.

The Tragedy of Robert Mueller

Robert Mueller, who died Friday at age 81, served his country as a Marine and was the second-longest-serving director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The tragedy of his legacy is that he agreed to lead the probe into whether Donald Trump colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election.

Robert S. Mueller III was born in Manhattan in 1944, the son of a DuPont executive. He attended Princeton, but when a classmate was killed in Vietnam in 1967, he joined the Marines. He was wounded and returned to the battlefield. This noble contrast with so many others of his generation couldn't be greater.

At the Justice Department, Mueller prosecuted Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and the perpetrators of the Lockerbie bombing. George W. Bush tapped him to lead the FBI shortly before 9/11. Tasked with restructuring the agency for the war on terror, Mueller ran the FBI with discipline and professionalism.

But he was more political than his reputation, in particular as a behind-the-scenes ally of James Comey on the warrantless surveillance of terror suspects, the unjust prosecution of Lewis "Scooter" Libby, and the Javert-like and misguided pursuit of Steven Hatfill on the post-9/11 anthrax letters.

Mueller was named special counsel in 2017 for his "straight arrow" reputation, but he was

the wrong man for the job as we warned at the time. He hired partisans as staff prosecutors and indicted a string of lesser figures for crimes unrelated to his central mission.

The FBI director's long service was marred by the Russia probe.

His final report nonetheless offered a dubious conclusion that Mr. Trump "may" have obstructed justice in firing Mr. Comey as FBI director even as he declined to indict. "While this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime," the report said, "it also does not exonerate him." But the Justice Department doesn't "exonerate" people. It investigates alleged crimes and prosecutes when evidentiary standards are met.

One question is how much a declining Mueller is in control of his investigation. In July 2019, when Mueller testified before the House, his decline was apparent. William Barr, then Attorney General, recalls a meeting in March of that year in which he and others were shocked by Mueller's diminished capacity. Last year his family divulged that Mueller had been suffering from Parkinson's disease for several years.

The Russian collusion fiasco was one of the great political frauds in U.S. history. It's a shame Mueller's long record of service was marred by ill-judged decisions made in this era of acrimony and confusion.

Chinese Wind Power Isn't a Load of Hot Air

Regarding "Renewables Get a Lift in Europe" (Heard on the Street, March 12), a renewables bull market in Europe is no surprise, driven by the war in Iran, but don't forget China, which must be laughing at the U.S. for launching its then turning its back on wind power, especially offshore wind. By 2022 China was supplying nearly 60% of wind turbines in a global market once monopolized by the West, and by 2024 the world's top four turbine manufacturers were all Chinese.

Support Indigenous Icons

Gerard Baker's discussion of the Bank of England's decision to dump "national heroes in favor of animals" on its bank note in "The Bulldog Is Out of the Pound. Make Way for the Squirrel" (Editor at Large, March 17) is yet another example of the willful commitment of cultural suicide being carried out in the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S. Everywhere this trend appears, it is motivated by racist identity politics that have stoked racism and antisemitism. If this trend continues, it won't end well anywhere or for anyone. History, ignored, can be a harsh taskmaster.

PHILIPPA NEWFIELD
San Francisco

It is more than a little ironic that the one place on earth that can't celebrate indigenous people on its currency, as DEI beliefs would dictate, is the U.K.

JAMES KING
Soquel, Calif.

China itself went from virtually no domestic offshore wind farms two decades ago to hosting about half of global capacity.

In the U.S., the Biden administration approved five offshore wind projects, but the Trump administration later suspended work on them. Federal judges have ruled for work to continue on all five. Offshore wind is only one tool, and it may or may not have a future in the next century. But it makes sense now. Turning our back on offshore wind makes no sense. As the war in Iran drives up the price of oil, pulling the plug on offshore wind is giving eminence to China, free of charge.

BILL BROWN
Washington

Mr. Brown served as the chief environmental officer of the Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management from 2013-24.

There's Still Only Tradeoffs

To Bjorn Lomborg's excellent op-ed on Gavin Newsom's wildfire climate alarmism ("Newsom's Climate False Alarms," March 18), I would add: For want of \$130,000 in repairs, the 117 million-gallon Santa Ynez Reservoir was empty when needed to fight the Pacific Palisades blaze, which caused tens of billions of dollars in damages. Instead, firefighters used three storage tanks holding a million gallons each. As Thomas Sowell said, "There are no solutions, only tradeoffs."

SCOTT KAUFMANN
Kansas City, Kan.

Free Expression
From WSJ Opinion

A daily newsletter on life, politics and culture. Edited by Matthew Hennessey and featuring columnists Matthew Continetti, Kyle Smith, Louise Perry, Ben Sasse, James B. Meigs, John J. Miller, Meghan Cox Gurdon and other contributors.



Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Pepper ...
And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Here comes the airplane, fifty minutes behind schedule with parts falling off mid flight."

OPINION

American Credibility Is on the Line in Iran

By Seth Cropsey

The Trump administration finds itself in a larger war than it expected, facing a profoundly hard decision. President Trump must put boots on the ground to open the Strait of Hormuz and demonstrate the unquestionable supremacy of American power. If he fails, his legacy will be one of American collapse. If he succeeds, he will have prepared the U.S. for an intense period of competition over the next decade. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been an incorrigible U.S. adversary since its founding in 1979. It has held U.S. diplomats hostage, killed American servicemen and civilians, attacked U.S. allies, and worked with nearly every other malign actor in the world. It sought to assassinate Mr. Trump and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

If Trump leaves the job unfinished, it will do to the U.S. what the Suez crisis did to Britain and France.

Iran's machinations have distorted politics and security in the Middle East, where the U.S. has core interests. U.S. allies rely on Persian Gulf oil. The movement of troops and arms between Europe and Asia requires a stable Middle East. Leverage in the Middle East is thus an essential element of East Asian statecraft and broader Eurasian order.

These reasons justify Mr. Trump's decision to join Israel in killing Iranian theocrat Ali Khamenei and much of Iran's upper echelons on Feb. 28. They also justify his choice to continue the campaign, degrading

Iran's missile and drone infrastructure and thereby its ability to support proxies.

Yet the job, while admirably executed, is unfinished. The president wrote on Truth Social Friday that "we are getting very close to meeting our objectives as we consider withdrawing our great Military efforts in the Middle East." The same day he told reporters he isn't open to a cease-fire. It's a familiar Trumpian combination of chest-thumping and misdirection.

The "winding down" remark is belied by his comment in the same announcement that he means to prevent Iran from getting "even closer" to becoming a nuclear state and to protect "at the highest level, our Middle Eastern allies—Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates" and others. Similarly with the president's threat on Saturday to "obliterate their various POWER PLANTS." This would have the opposite effect of "winding down" the war. Thus, in fewer than two days, Mr. Trump hinted at de-escalation, called attention to U.S. military successes, noted objectives that have yet to be achieved, and threatened escalation leaving open the war's future prosecution.

In the face of American pressure, Iran has demonstrated for more than three weeks a significant degree of leverage over the Strait of Hormuz. The question now facing Mr. Trump isn't whether his campaign has been justified, but whether it will succeed. There is clearly a temptation for the U.S. to call its campaign complete. Oil prices have risen sharply, and the longer the war goes on, the more damage will be done to Gulf state oil production in general. Halting now, however, would be a cataclysmic mistake with repercussions well beyond the Middle East. To understand why, look back at history.



An image of a strike on Haji Abad, Iran, released Friday by Centcom.

In 1956, Britain and France, following Israel, moved against Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt to undo the dictator's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The U.S. reacted harshly and directed its allies to step back from their Middle Eastern adventure or face full economic pressure from Washington. President Dwight Eisenhower believed the Anglo-French intervention would poison Arab states against the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. That was a miscalculation. The Arab states worked with the Soviet Union regardless, until the loss of several wars with Israel compelled Cairo and others to re-evaluate.

The lesson for the U.S. lies in the way Eisenhower's threats demonstrated Britain's and France's fundamental lack of credibility. The Suez moment marked the psychological transformation of two erstwhile great powers into medium powers with limited ability to influence the world around them.

The U.S. faces a similar risk today. The market plays the role of Eisenhower, the U.S. that of the French and British embarked on a strategically sound but difficult campaign in the Middle East. Quitting the war while leaving Iran with the ability to seize control of the Strait of Hormuz, and thereby able to shut down global oil supply,

would destroy American credibility. It could trigger a Chinese move against Taiwan or a Russian move against NATO, not simply because of relative military degradation, but because the U.S. clearly has no stomach for a knockdown fight against a great power, having abandoned a lesser bout against a much less capable adversary.

It is crucial that Mr. Trump resist the temptation to walk away, stay the course, reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and demonstrate the credibility of America and its military commitments.

The only way to accomplish this with a reasonable chance of success is to put boots on the ground. The U.S. has trained and planned for this contingency for decades. At the helm today are military officers—Gen. Dan Caine, Adm. Frank Bradley, Adm. Brad Cooper—who understand the precise capabilities of U.S. special-operations forces and the advantages of automated targeting. Mr. Trump can trust these men to see this through.

Deploying several thousand special-ops forces to southern Iran is enough to reopen the strait after some weeks of fighting. Casualties should be anticipated. To protect the special-ops units, regular troops will be required. With U.S. air supremacy, the Iranian regime's forces will be loath to mass forces for an attack.

The question is whether the president has the courage and conviction to authorize this operation, and to explain to the American people that the price of exerting U.S. power is far cheaper than the costs of its decline.

Mr. Cropsey is president of the Yorktown Institute. He served as a naval officer and as deputy undersecretary of the Navy and is the author of "Mayday" and "Seabindness."

California's Trump Derangement May Elect Eric Swalwell



LIFE SCIENCE
By Alysia Finley

Gov. Gavin Newsom blames every problem under California's sun, from wildfires to high energy prices, on President Trump—and he may be right in one respect. The neurotic antipathy that liberals feel toward Mr. Trump may supercede all other issues when they cast their ballots. Hatred is blinding.

If you think Mr. Trump is a mortal threat to the republic, vagrants shooting up at a neighborhood park seem less menacing. That only 29% of California fourth-graders are proficient in reading must also be the result of the Trump administration's cutting federal funding for schools, no matter that declining student achievement preceded his presidency.

