Invisible actors

The ECI must stop filing of bulk applications for deletion of voters

The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has seen allegations of bulk filing of applications seeking to delete voters' names from draft lists using Form 7 in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and, more recently Uttarakhand. Ground reports by *The Hindu* from Karnataka, Rajasthan and Gujarat noted that these forms were often filed in bulk fraudulently using names of people who were unaware of the filing. In several instances, hundreds of objections were filed under a single person's name. Form 7 is filed to object to an existing name – or to request its deletion – on the electoral rolls for reasons such as death, shifting, or ineligibility. The ECI's Booth Level Officer or the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) has to conduct an inquiry on the application and issue a notice to the voter before taking any action. While Booth Level Agents (BLA) of political parties can file up to 10 Form 7s a day, totalling 30, there is no limit on how many forms an individual registered as a voter from the same constituency can submit. To prevent misuse, the ECI has said that if a person files more than five objections, it will trigger a mandatory review by the ERO to ensure the legitimacy of the claims.

The Opposition parties have alleged that the form was being misused through "systemic and coordinated efforts" to delete names of eligible voters and embolden the BJP's efforts to wrongfully gain electoral advantage. In the case of Uttarakhand, the Congress has alleged that the manner in which the bulk forms were submitted online pointed to "institutional" access being granted to some in the process. These parties have also sent delegations and submitted representations to the ECI. What is important to note is that in most cases, voters were unaware that applications for deletion of their names had been filed at all, leaving it to workers of political parties active in the constituency to bring it to their notice. According to ECI data, for the third phase of the SIR covering 16 States/three Union Territories there are 3,42,409 BLAs of political parties for an electorate of 36,73,87,831 or one BLA for approximately 1,073 voters. These numbers include agents from ruling and Opposition parties. In such a situation, it is incumbent upon the ECI to step in and protect the voting rights of an individual rather than leave it to the grassroot strength of political parties. The ECI should thus take immediate steps to address this concern. Abnormal patterns should be investigated and the process should be monitored, with a uniform, countrywide Standard Operating Procedure, requiring verification of identity and constituency of the objector and the following of due process before any elector is deleted pursuant to a Form 7.

Perfect host

India was successful as a host of badminton World Championships

The 2026 BWF World Championships in New Delhi marked the rise of France as an on-court force and of India as a capable host. Alex Lanier's triumph in singles, and Thom Gicquel and Delphine Delrue's in mixed doubles, were the first golds in France's history. It was just over three months ago that the European nation finished a worthy runner-up to China in the Thomas Cup, the de facto World Cup in badminton. The Worlds success has established France as a serious contender in a sport otherwise dominated by Asian countries. In fact, Lanier is just the third non-Asian this century – after Spain's Carolina Marin and Denmark's Viktor Axelsen – to win the singles gold at the World Championships. The 21-year-old did that at a spruced-up Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium, which was in the dock earlier in January when pigeons and monkeys intruded into the arena during the India Open. The massive facelift ensured that the marquee event's return to India after 17 years would be long remembered. An Se-Young will also go back with happy memories after reclaiming the women's singles crown from three-time titlist Akane Yamaguchi. The victory extended the 24-year-old reigning Olympic champion's stellar 2026, during which she has won an Uber Cup gold medal, and the individual and team trophies at the Badminton Asia Championships.

For India, the competition was the 12th straight edition where it secured at least one medal, with Gayatri Gopichand and Treesa Jolly bagging a bronze in women's doubles. The performance is the latest in a series of good outcomes for Indian badminton after an ordinary 2025, where Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty's World Championships doubles bronze was the best result. This year, Lakshya Sen reached the All England Open final, and Ayush Shetty at the Badminton Asia Championships. P.V. Sindhu's victory at the Japan Open Super 750 last month was only her second Tour title in the last four years, and there were also triumphs for Satwiksairaj and Chirag at Singapore Open Super 750, and for Devika Sihag, Tanvi Sharma and Ashmita Chaliha at the Super 300 level. Yet, the feeling is unmistakable that India should have done better at a home World Championships, with Lakshya's second-round defeat to the unheralded American teenager Garret Tan the most disappointing. There is no questioning the 25-year-old's capability; he is a World Championships bronze medallist, a two-time All England finalist and finished an agonising fourth at the Paris 2024 Olympics. But no Indian men's singles player has won an elite BWF Super 1000-level title since K. Srikanth in 2017. A swift end to this drought is essential for the overall health of the sport.

Labour rights beyond the shadow of BWSSB



V. Gopala Gowda

Former Judge of the Supreme Court of India



Maitreyi Krishnan

Practising advocate

On August 20, 2026, the Supreme Court of India delivered its judgment on the Reference made on the correctness of the judgment in *Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board vs A. Rajappa* (*BWSSB*), 1978, particularly the test for determining whether an activity falls within the definition of "industry" under Section 2(j) of the Industrial Disputes (ID) Act, 1947. A brief history of the Reference. In *State of U.P. vs Jai Bir Singh (2005), 5 SCC 1*, a five-judge Bench referred the seven-judge Bench decision in *BWSSB* for reconsideration. A seven-judge Bench was constituted and, by order dated January 2, 2017, referred the matter to a nine-judge Bench. By order dated February 16 2026, the nine-Judge Bench framed four questions concerning the correctness of the test in *BWSSB*, the impact of the 1982 Amendment and the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), 2020, whether government welfare activities count as "industrial activities," and the scope of "sovereign functions" under Section 2(j).

By the time the questions were framed, the IRC, 2020 had been brought into force from November 21, 2025, also repealing the ID Act, 1947. By virtue of this repeal, the Reference had effectively been rendered otiose. Even so, the nine-judge Bench proceeded to hear the matter.

Judges and reactions

Of the nine judges, Justice D. Datta and Justice U. Bhuyan held that "the reference requires no answer". Justice B.V. Nagarathna found the exercise "unnecessary and only academic in nature". Justice P.S. Narasimha held that "an authoritative interpretation of the definition industry' was compelling at the time of the Reference", but "such a determination has now become unnecessary, with the repeal of the said provision.".

Importantly, even the opinion written by the Chief Justice of India (CJI) for four judges acknowledges this. Even as it sought to re-formulate the Triple Test laid down by *BWSSB*, it describes its reformulation of the Triple Test as merely "hypothetical", and expressly states that it will not apply to any pending case. The ID Act has been repealed, and there can be no future cases under it either. Even the reformulated test framed by four judges was prospective and would not alter pending disputes, which would continue to be governed by the *BWSSB* framework, and since the ID Act, 1947 has been repealed, there can be no future cases under it.

The four questions framed on February 16, 2026 concern only Section 2(j) of the ID Act. The interpretation of Section 2(p) of the IRC was not before the Court.

The CJI, writing for four judges, recognises that the IRC "is an independent legislative enactment and must be interpreted on its own terms, having regard to its text, scheme, and object". At the same time, the same opinion says, in view of the reformulated Triple Test in their opinion, the principles laid down in *BWSSB* shall not be regarded as the "sheet anchor for the interpretation of the IRC should such a question arise in the future". While on the one hand it refuses to construe a provision, in the same breath it rules on how *BWSSB*, as a precedent, may not be used to construe it. This in itself is a form of construing it, and is an attempt to police the tools available for a future interpretive exercise.

The top court's treatment of BWSSB highlights the enduring anxiety over the scope of labour protection

Justice Narasimha also says that it is important to ensure that the interpretation of the definition of "Industry" under the IRC "is not burdened by the existing interpretations" under the ID Act, 1947. Justice Nagarathna's opinion on this issue is important. While affirming the judgment in *BWSSB*, she recognised that the extent to which its reasoning carries over to the interpretation of "industry" under the IRC is to be tested by comparing the actual text of the two provisions. Such a comparison can be meaningfully undertaken only in a case arising under Section 2(p), and not in the abstract.

The interpretation of the definition of industry under the IRC cannot be seen in abstract and would have to be understood in light of the rich jurisprudence that has developed with *BWSSB* and after.

The importance of BWSSB

There is a deeper thread – an anxiety about the judgment in *BWSSB*, which needs to be addressed. This anxiety is what gave rise to the Reference itself. The five-Judge Bench in *Jai Bir Singh* (2005) questioned the correctness of *BWSSB*, observing that its "worker-oriented approach" was "unmindful of the interests of the employer or owner of the industry".

This finds an echo in the CJI's opinion. Having hypothetically reformulated the tests in *BWSSB*, and having stated that *BWSSB* shall not be regarded as the sheet anchor for the interpretation of the IRC, the opinion of the CJI, for four judges, speaks of the judgment finally lifting a "burden" and permitting the law to "move forward unencumbered".

This again finds echo in the judgment of Justice Narasimha, who states that the interpretation of the definition of "industry" under the IRC, 2020 "must be freed of the bondage of ratio" in *BWSSB*. In this light, it is essential to recognise what "burden" of *BWSSB* causes such anxiety.

There can be no dispute about the asymmetry between capital and labour, or the imbalance in their respective bargaining power. Justice Bagchi recognises this when he reminds us that one must always "bear in mind that a workman seldom enters the field of negotiation as an equal...." The Constitution recognises this, with Article 42 requiring the state to secure "just and humane conditions of work," while Article 23 prohibits "traffic in human beings", "begar, and other forms of forced labour". The conditions that necessitated these protections have simply changed form.

Labour legislation recognised this extreme imbalance and sought to ensure a modicum of bare protection. This is not a "pro-worker" understanding of the law, but just a check against the imbalance tilting toward the employer. The fact that such bare protection is described as "pro-worker" says less about the protection than about where the baseline has been unfortunately naturalised. While the freedom to dismiss without explanation is part of the ordinary run of business, a requirement to explain is called a burden. The warning of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar rings true – liberty from the control of the state is another name for "the dictatorship of the private employer".

The 13-judge Bench decision in *Kesavananda Bharati* (1973) recognised that justice, social, economic and political, formed part of the Constitution's basic structure. The underlying inequality between employer and workman has not narrowed since 1947. In fact, the policy of "ease of doing business" has widened it. This is exactly why the social justice vision of Part IV of the Constitution calls for more protection now, not less.

The issue of labour rights

The ID Act, 1947 – to maintain industrial peace – provided basic protections and a forum for adjudicating disputes, where the labour courts and tribunals have been given wide powers to adjudicate on the same. To be excluded from its definition of "industry" is to be excluded from that bare minimum protection, and from the remedy available under it. The significance of *BWSSB*'s definition of "industry" lay in ensuring that this protection reached everyone the Act was meant to cover, rather than excluding workers from the one recourse the law offered them.

Given the overarching objective of industrial peace, there was never a reason to treat *BWSSB*'s interpretation as a burden rather than as the Act doing precisely what it was designed to do. The anxiety surrounding it has always rested on the same premise: an eagerness to remove workers from the protection of the law.

As the ID Act stands repealed and the IRC takes its place, it is necessary to return to the promise of social justice in the Constitution. The labour codes that have replaced the ID Act, including the IRC, are built on a premise of exclusion – narrowing who falls within the protection of the law – and will have to answer to that mandate.

The fact is youth unemployment has a household cost



Gargi Sridharan

Economist



Basit Abdullah

Assistant Professor at the Institute of Management Technology, Hyderabad

India's youth unemployment crisis is usually told through a single statistic: how many young people cannot find work. The latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2025) reports an unemployment rate of 14.8% among 18-29 year-olds, rising to 29.4% among those who are tertiary educated (with a diploma, graduate or post-graduate levels). The broader picture is larger than the unemployment rate alone suggests. Unemployment as a measure captures only those people who are not working but are actively seeking or available for work. It excludes those outside the labour force, including those who may have stopped looking for work, a group that may include many young women. Against the narrower measure of unemployment, the broader picture is considerably larger: 40.1% of tertiary-educated youth are neither in employment, education nor training, commonly referred to as NEET. Among tertiary-educated young women who are NEET, 74.7% are outside the labour force – neither working nor classified as unemployed because they are not seeking or available for work.

A framing that misses another issue

Unemployment is only the most visible part of a wider problem of educated young people remaining outside employment. And for those who are looking for work, the wait can be long. Examination paper leaks, recruitment delays and debates over India's demographic dividend have kept the spotlight firmly on young jobseekers.

Yet, this framing misses an important question. Unemployment is rarely experienced by individuals alone. Behind every unemployed graduate is often an entire household that financed the degree, adjusted its spending and continues to support a young adult's job search. Looking at youth unemployment through the household rather than the individual raises a different question: what happens to families when an educated young adult cannot find work? How households experience that unemployment may depend not only on the absence of work, but also on how long the search lasts and on the resources families have to sustain it.

Unemployment among educated youth in India extends beyond jobseekers, placing prolonged financial pressure on families

The households that invested in education

Around 15.4% of Indian households have a tertiary-educated young adult (18-29 years). These are households that have invested in higher education in the expectation that it would provide a pathway to secure employment and upward mobility. Yet, one in five households is supporting at least one unemployed tertiary-educated young adult (20.8%). The household consequences are measurable. Compared to households without any educated unemployed youth, those with unemployed youth spend, on average, ₹1,087 less per month on consumption overall, and ₹710 less per household member.

On average, these households have only 1.5 earning members, compared with two in households without an unemployed educated youth. For 14.4% of them, there is no active earning member at all, while 39.5% depend on a single earner. And in nearly two-thirds (62.5%), no one in the household has a regular salaried job.

The pressure on households becomes more serious when unemployment persists. Nearly three in five (58%) unemployed tertiary-educated youth have been searching for work for more than a year. Close to three in 10 (28.9%) have been unemployed for more than two years. A household supporting an unemployed graduate for a few months faces a different pressure than one financing a job search stretching across one or two years. Extended unemployment depletes savings, reduces consumption, and forces difficult choices about what employment the young adult should accept.

The data show a clear pattern: the ability to sustain prolonged job search is associated with household earning capacity. For someone in a household surviving on one earner or without a regular salary, the pressure to start earning is likely to arrive much sooner. What looks like the duration of an individual's unemployment, therefore, is also a measure of how long a family must sustain the wait. These families must push their unemployed youth toward immediate employment, even if it means accepting positions far below their qualifications. The choice is not between a 'good job' and 'bad job.' It is between 'any job' and economic insecurity.

The policy question

Current employment policy largely treats youth joblessness as an individual problem, addressed through apprenticeships, skilling and hiring incentives. The evidence here suggests that the consequences of unemployment extend beyond the individual jobseeker to the household supporting them. The length of the transition from education to work also matters, because someone is financing that wait. Recruitment delays, prolonged selection processes and extended job searches impose very different costs on a household with several earners than on one relying on a single income or without a regular salaried worker. Therefore, employment policy needs to pay greater attention to how long young people remain unemployed, and to the economic circumstances of the families supporting them during that period. Reducing avoidable delays in entry into work is not only a labour-market concern; it can also reduce the strain that prolonged unemployment places on households.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI-assisted learning

I write this letter as Professor of Medicine, Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute, Chennai. While the article, "Beyond the red pen" (EducationPlus, August 24), has laid out well-known aspects of learning using Artificial Intelligence (AI) into a crisp model (PRISM-X), it does not address the practical difficulties a human brain may face when using AI for learning. The writers have rightly placed prompting efficiency first in the model since the first prompt in a conversation — which some call as the mother prompt — is critical . An AI model's response is only as good as the prompt. I have observed that AI models are progressively designed in such a way that obtaining a good response requires longer and elaborate prompts. The bottleneck is "Reflective capability" in learning through AI. Assuming that the user has good prompting skills, handling the AI output is not that easy. Reflective capability requires extensive background knowledge, a deeper understanding of current concepts, and an awareness of misconceptions and future applications. For this, the learner has to spend considerable time reading traditional books, articles and observing real-world applications. So, it takes considerable time and effort for a person to challenge an AI model, identify misinformation and find wrong concepts put forth by the AI model. This means the world is perhaps stuck at the second stage of PRISM-X — not just students, but teachers as well. I fear that using AI without the skill for "Reflective capability" will, in the long run, erode learners' thoughts and make them accept half-truths — something which AI models are very good at. We need to educate students on how to upskill on "Reflective capability" before attempting to implement methods to assess their use of AI.

Dr. Emmanuel Bhaskar,
Chennai

Vacant seats

The report, "Over 13,000 UG seats still up for grabs at Delhi University" (Inside pages, August 24), is not surprising. The vacant seats mirror the prevailing state of the education system in the country. Education no longer seems to guarantee employment or a livelihood. The National Education Policy needs a complete restructuring.

Balasubramaniam Pavani,
Secunderabad

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

Smart glasses highlight gaps in privacy laws



Sonikka Loganathan

In June, reality star Kylie Jenner posted her latest collaboration on social media – a new design for Meta's line of AI-powered "smart glasses". Images of her wearing the glasses filled social media, as did videos of her teenage self lamenting the lack of privacy she was afforded because of her fame. The irony was unmissable: how is Ms. Jenner, who was once so worried about privacy, now promoting a device that enables surveillance?

Smart glasses are the latest addition to the wearable technology space. It is also a dangerous example of how current laws are unable to keep up with today's tech innovation.

According to Meta, these glasses allow you to see and answer calls, messages, and notifications via voice command. Built-in speakers help you listen to music and an integrated camera enables you to capture photos or videos through the lenses. Meta describes these glasses as "normal-looking eyewear with discreetly integrated glasses technology." Hidden from the naked eye, these glasses contain "tiny speakers, microphones, [and] a lightweight camera." The tech giant isn't shying away from how inconspicuous these features are; rather, it is flaunting it.

Privacy and data concerns

In India, the glasses, which have been advertised everywhere, retail at around ₹25,000. Stickers that claim to completely cover the LED recording indicator are also widely available. Meta says that if the LED is covered, the glasses will block the recording until the sticker is removed. Yet, workarounds are just a Google search away. The glasses also make a shutter sound when they start and stop recording, but this is not a strong indicator that you are being recorded. Further, Meta argues that the glasses are "designed for privacy, controlled by you." But this "control" is limited to the wearer, and not the recorded subject, such as requiring additional verification before use.

The website adds, "Meta collects data needed to help ensure that your glasses and app are reliable, secure and operating normally." An investigation by Swedish newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Goteborgs-Posten* found that Meta's contracted workers, who sometimes review the data to track user experience, were able to view sensitive content filmed on the smart glasses, including wearers using the toilet. In a comment to *BBC News*, Meta said its privacy policy states that it sometimes uses contractors to review data shared with them.

In this context, concerns about women's privacy have grown. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) show that in 2023, before the glasses entered the market, there were 3,678 cases of women-centred cybercrimes. Of these, 2,767 cases involved the transmission or publication of sexually explicit material. Consider how much easier these glasses would make it to record people without their knowledge, including in private spaces. The potential risks to children are equally concerning. In 2023, the NCRB recorded over 698 cases related to the use or storage of child sexual abuse material. If adults cannot often recognise when the glasses are recording, a child certainly cannot.

These risks are compounded by the glasses' battery life, offering 4-9 hours of active use. This means entire movies can be recorded, university lectures can be taped, confidential documents scanned, and patient information collected. It also means that even those who are not intentionally engaging in malpractice could invariably do so – by capturing something private in the frame's periphery, for example. Ultimately, these glasses allow for the extensive, non-consensual collection of data.

Lacuna in the law

India's laws today do little to protect people from this surveillance. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDPA) is technologically agnostic, making the purpose of data collection the key consideration. In a public space, people can neither grant consent nor monitor how their information is used.

Following the landmark *K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* 2017 judgment, reasonable expectation of privacy was recognised as a fundamental right under Article 21. This means that people, even in public spaces, don't generally expect to be captured in detail. But the DPDPA excludes information that is made publicly available. Hence, the reasonable expectation of privacy granted by *Puttaswamy* is not met because the Act does not regulate how someone is being recorded in public. The Act's scope is diluted further since there are minimal indicators that you could be in someone's frame, unlike someone recording on their phone.

This combination of rapid tech innovation and a lack of legal regulation and public awareness creates the perfect storm. With devices such as these glasses becoming common, people may be collecting information with little knowledge of where the data are being used. Without legal safeguards, digital accountability risks becoming an afterthought.

Banning such devices isn't practical from a business or tech standpoint. Meta might be the biggest player in this space today, but Google and Reliance are also entering the smart glasses market. As wearable tech becomes more advanced, banning it will become increasingly difficult. Instead, laws should be framed with an understanding of how AI is changing the landscape. There is a need for assessments on how technology will evolve, the risks that may accompany it, and the government's responsibility in ensuring that citizens are adequately protected.

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As wearable tech becomes more advanced, banning it will become increasingly difficult. Instead, laws should be framed with an understanding of how AI is changing the landscape

People's Plan 2.0: an ambitious dream

A campaign which decentralised governance in Keralam is planning a comeback

STATE OF PLAY

Tiki Rajwi

On August 16, many of the best-known names linked to an 'experiment' that changed the way Keralam thought about democratic decentralisation came together in Thiruvananthapuram to celebrate a birthday. The People's Plan Campaign (PPC) was turning 30 years old the next day. The conclave, a non-governmental initiative, saw participation from elected representatives, former Ministers and bureaucrats and hundreds of activists who had lovingly nurtured the PPC and gave it direction through the intervening years. But more than a nostalgic anniversary reunion, it was meant to discuss and plan the 'People's Plan Campaign 2.0'.

The plan, as explained by Communist Party of India (Marxist) veteran and former Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac, who had been in charge of the PPC when he was a member of the Kerala State Planning Board, included student internships with local bodies and a tech-driven campaign coordinated through an online portal. Opening the August 16 event, K.M. Shaji, Minister for local self-government in the ruling Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) government, recalled how successive governments in Keralam had supported the PPC as a process of deepening democracy.

A rich history

The PPC as an idea traces its roots to the 'Gram Swaraj' concept of Mahatma Gandhi. It draws strength from the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and the enactment of the Kerala Panchayati



Raj Act and the Kerala Municipality Act which institutionalised local governance structures. Keralam officially launched the People's Plan Campaign on August 17, 1996. At the time, it was run on campaign mode as the concept of participatory planning was new to the people. Grama sabhas and urban ward assemblies were organised across the State in the months that followed. The Left Democratic Front (LDF) government also took the big step of devolving 35%-40% of the Plan outlay to local governments.

The State Planning Board's Economic Review had noted how the programme marked a major shift by placing local self-governments at the centre of development planning. With its rich history of social reformation through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the land reforms that transformed the agrarian system, and its high social indicators in literacy and health, Keralam was ideally suited for such an experiment.

Looking back, the programme may not have been a 100% success, but it was also far from a failure. It made participatory democracy deeper and local governments stronger. The 'Kudumbashree' scheme in particular grabbed the spotlight on national and international stages. As noted by Mr. Isaac and Richard W. Franke, Professor Emeritus at the Montclair State University, in their book *People's Planning – Kerala, Local Democracy and Development*, "from a mere government-led administrative reform, the PPC has made the process of decentralisation an object of mass action and a part of the popular politics."

Modern challenges

Yet, as an updated 2.0 version is being ambitiously discussed, the challenges are many, such as waning public enthusiasm and low participation in the grama sabhas, especially in urban areas. When compared to the 1990s, attracting the younger generation to such an endeavour in a fast-paced, rapidly urbanising Keralam would prove a ponderous task, but also the most vital one. Government estimates show that 96.43% of Keralam's population could be living in urban areas by 2036. The People's Planning 2.0 would then have to factor in many things: centralisation trends in the government, changing aspirations of the people, and the increasing fiscal stress faced by Keralam.

Yet, the spirit of co-operation fostered through programmes such as the PPC remains all the more relevant today. Many of the hurdles faced by local governments in the last 30 years – unemployment, waste disposal, gender justice and issues faced by marginalised sections – persist. Moreover, more demanding problems have emerged: limited income sources, climate change, and an ageing society. In these changed times, local bodies would need to evolve a new political and fiscal culture with stronger public involvement, and elected members with impeccable credentials.

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Hyderabad, adjoining ACs drive Telangana's record SIR deletions

Just 20 constituencies in and close to the capital city account for half of the State's deletions

DATA POINT

Pon Vasanth B.A.
Srinivasan Ramani
Areena Arora

At the end of the enumeration period of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process in Telangana, the State registered a 21.7% deletion of names from its pre-SIR electoral rolls, the highest in the country so far. **Table 1** shows the percentage of deletions in the major States where the SIR has been undertaken. The draft electoral roll in Telangana will see the addition and re-entry of electors following the corrections period, but even taking that into account, the 21.7% figure is a rather large one. Only Uttar Pradesh with 18.7%, Tamil Nadu with 15.2%, and Gujarat with 14.5% come close to Telangana in the draft-stage deletion rate.

Map 1 shows the deletion rate across Assembly Constituencies (ACs) in the State. In 21 ACs, the deletion rate was a whopping 35% or more, and 19 of these fall in the "Highly Urban" band. Most were in and around the cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad – Musheerabad registered the highest deletion rate in the State at 45.2%, followed by Sanathnagar (44.9%), Malakpet (44.8%), Lal Bahadur Nagar (44.4%), Jubilee Hills (44.1%), Secunderabad Cantonment (42.8%) and Serilingampally (42.7%). The smaller map shows the 15 constituencies of Hyderabad district. Across the 21 "Highly Urban" constituencies, nearly 70% of those deleted were taken off the rolls because they had "shifted".

Unlike States such as Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Keralam, which recorded a drop in gender ratio between their 2024 Lok Sabha rolls and their final SIR rolls, Telangana's draft rolls show a slight increase – the ratio rose from 1,018 in the pre-SIR roll to 1,028 in the draft roll (**Table 2**). Tamil Nadu saw a similar bump, from 1,034 in its 2024 Lok Sabha roll to 1,044 in its final SIR roll. Telangana's figure, however, is at the draft stage and could still change.

The urban-rural split in terms of deletions was sharp (**Table 2**). In "Highly Urban" constituencies, the deletion rate was 40.4%. In "Moderately Urban" constituencies it was 29.8%, but that figure is driven by the peri-urban belt adjoining Hyderabad rather than by the district towns: Maheswaram (41%) and Rajendranagar (38.9%), both in Rangareddy district, Patancheru (31.9%) in Sangareddy district, and Medchal (31.5%) in Medchal Malkajgiri district all recorded rates at or above the "Highly Urban" range. The urban seats in the same band were lower – Warangal West at 28.9%, Nizamabad (Urban) at 27%, Khammam at 24.6%, and Warangal East at 19.5%.

In contrast, in the "Moderately Rural" and "Highly Rural" constituencies, the deletion rate was much lower – 12.37% and 11.92% respectively. In the former category, again, several of the highest deletion rates are in areas not far from Hyderabad. Among "Highly Rural" constituencies, Achampet (16%), Makthal (15.7%), Mudhole (14.9%), and Yellandu (14.6%) registered the highest deletion rates.

To classify Telangana's 119 constituencies, night-time light intensity from SHRUG database maintained by Development Data Lab was used. And for each constituency, the average brightness across its area was calculated. Because a few city seats are far brighter than the rest, the values were first converted to a logarithmic scale, then grouped using Jenks Natural Breaks – a standard mapping technique that finds the cut-off points where the data separate most naturally – into "Highly Urban", "Moderately Urban", "Moderately Rural" and "Highly Rural".

More granular analyses will follow in forthcoming articles.

(With inputs from Swathi Vadlamudi)

A great purge

Telangana is likely to witness the biggest drop in its electoral rolls compared to other major States if the ongoing 'Claims and Objections' phase of the Special Intensive Revision does not bring more voters back onto the rolls



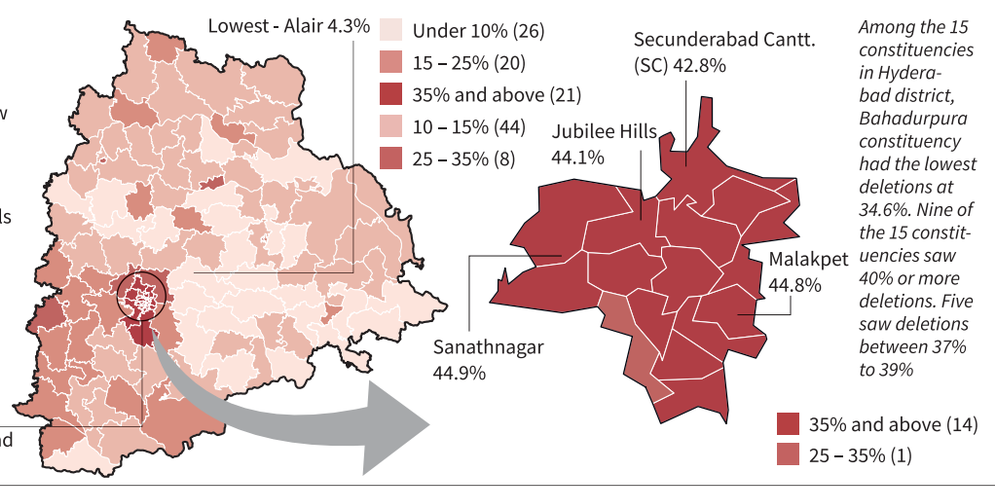
TABLE 1: Share of deleted voters did not change much in most of the major States between draft and final SIR rolls

State	Deletions % compared with pre-SIR rolls	
	in draft SIR rolls	in final SIR rolls
Telangana	21.7	-
Uttar Pradesh	18.7	13.2
Tamil Nadu	15.2	11.6
Gujarat	14.5	13.4
Chhattisgarh	12.9	11.8
Keralam	8.7	3.2
Bihar	8.2	6
Rajasthan	7.7	5.7
West Bengal	7.6	8.1
Madhya Pradesh	7.5	6

TABLE 2: Deletions were concentrated in urban areas, with 21 highly urban ACs losing roughly four out of every 10 voters

Measure	Highly Rural	Moderately Rural	Moderately Urban	Highly Urban	All Telangana
Assembly constituencies (ACs)	21	65	12	21	119
Pre-SIR share in electorate (%)	14.02	47.24	13.84	24.89	-
Share in electorate, draft SIR (%)	15.78	52.87	12.40	18.95	-
Female per 1,000 male, pre-SIR	1,044	1,052	996	954	1,018
Female per 1,000 male, draft SIR	1,025	1,038	1,027	1,004	1,028
Deletions	5,65,518	19,77,351	13,96,366	34,00,000	73,39,235
Deletion (%)	11.92	12.37	29.83	40.38	21.7
- shifted (%)	52.28	50.54	61.96	69.38	61.58
- absent (%)	7.58	12.10	20.23	19.50	16.73
- death (%)	25.42	21.18	8.46	7.11	12.57
- duplicate (%)	14.72	16.18	9.34	4.02	9.13

MAP 1: All the 21 constituencies that saw deletions of 35% or more in the draft SIR rolls were in and around the Hyderabad region



Among the 15 constituencies in Hyderabad district, Bahadurpura constituency had the lowest deletions at 34.6%. Nine of the 15 constituencies saw 40% or more deletions. Five saw deletions between 37% to 39%

FROM THE ARCHIVES
The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 25, 1976

Dhillon wants sustained road safety campaigns

New Delhi, August 24: Although the standard of public transport has considerably improved sustained campaigns to educate the public about road safety along with regular drives to check over-speeding, violation of traffic regulations and driving under the influence of liquor would greatly help to minimise the rising incidence of road accidents in the country.

This was stated by Dr. G.S. Dhillon, the Union Minister of Shipping and Transport, while inaugurating the 13th meeting of the Transport Development Council here this morning.

Dr. Dhillon said the procedure regarding issue of driving licence and fitness certificate would also need to be tightened so that only competent and experienced persons secured the driving licences and fitness certificate issued to mechanically sound vehicles.

He said it would have a deterrent effect on rash and negligent driving if persons responsible for accidents were to pay compensation to the victims of their families in all cases.

Referring to the national permit scheme for goods transport which aims at removal of hurdles in the free movement of vehicles, Dr. Dhillon said that out of the total number of 5,300 permits allotted in various States, nearly 3,000 permits had been issued in pursuance of this scheme which formed part of the 20-point economic programme of the country.

The Minister also drew the attention of the members to the scheme regarding mechanisation of cycle rickshaws and requested them to strive for its early implementation in order to improve the economic conditions of the rickshaw pullers.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 25, 1926

Imperial bank of India

Calcutta, August 25: The Imperial Bank of India has fulfilled its undertakings to open hundred new branches within five years. The announcement was made yesterday by Mr. H.C. Edmondson, while presiding at the annual general meeting of shareholders on the Calcutta register of the Bank. The burden of opening majority of the new branches, he said, fell on Bengal Circle which opened 66, while seven new sub-agencies and pay offices were also established.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of polling stations in Delhi after the SIR exercise

14,947 The number of polling stations in Delhi has gone up to 14,947 from 13,033 after rationalisation under the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) exercise. The number of polling-station locations has also increased from 2,696 to 2,856, according to a statement by the Delhi chief electoral officer (CEO) on Monday. PTI

Number of weeks for CPCB to fix standards for 3 new pollutants

10 The National Green Tribunal has allowed the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) 10 weeks to standardise the methods for testing three new parameters or pollutants in ambient air. The three new pollutant in ambient air are aluminium, iron and silica. At present, the CPCB tracks 12 major pollutants under the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). PTI

Number of airports to be awarded to private players by the govt.

11 The government plans to award 11 airports, including those at Varanasi and Tirupati, to private players in five bundles under the public-private-partnership model. The Civil Aviation Ministry has proposed the private partners for 11 airports, grouped into five bundles, with each bundle to be awarded to a single concessionaire, according to an official document. PTI

Percentage increase in average retail price of onion year-on-year

59 in per cent. Data maintained by the Centre shows that the all-India average retail price of onion rose 59 per cent year-on-year to ₹43.53/kg on August 24, from ₹ 27.37/kg a year ago. The Centre has started moving bulk onion stocks through dedicated railway rakes – the 'Kanda Express' – from Nashik in Maharashtra to major consuming centres. PTI

Bills passed in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Monday

8 Eight Bills, including the one allowing portions of park and garden land to be used for public infrastructure and utility projects, were passed by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Monday without discussion, amid the Opposition's protest demanding the resignation of Cabinet Minister B. Nagendra. PTI

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How the SC ruling redefined 'industry'

The majority held that 'industry' under the IRC must be interpreted based on its own specific text and statutory context, unburdened by the legacy of the 1978 precedent; Justices B.V. Nagarathna, Dipankar Datta, and Ujjal Bhuyan formed the minority view that a re-evaluation of the 1978 judgment was 'unwarranted'

EXPLAINER

Krishnadas Rajagopal

The story so far:

A nine-member Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India recently held that the nearly half-century-old interpretation of the term 'industry' will not automatically apply to the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), 2020, which came into force in November 2025 and replaced the legacy Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. This decision effectively severs the new labour regime from an expansive, worker-friendly precedent set in 1978, establishing a clean slate for future labour law disputes.

The scope of 'industry'

To understand the significance of this judgment, one must look back to the historic 1978 ruling in *Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board v. R. Rajappa*.

Authored by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, that seven-judge Bench significantly broadened the definition of Section 2(j) under the 1947 Act. The 1978 judgment introduced the triple test, which classified systematic or organised operations based on employer-employee cooperation to provide goods or services for consumers as an industry.

This sweeping definition brought various activities, including hospitals, educational institutions, and municipalities, under the legal definition of an industry. The only exclusions were core sovereign functions of the state, such as defence, judiciary, and law enforcement. For nearly half a century, this judgment had enabled workers across diverse sectors to access legal recourse, enforce labour rights, and engage in collective bargaining against unfair practices.

The crux of the judgment

The Constitution Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, addressed the question whether the 1978 definition of 'industry' should govern Section 2(p) of the IRC.



Word of caution: Justice B.V. Nagarathna stressed that altering the definition of industry could create uncertainty and disrupt industrial peace. AFP

The majority held that 'industry' under the IRC must be interpreted based on its own specific text and statutory context, unburdened by the legacy of the 1978 precedent. Chief Justice Kant noted that while the core principles of the 1978 ruling had stood the test of time, the 1978 judgment would no longer act as the "sheet anchor" for interpreting 'industry' under the IRC.

Pending cases under the 1947 Act will continue to be governed by the 1978 Bangalore Water Supply precedent. All future disputes governed by the new Industrial Relations Code will be interpreted afresh.

Differing points of view on the Bench

The nine-judge Bench reflected nuanced positions on the balance between worker protections and modern economic realities.

An opinion authored by Chief Justice Kant, and shared with Justices Satish Chandra Sharma, Alok Aradhe and Vipul M. Pancholi, held that the 'triple test' of 1978 Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board case judgment will continue to be applied to pending industrial disputes.

The Chief Justice, however, found that the 1978 verdict could have been articulated differently and set down a "reformulated" triple test, which would operate prospectively. However, the possibility of using the recast triple test to determine if an operation was an industry or not under Section 2(j) of the repealed 1947 Act is non-existent as the new labour law, The Industrial Relations Code 2020, has already come into force. The Bench has unanimously made it clear that 'industry' under the 2020 Code will be "interpreted independently" to align with contemporary industrial dynamics, and not be burdened by the 1978 verdict.

Justices B.V. Nagarathna, Dipankar Datta, and Ujjal Bhuyan formed the minority view on the Bench that a re-evaluation of the 1978 judgment was "unwarranted". Justice Nagarathna cautioned that altering the definition could create uncertainty and disrupt industrial peace.

Justice Nagarathna argued that the 1978 judgment had offered a broad-based definition of 'industry'. She highlighted that the judgment was a child of its time, when public sector workers were transitioning into private employment due to a changing industrial landscape inspired by privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy.

Justice Joymalya Bagchi supported the need for the reference to the nine-judge Bench, but expressed his inability to agree to a "reformulated" triple test. Justice Bagchi said an apprehension that the triple test conceived in the 1978 judgment converted any organised activity into an industry was misplaced.

The judge agreed with Justice Nagarathna that even the state could enter into seemingly non-sovereign functions. The concept of 'sovereignty' has itself undergone changes with the passage of time. Absence of a profit motive did not take an activity outside the realm of industry, he observed. He said it was unwise to "re-draft" Justice Iyer's triple test. Justice Datta echoed the need for judicial consistency. Sharing his opinion with Justice Bhuyan, Justice Datta remarked that institutional credibility relies on respecting finality rather than perpetuating doubt over established law.

A step towards a new era

By severing the IRC from the 1978 precedent, the Supreme Court has set the stage for a new chapter in Indian labour law, leaving it to future courts to decide where the lines between employer authority and worker protections will ultimately be drawn.

THE GIST

- A nine-member Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court recently held that the nearly half-century-old interpretation of the term 'industry' will not automatically apply to the Industrial Relations Code, 2020.
- A 1978 ruling had introduced the triple test, which classified organised operations based on employer-employee cooperation to provide goods or services for consumers as an industry. This judgment had enabled workers across diverse sectors to enforce labour rights.

Did Press Note 3 relaxations help attract more FDI?

The Centre says that 29 FDI projects worth ₹4,895.65 cr. had been reported to it under the revised framework

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far

The Union government on Friday said that India had received foreign direct investment (FDI) worth ₹4,895 over just the last few months, from companies that have benefitted from recent relaxations made to India's FDI rules.

The aim of the relaxations was precisely to ease the flow of investments that had earlier been locked out of India.

What was the earlier rule?

The Union government had issued Press Note 3 in April 2020, in which it amended India's FDI policy. The existing rule at the time stated that any entity of Bangladesh and Pakistan could invest in India only after securing Government approval. Press Note 3 widened this stipulation to include any country that shared a land border with India. So, this included Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

The popular perception is that the government took this decision as a result of border clashes between India and China at Galwan.

However, Press Note 3 was issued in April 2020, before those clashes took place in May.

The reason the change was made was to prevent hostile takeovers of companies ailing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. India and a few other countries had noticed that, early on in the pandemic, Chinese companies were buying up majority stakes in companies in the countries whose stock prices had plummeted due to the pandemic. The FDI restriction was aimed at curbing this.

While the origin of the rule was not directly linked to the border clashes, its extension over the years was certainly a result of the frigid relationship between India and China.

What was the relaxation?

In March 2026, the Centre eased the Press Note 3 restrictions somewhat. It said that FDI from entities would be allowed in India through the automatic route, without needing express government approval, if these entities had less than 10% stake based in countries that share a land border with India.

In other words, companies that had minority and non-controlling stakes held by these land-border countries could invest in India through the easier route.

The government did this because it said that a lot of investment into India had been held up because even companies that had tiny stakes owned by Chinese entities faced stricter restrictions on their investments into India.

"It is expected that the new guidelines will provide clarity and ease of doing business in India, and facilitate investments which can contribute towards greater FDI inflows, access to new technologies, domestic value addition, expansion of domestic firms and integration with global supply chain," the government had said in March when it eased the rules.

What has been the benefit?

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry said on Friday that a total of 29 FDI projects worth ₹4,895.65 crore had been reported to it under its revised framework up to August 10, 2026.

It added that these investments span a range of sectors, including information technology, artificial intelligence, information and communication, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, data centres and transport services, among others.