Your home's \$500 electric bill in July is just the price Californians have to pay to stop climate change, which Mr. Trump has made worse. If it weren't for him, wildfires wouldn't have incinerated tens of thousands of homes in Los Angeles in early January 2025, even though

they started before he took office. Now his donors in the oil and gas industry are getting richer by his war in Iran.

Trump derangement syndrome helps explain why Bay Area Rep. Eric Swalwell has become the favorite in the race to succeed Mr. Newsom this November. In California's June 2 jungle primary, all candidates compete on the same ballot, and the top two finishers face off in November.

In an Emerson College poll this month, Mr. Swalwell led a crowded field with 17%, followed by Republican Fox News commentator Steve Hilton (13%) and other candidates nipping at their heels. Yet prediction markets place Mr. Swalwell's odds of winning the governorship in November at upward of 60%. Why are gamblers wagering on Mr. Swalwell?

Not because of his fundraising. Mr. Swalwell has taken in \$5.8 million to date, less than Mr. Hilton (\$6.3 million) and San Jose's Democratic Mayor Matt Mahan (\$10.8 million). Billionaire climate activist Tom Steyer has contributed some \$88 million to his own campaign, which he has used to blanket the airwaves.

Yet the telegenic Mr. Swalwell, 45, has racked up valuable endorsements from his fellow Democrats in Congress, Hollywood celebrities and labor unions—most notably, the Service Employees International Union, whose healthcare workers affiliate is leading the ballot campaign for a wealth tax.

"I worked closely with Eric when we needed to investigate Donald Trump in his first term," Sen. Adam Schiff says in a social-media endorsement. Mr. Swalwell elevated

If the president is a threat to the republic, crime, vagrancy and wildfires don't seem all that bad.

himself in Democratic ranks when he served as a House impeachment manager in Mr. Trump's second impeachment trial, after a Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

The congressman gained a social-media following by producing cheeky videos during the 2024 campaign that mocked Mr. Trump. He has staked his campaign for govern-

ment on fighting the president, a cause that unites Democrats and many independents.

He doesn't talk much about policies, except with broad liberal brushstrokes. A favorite bromide: "Let's build a New California for everyone." He has been cagey about whether he supports the wealth tax, but his SEIU endorsement suggests he favors raising taxes to pay for a bigger welfare state.

Mr. Swalwell last month said he would hike taxes on businesses that employ workers who receive public assistance, such as food stamps or Medicaid. His goal to discourage businesses from hiring lower-income workers so they become more reliant on the government? Californians pay among the highest taxes in the country, but that doesn't seem to concern Mr. Swalwell.

During a 2023 town-hall meeting, a constituent complained that "it seems like taxes are going up and up and we are getting less and less." Mr. Swalwell replied that he wanted to "spend less on our national defense" and "those dollars can go into our communities in terms of healthcare and education because that has to be the priority."

Mr. Swalwell is as callow as he is

ambitious. Californians hoping for an upgrade in competence after Mr. Newsom departs Sacramento may be disappointed. Mr. Hilton could be counted on to restrain government unions, trial lawyers and the Democratic Legislature. But Californians haven't elected a Republican to statewide office since 2006.

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs have rallied behind the moderate Mr. Mahan, but he hasn't gained traction in polls. Perhaps because he doesn't scratch the left's anti-Trump itch. Mr. Steyer has also used his money megaphone to link Mr. Mahan to "MAGA-aligned billionaires."

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass employed this strategy of guilt by Trump association to defeat centrist businessman Rick Caruso in 2022. Someone who voted for her may regret it after her mismanagement of wildfires and failures to solve the city's crime and homeless problems.

Ms. Bass's approval rating is 24%, about the same as Mr. Trump's among Los Angeles voters, according to the Emerson poll. Assailing Mr. Trump is a tried-and-true campaign strategy for Democrats, but it isn't a successful governing strategy. What will it take for California voters to figure that out?

By Burton G. Malkiel

A sentiment common among Wall Street professionals is that the stock market is dangerously concentrated. The market value of the 10 largest stocks represents almost 40% of the total value of the S&P 500 index. Market indexes, the argument goes, are insufficiently diverse, exposing investors to dangerous risk and making index-fund investing an unjustifiable investment strategy.

The stock market is highly concentrated. But broad low-cost indexing remains the optimal strategy for investors, and staying invested in equities remains the best vehicle for earning generous risk-adjusted returns.

Worries about market concentration

have reached a fever pitch. Well-known professional investors have issued dire warnings. Jeremy Grantham writes that we're experiencing a speculative bubble and that the narrow stock-market indexes will produce unique underperformance. Howard Marks opines that index investors are, unwittingly, simply pouring money into the largest stocks regardless of value. Bill Gross declares that indexing isn't buying the market—it is owning just a few stocks, all betting on a single AI theme. Investment advisory firms like JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs are telling investors that the narrow market makes actual stock picking essential.

But is it really unprecedented for a handful of stocks to dominate the market and produce the highest re-

turns? Research by Hendrik Bessembinder indicates that almost all the wealth creation from equity investing was produced by a tiny fraction of individual stocks. For the 100 years since 1926, the U.S. stock market has returned about 10% annually. But only 3.4% of the stocks were responsible for all the wealth creation. The rest of the stocks combined didn't produce net gains that exceeded the amount that could be earned from investing in 30-day U.S. Treasury bills. And more than half the stocks in the market lost money. The generous average return from the market came from a tiny handful of stocks. An indexing strategy works because it captures these rare winners.

Those investment advisers who worry about today's market structure would argue that the current unique concentration requires a different approach. If the concentration reflects an expanding market bubble spawned by overoptimism about AI, then continuing to invest in index funds is too risky. They point to experience from the early 2000s, when the stock market was nearly as concentrated with internet-related stocks. Stock prices declined sharply until mid-2002, with index funds losing almost half their value. Had investors been able to time the decline correctly and shift to "value" stocks, they would have limited their losses and beat the index. The problem is that no one can time the market perfectly, and index funds overperformed the average actively managed fund even during the market decline.

Standard & Poor's began publishing its S&P Indices Versus Active reports, comparing market indexes with the performance of active portfolio managers, in mid-2002, at the bottom of the dot-com bust. It found that a majority of actively managed portfolios underperformed the market indexes even during a crushing bear market. Fifty-nine percent of active funds underperformed the S&P 500 in 2001, and

You'll experience losses when a bear market comes, but most active managers will do even worse.

72% did in 2002. From mid-1999 through June 2002 (the period that began when the bubble was reaching its peak to the bottom of the subsequent decline), 62% of active funds failed to beat the market. If the calculations are carried out over the next 10 or 20 years, more than 90% of actively managed funds will have failed to beat the market. Indexing gives you superior performance in all markets.

It is certainly correct that today's stock market presents substantial risks. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that we are experiencing an AI bubble. Stock markets always go to extremes. Stock price bubbles have expanded during all the major technological revolutions. The railroad boom in stock prices was followed by rail stocks' falling by

three-quarters of their value during the panic of 1873. The electrification revolution ended in the crash of 1929. The dot-com bubble led to a crushing bear market ending in 2002 with some internet-related stocks losing 90% of their value.

But we don't know if we are in the top of the third inning or the bottom of the ninth of the AI revolution. And we know neither when the stock market will fall nor what the best assets are to buy if we remain invested. Remember that Alan Greenspan used the term "irrational exuberance" to describe the Internet bubble in December 1996. The market continued to rally and peaked in March 2000.

While staying the course with your investment program is likely the best strategy, you can take steps to lessen the risks inherent in today's "narrow" market. First, reduce the concentration of AI-related stocks in your portfolio by using the broadest stock index possible. Use a mutual fund or ETF indexed to the total stock market, including small- and midcap stocks as well as value stocks. Consider adding foreign stocks from developed and emerging markets. This won't eliminate instability, but it will reduce concentration and increase diversification.

Having a substantial share of your portfolio in broadly diversified low-cost index funds remains the most reliable method for building wealth in the stock market.

Mr. Malkiel is author of "A Random Walk Down Wall Street."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

Lachlan Murdoch
Executive Chairman, News Corp

Rupert Murdoch
Chairman Emeritus, News Corp

Robert Thomson
Chief Executive Officer, News Corp

Emma Tucker
Editor in Chief

Almar Latour
Chief Executive Officer and Publisher

DOW JONES MANAGEMENT:

JASON P. CONTI, General Counsel, Chief Compliance Officer; DIANNE DESEVO, Chief People Officer; ARTEM FISHERMAN, Chief Technology Officer; LISA FITZPATRICK, General Manager, Dow Jones Industries; M. SCOTT HAVENS, Chief Growth Officer; DAN SHAR, EVP, General Manager, Wealth & Investment; ABHILASH SINGH, Chief Communications Officer; JOSH STINECOMB, EVP & Chief Revenue Officer; WSI | Barron's Group

EDITORIAL AND CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS:
1111 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y., 10036
Telephone: 1-800-DOWJONES

DOW JONES | News & Corp

Rupert Murdoch
Chairman Emeritus, News Corp

Emma Tucker
Editor in Chief

Liz Harris, Managing Editor
David Crow, Deputy Editor in Chief
Aja Whitaker-Moore, Deputy Editor in Chief
Sarah Ball, Features; Elena Cherny, Senior Editor; Dan Colarusso, Business, Finance, Economics; Chip Cummins, News; Tanush Evans, Digital; Gordon Fairclough, World; Alex Martin, Print & Writing; Bruce Orwall, Enterprise; Damian Paletta, Washington; Philana Patterson, Audio; Christopher S. Stewart, Investigations; Maral Usefi, Video

Paul A. Gigot
Editor of the Editorial Page
Geared Baker, Editor at Large

Par Ridder
General Manager

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

A megabucks bailout is brewing for Big Ag as the farm economy struggles

The White House has scheduled a party for Friday and you, taxpayer, will be picking up the check — in more ways than one.

The Celebration of Agriculture event at the South Lawn is intended to “shine a spotlight on the men and women growing our food, fiber and fuel.” Unfortunately, the spotlight also will illuminate trouble in the agricultural economy, which the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran has made worse, on top of tariffs that have severely punished the sector.