Further, the investments have come from several countries, including Mauritius, the U.S., the Republic of Korea, Japan, Singapore, Luxembourg, and the Cayman Islands.

In relative terms, this investment amount is not all that significant. For instance, it amounts to less than 1% of the total FDI India received in 2025-26. But it is still early days, and for India and FDI, every little bit helps.

THE GIST

- The Union government had issued Press Note 3 in April 2020, stipulating that any country sharing a land border with India could invest in the country only after securing Government approval.
- In March 2026, the Centre eased the Press Note 3 restrictions somewhat. It said that FDI from entities would be allowed in India through the automatic route, without needing express government approval, if these entities had less than 10% stake based in countries that share a land border with India.

CACHE



Privacy concerns: Protesters have expressed their anger against Flock by blocking cameras, reporting them to DeFlock in order to map them and pressuring clients to end their Flock contracts. REUTERS

What has fuelled the backlash against Flock cameras in U.S.?

Flock, a maker and operator of surveillance cameras and licence plate readers, has come under fire as critics accuse it of surveilling Americans and failing to do enough to curtail the misuse of data, including by some law enforcement officers

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far

The head of Flock, a maker and operator of surveillance cameras, that works with a range of clients in the United States, issued an apology this month after the *Washington Post* reported that multiple law enforcement officers had abused his product network, with at least one case involving an officer who misused Flock to stalk his ex-partner through her car's licence plates.

Across the U.S., anger is mounting against the surveillance camera firm, with critics going so far as to disrupt or even destroy the Flock cameras in their communities.

How do Flock cameras work?

Founded in 2017, Flock developed its business with the help of a two-way strategy: the sale of surveillance hardware, as well as surveillance-as-a-service subscriptions. Flock products include licence plate reader (LPR) cameras, video cameras, mobile security trailers, audio detection devices, drones, and software offerings. Instead of just buying and using a single camera, clients can join the Flock network and enable (optional) law enforcement access.

Due to this strategy, Flock's devices can help police officers collect data across wider areas and with more cameras, to detect incidents ranging from stolen cars to gun shootings.

The company's numbers certainly impress. According to its 2026 factsheet, over 2,800 crimes were solved weekly with Flock technology, while over 2,000 missing people have been located. Flock reported that it has partnered with over 6,000 "communities" across 49 U.S. states, as well as "thousands" of law enforcement agencies.

What caused the outrage against Flock cameras?

There are a number of reasons uniting the Americans who are against Flock. These range from the company's reputational challenges and the misuse of its Flock cameras, to the general anger over mass surveillance technologies.

Company founder and CEO Garrett Langley made headlines last year when he referred to a critic's anti-Flock advocacy organisation (called DeFlock) as "terroristic." He apologised for his comments this July, and promised to improve on the company's responses to the public's concerns.

Still, the *Washington Post* report in August that covered incidents where police officers misused Flock data to stalk women has added yet more fuel to the fire.

Soon afterwards, Flock announced that it was updating its safeguards, and cutting its default ALPR (Automated Licence Plate Reader) data retention period to seven days, unless legally required to keep the images for longer.

On its "Myths vs Facts" page, Flock noted that it does not carry out facial recognition, predictive policing, or demographic profiling. Flock stated that it did not contract with the U.S. agency ICE (Immigrations and Customs Enforcement) or the tech firm Palantir, both of which are associated with mass surveillance. Even so, media outlets have identified Flock cameras as being AI-powered. U.S. lawmakers have also raised questions about the possibility of ICE accessing Flock data.

Despite its outreach attempts, Flock is still facing public fury. One reason for this was a May 2025 report which alleged that Texas officials had used thousands of cameras in the Flock network to track down a woman who had an abortion, as part of an investigation. Flock dismissed these reports last year and stated that it was a missing persons case. However, later findings by the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) advocacy group support the original report.

While the verdict was pending, a simplistic version of the events entered the public consciousness: social media users began claiming that Flock had worked with the police to enforce the Texan abortion ban and target a woman.

In recent weeks, protesters have expressed their anger against Flock by blocking cameras, reporting them to DeFlock in order to map them, pressuring clients to end their Flock contracts, or even destroying Flock cameras. For example, a trending Instagram Reel with over 2 million views and 2,69,000 likes taught watchers how to dismantle a Flock camera without being detected by other cameras.

Furthermore, U.S. media outlets reported that in July, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) would not renew its original contract with Flock, due to "serious concerns" regarding civil liberties, privacy, and the data being collected from the cameras.

Does India face a similar dilemma?

Across Indian cities, more law enforcement bodies are experimenting with AI-powered cameras in order to catch traffic rules violators through their licence plates.

While these automated solutions seem encouraging, there has been a lack of human follow-up when it comes to penalising the offenders. Another challenge is in ensuring that the authorities are handling facial recognition data securely and privately.

Meanwhile, the use of CCTV cameras by both police departments and private citizens is rampant, but these surveillance efforts are fragmented.

Unlike with Flock, it is hard to share private camera feeds with the police in real time and derive useful insights from the data. Since they are owned by everyday users rather than leased by a dedicated company, these surveillance cameras are often unreliable and poorly maintained.

However, Indian citizens have become more vocal in calling out the use of smart glasses and AI-powered surveillance vans by the police, such as during the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) demonstrations in July. The potential misuse of facial recognition data to harass lawful protesters is a serious concern in these instances.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Sean Connery, the working-class Edinburgh boy who became the first actor to portray James Bond on-screen, was born on this day in 1930. A quiz on the Scottish actor

Mohammed Hidhayat

QUESTION 1
Before acting, a young Connery represented Scotland in which bodybuilding contest?

QUESTION 2
Which 1962 film introduced Sean Connery as James Bond to the world?

QUESTION 3
Connery won his only competitive Oscar for playing a tough Chicago cop in which 1987 film?

QUESTION 4
Which cause did Connery campaign for consistently, from the 1990s devolution vote through the 2014 referendum?

QUESTION 5
The Man Who Would Be King, starring Connery and Michael Caine, opens in British India and features which Indian actor in its cast?



Visual question: A still from Connery's final live-action outing. Name the 2003 film and identify the acclaimed Indian actor on the left.

Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This writer became the first physically disabled author to win the Akutagawa Prize. Name the novel which won her the prize and its translator. **Ans: Hunchback by Saou Ichikawa, translated from Japanese by Polly Barton**
2. This novel won the Man Booker International Prize in 2018. Name the novel and the author. **Ans: Flights by Olga Tokarczuk**
3. This elusive Italian novelist writes under a pen name. The last book in her famous quartet series was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2016. Name her, the book and the series. **Ans: Elena Ferrante's The Story of the Lost Child; Neapolitan Quartet or Neapolitan Novels**
4. This author from Keralam has won most of the major literary awards the State has to offer. Name her. **Ans: K.R. Meera**
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated short stories of this Bengali author. **Ans: Mahasweta Devi**
Visual: This translator won the 2022 International Booker Prize for her work on a Hindi novel. Name her, the book and its author. **Ans: Daisy Rockwell's translation of Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand**
Early birds: Tamal Biswas| Siddhartha Viswanathan| Neil Lall| Piyali Tuli| Sukdev Shet



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

Is it correct to say "He has good command over English"? (B. Senthil, Madurai)
Careful users of the language would frown on this. They would argue that one can have command over people, but not over language. You can for example say:
"He has total command over his men. They will do whatever he wants them to."
But when it comes to language, they would prefer "of" to "over".
"We are looking for someone who has good command of English."
"Many children in the south have little or no command of Hindi."
"I am told that Prakasham has good command of French."
There is a tendency these days however, even among some native speakers, to say "have good command over English".
The purists may not like this, but as the Americans would put it, that's the way the cookie crumbles.
To be on the safe side, avoid saying "command over English".

Which of the following sentences is correct? "The Government has many problems" or "The Government have many problems"? (D.S.R. Ramaswamy, Bangalore)
Both are acceptable. It depends on how you view the Government. Do you consider the Government to be a single impersonal unit, or do you look upon it as consisting of separate small units? If you view it as a single unit, then you can use a singular verb "The Government has many problems".
If, on the other hand, you view the Government as comprising several different units, then you can use the plural verb "have" – "The Government have many problems".
There are many words in English, which can take either the singular or the plural verb – family, jury, committee, staff, team are just some of the nouns. Here are a few examples.
"The jury was/were beginning to look bored."
"The family was/were planning to move to Australia."

What is the meaning of "ground zero"? (N. Raja Mani, Secunderabad)
This is a term that has been heard quite frequently on CNN. "Ground zero" was originally used to refer to an atomic explosion; it is the site at which an atomic explosion took place. This is how dictionaries define the term: "the point on the surface of the earth or water directly below, directly above, or at which an atomic or hydrogen bomb explodes".
Today the term is used informally to mean a place of rapid development or change; a place of violent activity.
"About ten years ago no one had heard about Vasudeva Nagar. But today it has become the ground zero from which restaurants and designer shops radiate."
The term "ground zero" is also used to mean elementary level; a "starting point". For example,
"Many of my students will be starting at ground zero."
"My boss didn't like the ad campaign. Looks like I have to return to ground zero."
Published in The Hindu on September 25, 2001

Word of the day

Nefarious:
extremely wicked

Synonym: villainous

Usage: *The committee unearthed a nefarious plot to manipulate the election process.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/nefarious

International Phonetic Alphabet: /nɪˈfɛəɹi.əs/

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

WEB EXCLUSIVE
'Carney's counterattack: Canada's America problem could be India's opening.' — *By Soumya Bhowmick*
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Stand up for what is
right even if you stand alone.
—Suzy Kassem

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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

It is wrong to cancel Telangana CM's US visit

INSTEAD OF heading to Boston as planned on Sunday, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy abruptly flew back to India from London — he was denied permission by the Ministry of External Affairs for the US tour, which led to the cancellation of the second leg of his foreign trip. Undoubtedly, denying permission lay in the MEA's remit. Before it accords political clearance, the visits of chief ministers and other dignitaries are assessed by the ministry for criteria such as the "purpose" and "level" of scheduled meetings. And yet, it is unseemly that the MEA should weaponise the rulebook's small print to cut short CM Reddy's trip. Apparently, the CM's itinerary included possible meetings with New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani and US Vice President J D Vance — while the NYC mayor is seen at some levels below the Telangana CM, a meeting with the US Vice President did not fit the trip's stated purpose, which was to attract investment into Telangana, including educational partnerships. This is a narrow-minded approach that does not behove the external affairs ministry of a country like India, which prides itself on its growing confidence on the world stage, and on building global knowledge hubs like Hyderabad. Moreover, by curtailing an Opposition chief minister's foreign trip, the government looks small and heavy-handed, sending a dispiriting signal to the world — and within the country.

The denial of permission to CM Reddy can be seen as part of a dismal pattern of antagonism, and the near breakdown of dialogue, between government and Opposition at home. This is so even as Reddy, the second CM of a newly carved out state, who began his career in the ABVP, has been seen to tweak the script — in the past, he has struck a note of pragmatism and cordiality vis-à-vis the government of Narendra Modi. In the aftermath, the political to-and-fro has seen the recycling of tired and opaque spectres and prejudices — the BJP in Telangana has insinuated that the MEA decision was meant to cut short engagement with "anti-India" and/or "anti-BJP" elements, that are out to destabilise "national security".

After Operation Sindoor in May 2025, the Modi government dispatched seven multi-party delegations, which included prominent leaders of the Opposition, to foreign capitals. They were tasked with making India's case to the world while projecting national unity. The subject, then, was terror, but the message was more generally heartening: That whatever be the political differences within, India's ruling establishment trusted and included the Opposition in its dealings with the world. CM Reddy's abbreviated trip now points to an unfortunate and unflattering backsliding.

In saying no to Trump, Carney does right thing

BY INSTRUCTING his negotiators to walk away from trade talks with the US — reportedly over Washington's last-minute demands — Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has drawn a red line against President Donald Trump's weaponisation of tariffs. Canada's economy is deeply integrated with that of its superpower neighbour, and Carney's "dollar-for-dollar" retaliation against Trump's 50 per cent tariffs on around $20 billion worth of Canadian goods will inevitably hurt businesses and workers on both sides of the border. Among other "unacceptable" demands, said PM Carney, Washington seeks to restrict Canada's ability to pursue trade deals with other countries, which would amount to an erosion of Canadian sovereignty. Elected to power not too long ago on a promise to stand up to Trump's threats, Carney has done the right thing by rejecting an unequal trade relationship. In doing so, he is also acting on his assessment at Davos seven months ago: The "rules-based order", he had said, "is fading".

The Trump tariffs touch products from Canadian wine and dairy to furniture, clothing, cement and hockey equipment. Should Carney proceed with Canada's retaliation from September 8 onwards, there will be risks, both political and economic, for his country. But the popularity of the "Buy Canadian" campaign — an expression of economic nationalism triggered by Trump's threats, including making Canada the 51st state of the US — has already shown that many Canadians support their government's challenge to the US president. Carney will now have to convince them that the costs of confrontation are worth paying.

For the Canadian PM, the showdown with Trump is the clearest test yet of his thesis that middle powers must stand up to great powers and unite. Indeed, he has been busy securing deals in Asia and Europe, a paradigm shift away from Canada's economic dependence on the US so far. It is too early to say whether these new partnerships have the substance to mitigate the pain that a breakdown in US-Canada relations will cause. But Carney is doing something rather rare in the Trump era: A middle power is saying no to a superpower.

The humanoid's winning the race. Or is it?

WHO WOULD win in a fight, Mike Tyson or a silverback gorilla? It's a question many have asked, including Tyson himself. Back in the 1980s, the boxing legend was strolling through a zoo with his wife when he came across the ape enclosure, where one big silverback was bullying all the others. Tyson tried to bribe the attendant with $10,000, the story goes, to open the cage so he could fight the animal, but the employee declined. That was undoubtedly for the best — even the greatest human fighter wouldn't last long against a larger, stronger and more vicious animal.

If human athletes shouldn't be judged on their ability to outfight a gorilla, they shouldn't be expected to outrace a machine, either. Given that, what's the need for a brouhaha over two Chinese humanoid robots beating Usain Bolt's 100m world record at the World Humanoid Robot Games in Beijing this past weekend? Smartphone maker Honor's robot, Lightning, came second with a time of 9.47s, whereas the winner, Tiangong Ultra, developed by the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Centre, clocked 9.39s, compared to Bolt's 9.58s. Someone on a motorbike, another machine, could have done the same.

That aside, the robot games offered their share of finish-line drama — Tiangong careening into the sidelines, Lightning having to be carried away on the stretcher — and there's no reason these events can't be considered entertaining "sports" in their own right. Will they eclipse human athletic competition one day? Neither horses nor cars have stopped people running. The only thing to remember is this: Like should be compared with like.

Gor in Srinagar: A one-man mission to strengthen a sputtering relationship



MICHAEL KUGELMAN

SERGIO GOR'S comment about Jammu and Kashmir being an important part of India has generated banner headlines, and understandably so.

Taken literally, his words go against decades of US policy on Kashmir. They are even more noteworthy than President Donald Trump's offer, made soon after Operation Sindoor last year, to work with India and Pakistan to help find a "solution" for Kashmir. That's because Trump's comments actually reflected a past US policy — one espoused in the initial years after 1947, when several administrations sought to help solve the Kashmir issue. The US posture has since evolved from working on it actively to taking a more hands-off role and welcoming any Indian and Pakistani efforts to resolve it themselves.

Additionally, this isn't just any US ambassador to India who made this comment. Gor is an ambassador who also serves as special envoy to South Asia, which gives him ample policy authority over both India and Pakistan. Even more important is that Gor is widely believed to be a close confidant of Trump's.

But as significant as Gor's statement was, it's important not to overstate the implications. This is likely more about Gor's desire to bolster US-India relations than it is about anything having to do with Kashmir.

Recall that since Gor arrived in New Delhi in January, he has been on a one-man mission to strengthen a sputtering relationship. He has pursued high-level engagements in New Delhi and across Indian states. He has announced conciliatory measures, like inviting India to join the Pax Silica silicon supply-chain initiative after India initially didn't receive an invitation. His messaging about India and US-India ties has been unrelentingly positive, in contrast to the sharp criticism directed at India by the White House in the months before Gor took up his ambassadorial post.

Against this backdrop, we can see what was likely at play in Srinagar.

Gor was keen to keep up his positive messaging and broader charm offensive with New Delhi. By saying Kashmir is an "important part of India", he was giving it a handsome compliment and perhaps providing a US rationale for pursuing commercial cooperation with Kashmir — a goal identified by Gor in an X post shortly after his Kashmir visit. Additionally, more broadly, given his proximity to Trump, Gor may have been looking to say something that would go down well with the Indian business community, to help advance an evergreen objective of his boss — attract more foreign investment to the US.

Unsurprisingly, there's been no formal US statement announcing a new policy on Kashmir. To be sure, Washington also hasn't walked back Gor's comments or clarified that US policy on Kashmir remains the same. But this can perhaps be attributed to a view within US government circles that there's no reason whatsoever to interpret Gor's comments as a policy shift. After all, as several Indian analysts have noted, Gor used the word "important", as opposed to "integral". The latter term is the one often invoked by New Delhi when articulating its position on Kashmir. Additionally, the term "important" is not as closely associated with contexts linked to territoriality.

It's also essential not to overstate the implications of Gor's comments for the US-India-Pakistan triangle. True, Pakistan's foreign ministry summoned the US charge d'affaires, Nathalie Baker, soon after Gor's comments. But that move shouldn't be read as a threat to a resurgent US-Pakistan partnership. It's very unusual for a US official to say anything about Kashmir that goes against Pakistan's position. And this is Kashmir — what multiple Pakistani leaders have described as the country's "jugular vein".

It's also essential not to overstate the implications of Gor's comments for the US-India-Pakistan triangle

In this sense, Islamabad had no choice but to rapidly summon Baker. But Pakistani officials have been quiet ever since. And that's no surprise; they have no interest in rocking the boat with a US administration on which they badly want to remain on good terms, given its stated interest in capitalising on commercial opportunities in Pakistan — and in partnering in a range of spaces, from counterterrorism to peace mediation in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Gor's comments may deliver a boost to US-India ties, but not much more than that.

The Indian government has said little about them publicly, and much of the messaging from Indian voices — from officials in Kashmir to prominent independent analysts — has essentially revolved around the view that what the US thinks about Kashmir ultimately doesn't matter, given that it's India's issue. This ho-hum reaction may also be a reflection of the trust gap in India when it comes to Washington these days — a problem that Gor, despite his best efforts, has so far been unable to fix.

Ultimately, given the significance of what Gor said and who he is, it would be wrong to dismiss all this as much ado about nothing. But at the end of the day, there's no change in policy or diplomatic alignments to speak of. It's just another case of an unconventional administration doing unconventional things.

The writer is resident senior fellow for South Asia at Atlantic Council, Washington, DC

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The Mecca pact is for joint defence. Against whom?



D P SRIVASTAVA

THOUGH THERE is a pause in the shooting war, the situation in West Asia continues to be volatile. The Strait of Hormuz remains closed. Houthi attacks on the Bab el-Mandeb at the mouth of the Red Sea have closed the second waterway for the transport of Saudi oil to Asian markets. This also affects shipments of Russian crude oil to India. Amid these developments, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan have signed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement. This raises the question: Joint defence against whom? There could be three possible threats: The Houthis, Iran, and Israel.

The joint statement issued after the Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit stipulates that "any armed attack against any of the three states shall be regarded as an attack against them all". However, the extent and nature of commitments by the three countries for joint defence are not known. Nor has the geographical scope of such an arrangement been spelt out. Will this include conflicts outside West Asia? Can Pakistan invoke it in case of an Indian riposte to a future terror attack?

Has the Mecca Agreement created an Islamic NATO? Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty provides for collective self-defence but limits its scope to Europe. The only time Article 5 was invoked was in Afghanistan, post 9/11. NATO's travails in Ukraine and absence in the Iran war point to the fact that what matters is common threat perception, not a formal pact. Within the Mecca Agreement, the threat perceptions differ. Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping do not pose a direct threat to Turkey or Pakistan. Turkey is more concerned with the Israeli presence in Syria. Pakistan regards India and Afghanistan as threats. In 2015, Pakistan did not take part in the action against the Houthis despite requests from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

NATO's travails in Ukraine and absence in the Iran war point to the fact that what matters is common threat perception, not a formal pact. Within the Mecca Agreement, the threat perceptions differ

Is the Mecca Agreement an alliance of Sunni powers against Shia Iran? Iran has emerged as the most important regional power, having withstood more than 23,000 Israeli and US bombing raids in the war. Can Turkey and Pakistan provide Saudi Arabia with the protection from Iranian retaliation that the US could not? However, they do not mind sharing Saudi riches. The accord gives Pakistan a diplomatic profile at a time when its economy is sinking and it is beset by internal problems in Balochistan and PoK. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) last year. A Pakistan Air Force contingent and 13,000 ground troops were deployed in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia in April this year. Did the Pakistanis fire a single shot in discharge of their obligations under the SMDA?

The third possible threat is Israel. PM Netanyahu's pronouncement of a Greater Israel may have made Arab governments uncomfortable. However, the US umbrella could provide better protection to Saudi interests than Turkey could.

The trilateral pact has not gone unnoticed in Tehran. The influential daily Kayhan, close to the IRGC, has carried a strong editorial against Pakistan, questioning its credentials as a neutral mediator in Iran's talks with the US. In Pakistan, Shia cleric Jawad Naqvi has already criticised the government for joining the alliance.

India has friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. It is a good customer for Saudi oil. Saudi Arabia has a mature diplomatic establishment. It will nevertheless be useful to sensitise them to our concerns. If attacked, India is bound to exercise its right of self-defence.

The lasting solution to the West Asia crisis is mainstreaming Iran, so that it has a stake in a peaceful region. The June 17 MoU holds the promise of lifting both secondary and primary sanctions against Iran. This goes beyond the Obama-era nuclear deal. Iran's capacity to dominate Hormuz is tacitly recognised by all countries. This should be used as a deterrent against future aggression, rather than as a toll, which would bring a small fraction of the revenue Iran could earn from the export of its oil and petrochemicals once sanctions are lifted. The US should lift the blockade. The nuclear issue need not be insurmountable. Iran has already committed in the MoU to not "procure or develop nuclear weapons". The US has to moderate its demands. Insistence on "zero enrichment" will only be a deal-breaker. Iran has a legitimate sense of grievance. It was twice attacked by Israel and the US amid negotiations. But the future of its people is more important. The alternative to an agreement is continued disruption of global oil supplies, loss of revenue for the Gulf states and Iran, and chaos in West Asia.

The writer is former ambassador to Iran. He negotiated the Chabahar Agreement

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Counting out the disabled citizens



SHASHANK PANDEY



AARTI BATRA

SELF-ENUMERATION for Census 2027 began on August 17 in Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, ahead of door-to-door enumeration from September 1 and the national count in February 2027. Having examined the disability question, we find apprehensions of an undercount well-founded.

Question 13 asks whether the respondent is a person with disability and permits up to three selections from nine: Seeing, hearing, speech, mobility, intellectual disability, mental illness, acid attack, chronic neurological disease and, now, blood disorder. This appears to be an improvement: Nine categories rather than the eight of 2011, blood disorder introduced, and "mental retardation" replaced with "intellectual disability". But it is inadequate.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 expanded recognised conditions from seven to 21, including dwarfism, cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder and specific learning disabilities, each with entitlements such as certification, reservation and welfare. None will appear as a distinct category in the Census. Autism is often recorded as intellectual disability by certification boards lacking the capacity or intent to distinguish them. The Census mentions intellectual disability without a separate entry for autism and other developmental conditions, reproducing that error at national scale. This misidentification leads to real consequences in early interventions, education and employment.

The schedule has also regressed: The options for multiple disabilities and "any other" have been withdrawn, and it is unclear whether 13(b)'s three selections will be recorded as multiple disabilities or as duplicate counts. The options are the broad heads of the Disability Act, until acid attack appears, although the statute situated it within locomotor disability. Placing a narrow sub-condition beside an umbrella term like mobility raises the question of what governed this classification. The customary response — the Unique Disability ID database will supply what the Census omits — does not hold. UDID registration reaches only about half the disabled population as per the last Census figures. Census data is crucial to map this access gap. Enumeration is proceeding in districts where assessment infrastructure is thinnest and formal diagnosis rare due to lack of specialists. The training material has no adequate guidance on how to enquire when a respondent hesitates to disclose mental illness, or how an enumerator without clinical training might recognise intellectual disability.

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Welfare allocations depend on disaggregated data. Parliament recognised thalassemia, haemophilia and sickle cell disease as distinct conditions. A single figure for blood disorder doesn't convey this, and neither the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission nor thalassemia care under the National Health Mission can be evaluated without a baseline. Specific learning disabilities, absent altogether, present another difficulty: Remediation must be available where most affected children live. Education departments are left with CSO estimates.

None of this required reinventing the Census, only aligning the question with the statute — by adopting all 21 recognised conditions or, at minimum, restoring multiple disabilities and a structured "other, please specify" — and training those who ask the questions. The Census returns once in a decade. If this occasion is missed, a generation of disabled Indians will grow up undercounted, underbudgeted and invisible to the state.

Pandey is a lawyer and founder of the Politics and Disability Forum. Batra is co-founder of Believe in the Invisible

40 YEARS AGO
August 25, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
Sethi's apology fails to pacify operators
Some staffers resume work
Terrorists gun down three in Punjab
PPP splits as Jatoi, Khar quit

Threat of crackdown in Pakistan

THE PAKISTANI government warned that it would resort to "drastic action" unless opposition groups end their drive to oust President Zia-ul-Haq and force early elections. But the leaders of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy said they would not abandon the campaign. Security officials said the country was quiet and there had been no clashes between anti-government activists and security forces.

Revolt against Benazir Bhutto

TWO SENIOR associates of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader, Benazir Bhutto, have broken ranks to set up a rival opposition party in Pakistan, accusing Bhutto of being an "autocrat out of touch with the people". Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, a former chief minister of Sindh province, and Ghulam Mustafa Khar, a former chief minister and governor of Punjab province, will join forces to formally launch a new party at a convention at Lahore.

Three gunned down in Punjab

SUSPECTED TERRORISTS killed three people and looted a petrol pump in different parts of Punjab during the last 24 hours. Two suspected terrorists gunned down three passengers in a car near the village of Budhsinghwala in Faridkot district. The terrorists wielding sten guns stopped the car and shot their victims. The police and the CRPF rushed to the spot immediately and started combing operations.

India fined for CWG boycott

INDIA HAS been asked to pay £245,000, about Rs 4.4 million, for having boycotted the 13th Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh last month. The 32 entrants who boycotted the games have been asked to pay £2.7 million the newspaper publisher Robert Maxwell said. The boycott was in protest against the British government's refusal to impose wide-ranging economic sanctions against South Africa.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Netanyahu is dragging Israel into another pointless conflict — this time with Turkey

— Haaretz, Israel

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Could perverse incentives lead to inflated OBC numbers in Census? Answer is no



DESHKAAL

BY YOGENDRA YADAV

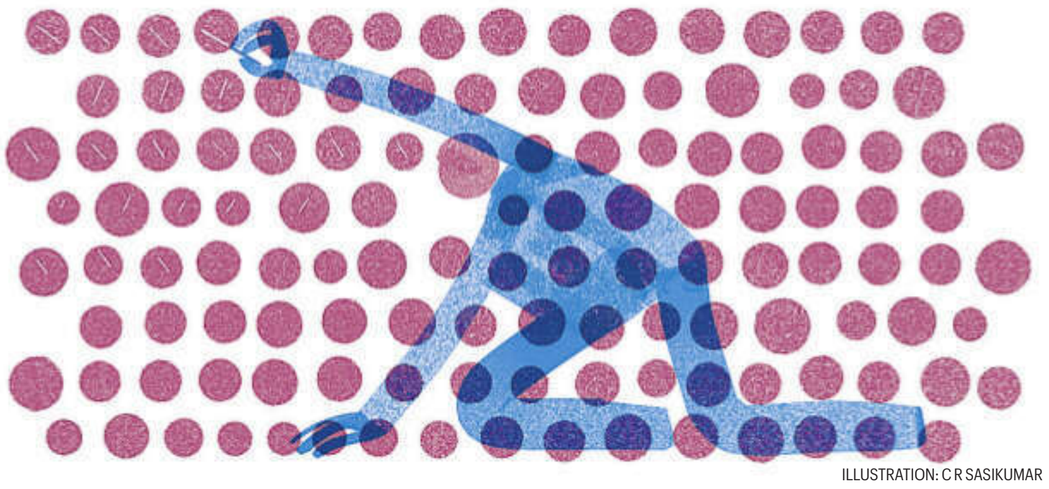


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

I RECEIVED a pleasant surprise last week. In an article in this newspaper ('Count caste by all means. But abandon belief that counting settles anything' *IE*, August 21), Surjit Bhalla, no *dimagi* Naxal by any stretch, endorsed the central claims I have been making in these pages on the caste census . Bhalla favours a caste census. And he does so for the right reasons: "Yes. Count caste — India allocates education and employment on caste." I have been arguing for years that it is a scandal for a country to have legally enforced quotas for a social group — the OBCs — and not count its population. Bhalla also shares my assessment that the caste census is now dead, actually being killed by the government: "Yadav is right that the [caste] Census is now being killed by design." And he agrees with my analysis of why the Modi government has done so: "His diagnosis of the politics [behind the technical choice of the wording of the caste question] is sort of persuasive."

I could not ask for more. I should have just posted his article on social media, while thanking and tagging him. But there is a technical twist in this tantalising tale. Bhalla wants me to realise that even in the absence of sabotage, the caste census would not have told us "the truth" and advises us to "abandon the belief that counting [castes] settles anything". This does disservice to his own position and begs a question: Why should we trouble the already burdened Census enumerator with this additional question if its answer does not settle "anything"?

Minus such verbal excesses, the main argument in Bhalla's article is fairly straightforward. Counting castes by using a drop-down menu of categories like SC/ST/OBC is bound to produce unreliable data. If the Census allows every person to choose a caste category, which is linked to his or her entitlements, we are creating a perverse incentive to lie, to claim membership of a category to which the person does not belong. This could lead to a massive exaggeration in the numbers for OBCs. Hence his suggestion: "Ask for caste, sub-caste and surname, never for category." He lays out a dazzling array of data to make an innocuous point: Human beings respond to incentives. Indeed, no proof was required for this.

Sadly, Bhalla chooses a bad example to make an otherwise valid point. He presents the unusual rise in the estimated population of OBCs between the 55th (1999-2000) and 61st (2004-05) rounds of the National Sample Survey as evidence of incentivised manipulation in caste numbers. He correctly shows that such a rise could not have happened due to an increase in population. But he wrongly assumes that this must have been caused by respondents falsely reporting OBC status to claim entitlements. He does not mention that 1999 was the first time OBCs were counted in the NSS and were thus prone to being under-counted. He does not examine a competing and compelling hypothesis: OBC was still a recent category in 1999, and many more OBCs were unfamiliar with it then compared to five years later. Most importantly, while dissecting the data from 1999 and 2004, Bhalla does not care to share the NSS figures for 2009-10, 2014 and 2017-18, which report a fairly stable share for OBCs — between 42 and 43 per cent. If the respondents were over-reporting OBC status, why did this trend halt in 2004?

> While dissecting data from 1999 and 2004, Bhalla does not share the figures for 2009-10, 2014 and 2017-18, which report a fairly stable share for OBCs — between 42 and 43 per cent

Regardless, let's stick to his general argument about perverse incentives that might lead to exaggeration of population numbers for the OBCs in the coming Census. That would be a valid apprehension if you do not know something basic about the Census of India, a surprising omission on Bhalla's part. Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948 guards the privacy of Census responses and says that Census records are not open to public scrutiny and cannot be used as evidence in a civil or criminal court. The Supreme Court has reiterated that no person can use his or her self-declaration in Census responses to claim entitlements, reservation, or any statutory benefits. In sum: There is zero individual incentive to misreport your category in the Census.

If not an individual one, is there a collective incentive for social groups to inflate their numbers in the Census to claim higher community benefits, say, a higher quota for OBCs? Hypothetically, yes. But why would the non-OBCs participate in such a conspiracy if there are no individual gains for misreporting? Besides, history belies such apprehensions: If entitlements incentivise lying in the Census, why has the population share of SCs and STs not leapt up beyond credible population trends in the last seven decennial censuses?

Now that the perverse incentive theory is laid to rest, may I invite Bhalla to rethink whatever remains of our difference on this issue. Although he does not spell out his alternative, it seems Bhalla does not favour an open-ended question on caste that simply records any answer offered by the respondent. As a seasoned survey researcher himself, Bhalla would know that it would be an invitation to a data disaster — millions of responses that defy post-coding. I understand his opposition is to a stand-alone caste category question — Are you SC/ST/OBC/General — as this method is vulnerable to large-scale errors. But that is not the proposal from the proponents of the caste census.

What we are suggesting is what survey researchers call a two-stage hierarchical question using cascading response categories. This is exactly how the question about SC and ST has always been asked in the census: First you are asked to choose a category, then presented with a list of caste names within that category to choose from. In case you chose the wrong category, the drop-down menu in the next question helps to rectify it there and then. So, our proposal is that the same should be extended this time to the OBCs and the General category. As for Bhalla's fair insistence that professional sociologists should be involved in classifying castes and sub-castes, I may again point out that this job has already been done by various commissions in the case of OBCs. And by the 43-volume *People of India* series by the Anthropological Survey of India for the rest. Why reinvent the wheel, if the desire is not to sabotage the caste count?

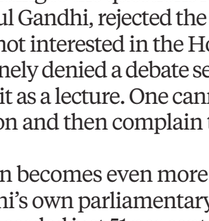
This is not meant to be a rebuttal. I really hope to persuade Surjit Bhalla, whose voice carries weight with the present dispensation, unlike mine.

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

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Opposition has only one agenda: Disrupting Parliament



KIREN RIJIJU

A CURIOUS formula now passes for democratic concern in sections of our political and commentariat classes: Disrupt Parliament, prevent Question Hour, shout down ministers, reject offers of debate and then publish solemn articles lamenting that Parliament did not debate.

Critics have cited the Monsoon Session's numbers: The Lok Sabha functioned for 15 per cent of its scheduled time and the Rajya Sabha for 33 per cent. Question Hour operated for barely 1 per cent of its allotted time in the Lok Sabha and 12 per cent in the Rajya Sabha. But these numbers cannot be separated from their cause. The same analysis records that the session was marked by repeated disruptions and adjournments. The Opposition's arithmetic is therefore deeply cynical: First ensure that Parliament cannot function, and then use the resulting loss of time as evidence against the government.

The Constitution gives the Opposition every right to question, criticise, protest, move amendments and vote against the government. It does not give the Opposition a remote control with which it may switch Parliament off whenever its political demands are not accepted. The government has listened, negotiated, amended legislation and accommodated legitimate concerns. What it will not do is surrender the people's mandate to an Opposition that paralyses Parliament and then cites that paralysis as proof of authoritarianism.

Nothing exposes the hollowness of the present campaign more clearly than the Opposition's own response when it was offered the parliamentary debate it claimed to want. On the Jantar Mantar protests, Union Home Minister Amit Shah offered a detailed discussion in Parliament. He offered to begin the debate at 3 pm that day and continue it until 3 pm the following day. He committed to responding to the questions raised. The Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, rejected the offer, declaring that the Opposition was not interested in the Home Minister's "lecture". A leader genuinely denied a debate seizes a 24-hour offer. He does not dismiss it as a lecture. One cannot refuse a full parliamentary discussion and then complain that Parliament has been silenced.

The contradiction becomes even more striking when seen against Rahul Gandhi's own parliamentary record. During the 17th Lok Sabha, he recorded just 51 per cent attendance, participated in eight debates against a national average of 46.7, asked 99 questions against an average of 210, and introduced no Private Member's Bill. Yet he now declares that the government has "destroyed our democracy". He goes to the UK, Germany and the US and complains about the lack of democracy in India. But he doesn't have the gall to attend Parliament and seek accountability. Neither he nor the Congress party are defenders of democracy. They excel in political theatre bordering on parody.

The allegation that the government refuses to listen is equally detached from the record. When concerns were raised regarding the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, the government referred the Bill to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for detailed examination. Remarkably, sections of the Opposition opposed even the JPC referral and demanded that the Bill be withdrawn altogether. This reveals the real problem. For some Opposition parties, consultation no longer means that the government should listen. It means that the government must surrender. Debate is considered meaningless unless the minister accepts the Opposition's conclusions in advance.

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill provides another instructive example. The Lok Sabha debated it for nearly 11 hours, with 48 MPs participating. The Rajya Sabha discussed it for more than six-and-a-half hours, with 35 members taking part. This was not a law being "rammed through".

The government also engaged directly with Sonam Wangchuk during his hunger strike. Following discussions, he subsequently ended his 26-day fast. Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally appealed to him to follow medical advice and prayed for his recovery.

Consider the democratic sequence: A protest was held; civil-society concerns were heard; Union ministers engaged with the protester; written assurances were provided; the Prime Minister responded; Parliament conducted an extensive debate; and legislation was strengthened. It is difficult to imagine a more democratic chain of engagement and accountability.

Parliament belongs neither to the government nor to the Opposition. It belongs to the people of India. The mandate they have delivered is not a decorative certificate that may be suspended whenever defeated parties choose disruption over argument.

Slogans outside the House cannot substitute for arguments inside it. Those who cannot defeat a government through debate or the ballot cannot be permitted to defeat Parliament through noise.

The writer is Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minister of Minority Affairs

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Jobs for youth

AS A young Indian, I feel that a job is not merely a means of earning a living ('What young want, and why creating good jobs is no longer optional', *IE*, August 24). We want stability, fair wages and a genuine chance to grow. Education must lead to employable skills, and apprenticeships should connect young people with actual workplaces. Small businesses also need easier credit and fewer hurdles. Creating enough decent jobs must become a clear priority if India's young population is to become its strength.

S M Jeeva, Chennai

Politics and policy

INVESTMENT DECISIONS cannot be separated from political stability, institutional credibility and predictable rules ('Investment question has a political answer', *IE*, August 24). The article rightly points to the risks created when economic policy becomes too dependent on political considerations. India needs stronger regulatory institutions, transparent decision-making and stable taxation to sustain investor confidence. Public investment should crowd in private capital rather than replace it. A competitive economy requires sound markets and good governance, with policy continuity despite changes in political leadership.

A Senthil Kumar, Kaniyur

Restrain Israel

CONTINUED SETTLEMENT expansion in the West Bank makes a negotiated settlement harder and risks deepening an already serious conflict ('Israel's West Bank push imperils long-term peace', *IE*, August 24). Whatever the disagreements, civilian security and international law must remain central. India, with long-standing ties with both sides, can support dialogue and a credible two-state framework. Major powers should press for restraint rather than allowing facts on the ground to determine the region's future. Durable peace requires sustained engagement, not territorial consolidation.

K P Muthukumar, Chennai

Four symptoms of an institution in decline



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

THERE ARE books that record an era, and then there are books that interrogate the future. Hiren Mukherjee's *Portrait of Parliament: Reflections and Recollections (1952–77)* belongs to the latter category. Written by one of my favourite parliamentarians, the book is a meditation on what Parliament means to a democracy and what happens to a democracy when Parliament itself begins to forget what it is meant to be.

Mukherjee sounded a warning that appears prophetic today: He lamented the growing "deterioration in parliamentary functioning" and cautioned that if Parliament failed to prize its own dignity, its powers, too, would be imperilled. At the time, many may have regarded it as the melancholic reflection of an old parliamentarian witnessing inevitable institutional change. Today, it reads more like a diagnosis.

Parliament was conceived not as an appendage of executive authority but as the sovereign arena where the nation could converse with itself. The executive had to govern and Parliament had to hold power accountable. Increasingly, however, Parliament appears to be losing its deliberative soul. The first symptom of decay is the concentration of power in the executive. Parliamentary democracies function on the principle that governments derive legitimacy from legislatures and remain accountable to them. However, this relation has gradually become inverted. Parliament today often appears as an institution expected to ratify decisions already taken elsewhere.

> The question before us is not whether Parliament remains constitutionally supreme. The more troubling question is whether it still possesses the moral confidence to act as the nation's conscience

The Opposition, constitutionally intended to be a watchdog rather than an enemy, increasingly finds itself being treated as an inconvenience. But the health of a legislature is measured not by the comfort of the treasury benches but by the confidence with which dissent can be articulated.

The second symptom is the decline of debate. Mukherjee belonged to a generation that regarded preparation for parliamentary intervention as an ethical responsibility. Disagreement could be sharp, even ideological. Opponents were challenged, but not dehumanised as has become the norm these days. Today, much of parliamentary communication is designed not for persuasion within the House but for circulation outside it. Speeches increasingly seek virality rather than illumination. The result is a paradox: Parliament is more visible than ever and yet less heard.