The White House response to hard times on the farm relies heavily on taxpayer-funded support, much of which historically flows disproportionately to larger operations. The Agriculture Department last month forecast government payments will jump 45% this year to \$44.3 billion, roughly 28 cents of every dollar in U.S. net farm income.

On top of that, the administration will probably use this month's so-called celebration to announce a big increase in the amount of ethanol that oil companies are required to blend into their gasoline.

Ethanol is brewed from corn, supporting crop prices and thereby helping grain farmers. But it also provides less mileage per gallon and does not reduce the price at the pump, because of transportation and infrastructure costs, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The ethanol subsidy is a longstanding giveaway to Big Ag at the expense of motorists and it's almost certain to go up.

Why all this support for the farm sector while most of the country struggles on its own?

For one, it's an election year and rural voters in the past have turned out in droves for President Donald Trump. Yet agriculture has suffered badly under Trump, and even fat government checks are unlikely to make up for policy decisions that have clobbered growers and ranchers.



A corn and soybean farmer injects ammonia into a farm field on April 19, 2021, in New Windsor, south of the Quad Cities in Illinois. Ethanol is brewed from corn, supporting crop prices and thereby helping grain farmers. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

The war against Iran is a particularly rough blow. While drivers everywhere can't help but notice how sharply pump prices have risen, the trouble on the farm goes beyond gassing up the F-150.

Midwest agriculture is heavily mechanized, and those planters, tractors and combines chugging around Illinois farm country use a lot of fuel. The cost of taking corn and soybeans to market, whether via truck, barge or rail, also goes up along with oil prices.

Another big concern is the rising price of fertilizer, which is mostly made with natural gas and similarly faces rising shipping costs. High prices and likely shortages probably mean less fertilizer will be used this spring, cutting crop yields and further pressuring farm incomes.

Not everyone in the heartland is crying about higher oil prices. Landowners who lease their

properties for oil production in the Illinois Basin and other areas dotted with wells and pumping rigs will see increased royalty checks.

Some farmers have invested in renewable energy, and given turmoil in the Middle East, solar and wind could be in for a boost after a year of attacks by the Trump administration. Farmers who use electric vehicles and other battery-operated equipment can take a victory lap.

Farming is far from the only industry feeling the heat from rising energy costs. The rest of the food industry, from packaging to distribution, is feeling it, too. Trucking companies and airlines pay more for fuel, retailers pay more for logistics and manufacturers pay more for chemicals and other petroleum-based inputs. Even the artificial intelligence boom is likely to see higher costs,

as it relies on data centers that consume vast amounts of energy, making even computer power sensitive to price spikes.

Farming in the U.S. has always enjoyed bipartisan political support, which makes the damage done to it in this past year all the more surprising. America's farmers were treated like cannon fodder in Trump's trade wars, as China and other important trading partners predictably retaliated against tariff attacks by reducing imports of U.S. food.

Further, there is still no final agreement on a new Farm Bill. Agriculture and feeding programs are supposed to be addressed in legislation every five years, but partisan conflict on Capitol Hill has made that impossible. The U.S. is still operating under its obsolete 2018 Farm Bill, which hasn't been adjusted for market conditions.

The GOP's Big Beautiful Bill passed last summer authorized tens of billions in direct payments from taxpayers to Big Ag, but everything from conservation to forestry programs have been left to rot. The House has floated a “skinny” version of the Farm Bill that would fall short of the comprehensive update that is needed, while attempting to sidestep hot-button issues such as cuts to food aid for the poor.

While it's still possible, we don't expect to see a new Farm Bill approved until after the midterms. Instead, watch for the Trump administration to keep shoveling money at the Grain Belt to help make up for policies that pick the pockets of producers.

Given the freedom to operate, America's farmers could feed the world. This year, with trade wars, shooting wars and costs on the rise, they won't even get to try.

Pritzker gets big win with Hyundai Translead's Joliet investment

With the election and lots of other news last week, you're forgiven if you missed an announcement that brought good tidings to Illinois and the Chicago area.

Hyundai Translead, North America's leading semi-trailer builder, struck an agreement with the state to establish major new manufacturing facilities in Will County, creating close to 2,500 new Illinois jobs.

There's more to the deal, of course, including the usual array of tax incentives any state uses to lure such a significant private-sector investment, but to read the comments of Hyundai Translead CEO Sean Kenney, Illinois' geographic and infrastructure attributes had more to do with the

decision than subsidies.

Speaking last week to industry peers at the American Trucking Associations' Technology & Maintenance Council show in Nashville, Tennessee, Lockport native Kenney enthused about Joliet and its environs as he disclosed the news. Remarking that more than 500 of his company's customers are located within 100 miles of the future facility, he was quoted by industry publication Transport Topics as saying, “Joliet is actually central to all things logistics.”

He told the publication, “For us, this move is about getting closer to our customers.”

Music to our ears. Hyundai Translead currently makes its trailers in Mexico, so

this announcement isn't good news only for Illinois and the Southland, it's good news for the country. That the company chose Illinois as its first such operation outside of Mexico is even more of a feather in our state's cap.

It gets better. Instead of building from the ground up, Hyundai Translead will be converting two mothballed plants, one formerly used by Caterpillar and the other the facility of the ill-starred and now-bankrupt electric bus maker Lion Electric. Just to make the symbolism even more powerful, Caterpillar closed the Joliet plant seven years ago, shifting those jobs to Mexico.

Caterpillar, of course, moved its headquarters four years ago to Texas from north suburban

Deerfield, delivering a major psychological blow to Illinois. The state's economic reputation suffered mightily from the departure of Caterpillar's headquarters; Caterpillar had been an Illinois company for more than 90 years before that.

Lion Electric's implosion shortly after Gov. JB Pritzker's administration negotiated generous tax incentives for the electric school buses that were to be built in Joliet was a different kind of blow — an undermining of Pritzker's focus on electric vehicles as an industry of the future in reviving Illinois manufacturing.

So the news delivered in Nashville was a most welcome vote of confidence in a state that sorely needs it. Hyundai will invest \$450

million to convert the two facilities. Kenney deserves credit for his imaginative (and cost-effective) willingness to split the new operation between two formerly moribund locations and bring them back to life. The state's \$69 million tax-incentive package is in the typical range for such splashy deals and is well worth the long-term payoff.

We've criticized the governor in the past for policies we view as holding Illinois back economically, but throughout his seven years in office he consistently has been an enthusiastic cheerleader and marketer for a state that has so many attributes, as attested by Southland native son Kenney. Pritzker deserves credit for this unvarnished win.

ON THIS DAY 120 YEARS AGO: CAUTION IN BOND ISSUES

Chicago voters are asked to vote another group of bonds. The total is \$34,200,000. A little caution ought to be in order.

The voters have been very responsive to bond issues in behalf of improvements long considered and essential to the general growth and progress of the city. Yet there is a limit to expenditure even in pursuance of the most desirable resolutions.

It is probable that we should spend \$15,000,000 upon the lighting system. But is it absolutely essential at this time? It is proposed to spend \$5,000,000 for small parks and playgrounds. We doubt if there is a more laudable object than that of providing recreation and healthy outings for children. But is it wisdom to mortgage the people at the very height of industrial unrest?

A combination convention and memorial hall is a distinct advantage to a city so desirable for national gatherings. But are we unavoidably pressed to build it this year? The city should have its bridges completed. Why at this moment?

It begins to look as if the “getting” is good and that bond issues should be put before the people while the mood for liberality is on.

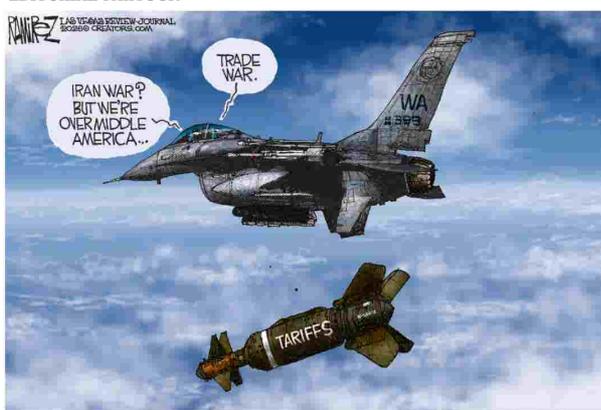
The limit of bonded indebtedness may soon be reached. Then what shall Chicago do in case of a sudden and unexpected emergency? It would be caught without a cent.

The voters will expect a thorough investigation of the various bond issues to determine if some may not be put off—the work of construction and reconstruction strung out to fit the public purse and the extraordinary industrial conditions.

The public improvements are necessary. But it is doubtful if the city ought to be mortgaged to the last cent. The people have been voting bonds with much regularity. They may begin to think it over.

Tribune editorial board, March 23, 1920

EDITORIAL CARTOON



X@Ramireztoons

michaelpramirez.com

Your Time Is Most Valuable Thing.

I will not let you down 🙏

I GIVE YOU MY GUARANTEE, THIS PURCHASE WILL BE WORTH IT.

Indian Newspapers:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>1) Times of India</u> | <u>6) The Hindu</u> |
| <u>2) Hindustan Times</u> | <u>7) Live Mint</u> |
| <u>3) Business line</u> | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
| <u>4) The Indian Express</u> | <u>9) Business standard</u> |
| <u>5) Economic Times</u> | <u>+All Editorial PDFs</u> |

Uploading
starts from
5AM

 Access to all this
In Just 19 Rupees
[lifetime Validity].

Click below to

Join



International Newspapers Channel

Magazine Channel (National & International).

Why both parties are failing our national security workforce

By Paul Vallas
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

For the second time in a matter of months, the gears of the federal government have ground to a halt, and once again, the men and women who serve on the front lines of our national security are being treated as collateral damage. Essential workers — including Transportation Security Administration agents, Department of Homeland Security personnel and Federal Emergency Management Agency field staff — are being forced to report for duty without the guarantee of a paycheck.

This is more than a fiscal impasse; it is a profound failure of leadership that spans both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. It is time to call out the reckless irresponsibility of a Democratic leadership that views government shutdowns as a legitimate tool of negotiation and a president who, despite his frequent and often controversial use of executive power, refuses to exercise that same authority to ensure our protectors are paid.

Make no mistake: The primary architects of this shutdown are the Democrats in Congress. By refusing to fund the government unless their specific demands on immigration, sanctuary city protections and restricted DHS provisions are met, they have effectively taken the federal workforce hostage.