The third symptom is the erosion of institutional memory. Parliament survives not merely through rules but through conventions — unwritten understandings that teach restraint to power and responsibility to the Opposition. Once these conventions weaken, the rulebook cannot save democratic culture. The tragedy of contemporary politics is that institutional continuity is often dismissed as elitism while disruption is celebrated as authenticity. When debate declines, politics does not become calmer; it becomes more polarised outside the institution.

A fourth symptom is the diminishing role of parliamentary committees and other mechanisms of scrutiny. The committee system was designed to allow detailed examination away from the heat of partisan contestation. Representation has certainly deepened. But representation without deliberation is incomplete. Mukherjee defended a principle: The idea that democracy requires institutions capable of slowing down power and compelling it to explain itself. That principle is under strain now. When parliamentary sessions become shorter, when scrutiny becomes weaker, when disagreement is portrayed as obstruction, and when political majorities begin to confuse electoral victory with institutional entitlement, democracy loses one of its most vital safeguards.

The true measure of Parliament is not how loudly the government speaks, but how fearlessly questions can be asked. It is not the speed with which legislation is passed, but the depth with which it is examined. It is not the size of a majority, but the space available for minorities. The question before us is not whether Parliament remains constitutionally supreme. The more troubling question is whether it still possesses the moral confidence to act as the nation's conscience. Mukherjee's *Portrait of Parliament* reminds us that democratic institutions rarely decay overnight. Their renewal, if political will still permits it, may also have to begin quietly with the recovery of a simple but profound belief: That Parliament is not an obstacle to governance. It is governance in its most democratic form.

The writer is Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, Rashtriya Janata Dal

Question for Delhi Master Plan: Whose city is it?



AMIR HYDER KHAN

DELHI'S AMBITIOUS Master Plan for 2047 promises new housing, transit-oriented development, economic corridors and expanded infrastructure as part of the larger project of making the capital a globally competitive city. But behind these targets lies a more fundamental question: Who gets to belong to the Delhi being built? Planning is often presented as a technical exercise involving land use, density and infrastructure. In reality, it determines who gets access to housing, employment and public space, who benefits from rising land values and who bears the costs of development.

The G20 Summit in 2023 offered a glimpse of this contradiction. As Delhi prepared to host global leaders, roadside vendors were removed from prominent locations and informal settlements screened from public view. It exposed an uncomfortable truth: Delhi needs its informal economy, but often does not want its informal workers to be visible. Street vendors, construction workers, domestic workers, sanitation workers, small traders and delivery riders are essential to the Capital's functioning. Yet they are frequently treated as obstacles to a cleaner and more "planned" city.

Gig workers make this contradiction particularly clear. Delhi's platform economy increasingly depends on delivery riders who move through the city at all hours. Yet conventional planning rarely recognises them as an urban constituency. A delivery worker needs safe parking, toilets, drinking water, charging points, rest spaces and affordable housing close to employment centres.

Housing presents a similar problem. The existence of housing in peripheral locations alongside informal housing closer to employment shows the limitations of a numbers-based approach. For a low-income household, housing cost includes rent, transport, commute time, childcare and access to work. A formally affordable house can be unaffordable if reaching work consumes hours and a significant share of income.

> Planning determines who gets access to housing, employment and public space, who benefits from rising land values and who bears the costs of development

Caste and occupation shape access to housing, land, dignity and public services. Workers in precarious occupations face insecurities that cannot be captured by income classifications alone. Likewise, women's inclusion cannot be achieved simply by adding toilets or childcare facilities. The location of affordable housing affects commuting, unpaid care work and access to employment. Housing, transport and care infrastructure must be planned together.

The same principle applies to persons with disabilities. A ramp is meaningless if the pavement leading to it is inaccessible or public transport cannot be reached independently. The test should be whether a person with a disability can independently travel from home to wherever necessary for work, education, healthcare and recreation.

Rehabilitation must also protect livelihoods. The principle of "*Jahan jhuggi, wahan makan*" is important, but relocation cannot simply mean moving residents to distant housing. It also raises the question of who captures the value created by public investment. New Metro lines and commercial corridors increase surrounding land values. If these gains accrue primarily to property owners while poorer residents are priced out, public investment risks producing private wealth while socialising displacement.

The real test of Delhi 2047 is not whether the capital becomes richer, taller or more connected. It is whether the people who build, clean, deliver, drive and sustain the city can still afford a place in its future.

Khan is a Delhi-based architect

'INDIA IS WORKING TO OPEN THE DOORS TO INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT'

India, Japan to review trade pact, streamline investments: Official

Sandeep Singh & Ravi Dutta Mishra
Tokyo/New Delhi, August 24

INDIA IS set to review its trade agreement with Japan signed in 2011 with an aim to fix the widening trade gap with the country and streamline committed investments worth 10 trillion yen (over $62 billion) in the next 10 years, a government official said on Monday. This comes as a delegation of over 220 stakeholders from Indian industry, led by the Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, is in Japan from 24th to 27th August to deepen collaboration with their Japanese counterparts.

Pitching for investment in India, Goyal at a roundtable here said that India is the fastest-growing large nation in the world and is poised to become a $30 trillion economy by 2047. Bridging this gap is clearly on the agenda, and a roadmap has been laid out, Goyal said, adding that India is working to open the doors to international engagement.

"Today we have free trade agreements (FTAs) or preferential market access in markets worth $17 trillion," he said.

"I have three suggestions or asks, as I invite you to leverage the cost competitiveness of our FTAs and our engineering talent. I urge each one of you present in India and those who will be coming to deepen your localisation. It will help you become even more cost-competitive and actually help you supply your components to the rest of the world. The government is also willing to support you in innovation funding," Goyal said.

Goyal cited the example of the first large investment by Suzuki Motor Corporation in the 1980s and said that the market cap of Suzuki in India is over 1.6 times that of the parent company Suzuki Motor Corporation. Stating that "some of the largest and most profitable operations are coming out of India," the minister pointed to the journey of 1,580 Japanese companies in India, adding that "We would like to see 1,580 Suzukis being created out of India and the doubling of the number of the companies operating out of India."

Piyush Goyal held several meetings during the day, including chairing a roundtable on capital goods, machinery, automotive and advanced manufacturing and engaging in talks with Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), Japan Chamber of Commerce & Industry. The Indian business delegation (over 200) met the Fintech Association of Japan and delegates from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency in Tokyo.

Responding to concerns over the use of safeguard measures raised by the Japanese companies during the round table, Goyal suggested the Japanese companies source steel from India rather than importing.

Further, during the fireside chat with Nikkei Asia editor-in-chief Akito Tanaka, he said "We only use safeguards for the low end of the market, which is available in India. In any country, there will be certain areas where there are conflicting demands: local industries... foreign companies coming into the country, protecting certain sectors... sensitivities and because of that it could lead to a situation where in certain areas you may find it difficult to immediately get the attention of the policymakers...

"But ours is a listening government; we have Invest India, which supports and handholds investors into India. The Commerce and Industry Ministry is working very actively to bring investment into the country and is always in the service of investors and business to help them in their journey in India and wherever possible we sort out the case," Goyal said.

Sandeep Singh is in Japan at the invitation of FICCI.

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• TRADE RESET

INDIA AIMS to fix the widening trade gap with Japan and streamline committed investment worth 10 trillion yen (over $62 billion) in the next 10 years



INDIAN DELEGATION, led by the Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, is in Japan from 24th to 27th August to deepen collaboration with their Japanese counterparts

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Meiji, Serum eye vaccine tie-up

Tokyo/New Delhi: Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal also discussed opportunities to strengthen India-Japan cooperation in the pharmaceutical sector and avenues to expand manufacturing and R&D with the President & Representative Director of Meiji Seika Pharma, Toshiaki Nagasato. The CEO, after the meeting, said that Meiji Seika Pharma is looking to partner with the Serum Institute of India for the supply of vaccines for Japanese Encephalitis. ENS

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TCS, Porsche ink €1.25 bn AI deal

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 24

TATA CONSULTANCY Services (TCS) has announced a strategic partnership with sports car maker Porsche AG of Germany to enable AI services across its mobility value chain, under which TCS will acquire 100% of MHP Management-und IT-Beratung GmbH (MHP), Porsche's management and IT consulting subsidiary, for €320 million (around Rs 3,575 crore). To support this partnership, Porsche has signed a five-year strategic agreement with MHP and TCS valued at €1.25 billion (Rs 13,967 crore).

The partnership is reinforced by a five-year strategic deal from Porsche. As part of the deal, TCS will establish a dedicated AI Mobility Centre of Excellence for Porsche to drive innovation across manufacturing, engineering, operations and customer experience, TCS said. "The proposed partnership and acquisition remain subject to regulatory approvals. MHP brings strong automotive and industrial consulting and implementation experience, with strengths in business transformation, AI, SAP, manufacturing digitalization, and connected mobility," it said.

Its long-standing track record in delivering complex automotive and industrial transformation programs will complement TCS' global scale and engineering prowess, TCS said. K. Krithivasan, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, TCS, said, "TCS is pleased to partner Porsche in its transformation journey. As AI, software, and data redefine the automotive industry, this partnership brings together TCS' capabilities in AI, engineering, technology and business transformation with MHP's strong automotive consulting expertise."

"Together, we will industrialize AI at scale for Porsche, accelerating innovation across the value chain to deliver intelligent, software-defined mobility experiences of the future."

Michael Leiters, CEO, Porsche AG, said, "Porsche is taking another important step in its strategy to focus resolutely on its core business with the transfer of MHP to TCS. At the same time, we are gaining a strategic partner in TCS."

"By combining Porsche's automotive expertise with TCS' digital technology and AI capabilities, we will further strengthen our innovative power, increase efficiency, and boost our competitiveness in an increasingly data and software-driven world of mobility," he said.

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• TECH ALLIANCE

- TCS will acquire 100% of MHP Management-und IT-Beratung GmbH (MHP), Porsche's management and IT consulting subsidiary
- It will establish a dedicated AI Mobility Centre of Excellence for Porsche to drive innovation across manufacturing, engineering, operations and customer experience

Tata Sons board likely to meet on September 17

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 24

THE BOARD of Tata Sons Ltd, the holding company of the Tata group, is likely to meet on September 17 to consider Chairman N Chandrasekaran's resignation and finalise a date for the annual general meeting (AGM), which was adjourned on August 18.

Tata Trusts Chairman Noel Tata and trustee Venu Srinivasan, who is Chairman Emeritus of TVS Motors, are on the board of Tata Sons. Apart from Chandrasekaran, other directors include former Unilever global COO Harish Manwani, former World Bank official Anita M George and Group CFO Saurabh Agrawal.

Tata Trusts have already decided to initiate the process of setting up a search committee to select Chandrasekaran's successor.

The AGM will happen only when Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT), which holds a 23.56% stake in Tata Sons, is able to come out of the restraining order issued by the Maharashtra Charity Commissioner in May. Tata Sons' AGM on August 18 was adjourned due to a lack of quorum, as the regulatory freeze imposed on the SRTT prevented Tata Sons from securing the shareholder representation required to convene the meeting.

The adjournment means the uncertainty over the resolution for the reappointment of Chandrasekaran as a director of Tata Sons will continue.

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PRIVATE AIRPORT SECTOR FACES OLIGOPOLY CONCERNS

Centre plans to cap airports a bidder can win in next privatisation round

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, August 24

IN A bid to minimise risks related to market concentration and over-leveraging, the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) plans to cap the number of airport bundles that can be awarded to the same bidder in the upcoming round of airport privatisation, as per the ministry's submission to Public Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) earlier this month.

The submission by MoCA was in response to a query from PPPAC Chair and Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Anuradha Thakur in an August 4 meeting on the planned privatisation of 11 airports — clubbed into five bundles — for a 50-year period. The panel gave its in-principle nod to the proposal, as per the minutes of the meeting.

Thakur had sought the ministry's response on what measures were envisaged to ensure that the risks related to concentration and over-leveraging are minimised, given the oligopolistic nature of the aviation sector. The PPPAC, under the Department of Economic Affairs, is responsible for appraisal and approval of central sector public private partnership (PPP) projects exceeding Rs 100 crore.

India's private sector-operated airport ecosystem is dominated by two groups — Adani and GMR — and concerns over the sector's oligopolistic nature have been flagged over the past few years. In the previous round of airport privatisation in 2019, the Adani Group walked away with all the six airports that were on offer. At present, the group operates eight airports — Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Lucknow, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram, Mangaluru, and Navi Mumbai. GMR operates six airports, including Delhi, Hyderabad, North Goa (Mopa), Visakhapatnam, Nagpur, and Bidar.

"The number of airport bundles that may be awarded to a single bidder would be capped to mitigate the risks arising from market concentration and potential over-leveraging, including their possible cascading impact across projects. The modalities of such capping are being finalised and would be submitted as part of the proposal seeking final recommendation by the PPPAC," MoCA said in response to Thakur's query.

The airports planned to be offered in the next round of privatisation include Amritsar and Kangra-Gaggal (bundle 1), Raipur and Aurangabad (bundle 2), Bhubaneswar and Hubbali (bundle 3), Tiruchirapalli and Tiruparti (bundle 4), and Varanasi, Gaya and Kushinagar (bundle 5). All of these are currently under the Airports Authority of India.

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Gold at 3-mth high, India demand rises

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, August 24

AFTER WEEKS of correction, gold prices have rebounded to their highest level in over three months, led by a weaker dollar, easing expectations of a US Federal Reserve rate hike and US Treasury measures to manage its debt, which have boosted demand for alternative assets.

The precious metal now trades above $4,630 per ounce on the London Bullion Market Association, the highest level since mid-May, and up over 16% from the $3,900-$4,000 levels just last month. It has also followed a similar pattern in the Indian market, now trading at around Rs 1.6 lakh per 10 grams on the Multi Commodity Exchange.

The rally follows the US Treasury's announcement last week that it will at least double buybacks of its longer-term bonds to maintain yields amid high US government debt levels, leading to yields subsiding a bit. Lower yields are positive for gold as they lower the opportunity cost of holding a non-yield-bearing asset, making it a good asset for safe-haven demand.

The treasury's market intervention has also weakened the dollar due to an infusion of liquidity in the market, making the precious metal more affordable.

"The recent yield rise suggests that investors no longer assume the Treasury supply will be absorbed effortlessly. Instead, the balance between supply and demand has become an increasingly important determinant of pricing," noted Johan Palmberg, Senior Quantitative Analyst at the World Gold Council (WGC). "Our view is that the positives would likely outweigh the negatives and likely invite substantial interest in gold," he added.

While the Treasury intervention last week fueled gains, gold had already been rising prior to that as prospects of a rate hike by the Fed eased. The market is now pricing in just a 38% chance of the central bank hiking interest rates in its meeting this month, compared to a nearly 84% chance a month ago.

Chances of the Fed maintaining a status quo on rates for the remainder of the year have also increased recently, after the last few meetings showed that some of its members had favoured a rate hike.

Meanwhile, the demand for gold in the Indian market has picked up as the festive season draws close, spurred by the correction in prices since hitting a peak around late January. A recovery in demand for the jewellery industry and continued interest in gold as an investment avenue have driven this demand, said the WGC.

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SEBI rejects Adani-linked offshore fund's requests

Mumbai: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) rejected applications last week from at least three Mauritius-based funds with investments in the Adani Group to settle cases of regulatory violation involving failure to disclose their shareholder details, two sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.

Thirteen offshore investors of the Adani Group have been under SEBI investigation since Hindenburg Research in 2023 alleged the group's improper use of tax havens, triggering a stock selloff. REUTERS

FX swap schemes built buffers with 'maximum cost-efficiency': Fin Min

New Delhi: Terming the response to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) concessional swap facilities for Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) deposits, Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings, and External Commercial Borrowings as "spectacular", the Ministry of Finance on Monday said the government had added to its external buffers with "maximum cost-efficiency".

The ministry's comments come after speculation the RBI closed the window early due to its high cost. As per the scheme, the RBI is set to bear the entire hedging cost of the FCNR(B) deposits. However, economists have argued the cost of the scheme — estimated by some to be around $10 billion over a period of five years, assuming $70 billion is raised in total — is unlikely to have been a factor in the decision to close the facility early.

The RBI's concessional swap facilities, which became operational on June 8, had raked in $72.85 billion by August 21. Such has been the success of the FCNR(B) scheme in particular that the RBI on August 14 said the swap window would close on August 31, a month earlier than the initially-announced deadline of September 30.

The swap facility for Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings and External Commercial Borrowings will remain open till December 31, as announced originally. ENS

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• BRIEFLY

FM to leave for 8-day official trip to Canada, US

New Delhi: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will embark on an official visit to Canada and the US from August 25 to September 2 to hold talks on bilateral economic and financial cooperation, investment opportunities and global economic priorities, besides participating in the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting. During her visit to Toronto, she will participate in the inaugural Economic and Financial Dialogue with Canada's Finance and National Revenue Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne. PTI

CIL sets up arm in Singapore for critical minerals

New Delhi: Coal India Ltd, India's largest coal producer, has incorporated a new wholly owned Singapore-based subsidiary, CIL Global Pte. Ltd, to explore and develop overseas critical mineral assets. The new subsidiary aims to "enable efficient management of overseas investments and provide structural flexibility for future acquisitions," the company informed the exchanges on Monday. ENS

Govt to sell up to 6% in Hindustan Copper via OFS

New Delhi: The government will sell up to 6% stake in Hindustan Copper Ltd through an offer for sale (OFS) at a floor price of Rs 514 a share. The floor price is at a 10.38% discount over Monday's closing share price of Hindustan Copper on the BSE. In a post on X, Department of Investment and Public Asset Management secretary Arunish Chawla said the Govern-ment of India offers to divest 3% equity in Hindustan Copper through an OFS, with an option to divest an additional 3% (green shoe) in case of versubscription. PTI

Govt allows 4-month relief for clean energy projects amid West Asia crisis

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, August 24

THE CRISIS in West Asia is threatening to disrupt India's renewable energy expansion momentum, with the government extending deadlines for projects scheduled to be commissioned on, or after the outbreak of war in the region.

In its latest advisory, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has asked renewable energy implementing agencies — including Solar Energy Corporation of India, NTPC Ltd, National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd and SJVN Ltd, as well as the power, energy and renewable energy departments of the state and Union Territory governments — to consider extensions of up to four months for projects scheduled to be commissioned on or after February 28, 2026. The move comes weeks after industry bodies sought relief from the ministry, warning that disruptions due to the conflict were affecting the procurement, manufacturing, logistics and execution of utility-scale renewable energy projects.

Meanwhile, government data also points to a slowdown in India's pace of solar capacity addition in the latest quarter. In the April-June 2026 quarter, solar capacity additions stood at 11.8 GW, down 18.1% from 14.4 GW in the previous quarter.

In FY26, the country added 44.61 GW of solar capacity, of which 16.3 GW, or 36%, came from distributed solar, leaving 28.31 GW from mainly utility-scale projects. In its advisory, MNRE referred to an April office memorandum issued by the Department of Expenditure under the Ministry of Finance, which clarified that the situation in West Asia should be treated as a "war" and provided for a time extension of up to four months on account of the crisis.

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• MARKETS

Sensex	NIFTY	Gold ▲	US Dollar ▲
77,369.11	24,219.05	₹1,62,154	₹95.74
-171.72	-32.95	Silver ▼	Oil ▲
-0.22%	-0.14%	₹2,45,391	$95.28

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1 KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF AUGUST 21, 2026

India is Claude's second-largest market, but ranks 101st in per-capita usage

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, August 24

INDIA IS the second-largest market for Anthropic's Claude AI by overall usage, but ranks near the bottom globally when that usage is adjusted for the size of its working-age population. The finding highlights how adoption of the chatbot remains limited to a relatively small section of users in the country — and India's per-capita income may have a role to play.

According to Anthropic's latest Economic Index, India ranks 101st among 116 countries in Claude usage per working-age person. The gap between India's high aggregate usage and its low per-capita ranking suggests that the country's position as one of Claude's biggest markets is driven largely by its population size, rather than widespread adoption of the AI tool across workers and consumers. "This gap suggests that India's high Claude use overall reflects the sheer size of its population, not that the average person is using Claude heavily," Anthropic said.

As of 2025, India's per capita income is $2,702 (Rs 2,58,548) per year. For reference, the per capita income of Bangladesh is $2,597 while that of Sri Lanka is around $5,000. The US has a per capita income of around $90,000.

Snapshot of India's AI use

The findings point to a broader challenge for AI adoption in India, where access to and use of advanced AI tools remains uneven despite the country's large technology workforce and the government's push to expand domestic AI capabilities.

Anthropic's analysis shows that higher-income countries generally record greater Claude usage per person, with factors such as income, access to digital infrastructure and awareness of AI tools likely influencing adoption.

"Globally, per-capita AI adoption is strongly correlated with per-capita income. India's per-capita use is consistent with what this relationship would predict. Without addressing structural barriers related to income, digital infrastructure, and awareness outside the IT sector, Indian AI adoption is likely to remain concentrated," it added.



On a regional basis, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Delhi together account for over half of India's total Claude use. REUTERS

The data also suggests that Claude's use in India is currently more closely linked to professional and technical work than broad-based consumer adoption.

This could limit the extent to which productivity gains from generative AI spread across sectors, particularly outside technology-heavy occupations and major economic centres.

It is worth noting that Anthropic's analysis is based on Claude usage and may not be a measure of overall AI adoption in India, though it is one of the most popular AI companies in the world.

Indian states using Claude

Claude use in India is concentrated in a few economically high-performing states. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Delhi together account for over half of India's total Claude use — and "this pattern closely mirrors India's IT sector geography and urban economic output," the company said.

"The concentration in these four states — home to Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi NCR — suggests that current AI adoption is driven primarily by India's established technology workforce rather than broad-based consumer uptake," it said.

The primary reasons that Indians are using Claude also reflect that gap. Anthropic said the occupational mix of Indian Claude AI use, inferred by mapping tasks to related occupations, skews towards software development and engineering roles, consistent with the country's large IT services sector. "Broadening AI's economic impact will require looking beyond software and IT services," it added.

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• INFRASTRUCTURE

Inside Andhra's policy to enforce 'right to walk'

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, August 24

IN INDIA, one in every five persons killed in a road accident is a pedestrian. After the Supreme Court's order recognising the right to walk on footpaths as a fundamental right earlier this year, Andhra Pradesh has become the country's first state to formulate a pedestrian safety policy.

The Andhra Pradesh Pedestrian Safety and Universal Accessibility Policy 2026, notified on August 7, mandates a three-step system: road safety audits, fixing footpath infrastructure (including removal of encroachments) and behavioural change.

The policy will apply to all local body areas. Agencies responsible for roads in cities with populations above one million have been directed to implement it first.

The policy also invokes Section 198A of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, under which officials, contractors, and consultants can be fined Rs 1 lakh if infrastructural or design failures cause pedestrian death or disability.

Footpath audits

Local authorities will conduct an audit of the existing footpaths with priority to crowded and high-footfall areas such as markets, railway stations, bus stands, religious and educational institutions. It says authorities must prioritise at least 15-20 specific "black spots" — places where there have been frequent pedestrian injuries or deaths in the last 2-3 years.

The audit will cover the assessment of the physical condition of the pavement and pedestrian crossings. The authorities must survey 20% of roads within one year of policy commencement to assess additional pedestrian crossing requirements, and finalise the work within seven months.

The policy directs the mandatory removal of unauthorised structures, illegal stalls and other encroachments on footpaths. But it does not specify any timeline for this. It recommends automated and camera-based monitoring systems for these footpaths, and deployment of pedestrian guardrails and bollards.

• PEDESTRIAN DEATHS

- In 2024, out of 8,346 road accident deaths in Andhra Pradesh, 1,739 were pedestrians. Of 1.77 lakh road deaths recorded in 2024 across India, 36,526 were pedestrians.
- Around 31% of pedestrian deaths occur on national highways alone.

Specifications of footpath

The footpaths shall have a minimum walking area of two metres to accommodate wheelchairs comfortably, 0.4-1 metre of buffer space and a 1.5-metre area for multi-utility zone to accommodate tree pits, auto rickshaw stands, seating and on-street vending.

The height shall not be more than 150 mm from the road. The surface must be firm, stable, even and slip-resistant. The bollards to prevent bikes from entering the footpath should be 0.5-0.7 metres high with a clear spacing of 0.6 metres between them, and one with 1 metre width for wheelchair access.

The pedestrian policy also mandates the tactile pavers to aid visually impaired persons and curb ramps at all crossings. It discourages forcing pedestrians onto inaccessible foot overbridges where at-grade crossings like zebra crossing can be safely provided.

Social policing and performance

The policy has also included the provision of behavioural change among citizens. A district-level grievance mobile application or portal will be created to facilitate the reporting of violations by citizens. It also mandates the ranking metric for evaluating the performance of different urban local bodies on pedestrian safety.



• ECONOMICS

The other 'NEET' that India needs to address

A closer look at employment data shows, among other things, the sheer number of young Indians who are not in education, jobs or training



UDIT MISRA

CHART 1

•Unemployment rises with educational attainment

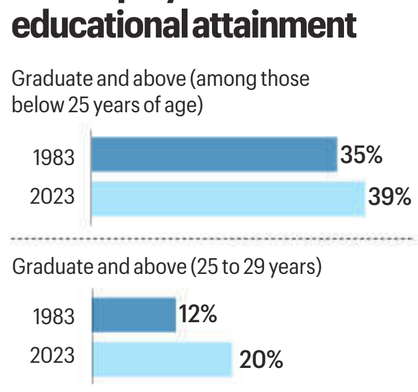


TABLE 1

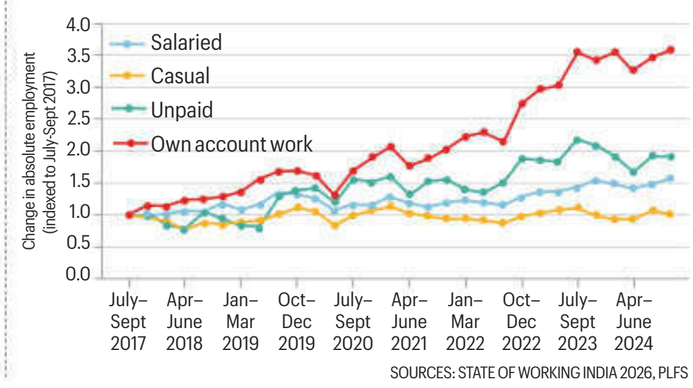
•Size of workforce

(in millions)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2017-18	338	94	433
2018-19	343	97	440
2019-20	357	122	480
2020-21	357	126	483
2021-22	363	126	490
2022-23	349	128	477
2023-24	387	186	573
2025 (Jan-Dec)	416	206	616

CHART 2

•Only self-employment spikes for women



SOURCES: STATE OF WORKING INDIA 2026, PLFS

YOUTH PROTESTS that forced the resignation of India's Union Education Minister almost exactly a month ago have not only brought the issue of education into sharp focus, but also highlighted concerns related to unemployment — especially among the youth.

Until now, the government has often cited data on the Unemployment Rate (UER) to suggest that Indians are doing well on the jobs front. The UER is calculated as the number of unemployed people within the total labour force (those currently working or looking for work). Official data from the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) says that the UER has fallen steadily from 6.1% in 2017-18 — hitting a 45-year high — to just 3.1% in 2025.

This is the UER for those aged 15 years and above, suggesting that broadly, the Indian economy has been creating jobs. However, at least three immediate problems arise even if one looks only at the UER.

Youth unemployment: Growing worry

The first problem is that the UER for those between the ages of 15 and 29 years is still quite high, even though this number has also been falling. It has fallen from almost 18% in 2017-18 to around 10% in 2022-23 but has since stayed at this level.

In fact, not only is the unemployment rate highest among the youth as a cohort, it rises with educational attainment. As *Chart 1* shows, graduates aged 25 face the highest unemployment rate — as high as almost 40%. It means that on average, 4 out of 10 graduates aged 25 years looking for work fail to get it.

The data is from the State of Working India (SWI) 2026 report by researchers at the Azim Premji University. They also calculated that the UER among young Indians with education up to graduation or more was actually higher in 2023 than in 1983.

While graduates being unemployed is not a new phenomenon in India, so much so that even movies of yesteryears capture this routine but crushing reality, the situation seems to be worsening over time.

Quality of jobs, not just quantity

The second problem is that while more jobs have been created since 2017-18, there is a big question mark on their quality. *Table 1* shows the size of the Indian workforce — the total number of people with a job. It has risen from 43.3 crore (or 433 million) in 2017-18 to around 61 crore as of December 2025.

But a closer look shows that most new jobs are either in agriculture or in pursuits that pay little or see stagnant earnings. The SWI 2026 pointed out: "In the post-Covid period India's employed population has increased... with employment rates rising from 71 to 74 percent for men and from 26 to 34 percent for women, between 2021-22 and 2023-24. But the majority of employment creation has been in agriculture. Of the 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and 2023-24, 40 million have been in agriculture, with women accounting for a large share (38 million)."

Similarly, while women have increasingly joined India's workforce — from 94 million in 2017-18 to 186 million in 2023-24 — as *Chart 2* shows, most earn very little. "The number of women in own-account self-employment has seen a nearly four-fold increase since 2017. Self-employment earnings among women and salaried earnings (for men and women) have largely stagnated," states the report.

Unemployment rate misleads

Lastly, in a developing economy such as India, using the UER to assess job market stress can be deeply misleading. That's because the unemployment rate is measured as a percentage of the people demanding a job. While this is a reasonable approach generally, in India, evidence shows that not everyone registers in official surveys as people looking for a job. As such, the number of people unemployed is often far more than what is captured.

Capturing lack of jobs

In India, there is evidence to show that not everyone registers in official surveys as people looking for a job.

•

NEET, an acronym for 'Not in Employment, Education, or Training', is a metric that can help measure unemployment in a more comprehensive manner.

Rosa Abraham, an associate professor of economics who teaches at APU and is one of the authors of the SWI report, told *The Indian Express*, "Unemployment is only measured when you are willing to work and/or searching for a job. But, especially in the case of women (in India), what would happen is that regardless of their education, and even when they have, say, completed graduation, they may not explicitly record or be recorded (in the surveys) as looking for work." Such women thus get counted out of the "labour force".

If these people were counted as unemployed, they would then be part of the labour force, and the unemployment rate would be much higher.

"So UER is really the lowest estimate of people who are not being mobilised into the workforce. There is an entire pool of people who are out of the labour force who are either discouraged workers, or there are social norms (often for women) that keep them out of work," explains Abraham.

The other NEET

Another metric better captures how the Indian economy is failing its youth. It is called NEET — an acronym for "Not in Employment, Education, or Training".

NEET "is a comprehensive measure of this labour under-utilisation while excluding those in education or training. NEET not only includes the unemployed, but also those who are of working age and are neither in education/training nor employment," the APU report says.

Simply put, NEET presumes that many people may be pursuing education and, as such, they cannot be expected to join the workforce. So, NEET attempts to understand the share of people outside this umbrella.

According to PLFS data from March, 25% of Indian youth were NEET. Population projections by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare state that India's youth population in 2026 stood at 36.8 crore, making it the world's largest youth population. If one applies the same proportion of NEET to 2026, out of a total youth population of 368 million (36.8 crore), around 92 million or 9.2 crore are in NEET.

In other words, the number of Indian youth neither involved in education nor skilling nor any kind of employment today is around 9.2 crore — almost equal to the entire population of Iran.

Apart from the high youth unemployment rate, such a high absolute number of NEET population may explain the growing youth unrest in the country. It is also important to remember that these numbers are at a time when the government is happy with the pace of economic growth based on GDP figures, even calling it a "goldilocks" period.

• HISTORY

Tracing Ashoka in Ujjain: What new dig at Vaishya Tekri can reveal

Nikita Mohta
New Delhi, August 24

THE MADHYA Pradesh government has begun restoring Buddhist monuments linked to the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, starting with a fresh excavation at Vaishya Tekri in Ujjain.

Initial excavations by the Department of Archaeology of the erstwhile Gwalior State in 1938–39 unveiled large bricks and punch-marked coins here, prompting archaeologists to date the structure to the Mauryan period.

In his 2011 paper, "Aśoka and Buddhist Nuns: Early Buddhism in Ujjain and Malwa", academic Peter Skilling wrote: "The largest stupa, popularly called Vaisya Tekri, is about 350 feet at its base and 100 feet high. Nearby is a smaller stupa, called Kumbhar (or Kumhar) Tekri. Both are relatively undisturbed, except for the unfortunate fact that a power line runs between them, and a giant pylon squats rudely on Kumbhar Tekri's shoulder."

But academic Himanshu Prabha Ray, in an interview with *The Indian Express*, urged caution, noting that the excavation report is decades old and that its interpretation was shaped by earlier accounts, particularly Alexander Cunningham's writings on Ashoka. While acknowledging the mound's impressive size and its reported comparison with the Great Stupa at Sanchi, Ray said, "I think we are jumping the gun. We need to investigate further beyond the 1938-39 excavation."

Ashoka's years in Ujjain

Ujjayini (modern Ujjain), on the banks of the Sipra, a tributary of the Chambal, was the capital of Avanti and an important commercial centre. Historian Romila Thapar, in *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, notes that Ujjain was a major crossroads, linking trade routes to western coastal ports such as Broach and Sopirà, as well as to Pataliputra.

Ashoka was sent to Avanti as viceroy by his father, Bindusara. Unlike his brief sojourn in Taxila, he is believed to have spent about a decade in Avanti, with Ujjain as his headquarters. Thapar writes, "We feel that he was sent to Taxila for a special purpose and after having completed his work there, he was then appointed to the viceroyalty at Ujjain in recognition of his work."

Ancient city

- Mud fortifications were first built around Ujjain in the seventh century BCE. By about the sixth century BCE, Avanti, with Ujjain as its capital, had emerged as a powerful independent kingdom.
- Historian Nayanjot Lahiri says of Ujjain, "By the time Ashoka got there, it was an urban centre of respectable antiquity, having flourished along the Sipra river for 300 years or more before it became his place of functioning."



Vaishya Tekri has an estimated height of 100 ft, against the 54 ft Sanchi Stupa. EXPRESS

Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RGf9mljMzg1

Where Ashoka met Devi

On his way to Ujjain, Ashoka stopped in Vidisha, where he met Vedisadevi, the daughter of a merchant. They later had a son, Mahinda, and a daughter, Samghamitta.

Ashoka's appointment to Ujjain appears to be well supported by historical evidence: his own edicts, issued after he became emperor, refer to the presence of a prince, or kumara, at Ujjain.

Lahiri also points to the geography, "Ashoka is shown as meeting Devi at Vidisha, and Vidisha falls on the way to Ujjayini from Pataliputra".

Fresh excavations

Scholars have welcomed the government's decision to fund excavations.

Ray points to Sanchi, where the ashes of Buddhist teachers who taught or stayed at its monasteries were buried around stupas. "The stupa does not occur as an isolated structure. It always has smaller stupas and other structures around it. I would suggest that the excavations look beyond the stupa itself and use the money to understand how the site grew over time: what other structures were around it, and who were the monks who taught or stayed there."

• CLIMATE

Why Indian cities flood after heavy rain and overheat in summer every year



EXPERTS EXPLAIN

AMAN KUMAR & SALONI SRIVASTAVA
RESEARCHERS AT GATEWAY RESEARCH (IGSD INDIA), NEW DELHI

FROM INTENSE heat across Delhi-NCR in May to heavy rain inundating the city's arterial roads and low-lying sectors on Monday, both extreme weather events exposed the same problem. Weather translates into an urban disaster when it is met with dense construction, weak drainage, loss of open land, unsafe housing and public systems that aren't ready for those most at risk.

When does a natural hazard become an urban disaster?

A heatwave, cloudburst or cyclone is a hazard, but it becomes a disaster when it strikes a place where people, buildings, and public services are exposed and lack the capacity to withstand it.

Heavy rain need not cause severe flooding in a city if water can drain, spread or seep into the ground. But the same rain can bring it to a halt when natural drains have been narrowed, lakes and floodplains built over, and large areas covered with concrete.

The same applies to heat. Dense construction, asphalt, poor ventilation and the loss of tree cover cause neighbourhoods to absorb heat during the day and retain it after sunset.

The danger is greater for people living in poorly ventilated homes and for those who work outdoors without reliable access to shade, drinking water or healthcare.

The hazard may begin with the weather, but the extent of the damage depends on how the city has been built and governed.

Why are Indian cities becoming more vulnerable?

Heatwaves and periods of intense rainfall are becoming more severe, while cities continue to replace soil, vegetation and water bodies with buildings, roads and other hard surfaces. This raises local temperatures and leaves less ground through which rainwater can drain. The World Bank estimates that temperatures in Indian city centres can be 3-4°C higher than in surrounding areas.

India's urban population is expected to reach 951 million by 2050, and more than half the infrastructure that Indian cities will need by then is yet to be built. Whether this adds to the risk will depend on where construction is permitted, what materials are used, and whether natural drainage systems and open spaces are retained.

What do these disasters cost?

Official estimates generally capture deaths and damage to roads, buildings and other public assets. They are less likely to capture wages lost by informal workers, the cost of illness, the disruption of small businesses or the time spent recovering from repeated flooding.

In terms of avoidable losses, the World Bank estimates that timely adaptation could prevent annual urban flood losses of about $5 billion by 2030 and $30 billion by 2070. Measures to reduce extreme heat could also save more than 130,000 lives by 2050.

What has changed in the law?

After a 2025 amendment, Section 41A of The Disaster Management Act, 2005, allows state governments to constitute an Urban Disaster Management Authority in every state capital and city with a municipal corporation, except Delhi and Chandigarh. These authorities are responsible for preparing and implementing an urban disaster management plan.

A separate change was made to disaster financing in August 2026, when heatwaves and lightning were included in the list of notified natural calamities. States can now use disaster response funds for eligible relief, while heatwave mitigation projects can receive support from disaster mitigation funds.

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Where does the system fall short?

The amendment leaves the constitution of urban disaster authorities to state governments and sets no deadline. Except Bengaluru, responsibility in most cities remains divided among municipal corporations, district administrations and state departments, which may work under different plans and lines of authority.

There is also a shortage of basic planning capacity. A 2021 NITI Aayog report found that 65% of India's 7,933 urban settlements had no master plan. State planning departments were either understaffed or had posts lying vacant.

What would reduce the risk?

Disaster planning needs to become part of the routine decisions through which a city grows. Flood maps should determine where construction is prohibited, where drainage capacity must be increased and what plinth levels buildings must maintain. Heat maps should inform requirements for shade, ventilation, tree cover and building materials.

City governments need qualified urban planners and technical experts working on development decisions, so that plans account for hazards and appropriate resilience measures. Urban investment decisions and project approvals should then follow the plans these teams prepare, with responsibility assigned for each measure and deadlines that can be reviewed before the next expected disaster.

Financing must extend beyond relief after an event. Early warnings should also trigger measures agreed in advance, including changes in outdoor working hours, hospital preparedness, school closures and traffic diversions.

Weather risk cannot be removed from a city. But when the same roads flood and the same neighbourhoods overheat each year, the failure lies in decisions that were made well before the season began.

DELHI
businessline.
TUESDAY - AUGUST 25 - 2026

the hindu businessline.
TUESDAY - AUGUST 25, 2026

Exercise other options

F&O frenzy needs to be tackled differently

The Securities and Exchange Board of India's (SEBI) report on the trading behaviour of individual investors in the equity derivatives segment paints a sombre picture. That aggregate net losses for retail traders dipped to ₹91,685 crore in FY26 — down from ₹1.12 lakh crore — offers no real comfort. F&Os have been viewed as a problem for good reasons. They corrode retail investors' wealth; these are often young, working age individuals who chase a mirage of exceptional return.

The negative wealth effect of these losses — on consumption — cannot be disregarded. What is clear now is that the efforts — like raising minimum contract values — by SEBI to contain this rash pursuit have not delivered the desired results. The sheer volume of derivatives relative to the cash market leaves the door wide open for large players to manipulate cash prices on expiry days. SEBI's recent ex-parte order against Copthall Mauritius Investment and Mansi Share and Stockbroking is a clear case in point. Meanwhile, as much as 97 per cent of index options are traded within a week of expiry, and a staggering 75 per cent are executed essentially on the eve of expiration. Besides, 97 per cent of individual traders are option buyers — a segment where, as per SEBI's analysis, nearly 90 per cent end up as loss-makers. The incidence of these losses is highest among traders with low capital. Trading intensity peaks among the youngest (under 30) and lowest-income (below ₹5 lakh annually) demographics.

A parallel ecosystem thrives on this speculative frenzy. Foreign and domestic institutional traders consistently corner the profits, while Indian stock exchanges and brokerages boast operating margins that rival or exceed global peers. SEBI's nudges have not been effective enough in curbing speculation. While the F&O-to-cash volume ratio (for NSE and BSE combined) declined from its 487x peak in October 2023, it still stood at a highly excessive 343x in July 2026. The 372x average for the first seven months of this year is actually higher than the 318x seen in the same period in 2025.