It is a cynical and dangerous gambit. These essential workers are not high-paid bureaucrats in Washington; they are lower-paid working men and women who live paycheck to paycheck. A TSA officer typically starts at an annual salary of approximately \$37,000 to \$45,000. For these families, a single missed pay period is not an inconvenience — it is a crisis. It means missed rent, empty cupboards and mounting debt.

By tethering the livelihood of these workers to divisive debates over sanctuary policies, the Democrats have prioritized political optics over the basic welfare of the American worker. Using the power of the purse to paralyze the nation's security apparatus is not "resistance"; it is a dereliction of duty.

While the Democrats have initiated this crisis, President Donald Trump is not without fault. The president has never been shy



A passenger has his identification checked at a Transportation Security Administration checkpoint at Harry Reid International Airport on March 11 in Las Vegas. **BIZUAYEHU TSEFAYE/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL**

about testing the limits of executive authority. From trade tariffs to border emergency declarations, this administration has consistently bypassed traditional legislative hurdles to achieve its ends. Why, then, is that same "boldness" absent when it comes to the financial security of our essential workers?

The president has the moral, and arguably the legal, standing to issue an executive order directing the Treasury to prioritize the payment of essential personnel during a lapse in appropriations. While the Antideficiency Act generally prohibits government spending without congressional approval, the law provides exceptions for "emergencies involving the safety of human life or the protection of property." If the work being done by TSA and DHS is critical enough to require them to work without

pay, it is critical enough to justify an executive mandate to pay them.

By failing to act, the president is allowing the Democrats to maintain their leverage. He should immediately exercise his executive authority to pay all essential workers, effectively freeing the hostages and shifting the burden of the shutdown back onto the legislators where it belongs.

This is not just a labor issue; it is a national security crisis. During the 35-day shutdown in 2018-19, TSA saw unscheduled absences rise to 8% as officers struggled to find child care or fuel to get to work. When our security screenings are understaffed and our FEMA coordinators are distracted by personal financial ruin, the entire nation is vulnerable.

We are asking people to protect our borders and our airports while they wonder if they can protect

their own homes from foreclosure. It is a recipe for disaster. The airlines, which are the primary beneficiaries of the labor provided by TSA and air traffic controllers, should be the first ones at the table demanding this action. The stability of the entire aviation industry — which contributes over \$1 trillion to the U.S. economy — rests on the backs of these unpaid workers.

The president should act now and dare his opponents to stop him. Let the Democratic leadership explain to the American people why they would seek a court injunction from a friendly judge to block paychecks for the people keeping our skies safe.

Let the legal battle play out over whether the president can ensure public safety by paying his staff. In the court of public opinion, the president would hold the high ground. He would be the leader

providing for the workers, while his opponents would be the ones filing lawsuits to keep them financially strapped.

The era of using the federal workforce as a political human shield must end. We cannot claim to value "national security" while we systematically devalue the people who provide it. Democrats must stop using the budget process to litigate immigration policy, and the president must stop waiting for a legislative "thank you" before he does the right thing.

Pay the workers. Secure the country. Put the political theater to bed once and for all.

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.

Art is democracy's essential second responder

By Jane M. Saks
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The relationship between art and justice is hazy and fluid. In moments of societal upheaval, we instinctively seek the basics: food, water, safety and shelter. But we also require something equally vital but less tangible — art. Art serves as the essential "second responder," offering us our humanity, a place to reflect and experiences of beauty, joy, challenge and risk, and sustaining us as we build and imagine our futures when we are weakened, broken and under siege.

The administration of President Donald Trump is systematically defunding the very spaces where excluded communities have found voice and agency. It is gutting the vehicles that engage communities across the country in examining contemporary upheavals. The goal is to isolate populations and splinter power. Federal mandates targeting diversity or racial and gender equality have led to bans of or attempts to ban words, ideas, books and people. Recently, the Kennedy Center's head of jazz programming and the last member of its social impact team were fired.

Chicago is a national example of the deleterious impact of this agenda on the national cultural landscape. Recently, a diverse array of groups lost funding, from 18th Street Casa de Cultura to The Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras to Black Girls Dance and the Center for Native Futures. Illinois Humanities lost approximately \$2 million.

Authoritarian regimes understand art's power, which is why they attack cultural expression. From banned protest songs to today's censored Iranian films, authoritarian systems recognize that when art dares to provoke, it mobilizes dissent, creates space for marginalized voices, and inspires commitment to democracy's survival and evolution when formal politics falter. During the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, the yellow umbrella became a potent symbol of protest, repre-



Members of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras rehearse in their eighth-floor space on Oct. 1, 2023, at the Fine Arts Building. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

sending protection from tear gas and a message of democracy and resistance.

These draconian cuts sabotage future generations. Trump's move to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, museums, libraries and other cultural institutions is a drastic limitation on our future. This will render research, innovation and societal advances as dim, undetectable versions of themselves, restricting the country's ability to lead globally in addressing the most pressing issues of our times. The participatory function of art and culture faces direct assaults from this administration's new federal restrictions that cut support for programs that promote diversity, equity and inclusion, including creative work related to LGBTQ+ issues; Black, brown and Indigenous communities; climate change; health care; and social justice. Art makes dissent visible and transforms abstract grievances into visceral experiences that formal opposition often cannot.

Around the world, oppressive governments and leaders recognize this power. Political theater, dating to ancient Greek drama and Roman satire, used performance to address, criticize and influence social and political issues. This form evolved in the 20th century to address Marxism, fascism and class struggle, challenging traditional narratives through activism and experimental techniques. Poetry has been a constant, courageous form of confronting raw truths. The great South African anti-apartheid freedom fighter Albie Sachs said that it was Pablo Neruda's poetry that brought him into the struggle.

The Trump administration recognizes the power of art that creates narratives that formal political discourse cannot accommodate. When authoritarian impulses emerge — silencing, burning and banning the written word — it becomes a priority. Trump's culture wars are spreading fear, intimidation and self-censorship, but American artists, along with artists around the world, have long been the ones to speak out when others are too frightened.

Art has the unique ability to

deliver on the democratic promise. Artistic expression offers alternative pathways to agency. Art can take over public spaces, transforming them into a public square that intersects all dimensions of society. Community murals become voting campaigns. Spoken word events become town halls. The South African Market Theatre brought together Black and white performers and audiences when apartheid laws made integrated participation illegal — an act of democratic engagement and participation when formal systems legally denied their existence. AIDS crisis activists created billboards targeting government inaction: "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Ignorance Does." Art teaches how to navigate institutional breakdown.

When historians examine how societies navigated compounding crises, they look not just at legislation or reformed systems, but also at art's overarching impact: the paintings, poetry, performances, music, literature and stories that help us reimagine possibilities when existing structures fail.

What makes art especially effective in times of chaos is its embrace of ambiguity. While systems' responses to crises typically seek to impose order and certainty, art creates spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity are embraced rather than denied. It is exactly the creative process that investigates and models new visions and possibilities. Art goes toward the tensions, not away from them. It acknowledges the challenges and the contradictory nature of human experiences.

Most crucially, art sustains democratic possibilities when institutions fail to deliver it, such as miles and miles of street art of the Black Lives Matter movement replete with imagery related to Black people killed by the police, and vibrant symbols of freedom, hope and joy. Art models democratic futures before institutions and policymakers.

Art that truly supports the democratic experiment doesn't just celebrate existing narratives — it urges their expansion. When governments create agenda-driven narratives or threaten the creation of new stories about the future, they constrain the imagination essential for democracy and navigating social challenges.

Cultural sabotage goes beyond government priorities; it reflects its deeply held values and agenda for the future. Art, free expression, the creative process and cultural production drive society forward through creative imagination, authentic participation, collective action and shared democratic aspirations. Art embraces our solitudes and our interdependencies. It reminds us all of the subtle and often hidden ways our shared human art articulates itself.

Art doesn't merely reflect — it generates aspirations. Embracing and fearlessly supporting the essential second responder is vital to democracy's evolution. We cannot survive or thrive without them. We never have.

Jane M. Saks is a writer, producer, educator, arts advocate and creative collaborator who lives in Chicago with her two daughters, Esmé and Elodie.

OPINION

Pentagon's press panic threatens august Stars and Stripes



Clarence Page

Oh, no. Stars and Stripes is under fire again.

Controversy is not exactly unknown to the legendary military newspaper. Born during the Civil War, Stars and Stripes has taken all sorts of flak and survived, impressively for a publication owned and operated by the U.S. military that nevertheless calls itself an "independent" voice.

As someone who served overseas as a drafted Vietnam-era army journalist, I can tell you that military journalism is not an oxymoron. Or, at least, it's not supposed to be.

But "Stripes," as its commonly called in the service, has a new and imposing critic: Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, famous — or infamous — for his personal crusade against "woke" culture and its imagined effects on the nation's "warfighters," the Trump administration's ideologically loaded term for what most Americans call service members.

As Stars and Stripes revealed, the Defense Department issued a "modernization plan" for the paper with alarming stipulations. It "limits the use of wire services, bars comics and other syndicated features," and, rather ominously, requires that "content must be consistent with 'good order and discipline,' a phrase borrowed from the Uniform Code of Military Justice," the paper reported.

As a fan of Stripes going back to my military days, I immediately wondered what changes Hegseth's culture war might bring. It looks a lot like an attempt to make the paper less interesting to its readers, not to mention less credible as an independent voice of news and analysis.

It's not exactly a surprise coming from Hegseth. This is the same defense secretary, you may recall, who famously shared sensitive information regarding U.S. military strikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen in March of last year over the unsecured commercial messaging app Signal.

Included in the chat group was the editor of The Atlantic, who later revealed details he had learned.

Hegseth also imposed a pledge on journalists not to gather or transmit information about mili-



Two soldiers with the U.S. 25th Division read the Stars and Stripes newspaper in South Vietnam on Sept. 10, 1969. MARK GODFREY/AP

tary affairs that had not been approved by his department for release. Most credible media groups refused to sign his pledge and have been denied Pentagon press credentials.

Stars and Stripes is owned by the Defense Department but is run by civilian editors. The paper's staff does include service members, who work under the mentorship of civilian journalists. Congress members of both parties have consistently supported the publication's mission to produce independent journalism consistent with the principles of the First Amendment.

The memo says that Stars and Stripes will continue to "operate with editorial independence." However, as Stars and Stripes reported, Pentagon chief spokesperson Sean Parnell asserted that going forward the paper would be "by the warfighter and for the warfighter."

Stars and Stripes editor-in-chief Erik Slavin told NPR that phrase "good order and discipline" raises concerns that reporters who are in the U.S. military might face court-martial.

"If they were to complete a story that the Defense Department did not like, and did not find 'consistent with good order and discipline,' would they be in legal jeopardy?" Slavin asked. "We don't know the answer to that."

The prospect immediately brings to mind one of the most famous stories in Stars and Stripes history: the clash between Gens. George Patton and Dwight Eisenhower during World War II over the wildly popular "Willie and Joe" cartoons of Bill Mauldin.

Grimy, mud-caked and weary, Willie and Joe depicted for the folks back home the thoroughly miserable conditions faced daily by our GIs — and managed to squeeze a few chuckles of knowing laughter out of the readers.

Patton, a notoriously tough and humorless commander, considered Willie and Joe to be a threat to discipline and morale — quite the opposite of the way many fans saw them.

Patton threatened to ban Stars and Stripes, but Eisenhower defended the paper as more of a support for morale than a threat. The paper remained indepen-

dent. Mauldin went on to win two Pulitzers and the Army's Legion of Merit.

Such disputes are not uncommon in an institution as large and diverse as the U.S. military. In my experience, challenging conventions and presenting a more candid depiction of what troubles our fighting men and women — and their folks back home — brings you more credibility and appreciation than trying to spray perfume on the horrors of the battlefield.

A similar story is told about the cartoon GI "Beetle Bailey." The strip was starting to build an audience in the early 1950s when the Tokyo edition of Stars and Stripes banned the strip out of fear it would encourage service members to adopt Bailey's generally lackadaisical attitude and behavior.

A second ban was imposed in 1970 after the introduction of the strip's first Black character, Lt. Jackson Flap, whose Afro technically was way too voluminous to pass regulation in the real world, a fact that delighted me and many of my fellow Black service personnel in the late stages of the

real Vietnam War era.

Sometimes in media, you don't know what's going to work until you try it. A free press enables journalists and others to express themselves and react honestly and candidly, which in the long run builds trust and credibility with understandably skeptical audiences.

A lot of people understandably question whether we even need newspapers like Stars and Stripes — or the one you're reading now — in this digital age.

But, regardless of the medium, what matters is the content. Media provide not only information and entertainment but also connections of the sort that help people inside the military and their families back home feel less isolated.

It's unclear what threat Hegseth perceives in Stars and Stripes as it is currently run, but I suspect he's going to find out that a lot of Americans still believe that a free press is worth defending, especially when it serves the people who serve our nation.

Email Clarence Page at cptmeee@gmail.com.

Voice of the people

Loyola student's killing

The killing of a Loyola freshman at the lakefront is a devastating tragedy — and it demands more than sympathy and broad promises from City Hall. It demands honesty about what our leaders are prioritizing. Right now, in Rogers Park, those priorities are misplaced.

An editorial ("Loyola student's killing shows how much is at stake for Chicago universities in reducing crime," March 20) calls for renewed public safety efforts. But on the Far North Side, residents and students are watching the city, under Brandon Johnson, and Ald. Maria Hadden — whose ward includes Loyola University Chicago and much of East Rogers Park — expand speed cameras along Sheridan Road, Broadway and nearby streets. These devices generate ticket revenue. At the same time, the city has not made comparable investments in police cameras, license plate readers and real-time surveillance tools that could help prevent or solve violent crime.

These are not equivalent strategies. Speed cameras do not deter armed offenders, identify suspects or enable faster police response. They issue tickets days later. Meanwhile, the streets where students walk at night remain unmonitored in ways that actually matter.

This is not about opposing traffic enforcement. It is about priorities. When the city moves aggressively on revenue-generating measures while lagging on tools that directly support policing, it sends a clear message: Collecting fines comes first.

For Loyola students and Rogers Park families, that message is unacceptable. After a tragedy like this, there should be an immediate, visible shift toward measures that deter violence and help catch those responsible. Instead, we are asked to accept incrementalism. That is not enough.

If city leaders truly understand what is at stake, they should prove it. Reallocate resources. Expand the technology that directly enhances public safety. Be transparent about these decisions. And stop defaulting to programs that are easier to justify because they pay for themselves.

A young life was lost. Students are afraid. Residents are demanding action. The response from City Hall — and from Ald. Hadden — will show whether safety is the priority or just the talking point. — Nick Agnew, Loyola University of Chicago Class of 1990, Evanston

Priorities of Congress

After reading Jackson Shedelbrower's piece on congressional delay in approving funds for U.S. aviation improvements ("Congress needs to clear the runway for O'Hare upgrades," March 19), it struck me as lunacy that \$1 billion a day of taxpayer money can be found overnight to finance a U.S. war of choice against a country that posed no imminent threat to us, but the \$19 billion necessary to upgrade aviation technology from floppy disks and recruit air traffic controllers can't get funding in Congress.

What are Congress' priorities if not for such a vital and important public good? That this goes ignored at the expense of flight reductions, flight delays and passenger safety is egregious. — Marge Malo, Chicago

Data centers' power

How frustrating to read Elizabeth Shackelford's lament ("Global oil crisis once again makes the case for renewable energy," March 20) that the United States did not follow President Jimmy Carter into a solar-powered future and then read in the business section that the Illinois Commerce Commission approved larger deposits from power-hungry data centers

under construction to limit rate increases for Illinois citizens ("ICC OKs ComEd proposal for data centers").

The solution seems obvious enough, borrowing from Carter's "road not taken": Illinois should require data centers to install solar panels on their massive roofs, thus generating power for themselves. My own garage has solar panels that provide enough electricity for my Edgewater two-flat, with enough to spare for the winter months.

Why not ask incredibly busy technology companies to do what my partner and I did and invest some of their money into their very own solar power plant? Illinois ratepayers only stand to benefit. — Bryan Cones, Chicago

EWA no payday loan

Regarding the op-ed "The high cost of workplace payday loan apps in Illinois" (March 13): Having worked in the consumer financial protection space for nearly 20 years, I've seen many consumers preyed upon by predatory lenders. There was a woman who lived in her car, fearing that an auto title lender would take it. There's a woman on Social Security who took out several pawn loans at 240% APR and had to extend them 20 times, paying \$2,500 interest on the \$2,050 she borrowed. Reading Christopher Greenwood's piece against this backdrop, the details don't add up. Literally.

Earned wage access (EWA) providers charge no interest, mandatory fees or late fees. The only charges are a fee if you want the funds expedited and deposited into your account immediately, and some companies collect "tips" — voluntary payments like any other type of tip. In my experience, if you don't pay the expedite fee, you still get the funds within 24 hours. Most, if not all, EWA providers have a free

option, meaning you can get a cash advance for free. No payday lender ever made the payment of fees and interest optional.

Of course, overreliance on EWA can upset your finances — just as any financial service product. Unlike a typical loan, however, if you stop paying an EWA provider, the only consequence is you cannot use that service again until you pay it back. Thus, EWA itself cannot force a person into eviction. EWA is used to address a cash shortfall caused by something else.

This month, one of my dogs is having a lump removed, which will cost about \$1,100. I'm using EWA to pay for part of it, which gets automatically repaid on my next payday. Every other method of addressing my shortfall, other than asking my friends for help, is more expensive than EWA. My main credit card, for example, has an APR of 28.99%, and cash advances on credit cards often carry an additional fee.

While EWA is better than other financial products, the Woodstock Institute supports legal guardrails to prevent situations such as the one Greenwood describes. Preventing "stacking," for example — when you use multiple EWA providers at a time — is a reasonable limit that might have prevented her situation, but calling EWA a payday loan is not the answer.

— Brent Adams, senior vice president of policy and advocacy, Woodstock Institute, Chicago

We need fairer taxation

Corporations and the richest people in America are able to use loopholes and special tax breaks to avoid paying what they owe. All of us pay taxes when we buy gas and groceries. Local folks and

small businesses pay taxes for roads, schools and services their communities need.

Many corporations and the wealthy among us pay lower tax rates than teachers, nurses and public employees. Corporations with billions in profits routinely pay little in federal taxes while hugely rewarding CEOs and executives.

Our present tax policies written by Congress benefit wealthy elites and powerful corporations instead of the people who actually do the work to make our nation great. We need Congress to implement policies making the ultra-wealthy and big corporations pay their fair share.

First, demand billionaires and those at the top of the financial ladder have their wealth taxed the same way wages are taxed. Second, raise corporate rates, ending tax breaks that shift profits offshore and enforce the Corporate Alternative Minimum Tax so they cannot pay taxes at rates lower than the rest of us. Third, reform the estate tax that allows inherited wealth to escape taxation. Implement a financial transaction tax and tax billionaires on wealth gains.

These changes could raise trillions of dollars over the next decade and lower costs for the rest of us.

Demand political agendas that tax wealth and profits at levels commensurate to their standing at the top of our nation's economic ladder.

Take back your government through the power of your vote! Send no one back to Congress who will not commit to tax reform benefiting ordinary Americans. — Jerry Hanson, Elkhorn, Wisconsin

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Pakistan and Afghanistan tensions reach breaking point

However difficult it may be, the world must re-engage with the troubled region

In the nearly five years since the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan the world has paid scant attention to developments in the region, still less managed to influence them. In that time the hard-line Islamic movement has reimposed grim restrictions on women in public life and education. It has also fallen out badly with its old sponsor, neighbouring Pakistan. With the two states now close to all-out war the world has no option but to re-engage with the region – however difficult the options and distasteful the Taliban's governing ethos.

There is a bleak irony to Pakistan's dire relations with its neighbour. During the two decades of the ill-fated US-led Nato intervention in Afghanistan, which ended with an ignominious withdrawal in 2021, Islamabad played a

double game: it worked with Washington while also backing the Taliban, assuming it would be able to control it. But since 2021, relations with its old proxy have deteriorated rapidly. Islamabad accuses Kabul of hosting separatist militants who have killed 4,000 people in Pakistan in the last four years.