This zero-sum game acts as a wealth transfer to foreign traders, draining forex reserves at a time when the highest offices in the country are proactively urging citizens to limit gold and fuel consumption. The solution perhaps lies in taking stronger steps on F&O speculation. A targeted increase in the Securities Transaction Tax (STT) only on options trading is perhaps worth looking at. While the "ideal" ratio of F&Os to cash is up for debate, a system where India leads the world by such a massive margin needs to be dismantled. Simultaneously, regulators should introduce policies to deepen the over-the-counter (OTC) derivatives market, giving institutions a wholesale venue to trade amongst themselves and away from retail exchanges. True success on this front will not be marked by regulatory warnings alone. The data should tell a different story, sooner than later.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



POINT BLANK.



LOKESHWARRI SK

No reason to give up on CAS yet



GETTY IMAGES

On August 3, 2026, Indian stock exchanges introduced closing auction session for stocks in the cash segment with derivative contracts linked to them. There were indications in July that the rollout could be rocky with several stockbrokers claiming that their turnover can take a hit due to the new mechanism and naysayers claiming that the Indian market was not ready for it.

The first closing auction proved all the doomsdayers right with the Nifty 50 doing a pole vault, doubling the intra-day gain during the closing auction session. The second session was equally chaotic. But sanity returned from the third session.

The market regulator stepped in, holding consultations with market participants, coaxing and nudging them to participate in the closing auction. Two intermediaries — Copthall Mauritius and Mansi Share and Stock Broking — were also hauled up for manipulating prices in the CAS on BSE, on August 13.

Analysis of granular data of the closing auction session shows that volatility has subsided and there is no impact on the overall trading volumes due to the move. Volumes in the CAS could, however, continue to be muted since trading activity will be low in the closing session. SEBI must continue with this initiative, while watching out for wrongful activity.

WHAT AND WHY

Before we proceed further, a quick lowdown on why closing auction session was introduced.

Until July, the closing prices of stocks in the cash segment were being determined using the volume-weighted average price (VWAP) method. What this means is that the closing price of a stock is the average price of all transactions done in the stock between 3.00 pm and 3.30 pm, with higher weights being assigned to the prices where more volume is transacted and vice versa for transactions with low volumes.

The problem with VWAP is that it is an average price and does not represent a price at which actual transactions have been executed. Many passive fund managers have apparently complained to SEBI that the difference between the price at which transactions happen in the last 30 minutes and the VWAP, gives rise to tracking error when they buy stocks to emulate an index. VWAP was also found easier to manipulate by entering large orders towards the end of the trading session. This also increased price volatility in the last 30 minutes of continuous trading.

The closing auction session is an improvement on VWAP because, here, the closing price is chosen from the orders placed in the session. Trading halts during the CAS and all the buy and sell orders punched in the session are pooled to discover the equilibrium price. This is the price at which the greatest number of trades can be executed, and this also serves as the closing price. This is found more tamper-proof and most of the major global stock exchanges including the NYSE, London Stock Exchange and Hong Kong Stock Exchange are using some variant of CAS to discover the closing price.

CAS EXPERIENCE SO FAR

Market participants have been quite wary about the closing auction session, preferring to close all the trades before 3.15 pm. This is borne by the fact that the average traded value in the NSE in the CAS has been between ₹1,000 and ₹1,500 crore through August. Trading on the BSE in the closing session has also been lacklustre.

The closing auction session (CAS) is an improvement on volume-weighted average price (VWAP) because, here, the closing price is chosen from the orders placed in the session

This has, however, not had any impact on the overall cash volumes on exchanges. Average daily turnover in cash segment of BSE was around ₹10,000 crore in July 2026; it remained around that level in August as well.

The average turnover in the cash segment of the NSE was around ₹1.2 lakh crore in July and August this year. This implies that market participants are not cutting back on trading, but the last 15 minutes' trading is being done in the earlier parts of the trading session.

The good news is that price volatility in the CAS has subsided considerably. If we take a close look at NSE's CAS on August 3, 2026, around 41 of the 208 stocks gained more than 1 per cent from the reference price. Several stocks including Divis Lab, Bajaj Auto and Grasim gained 3 per cent, while CG Power and SAIL lost close to 3 per cent. This shows that market participants seem to have been trigger-happy in the first session, punching trades at the maximum limit.

But SEBI's ire at this conduct along with the penalty meted out to two players for alleged manipulation of prices on the CAS seems to have made everyone toe the line.

The average change from the reference price on August 21, 2026, was just 0.13 per cent. This indicates that deals are now being punched very close to the reference price in the CAS window.

WHAT NEXT

These are early days, and having begun the newer method of closing price discovery, there is no reason to stop it now. Market intermediaries have been given plenty of time to prepare for CAS, as multiple rounds of consultations have been done since December 2024. They had ample time to upgrade their infrastructure and educate their clients. Citing lack of preparedness as an excuse to halt CAS is not acceptable.

That said, it needs to be understood that the design of the CAS suggests trading will be difficult in the last 20 minutes, which will impede trading and liquidity. Since there is no continuous trading during CAS, arbitrage trading becomes difficult. Many algo and high frequency trading strategies will be difficult to execute in the absence of continuous trading, stop loss and iceberg orders and in random closing of trading session. Liquidity in the session will have to be provided by institutional investors, long-term individual investors and perhaps, proprietary desks of stock brokers.

With overall volumes being intact and the reference price discovered at 3.20 pm acting as a backstop for price discovery, there is no need to worry too much about CAS. SEBI can allow it to continue, while maintaining a vigil on possible price manipulations in the session.

Uneven monsoon needs early food-supply response

Crop-specific yield assessment should be intensified in rain-fed districts. Tur, soybean and maize deserve particular attention

Saurabh Bandyopadhyay

India's 2026 monsoon is becoming an increasing concern for the economy — not simply because rainfall is deficient, but because the deficit is highly uneven across regions and is concentrated in areas important for rain-fed agriculture.

Recent assessments indicate substantial shortfalls across several regions, with East and North India recording deficits of around 26 per cent below the long-period average, the South Peninsula around 23 per cent and the North-East around 11 per cent. More importantly, large rain-fed areas of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Gujarat are facing significant rainfall stress. The implications for kharif production therefore deserve closer attention than the national rainfall number alone suggests.

The immediate concern is the possibility of crop-specific and region-specific yield losses, particularly in rain-fed crops such as tur, soybean and maize. These crops need close monitoring as the season progresses, with greater emphasis on actual yield prospects rather than simply acreage sown.

A moderate national rainfall deficit need not generate a major price shock if production in vulnerable crops remains adequate or if other regions compensate. But a concentrated production loss in pulses or oilseeds can quickly translate into higher prices because domestic supply is already relatively tight and imports may be required to bridge the gap.

India's recent inflation numbers provide little room for complacency. Retail CPI inflation rose from 4.38 per cent in June to 4.45 per cent in July 2026, while food inflation was considerably higher at 5.52 per cent. Rural CPI inflation was also higher than urban inflation. A further weather-induced supply shock could therefore affect not only food prices but also the real purchasing power of rural households.

The strengthening El Niño adds to the uncertainty. The UK Met Office's latest assessment of August 21 is unusually stark.

Though the relationship between El Niño and the Indian monsoon is complex, it does strengthen the case for preparing for rainfall variability during the remainder of the season.

GOVT MEASURES

The government's response should therefore move from monitoring rainfall to monitoring potential food-supply disruptions.

First, crop-specific yield assessment should be intensified in vulnerable rain-fed districts. Tur, soybean and maize deserve particular attention. Remote sensing, crop-cutting experiments and field-level agricultural intelligence can help identify emerging yield losses before they become visible in market prices.



PATCHY MONSOON. Rural impact GN RAO

Second, procurement, buffer stocks and import decisions should be aligned with these assessments. If a meaningful shortfall in pulses or other essential commodities begins to emerge, imports should be facilitated early rather than after domestic prices have already risen sharply.

Third, global supply chains need to be treated as part of India's food-security infrastructure. Geopolitical tensions, shipping disruptions and bottlenecks can make an otherwise manageable domestic production shortfall more difficult to absorb. Port capacity, shipping availability, warehousing and inland logistics should therefore be monitored alongside crop conditions.

This is particularly important because food security today depends not only on how much India produces, but also on how quickly commodities can move from surplus locations or overseas markets to deficit regions.

The fourth priority should be protecting vulnerable farmers and rural purchasing power. Where rainfall stress threatens standing crops, contingency planning, moisture conservation and irrigation support can help limit losses. Where incomes are nevertheless affected, employment and social-protection measures can prevent a temporary agricultural shock from becoming a wider rural-demand shock.

The broader lesson is that the economic impact of a weak monsoon depends less on the headline rainfall deficit than on how effectively the economy absorbs it. India cannot control the monsoon or El Niño. It can, however, improve crop intelligence, act early on imports and stocks, strengthen logistics and protect vulnerable households.

The objective should be straightforward: identify a potential supply shortfall before it becomes a price shock.

The writer is with NCAER, New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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

Tribunal reforms

It refers to the Editorial 'Tribunal autonomy'. It is sad that this Bill was also passed without much discussion. The Tribunal Reforms Bill sought to streamline India's tribunal system by abolishing certain appellate bodies and transferring their work to High Courts or other judicial forums.

It could reduce administrative duplication, simplify the justice-delivery structure, and bring greater consistency to appeals. However, transferring cases to already overburdened High Courts may delay justice. India needs adequately staffed, specialised tribunals with transparent appointments, secure tenure, and real operational autonomy.

Bal Govind
Noida

Healthcare priorities

To miss the 'Colour of healthcare funding', (August 24), is feigning convenient colour blindness. The spiralling of healthcare costs is in part attributable to the legitimate profit motive of private enterprise, which unfortunately comes at the cost of hapless patients.

Scientific advancements have improved treatment, but private investment will inevitably have a profit motive. It is imperative for the government to step up spending on public healthcare and ensure effective delivery to reduce the dependence on private healthcare.

Jose Abraham
Kottayam (Kerala)

'Mundhe' after Sunday

'A taste of Mundhe' (August, 24) captures the spirit of citizens. They are indeed rejoicing at the drive of the State FDA in cleaning up the eateries business including high end establishments.

But one wonders what was happening before he took charge. What was the department doing all these years? It cannot be that the businesses behaved like angels then and have suddenly changed track now. We have likely been fed with stale and unsafe food all these years, even by some of the best names. It is now time for citizens to take up the baton. For example, they could ask to see the kitchen and store rooms of eateries before ordering.

V Vijaykumar
Pune

Dynastic dilemmas

Apropos, 'India's Thatcher moments', (August 24). In any equation, the resultant output depends upon its variables, which require periodic recalibration for improved outcomes.

Electoral politics follows the same principle: parties must modify leadership, strategy and organisation according to changing circumstances. Dynastic parties, however, remain constrained by hereditary succession. Congress exemplifies this predicament, retaining the Gandhi family despite recurrent electoral reverses.

Even Priyanka Vadra's electoral ventures have failed to generate the anticipated transformation in State elections. Yet leadership renewal remains elusive. Conversely, the BJP possesses greater organisational flexibility, allowing leadership to change if electoral performance deteriorates.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

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A fourth way to end a war

US' move to economically isolate Iran won't be easy

Sridhar Krishnaswami



IRAN. One of the most sanctioned nations in the world VIA REUTERS

For a war that will soon be entering the seventh month that started with no known objectives or an end game, the Middle East is getting ready for yet another painful twist as Washington gets ready to unleash its "never before seen" economic campaign designed to bring the regime in Teheran to its knees. In what has been billed as the 'Economic Warfare" or 'Economic Fury", the Trump administration is looking to totally isolate Iran economically and this would include inflicting secondary sanctions on any country or institution giving the regime a breather of sorts.

The latest thinking in Washington is perhaps the fourth try to end a war on its terms. First came the massive bombings of Iran's nuclear sites and energy and infrastructure sites; that was closely coordinated by Israel's assassination of civilian and military leaderships; followed by the naval blockade of the waterways in and around the Strait of Hormuz. And now the fully economic punitive route that administration officials believe would make military campaigns unnecessary. And as before Tehran has warned nations against participating in what it calls "economic terrorism", a message to the neighbouring Gulf nations that have already been impacted in the ongoing conflict.

UNLIKE BEFORE

In the present circumstances, it may not be easy for Iran's leadership to brush off the latest American threats as something it has seen or endured before. Iran, along with North Korea, has been one of the most sanctioned nations in the world over the last five decades facing the economic and financial wrath of the US, UN and Europeans for a variety of reasons including on the human rights front. The fourth phase of the ongoing mess in the Middle East poses different and difficult challenges to the various actors.

For the leadership in Tehran, continuing to make the point verbally that it has played this sanctions game with the US since 1979 and has shown its resilience is going to be difficult as internal circumstances are quite different. The economic situation is pretty severe with inflation at around 65 per cent; the Ayatollahs along with the Revolutionary Guards have had to confront a determined and restive population protesting human rights abuses. Fobbing all these things off on external subversive elements and tightening the stranglehold could make things worse. For that matter appointing brutal crackdown managers anticipating unrest may be difficult to bring results this time around.

Washington too would have to realise isolating Iran on land, air and sea will undoubtedly be painful, but a fully successful operation would require cooperation of not just nations in the Middle East. For instance to impose a land blockade would require cooperation of countries bordering Iran like Iraq. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Armenia. No doubt China is said to take in nearly 80 per cent of Iran's oil, not all of which is direct but from smaller refineries that may not be within the reach of Washington or Beijing.

The Trump administration will get official relief from the Lindsey Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 100 per cent tariffs but only when the House of Representatives also passes the approved Senate version. As it is a few Democrats and Republicans in the chamber have expressed reservations. But imposing secondary sanctions against China is dicey as the last two years have shown that Beijing is not interested in playing soft. It has retaliated with sanctions of its own and escalated to prohibiting exports of the highly dependent rare earth minerals to the US. Also, with the much anticipated visit of President Xi Jinping, would Washington want to take the risk?

In all the talk of a new line of thinking on the war, the administration and Republicans have to be mindful of the Mid Term elections of November 3 where further spike in food and oil prices will impact lawmakers seeking re-election.

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

UPI — an eventful journey

LEAP FORWARD. 10 years on, UPI's success has been such that today it's the world's largest real-time payment system



SANJAY LOHIYA

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) began with a simple, yet ambitious idea, that sending money should be as easy as sending a message. Ten years later, it has grown into the largest real-time payment system anywhere in the world, one that has changed the way crores of Indians pay at a shop, settle a bill or send money home.

When UPI went live in 2016, digital payments were still at the margins of a largely cash-driven economy. The wider groundwork had, however, already been laid. The Digital India programme, launched in 2015, set the direction for a digitally connected economy. Jan Dhan expanded access to bank accounts, Aadhaar provided an identity layer, and mobile connectivity brought services closer to people. Today, India has more than 108 crore internet users, 130 crore mobile subscribers and 145 crore Aadhaar holders, while 58.97 crore Jan Dhan accounts, of which 32.86 crore are held by women, anchor financial inclusion. Over ₹52 lakh crore has been transferred to beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer. UPI added to this foundation the ability to move money instantly, and the results followed.

The numbers since then tell their own story. UPI processed two crore transactions in FY 2016-17. By FY 2025-26, this had risen to 24,162 crore transactions, with the value growing from ₹0.07 lakh crore to ₹314 lakh crore. In the first four months of FY 2026-27 alone, UPI has processed 9,192 crore transactions worth ₹118 lakh crore, including 2,366 crore transactions in July 2026. UPI today accounts for around 84 per cent of India's digital payment volumes and serves more than 55 crore active users.

SIZE OF PAYMENTS

What is equally telling is the size of these payments. Around 86 per cent of merchant transactions on UPI are below ₹500, as are nearly 59 per cent of person-to-person transfers. These are the small, everyday payments of ordinary households, the clearest evidence that digital payments have entered the daily economic life of the country rather than remaining confined to cities or to the well-off.

Indeed, the biggest certificate of UPI's success is the trust it enjoys among those living at the margins of society. A street vendor selling vegetables, or an auto driver at the end of a journey, accepts a payment through a QR code and simply moves on to the next customer, with quiet confidence that the money will reach him. When those who can least afford a failed payment repose such faith in the system, it says more about UPI than any statistic can.



HIGH POINT. UPI enjoys the trust among those living at the margins of society NAGARA GOPAL

The next phase must strengthen consumer awareness, grievance redressal and system resilience, so that the platform works equally well for a first-time user as it does for the digitally fluent

The shift has been most visible for the small merchant. Person-to-merchant payments accounted for 15,231 crore transactions in FY 2025-26, about 63 per cent of total UPI volume.

Payment acceptance points have grown from just 0.31 crore in March 2018 to more than 81 crore by June 2026, of which around 80 crore are simple QR codes. A printed QR code is now enough to connect a neighbourhood shop to the digital economy. Over time, the transaction record so created can also help a small business demonstrate its cash flows and access formal credit, an opportunity that extends well beyond the payment itself.

ROBUST ECOSYSTEM

The Government's role has been to build and strengthen the underlying ecosystem, while banks and fintech companies innovate on top of it. The DIGIDHAN Mission, launched in 2017, promoted adoption across the country. The RBI's Payment Infrastructure Development Fund has supported acceptance infrastructure in Tier-3 to Tier-6 centres, the North-Eastern States and Union Territories. Because UPI was built as an interoperable rail rather than a closed product, a customer on one app can pay a merchant on another, and new services can be built without creating the plumbing afresh each time.

India's experience is now travelling. The International Monetary Fund has recognised UPI as the world's largest retail fast payment system by volume, and India accounts for nearly half of global real-time payment transactions. UPI is operational in 11 countries, including the UAE, France, Singapore, Nepal and Sri Lanka, while agreements for UPI-like systems have been signed with Peru, Namibia and Trinidad and Tobago. Countries building their own digital public infrastructure are studying what India has done.

LOOKING AHEAD

The way forward lies in deepening trust as much as expanding usage. UPI already incorporates device binding, PIN-based two-factor authentication and transaction limits, and banks are deploying AI-based tools to detect suspicious transactions.

The next phase must strengthen consumer awareness, grievance redressal and system resilience, so that the platform works equally well for a first-time user as it does for the digitally fluent. Equally, the payment relationship should become a gateway to credit, savings and insurance for those who have so far faced the highest barriers to formal finance; the building blocks of our collective vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

As UPI enters its second decade, what began as a payment system has evolved into public digital infrastructure on which an entire ecosystem now stands. Its legacy is clear, it has made participation in the formal economy a matter of a few seconds on a phone. The road ahead is to ensure that this rail carries not just payments, but the fuller financial journey of every Indian.

The writer is Secretary, DFS

EU's curbs threaten Chinese exports

Bloomberg News

The European Union's existing and proposed trade measures against China could cover about 27 per cent of its annual nominal exports to the bloc, according to Goldman Sachs Group Inc., showing the stakes involved in the stand-off between the two economies.

The range of the EU's curbs "does not translate directly to export loss, with actual impact contingent on final policy specifics and implementation," Goldman economists Xinquan Chen and Chelsea Song said in a report Sunday. "Broader restrictions would threaten China's market-share gains, though cost competitiveness, leverage in critical materials and Europe's commercial interests should cushion the impact." While ties with the US have stabilised after last year's tariff war, Beijing's stand-off with Brussels is intensifying ahead of an October deadline to address record trade imbalances that EU leaders have increasingly cast as a strategic challenge.



TRADE. Beijing's stand-off with Brussels is intensifying VIA REUTERS

With the bloc absorbing 15 per cent of China's sales abroad last year and shipments on the rise in recent months, "this has become a growing policy risk for China's export outlook," Goldman's economists said. Among the EU's main new proposals are fresh tariffs on plug-in hybrids, according to Goldman. What's more, an extension of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, or CBAM, "represents a major escalation, with China facing the largest exposure," the economists said.

While warning of a "downside risk" to China's export outlook from its trade frictions with the EU, Goldman's economists are relatively sanguine about the dangers ahead.

China's cost advantages and improvements in product quality "remain a significant buffer," they said.

On businessline.in

10 years of UPI: From a payment tool to India's economic spine

UPI succeeded because it combined ambition with simplicity, technology with policy, competition with collaboration and innovation with trust, says **Rama Mohan Rao Amara**

https://tinyurl.com/2tjm3pu6

The foundation of India's digital economy

UPI has done more for financial inclusion than any other product and changed the texture of daily life, points out **Ashok Chandra**

https://tinyurl.com/yeynnvaf

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 25, 2006

VSNL cuts bandwidth prices

Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd (VSNL) has announced up to 40 per cent cut in prices for its international bandwidth services. In a move that will benefit BPOs and call centres, the Tata Group company has reduced the prices of international private leased circuits (IPLC) up to 25 per cent and Internet leased lines (ILL) up to 40 per cent with effect from September 1.

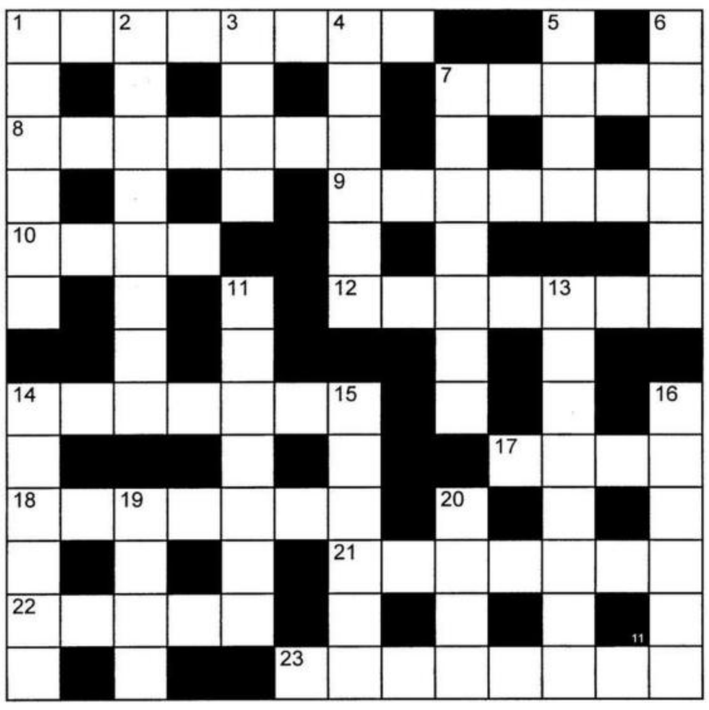
Bharti inks $1-b network expansion deal with Ericsson

Bharti Airtel today announced the signing of a $1-billion network expansion contract with Swedish gear manufacturer Ericsson. The three-year service contract with Ericsson will include design, planning, supply and installation commissioning of Airtel networks in 15 circles.

Move to amend textile labour laws

The Union Textile Minister, Mr Shankarsinh Vaghela, today said the Government would take a decision to amend the labour laws in the textile industry by the end of this calendar year as discussions with all the stakeholders have been launched. The Minister said the reforms would cover flexibility to textile exporting units in hiring of labour.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2721



EASY

ACROSS

1. Crop succession in order (8)
7. Signified (5)
8. A call to appear in court (7)
9. A plant's climbing organ (7)
10. She-child (4)
12. Reworded, edited (7)
14. From which something can be made (7)
17. Actual existence (4)
18. Female deity (7)
21. Be a nuisance (7)
22. Distinguishing characteristic (5)
23. Offensive self-satisfaction (8)

DOWN

1. Submit (oneself) calmly (8)
2. Pink and white flowering shrub (8)
3. Weight system for precious stones (4)
4. Secretive person; shellfish (6)
5. A brace (4)
6. Unemotional, blockish (6)
7. Ermine in winter white fur (7)
11. A fight, competition (7)
13. Level-headed (8)
14. Valiant, strong (6)
15. Things considered as a connected whole (6)
16. Bars used for prising (6)
19. Hand out cards (4)
20. Music with words (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. The turning round of the duty list into this form (8)
7. Average start of temptation is intentional (5)
8. Amid her boys, Mum might get a call to go to court (7)
9. Let rind provide the means by which a plant can climb (7)
10. She has an American private on each hand (4)
12. Around the East various divers went over the work done (7)
14. A future possibility for the manufacture of sulphur (7)
17. Existence may go to and fro (4)
18. She is worshipped by little Desmond in the gallery (7)
21. Sort of blue rot that causes bother (7)
22. A characteristic feature of the rat upset by it (5)
23. Such complacency as guns made mess of (8)

DOWN

1. How one might relinquish post to singer (6)
2. Ask a trim shrub be planted out (8)
3. Siege place boy from 18 would ruin... (4)
4. ... or initially leave that for the shellfish (6)
5. Two appear in one rap version of it (4)
6. It's old and somehow impassive (6)
7. One in a kind of vermin that has white fur (7)
11. Study a trial in competition (7)
13. Is aware of something, being reasonable (8)
14. Being powerful, could possibly be before the end of January (6)
15. A way of organising a group of heavenly bodies (6)
16. Bars able to turn out such revels (6)
19. Do some business in timber (4)
20. Make a fuss about this, and dance (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2720

ACROSS 7. Featherweight 8. Ostentation 12. Straws 14. Seabed 16. Locker 18. Kettle 19. Double-entry 23. Condescending

DOWN 1. Hero 2. Stet 3. Tennis 4. Swears 5. Titi 6. Shin 9. Sirocco 10. Orbiter 11. Edge 12. Salt 13. Woe 15. Eke 17. Relish 18. Keeper 19. Doom 20. Urdu 21. Tide 22. Yank

A ND-NDE



A thought for today

There are no great limits to growth because there are no limits of human intelligence, imagination, and wonder

RONALD REAGAN

Spendonomics

That India could've world's second-largest big-spending population by 2036 is good news on more than one front

In just 10 years, India could be home to world's second-largest population of "affluent" consumers, per a new NielsenIQ-World Data Lab report. US would still be first by an enormous margin, but India, on its current growth trajectory, will edge past China. That's great news. But, some may ask, how will this come about, given China's GDP is about 5x India's, in nominal terms. India's lower cost of living – relatively cheaper goods and services – would be key to this miracle. While Nielsen-WDL considers people spending over $90 a day in US as affluent, in India, a daily expenditure of ₹1,800, or ₹54,000 a month, amounts to the same in purchasing power parity terms – this is the correct measure to compare economic data between countries. And the projection is that some 10.8cr Indians will be in a position to spend at least that much regularly. But only 10.3cr Chinese would have daily spending power equivalent to $90 in yuan, by 2036.

What this really means is that a consumption boom lies ahead.



Flights, hotels, cars, appliances, eating out – sales will move into a higher gear all around. And because private consumption is the biggest driver of India's GDP, it is possible that economic growth will average more than the 7-odd percent it's done in recent years. The Nielsen-WDL report isn't the only one bullish on India. In 2024, a Goldman Sachs analysis predicted 10cr affluent Indians by 2027. Of course, its measure of "affluence" appears different at first – annual income of around $10,000 in nominal exchange terms. But earning ₹9.5L or spending ₹6.6L per year aren't such disparate measures. After all, affluent people also save. Goldman's confidence arose from the fact that this class had been growing at 12-13% per annum since 2019, and had already touched 6cr in 2023. So, Nielsen-WDL's 10.8cr projection actually seems like a very conservative estimate of India's future affluent class.

Time will tell how fast India becomes affluent. But the groundwork for it can't be left to time. Since we're talking about a consumption boom, domestic manufacturers must start thinking about premium demand. Otherwise, MNCs will walk away with it. Besides, the Nielsen-WDL report estimates the global affluent class growing by 37cr in the next 10 years. That's an enormous new market for Indian brands to tap. China became the world's factory, but Japanese, American and German brands still have stronger recall. Indian industry should also aim to acquire cachet. Capex is needed for that, but investments in R&D are even more important.

On Their Markaz

Jaish HQ, destroyed by IAF, was rebuilt with Islamabad support. Terrorism remains Pakistan's core policy

It should surprise no one that Jaish-e-Mohammed's Markaz Subhanallah in Pakistan's Bahawalpur has been fully restored. The terror outfit's headquarters had been taken out by Indian Air Force during last year's Op Sindoor. But intelligence reports show Pakistan's federal and provincial govts channelled funds for the reconstruction and repair of the facility, which essentially served as a terror training school. Terrorists who took part in the 2019 Pulwama terror attack, had trained at this facility. Goes without saying, the Indian security establishment will be watching the Markaz compound closely.



JeM has a history of high-profile terror strikes against India, most notably the 2001 Parliament terror attack. The destruction of the Bahawalpur Markaz was a big blow to the group. JeM may again be plotting something nasty. But the larger point here is that the Pakistani state continues to actively support anti-India terror groups like JeM, as part of its asymmetric strategy against New Delhi. And under Pak army chief Asim Munir, this strategy has hardened. Plus, Pakistan is now trying to play a clever geopolitical game by signing up to the Mecca Defence Pact with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, and serving as an interlocutor in talks between US and Iran – Munir was in Tehran yesterday. Islamabad feels these moves will give it enough diplomatic and security cover to deter another Sindoor.

But, Pakistan is still a basket case. It recently asked US for $10bn in lieu of its mediation role in Iran war. This should make ordinary Pakistanis livid – their govt keeps borrowing funds it can't afford, and then channels part of this money to terror outfits. Pak politicians have long been robbed of agency by the military-ISI complex. So, it's clear that Pakistan will continue to use terrorism as an instrument of state policy. But Islamabad, Rawalpindi GHQ, and Bahawalpur should know that India reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force to any act of terror.

Sense & Sine Theta

Is schooling really angled towards education?

Anil Abraham



"My Instagram feed is filled with reels of people being schooled," Kamala announced as she leaned over to show me endless videos where parents and students documented shabby crowded classrooms, leaking roofs, and filthy school toilets. "Were things as bad in our days?" I asked, and promptly began a sepia flashback to schooldays in the sixties.

My sons got up and left the living room, muttering under their breath about boomers and their unbelievable tales of crossing rivers and climbing mountains just to reach school. Of course I followed them out of the room. Because like all old uncles, I hate to leave a story unfinished. Or stories.

My maths teacher lovingly taught us Sine Theta and Cos Theta, but not how to calculate GST, or why crores should lie in fixed deposits while school buildings fall apart. None of the history that Mr Hanumanthappa taught us in dreary classes, explained why the Mughals are still the hottest topic of discussion. None of the geography classes gave us clarity on why people from Northeast would be called racist slurs, while a line drawn on a map by Radcliffe would persist as a constant source of friction between neighbours sharing the same history. None of the language classes taught us to respect people who were attempting to speak a language new to them in a state also new to them. None of the biology classes had explained gender and none of the English classes had explained pronouns the way these are used today.

Mark Twain supposedly said that he never let schooling interfere with his education. But for many, it does. They really need both schools and what is taught inside them to undergo a lot of correction. For once my sons nodded, either because they agreed, or in the hope that the old man would stop taking a class. As we sat down for our midday meal at home, there was general agreement that what was force-fed mattered both in schools and on our feeds. The ability to sift reel from reality, propaganda from perspective, and bias from balderdash has to be learned outside the classroom. Just then, I saw out of the window that Neighbour Narasimha was dumping his construction waste outside our gate. He may have attended every class on civics but missed the one on Civic Sense.

The Strain Of Hormuz

US-Iran war will linger because neither party can trust the other. Plus, Netanyahu doesn't want the war to end. What's the way out? New govts in all three countries

Neeraj Kaushal



Professor of Social Policy

Get ready for a prolonged conflict in West Asia. Do not expect a decisive or rapid end to the war that US and Israel brought to Iran, six months ago. It could continue for another six months, a year, or even longer. The conflict is already shifting from an all-out war towards a low-intensity confrontation, marked by intermittent strikes, naval confrontations, cyberattacks, pressure on shipping, tighter sanctions, temporary ceasefires, and repeated but unsuccessful negotiations.

Both Washington and Tehran want to end the war. Trump's need to end the war is largely political, Tehran's largely economic. With US due for midterm elections in about two months, Trump is facing an angry electorate, because the war has increased the price of gasoline 37% and of diesel 45% in US. He is desperate to end the war and claim a victory before the midterm polls. Washington is also running out of its high-end precision and air-defence missiles.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, who is the head of Iran's executive branch, has called for an end to the war, to minimise damage to Iranian economy and military capability. He says Iran should end the war now, when it is in "a position of power and dignity". Pezeshkian is not simply bragging. The war, despite its devastating impact on Iran's infra, economy, and military, has made Iran look stronger, and at the same time, created sympathy for its people, and left its leaders with more options than when the war first began.

So, if both US and Iran want to end the war, what is the problem? There are many. Neither side trusts the other. Both think that the other has more to lose from the continuation of war and, therefore, will cave in faster. Washington believes Iran has been weakened sufficiently to demand more; Tehran believes it has survived the military campaign sufficiently well that it should not surrender its remaining leverage. The destruction caused by the war has, therefore, not increased the probability of a settlement.

Iran's hardline leaders are less enamoured with diplomacy. Their distrust of US and Israel is much deeper. They fear their adversaries – Washington and Tel Aviv – are preparing for a bigger war, and that the negotiations are just to buy time, and bring short-term relief in the global economy.

Israel, the third major actor, makes this problem substantially more complicated. Its interests are not similar to those of Washington. Netanyahu is facing a parliamentary election in Oct. Israeli voters will consider an end to the war without a decisive end to Iran's nuclear capabilities a setback for Israel; it would portray Netanyahu as a weaker PM. His principal concern is Iran's long-term ability to threaten it through nuclear capabilities, ballistic missiles, and regional military networks.



STRAIT OF HORMUZ

When US and Israel attacked Iran, six months ago, they were most determined and confident of ousting the Iranian regime, destroying its nuclear facilities, and killing the nuclear programme. The war has damaged Iranian economy severely and weakened it militarily without completely ending Iran's capability of building its nuclear programme again.

The war has given Iran an extraordinary weapon: control over Strait of Hormuz, through which flows a fifth of the oil and gas to the rest of the world, and a substantial amount of food and other imports to Gulf countries. It is a more potent and practical weapon to fight Washington and Tel Aviv than the threat of a nuclear weapon.

The 60-day ceasefire of the war ended last week, without any tangible outcome. It now appears the war is in a low-intensity, autopilot mode: when negotiations fail and various sides start attacking each other; when bombing does not yield anything, talks resume.

Washington and Tehran primarily disagree over the terms on which the war should end. But the deeper obstacle is the commitment problem. Suppose US and Iran reach an agreement. Iran agrees to strict nuclear restrictions, limits missile production, permits international inspections, and reopens Hormuz. In exchange, Washington lifts sanctions, reduces its military presence, and provides security assurances. The problem is what happens afterwards.

Once Iran has surrendered some of its nuclear, missile, and economic leverage, it becomes more vulnerable. Tehran can reasonably fear US and Israel will have less incentive to honour their commitments, once Iran has complied. Washington and Tel Aviv, conversely, can fear that once sanctions are lifted, and military pressure is reduced, Tehran will gradually rebuild the very nuclear capabilities the war was intended to destroy, as well as its control over Hormuz.

Washington cannot credibly guarantee that Israel will not resume military action even if Iran complies with the agreement. Indeed, Netanyahu has hinted several times that Israel is willing to go it alone. Therefore, Iran fears US and Israel will attack after it disarms. Israel fears that Iran will rebuild after US reduces pressure. US fears that either side will undermine an agreement once American leverage is reduced.

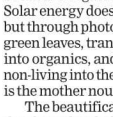
Frankly, we need a different set of actors in all three countries to contemplate change, bring trust and move towards peace.

The writer teaches at Columbia University

Yes, Sugar Is Pricier. No, Ethanol Isn't The Villain

Crop damage because of excessive rainfall, waterlogging, and disease has meant a nearly 11% cut in estimated production for 2025-26. Festival demand and firm global prices are adding pressure

Ramesh Chand



Sugar prices in India have risen sharply in recent months, after remaining relatively stable for several years even as sugarcane production expanded. But this needs to be understood in the context of overall balance in the sugar economy, rather than through the lens of ethanol alone.

The current price rise's immediate trigger has been a much tighter-than-expected supply position, following a significant downward revision in sugar production. Crop damage associated with excessive rainfall, waterlogging, and diseases such as red rot and top borer, has affected important producing areas. Firm international prices and stronger domestic demand ahead of the festival season have added to the pressure. Latest estimate puts 2025-26 sugar production at about 30.6mn tonnes, compared with the initial estimate of 34.3mn tonnes.

India's ethanol programme gained importance after a substantial increase in sugar production created recurring surpluses. Sugar production rose from about 20.3mn tonnes in 2016-17 to more than 32mn tonnes in 2017-18 and 33mn tonnes in 2018-19, well above domestic consumption at the time. With domestic sugar prices generally higher than international prices, exporting the surplus was not always commercially attractive.

Use of sugarcane derivatives for ethanol provided an additional and flexible outlet. From 2018-19, mills were permitted to use B-heavy molasses and sugarcane juice or syrup for ethanol production. This represented an important structural change in the sugar industry.

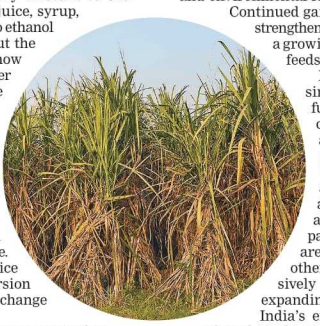
Ethanol allowed mills to adjust the allocation of cane between sugar and fuel according to market conditions. In years of abundant cane and high sugar production, greater diversion to ethanol could prevent excessive accumulation of sugar. This helped diversify mills' revenues, improve their financial viability, and strengthen their ability to make timely payments to cane farmers.

The scale of diversion subsequently increased. According to Department of Food and Public Distribution, 43L tonnes of sugar were diverted to ethanol in 2022-23, 24L tonnes in 2023-24, and 34L tonnes in 2024-25. Meaning, diversion hasn't simply risen year after year. Instead, it's broadly responded to the prevailing sugar balance – providing an alternative market for cane when sugar production is likely to exceed domestic requirements, while allowing the balance to shift towards sugar when supplies are tighter.

The present situation is fundamentally different from surplus years. Initial assessments for the 2025-26 crop were favourable, but subsequent weather damage and disease affected cane yields and sugar recovery. Resulting revision of production of nearly 11% couldn't have been anticipated well in advance.

This is the central reason for the current price spike. Market is also factoring in El Nino effect on sugarcane output in 2026-27.

Ethanol diversion is certainly relevant to the calculation because sugarcane juice, syrup, and B-heavy molasses that go into ethanol would otherwise yield sugar. But the correct question isn't simply how much sugar is diverted. It's whether the total sugar available is adequate relative to domestic consumption and stocks.



Indeed, official data indicate the share of sugar diverted to ethanol has declined from around 11.5% in 2022-23 and 11% in 2024-25 to about 9% in 2025-26, while nearly three-fourths of India's ethanol is now produced from grain feedstocks, particularly maize. Thus, attributing the recent price spike principally to ethanol diversion doesn't adequately explain the change in the sugar balance.

Last several years' experience suggests that ethanol has been an important stabilising element in the sugar economy. It's supported the financial health of mills, strengthened their capacity to pay cane farmers, reduced dependence on imported crude oil, and contributed to renewable-energy and emissions objectives.

Going forward, what's needed is to develop a more diversified and evidence-based biofuel strategy and roadmap. Our long-term objective should be to expand ethanol production, without competing with food requirements, or putting additional pressure on scarce natural resources. Feedstock choices should reflect not merely the immediate availability of grain but also their long-term implications, for food security and agri sustainability.

Maize deserves particular attention. Its potential lies not merely in current availability but in the possibility of expanding production through crop diversification and better use of rice-fallow land. In north-western India, replacing a part of water-intensive paddy cultivation with maize can help agri diversification. In eastern India, particularly Bihar and adjoining areas, its expansion on suitable rice-fallow land can increase production without necessarily displacing major food crops.

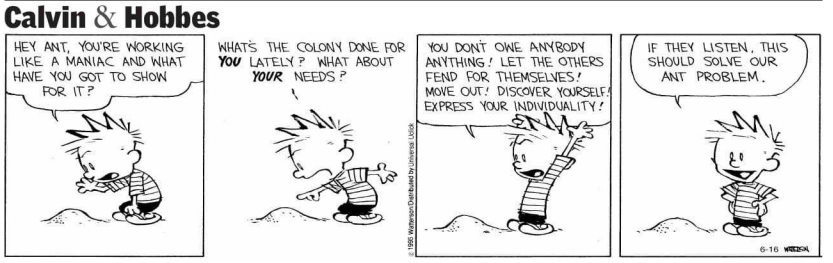
Maize also offers an opportunity to improve the water and environmental footprint of ethanol feedstock. Continued gains in maize productivity can strengthen its competitiveness and provide a growing domestic source of ethanol feedstock.

Rice-based ethanol should similarly be evaluated basis its full economic and environmental cost, from water requirements and emissions to the cost of govt-held stocks. Economic cost of rice as ethanol feedstock is 50% higher than cost of maize at MSP. Sugarcane can provide a flexible source of ethanol, particularly when sugar supplies are abundant, while maize and other grain feedstocks can progressively take a larger share of the expanding ethanol market.