Taking advantage of the west's disengagement from the region, Pakistan has in recent months taken matters into its own hands and launched a series of air strikes across the border. More than 1,000 people are estimated to have been killed in the past three weeks of fighting between the two states, and over 100,000 people have been displaced. In the single bloodiest incident, 400 people were killed last week. Afghan officials say, in an air strike on a Kabul drug rehabilitation centre. Pakistan denies responsibility. The Taliban, just as unconvincingly, denies it shelters the militants who have been destabilising swathes of western Pakistan.

Against the backdrop of the war in the

Gulf, the west is distracted. So are the regional powers such as China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey who have tried ineffectually in the past few years to reduce the tensions. But this crisis cannot be allowed to metastasise. An all-out war in Afghanistan threatens stability across south and central Asia. There is also the very real risk that it becomes, again, an incubator for terrorism.

Pakistan seems to think it can shore up its security by a bombing campaign. But that will never quell the insurgencies. A shaky truce is in place for the festival of Eid al-Fitr. A first step is for this to endure. Then there have to be face-to-face talks. This will require the intervention of both the great powers, the US and China.

The Trump administration has close ties with the most powerful figure in Pakistan, the military leader Field Marshal Asim Munir. It needs to lean on him to stop the cross-border attacks. Maybe privately it can make clear to Islamabad that the war with Afghanistan

Against the backdrop of the war in the Gulf, the west and the regional powers are distracted, but this crisis cannot be allowed to metastasise

complicates the war on Iran. Simultaneously, if it is to crack down on the militants, the Taliban will have to be presented with both sticks and carrots; it is desperate for funds.

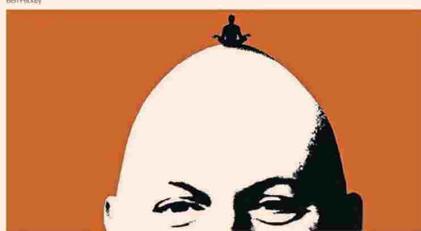
In all this there is also an important role and opportunity for China as the emerging superpower. Pakistan is a client state. Beijing equally has strategic interests in Afghanistan: it hopes to extend its Belt and Road Initiative south through Afghanistan. It also worries Afghanistan could become a haven for Uyghur separatists. China has long floated the idea of itself as a responsible great power and a leader of the global south. It has tried shuttle diplomacy, but could this be the moment for it to step forward and prove itself as a serious mediator on the stage?

The precedents for a settlement are not inspiring. A truce last autumn did not last long. The Taliban is a mercurial movement. Pakistan is enraged. But the stakes are too high for the world to keep looking away.

Opinion Society

Reading Socrates in Silicon Valley

Dora Hickey



Jemima Kelly

If you go back, like, 400 years ago it never would have occurred to anybody to be introspective," said a great sage of Silicon Valley last week, during the modern-day equivalent of a Socratic dialogue (a podcast). "Great men of history didn't sit around doing this stuff." The sage was none other than Marc Andreessen – venture capitalist, crypto enthusiast, devoted Democrat turned Donald Trump adviser, and author of the 2025 late-capitalist cry for help, the "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" ("love doesn't scale... let's stick with money"). The man who bet big on Web3 (remember that?) and NFTs (remember them?), and who once described criticisms of the metaverse as "reality privilege" (Meta, on whose board Andreessen sits, announced this week it was all but pulling the plug on the metaverse.)

The a16z founder was proudly

Wealth, influence and confidence are too often equated with wisdom

explaining to Founders podcast host David Senra that he had "zero" levels of introspection. "Move forward, Go," was his own anti-introspective mantra. "I've found that people who dwell on the past get stuck in the past. It's a problem at work and it's a problem at home." He went on to claim that the very concept of the individual was only invented a few hundred years ago and that it wasn't until the start of the 20th century that we started to believe in guilt and self-criticism.

It's hard to know quite where to start. I could start by surmising, as commentators on X were quick to do, that perhaps Andreessen hadn't heard Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living", or had misunderstood the entire philosophy of stoics like Marcus Aurelius whose thinking he often cites (he even claimed, as part of his defence, that the author of *Meditations* would have been on his side of this argument).

Let's start instead with the most charitable interpretation. After all he was getting at some element of truth: overthinking and ruminating on things that are in the past or out of our control gets us nowhere, as the Stoics knew. Further, in our decadent age, in which most of us sit on our behinds all day rather than using our bodies for anything productive, there is a risk

that we can become a little indulgent of our own emotional whims. At a certain point, turning inward stops being helpful and slides into navel-gazing, which becomes yet another form of procrastination. And it's important to ensure plans and ideas are followed with action, or we'd get nowhere.

But Andreessen has grossly misunderstood the meaning of introspection, as was revealed in his responses to the online backlash generated by his comments – not just his claims to be on the side of the Stoics. He shared, for example, a video of Apple founder Steve Jobs being asked by an interviewer to "be introspective" by saying how he fit into "the American family of thinkers and inventors". Jobs replied: "I don't think that way." Andreessen captioned the video with one word: "Well." As if working out where you fit in history could in any way be described as introspective; as if this proved that Jobs – a committed Zen Buddhist – was also opposed to the idea of introspection.

Andreessen seems to conflate the idea of overthinking, and even of guilt, with introspection, a word deriving from Latin that simply means "looking within". The value of introspection is not to keep us in our heads but rather to liberate us from them. It is to allow us to let go of our repetitive thoughts – our own mental doomscrolling, if you will – by the conscious process of working out why and how they got there in the first place.

He also fails to realise that the current era is the only one in which we would even have the option of not being introspective; the only one in which the a16z-backed merchants of the attention economy have made non-optional boredom extinct. In a recent X post, Andreessen described his "information consumption" thus: "1/4 X, 1/4 podcast interviews of the smartest practitioners, 1/4 talking to the leading AI models, and 1/4 reading old books. The opportunity cost of anything else is far too high, and rising daily." (One wonders whether he reads the old books, or asks those leading AI models for their summaries.)

My main issue with Andreessen is not so much that he's wrong; it's that he's so confident about it. He sounded similarly confident when he told us that bitcoin represented a breakthrough through akin to the internet, that Web3 was the future and that we shouldn't fear AI because "the moral of every story is the good guys win".

We seem to believe, as a society, that wealth, influence and confidence can be equated with wisdom. But Silicon Valley billionaires are not our sages; they're our enablers, keeping us distracted and dumb, and making sure we never stop scrolling for long enough to think about why we are wasting our lives on their platforms.

jemima.kelly@ft.com

Letters

Museums need directors with genuine operating skills

The piece by Charlotte Burns "Men retire, women get fired" – the quiet crisis gripping museums" (Arts, March 12) makes a compelling case for a troubling pattern, then undermines it by retreating into the framework that created the problem. Museums should ideally be led by the most capable people available, selected on a near gender-blind basis. The real question being dodged is whether the appointment process over the past decade selected for capability, or for representation of capability.

My daughter teaches at Williams

College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, a well-known feeder for museum leadership. Her comments from inside that pipeline are sobering: a significant cohort of recent directors have been selected less for their competence and performance record than for their ability to tick boxes – gender, race, sexual orientation. The narrative mattered more than the substance; not a recipe for resilience under pressure. Conformity to outward appearances prevailed over audacity.

Museums face a brutal operational vice – priced out of acquisitions by

soaring art values, stripped of rewarding collection-building, grinding through doing more with less. Museums also struggle to attract younger audiences. Many remain slow-moving, hierarchical institutions with governance structures – often large volunteer boards – ill-suited to rapid change. The gap between what curators want to do and what boards will fund or risk creates persistent friction. This demands directors with genuine operating skills, even turnaround instincts, mercilessly exposing gaps between symbolic

appointments and operational depth.

The author's conflation of bad outcomes for women leaders with systemic bias skips steps. It fits a selection process that sets people up to fail – appointed for representation, not ability.

Competent women in the field, including my daughter, are not well served by narratives treating female leadership failures as male conspiracy rather than probing how those leaders were chosen and why they failed.

R James Breiding
Zurich, Switzerland

Prediction markets – now the pushback

Reports that Arizona has charged the company Kalshi with operating an illegal gambling business ("Kalshi charged with offering illegal bets on elections", Report, March 18) will probably be a watershed moment for the future of prediction markets.

Prediction markets are websites where users place a financial transaction on a "yes" or "no" outcome (an "event contract") and much like a bet, if they have selected the correct outcome, users receive a payout. With the rise of Kalshi and other companies such as Polymarket, my research shows we are witnessing the gamification of trading and the gamification of everything; these stock markets for trends include offers on a range of topics from the Oscars to presidential elections.

A series of high-profile controversies for prediction markets have peppered the last month or so, from accusations of insider trading or misuse of confidential information before geopolitical events in Venezuela, Israel and the Portuguese election. However, it is the current war in Iran that has brought the debate about prediction markets into sharp relief.

Last summer there was the strapline on a Kalshi advert – "the world's gone mad – trade it". But should we bet on war and conflict? And is this gambling or a financial product? Lawmakers are playing catch-up and Arizona is leading the charge. The outcome of its attorney-general's legal action will be fascinating and could potentially open the floodgates for a backlash against prediction markets in other US states and globally.

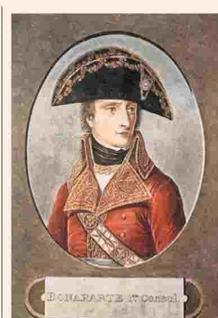
Many countries in Europe have already "geo-blocked" or banned prediction markets, including the UK. However, what is striking is that even if countries do not allow their own citizens to access prediction markets, the rest of the world (especially the US) is still currently betting on those nations and their next election or leadership contest.

The space between gambling and gaming is an incredibly grey area for legislation, but these first criminal charges in the US should lead to the answers for how prediction markets will operate in the future. Kalshi seeks to "trade the future" but its own future now seems uncertain.

Sarah Mills
Professor in Human Geography,
Loughborough University, Loughborough,
Leicestershire, UK

The trouble starts when we ask AI to be subjective

Sarah O'Connor is right to worry about the oversight of AI. ("It's hard for humans to have the final say over AI", Opinion, March 17), but perhaps we are looking for the brake pedal



Napoleon Bonaparte became the first emperor of France in 1804

in the wrong place. The real issue isn't just about who has the final say but whether the outcome we are checking is actually measurable.

In truth, we've been "surrendering" our cognition to machines for decades without much fuss. No one stays awake at night double-checking if a spreadsheet correctly multiplied two seven-digit numbers. We treat it as a binary: it is either right, or it's a bug for the software provider to fix. Even a complex macro, for all its moving parts, eventually spits out a result that can be audited against a hard truth.

The trouble starts when we ask AI to be subjective. When an agent suggests a legal strategy or a hiring shortlist, there is no "correct" answer to verify. This is where the "check-the-box" mentality becomes truly dangerous. If we treat AI like a glorified calculator, we end up spreading our human oversight so thin that it becomes a mere formality.

Instead of blanket supervision, we should be concentrating our "cognitive stamina" exactly where the defined outcomes stop and the judgment begins. We should trust AI for binary results and hold the AI providers accountable for correctly providing those outcomes. Detailed human review should be reserved for the nuances that a line of code will never quite grasp.

Peter Balchius
St.Glas, Switzerland

Glossing that glitch

Reading your piece "UK's Companies House halts online filing amid data glitch" (Report, March 14), I would point out, as someone with an electronics background, that a "glitch" is a transient, hard-to-reproduce error caused by timing mismatches or rare conditions, and not a persistent and easily reproducible fault.

Mike Whittaker
Stapleton, Shropshire, UK

Latin America's fintechs must focus on SME loans

Fintechs in emerging markets would do well to take note of Europe's lending revival to small and medium-sized enterprises ("New fintech unicorns are less radical and more profitable", Lex, March 4) and seek to incorporate a similar model.

Throughout Latin America, fintechs have traditionally focused on consumer credit. While this creates flashy headlines, it can lead to troubling levels of consumer debt as well as generating low returns for fintechs.

In reality, SME credit is far more productive. Rather than a loan for a new TV, business-to-business loans can drive meaningful economic growth. In Mexico, SMEs account for 95 per cent of businesses and provide employment to more than 68 per cent of the population. Despite this, fintechs have continued to focus on consumer lending.

What's more, in Europe, SMEs were served by the traditional banking sector before fintechs arrived on the scene. But in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, these businesses never had access to meaningful credit in the first place, making the case for B2B lending here that much stronger.

The next step for emerging markets is therefore better credit, not just more credit. In practice, this means a greater focus on SME lending.

Done properly, this will help to power the economy, drive greater financial inclusion and fuel social mobility. And as the likes of Allica Bank and Ebury, the payments group, have shown, SME loans deliver better, more reliable returns, and create profit.

A low non-performing loan rate is hardly radical, but with B2B fintechs attracting higher valuations and more investors, it might be more exciting than it sounds.

Carlos Marmolejo
Chief Executive, Finsus (a fintech platform providing banking services to people and SMEs), Mexico City, Mexico

Nature's view on climate crisis is out of our hands

Martin Wolf ("The UK is struggling to achieve its aims on clean energy", Opinion, March 16) writes "the idea that we will 'solve' the climate emergency by collapsing our output (called 'degrowth') is a non-starter".

We can only hope that nature understands that, because with desertification spreading, crop yields already dropping in parts of the world, wildfires destroying housing and infrastructure, flooding an increasing risk and other climate change impacts becoming ever clearer, it looks as if the decision may not rest with us.

Robin Cooke-Hurle
London SW11, UK

French emperor's maxim on unpredictability of war

Martin Wolf suggests that by controlling the Strait of Hormuz, Iran is "winning" ("Trump has broken it. Now he owns it", March 18, 2026). This confuses tactical leverage with strategic victory. The maxim "On s'engage, et puis on voit" ("One engages, and then one sees), often attributed to Napoleon, acknowledges the inherent unpredictability of war that Wolf's demand for "thinking things through" ignores. However, Napoleon also understood that "victory" is a physical reality on the ground.

As a Soviet soldier in Siberia, I was taught that we won the second world war when our troops stormed the Reichstag in 1945 – not when our bombers began controlling German airspace. Control of a waterway or an altitude may cause economic or logistical pain, but it does not constitute a win in the historical sense.

With Washington unwilling to commit boots on the ground and Tehran unable to reach American soil, we are not looking at a "win" for either side. We are witnessing a high-stakes skirmish that, lacking the capacity for a decisive land engagement, can only end in a draw.

Mergen Mongush
Moscow, Russia

A class critique of the Waitrose mackerel story

Tim Hayward (Opinion, FT Weekend, March 7) is apparently so excited by mackerel swimming away from Waitrose that he contends that only "posh" people eat it, and of course Waitrose is "our poshest grocer". But can posh, an acronym for the steamship age phrase "Port Out Starboard Home" (equivalent to "flies first class") become "poshest"?

And surely it is more that mackerel used to be cheap, but more people have developed a taste for it. As the diet-conscious moved from red meat to eat more fish and wanted variety, and dietitians recommended it for health reasons, it became more expensive.

As for the "bienen pensant middle classes", surely Hayward has his sturdy feet well planted towards the upper end of that group? Or perhaps he should have gone to Iceland (the shop, not the country) for his mackerel.

J M Castles
London W2, UK

Can fossil fuel vigilantes force the conflict to end?

Bond markets have often been shown to curtail wayward government fiscal policies – viz the Liz Truss "mini" Budget of 2022. Can fossil fuel markets perform the same trick and bring forward an end to military conflict?

Fred Lucas
London W4, UK

Opinion

America keeps bailing out Trump

MARKETS

Ruchir Sharma



Last year America's prowess in AI more than offset the damaging economic effects from Donald Trump's tariffs. Now, different strengths – including energy independence, an army of retail investors and the dollar's safe-haven status – are saving the US economy and markets from the worst effects of his Iran "excursion".

Since the war began on February 28, petrol prices have risen more than 20 per cent in the US but much more steeply in many other countries. Natural gas prices have barely budged in the US while surging in the rest of the world. Across Europe and Asia, energy shortages are leading to higher electricity prices, factory shutdowns, shorter work weeks, school

closure and corporate insolvencies. While no country is gaining from the war, economically the bigger losers are outside America. The signal from global bond markets is that they expect the energy shock to drive up inflation faster in countries outside the US. The Trump team is spinning higher oil prices as short-term pain for consumers but overall a positive for a net energy exporter like the US with producers in line to receive a major windfall.

The relative resilience of the US economy is feeding the arrogance of American power, which long predates Trump and permeates the establishment. After all, the Biden administration took the weaponisation of the US dollar to another level in its imposition of sanctions on Russia. Lately, when I ask Silliman Valley and Wall Street leaders about threats to the US economy – from policy unpredictability to declining immigration and record budget deficits – they typically shrug as if to say: "Where else will the money go? America's huge lead in AI is reinforcing this narrative."

Superpowerdom naturally breeds hubris. And no country has ever

dominated the financial landscape to the extent the US has in recent years, with a share of global market flows far above its share of the global economy.

One mainstay of the US market is its endless army of retail investors. They keep buying stocks and that enthusiasm has not been dimmed by the grim headlines out of Iran. They have been net buyers virtually every day since the war

The president is layering a haphazard conflict on top of his tariffs and largely getting away with it

began, and as a result the US stock market has held up better than international markets.

Though foreigners heap criticism on Trump for a destabilising war of choice, they don't hold the US accountable in financial terms. They keep buying US stocks and there is hardly any "Trump risk premium" visible across US assets.

In fact, the dollar has appreciated

this month against every other major currency in the world. This reversed a period of depreciation, which appeared to signal the end of a long dollar bull run. So rather perversely, the Iran adventure has at least temporarily rescued the dollar's role as a haven currency.

The mild domestic impact of the war so far suggests that, once again, Trump is getting bailed out by America's pre-existing strengths. The mighty dollar, the dominance of US markets and revolutionary technologies all have roots that predate him.

Trump is layering a haphazard shooting war on top of an ill-conceived tariff war and largely getting away with it, in part because other nations have become too dependent on America – militarily, technologically and, above all, financially. Countries have recently tried to decouple from the US by spending more on defence, or directing central banks to hold fewer dollars in their reserves, or by striking trade deals that don't involve America. But the lopsided economic fallout from Iran shows that they need to do a lot more.

The law of the jungle prevails, and the

best way for smaller powers to survive when might makes right is to work in a pack. Nations could form bargaining coalitions to respond to tariff threats, rather than let Trump force deals on one overmatched target at a time. Europeans could focus more on creating a unified military structure and prioritising spending towards establishing energy independence. Many countries could strengthen their own financial markets by encouraging domestic investors and sovereign wealth funds to invest more at home.

Until Trump faces serious domestic blowback from his various wars, he will keep exercising American power in an unbridled way. Ninety per cent of Maga Republicans back the Iran campaign, so other nations can't just hope for his base to revolt. They need to do more to strengthen themselves, collectively and individually, or they will keep suffering more damage from the whims of an erratic US leader.

The writer is chair of Rockefeller International. His latest book is 'What Went Wrong With Capitalism'

AI companies should pay a content levy in Europe

Arthur Mensch

Europe is a land of creators. The continent has nurtured ideas that have enriched, and continue to enrich, the world's intellectual and creative landscape. Its diverse and multilingual heritage remains one of its greatest strengths, central not only to its identity and soft power but also to its economic vitality.

All this is at risk as AI reshapes the global knowledge economy.

Major AI companies in the US and China are developing their models under permissive or non-existent copyright rules, training them domestically on vast amounts of content – including from European sources.

European AI developers, by contrast, operate in a fragmented legal environment that places them at a competitive disadvantage. The current opt-out framework, designed to enable rights holders to protect their content and prevent AI companies from using it for training if they say so, has proved unworkable in practice. Copyrighted works continue to spread uncontrollably online, while the legal mechanisms designed to protect them remain patchy, inconsistently applied and overly complex.

The result is a framework that satisfies no one. Rights holders correctly fear for their livelihoods yet see no clear path to protection. AI developers face legal uncertainty that hampers investment and growth.

Europe needs to explore a new approach. AI Mistral, we are proposing a revenue-based levy that would be

Rights holders correctly fear for their livelihoods yet see no clear path to protection

applied to all commercial providers placing AI models on the market or putting them into service in Europe, reflecting their use of content publicly available online.