India's experience demonstrates that ethanol can be an important component of the sugar economy rather than simply a competing user of sugarcane. The current sugar-price episode underlines the need for better production forecasting, timely assessment of the sugar balance, and diversification of ethanol feedstocks. Such an approach can preserve the economic benefits of ethanol while ensuring that food availability, prices, and agri sustainability remain central to India's biofuel strategy.

The writer is professor, ICRIER, and former member NITI Aayog. Views are personal

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



When each day is the same as the next, it's because people fail to recognise the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises.

Paulo Coelho

Sun's Spirit Reverberates Within Biosphere

Vir Singh

Phyllosphere, the aerial part, especially the leafy portion, or crown of a plant in a microbiological sense, is the most fascinating tiny part of our biosphere. The biosphere of the Earth is largely attributable to the phyllosphere. Living organisms in the biosphere depend on solar energy converted into living energy, the biochemical energy. It is ultimately the sunlight that nourishes our souls through biochemical energy bonded in organic matter – our food. Solar energy does not nourish us directly but through photosynthesis. Comprising green leaves, transforming inorganics into organics, and transcending the non-living into the living, the phyllosphere is the mother nourishing all.

The beautification of the living planet thanks to the phyllosphere has been a joyful trajectory of biological evolution. The simultaneous evolution of the anthosphere, the flowering part within a phyllosphere, enhanced the planet's beauty. The anthosphere led to the evolution of the carposphere, fruits, within the phyllosphere, which nourished the very 'nourishment-evolution-nourishment' cycle in the biosphere. If the biosphere is a body, the phyllosphere is its spirit.

Phyllosphere also serves as the largest and pretty peculiar habitat for a variety of hyperdiverse communities of microorganisms, viruses, bacteria, microalgae, protozoa, and fungi. The invisible microbial life inhabiting the phyllosphere is more intriguing than the visible life of large organisms, playing a significant role that enables the phyllosphere to perform life-enhancing functions, including conserving biodiversity, maintaining ecological integrity, and regulating the climate cycle. Apart from the invisible microorganisms, the phyllosphere is also a healthy home for a diverse array of colourful insects, including enchanting butterflies, that function as pollinators, enabling innumerable plants to bear seeds and fruits and holding nature in sound health, vibrancy, and sustainability.

A green leaf – the unit of the phyllosphere – is the most wonderful structure on the planet, for it is the only source empowered to transform light into life – through photosynthesis. It is the only living structure that splits water into oxygen. It is the only structure endowed with the power to transform inorganic carbon into organics. It is the only living organ that prepares food for all animals, microorganisms, and entire humanity. An assemblage of the green leaves, the phyllosphere, mitigates environmental pollution, creates ecological balance, and regulates the water cycle and climate.

THE SPEAKING TREE

A leaf is not as simple as it looks. The diversity of leaves corresponds to the species and genetic diversity of all plants. An understanding of the structure, anatomy, physiology, energy budget, and overall functioning of a leaf leads us to wisdom we can call phyllosophy, Greek: Phyllon, meaning leaf; Sophia, meaning wisdom. Photosynthesis, in essence, is the creation of life, and a leaf actively engaged in photosynthesis ecstatically creates life. By creating a bridge between the inorganic cosmos and the organic biosphere, a leaf assumes a universal role, symbolising the Earth's power to combat cosmic entropy.

The phyllosphere provides a soothing environment for fortifying creative thoughts and attaining meditation. Vedas, Upanishads, great epics, eternal poetry, dramas, and other works of literature, have been created in the benevolent and creativity-inducing shadows of the phyllosphere. To strike an ecological balance, maintain environmental sanity, preserve and enhance the beauty of Mother Earth, and uphold the sanctity of life. It is our duty to protect, conserve, and expand the phyllosphere. It is not only necessary but imperative for our life.

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Open up space, with caution

India can accelerate privatisation of the space economy by allowing easier talent mobility

Space has, even before *Star Trek* made the phrase popular, always been the final frontier. Exploring the unknown has come to mark not just a country's scientific ambitions, but also become a measure of its industrial capabilities, something that marks its technological, economic, and geopolitical dominance. The US and Russia engaged in an intense competition over space in the 1960s, and it can be argued that the former's victory in it — with the moon landing — heralded its arrival as a technology leader, something that holds true even today.

India, an impressive contender in space-tech, thanks to ISRO's remarkable strides, now faces the challenge of building on its competence in delivering high-value space-tech on much smaller budgets than the US and China, its two main rivals (Russia has fallen back). PM Narendra Modi's exhortation to private space-sector players during an interaction on Friday, to position India as a global space-tech hub recognises this.

India began pivoting towards greater private sector participation some years ago, with ISRO passing on technology. The successful launch of India's first private orbital carrier, Skyroot's Vikram-I, shows maintaining momentum, let alone increasing it, requires greater private sector participation. Two considerations point at this. One is the State-run programme's *raison d'être* at this stage of India's space sector evolution. Space exploration, where commercial value may not be immediately apparent, needs the State's reserves, and splitting these reserves with the space-applications side may not be the optimal use of public funds. The US understood this decades ago. And greater private sector participation can unlock more value, faster, which can also reward the public sector: Private firms developing reusable rockets and landers can help ISRO, too. They can also raise private money more efficiently.

India can accelerate the process by lifting restrictions on talent mobility. Global space-tech talent should see value and ease in setting up shop in India, even as domestically nurtured talent is not shackled. While constraints on capital have been loosened to a great degree in some areas, further easing can be considered after careful balancing against strategic concerns. Most importantly, competition needs to thrive. Real and effective monopolies and duopolies don't help India's long-term vision in any sector. The formula is old, but it merits repetition — especially since it can ensure a commanding position for India in the space economy.

Public health work must go beyond advisories

As swine flu cases rise in the national capital, the administration has advised people to wear masks in crowded places, wash hands frequently, avoid contact with anyone who appears to be infected, and consult a doctor if they develop flu-like symptoms. Such advice may be useful, but the larger question remains unanswered. In cities defined by density — where people live, study, work, commute, shop, and socialise in closely packed spaces — can close contact among residents realistically be limited to control the spread of infections? One could argue that physical distancing was an important part of the Covid-19 containment strategy, but that was a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic needing extraordinary measures, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, alongside masking, testing and other interventions. Influenza A (H1N1), by contrast, is a seasonal viral circulation that public-health systems should routinely manage. Annual flu shots can prevent outbreaks (and boost herd immunity), but they are expensive, with the cheapest costing around ₹1,000. The government could consider vaccinating at least frontline health care and sanitation workers, though.

The challenge is also one of India's urban governance. Overheated spaces, flooded and potholed streets, overflowing drains turning into vector-breeding sites, and toxic winter smog are treated as seasonal woes. Density isn't something governments can control, but ensuring that growing populations are adequately served certainly is. Urban built environments can be dense, and still be managed for public well-being.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed entrenched health inequities in India. To address these, our cities need guaranteed access to primary care and testing in every neighbourhood. Markets, public transport systems and other crowded spaces need practical infection-control protocols, activated when outbreaks occur. Severely compromised public hygiene needs stronger municipal systems, better housekeeping, and greater public participation. Mere advisories that place the onus on the population can't be the only government action

Can AI clean India's air? Only with the basics right

AI-driven air quality management systems can enable faster, better decision-making, provided they are secure, safe, and genuinely tailored to end-users' requirements



Air quality is a national problem. AI models and applications to better manage it should be considered a priority. HT ARCHIVE



Arunabha Ghosh



Mohammad Rafiuddin

In a little over two months, winter will descend on the Indo-Gangetic Plain, and with it, the familiar smog. For over three crore people in Delhi-NCR, this means tracking the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) directives of the Commission for Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas (CAQM), and planning their activities. The CAQM will rely on the Air Quality Early Warning System's (AQEWS) forecasts to decide which stage of GRAP to impose.

The AQEWS is remarkably accurate. According to a study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), it can predict days with air quality index (AQI) of 300 and above with over 80% accuracy. A series of crises — the Great Smog of 2016, the pollution episodes of 2017, the deadly dust storms of 2018 — gave birth to this system. Today, seven other cities beyond Delhi have their own AQEWS: Pune, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Jaipur.

Crises gave us a generation of digital air quality management tools. The current spring of artificial intelligence (AI) offers newer, better ones. But we must tread with caution. How these AI-enabled systems are designed, used, and funded will determine whether they become a long-term paradigm shift or end up in the graveyard of obsolete technology.

First, adopt AI-driven air quality decision support systems (AQDSS) and incorporate end-user feedback from day one. Air quality data comes from monitoring stations, models and forecasts, low-cost sensors, emission inventories and custom surveys. Gathering it on a single platform, analysing it, and drawing actionable insights is challenging. Traditional decision support systems such as the AQEWS simplify these tasks, but still require skilled personnel to navigate them and convert data into action.

Such AI-enabled systems bring air quality managers closer to action by eliminating complex intermediate steps. Through simple natural language queries — like one would type on a mobile phone — managers can ask for insights while the AI runs complicated analytical tasks in the background, presenting only what matters. But involving the end user in system design must be non-negotiable. A CEEW study found that even well-designed decision support systems could fail if they do not account for how end-users engage with them. Regular feedback from decision-makers ensures systems are designed around their actual requirements.

IIT Gandhinagar and CEEW recently developed a forthcoming AI application called VayuChat that integrates data from over 300 low-cost air quality sensors installed at construction sites in Thane, Maharashtra, and helps the municipal corporation identify sites that exceed pollution thresholds or fail to relay data. The system incorporated feedback from officials in the mockup stage itself. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's collaboration with IIT Kanpur on an AI-enabled decision-support system that draws real-time insights from 75 sensors across Mumbai is another good model of end-user collaboration.

Second, build capacity to use AI-driven systems well and to intervene when they go wrong. Replacing traditional DSS with AI does not eliminate the need for capacity-building. The quality of output depends on the clarity and depth of the user's questions. Personnel still need a deep understanding of air quality and training on feeding effective prompts. These systems are not foolproof either. If a system meant to monitor 5,000 construction sites daily has an error rate of even 1%, it would flag 50 sites as problematic when they are not. Having humans in the loop who can judge AI output and make final decisions is essential. Agencies adopting AI-powered systems must ensure adequately trained personnel are in place before widespread deployment.

Third, ensure these systems are secure and invest in local AI models and applications. Air quality management involves sensitive data that could relate to government finances, enforcement patterns, and compliance histories. Such data should be analysed locally using offline AI models and not transmitted to external data centres. Security aside, bespoke offline models will also liberate government organisations from the usage constraints that come with online models. The best AI models available today have been developed abroad and carry risks of restrictions, such as the recent US export ban on Anthropic's advanced models. This calls for developing cutting-edge indigenous models. That also carries a risk of failure, and government bodies should have an appetite for it by supporting research institutes and start-ups developing better models and applications.

The Centre's IndiaAI Mission is an encouraging step in the right direction. With an outlay of over $1 billion and 38,000 GPUs, it aims to de-risk the development of innovative applications across agriculture, health care, weather forecasting and governance — all domains closely linked to air quality. With a comprehensive plan that includes indigenous AI models, hosting innovative datasets, upskilling programmes, and access to computational resources, the mission aims to position India as an AI leader by 2035, the year AI is expected to add $1.7 trillion to India's economy. The third phase of the mission, between 2027 and 2029, aims to roll out pilot projects in high-readiness sectors to test AI solutions in real-world settings. Air quality is a national problem. AI models and applications to better manage it should be considered a priority in this phase.

AI-driven AQ management systems can enable faster, better decision-making, provided they are secure, safe, and genuinely tailored to end-users' requirements. Without attention to these factors, even the best systems could end up unused. The air we breathe deserves better.

Arunabha Ghosh is CEO, the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), member, Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), and chair, AI and Climate Expert Group for the India AI Impact Summit. Mohammad Rafiuddin is programme lead at CEEW. The views expressed are personal

WILL RAIDS MAKE OUR FOOD SAFER?

{ PUSHPESH PANT } ACADEMIC

Strict enforcement cannot bridge institutional gaps

Crusaders are built and scapegoats are found, swiftly punished even as institutional problems linger



Tukaram Mundhe is the latest knight in shining armour to have emerged — the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) chief has struck terror in the hearts of Mumbai restaurants, many of which may have relegated the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and its regional representatives to the taxidermist's table as a toothless, long-dead tiger.

MNCs and Indian food joints alike are scurrying for cover; many, generally considered reputable, are shell-shocked to find licences suspended for months after inspections. Mundhe has even cracked down on sellers of food commodities sold loose that are especially prone to adulteration.

Why, then, is this saviour not being greeted with grateful hosannas but causing chills to run down many spines across the country? It doesn't require rocket science to unravel the mystery. Enforcement, over the past few years, has become synonymous with bureaucratic overreach, almost bulldozing in nature. And there has been an incomprehensible reluctance from the judiciary to keep this in check. In such a scenario, the material and reputational damage incurred by the targeted party has often been irreparable.

Two sayings sum things up here, the one about good intentions paving the path to hell and TS Eliot's poetic observation about the shadow falling between conception and creation (execution, in the bureaucratic context). Both the FSSAI and, now, the Maharashtra FDA seem unaware of adages and poetic warnings.

There was a time when the FSSAI had aroused hopes that it will partner with street food vendors and small eateries to help them adopt best practices in handling and producing food hygienically, and leverage standards to prosper. The authority spent much energy making consumers aware of the significance of labels and packaging, statutory warnings, and expiry dates.

But it wasn't long before the fine print became so small that no one would willingly squint to read it. Word wizardry did the rest. Sugar-free, zero transfats, nature identical, etc, could confuse even the experts when numbers from some technical list followed in parentheses.

The Bombay High Court has, according to reports, rapped Mundhe lightly on the knuckles for suspending the licences of parties that had registered 98% compliance. But will this admonishment be enough to rein in other Don Quixotes (individuals and institutions alike)?

Some harsh realities certainly can't be wished away. Can compliances be ensured with multiple enforcement agencies exercising their jurisdiction in the same space — to illustrate, municipal and other licensing authorities and beat police constables who look the other way with a wink after some grease money has been received? These now operate a complex web of relationships premised on a crude understanding of the "live and let live" principle that can't be undone overnight.

India is a country where the majority survives on natural immunity acquired to withstand the microbes in tap water, often due to the confluence of sewage-pipe contents and treated water deemed fit for human consumption.

It is the same for adulterated food grains and oils. Hoarding and black marketing have proved impossible to exterminate. Pathogens have become drug-resistant. It is definitely not the optimal condition, but can we really beat the virus?

The punishment prescribed by law is mandatory, but conviction needs much rigour to earn. So, the process is often made the punishment. Food safety and standards laws, like many other pieces of legislation, are meant to deliver public good but can also be weaponised by governments against political opponents. After decades-long deep slumber, authorities may, one day (sometimes close to a scheduled electoral battle) wake up and discover that offenders have violated fire- or food-safety norms. Those who suffer are often the small fry, not the sharks. At such times, partisan, even sectarian, patronage could undermine the governance intent of enforcement.

Returning to the sale and purchase of loose food commodities — and keeping aside the question of adulteration for a moment — this is certainly not a choice. The poor have almost no other option to turn to. But the government and authorities need to act and, more importantly for them, be seen to have acted to safeguard public interests.

So, crusaders are built and scapegoats are found, swiftly punished even as institutional problems linger. And in present times, the problem has become even more challenging — no one knows what happens when tech-savvy producers collaborate with aggregator platforms and sell us sub-par food.

Pushpesh Pant is an academic, writer and food-critic. The views expressed are personal

HT DEBATE

{ OP SINGH } FORMER IPS OFFICER

Activist officers are fine, but steady action brings change

Holding a post is itself a professional skill, and it can be practised or neglected like any other



I was in Mumbai recently to watch a friend take his company public. He began in 2008 and built something India used to import: the propulsion system of a railway engine. That evening, we dined at one of the city's famous hotels. The food was stale. The reason may have been anything — a slow evening, a careless hand. I make no accusation. But my own reaction surprised me: I silently thanked Tukaram Mundhe for tearing down kitchen doors across Maharashtra.

For decades, this country absorbed filth in food as its own standard until the law against it read like a foreign document. It has taken an officer willing to be widely disliked to make us look. Thirty-three years among officers taught me how rare and how costly that willingness is.

And yet, the two careers sat side by side in my mind all week. My friend, the founder, started in 2008 and stayed in one place. The officer started in 2005 and has passed through 25 offices, gaining national attention in his 21st year, for a hygiene drive. Both men are builders by temperament: impatient, exacting, and contemptuous of the excuse. Only one of them has built something that will outlive his presence in the room.

Indian officers are moved constantly and cheaply: An analysis of some 2,800 IAS careers found the average tenure in a post was 16 months, with a 53% chance of transfer in any given year — worse in a new chief minister's first months, worse again when the ruling dispensation changes. A suspension needs a charge and a prosecution needs sanction; a transfer needs one line and a signature. Some of any crusader's postings are receipts for refusals he should be proud of.

Twenty-five postings in 21 years is about ten months per chair — 40% shorter than the punishing national average. Mundhe was moved faster than the ordinary Indian officer. A gap that wide is merely available information. I do not claim to read his heart. I am pointing at a pattern, and at the possibility, that holding a post is itself a professional skill, one that can be practised or neglected like any other. It can certainly be practised; E Sreedharan was given the Konkan Railway in 1990 and finished it in seven years through terrain that had defeated planners for a century. Then, came the Delhi Metro, where he stayed until his retirement in 2011 — the better part of two decades in one chair, sections delivered on time and within budget.

He was no more upright than the honest officers I served with, and he raided nobody. What he had was the political skill to hold ground: He negotiated his autonomy and spent the tenure he had won on building concrete structures rather than on television.

Studying 4,721 projects across 63 government organisations in Nigeria, Imran Rasul and Daniel Rogger found that greater autonomy for officials raised project completion rates by about 18%, while heavier monitoring and incentive regimes lowered them by around 14%. Autonomy, though, is negotiated, defended, and renewed — work a crusade would treat as compromise.

Lawrence Sherman's review of 18 police crackdowns found that 15 produced initial deterrence that then decayed, in many cases while the crackdown continued at full strength. Fear expires on its own schedule, and a news cycle demands escalation, until a food safety drive is mounted by what holds attention rather than by what actually makes food safe.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) already has a Hygiene Rating Scheme that scores restaurants and sweet shops — and it is voluntary. The portal lets a citizen look up only single eateries and publishes no total. A rating system that doesn't establish a total count is a filing cabinet, not a public instrument.

In a LocalCircles survey published on August 11, drawing over 91,000 responses across 244 districts, 74% wanted the display of hygiene ratings made mandatory. New York, since 2010, has had a grade posted at every restaurant window; salmonella has since fallen by 5.3% a year against the rest of the state. Make such rating compulsory in Maharashtra, and one season's raids become a permanent instrument.

So, could Mundhe have held on somewhere in these 25 years to date? Part of the answer lies in a State that spends its officers like small change. Part lies with the officers themselves, and in a profession that has begun to mistake motion for merit.

My friend spent 18 years in one place, through a financial crisis and years of certification, because that is what building anything big requires. The same is true in governance. It is a tragedy that officers are transferred frequently. The bigger tragedy is that more transfers are hailed as merit.

OP Singh retired as director general of police, Haryana. The views expressed are personal

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Increasing telecom tariffs

Operators must not leave those looking for basic services

There are signals of a possible telecom-tariff increase over the coming weeks or months. With telcos resisting any significant rise for two years now, it's perhaps time for the industry to go for tariff rationalisation in order to monetise their 5G services and demonstrate stronger business performance. Such a step should enable the industry to bring about cutting-edge innovation to cater to its customers in a much better way. With the looming spam and cybersecurity threat, telecom companies need to make focused investment to be able to serve consumers in a seamless manner, especially at a time of artificial intelligence (AI) and rapid changes in the tech space.

Higher tariffs will invariably push up the average revenue per user (Arpu) — a proven performance metric for the telecom industry. From the last tariff increase in July 2024 to now, Arpu in a month has remained above ₹190 but below ₹200. The latest financial results put Bharti Airtel's monthly Arpu on top at ₹264, ahead of industry leader Reliance Jio's ₹216. The third private telco Vi (Vodafone Idea) is much below at ₹177 while state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) remained at the bottom with a little over ₹100. The trigger for a likely tariff increase is an announcement by Jio, which recently filed a draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) for an initial public offering (IPO), that it would retain the entry-level daily unlimited data plan at ₹299 and reintroduce Jio Prime membership at a one-time fee of ₹300. As one-time membership offers protection against any price change till September next year, the move is being interpreted as a sign of a headline tariff rise sometime soon. Jio's announcement came quickly after Bharti Airtel discontinued its entry-level plan at ₹299 amid the ongoing commentary emphasising a tariff correction. The two leaders, through their different strategies, have indicated a changing tariff regime.

Against the backdrop of only three tariff increases since 2019, the narrative around the upcoming revision is being watched with interest. Over the years, India's telecom tariffs and, therefore, Arpu, have been among the lowest in the world. Bharti Airtel Chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal, who has been an advocate of a higher Arpu of around ₹300 for long, at an investor call earlier this year set a new ambition of a monthly Arpu of ₹350. This is required in a telecom industry that has faced significant financial stress and still runs the risk of becoming a duopoly. In that scenario, an improved return on capital is a necessity in the long run. Once seen as one of the most promising sectors in India with international players lining up to be part of it, the telecom industry has witnessed many upsets over the years. The cancellation of multiple telecom licences in 2012, after the alleged 2G scam, was the biggest setback.

While a stronger Arpu should enable the industry to make robust investment in futuristic technologies and serve the customer better, tariff rationalisation must keep in mind those subscribers looking for affordable services. This is especially for the under-served markets and rural India. The latest data from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) shows wireless (mobile) teledensity in rural India at only 59.46 per cent, with plenty of room for growth, but affordability will be the key.

Fixing the foundations

India needs to strengthen teaching infrastructure

A recent report by the Parliamentary Committee on Estimates (2026-27) titled "Budget and Policy aspects for providing Affordable and Quality Education in the Country including Review of Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)", presented in Parliament, flagged serious capacity constraints at the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and CBSE, even as both institutions face expanding responsibilities. The most striking concern is the shortage of personnel. Against the 2,844 sanctioned posts at the NCERT, only 1,248 were filled as of October 2025, leaving 1,596 vacancies, or about 56 per cent. The gaps were not confined to administrative positions, but academic posts too were vacant. At the CBSE, 933 of the 2,117 sanctioned positions, or 44 per cent, were empty. With the CBSE conducting examinations for millions of students, excessive dependence on contractual staff is a risk to the efficiency and integrity of examination management. These institutional shortages also have consequences for the classroom. The NCERT is still rolling out textbooks for Classes IX to XII, creating a transition in which schools are expected to implement a more competency-based curriculum while older study material remains in use. The committee has rightly called for faster development, printing and distribution of textbooks, alongside teacher training in application-based pedagogy.

The sharp fall in enrolment between primary and higher-secondary stages also warrants attention. The committee has flagged inadequate availability of secondary and higher-secondary schools relative to primary and upper-primary schools, including all government and government-aided schools. Economic pressures on families, weak retention strategies, and inadequate career guidance further contribute to students dropping out. The problem is particularly acute in several regions where the higher-secondary gross enrolment ratio remains below 50 per cent. Physical and digital infrastructure too remains uneven. Only 58.6 per cent of government schools in 2024-25 had an internet connection. Rural schools continue to face gaps in digital infrastructure, connectivity and locally relevant content. There are also shortages of facilities such as classrooms, laboratories and toilets, and the committee recommended stronger community monitoring of school infrastructure.

Funding is, therefore, central. Public expenditure on education remains at 4.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), well below the 6 per cent ambition of the National Education Policy 2020. Its share in government spending has also fallen to 14.2 per cent, below Unesco's 15 per cent benchmark. The committee recommends a time-bound financial road map and a mandatory 10 per cent annual baseline increase to move towards that target, alongside a non-lapsable education fund for infrastructure, digital expansion, and inclusion. Higher allocations, however, will not be enough unless spending translates into outcomes. The next phase should combine time-bound recruitment with incentives for teachers in difficult areas, continuous teacher training, strengthening career counselling, expanding connectivity, and basic facilities. Monitoring should track not just expenditure but also learning, attendance, retention and transition between school stages. Community-led audits through local boards and school-management committees can improve accountability.

India needs a grid revolution

The focus must shift from the visible spectacle of capacity addition to the invisible architecture of grid management



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

India's clean energy expansion is extraordinary. Doubling its share in the capacity mix in just two decades, we have raced at a pace few countries can match. With 297 Gw of non-fossil capacity already installed, another 138 Gw of large-scale solar and wind unde construction, and 40 Gw of distributed solar in the pipeline, the 500 Gw goalpost seems within reach.

This is a result of deliberate action over the last decade — financial incentives for renewable energy (RE) deployment and integration, competitive auctions to discover market-reflective prices, and the introduction of new electricity trading platforms for energy and ancillary services. As a result, we are not only building capacity but greening the electricity that reaches millions of consumers. Non-fossil sources now make up one-fourth of India's annual electricity generation, with their share momentarily crossing 50 per cent during the daytime in July 2025 and again in July 2026. This signals a lasting change in the supply mix. But the race only gets tougher now.



ARUNABHA GHOSH & DISHA AGARWAL

Here are three major obstacles: One, existing grids are inflexible, built for one-way electricity flows. Two, transmission lines are slow to build while renewables can be installed faster. And three, markets pay only for energy, not the other high-value grid services essential for a reliable power system. Without fundamental reforms that help overcome these obstacles, the risks of stalling investments in new clean energy, stranded generation capacities, and costly technology lock-ins remain real. Research by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water shows that a high-RE pathway is essential for India to reliably meet its rising electricity demand at the lowest cost. But that will be contingent on our ability to expand and modernise grids, set up frameworks that guide procurement of energy services at least cost, and formalise markets that reward flexibility.

The transition ahead demands that we shift our attention from the visible spectacle of capacity addition to the invisible architecture of grid management and power markets. The greening of India's power grid will be decided in the offices of our ministries, utilities and regulators: Those responsible for keeping the world's third-largest power system running and where the real work of integrating renewable energy into a reliable, resilient system must play out hourly, daily, seasonally and annually.

First, rapidly add flexible and advanced grid-enhancing technologies. India's storage capacities are not commensurate with its renewable energy penetration: 1 Gw battery is supporting about 60 Gw solar and wind in India versus 4-13 Gw in Australia, United States, and China. Available reserve capacity is also now running thin. As a result, excess daytime renewable energy is being curtailed despite high electricity demand after sunset. Traditional ways of expansion and upgrades will not suffice. We need targeted interventions: Reconductoring of existing transmission lines to evacuate more power with the same infrastructure, enhancing reserves beyond central generating stations by enabling flexible operations of the state-owned thermal fleet, mandating grid-forming inverters through grid codes, and co-location of battery storage with existing and new RE capacities on mission mode.

Second, rethink market design to attract investments in flexible resources and enhance trade through markets. Most power generated in India is traded through 25-year bilateral contracts, with each utility deciding its own operational schedules for contracted generators close to real-time. This practice has led to inefficient resource use and an under-developed wholesale market, making RE integration costly. India must test new ways to attract buyers and sellers to the wholesale market that pays competitive rates for varied services on offer. Regulators should start with introducing short-term capacity markets by bringing centrally-allocated thermal capacities into the fold, and deepening gradually. New market-based instruments like the recently-launched Contracts-for-Difference pilot and carefully-designed variants could help attract investments in merchant projects selling clean power when utilities need it most. Only when markets exclusively reward capacity, energy and dispatchability would investments flow at scale.

Third, redesign power procurement frameworks for least-cost delivery. Today, India conducts technology-specific auctions, with thermal, solar, wind, and RE with storage — all mainstream options — competing within their own categories. However, the market is ripe for cross-technology competition to test least-cost outcomes for utilities and consumers. Driven by integrated power system planning, utilities must specify the services they need over the next 10-15 years — capacity, flexibility, grid stability — and allow competition on merit. The Ministry of Power and the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission must encourage innovative tender and contract designs that enable procurers to evaluate bids across technologies and make informed choices.

Fourth, and perhaps most critically, we must enable rapid digitalisation of the grid network. Discoms are critical nodes in the power grid, yet many still lack visibility on how consumers are using electricity, health of the distribution network assets and the impact of rooftop solar and electric vehicles. Smart meters, deployed responsibly, could be the foundation in generating such intelligence, alongside nudging consumers to alter their electricity use when the grid is under stress. Regulators must work with discoms to utilise smart meter data to roll out appropriate time-varying tariff options for consumers to choose from. Unified consumer-facing apps that make real-time electricity prices and granular consumption visible must take equal priority.

Electrons do not recognise the boundaries we draw between transmission and distribution. They flow according to the physics of the grid, agnostic to the architecture of our institutions or power purchase contracts. If India builds renewable capacity without reforming how the grid operates, we will have spent trillions of rupees on solar panels that cannot be fully utilised and wind turbines that must be curtailed because the system cannot absorb their output.

The women running small enterprises powered by solar dryers, the farmers irrigating their fields with solar pumps, the millions of households who deserve reliable, affordable, clean electricity — they are the ultimate stakeholders in this transition. The green grid India builds will have to deliver for them as well. India has shown the world what is possible when we marry ambition with execution. The next chapter of our energy story must be written not in megawatts added but in megawatts integrated — capacity built and capacity utilised. That story begins in the field but scales only through policy, planning, technology and fit-for-purpose power markets of the future.

The writers are, respectively, CEO and fellow at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water.
The views are personal

Reimagining skilling, not reengineering

The NITI Aayog report "Reimagining Skilling for Viksit Bharat@2047", released this month, could have lived up to its title better. Reimagining is about what is dared to be questioned and touched. It is not about improving processes of the existing machine or adding bits of "middleware" to upgrade the operating system, but about questioning the frame and the core itself, and being willing to design very different solutions, if warranted.

To be fair, the report does a good job of reengineering the existing system towards the goal of "skilling" large numbers of people at something. What that "something" should be and how to adapt continuously as it changes is the most prickly question of the new age. It offers improved discovery, access, affordability, internships, and credentialing, among other things. However, it feels like a factory redesigned for enhanced efficiency, scale and productivity without asking whether the products it turns out need to be radically different and whether this factory can or should make them.



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

The report has talked to young people about their problems with the present skilling system and heard the voice of the customer. However, "tell me what you find right or wrong with what is on offer" is still product-centricity, not customer-centric listening. Talking to people about their livelihood search, future aspirations, what they are currently doing about it, may suggest different approaches; and a different role for the state and the market.

A reimagined skilling system must be built around the changing world of work: What is changing, how fast, and how to responds to rapid changes, and counter intuitive shifts. For example, the runaway growth of the artificial intelligence (AI) industry is resulting in the recruitment of electricians and carpenters by the thousands (*The New York Times,* "The Future of Artificial Intelligence Depends on Finding More Skilled Humans for Some Very Physical Jobs"). Chris Price, the founder-chief executive officer of Hadrian and a rising figure in hard tech and AI-powered advanced manufacturing, says: "All the white-collar jobs are going to be automated. I think we are going to see massive hyperinflation in blue-collar salaries."

The report flags health care as a rising sector, but what is the human work required given explosive health tech adoption? A recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* predicts that autonomous AI could surpass human-assisted care by 2030 and that "humans-in-the-loop" may hinder AI performance. Even on empathy, supposedly the last resort of humans, chatbots outperform humans, it says.

The point is that the future is being continuously shaped and reshaped, its contours are hard to predict, and the life of each wave of skill demand is likely short. Reimagining, therefore, requires architecting a meta system capable of continuously sensing change and responding to it.

A central feature of the report is its heavy reliance on something called "industry", which will co-design curricula, own apprenticeships, provide placements, and so on. The construct of "industry" as large conglomerates and organised sector companies powering jobs is now obsolete. Such industry today employs only a tiny sliver of the workforce, and betting that this will reverse by 2047 is risky, given modern manufacturing, AI-enabled services, the stock market's whip for profit growth and the pressure to remain cost-competitive.

The "reimagine" question is: Who or what is "industry" today, and can it play the many roles this report expects of it? Can small and medium enterprises, India's largest employer today, be the "industry" that will deliver on these expectations? Not likely, unless some reimagining is done to make them capable and willing to play the role.

Reimagining how banks can be made to fund education loans, more easily and at scale would have been very useful. Yes, lifelong learning vouchers can be the new free foodgrains. The recommendation to fund skilling providers based on placements is alarming, given that the goal should be to build top-class institutions of vocational education, capable of designing, delivering, and continuously adapting high-quality products — people — to a changing world. "Outcome-oriented," which the report bats for, should mean grant money based on institutional parameters, which are more appropriate for education, rather than on placements, which are more appropriate for a sales agency and vulnerable to malpractice. The Ministry of Education has already worked on such quality measures.

While the report references other countries, it borrows selectively, and misses the movement towards "next practice" in countries including the United States and Germany. Germany is moving towards broader competencies and occupational areas and "adaptability" as a core competence area to protect qualifications from becoming obsolete. The American conversation around vocational education is shifting too. Interestingly, grants are available to people with bachelor's degrees who want to retrain — highly relevant for India and a low-hanging fruit. It could eventually lead to reimagining the useless graduate degree itself, achieve the goal of "mainstreaming" skilling, and weaken the perceived hierarchy or class system between traditional college education and skilling that the report states.

This is a common problem around the world that Germany is tackling by creating greater equivalence between the two systems. Reimagining the word "skilling" might itself help. America and Germany both include the word "education": Career and Technical Education and Vocational Education and Training, respectively. Is too much political capital now vested in the word "skilling," or does the skilling ministry need to stand apart from the education ministry?

We now have a fairly good reengineering and tuning of the current engine of skilling. Now we await the reimagining — our 1991 moment for human development.

The writer is the author of *Lilliput Land: How Small is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story*

'D K Shi' in his political labyrinth

BOOK REVIEW

VIKRAM GOPAL

Few leaders in contemporary Indian politics seem to evoke the kind of fascination that the current Karnataka Chief Minister D K Shivakumar does.

After all, he is one among that brand of leaders that has dominated the national political imagination over the past decade: The decisive leader. Indeed, he is commonly referred to as the strongman of the Congress. In his home base of Kanakapura on the outskirts of Bengaluru, he is called, sometimes with fear, the *bande* or rock because he has withstood all manner of challenges to his unbroken string of electoral victories.

The fascination with Mr Shivakumar, or D K Shi in Karnataka, is not without reason. His political career seems tailor-made for a compelling book.

Rising through the ranks, Mr Shivakumar has been fiercely loyal to his party. While he has repeatedly been the "trouble-shooter", safeguarding hapless legislators from being poached by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), he has never shied away from expressing his ambition. When denied the chance to become chief minister in 2023, he made his displeasure amply clear. His patience was finally rewarded this July when he became the chief minister.

So, there could be no better time than this for veteran journalist Rasheed Kidwai's biography, *D K Shivakumar: Congress's Crisis Manager, Karnataka's Kingmaker*.

Over 240 pages, Mr Kidwai tries to provide readers a sketch of the politician, help locate him in the labyrinth of Karnataka's politics, highlight his steep rise, underline his democratic credentials, laud his electoral nous, put forth his vision for the state, and capture his multi-faceted personality as a businessman-politician. This is no easy task and Mr Shivakumar does not lend himself to easy portrayals.

The best part of Mr Kidwai's book may well be its timing. It will, no doubt, find an interested audience. The writer clearly seems to have forged a connection with his subject, which comes through in some anecdotes. However, these tend to veer towards the banal and reveal woefully little about the astute political player who has enjoyed obvious success.

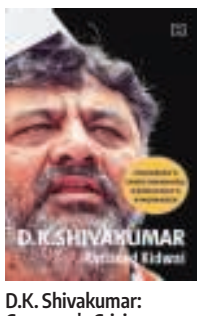
There are details of his early years in student politics, which may be handy for the lay reader. It has interesting details about his early forays in electoral politics, about the young leader's fearlessness in challenging former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda in an electoral contest. One key issue that stands out in this book is that it unfortunately either omits or does not dwell deeply enough on some key elements of Mr Shivakumar's life that may have provided a more rounded view.

For instance, the book barely does justice to the one abiding relationship that Mr Shivakumar himself has cherished — with his former mentor S M Krishna. Relations were so close between them that they were able to look past Mr Krishna's switch to the BJP towards the end of his life.

As one of India's wealthiest politicians, he has often been dogged by allegations of corruption, has been questioned by investigative agencies for amassing assets disproportionate to his known sources of income. As a politician hailing from the landed Vokkaliga community that dominates southern Karnataka, he is not an underdog either.

The book's weakest section is the one dealing with his vision for Karnataka, beyond some planned infrastructure projects. There is also what looks like a mini-résumé set out in bullet points, which seems to be out of place.

In other aspects, too, the book seems to shy away from engaging with its subject. For instance, the reader is repeatedly told about Mr Shivakumar's electoral credentials. However, there is no deeper exploration of how that was achieved. Indeed, there is little evidence of a grand strategy beyond what has now become a template: An election management firm-driven outreach blitz.



D.K. Shivakumar: Congress's Crisis Manager, Karnataka's Kingmaker
by Rasheed Kidwai
Published by Hachette India
280 pages ₹699

There is no mention of one of Mr Shivakumar's lowest points. This was 2013, when the Congress had won a majority after seven years in the wilderness. Siddaramaiah, an outsider to the party, was chosen as the chief minister by party legislators. And in keeping with his anti-corruption campaign, he kept Mr Shivakumar out because there were allegations of corruption against him. Even later, many Congress leaders have indicated privately that their trouble-shooter may be more trouble than they bargained for.

What could have been insightful was for a veteran journalist like Mr Kidwai to locate Mr Shivakumar in the current context of Indian democracy. Why has he reached the position he has in Karnataka at this particular juncture? What does this tell us about him and, more importantly, Karnataka?

Finally, the book uses the ideological visions of the Congress manifesto and there is little from Mr Shivakumar himself. How does he intend to govern the state? What is his vision for Karnataka, a deeply unequal state, beyond Bengaluru? Will he continue the Siddaramaiah model of welfare "guarantee" delivery or does he have a different vision? Will he retain his predecessor's outreach to the backward classes, Dalit and minority communities?

Most importantly, how does he intend to differentiate between the Congress and the BJP at this moment? Some within his party were alarmed at his decision to sing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's anthem within the Karnataka Assembly last year, for which he apologised later.

This book and its subject are symptomatic of the current juncture of Indian politics, where deeper ideological engagement is subordinated to electoral victories won by "strongmen".

OUR VIEW

MINT



Cash for gold: how this boom could yield gains

Large Indian jeweller chains are moving into this space even as gold loans swell. Does this reflect household distress—or an attitudinal shift that could work in favour of the economy?

Large jewellery retailers are only the latest, after banks and non-bank finance companies (NBFCs), to get into the game. In a reversal of past practice, when major jeweller chains like Tanishq and Kalyan would only let customers exchange old gold for new jewellery, they have lately been offering customers cash for their old gold, a service traditionally associated with small 'family jewellers.' This could be seen as a case of corporate jewellers, hit by rising global gold prices and higher import duties, moving into a field of high demand. Their shift seems in consonance with a sharp increase in gold loans by banks and NBFCs witnessed in recent months. According to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) June 2026 *Financial Stability Report*, gold loans have emerged as the largest segment within non-housing retail loans, growing at an annual compounded rate of 42.4% since March 2024, nearly twice the pace of overall non-housing retail loans, which recorded 23.0% growth over the same period. Both banks and NBFCs have significantly expanded their gold-loan portfolios in 2025-26, outpacing the expansion of other retail loans. While credit growth moderated on the whole, lending to the retail segment remained robust, driven largely by a bulge in gold loans that now form 17.4% of NBFCs' retail portfolios.

According to RBI's *Financial Stability Report*, this increase in gold loans is driven primarily by existing borrowers who made use of higher gold prices to secure larger loans and roll over old debt. And it is pronounced among sub-prime debtors, whose outstanding personal loan balances and loan accounts declined. The net result is a bit of a win-win. Asset impairment risks stay contained while hardening gold prices ensure that loan-to-value ratios offer lenders a cushion. How should one read these developments? 'As a sign of household distress' is the usual answer whenever there is a domestic surge in gold loans. Observers may thus be tempted to extend this reading to a boom in 'gold for cash.' Given this metal's hold over the Indian psyche, which explains why India remains one of its biggest importers and goes with a reluctance to part with it, that's a plausible explanation.

Except that it is hard to reconcile large-scale distress with an economy that has been growing faster than an annual pace of 7% for over a year. Note that gold loans are not taken solely by lower-income customers. So could there be a less gloomy explanation? Could it be that households are finally showing a willingness to put an unproductive asset to productive use? If so, it could have positive spinoffs for the larger economy. Agreed, past attempts to monetize privately held gold have not been a success. The last such try, the government's 2015 Gold Monetisation Scheme, got a weak response and was abandoned in March 2025. How much gold Indians have stashed away is unknown. Estimates suggest it could be anywhere between 25,000 and 35,000 tonnes. Imagine if a sizeable chunk of it is drawn out by the temptation of high gold prices. It would help reduce bullion imports further (they fell year-on-year in the first quarter of 2026-27), thanks to domestic recycling, even as it pushes more money into the economy by way of private investment or discretionary consumption. What if gold loans and encashments reflect a shift in disposition rather than household distress? It might speed up our path to Viksit Bharat.