Crucially, this levy would apply equally to providers based abroad, creating a level playing field within the European market and ensuring that foreign AI companies also contribute when they operate here. The proceeds would flow into a central fund dedicated to investing in new content creation, and supporting Europe's cultural sectors.

In return, AI developers would gain what they urgently need: legal certainty. The mechanism would shield AI providers from liability for training on materials accessible online. Importantly, it would not replace licensing agreements or the freedom to contract. On the contrary, licensing opportunities should continue to develop and expand for usage beyond training. The fund would complement, not crowd out, direct relationships between creators and AI companies.

We believe in Europe. That is why we are investing €4bn in European infrastructure to train our models on European soil. But we cannot build Europe's AI future under rules that place us at a structural disadvantage to our US and Chinese competitors. Europe cannot afford to become a passive consumer of technologies designed elsewhere, trained on our knowledge, languages and culture, yet reflecting neither our values nor our diversity.

We are putting forward this idea as a starting point for discussion rather than a final blueprint. With this proposal, we're inviting creators, rights holders, policymakers and fellow AI developers to come together around a solution where innovation and the protection of creators move forward together.

Europe does not need to choose between protecting its creators and competing in the AI race. It needs a framework that enables both.

The debate around AI and copyright is too often framed as a confrontation between creators and AI developers. This framing is not only unhelpful, it is wrong. Far from being adversarial, the two communities are the most natural of allies. Both have a profound shared interest in ensuring that Europe does not cede ground, culturally, technologically or strategically, in an era that will be defined by how societies choose to govern the tools of intelligence.

The writer is co-founder and CEO of Mistral AI

Iran war has exposed US fragility at sea

BUSINESS

Rana Foroohar



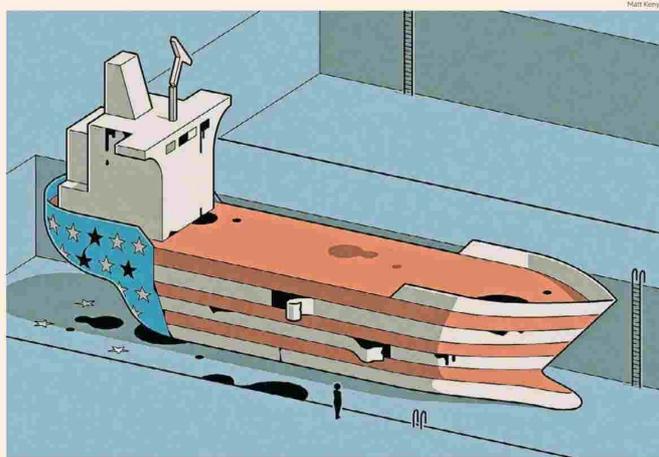
The latest faultline exposed by the war in Iran is maritime trade and security. The blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, coupled with port attacks in Dubai and worries that Houthi rebels could pile in with more attacks in the Red Sea, has brought global shipping in the region, along with the transport of crucial energy supplies, to a grinding halt. In doing so, it has exposed the fact that neither America – nor the world – is yet prepared for how quickly global trade can be compromised in the face of geoeconomic disruption.

It's amazing to me that we are not ready for this yet, given that we've been watching this movie for almost three decades. There was the 1999 Taiwanese earthquake that disrupted chip supply globally and resulted in the closure of factories in California and Texas. There was the Japanese tsunami in 2011 that shut down parts of the global automotive supply chain for months. There were, of course, the many Covid-related supply chain snags, and the food and energy inflation wreaked by the war in Ukraine. And now, President Donald Trump is giving us the mother of all

supply chain shocks – this time in oil – with seemingly little forward planning about how to manage the disruption. For all the post-pandemic talk of building economic systems that are resilient as well as efficient, we seem to have got neither right.

Consider the fact Trump last week was forced to waive the century-old Jones Act, which stipulates that only US-built and flagged ships can carry goods between American ports. It's been a contentious piece of legislation for a long time, since the loss of the US industrial base in shipping has diminished economies of scale in American shipbuilding. That has meant that many foreign builders can make ships and run maritime operations more cheaply than the US industry can. Trump hopes to bring down oil and gas prices at least temporarily by allowing foreign vessels to ship goods between American ports, thus making the shipping of such commodities – which have risen sharply in price due to the Iran war – cheaper.

Whether this will do more than shave a few pennies off oil prices is unclear. Still, it has at least reopened debate about the Jones Act. A 2026 white paper from Vanderbilt University on the challenges in shipbuilding notes that "the Jones Act's protected market cannot drive the industrial resurgence needed for global competitiveness without major overhaul and public investment". As the authors outline, the act encourages operators simply to repair old ships flagged in the US rather than build new



ones, which cost three to eight times what foreign-built vessels might.

Still, they note, a "repeal of the Jones Act offers a short-term gain, while increasing longer-term fragility. Without domestic protection requirements, operators would simply buy cheaper foreign-built (and state-subsidised) ships, leaving the US without a manufacturing base."

In fact, that's pretty much what has happened in every area of shipping outside the purview of the act – the industry is now dominated by Chinese ships. Both the Vanderbilt researchers and an Open Markets paper on how to save US shipbuilding argue (and I'd agree) that the real issue is the failure of the government to provide strong demand signals to the industry by underwriting support

What is needed are fewer mega tankers and frigates and more nimble, dual-use vessels

across years and decades. Ensuring that public and private shipbuilding are reconnected is historically the only way that any country has managed to build a strong navy, commercial maritime sector and ocean defence.

But it's worth remembering why we have the law in the first place. At the beginning of the 20th century, the US was dangerously dependent on foreign shipping cartels (including those in the UK, which were state subsidised). The monopoly power of such companies drove prices for the shipping of key items up by as much as 20 times. "While there was some justification [during the first world war] for these enormous increases in charter rates, ship costs and freight rates, it was evident that they had been artificially inflated," according to Edward Hurley, the head of the US Shipping Board at the time.

This very much mirrors the monopoly power exerted today by the world's largest shipping groups including MSC, Maersk, Cosco, Hapag-Lloyd and the handful of others that control 90 per cent of the global shipping capacity.

Thanks to the rise of supertankers and container shipping, fewer, larger boats are carrying most of the world's goods (90 per cent of which are transported by sea). That's a system built for "efficiency" rather than resilience – especially in a new age of warfare in which one cheap Iranian drone can take out a tanker in minutes.

If ships are indeed the new chips, as the last two US administrations have asserted, America is going to have to completely rethink the way it incentivises and regulates the building of new vessels. What's needed are fewer mega tankers and frigates and more nimble, dual-use vessels, perhaps built in conjunction with partners (few countries can build ships completely on their own).

Whether or not that happens, the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz will further speed up the desire to find new shipping pathways – in the Arctic, for example. In a world of great power conflict, flexibility equals safety.

rana.foroohar@ft.com

'EU Inc' is a missed opportunity for start-ups

EUROPE

Martin Sandbu



The promised solution to Europe's lack of scaling-up opportunities for innovators was published last Wednesday, just in time for a summit of EU leaders. This much-awaited "28th regime" of corporate law was demanded in two influential reports by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi: a new, lean, company structure with streamlined rules that would float on top of the jungle of 27 national systems that currently prevent start-ups from scaling across the bloc.

To ordinary voters, it may not seem obvious why creating more European rules should boost innovation and growth. But the new regime – or as Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has rechristened it, "EU Inc" –

has been hailed as a potential game-changer, not least by Europe's start-up community, for a reason.

Businesses note that the EU has innovation, talent and resources but that growing across the notionally single market is so hard that it is easier to move to the US once an idea is worth a big bet. A single pan-European company scheme, unshackled from any single member state's corporate rules, could change this – if it meets two tests.

An "EU Inc" could help founders by making it quick and easy to set up new businesses across all of Europe, and to shut them down fast if unsuccessful. It could help investors by creating legal certainty and well-understood, consistent treatment of new ventures regardless of which EU country they expanded to. Achieve both these objectives, and the scale and funding that are so easy after moving your company to the US would no longer be quite such a draw for promising European companies.

So how does the Commission's proposal stack up against these two tests? On the first, not badly. Brussels has designed a company structure with

much of what founders have said they need: flexible funding rules, a harmonised employee stock option regime (with incomes and gains only taxed when realised) and procedures that must be fast, digital and based on "once-only" reporting. The proposed "EU Inc" even includes agile liquidation processes, although its insolvency rules

A truly common corporate regime could revive activity and boost taxes currently lost across the Atlantic

are restricted to companies deemed "innovative".

On the second, however, it disappoints. As trade group Allied For Start-ups puts it: "On paper, it looks European, but in practice it may feel national."

I note two particular misgivings from the start-up community. One is the patchy-together nature of the initiative: rather than a true 28th regime or

"virtual jurisdiction", the proposal requires member states to facilitate a new, harmonised type of company in their national business registries. The other gripe is that national courts will remain in charge of interpreting the new common corporate rules.

To be fair, the Commission urges member states to set up dedicated courts to adjudicate the new regime. But that falls short of the single, specialised EU-level commercial court system that many have called for. The obvious concern is that legal interpretation and dispute resolution will be unpredictable and inconsistent.

Investors will still need to ask questions about how things might work out in 27 different places – or more likely, keeping open for the easy life of investing under well-known corporate regimes across the Atlantic. So the incentive for Europe's innovators to move overseas will not go away.

Why has the Commission not gone all out for a real 28th regime? Experts tell me they think that resistance runs deep in governments and trade unions, who worry it could risk undermining

domestic standards on labour rights and other issues, creating a race to the bottom. Some therefore endorse a strategy of asking for less in the hope that getting something approved is better than asking for everything and getting nothing.

But nothing ever emerges in a bolder and better form after a tug of war between member states and EU institutions. As with its proposal for the next multiyear budget, Brussels has preemptively aimed low.

Governments who really want their own economies, and Europe as a whole, to grow faster, should expect better – and pursue it in "coalitions of the willing" if necessary. A truly common corporate regime could revive activity and boost taxes currently lost to the US, or to EU states that engage in a race to the bottom already.

Above all there is the cost of potential ventures that will never exist without better scale-up options – the price of continued fragmentation is all the great businesses that never get off the ground. They badly need a champion.

martin.sandbu@ft.com