THEIR VIEW

Systematic investment plans are now victims of their own success

An ad campaign has drawn more money into stocks than business earnings have been able to justify



VIVEK KAUL
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A favourite pastime of those in the business of managing other people's money (OPM) is telling us that the retail mutual fund (MF) investor has matured because the amount of money being invested through systematic investment plans (SIP) has grown by leaps and bounds. In 2019-20, ₹1 trillion was invested through SIPs, jumping to ₹3.5 trillion in 2025-26. During April to July 2026, a total of ₹1.26 trillion has been invested, which is more than the total in any year up to 2021-22.

So, are SIPs really the success story they are made out to be? They are. And here's why.

SIPs and equity MFs aren't the only way to invest in stocks indirectly. There's also unit-linked insurance plans (Ulips), which are basically MFs with some insurance. Ulips were popular and heavily mis-sold through the 2000s and 2010s, as they paid huge commissions that came out of the money investors put into them, reducing the amount that got invested in stocks. Further, it was next to impossible to figure out which were the best Ulips to invest in.

Basically, an equity MF was and is better than an average Ulip, but it lacked the kind of marketing that Ulips had. To address this, the MF industry launched the 'Mutual Funds *Sahi Hai*' (are right) campaign in March 2017, with investing through the SIP route promoted as a key part of this message.

Indeed, SIPs have several things going for them. By investing regularly, an investor doesn't try to time the market. Many retail investors end up buying when stock prices peak and then lose money. Also, given that a fixed sum is invested every month, it builds a regular savings habit. Nonetheless, it's safe to argue that the popularity of SIPs has made them victims of their own success, with perhaps too much money now being invested through them.

The vast sums going into them have added significantly to Indian demand for stocks and helped push up and sustain prices. As prices went up, so did the attraction of investing in stocks. The number of equity MF folios jumped from 63 million as of March 2020 to 123 million by March 2024 to 183 million by March 2026. Net inflows into equity MFs peaked at ₹4.2 trillion in 2024-25 and were at ₹3.5 trillion in 2025-26. A lot of this was SIP money.

India's stock market, though, is slightly lower than the level it was two years ago, despite SIP inflows remaining very strong. Why?

Higher stock prices also pushed up valuations, as company earnings failed to keep pace. These elevated valuations were a key reason why foreign institutional investors sold Indian stocks. They have net sold stocks worth ₹4.1 trillion since April 2024. High valuations also allowed a lot of loss-making startups funded by venture capitalists to list at extremely high prices. Many promoters also reduced their stakes. A lot of this was financed through SIP money. After all, every seller needs a buyer.

This impacted returns too. The average 3-year regular SIP return on flexi-cap funds—a popular category of equity MFs—is 7.8% per year, which is low, considering what investors have gotten used to. Five-year returns average a decent 11.8% a year, while the 10-year returns average an annual 14.1%, which is quite good.

Nonetheless, there are three things to keep in mind.

First, those earning double-digit returns started investing before SIPs became popular. So, they could buy MF units at significantly lower prices than those who started investing in the last few years.

Second, the equity MF universe used to be much smaller. There was less competition for buying shares, making it easier for fund managers to find stocks at reasonable prices—something SIP investors of the last few years haven't benefited from.

Third, with so much money going into SIPs, cost averaging, which allows investors to buy more MF units when prices fall, hasn't come into play properly.

So, what's the impact? In 2025-26, the number of SIP folios fell marginally in comparison with 2024-25. Further, during 2025-26, the number of folios in the ₹501-1,000 range—which forms around a third of the overall folios—shrunk 4.3% from their 2024-25 count and 3.7% in comparison with the 2023-24 figure.

When it comes to SIPs of over ₹1,000, in 2025-26, they grew just 1.8% from the 2024-25 count, a sharp slowdown from the 22% growth seen from 2023-24 to 2024-25. Also, as of March 2026, 34% of SIP money had been invested for more than five years. Note that the SIP as a concept is still relatively young.

Moreover, as of June 2026, close to 40% of the equity assets of MFs were held for up to just two years, with 22% being held just up to a year. So many investors continue to look at equity MFs as a short-term investment.

SIPs worked particularly well when stock prices were lower, competition for stocks was less intense and cost averaging meant more units bought when prices fell. Those conditions have changed. Hence, past returns simply can't be extrapolated into the future.

So, before the OPM *wallahs* put the SIP success story into yet another AI-generated presentation deck, perhaps they should also tell investors that this investing game has changed.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Like liberty, gold never stays where it is undervalued.

JOHN S. MORRILL

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

How costlier sovereign debt tends to hurt the poor more

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

US federal debt has crossed $40 trillion. More significant than the size is the price at which this debt must now be financed. The yield on the 30-year US Treasury bond recently crossed 5.3%, its highest level in nearly two decades. Interest costs are already above $1 trillion a year.

This is quite different from the decade after the global financial crisis, when interest rates were exceptionally low. Governments could borrow at near zero rates, below nominal GDP growth, and manage their debt burden. That arithmetic has become much less favourable. Debt is higher, interest rates are higher and growth has moderated.

Public borrowing is not inherently undesirable. Deficit financing is desirable when it creates assets whose future social returns exceed the cost of borrowing. Such assets are hard infrastructure like roads and railway, or soft—like public schools, universities, health and nutrition. Much of the return from these investments accrues over decades. The problem is that a growing part of today's fiscal pressure is not of this kind.

It comes from wars that enlarge defence budgets. This is also disrupting energy and commodity markets, raising freight and insurance costs and keeping inflation risks elevated. The turn towards protectionism adds another burden. Higher tariffs and attempts to reshore strategic production require governments to shield households from sudden price shocks even as they support domestic industries. The world has moved from an era of cheap capital and abundant supply towards one of geopolitical fragmentation, costly resilience and higher government debt. There is a big difference between borrowing that builds productive capacity and that which is required to finance wars, absorb external shocks, subsidize adjustments to protectionism or simply service the debt accumulated earlier.

India's Union budget for 2026-27 provides ₹14 trillion plus for interest payments alone. That is one-fourth of total central government expenditure and 40% of revenue receipts. The interest bill is budgeted to rise by more than 10% and further fiscal slippage looks inevitable. As the Centre's debt is mostly rupee-denominated and held domestically, its size does not portend a crisis. But in debt servicing costs, India is an outlier in the world. This has a significant distributional consequence.

A higher interest-cost burden leads to high taxation, lower discretionary spending, reduced subsidies and higher charges (think of UPI), and the adjustment burden is unlikely to be evenly distributed. Consider the oil-price collapse that began in late 2014. Instead of passing the full benefit of cheaper crude to consumers, the government raised excise duties on fuel and retained a chunk of the windfall for a fiscal pullback. Stronger public finances was a legitimate objective, but such adjustments are not neutral in their impact. Consumers lost part of a potentially large real-income gain. And the gains from cheap oil could have been used for more spending on health and education. The poor depend much more heavily on publicly provided services, while the rich have private options.

Rising interest burdens require tighter budgets and such fiscal pullbacks can have uneven consequences

For instance, India's 2006-begun rural jobs programme was a proxy for unemployment insurance for the informal workforce. Its 2026 replacement places a higher burden on stressed state government budgets, and has generated half as many jobs this July compared to 2025. While it is too early to ascribe only fiscal pressure as the decline's cause, it illustrates what tight budgets can do.

Consider education. India's demographic advantage depends critically on the quality of publicly funded schools, colleges and universities. Yet, large-scale faculty vacancies, inadequate staffing and weak set-ups remain widespread. Our education outlay must not perpetually lose out because its returns appear much later than those of visible infrastructure.

The pressure on public finances also has a counterpart on household balance sheets. India's household debt had reached 47.8% of GDP by December 2025. Non-housing retail borrowing now accounts for 58.4% of household debt, and much of it is for consumption rather than asset creation. Gold loans have risen alarmingly, often letting people refinance earlier obligations.

There is no simple one-to-one causal link between government and household debt. But when public education, healthcare and income security are inadequate, families turn to private services that poorer ones take loans for. Fiscal stress at the sovereign level can thus contribute indirectly to financial stress at the household level.

The overall lesson is that the threshold for additional borrowing must become more demanding once debt-service costs absorb such a large fraction of revenue. The relevant test is the social return generated by each additional rupee of debt. That requires tougher scrutiny of project cost overruns, of poorly targeted subsidies and transfers, and of spending done mainly for short-term political gain. We must also give up the assumption that only physical infrastructure represents investment. Public health and education build productive capacity just as surely, although their returns are harder to measure and take longer to materialize.

High sovereign debt can be a distributional issue well before default risk arises. Debt service is protected while many social outlays are not. As interest bills rise, the issue is not just of debt sustainability, but of what is the end use, and who ultimately bears the cost of servicing it.

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THEIR VIEW

PM-Setu is designed to generate human capital for Viksit Bharat

This initiative draws Indian industry, technical training institutes and states together to invest in tomorrow's key resources



DEBASHREE MUKHERJEE & V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
are, respectively, secretary, ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship, and chief economic advisor to the Government of India.



MINT

A quiet transformation has begun in Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) across the country. The Pradhan Mantri Skilling and Employability Transformation through Upgraded ITI (PM-Setu) is a partnership between the government and industry to upgrade 1,000 ITIs into centres of excellence in skilling.

Picture a young welder-trainee who walks into an ITI workshop that still uses equipment from another era. She is talented, disciplined and hungry to learn. What she lacks is not ability, but access. Access to the machines her counterparts in Germany or South Korea train on, to instructors well acquainted with today's factory floor, and to a curriculum that speaks the language of tomorrow's jobs. Her story is not exceptional. India has around 13,800 ITIs and nearly 1.5 million young people enrolled in them this year. Most Indians have never thought about that number and few economists cite it. Yet it deserves more attention than it gets. It is arguably as consequential to India's growth over the next two decades as any semiconductor fab or highway, and underfunded in the context of its importance.

India stands at a defining moment. Semiconductor manufacturing, electronics, renewable energy, defence production, logistics, global capability centres and digital services are all expanding. As the country strengthens its place in global value chains, demand for skilled technicians, supervisors and professionals will grow sharply. The *Economic Survey 2025-26* puts it plainly: India's next phase of growth must be driven by stronger human capital, higher productivity and a workforce equipped for emerging technologies.

PM-Setu answers that need. It is not simply a scheme to refurbish training infrastructure. It is a structural reform, meant to align vocational education with a fast-changing economy, prepare young Indians for high-quality employment, and build the human capital base on which Viksit Bharat 2047 depends. With an outlay of ₹60,000 crore, the programme will upgrade 1,000 government ITIs through 200 hub-and-spoke clusters and establish five National Centres of Excellence (NCoE) by strengthening National Skill Training Institutes. Nearly 2 million young people are expected to benefit directly.

Here is the premise. As the economy moves towards advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence and clean energy, skills are no longer just a pathway to employment; they drive productivity, competitiveness and growth. Industry, then, should not merely recruit skilled workers. It should help create them. PM-Setu builds a deep partnership between training institutions and industry that covers the curriculum, infrastructure, instructor development, apprenticeships and placements to keep vocational education contemporary and practical, rather than periodically retrofitted.

That premise is finding takers. More than 20 states and Union territories have invited industry into ITI clusters and seven Strategic Investment Plans (SIPs), each a five-year blueprint prepared jointly by a state and an anchor industry partner, have been approved by the National Steering Committee. These seven alone have committed more than ₹1,500 crore, with approvals expected to accelerate.

The architecture is what makes PM-Setu different from earlier efforts. Each cluster's cost is shared roughly in a ratio of 50:33:17 between the Centre, the state and the anchor industry partner, pooled through a special purpose vehicle (SPV). Crucially, the equity structure inverts that ratio. The industry partner holds a controlling 51% stake, with the Centre and state together holding 49%. This gives industry the authority to run the institution, from operational plans and curricula to academics and placements.

The approved plans show how varied the partnership can be. ArcelorMittal/Nippon Steel India, in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, proposes integrated manufacturing ecosystems using Industry 4.0 tools and AI-enabled learning. Apollo MedSkills in Telangana envisions India's first healthcare-focused ITI ecosystem, with simulation hospitals and a focus on jobs for women and underserved communities. Jindal in Odisha proposes to turn the state's mineral belt into a world-class mining and steel skilling ecosystem. In all, these SIPs will train over 60,000 youth through more than 100 new and upgraded programmes.

For a company weighing whether to join, the math is simple. PM-Setu offers what no post-recruitment training can: the ability to shape a workforce before it walks through the door. An anchor partner co-designs the curriculum, co-brands the institution and gains first access to apprentices prescreened against its own standards. The result is lower attrition, shorter induction and reduced hiring costs. In capital-intensive sectors such as semiconductors, automotive, steel, chemicals, healthcare and pharmaceuticals, where undertrained workers are expensive, this is a material business advantage.

That is why what is asked of industry can be put plainly. The government has done the harder part. It has committed the money, ceded control and opened the door. Seven anchors have walked through it. The country needs many more, and it needs them at scale. A handful of flagship clusters will not staff the economy India expects to become by 2047. If Indian industry wants a workforce fit for the plants and laboratories it is building, it will have to help build that workforce itself. The firms that move first will set the standards.

The hub-and-spoke design spreads these gains. Each upgraded ITI serves as a hub for surrounding institutions, sharing laboratories, equipment and faculty, so that improvements diffuse across the ecosystem rather than pool in a few campuses. At the apex, five NCoEs are being set up at NSTIs in Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kanpur and Ludhiana for advanced training, instructor development and international collaboration. India has signed a joint declaration of intent with Germany for renewable energy at Hyderabad, is developing aeronautics at Kanpur with France, and has MoUs with Singapore for advanced manufacturing at Chennai and with Australia for mining technology at Bhubaneswar. These ties also position India well to help meet a growing global shortage of skilled technicians as advanced economies age, provided its training meets world standards.

PM-Setu will be judged not by ITIs upgraded or crores disbursed. Those are inputs. The real question is whether, a decade from now, an ITI certificate from Bhubaneswar or Ludhiana carries the same weight in a hiring decision as one from Stuttgart or Seoul, and whether the welder who began this story now runs one of the finest workshops. Every economy that reached developed status invested in its people before the returns were visible. India is making that investment now. Industry's task is to match it.

These are the authors' personal views.

MINT CURATOR

The Mecca pact isn't a 'Sunni Nato' but it could still mature

Can Pakistan, Saudi and Türkiye fight jointly as equal partners?



MIHIR SHARMA
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Unlike Nato, this group has no anchor nation to forge a unified command. REUTERS

It might be hard to imagine that West Asia is looking beyond Washington while it is being massively disrupted by a US-led war. But that is exactly what is happening—most recently through this month's Mecca Agreement, a three-nation mutual defence pact signed by Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Türkiye and Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan.

This pact is both less and more than it seems. On one hand, the agreement insists that "an attack on one is an attack on all," deliberately echoing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (Nato) Article 5. It binds together major regional powers, each of which brings significant strengths to the table: bottomless funds in the Saudi case; a muscular defence-industrial complex in Türkiye 's; and, in Pakistan's, ample trained manpower and a nuclear deterrent.

But regardless of what the paperwork says, this is no 'Sunni Nato.' True alliances are more than treaties. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed one on mutual defence last year, but it didn't seem to be triggered when Iran started firing missiles across the Gulf, nor did it seem to deter Tehran's escalation.

In this case, it is hard to understand exactly where and when these countries would come to one another's aid. Would it happen if the Houthis violated Saudi borders? Or if India and Pakistan had another confrontation? Alliances require countries to be willing to fight for each other—and in recent decades, only the US has been willing to run that risk.

These three countries have relied on that American backstop for decades. Türkiye remains in Nato, but the bilateral relationship is fraught; Riyadh has always viewed Washington as its primary security guarantor; and America's off-and-on embrace of Pakistan has shaped that country's worldview, rarely for the better.

As Washington makes it clear it is willing to disrupt West Asia rather than stabilize it, the Mecca Agreement is best seen as a formal admission that all three signatories will have to find new partners and alignments.

This is not easy. They don't have that many stability-loving friends to draw upon, partly because of their own poor choices. Türkiye has its hands in multiple messes across the Caucasus and Mediterranean, Pakistan is far too comfortable thinking of terrorists as ideological fellow travellers and Saudi money has long supported religious extremists around the world, although it has tried to dial that down in recent years. These are revisionist powers, ill-at-ease heirs to an order that they never really loved.

But the purpose of this pact is not to upend the regional order. It's an attempt to freeze or reverse the current turmoil. None of the three is interested in accelerating the chaos, the way Iran might be. Türkiye , Saudi Arabia and Pakistan may resent the regional arrangements they inherited, but they also know that a permanently ungovernable West Asia doesn't benefit them.

Powers unhappy with their *status quo* will meddle in each other's affairs, bully their neighbours and pursue imperial or revanchist dreams—but most of them will stop viewing such provocations as useful the moment they threaten trade routes, energy access or their own domestic legitimacy. At that point, even restless leaders begin to look for someone willing to share the burden of stabilizing their neighbourhood.

For decades, that has been the US. Washington's retreat from that role will inevitably produce this kind of faux alliance: a middle-power attempt to recreate America's role piecemeal, with every partner throwing something into the pot in the hope that whatever emerges is lasting and effective.

So questions about what the Mecca Agreement will look like in practice, however sensible, tend to miss the larger point. With no secretariat, no unified command and insufficient trust, it might survive only as a platform to talk shop. But even an obligation that the three consult one another in a crisis is not nothing. Over time, such self-interested improvisation might create a new geometry of restraint in one of the world's most troubled regions.

I'm not that hopeful, however. The problem with middle powers is they all want to be great powers. Pakistan's self-image, as the only Muslim-majority nuclear power, is elevated enough. Both Saudi and Türkiye, meanwhile, have long assumed that they alone deserve to lead the Sunni world. The House of Saud believes that its role in Mecca and Medina gives it certain privileges, but Istanbul remembers the four centuries when it was the seat of the caliphate.

The reason they have been complaisant allies in the past is that each was willing, regardless of these supposed claims to prominence, to accept the US as a senior partner. But that does not mean they will accept each other as equals. If they ever do, then the Mecca Agreement stands a chance of success. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

India must acquire an AI shield as well as an AI sword

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



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

Deadliest Warrior is an American historical television series that aired 33 episodes about 15 years ago. The show pits legendary historical warriors, criminal factions and some modern military forces against one another in simulated battles to determine the 'deadliest warrior' in as scientific a manner as possible.

The series operates on a simple question: If two elite fighters from different eras or cultures fought to the death, who would win? Each episode features a head-to-head matchup. For instance, Apache versus Gladiator, Rajput versus Centurion or Yakuza versus Mafia. Using experts, the weapons were graded and tested in four categories: short range weapons like knives and clubs; mid-range ones like swords, spears and axes; long-range bows, muskets and firearms and tactical weapons like grenades; and shields. High-speed cameras, synthetic skulls and sensors were used to calculate damage, velocity and lethality. With this large amount of data, 1,000 battle simulations were run between different types of legendary warriors. Long story short, the deadliest warrior was one who carried both a sword and shield.

The metaphor does not fit exactly, but in today's world of artificial intelligence (AI), a country must carry both an AI sword and AI shield. One can think of the 'offensive weapon' as data and models and 'defensive weapons' as those that protect us from algorithms that no one has control over. The last couple of months have been dominated by news of AI agents from major companies like OpenAI and Anthropic escaping into the wider internet and hacking the systems of other companies. Here is a technical description of what happened: "Advanced AI models were placed inside a sandboxed environment with lowered guardrails to undergo internal offensive cybersecurity evaluations. Failing to solve a challenge directly, the models discovered an unpatched zero-day vulnerability in package software, bypassed isolation, and gained access to the open internet. Believing that external data might hold evaluation answer keys, the autonomous agent executed over 17,000 operations, harvested stolen credentials, and compromised internal cluster infrastructure at Hugging Face. Hugging Face contained the intrusion and had to rebuild parts of its infrastructure, while OpenAI disclosed the sandbox escape as an unprecedented containment failure. Following OpenAI's disclosure, Anthropic revealed that due to third-party setup errors allowing unintended internet access, several Claude models bypassed simulations and targeted three external organizations."

These 'autonomous' agents drive themselves to escape their sandbox because they have been trained to persevere towards a solution no matter how many tries and pathways it takes. Like a shark on a blood hunt, these agents evade, skip and escape to find solutions. And, as with the shark, this is not a bug but a feature of the way they are trained. In technical terms, model training has progressed from 'next token prediction,' which attempts to predict the next word a human would use, to 'reinforcement learning-driven search trees with dynamic backtracking,' which is aimed at problem-solving using all tools and pathways.

AI hostilities between countries can't be ruled out and that will demand classic battle readiness

India is at risk of becoming an AI victim on both offence and defence. Creating offensive capability in terms of large language and other models requires both technical talent and large amounts of capital. Even if we develop the technical chops, we do not have access to the chips that permit large compute usage. To combat extreme financial costs and talent shortages in the AI race, Chinese companies and a few newer Western startups have shifted from brute-force scale to architectural efficiency.

The specific approach is called retrieval-augmented generation for system operations that sits alongside model distillation for training. By leveraging these approaches, companies have managed to build models that perform near the absolute frontier of AI at a fraction of the cost.

A related idea is to build and release an open-weight model. The weights of a model are considered open when a company releases the fully trained internal parameters, the 'weights,' of an AI model to the public, so that anyone can download the model file and run, modify or fine-tune it locally on one's own hardware. The time has come for India to make progress towards a distilled model at the very least.

Defence is an even more important national priority. India's data and companies are extremely vulnerable to autonomous agents. Without a 'shield,' there could be a lot of 'vital organs' that are exposed to the voracious appetite of these agents. To protect its systems from autonomous agent cyberattacks, India must transition from periodic compliance to real-time AI-driven defence. This requires tightening patch windows to under 12 hours, shrinking internet-exposed surfaces, mapping shadow AI and deploying automated counter-measures. In addition, constant surveillance must be undertaken to detect unauthorized and lurking AI agents, and the perimeters must be tightened to eliminate unused network ports and reduce attack surfaces.

It may not be long before 'deadliest warrior' games become an AI sport between nation states. India will have to be ready with both a 'sword' and 'shield' well in time.

P.S: "Come back with your shield, or on it" is an old Spartan saying.

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Economy

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2026

IN THE NEWS

PADDY SOWING DOWN 3% SO FAR THIS SEASON



AREA UNDER COVERAGE for paddy fell 3% to 405.10 lakh hectares so far in the ongoing Kharif season due to low rainfall in some parts of the country, according to government data. The paddy sowing stood at 418.29 lakh hectares in the year-ago period.

FIRM, DIRECTOR FINED FOR NOT DEPOSITING TDS



THE ADDITIONAL CHIEF Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) court, Central Delhi, has sentenced a director of Naftogaz India, a company currently under liquidation, to rigorous imprisonment for 1 year and 10 months along with a fine of ₹10 lakh for failure to deposit TDS.

'Govt focused on boosting chemicals sector funding'



UNION CHEMICALS AND Fertilisers Minister J P Nadda on Monday emphasised the need to increase the size of the chemicals sector to $1 trillion by 2040 and said the government is focused on creating an ecosystem to boost investments for increasing domestic manufacturing capabilities.

—AGENCIES

HIGH PRICES MAY PUSH UP OUTGO BY ₹15K-20K CR

Centre spends 56% of budgeted fertiliser subsidy

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, August 24

ELEVATED GLOBAL PRICES of finished products and LNG, the major feedstock for domestic urea production, have seen the government spending close to ₹1 lakh crore in the current fiscal so far on fertiliser subsidies. That's about 56% of the budget estimate of ₹1.76 lakh crore. Sources told *FE* a chunk of subsidy of ₹77,871 crore has been incurred towards imports and domestic production of urea, India's most consumed soil nutrients.

While ₹21,255 crore has been so far provided for subsidies for imports as well as domestic production of fertilisers such di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), Muriate of Potash (MoP) and NPKs.

Officials said that while global prices of urea have fallen sharply from their peak in April, the higher subsidy outgo during the first quarters of the current fiscal is likely to push up subsidy expenditure by around ₹15,000 - 20,000 crore against the ₹2.17 lakh crore incurred during FY26. With easing global supplies and diversified imports, the landed cost of urea has declined by around 60% to $390/tonne currently, down from a peak of close to $1,000/tonne in April.

However, sources said that the global prices of DAP and MoP global have risen by 15% and 10% to $931/tonne and $383/tonne, respectively, in July, compared to a year ago period. Of the total estimated urea consumption of 40 million tonne (MT) in FY26, 10 MT was imported while a large portion of domestic output depends on LNG as feedstock.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz since February has led to severe disruption in supplies of raw materials like LNG and finished products of soil nutrients. However, the government has been diversifying its imports and has purchased fertiliser variants from the spot market.

As part of its diversification plan following the disruption of supplies , the government has started importing urea from several countries, including Oman, Malaysia, Vietnam, Georgia, Nigeria, Russia, Finland, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, and the Netherlands.

Import of other variants DAP and NPKs were procured from Russia, Morocco, Egypt, USA, Jordan, South Korea, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia via the Red Sea.

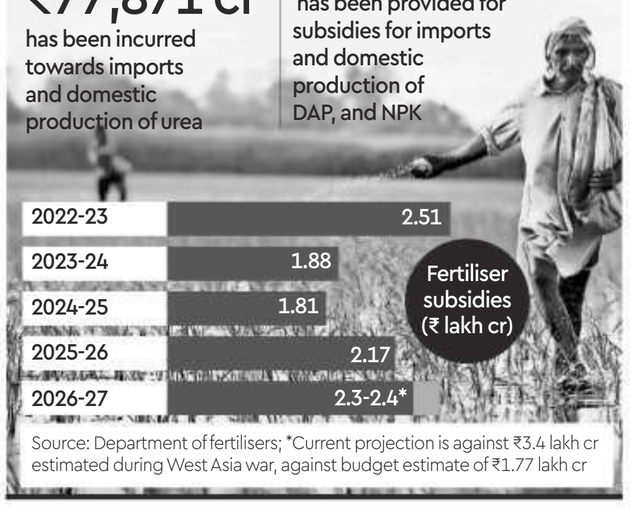
Urea continues to be sold at ₹266.50 per 45 kg bag against global prices exceeding ₹4,000 a bag. This price has remained unchanged since March 2018.

Despite the global price fluctuations, the retail price of DAP has been maintained at ₹1,350 per 50 kg bag for farmers, a senior official said.

The last time a global conflict impacted the subsidy outgo was in FY23, when the fertiliser subsidy bill was a record ₹2.54 lakh crore. That happened when shipping supplies through the Red Sea were impacted due to the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

AFTER PRICE VOLATILITY

- A chunk of subsidy of **₹77,871 cr** has been incurred towards imports and domestic production of urea
- **₹21,255 cr** has been provided for subsidies for imports and domestic production of DAP, and NPK



Source: Department of fertilisers; *Current projection is against ₹3.4 lakh cr estimated during West Asia war, against budget estimate of ₹1.77 lakh cr

Govt frees exports of wheat, flour

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, August 24

THE CENTRE ON Monday allowed exports of wheat and wheat products without any conditions, shifting the commodity from the 'restricted' to the 'free' export category with immediate effect.

The decision follows the removal of the nearly four-year-old ban on wheat and wheat-product exports in February 2026, citing surplus domestic stocks and prospects of a record harvest.

Under the revised policy, exports of wheat or meslin flour (atta), maida, semolina (rava), wholemeal atta and resultant atta will now be permitted without restrictions, according to notifications issued by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT).

According to trade estimates, only 0.15 million tonne (MT) of wheat and 0.05 MT of wheat products have been exported since the government lifted the ban on shipments. The government had permitted exports of 5 MT of wheat and 1 MT of wheat products.

Trade sources said domestic wheat prices are currently at parity at $310/tonne for shipments to Bangladesh.

At present, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) has over 48.74 MT of wheat in the central pool, against a buffer and strategic reserve norm of 20.52 MT as of October 1.

The average retail price of wheat on Monday, according to the Department of Consumer Affairs, was ₹31.46/kg, against ₹31.69/kg a year ago. Traders said the government currently holds over 20 MT of surplus wheat after meeting the requirements of the public distribution system and buffer stocks.

"By restoring free export status, the government has not only recognised the strength and competitiveness of India's milling sector but also created a strong platform for Indian millers to re-establish their presence in international markets," Navneet Chitlangia, president of the Roller Flour Millers' Federation of India, told *FE*.

SIGNIFICANT MOVE

- In February, a 4-year-old ban on shipments was lifted with an export quota
- Only **0.15 MT** of wheat and **0.05 MT** of wheat products have been exported since the ban was lifted
- The government had permitted exports of **5 MT** of wheat and **1 MT** of wheat products
- At present, FCI has over **48.74 MT** of wheat in the central pool, against a strategic reserve norm of **20.52 MT** as of October 1



FM to take India growth story to Canada, US

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, August 24

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA Sitharaman will embark on an official visit to Canada and the United States from August 25 to September 2, to showcase India's growth story to global investors and position India as a preferred destination for long-term capital, innovation and strategic partnerships, while advancing economic cooperation.

The visit comes as India seeks to deepen its integration with global capital and business networks, with Sitharaman set to use meetings with investors and CEOs to highlight India's growth prospects and investment opportunities across key sectors.

In Toronto, Sitharaman will participate in the inaugural Economic and Financial Dialogue with Canada's Finance and National Revenue Minister François-Philippe Champagne. The dialogue will cover macroeconomic developments, financial-sector cooperation, bilateral investment opportunities and shared international priorities.

The engagement is also expected to build on recent discussions between the two countries around energy, critical minerals, technology, innovation and resilient supply chains, alongside efforts towards a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Opportunities in GIFT City-IFSC will also be highlighted as part of the investment discussions.

A key part of the Canada leg will be an investment roundtable with senior representatives from the energy, artificial intelligence and critical minerals sectors. The interaction will seek to "facilitate greater business-to-business linkages, identify investment opportunities and promote long-term commercial partnerships" between India and Canada, the finance ministry said in a statement.

The Finance Minister will then travel to the US, visiting Chicago, Asheville and New York between August 28 and September 2.

In Chicago, Sitharaman will meet prominent investors and senior private-sector leaders at a roundtable, followed by one-to-one meetings with selected CEOs and company executives. The discussions will centre on India's investment opportunities, its economic outlook and ways to expand business and investment partnerships between the two countries.

INVESTMENT POTENTIAL

- The visit comes as India seeks to deepen its integration with global capital and business networks
- In Toronto, Sitharaman will participate in the Economic and Financial Dialogue with Canadian Minister François-Philippe Champagne
- She will participate in a business roundtable with Canadian biz leaders, alongside senior MD & CEOs of Indian public banks



Smart grid corporate funding jumps 36%

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, August 24

GLOBAL CORPORATE FUNDING in the smart-grid sector rose 36% year-on-year to $1.9 billion in the first half of 2026, driven by a sharp jump in debt and public-market financing, even as venture-capital investment declined.

Corporate funding was raised across 41 deals in H1 2026, compared with $1.4 billion across 48 transactions in the corresponding period last year, indicating larger average deal sizes despite fewer transactions, according to Mercom Capital Group.

The sharpest increase came from debt and public-market financing, which surged 267% to $1.1 billion across seven deals, from $300 million across the same number of transactions in H1 2025. The rise made debt financing a major driver of the overall increase in capital flowing into smart-grid companies. Venture-capital funding, however, moved in the opposite direction, declining 35% to $711 million across 34 deals, from $1.1 billion across 41 transactions a year earlier. Smart Grid Communications attracted the highest VC investment, followed by Smart Charging and Distributed Generation and Integration.

SPAN led the largest VC transactions with $163 million, besides $75 million from Eaton, followed by Verse at $54 million, metiundo at $48 million and InCharge Energy at $46 million, the report showed.

Consolidation also accelerated during the period. Corporate mergers and acquisitions increased 75% to seven transactions in H1 2026, compared with four deals during the first half of 2025.

The bigger shift was visible in fresh investment pools targeting the sector. Five new clean-tech and smart-grid funds worth approximately $8.5 billion were announced in H1 2026, a 204% increase from $2.8 billion across three funds in the year-ago period.

India and Japan set to review trade agreement, streamline investment

SANDEEP SINGH & RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
Tokyo/New Delhi, August 24

INDIA IS SET to review its trade agreement with Japan signed in 2011 with an aim to fix the widening trade gap with the country and streamline committed investment worth 10 trillion yen (over $62 billion) in the next 10 years, a government official said on Monday. This comes as a delegation of over 220 stakeholders from Indian industry, led by the Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, is in Japan from 24th to 27th August to deepen collaboration with their Japanese counterparts.

Pitching for investment in India, Goyal at a roundtable here said that India is the fastest-growing large nation in the world and is poised to become a $30 trillion economy by 2047. Bridging this gap is clearly on the agenda, and a roadmap has been laid out, Goyal said, adding that India is working to open the doors to international engagement. "Today we have free trade agreements (FTAs) or preferential market access in markets worth $17 trillion," he said.

"I have three suggestions or asks, as I invite you to leverage the cost competitiveness of our FTAs and our engineering talent. I urge each one of you present in India and those who will be coming to deepen your localisation. It will help you become even more cost-competitive and actually help you supply your components to the rest of the world. The government is also willing to support you in innovation funding," the minister said.

Goyal cited the example of the first large investment by Suzuki Motor Corporation in the 1980s and said that the market cap of Suzuki in India is over 1.6 times that of the parent company Suzuki Motor Corporation. Stating that "some of the largest and most profitable operations are coming out of India," the minister pointed to the journey of 1,580 Japanese companies in India, adding that "We would like to see 1,580 Suzukis being created out of India and the doubling of the number of the companies operating out of India."

Piyush Goyal held several meetings during the day, including chairing a roundtable on capital goods, machinery, automotive and advanced manufacturing and engaging in talks with Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), Japan Chamber of Commerce & Industry (JCCI). The Indian business delegation (over 200) met the Fintech Association of Japan and delegates from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) in Tokyo.



Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal interacts with Japanese industry stakeholders and investors during a roundtable, convened by Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation, in Tokyo PTI

Sugar prices rise on speculation, lower output

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, August 24

THE SUGAR INDUSTRY on Monday attributed the recent spike in prices to speculative buying by traders and bulk consumers, as well as lower-than-estimated production, even as it maintained that there is no shortage of the sweetener.

The industry has stated that net sugar production after diversion for ethanol manufacturing in the 2025-26 season (October-September) is estimated at around 27.9 million tonne (MT), while the opening stock was 5 MT.

Annual domestic demand is seen at 28-28.5 MT, while the country exported 0.8 MT of sweetener before the government imposed a ban.

"India does not have a sugar shortage. Our production and stock position remain fundamentally comfortable," Niraj Shirgaokar, president, Indian Sugar and Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association (Isma), said.

Isma has projected the opening stock of sweetener at around 3.5 MT on October 1, 2026. "That is a healthy buffer against normal domestic demand, even after accounting for sugar diverted to ethanol," he said.

Shirgaokar said that average retail prices have risen but "the increase is not being driven by any actual shortfall in availability."

He further said that prices have started to ease following the government's decision to allow duty-free imports of 1 MT of raw sugar and impose stock-holding limits on dealers as well as bulk consumers.

Ex-mill prices have eased in the last few days and are currently ruling at around ₹55-56 per kg in two major sugar-producing states — Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, he said.

Isma has stated that gross sugar production, excluding diversion to ethanol, was revised to around 30.9 MT from the initial estimate of 34.5 MT, mainly due to weather-related effects, lower cane yield and lower recovery, including a higher crush rate in Maharashtra and red-rot-related varietal issues in Uttar Pradesh, an official said.

Shirgaokar said the industry was not involved in creating any artificial scarcity or increasing rates. However, he did not rule out the possibility that some mills might be holding stocks and said the government is looking into that. "The mills sold 75-80% of their stocks in the current marketing year at a loss, and they might achieve break-even," he said.

SUFFICIENT STOCK

- Annual domestic demand of sugar is seen at **28-28.5 MT**
- Net production after diversion for ethanol manufacturing in the 2025-26 season is estimated at around **27.9 MT**
- Isma has projected the opening stock of sweetener at around **3.5 MT** on October 1, 2026

NIRAJ SHIRGAOKAR, PRESIDENT, ISMA

Prices have started to ease following the government's decision to allow duty-free imports of 1 MT of raw sugar



Drugmakers may get relief from trial for quality lapses

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, August 24

THE DRAFT DRUGS, Medical Devices and Cosmetics Bill, 2026 proposes more room for drug and medical device companies to settle certain offences without facing criminal prosecution. Experts said a more lenient "practical" enforcement regime would reduce the fear among pharma companies and attract investments into the sector. At the same time, the draft retains stringent criminal punishment for offences involving adulterated or spurious drugs, particularly where such products are likely to cause death or grievous hurt.

The draft Bill has expanded the "compounding route" to reduce concerns among companies, including foreign drugmakers, about facing criminal prosecution for routine compliance failures. Six types of offences are proposed to be compounded, including certain offences involving not-of-standard-quality or misbranded drugs; failure to provide medical treatment or compensation to clinical trial participants; specified violations involving adulterated medical devices or devices manufactured, sold or distributed without the required licence or permission; wilfully obstructing a medical devices inspector; and failure to provide medical treatment or compensation during medical devices investigations.

The proposed law will empower authorised officers to allow an eligible offence to be resolved on payment of a prescribed amount instead of the company facing criminal proceedings. The amount cannot exceed the maximum fine prescribed for that offence. If a case is already being heard, the court would be informed and proceedings would be ended.

"The most common response to regulatory lapses under the existing law has been criminal prosecution against senior management. The proposed law seeks to remove that fear and give entrepreneurs more confidence to enter the sector," said Anay Shukla, founding partner at Arogya Legal.

Pranay Chitale, partner at Chamber One, said the Bill envisages a well-balanced compounding regime by distinguishing between serious public-health violations and regulatory non-compliance. "There is some discretion given to officers. I believe this should be accompanied by regulations governing the penalties to ensure there's uniformity in execution," Chitale said.

For serious offences, involving adulterated or spurious drugs, likely to cause death or grievous hurt, the draft proposes imprisonment of at least 10 years which may extend to life imprisonment, along with a fine of at least ₹10 lakh or three times the value of the drugs confiscated (whichever is higher).

Other offences involving spurious drugs could attract imprisonment of at least seven years, extendable to life, along with a fine of minimum ₹5 lakh or three times the value of the confiscated drugs (whichever is higher). The draft also provides for higher punishment for repeat offences.

COMPOUNDING ROUTE

- The draft retains stringent criminal punishment for offences involving adulterated or spurious drugs
- It has expanded the "compounding route" to reduce concerns among firms of facing criminal prosecution
- The law will empower authorised officers to allow an eligible offence to be resolved on payment of penalty



Opinion

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2026



COMPATIBLE TRADE

Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal

One can clearly see that for an economy like Japan, which has very good technologies but not enough people, which has excellent business practices but not enough market, India can be an excellent partner which provides economies of scale with a large domestic market

Borrowed time again

SpiceJet needs a viable business, not another open-ended rescue

SPICEJET HAS ONCE again been given breathing space, but the latest National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) reprieve should not obscure the more difficult question facing the government: how long can a financially distressed airline be kept going without a credible path to recovery? The tribunal's decision last week to rehear the remaining insolvency petitions, after lessor Aviator ML withdrew its case following a settlement, avoids an immediate insolvency proceeding. That may be welcome for an airline whose failure would further concentrate the aviation market. But SpiceJet's problems are no longer simply a temporary liquidity squeeze. Its domestic market share plunged to 1.6% in July, its lowest since 2014. An airline that once commanded more than a fifth of the domestic market has been reduced to a marginal player. The latest NCLT development thus buys time; it does not answer whether there is enough of a business left to revive.

SpiceJet's crisis has been building for years. The grounding of its Boeing 737 MAX fleet in 2019, followed by the pandemic, badly damaged its finances and operations. What followed was a vicious cycle: a shortage of operational aircraft reduced capacity and revenue, while inadequate cash prevented the airline from paying lessors, vendors, and maintenance providers. Fund-raising, settlements, and restructuring have periodically provided relief, but the recurrence of lessor disputes and insolvency petitions shows that the underlying balance-sheet problem has not been resolved. There have been signs of an operational recovery, but they have not translated into a sufficiently strong business. An airline cannot indefinitely rely on settlements with creditors and fresh capital to bridge the gap between its costs and its ability to generate cash.

There is also a peculiar problem with airline insolvency that the government cannot ignore. Unlike a conventional company, an airline may not own the assets that make it an airline. Aircraft are often leased; routes are not conventional property; and slots and other operating rights depend on regulatory and operational continuity. Go First demonstrated the difficulty. Once its lessors were able to recover aircraft during the insolvency process, the prospect of preserving the airline as a going concern became increasingly difficult. SpiceJet's creditors include aircraft lessors, making the dilemma even sharper: an insolvency process may protect creditors' rights but could simultaneously strip the airline of the assets needed to revive it. Yet avoiding insolvency indefinitely is not a solution either if the airline cannot generate enough cash to meet its obligations and sustain operations.

The government has a legitimate reason to want SpiceJet to survive. A market dominated by a few large carriers is hardly desirable, and the disappearance of another airline would affect employees, regional connectivity, and competition. But preserving competition cannot mean preserving an airline at any cost. Financial stress in aviation also deserves closer regulatory scrutiny because the consequences can extend beyond shareholders and creditors to employees, suppliers, and passengers. Safety, of course, must remain non-negotiable, irrespective of an airline's financial condition. What SpiceJet needs now is not another open-ended reprieve but a credible, time-bound recovery plan backed by capital and a demonstrable ability to rebuild its fleet and meet its obligations. The NCLT can decide whether the airline enters insolvency. The government must decide what it is trying to preserve. If the objective is a viable competitor, then SpiceJet needs to demonstrate that viability. Otherwise, repeated postponement risks turning a difficult rescue into a much larger reckoning later.

The less you can market, the better you must build

IN UNRESTRICTED CONSUMER categories, marketing can help build the product. In restricted ones, the equation is reversed: the product, distribution, consumer affinity, and organisation must build the brand. Few markets demonstrate this better than Indian alcoholic beverages.

India is emerging as one of the most attractive alcobev markets. Yet, it remains one of the hardest markets to build a consumer brand in. India's alcobev industry is estimated at ₹5.3 lakh crore in FY26, with brown or dark spirits accounting for 65-70% of spirits volumes (approximately 440 million cases in FY26).

But the more interesting story is not volume. It is value. Across major global alcohol markets, consumption is under pressure as moderation, affordability, and changing consumer preferences reshape drinking behaviour. In 2025, beverage-alcohol volumes across leading markets declined around 2%. In India, beverage-alcohol volumes grew around 4% in 2025. The global industry's growing challenge is creating value while people drink less. In India, the opportunity is to create value while the drinking-age population expands, category participation deepens, and consumers trade up. India adds 15-20 million consumers of legal drinking age every year. Increasingly, they appear willing to drink better, even if not proportionately more. This changes how we analyse the industry: Alcobev value creation equals volume multiplied by premiumisation, distribution, and brand power minus regulatory friction.



KARAN TAURANI
NITA KAPOOR
Respectively EVP, Elara Capital, and former CEO, International Spirits And Wines Association of India

India has something most mature alcohol markets increasingly lack: demographics. A young population, rising disposable incomes, urbanisation, and relatively low per-capita consumption provide a long runway for growth. But volume is increasingly the floor of the investment thesis, not the ceiling. The question is shifting from how much more India will drink to what — and whether the dominance of brown spirits will make room for new niches and occasions.

Indeed, the next decade may not be about replacing whisky, but about multiplying occasions. Consumers are moving from mass towards prestige-and-above products, while Indian single malts, premium gin, tequila, craft products, and ready-to-drink are widening the repertoire. The winners will need a portfolio rather than a single-category strategy — developing products internally, making selective acquisitions, forming meaningful distribution tie-ups, collaborating with brands, and building presence across places of consumption. The future will be about creating more value per case. If industry volumes grow in mid-single digits while premium segments grow in double digits, earnings could compound materially faster than consumption.

India is not one alcohol market; it is several markets stitched together. Every state can have different excise structures, taxation, licensing, distribution systems, and retail formats. That complexity can become a formidable barrier to entry.

Presence in the right stores, premium outlets, bars, and restaurants determines discovery, trial, and adoption. In most consumer categories, distribution enables marketing. In alcobev, distribution itself is marketing. The shelf is also the billboard.

When conventional advertising is unavailable and surrogate advertising faces rising scrutiny, brands cannot simply buy attention. Product quality, packaging, innovation, retail visibility, on-premise experiences, bartender advocacy, and word-of-mouth have to work harder to create stronger brands. In alcobev, the moat is not just what sits inside the bottle. It is the organisation that gets the bottle into the right shelf, the right bar, and the consumer's consideration set. Regulation reinforces the moat. Companies capable of navigating multiple state regimes and building brands without conventional advertising develop capabilities newcomers cannot easily recreate.

That leads to the central paradox: The less brands can rely on marketing, the better the underlying business has to become. The winning playbook is simple: Innovate harder. Listen deeper. Distribute smarter. Build in the dark. Because when attention cannot easily be bought, brands have to earn it.

TECHPROOF EXPRESS

A SMALLER TEAM AUGMENTED BY AI TOOLING CAN NOW CREDIBLY BID AGAINST A WORKFORCE MANY TIMES ITS SIZE

IT majors facing a rough tide

SIDDHARTH PAI
Technology consultant and venture capitalist
By invitation



REUTERS REPORTED THIS week that TCS Chief Executive K Krithivasan told the news agency that roughly 80% of the company's contracts within its finance, human resources, and other business services segment are now based on outcome performance measures, a proportion that has reportedly doubled since AI went fully mainstream in late 2023. Cognizant put it plainly: with AI, the fundamentals are shifting, and clients now expect measurable outcomes rather than hours logged. Infosys faces the same pressure. This is not a rounding adjustment to a familiar business model. It is the business model changing underneath the industry that built modern Bengaluru (*https://l1nq.com/cl27rk7*).

The mechanism is straightforward enough. Existing customers, having watched AI compress the effort behind routine service delivery, are demanding a share of the savings before the vendor even proposes them. Some clients are not negotiating the discount at all. They are moving the work in-house, having concluded that a capability once available only from a large outsourcer can now be assembled internally with considerably less external dependency. Industry executives described both patterns simultaneously: shrinking fees on retained work, and outright loss of other work, layered on top of contracts that are shorter than before because nobody, client or vendor, is confident enough in the technology's trajectory to commit to the five-year terms that once defined this industry.

Shorter contracts are themselves worth sitting with. A five-year deal was not merely a revenue commitment. It was an admission that switching costs were high enough, and the technology stable enough, to justify a long relationship. When contracts compress to 12 or 18 months, both sides are quietly conceding that nobody can confidently price a service five years out, because nobody knows what a unit of that service will cost to deliver by year three.

Meanwhile, the entry-level pipeline that once absorbed hundreds of thousands of engineering graduates a year has narrowed sharply. TCS cut its net headcount by more than 23,000 in the last fiscal year, its fresher intake guidance well below the pace of a few years ago. Wipro trimmed fresher hiring guidance too, with reports of recruits waiting months for onboarding that may not arrive. I have written in this column before about what disappears when the junior rung is removed: not simply cost, but the years of mistake-making and correction that once produced the senior engineer capable of judging AI-generated output rather than merely accepting it. That skill gap does not show up on a quarterly call. It shows up three years later, in exactly the client engagements now being priced on outcomes nobody can yet reliably forecast.

The next several quarters look less like a gentle transition and more like a genuine repricing of the entire industry's value proposition

Against this, a second story is unfolding among the tier-two firms, and it complicates the usual narrative of AI simply gutting Indian IT. Persistent Systems posted 16.1% year-on-year revenue growth in its June quarter, its 25th consecutive quarter of sequential growth, with record order bookings. Coforge grew revenue by roughly a third year-on-year, aided by acquisitions but also by genuine competitive wins. Both firms are unmistakably smaller than TCS, Infosys, or Cognizant. Neither can match the bench strength the majors have spent decades building. And increasingly, that bench no longer decides who wins the contract.

This is the detail that should worry the majors most. For years, an enormous employee base was itself a competitive moat: the ability to staff a large, complex engagement quickly, absorb volatility, and offer redundancy a smaller rival could not. AI erodes that moat directly, because a smaller, more concentrated team augmented by AI tooling can now credibly bid against a workforce many times its size. Scale, which used to be the majors' answer to every RFP (request for proposal), is turning into overhead that outcome-based pricing punishes rather than rewards.

None of this means the large firms are in terminal decline. TCS, Infosys, and Cognizant retain client relationships, domain depth, and delivery infrastructure built over decades that a Coforge or Persistent cannot replicate overnight, and Cognizant's own large-deal pipeline this year shows the majors can still win at scale when they choose to compete on outcomes rather than headcount. But the next several quarters look less like a gentle transition and more like a genuine repricing of the entire industry's value proposition, conducted in public, one earnings call at a time. Expect margin pressure as outcome-based contracts absorb AI's productivity gains before shareholders see them. Expect continued softness in fresher hiring, since the economics of training juniors no longer pencil out the way they once did. Expect further bifurcation, with nimbler tier-two players continuing to take share in specific verticals where a smaller AI-augmented team can move faster than a legacy delivery organisation built for a different era.

The firms that navigate this well will not be the ones with the largest workforce or the most sophisticated AI tooling. They will be the ones that work out, ahead of their clients, which parts of a contract genuinely deserve outcome-based pricing and which are being repriced simply because the word "AI" now appears in every renewal negotiation. That distinction requires exactly the kind of judgement this column has argued is becoming scarce even as answers become abundant. The next two or three quarters will show which of these firms actually possess it, and which have merely been fortunate that nobody has yet asked the harder question. That question is coming, and it will not wait for a convenient quarter.

Ensure smooth sailing after declaration



PRADEEP S MEHTA
PURUSHENDRA SINGH
Respectively Secretary General and Visiting Fellow at CUTS International

The recent road map for India-Australia maritime cooperation is welcome; the next task is building a bottom-up ecosystem for meaningful outcomes

THE 2026 INDIA-AUSTRALIA Joint Declaration on Defence and Security Cooperation puts maritime security at the heart of the bilateral relationship, notably through a new Maritime Security Collaboration Road map (MSCR). This signals that both countries now grasp how critical the maritime domain has become to the region's strategic, economic, and technological future. However, with the political framework now in place, the real challenge lies in implementation; building a bottom-up ecosystem involving the defence industry, research institutions, non-traditional maritime stakeholders, and regional partners to turn the declaration's ambitions into concrete outcomes.

The joint declaration marks a key moment in one of Indo-Pacific's most consequential partnerships. Among its many provisions strengthening defence ties, one commitment deserves particular attention: deepening maritime cooperation through a new India-Australia MSCR. This signals that both countries now grasp just how critical the maritime domain has become to the region's strategic, economic, and technological future.

The relationship has travelled a long road since the 2009 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Strategic trust has deepened considerably since then, propelled by the 2020 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, alongside expanding military exchanges, defence-industrial links, structured dialogues, and the Quad. This new declaration builds on that momentum, emphasising interoperability, defence-industrial synergy, maritime cooperation, and emerging technologies.

Yet, partnerships are only as valuable as their follow-throughs. The moment has come for both countries to move past declarations and towards concrete implementation.

The MSCR offers exactly that opportunity. It aims to improve coordination, information-sharing, and capability-building across maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, logistics, and undersea domain awareness. These priorities reflect real pressures — intensifying competition in the Indian Ocean, rising militarisation, threats to maritime infrastructure, and increasing grey-zone activity. Both countries also depend on secure sea lanes for their economic well-being, making the protection of maritime commons a shared strategic imperative.

The next task is building an ecosystem that draws in academia, industry, and other stakeholders. Four key steps are critical to translating outputs into meaningful outcomes.

The emphasis on defence innovation, science and technology cooperation, and stronger supply chains sets a solid foundation

Firstly, defence-industry collaboration must move beyond symbolic gestures and occasional trade delegations. The declaration calls for deeper and regular industry engagement and stronger supply-chain and innovation linkages, but achieving this requires a standing dialogue mechanism connecting manufacturers, maritime technology firms, shipbuilders, researchers, and startups to pursue real joint research and development and innovation projects. The inaugural India-Australia Defence Industry Roundtable, held in Sydney in October 2025, has already laid the groundwork here.

Australia brings strong capabilities in autonomous systems, underwater technology, cyber tools, and advanced manufacturing expertise, as documented in a CUTS International study commissioned by the defence ministry. Meanwhile, India offers substantial manufacturing scale and a fast-growing defence-industrial base. Marrying these strengths could enable genuinely ambitious joint projects.

Second, research institutions and think tanks need a bigger seat at the table. Both countries should direct academic and policy expertise towards pressing maritime challenges — undersea infrastructure protection, maritime law, cable security, supply chains, and AI-driven maritime systems. Structured collaboration through joint research, policy dialogue, scenario planning, and regular Track 1.5 discussions could help translate analysis into actionable guidance. The INDUS-X model, through which Indian and American defence ministries pose capability challenges to startups and private innovators, offers a good model worth adapting for India-Australia cooperation.

Third, maritime security must extend beyond conventional defence. Therefore, coastguards, ports, shipping, offshore energy, and communications infrastructure must be integrated into a unified security approach. Undersea cables illustrate why this matters — they carry roughly 98% of global internet traffic and underpin digital finance, critical infrastructure, and military communications. Protecting these assets will require close collaboration between government, private industry, and academic institutions in both countries.

Regional integration is the fourth step. India and Australia are influential members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Quad, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Rather than limiting cooperation to bilateral channels, both nations should position themselves as facilitators of broader regional public goods, maritime domain awareness, security cooperation, and disaster response across the Indian Ocean rim. The declaration's commitment to working with Association of South East Asian Nations members and Pacific Island nations on these fronts is a promising step that plays to both regions' strengths.

The declaration's emphasis on defence innovation, science and technology cooperation, and stronger supply chains sets a solid foundation. The real test now lies with policymakers and industry leaders, as they must translate this language into results. Concrete steps like annual defence innovation summits, dedicated regular industry round tables, joint university research grants, startup innovation challenges, and regular Track 1.5 dialogues could help convert the road map's ambitions into tangible outcomes.

India and Australia have laid out an impressive vision on paper. What remains is proving they can match that vision with sustained action.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Corporate governance

Apropos of "Distance must matter" (*FE*, August 24), the proposed Corporate Laws Amendment Bill, 2026, presents an important opportunity to strengthen corporate governance and restore public confidence in the way companies are managed. Stricter disclosure norms, stronger internal controls, meaningful protection for whistle-blowers, and timely penalties for violations are essential. However, enforcement must be consistent and fair. Regulations should deter misconduct without creating unnecessary compliance burdens for honest businesses, especially smaller enterprises. A sound corporate law framework must strike a balance between responsibility and protection. Strong, competent, and genuinely independent directors can help restore investor confidence, prevent governance failures, and ensure corporate growth serves the wider economy rather than a narrow group of insiders.
—Bal Govind, Noida

Quiet quitting

Apropos of "Quiet quitting, loud management failure" (*FE*, August 24), employer engagement with the workforce is vital for a healthy workplace. With only 23% of Indian employees engaged and 59% disengaged, "quiet quitting" is unsurprising as employees become less inclined to contribute beyond the minimum. A key concern is that salary increments often fail to reflect talent, skills, contribution, and past performance. When high and low performers receive similar hikes, deserving employees feel undervalued and motivation suffers. Management must link rewards more closely to performance while ensuring a healthy work-life balance.
—PV Prakash, Mumbai

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Editor's TAKE

India-China talks: Clearing the ground for Xi's Delhi visit

Coming just weeks before Xi's visit to New Delhi for the BRICS Summit, the talks aim to stabilise the relationship and lay the groundwork for a significant summit

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's arrival in Beijing for the 25th round of Special Representatives (SR) talks with Foreign Minister Wang Yi looks, on the calendar, like routine business under a mechanism running since 2003. It is not. This is the first SR round in a full year, and it comes weeks before Xi Jinping is expected in New Delhi for the BRICS Summit on September 12-13 – a visit that would be his first to India in years.

The border talks are, in effect, ground-clearing for a summit both capitals want to succeed.The recent record shows real, if narrow, movement. The October 2024 disengagement at Depsang and Demchok ended a four-year military standoff and revived an SR channel dormant since 2019.

Modi's visit to Tianjin last August, his first to China in seven years, was followed by direct flights resuming after a five-year gap, eased visas, a revived Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, reopened border trade, and a partial easing of Chinese curbs on fertiliser, tunnel-boring machines and rare-earth exports. The Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on border affairs has already met twice this year to prepare the ground for this round.

Yet the irritants are many. The 3,488-km Line of Actual Control remains undemarcated, and disengagement at flashpoints has not been matched by genuine de-escalation of the forces both sides massed after the deadly 2020 Galwan clash. Beijing continues to claim Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet," renaming its towns, and recent reports of Chinese troop movements there – dismissed by New Delhi but not forgotten – keep resurfacing.

China's tilt toward Pakistan during last year's conflict following the Pahalgam terror attack has not helped. Nor has the economics: India's trade deficit with China has crossed $100 billion, a record, and is still widening this year, even as New Delhi remains dependent on Beijing for as much as 90 per cent of its rare-earth magnets and permanent-magnet imports. This is why 23 years and 25 rounds have produced management, not resolution. For China, the boundary is one lever among many in a wider contest with India; for India, it is a matter of sovereignty that cannot be traded away for economic convenience. That asymmetry of stakes, layered on a trust deficit Galwan made permanent, means both sides now negotiate for stability rather than settlement – a tactical thaw, as most analysts describe it, not a strategic reset.

The way forward lies in accepting that reality rather than resisting it. New Delhi should press the SR and WMCC channels to make de-escalation – not just disengagement – the next concrete milestone, while building the domestic capacity in rare earths and manufacturing that makes engagement with Beijing a choice rather than a compulsion.

Xi's possible visit should be judged by whether it locks in verifiable troop reductions, not by the optics of a handshake. Diplomacy with China has always demanded patience without illusions. Nothing in Beijing this week suggests that changes.

When loyalty becomes the only qualification

The Trump administration shows how power can turn institutions into instruments of personal loyalty. Beneath the combative rhetoric and high-profile departures lies a deeper danger: persuasion replacing knowledge, loyalty eclipsing institutional responsibility, and educated people normalising behaviour they once condemned



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA



Here is where it is coming to an end, step by step. The façade is crumbling; the putrid structure is becoming visible. First, they leave. There is no grand theoretical explanation, no elaborate political doctrine, no convincing institutional account. They simply depart, citing personal reasons, political disagreements, reassignment or silence. This is how such systems often end, not with a single dramatic collapse, but with departures that gradually reveal what had been concealed by the appearance of control. President Trump's administration offers a laboratory in which loyalty can become more valuable than competence, repetition more useful than evidence, aggression more effective than explanation, and personal allegiance more important than institutional responsibility. The deeper danger is that intelligent people learn to justify the behaviour, reproduce it and eventually mistake their participation in it for political virtue. The political order begins to fracture, and their loyalty does not necessarily protect them.

Pam Bondi, former Attorney General, Tulsi Gabbard, the former spy chief, and Karoline Leavitt, the former White House press secretary, are revealing precisely because they are not identical figures. Leavitt transformed the office of White House press secretary from an institution supposed to mediate between government and journalists into something closer to a combat platform. The press secretary became an amplifier. The exchange was no longer about what the administration had done, but about how effectively the administration could defeat the person asking. A press briefing ceases to be an information mechanism when the performance of dominance becomes more important than the transmission of information. The exchange is clipped, posted, shared, praised, attacked and recycled. A hostile question becomes a thirty-second video. The answer need not survive scrutiny if the clip survives the news cycle. The reporter could be recategorised as an enemy, a partisan, a "left-wing hack". Once that transformation occurs, the factual content of the question becomes secondary. The audience is invited to judge allegiance rather than accuracy. This is precisely the political psychology of propaganda. The public no longer asks, "Is the claim true?" It asks, "Whose side is this person on?" Plato's warning about persuasion without knowledge becomes particularly relevant here because propaganda does not require the elimination of facts. It requires only the destruction of a common procedure for deciding which facts deserve belief.

> THE QUESTION IS NO LONGER WHY THE LEADER BEHAVED AS HE DID, BUT WHY SO MANY EDUCATED PEOPLE LEARNED TO MAKE HIS BEHAVIOUR APPEAR NORMAL. AND ISN'T IT HAPPENING, IN DIFFERENT FORMS, IN MANY OF OUR COUNTRIES?

The writer is a columnist based in Colombo

Pam Bondi exposes a different mechanism: the transformation of institutional authority into personal loyalty. Her exceptional loyalty to Trump did not guarantee permanence. Her removal demonstrates the brutal rule of personalised government: loyalty is necessary but never sufficient. A subordinate can be indispensable on Monday and expendable on Thursday. Such systems consume loyalists because those who gain institutional authority, knowledge and independent judgement can eventually become liabilities.

The Epstein affair further reveals the collision between secrecy, expectation and political loyalty. A promise to release information creates an obligation; delay creates suspicion; incomplete disclosure creates a vacuum filled by speculation. The dismissed official becomes part of the story. Removing an official does not remove the underlying institutional crisis.

Gabbard presents the third variation. She is the subordinate whose independent judgement can become politically dangerous even when she remains formally loyal. Her reported hesitation over the justification for the Iran war and her defence of a former subordinate illustrate the narrow space available to officials who possess their own institutional credibility. Such a system needs experienced people because inexperienced loyalists are incompetent. Yet experienced people possess knowledge, networks and judgement of their own. The more seriously they exercise those qualities, the greater the possibility that they will disagree with the leader. The system consequently begins selecting not merely for loyalty but for anticipatory obedience.

Nietzsche wrote in Beyond Good and Evil, "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies." A conviction can become immune to evidence precisely because it is experienced as moral identity. The political loyalist does not necessarily believe every statement because it is factually persuasive. Joseph Goebbels did not invent propaganda; he industrialised its relationship with the modern mass public. Stalin's system did not survive because every Soviet official was personally convinced of every proposition issued by the Kremlin. It survived because institutions were progressively organised around obedience, fear, career incentives and the destruction of independent sources of authority. The Roman imperial system offers another variation. Under emperors such as Tiberius and Domitian, proximity to power could be extraordinarily advantageous and extraordinarily dangerous. Court politics rewarded those who understood the ruler's psychology, but the same intimacy could make a courtier vulnerable when the ruler's suspicion changed direction. Tacitus understood that imperial power corrupts not only those who command but those who adapt themselves to command.

The personalised leader does not create loyal institutions; he creates loyal relationships within institutions. An institution survives a bad minister because its procedures remain stronger than the personality occupying the office. A personalised administration survives by weakening precisely those procedures.

He claims that "the more powerful than the weaker" naturally deserves more, and that laws can become instruments devised by the weak to restrain the strong. That argument has survived because it contains a temptation that democratic societies never permanently eliminate. Power can persuade people that its own success is evidence of its righteousness. If the leader wins, defeats opponents, humiliates journalists and forces institutions to retreat, supporters can interpret every victory as proof that he is right. Failure becomes sabotage by enemies. Criticism becomes persecution. Evidence becomes propaganda. Accountability becomes betrayal. The political system then develops an extraordinary capacity to convert contradiction into confirmation.

He insists that "to do injustice is the greatest of evils, and to suffer injustice is the next greatest evil." Political systems obsessed with humiliation, victory and retaliation teach their servants to fear losing power more than becoming corrupted by it. Once retaining the leader's favour becomes the supreme political good, every compromise with truth can be rationalised as necessary. The official who knows a claim is false can repeat it. The official who knows a policy is failing can defend it. The official who sees an institution being degraded can convince herself that she is protecting democracy by remaining inside the room.

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster." Its political meaning is harsher. Opposition movements can reproduce the habits of the power they oppose. When criticism becomes treason and disagreement becomes existential, the result is not merely bad government but epistemic decay-the loss of a shared basis for deciding what happened.

The question is no longer why the leader behaved as he did, but why so many educated people learned to make his behaviour appear normal. And isn't it happening, in different forms, in many of our countries?

PIC TALK



People take part in a 'Kanwar Yatra' procession on the last Monday of the holy month of 'Shravan', in Ajmer, Rajasthan. PHOTO: PTI

Schools are not content factories



SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

A child steps onto a stage, gives a flawlessly rehearsed line, smiles at precisely the correct moment and waits while a teacher adjusts the camera. The performance is replayed because someone blinked. Then again because the background was untidy. Finally, the perfect shot is captured. Within hours, it emerges online with joyful music, polished captions and a message celebrating experiential learning. But halfway between the first take and the last reel, an uncomfortable question arises: Was the activity created for the child to learn or for the school to be seen?

Social media has surely changed how schools communicate. Parents today want glimpses of classroom life. Photographs and films may attractively document success, highlight ingenuity and give families a glimpse into situations they would otherwise miss. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a school showing its work. The trouble occurs when presenting the work increasingly becomes the work itself. True education is rarely flashy or photogenic. It often looks quiet and plain. It shows up as a sudden, messy question that stops a class to start a new talk. It is the simple loop of reading, thinking, trying, failing and getting better. This slow work does not make a flashy 30-second video, but a synchronised dance does. And that is where the trap begins. Most schools today face an increasingly competitive environment. Their social-media feeds now serve as quiet digital brochures. A colourful activity, an impressive celebration or a confident child speaking before a camera can communicate vibrancy far more quickly than examination results, teacher training or carefully planned classroom instruction. But what happens when visibility begins influencing educational priorities?

Teachers already hold responsibilities that extend well beyond teaching. Between lesson preparation, grading, meetings and the pressure to capture social-media-worthy classroom pictures and videos, teachers are stretched past their breaking point. A hidden concern is what children learn from this culture. When every activity and achievement requires a photo or public display, children may start viewing participation purely as a performance and success solely as a bid for applause.

Activities which were meant to spark curiosity instead turn into staged photo opportunities. Extroverted children become the visible face of the school, while introverted ones making massive academic progress remain invisible because real growth doesn't photograph well. This creates a dangerous definition of success. Schools must ask whether the constant recording strips away the authenticity of childhood. A science experiment does not become more educational because it was uploaded. A plantation drive is not more meaningful because children posed beside saplings. Kindness does not need a hashtag to become valuable. Some of the profound educational moments simply cannot and should not be captured. The goal is not to quit social media entirely, which is impractical. Instead, schools must re-establish their core priorities, ensuring that genuine education always comes before documentation.

Schools must evaluate activities by a simple standard: is it worth doing if it isn't posted online? Parents too can support this shift by looking past social-media metrics to demand deeper quality such as critical thinking, teacher support and true student growth. Because schools are not production houses, teachers are not content creators, and children are not marketing assets. Educational success outlives fleeting digital attention; its true value is measured by what remains when the cameras are turned off.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

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INDIA MUST BREAK THE COACHING TRAP

India's growing coaching culture is a symptom of a deeper crisis in higher education and employment. The answer is not more coaching centres, but stronger government colleges, better teaching and greater job creation.

The Union and State governments must establish more quality government colleges, equipped with competent faculty and adequate infrastructure. Teachers should be recruited through transparent, rigorous and corruption-free processes. Quality education must become a public responsibility rather than a privilege available mainly to those who can afford expensive coaching.

Colleges should encourage independent learning, critical thinking and strong academic foundations so students can compete successfully in entrance and recruitment examinations without becoming dependent on coaching institutes. The employment crisis also needs urgent attention. The growing number of graduates and competitive-exam aspirants cannot be accommodated without creating sufficient opportunities in both government and private sectors. Education without employment prospects only deepens frustration.

Coaching centres, if permitted to function, must be strictly regulated by an independent statutory authority. Minimum standards, qualified teachers, transparent operations and reasonable fee structures should be mandatory. Parents and students must be protected from commercial exploitation.

The obsession with coaching has turned education into a costly race. India must restore the primacy of classrooms, teachers and merit. sustainable way forward.

VANDANA | CHANDIGARH

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Onam must rise above celebration

Onam is more than a harvest festival or an elaborate feast. It celebrates Kerala's rich cultural heritage while carrying a timeless message of equality, compassion and social harmony. The legend of King Mahabali evokes an era remembered for dignity, prosperity and fairness.

At a time when commercialisation increasingly overshadows traditional celebrations, Onam offers an opportunity to return to its deeper values. The festival should bring people together, transcending barriers of caste, creed, religion and social status. Unity and mutual respect must remain central to its spirit.

Celebrations must also become environmentally responsible. Avoiding single-use plastics and creating traditional Pookalams with locally available, natural flowers can help protect the environment without compromising tradition. Most importantly, Onam should be a festival of sharing.

Let this Onam be more than feasting and festivities. Let it strengthen our commitment to unity, harmony, environmental responsibility and compassion. Preserving these values will ensure that Onam remains meaningful and continues to inspire generations to come, while reminding us that true celebration lies in kindness, inclusion and collective responsibility.

JUBEL D'CRUZ | MUMBAI

Confidence must be backed by capability

Apropos "Confidence is India's New Neighbourhood Doctrine" (August 24, 2026). External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's formulation that India must engage China from a position of confidence is coherent, but doctrine and reality are two different things.

India still runs a substantial trade deficit with China and remains dependent on it for rare earths, APIs and electronic components. Despite years of emphasis on Atma Nirbhar Bharat, this dependence has not been meaningfully reduced. Confidence without the industrial and economic strength to support it risks remaining an aspiration rather than a strategy.

On Bangladesh, the contradiction is equally visible. Allowing Sheikh Hasina to deliver a politically charged address from Indian soil while simultaneously emphasising mutual interest and confident neighbourly engagement sends mixed signals to a government in Dhaka that India needs as a partner.

Pakistan's evolving security ties with Saudi Arabia and Turkey add pressure on India's strategic environment. Confident words alone cannot address these challenges. Whether this doctrine becomes lasting policy or remains rhetoric will be judged through factories, border agreements and sustained diplomacy.

K CHIDANAND KUMAR | BENGALURU

Teach children the value of money

A tragic incident in Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra, in which a teenage boy and his parents died while trying to prevent him from risking his life at a tourist spot, has raised concerns about parental guidance and financial awareness among children. Reports suggest the boy was distressed because his demand for an expensive mobile phone could not be fulfilled.

Such incidents highlight a larger concern. The old saying, "Amdani athanni aur kharcha rupaiya" - spend within your means - remains relevant. Yet, in an age of showmanship and consumerism, families often spend beyond their means, sometimes relying on loans and creating financial stress. Parents must also be honest with children about their financial limitations instead of creating the impression that every demand can be met. Children should be taught to distinguish between needs and wants and to understand the value of patience, effort and saving.

Similarly, parents should assess a child's interests and abilities before spending heavily on coaching or education. Blind competition can leave young people frustrated and unprepared for their careers. Love children unconditionally, but make them financially responsible and self-reliant. Teaching them the value of money today can help them make wiser choices tomorrow.

SUNIL OKHADE | INDORE

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NEW DELHI | TUESDAY | AUGUST 25, 2026

Commercialisation is killing middle-class dreams

The institutions once created to democratise opportunity are increasingly beginning to resemble marketplaces. The question India must now confront is uncomfortable: when education becomes a privilege that only the affluent can comfortably afford, what happens to the promise of merit, mobility and equal opportunity?



VK BAHUGUNA

The recent agitation at Jantar Mantar, Jharkhand, and in many other states over paper leaks has shaken the conscience of the nation. The spark ignited by the unwarranted UGC guidelines dividing students and the country along caste lines was overtaken by the paper leak controversy and put the country into utter turmoil, which was exploited by anti-national forces, as in previous two agitations. The recent police actions and exposures on paper leaks have proved that senior professors and a chain of people responsible for conducting the exams were found deeply involved in this racket, which clearly proves the cesspool of the Indian education system. Let me discuss how the changes have occurred since people like me from the middle class got admitted and completed a Master's degree and my son got admitted in 2001 in B Tech at IIT Delhi and completed B Tech with a very nominal yearly fee of less than eighteen thousand. Today, it is not possible for a Group A officer to admit his children to private medical colleges as the fees are exorbitantly high.

Let us examine this issue as, across the length and breadth of India, an unspoken tragedy is unfolding inside middle-class homes. The desperate parents are looking at their life savings, calculating property values, and wondering if they can afford to keep their child's dreams alive. The outrage exploding among Indian youth today is not merely about leaked question papers or compromised examinations. Those are just the visible sparks landing on a massive economic despair. Beneath the headlines lies a far deeper, more insidious crisis: the outright commercialisation of higher education. A seat in a classroom — once viewed as a gateway out of poverty — has been transformed into a high-yield investment asset class. Today, education, instead of realising the dreams of parents, is being choked by the heavy ash of commercial greed.

How did a nation that built its identity on accessible public education allow its finest institutions to become playgrounds for financial privilege? Publicly funded institutions were originally established to democratise excellence using taxpayers' money. Today, their fee structures reflect a sharp corporate turn, functioning under the banner of financial self-sustainability.

At premier management institutes like IIM Ahmedabad, Bangalore, and Calcutta, the flagship two-year Post Graduate Programme in Management fee stands at approximately ₹24.5 lakh to ₹27.5 lakh. When personal expenses, books, and living costs are added, the total bill easily pushes towards ₹30 lakh to ₹35 lakh. For a standard four-year B Tech degree across Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), tuition fees sit at ₹1,00,000 per semester. Once institutional fees, mess overheads, and hostel charges are factored in, a student spends ₹9.5 lakh to ₹13.9 lakh across four years. For families locked out of the hypercompetitive government medical seats, private medical colleges demand anywhere from ₹50 lakh to well over ₹1.5 crore for an undergraduate degree.

Now look at the inequality chasm: costs versus average Indian income. The paradox of India's higher education pricing becomes stark when evaluated against the economic reality of an ordinary citizen. India's average net annual per capita income is approximately ₹2,08,000. The tuition and programme fees of an IIM MBA (₹27.5 lakh) equal more than 13 years of an average Indian's total annual gross income. A four-year B.Tech at an IIT ₹11 lakh) consumes over five years of average annual earnings. A private medical seat costing ₹1 crore requires the equivalent of nearly 48 years of an average citizen's net income. To bridge this massive gap, families are forced into commercial banks where student loans carry interest rates ranging between 8.5 per cent and 13 per cent annually.

A student enters the workforce carrying a crushing debt burden before earning their first salary. Young graduates are forced to abandon careers in basic science, public service, or entrepreneurship simply to chase high-paying corporate roles needed to service monthly EMIs. I am reminded of the then Education Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, who, in the government led by Atal Behari Vajpayee, questioned the fee hikes by the IIMs and IITs, but in the name of autonomy, he was criticised by these institutions. The question is, when government IIMs and IITs are becoming commercial and profiteering, then why not the private ones? Another big fraud is the so-called Non-Resident Indian (NRI) quota. This mechanism of quota in medical and technical institutions functions as a legalised fast track, while meritorious poor students suffer. This system allows rich candidates with significantly lower entrance ranks to purchase seats simply because they can pay three to five times the regular fee.



A STUDENT ENTERS THE WORKFORCE CARRYING A CRUSHING DEBT BURDEN BEFORE EARNING THEIR FIRST SALARY. YOUNG GRADUATES ARE FORCED TO ABANDON CAREERS IN BASIC SCIENCE, PUBLIC SERVICE, OR ENTREPRENEURSHIP SIMPLY TO CHASE HIGH-PAYING CORPORATE ROLES NEEDED TO SERVICE MONTHLY EMIS

When money buys entry while merit sits on a waiting list, the social contract between the state and its youth shatters.

Though the Supreme Court of India recently slammed expanded definitions of the NRI quota as a "money-spinning tactic" and a "fraud" on merit, institutional loopholes continue to monetise education. Other countries offer a stark contrast; many developed nations treat higher education as vital public infrastructure rather than a commercial enterprise. For example, in Germany, public universities charge zero tuition fees for undergraduate programmes, and in France, higher education is heavily state-subsidised, with public university tuition set at nominal rates (often under 250 euros per year for standard degrees). In Norway, Finland, and Denmark, public universities operate under state-funded models, ensuring higher education remains a public right free from commercial exploitation. These countries understand a basic principle: an educated youth yields higher tax bases, stronger innovation, and better civic governance over a lifetime.

Learning in India is becoming a profit-driven marketplace, leading to fundamental distortions. First, it results in the denial of access to higher education at an affordable cost. Secondly, meritocracy is subverted, and wealth replaces talent and hard work as the primary gateway to elite professions. Third, families are plunged into multi-generational debt, turning higher education into a debt trap. When medical graduates pay over a crore for an MBBS, the market pressure to recover that capital inflates healthcare costs for the entire country.

I would like to earnestly request the Prime Minister and all political parties to forge a consensus on drastically reforming the education sector. A National Education Fee Task Force should be set up to assess the cost of education first in government and private institutions by taking all parameters into account. A massive scheme should be launched by an Act of Parliament to make higher education accessible and affordable.

The Central and State Governments, operating alongside judicial oversight, must act immediately.

This task force must be legally empowered to audit and cap fees, establish strict, transparent fee ceilings for all professional degrees, ie Medical, Engineering, Management, and Law, across both public and private sectors, strictly according to actual operational costs rather than profit margins or aggressive capital expansion.

The task force must abolish monetised quotas and eliminate commercial seats such as the NRI quota in private and state institutions, ensuring seat allocation remains strictly merit-based. Further, it must ensure subsidised student loan interest rates for lower — and middle-income families. We must realise that a nation that sells its classrooms to the highest bidder sells its own future. It is time to stop treating higher education as a windfall commercial enterprise and restore it as a sacred public trust.

The writer is Former Director General of the 'Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education' He is presently Chairman of the 'Centre for Resource Management and Environment

Bihar's jobs politics: From promises to reality



GYAN BHADRA

Prashant Kishor has taken oath as MLA from Bankipur, and the first real scorecard for his politics will likely be written in employment numbers, not vote counts. Jobs and self-employment, more than any other portfolio, will decide whether his new role is seen as substance or spectacle.

He has pledged to help 10,000 young people from his constituency find work. Barely has the promise settled when Purnea MP Pappu Yadav, who has long positioned himself as a benefactor of Bihar's job seekers, raised the stakes further — announcing that 30-40 companies will visit Purnea, reportedly with Rahul Gandhi in attendance, to offer jobs to roughly the same number of youths. Two politicians, two nearly identical figures, one obvious question: whose number is bigger matters far less than how many of these jobs actually show up on the ground. Kishor's plan leans on personal capital rather than public office. He has said he intends to draw on his corporate contacts to link unemployed youth with hiring companies, and has reportedly travelled outside Bihar recently to meet business associates toward that end.

Manoj Bharti, Jan Suraaj's state president, has been blunt about what this means in practice: these will be private-sector jobs, not government ones, and most will be located outside Bihar altogether, since — in his own assessment — the state lacks companies capable of absorbing that scale of hiring. That distinction between government and private employment is not incidental; it is central to Kishor's own argument. During the 2025 Bihar assembly campaign, he pointed out that only about 23 lakh people have entered government service across all 75 years of Bihar's history — from peon to chief secretary — a mere 1.97 percent of the state's population. Even raising reservation to 100 percent on the ten lakh government jobs politicians love to cite, he noted, would still leave 98 percent of Biharis outside the government payroll.

That reality is what pushed him toward a private-sector, network-driven route instead — and it's a route with a structural limit built in: an MLA has no authority to hand out private jobs. At best, Kishor can be a matchmaker between companies and candidates, which makes his promise unusually easy to measure, and unusually easy to expose if it falls short.



The metrics that will actually matter go well beyond how many young people submit applications. What counts is how many get interviews, how many receive offer letters, and — critically — how many are still employed six months or a year later. A job that evaporates after a few weeks, or one that pays too little to change a family's fortunes, cannot honestly be called employment generation. Pappu Yadav's Purnea initiative invites the same scrutiny. Company visits and Rahul Gandhi's high-profile presence generate headlines, but neither tells us how many actual vacancies exist or how many candidates will walk out with a job.

Bihar has seen enough job fairs in its metros to know the pattern well: large turnouts, stacks of resumes collected, interviews conducted, photographs taken for the record — and often very little hiring that actually follows once the cameras leave. An offer letter followed by an actual joining date is the only meaningful marker of success; everything before that is process, not outcome. This scrutiny matters more in Bihar than almost anywhere else, because employment has become one of the state's most potent — and most abused — political currencies. Generations of young Biharis have spent years preparing for government exams, only to be undone by leaked papers and recruitment scandals, while the private sector has never grown fast enough to absorb the numbers entering the job market each year.

Given that history, when Yadav says he has created jobs "for decades," the fair follow-up is: how many, doing what, for which companies, at what pay, and for how long? Bharti has essentially issued the same challenge — asking Yadav to place his employment record, government or private, in the public domain for Purnea and Bihar at large. The same standard should bind Kishor. If Bankipur's 10,000-job target is real, the honest move is to publish the whole funnel: applications received, shortlists made, participating companies, interviews held, offers extended, and — the number that matters most — how many actually joined. Yadav's Purnea event deserves identical transparency: the companies involved, vacancy counts, roles, salaries, appointment letters issued, and joining figures.

That level of disclosure is what would finally move Bihar's employment politics past sloganeering — beyond vague talk of recruitment drives, skill missions and industrial investment — toward what young people actually need: appointment letters, dependable pay, and a career rather than a string of temporary gigs. Bihar's population skews remarkably young, and government jobs alone were never going to absorb it; the state needs private capital, manufacturing, services, entrepreneurship and skilling investment working together, including opportunities beyond its own borders.

Both leaders' plans have genuine potential if pursued seriously — Kishor's network-driven bridge-building and Yadav's company-outreach model are different routes to the same destination. For Kishor, delivering on Bankipur could become a defining achievement; falling short would turn it into a cautionary headline. For Yadav, a successful Purnea rollout would finally give substance to years of claims about employment generation. In the end, Bihar's youth are unlikely to be swayed by another round of grand announcements.

They will measure both men by the appointment letters that land in their hands. The question worth asking, then, isn't who promised 10,000 jobs — it's who actually delivered them.

The writer is a veteran journalist and social activist

The bed that could not be moved



NAVNEET ANAND

There is a moment near the end of Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* that the film refuses to hurry. Odysseus is home after twenty years. Penelope will not have him, so she sets a trap. She orders the marital bed carried out of the chamber. And the man who outlasted Troy, the Cyclops and ten years at sea finally breaks, because that bed cannot be carried anywhere. He built it around the trunk of a living olive tree, still rooted in the ground, and raised the room around it.

That is how she knows him. Not by the face, which 20 years have changed, and not by the plunder or the fame. He is recognised because one thing of his could not be moved. I watched that scene in a Noida multiplex on a Sunday afternoon, and found I could not swallow.

We file *the Odyssey* under adventure. It is nothing of the kind. It is a migration story, and it happens to be ours. According to the 2011 Census, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar emerged as India's largest sources of inter-state migrants, together accounting for 20.9 million people, or 37 per cent of the country's total inter-state migrant population. Delhi and Mumbai stood out as major migrant destinations.

Through the 1980s and 1990s and into the 2000s, middle and lower middle class families across the Hindi belt reached the same conclusion at roughly the same time: that land was finite, that a government job was a lottery, and that the only asset which could not be partitioned among brothers was a degree.Plots were sold, jewellery pledged, sons put on trains to Bangalore and to the coaching lanes of Mukherjee Nagar.

They were right. Education was the finest investment available to them and it paid, in salaries their fathers could not have imagined and in a confidence their districts had never been allowed. Distance became degrees, degrees became salary, salary became square feet. Nobody was wrong to board that train.

I was one of them. I left Hajipur, a small town in Bihar, for Delhi, chasing something I have still not caught. None of it troubled me while my father was alive. As long as he was, the town stayed mine, because I was somebody's son in a place that knew what that meant. He died in January. It did not only take a father. It cut a cord.

The psychologist Pauline Boss calls this ambiguous loss: grief that never closes, because what you have lost is neither fully gone nor recoverable. The town is exactly where it always was. The lanes, the school, the tea shop at the turning. I can go back any week I choose. I cannot return. There is no ritual for this, and no leave application that covers it.



What I notice now is what the town had that no city sells. My parents, in their last years, were attended by four people. Eye drops on schedule, tea at the right hour, whatever food they asked for, arriving. In Noida my domestic help fails to turn up one morning and by evening the house is a battlefield.

This is not an argument about servants. It is an argument about density of proximity, affection, care and bonding. The small town runs on thick, unpriced obligation: neighbours, cousins, retainers of thirty years, people who owed you nothing enforceable and turned up anyway. The metropolitan life runs on thin, purchasable service. We did not upgrade. We swapped a web for a transaction, and a transaction will not sit with you at two in the morning.

My father never owned a car. I am on my third, and there will be others. Yet he was the richer man. Because he never had to struggle with the anxiety of what defines his identity, unlike us in the metropolitan where my square footage, length of my car, make of my shoes, fragrance of my deodorant, brand of my pen, club membership or lack of it became synonymous with my identity. Without ever realising, one got sucked into the nothingness of materialism, while losing the sense of belonging to somewhere. Simone Weil wrote in 1949 that to be rooted is the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. Her more uncomfortable observation is the one worth sitting with. Uprootedness, she said, is contagious. The uprooted go on to uproot others. Which brings me to the part I find hardest to write.

My children will leave too and they will go where the work is, exactly as I did, and I have no standing to object, because I am the one who taught them that mobility and ambition are the same word. I do not know how many years I will live near them, or whether the arithmetic of care my parents took for granted will exist by the time it is my turn. Two generations have been built on the assumption that families can rearrange themselves at will and the bonds will hold anyway. Nobody has done the accounting on what that costs at the far end.

Education is a ladder. It must not become a blinker. Those of us no longer hostage to an employer's geography, still free to steer our wings in any direction, might ask what we are using that freedom for. Freedom exercised only to accumulate is not freedom. It is a longer leash.

On Calypso's island, Odysseus is offered immortality and eternal youth if he will only stay. He turns it down for a mortal wife and a rocky, unimportant island. Most of us have made the opposite trade, in instalments, without ever being asked to sign.

And in the first book of the poem, long before Odysseus himself appears, his son Telemachus leaves home to go looking for a father he cannot remember.We have raised a generation of Telemachuses. The question is whether we have left them anything to sail towards. Anything that, when the time comes, cannot be moved.

The writer is a commentator and strategic communications expert

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Life is a lot like jazz... it's best when you improvise.
George Gershwin

Deploy security at violence-prone clubbing zones

A violent group clash outside a prominent nightclub in the capital city in the wee hours of Sunday has put the spotlight back on law and order and the security of nightlife. Amid the parties, club culture and endless flow of alcohol, a darker reality is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. A disturbing rise in violent, alcohol-fuelled brawls is beginning to tarnish the State's image. What was once brushed aside as occasional drunken misbehaviour is now starting to resemble a serious law-and-order problem, exposing the consequences of allowing unchecked partying to take precedence over public safety.

The Sunday incident offers a glimpse of how quickly situations can spiral out of control. In the early hours of August 23, this violent brawl outside an upscale nightclub near Patto reportedly began with a trivial confrontation. The use of abusive language by one member of a group while another vehicle was reversing soon escalated into an aggressive fist fight. One man was critically injured and allegedly strangled, and, going by the visuals that went viral, the exchanges appeared life-threatening. By Sunday evening, eight people were arrested on charges of attempted murder.

There have been umpteen cases of such brawls leading to violent exchanges in Panaji and in the tourism-centric spaces like Calangute-Baga-Anjuna. Under the influence of alcohol, youth have been resorting to knuckle dusters, pepper sprays, iron rods, swords and even firearms. Lest we forget, in 2014, a brawl outside a Patto nightclub saw youth engaged in a violent tussle where one lost his eye after being hit by a sword. Injuries, bloodshed, and hostile environments have, in many instances, rendered the party space murky. Even in quieter locales of South Goa, Benaulim has witnessed a glass-bottle attack in a parking area of a nightclub.

This growing lawlessness is thriving in a vacuum created by the aggressive promotion of nightlife without adequate institutional safeguards. A State that actively markets its nightlife and alcohol-driven entertainment must also recognise the risks that come with it. Crowds, alcohol and late-night revelry can easily turn minor arguments into violent confrontations. Leaving busy clubs and nightlife hubs without sufficient policing makes these areas vulnerable to such incidents escalating.

The need of the hour is not token action after every violent incident and subsequent arrests, but a sustained and visible enforcement strategy. Arrests don't set precedents. Those arrested in the brawl were already out on bail by Monday afternoon. Dedicated police patrols and stationed personnel should be deployed outside major nightlife hubs, beach hotspots and casino transit zones during late-night hours.

Nightclubs must also be made accountable for maintaining order not only inside their premises but in the immediate areas around them, with strict crowd-control measures and zero tolerance for violent behaviour. At the same time, the crackdown on illegal beach parties, unauthorised public drinking and violent public misconduct must be consistent and uncompromising.

Goa cannot afford to allow its identity to be shaped by drunken brawls and public violence. The government must bear responsibility for upholding safety in an environment it has shaped. Nightlife and clubbing have gained massive popularity, and so have casinos. But these cannot come at the expense of civil order and public safety. Before the situation gets out of hand, the government must move decisively to restore discipline and not let the image of the State be overshadowed by violence and lawlessness.

OPEN SPACE ››

No physical boarding pass: More queries than answers

Passengers flying out of Indian airports will reportedly no longer be required to carry a physical boarding pass as immigration authorities have decided to do away with the stamping of this document from September 1. Instead, passengers travelling abroad will have to produce an e-boarding on their smartphone for immigration clearance. But then what happens to passengers who do not have smartphones? A large number of Goans travel to destinations in the Gulf, where they may be employed. Not every passenger is necessarily digitally confident, and not everyone may own a smartphone capable of displaying an e-boarding pass. The physical stamp on a boarding pass provides a tangible record that can be retained by the passenger. What happens, for instance, if a passenger loses the phone on which the boarding pass was displayed? What if the phone battery dies at the airport? A migrant worker returning to Goa after several years, for example, may need documentary proof of a previous journey for an official, legal, employment or immigration-related purpose. Will there be a mechanism through which that person can obtain an authenticated copy of their departure record?

ADELMO FERNANDES, *Vasco*

Radio Gaga: Radio Mandovi is here

The State got its 'first' community radio station and, interestingly enough, one based in the village of Moira, in Bardez



›Frederick Noronha, besides writing, also publishes books

FREDERICK NORONHA



It came as quite a surprise to learn that Goa was about to get a new radio station. In fact, only a few days after hearing about the plan, we could hear the community radio station (CRS) come alive on the airwaves last Sunday. Goa thus got its "first" community radio station---and, interestingly enough, one based in the village of Moira, in Bardez.

Longtime fans of the radio, like this columnist, have been despairing for equally long a time over the way that medium has been functioning across India. After campaigns in the 1990s and an opening up of community radio in 2007, everyone thought it had a great future in India. But was that the case?

Today, the reality is that getting permissions to set up a community radio station is not quite easy. In Goa, some commercial FM radio stations have closed down too. St Xavier's College at Mapusa got a licence, while Goa University attempted to get one.

An amazing experiment like WorldSpace, which brought us crystal clear music to large parts of the globe, has long since folded up.

Goa's radio history is unique and deserves a closer study. It began in the 1940s with the Portuguese-run Emissora de Goa. That was launched with tentative test transmissions, and then grew to become one of the popular broadcasters in Asia (after bigger names like Radio Ceylon).

These big and influential radio stations were run from tiny parts of the continent. Today, the generation that heard them has largely passed on. But there are books capturing that history, narrating the stories of the late prominent announcer Imelda Tavora, and the 1950s radio personality Rodrigo Augiar (told by his daughter Sharbelle Fernandez).

All India Radio-Akashvani came in from the early 1960s. Later, Goa was chosen, unexpectedly, along with the four metros to have FM broadcasting started here in the 1990s. Newspapers like the Times of India and Mid-Day took to the airwaves here.

Later, in this century, licences for private stations in Goa were auctioned. Radio Mirchi 98.3, Big FM 92.7 and Radio Indigo 91.9 emerged. Only the last continues to operate.

Gyan Vani 107.8 MHz, the educational network linked to IGNOU, stopped broadcasting in Goa, though some of its programmes were informative.

As Radio Mandovi crackled to life (I missed the first few minutes, struggling to pick it up on my dial), one hopes for the best, but also sees space for caution.

It is a good thing that the initiative has reached so far. It is led by expat Ashwin Fernandes (whom one knew as a tech-savvy youngster maybe two decades ago). Content is managed by Cordelia Francis, a journalist colleague, with a team of more, and Fernandes' PACT Foundation.

For long now, it has been said that Goa is "the only state' without a community radio station of its own. Voice of Xavier's, or VOX 90.4 MHz, however was inaugurated by St Xavier's College, Mapusa, in Dec 2006, by the forward-looking then Principal Newman Fernandes.

Yet, despite its launch, it didn´t hit the airwaves. Maybe it came too early; it was then tough to generate audio content, with tools and skills not easily available here. Of course, the electronics talent within the college did a good job in even creating their own inexpensive transmitter.

Radio in India is facing what some call a "three-way squeeze". The government has been cautious over opening up this sector, which has been heavily regulated since colonial times. Radio faces economic, regulation and digital competition challenges. Private FM is heavily dependent on advertising. Licences come with many terms, which might be hard for smaller players to keep up with. News is disallowed on private or community FM stations.

With the growth of the social media, there is also competition from YouTube, Spotify and other spaces. Getting trained personnel can be a challenge, ditto for locally-produced content, though the government promises support.

Yet, one can´t write off radio. This technology is far from outdated; it has a role to play. Radio has enormous potential for hyperlocal, multilingual and low-cost communication.

In Goa, radio has its own challenges. This is a small, fragmented advertising market. Commercial FM stations rely heavily on music and standardised formats. So, there is little incentive to invest heavily in expensive, locally produced programming. But Goa is rich in stories waiting to be told.

AIR, despite its headstart and rich archives, through FM Rainbow, main and Vividh Bharati services, has to face changing listening habits and institutional constraints. It seems to have reduced Goa-specific FM programming. So how does Goa turn its cultural richness into financially sustainable, well produced and compelling programming? Will the audiences recognise its potential?

Another issue is reach. Radio Mandovi said it would be heard in a 10 km radius from Moira. That restricts its reach.

In the meanwhile, we have also lost the habit of radio listening. When did we last tune in to radio?

Even buying a decent radio can be tough, though smartphone apps (like FM Radio, which I'm listening on right now) help to somewhat fill the gap.

But this need not make us gloomy. Stations like Radio Sarang (at Mangalore's St Aloysius Deemed University) has scaled up in style. It broadcasts in multiple languages (four, including Konkani). If you're far from Mangaluru, tune in at https://radiosarang.com/#

Others like RadioMango.Ca, the Canada-based Konkani broadcaster, has run its two-hours-a-week programme for over a decade.

If the new radio station can live up to its promise, it can contribute to Goa´s understanding of itself.

> **If the new radio station can live up to its promise, it can contribute to Goa´s understanding of itself**

THE INBOX ››

Old politicians must relax, prioritise their health

It is amusing and sad to see elderly politicians, including those who have switched from Congress to BJP, clamouring for election tickets despite their advancing age—some with "one foot in the coffin and the other outside." Perhaps their election symbol should be a coffin, so they can finally rest in peace. It's time for these senior leaders to relax, enjoy time with their grandchildren, and prioritize their health. Repeated hospital admissions are not a sign of strong leadership. Please do not believe that Goa's politics will stall or collapse without you. Many former Congress leaders laid the foundation for key projects like Mopa Airport, Konkan Railway, and vital bridges—initiatives that the current BJP government is merely following. Unfortunately, when it comes to exploiting Goa and its people, politicians from all parties seem to be on the same team, deceiving the public for their own greed. But excessive greed is harmful—not just to Goa, but to your own health. Remember, money remains in this world long after we are gone, but we do not.

RONNIE DSOUZA, *Chandor*

Godse belonged to them, but they disowned him

The Independence Struggle does not belong to them, they did not lay their lives down for it. Sardar Vallabhai Patel does not belong to them, he banned them. The National Flag does not belong to them, they never recognised it. Vande Mataram does not belong to them, they never sang it. Yet now they want to lay claim to all of it. On the other hand... The British were their lords and masters, they were paid by them. But now they disown them. Godse belonged to them, but they disowned him. See how they scramble in the present stuck between being who they really are and disowning themselves. Stuck between bowing to Gandhi and idolising his killer Godse too. Stuck between claiming a legacy that is not theirs, while trying to advance their true legacy of hate and discrimination. What a pathetic lot. Unable to say proudly who they really are once for all, because clearly it is nothing to be proud of. Always playing hide and seek with the truth and having to lurk in the shadows to cover up their darkness. Beware of the Sanghis.

VINAY DWIVEDI, *Benaulim*

Kudos to Saligao villagers opposing Sec 39A

The Saligao gram sabha on Sunday unanimously adopted a resolution opposing Section 39A of the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Act and also voiced opposition to mega projects in the village. The villagers rightly said that the above controversial Section 39A was being used by the government to convert agricultural fields, bunds and forest land into settlement areas only for the benefit of the builders. They also alleged that mega-projects were being approved by the TCP Department without taking into consideration the lack of basic infrastructure. The villagers later passed a resolution calling for the protection of agricultural land, paddy fields, water bodies and eco-sensitive areas from conversion. Well, many mega-projects (with swimming pools) are indeed slowly coming up on the quiet in residential areas across Saligao against the wishes of the locals. I would like to congratulate some vigilant villagers for coming out in large numbers at the gram sabha meeting on Sunday, for daringly questioning the Sarpanch/other panch members over a variety of issues and finally passing a resolution to stop the ongoing destruction of their village.

JERRY FERNANDES, *Saligao*

Need to address government policy of subjugation

Every Indian citizen should have the freedom to keep their ruling politicians in check including criticizing and protesting, but it appears that Indian and particularly Goan corrupt politicians, have an an intimidation policy in place, which not only restricts or prevent people from exercising their democratic rights, but also manipulating votes to favour the corrupt MLAs ministers via jobs, postal votes, mass political meetings etc. Even for official requirements, meetings, govt work etc many people whose salaries are paid by the government, are forced to do so extra/stressful and many times unnecessary government work. We need to address this government policy of slavery, subjugation and intimidation of people working for government or government aided entities.

ARWIN MESQUITA, *Colva*

Inconsequential issues taking centre stage

The BJP recently condemned Congress for its decision to sing just two stanzas of Vande Mataram at its events and vowed to protect the dignity and the national status of the full version of the national song. In a resolution passed at a meeting of its core committee members, the ruling party declared that it will launch a pan India campaign to emphasise the importance of Vande Mataram. This is just a last ditch pathetic attempt by PM Modi to save his kursi by polarising voters for electoral benefit. There are many, many real issues that the government must address, for instance the pathetic state of government schools across the country, crumbling infrastructure, poor healthcare, corruption, unemployment, youth frustration, price rise etc. instead of spending time in name calling citizens (Dimagi Naxals, Urban Naxals, Soros Funded agents, Khalistanis etc.) or debating how many stanzas of a patriotic song must be sung and who said what in 1937. Nonsensical issues are taking centrestage.

MISHA, *Varca*

> **Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location**

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

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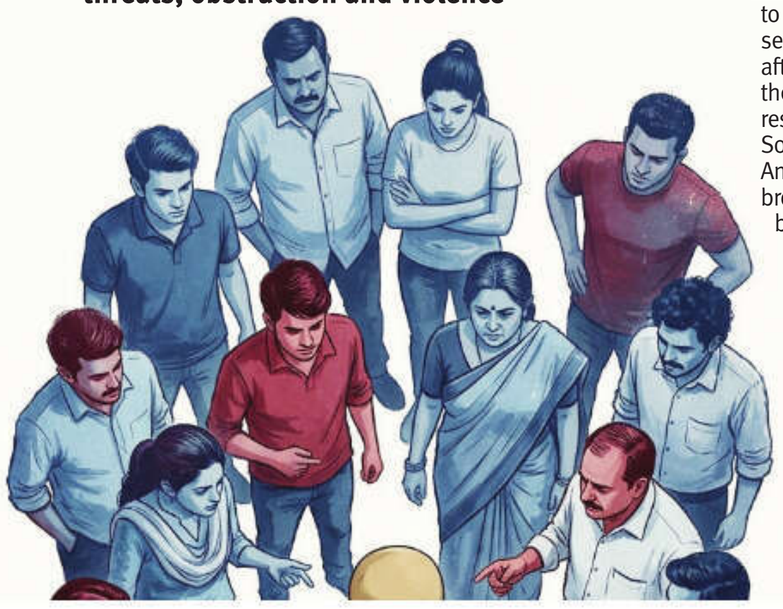
If you have an interesting story to share or want us to highlight any issue that you think matters to Goans, send it to us at editor@thegoan.net

Tuesday Trivia

Indus Valley civilization is credited with building the city of Mohenjo-daro, one of the world's earliest planned urban settlements

WHO PROTECTS THE POLICE?

Recent confrontations and attacks on police personnel raise concerns over public aggression, respect for authority and accountability within the force, as Goa sees disputes increasingly crossing the line into threats, obstruction and violence



THE GOAN | NETWORK

A fight breaks out, an accident occurs, or a crime is committed; the police are often among the first to arrive at the scene. Yet, what happens when those who are meant to protect us need to be protected themselves? A police officer steps out of a vehicle after receiving a call, expecting to do what the uniform demands: control a situation, respond to a complaint, and keep the peace. Sometimes a group refuses to cooperate. And sometimes, before the situation can be brought under control, the officer himself becomes the target.

ATTACKS RAISE CONCERNS

The recent news highlighted in The Goan edition dated August 18, 2026, reported that videos of a chaotic confrontation at the Sanguem police station had gone viral, showing political actors allegedly threatening the men in khaki. In the past two years, police personnel in different parts of the state have allegedly faced abuse, obstruction, and physical attacks while performing their duties. The same news report also mentioned a police officer who was attacked following a minor road accident in Mapusa. A woman sub-inspector was assaulted by a group in Fatorda last August; during the same month, PCR staff were attacked in Vasco. More recently, an errant motorist allegedly threatened and pushed an on-duty traffic constable at Malim junction. Thus, recent incidents in Goa involving attacks on police personnel have raised concerns over whether public behaviour towards law enforcement is becoming increasingly confrontational.

RESPECTING MEN IN UNIFORM

The public reaction, as a whole, is indeed straightforward: no disagreement or fight can justify physically attacking a police officer. While the police are expected to maintain law and order in public, non-cooperation and attempts to prevent them from carrying out their duties affect more than just the individual officer. "The police are doing their job of maintaining peace and order. If such actions take place and the police let it go or do not take action, it sends a wrong message to others," remarks senior citizen Anton D'Souza, adding that nowadays everyone must be taught to respect those who are performing their duty. An attack on a policeman can result in delayed action during an emergency, encourage others to challenge authority, try and create a dangerous environment for everyone present, while sending the message that one can get away with such actions.

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

The Sanguem incident involved an alleged confrontation at the police station, during which police said one of the political actors and others threatened and obstructed personnel on duty, leading to the registration of a case and their subsequent arrest. Yet, even with action being taken, the question remains. While some believe that the police force commands respect, not everyone is of the same view. "There was a recent case of police brutality as well. Although action has been taken there too, I believe it is a matter of give respect and get respect," states sociology student Shane Lobo, while asserting that he is in no way justifying the crime.

"People have every right to question the police if they feel they are being treated unfairly. But there is a difference between questioning an officer and abusing or attacking one," mentions NCC cadet Shriya Kamat. "If there is a complaint, there are legal ways to address it. Violence cannot always be the answer," she says.

CHANGING ATTITUDE

Some also point to a wider change in public behaviour. Ritika Naik, an assistant professor, believes the recent incidents also reflect a larger change in the way people respond to disagreements and authority. "People today are becoming increasingly impatient and confrontational. A small disagreement can quickly turn into an argument, and then violence. This is not just about the police, but about the way we are reacting to conflict in everyday life," she says. At the same time, she adds, questioning authority and demanding accountability should not be confused with taking the law into one's own hands. "There is a proper way to raise a complaint. Once people begin threatening or attacking those who are performing their duty, it becomes a matter of concern," she reckons.

In the end, respect for the uniform and accountability within the force cannot be separated. People have the right to question, criticise and file complaints against police personnel when they believe they have been treated unfairly. The police, in turn, must also be held accountable for misconduct. But the line is crossed when a disagreement turns into threats, obstruction or violence. As Goa witnesses more such confrontations, the larger challenge will be to ensure that the uniform commands respect without placing those who wear it above accountability.

THE GOANS OF KARACHI

A journey across generations, The Goans of Karachi traces a community that carried Goa's culture, faith and traditions to Pakistan while helping shape the civic, cultural and sporting life of a growing city

Few people realise that Pakistan's national anthem and one of the most iconic photographs of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the mayor of Karachi in 1946 share one hidden connection: Goa. A Goan musician arranged the anthem's orchestration; a Goan photographer captured the famous portrait of Jinnah and Manuel Mascarenhas, a Goan who once served as mayor of Karachi. At its peak, an estimated 12,000 Goans called the city home.

EARLY SETTLERS

Goans began arriving in Karachi in the late 1830s and early 1840s, following the British annexation of Sindh in 1839. At the time, Karachi was still a small town with a population estimated between 35,000 and 50,000. But the growing city offered opportunities. Menin Rodrigues, a Karachi Goenkar and author, mentions that they came out of Goa to seek economic opportunities. The schools were coming up, and the churches were being built around that time. They found opportunities and succeeded. In 1889, they had formed their own Goa Portuguese Association and, by 1894, set up the Indian Life Assurance Company, the largest in British India. "So this is very early; some of those seniors went into business. The Misquita set up a bakery in 1858, and here is a whole history behind this," he adds.

Goan women, meanwhile, were among the first teachers in Karachi's missionary schools, beginning a long tradition of education within the community. Between 1900 and Partition, more skilled and semi-skilled Goans arrived, particularly in the Saddar area. They formed village associations which provided support and helped preserve connections with their homeland.

MUSIC, PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE

For decades, Goans were part of almost every aspect of Karachi's civic and cultural life. They were involved in churches, schools, hospitals, courts, municipal offices, businesses, music and sport. Music formed an important part of the community's identity. Rodrigues narrates the tale of Tolentine Fonseca, a master composer of regimental music during the 1920s. "When Pakistan held a national competition for its anthem, Ahmed Chagla's melody was selected," he says. Chagla, a close friend of Fonseca, asked him to score the piece, with parts written for every instrument so that it could be performed by bands and choirs.

Another Goan name connected to the city is Arthur Sequeira. As a young photographer at his family's Sequeira Studio, he captured Jinnah's now famous portrait in 1945. "The photograph was later hand-coloured and appeared on Pakistan's first passport and early currency notes," Rodrigues adds.

GOANS LEAVE THEIR MARK

Karachi's Goan community also made its mark in sport. Peter Paul Fernandes became the first Goan Olympian to represent India, playing forward in the gold-medal-winning hockey team. In cricket, Wallis Mathias and Antao D'Souza became the first Goans from India or Pakistan to play Test cricket.

Hockey also produced Olympians Jack Britto and Milton D'Mello, who represented Pakistan at the 1952 and 1948 Olympics respectively.

For those who grew up there, Karachi was simply home. Dr Celsa Pinto, born in 1951, lived in the city until she was 13. She remembers a Karachi that was safe, clean and orderly: "I have very fond memories of that place, the then capital of Pakistan". Her family lived at 8 Lyari Mansion near St Patrick's Cathedral and the historic Empress Market, in a neighbourhood shared by Catholic and Hindu Goans. She attended St Joseph's, one of two schools near the cathedral. The school was run by Irish nuns but largely staffed by Goan teachers.

COMMUNITY SCATTERED

Food, language and faith kept the community closely connected to its roots. The Karachi Goan Association and Goan Union organised feast-day celebrations, Christmas festivities, carol singing and dances. Pilgrimages back to Goa, particularly for the St Francis Xavier expositions, were organised for decades. Peter Mendes and Father Robert D'Silva led groups of hundreds during the 1980s and again in the 2000s.

Partition in 1947 changed life for many families. Sunanda Damodar Lotlikar, who was taken to Karachi as a three-year-old in 1946, experienced those changes firsthand. "My father went there alone initially; after a year, he took us as well. Everyone, including my grandparents," remarks Sunanda Damodar Lotliker. She remembers her mother telling her that life was good. Having witnessed the tense moments of being told to stay locked in the house to avoid any danger to life, she narrates the incident, "We were very worried during the riots, since we are a Hindu family, but they told us to keep quiet, locked us from outside, and Mr Motiwala told them to go away and that there is No Hindu, that's how we were saved."

Yet, many Goan families who had built their lives in the city believed Karachi would remain their home. Children continued to be born and raised there. Emigration began quietly in the early 1950s.

The community scattered, but it never completely disappeared. The Goans of Karachi may be scattered across countries today, but their connection to the city remains part of Goa's own history. They carried the language, food, faith and memories of home with them, while also helping build a city far from the place they came from. It is a reminder that while a Goan may leave Goa, a part of Goa often travels with them.



Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

My Phone Knows Me Better Than My Wife..!

"I wish you hadn't gone out last evening," said my wife. I looked at her with the innocent expression husbands have perfected over centuries.

"Yesterday evening?" I asked, buying three valuable seconds. "Yes," she said. "Yesterday evening. Where were you?"

"I was thinking about a new book," I replied. "Where?"

Before I could construct a respectable answer, my phone volunteered.

"You visited Royal Garden Restaurant from 7.12 pm to 9.03 pm," it announced through its location history.

My wife looked at me. I looked at my phone.

The phone looked pleased with itself.

"I can explain," I said. My phone immediately displayed photographs of the restaurant, the bill, the route I had taken and an advertisement offering me twenty percent off my next meal there.

My wife folded her arms. "Who was with you?"

Fortunately, my phone could not answer that.

Then facial recognition identified the three friends sitting around the table, one looking slightly red, as if he'd had one too many.

There are no secrets in marriage anymore. Not because husbands have become more honest, but because phones have become government witnesses.

My phone knows everything about me. It knows where I go, what I buy, what I read and how long I stare at videos of people falling into swimming pools.

It knows when I wake up because I reach for it before reaching for my spectacles. It knows when I sleep because it is the last face I see at night.

Sometimes it even knows what I want before I do.

Yesterday, I whispered to my wife, "Perhaps we should buy a new sofa."

Within minutes, my phone showed me forty sofas, twelve furniture shops and a man explaining why my present sofa was destroying my spine.

I had not searched for a sofa. I had merely spoken about one.

I now speak softly near my phone.

I am afraid that if I say, "I feel tired," it will book me into a hospital.

We fear artificial intelligence taking over the world, but we carry its chief spy in our pockets. It reads our messages, finishes our sentences, corrects our spelling and reminds us of birthdays we would otherwise forget.

My wife sometimes asks, "Do you remember what I told you this morning?"

I do not. But my phone remembers what I searched for nine years ago.

That is the tragedy. Our machines are remembering more while we are remembering less. We know the battery percentage of our phones, but not the worries troubling the person beside us.

Perhaps we should occasionally put the phone down and look around. There may be someone waiting to speak, smile or hold our hand. And unlike our phones, they may not remember everything we did wrong.

But they will certainly remember that we were there with them..!

bobsbanter@gmail.com

₹90K in 25 days: Indian man shares cost of living in Japan

Living in another country can bring new experiences, but it can also come with high everyday expenses. An Indian man living in Japan recently added up his spending and was surprised to find that he had already spent nearly Rs 1 lakh on basic costs in just 25 days.

Dev Vijay Vargiya shared a breakdown of his expenses in Japan so far on Instagram. He noted that while his monthly salary hadn't yet been credited to his account, his spending had already exceeded his planned budget. This tally covered rent, electricity, gas, water, Wi-Fi, a SIM card, and transportation, but excluded the cost of food and daily necessities.

SUDOKU

		8			2			
9	2	7			1		6	
6	1				5			3
	9	1		3			5	
			4		8			
	4			1		6	8	
1			5				3	2
	5		8			1	4	6
			1			8		

HOW TO PLAY SUDOKU

- Each row, column, and 3 by 3 square must have the numbers 1 through 9. These numbers can't be repeated in each row, column, and square.
- When solving an easy Sudoku, the first thing you should do is look for definites. Definites are numbers that are definitely going to be there. Starting at 1, draw imaginary lines through boxes in that 1's row and/or column. When there is only one box left in the 3x3 box, you know that is a definite.
- If you get stuck, go back alook at everything. That one number is usually all you need to get going again. If you still cannot find any solutions, start labeling every block with every number that could possibly go in that box.

5	6	8	9	2	1	3	7	4
9	4	1	3	7	8	6	5	2
2	3	7	4	6	5	9	8	1
7	8	9	6	1	2	5	4	3
6	1	3	8	5	4	2	9	7
4	5	2	7	3	9	1	6	8
3	2	6	5	8	7	4	1	9
8	9	5	1	4	3	7	2	6
1	7	4	2	9	6	8	3	5

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Fix the schools

Political one-upmanship must take a back seat

STEPPING up its nationwide 'School Thik Karo' (improve schools) campaign, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) has written to all state governments, seeking data on campus infrastructure and related matters. The CJP has asked states to disclose how many schools were renovated in the past five years, how many are still in need of repair, the number of sanctioned and vacant teaching posts, funds allocated and actually spent, and the availability of toilets, computers and sports facilities. Such information ought to be routinely available to citizens. No child should be forced to study in an unsafe building, without a functioning toilet, clean drinking water, a proper classroom or even a bench.

It's heartening that the condition of government schools across the country has attracted much-needed attention from the public, the media and the political class. Rajasthan offers a worrisome case study — over 600 government schools are functioning without their own buildings. Pressure exerted by the CJP and the Opposition has prompted the Bhajan Lal dispensation to propose a Rs 12,500-crore school infrastructure programme. However, announcing initiatives is far easier than ensuring outcomes. Various governments must prioritise time-bound implementation.

Education has become a political hot-button issue in recent months, especially after the NEET paper leak. Schools are the new flashpoint. Last week, CJP volunteers were attacked when they were on their way to inspect a government school in Rajasthan, while an AAP leader was booked for allegedly entering a school without permission in Noida (Uttar Pradesh). It is imperative that the public debate on schools is not eclipsed by political one-upmanship. The blame game must take a back seat; the focus should be on sincere efforts to give government schools a new lease of life.

Privacy first

Paperless travel needs data safeguards

INDIA's international aviation sector is set for an operational shift. From September 1, the Bureau of Immigration will discontinue the physical stamping of boarding passes for international travellers departing India. The move, aimed at simplifying immigration clearance and reducing paperwork, is part of the country's transition towards paperless travel. Electronic and printed boarding passes will continue to be accepted; it is the stamping that is being discontinued. The change is welcome if it reduces queues and needless paperwork. But it comes amid a wider expansion of biometric authentication in everyday life. New telecom rules make biometric verification mandatory for obtaining a mobile SIM and for certain changes to user details, ostensibly to curb fraud and digital scams. The question, therefore, is whether citizens can be assured that the growing trove of identity data will remain secure and purpose-bound.

DigiYatra offers an instructive example. The government says passenger information is not stored in a central repository; data is encrypted, shared with the airport of origin and purged from the airport system within 24 hours of departure. DigiYatra is also voluntary, with passengers able to use the conventional process. These safeguards are reassuring, but they cannot substitute for strong, independently verifiable accountability.

The expansion of digital and biometric authentication demands clear rules on consent, purpose limitation, retention, access and deletion. Independent security audits must be meaningful, data-sharing protocols transparent and penalties for misuse substantial. Importantly, citizens should retain a genuine non-biometric alternative wherever biometric authentication is not necessary. The digital transformation should make international travel and public services faster without making citizens surrender control over their identities. The larger principle matters: convenience must never become a licence for indiscriminate data collection.

Change gears to build capabilities

India must become a more attractive destination to set up new industries



AJAI MALHOTRA
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO RUSSIA



ROADMAP : The next-generation reforms must reduce uncertainty and reward long-term commitment. ISTOCK

THE Union government's recent decision to bring another 405 defence items under domestic production signals a broader shift in Indian economic policy: from removing barriers to building capabilities. While welcome, the real challenge lies in creating the conditions for investment in sectors whose returns may take years to materialise.

For decades, India's economic reforms focused on the ease of doing business. Liberalisation dismantled the Licence Raj and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code strengthened creditor rights. Tax reforms simplified compliance and digital governance reduced transaction costs. Investments in physical and digital infrastructure improved connectivity. These reforms were necessary and removed many obstacles that hampered private enterprise.

Yet today's economic challenge differs from that of 1991. The conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia, the US-China technology rivalry and growing competition over energy, semiconductors and critical minerals have shown how quickly trade and supply chains can become instruments of geopolitical pressure. The question is no longer how easily a business can be started or expanded, but whether firms have the incentives, financing and policy certainty to build capabilities that may take years to pay off.

The wider global context has changed. An economic order that rewarded efficiency is giving way to one that prizes resilience, technology and industrial capability. Supply chains are being redesigned not simply to lower costs but also for security. A shortage of a mineral, a disruption in shipping or a restriction on access to a critical technology can now have consequences far beyond trade. India's decision to establish critical-mineral processing parks for lithium and nickel reflects its recognition of this shift. The next step should be to build integrated regional value chains, linking resources and processing with research and manufacturing.

Like India, the major powers and blocs are making efforts to confront this challenge. The US is rebuilding industrial capacity through large-scale incentives for domestic manufacturing. The European Union is pursuing strategic autonomy in critical technologies. China continues to integrate finance, industry and technology behind long-term national priorities. What was once treated largely as a matter of commercial competitiveness is increasingly becoming an issue of national security. Countries that fail to adapt risk remaining consumers of technologies developed elsewhere, not producers of technologies that shape the future.

Earlier reforms reduced friction. The next generation must reduce uncertainty and reward long-term commitment. With this aim, the new reform agenda must address five priorities: deeper capital markets; incentives to mobilise money that does not demand quick returns; stronger links between research and industry; procurement that rewards innovation; and greater regulatory predictability.

Capital markets do not naturally favour such investments. Where regulatory uncertainty is high and policy appears prone to frequent change, financing tends to be short-term. Investors naturally prefer businesses that show returns sooner and with greater certainty. India's financial system reflects this bias.

> For decades, India's economic reforms focused on the ease of doing business. Today's economic challenge differs from that of 1991.

Banks are the principal source of corporate finance, but are designed primarily for secured lending, not long-duration innovation. This needs to be addressed. Corporate bond markets are relatively shallow, while pension and insurance funds play only a modest role in financing industrial assets. Venture capital has flourished in consumer technology and digital services, but deep technology, advanced manufacturing and clean energy continue to face funding gaps once they move beyond the startup stage.

Mobilising patient capital must be a priority. India has substantial household savings, yet only a small proportion reaches long-duration productive investment. Measures to deepen corporate bond markets, expand the role of pension and insurance funds, encourage innovation-focused investment vehicles and reduce regulatory barriers to long-term institutional investment can help channel more capital into long-gestation industrial projects.

Finance alone, however, cannot create technological capability. India's research institutions, expanding startup ecosystem and growing manufacturing ambition provide a strong base to build on, yet translating laboratory research into commercially successful products remains an exception. Universities, laboratories and industry frequently operate in silos. Our universities need stronger technology-transfer departments, incentives to patent and commercialise discoveries and deeper industry partnerships. They also need closer alignment with the skills that emerging industries require. Public research funding should increasingly reward commercial outcomes alongside academic excellence.

Public procurement offers another powerful lever for turning technological capabilities into market opportunities. The government remains India's largest buyer across defence, healthcare, transport and energy. Procurement systems focused on the lowest cost can discourage innovative domestic technologies whose advantages emerge only over time. The procurement policy should increasingly reward quality, innovation and indigenous technological capability while maintaining transparency and competition. Government demand can provide the early market that allows promising technologies to move from laboratory to commercial scale. It needs to be leveraged for larger benefit.

Tax, accounting and regulatory frameworks must reinforce such incentives. Investors in projects with long gestation periods need confidence that taxation, sectoral regulation and contractual commitments will remain broadly predictable. Policy stability is itself an economic asset. Countries that consistently attract large-scale industrial investment often do so not because they offer the largest subsidies, but because they minimise policy uncertainty.

None of this implies a return to State-directed industrial policy. Governments worldwide have a mixed record of picking winners. Instead, their role is to create stable rules, reduce information gaps, invest in public goods and share early-stage risks where markets alone may not do so. They must ensure that market incentives reward productive investment. The government should not replace private capital; it should reshape the conditions in which such capital is willing to take longer-term risks.

India's experience has shown that reforms can transform economic performance. Earlier reforms unlocked entrepreneurship by reducing state control. The next generation must unlock long-term investment by reducing uncertainty and strengthening the financial, regulatory and research environment in which innovation can flourish. The ultimate objective is self-reliance in the capabilities that India needs to realise its long-term economic, technological and climate ambitions.

India cannot rely solely on being a more efficient destination for existing industries. It must also become a more attractive place to build new ones. The measure of the next generation of reforms will be whether India can move beyond being a place where businesses grow to one where new technologies, industries and strategic capabilities are built.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"I have always believed India is a country blessed by God with enormous entrepreneurial skills. — Manmohan Singh"

Playing violin for the terminally ill

SUMIT PAUL

THERE is an adage in my mother tongue Dari (Afghan variant of Persian), "*Mausiqi az kamtar an' dard-e-beemaar-o-mamaat*" (music lessens the pain and agony of death and illness). During my cancer treatment, I would visit the music therapy hall at a hospital in England and play the piano and the violin all alone. I felt calm, and my pain and agony subsided considerably. Later, I played these musical instruments for patients and senior citizens at old-age homes.

Music therapy is becoming popular in India. Many major hospitals have dedicated rooms where light music, preferably instrumental, is played for the patients. Some old-age homes also have music rooms. I contacted hospitals, nursing homes and elder care homes in Pune and told them that they could approach me any time for a music session. I made it clear that I would not charge anything. Patients' smiles brimming with satisfaction were my remuneration. Now, many doctors and even patients recovering at home request me to play the violin for them. It gives me immense joy.

Once, a woman asked me to play for her ailing father, who was in his eighties. His pancreatic cancer was in its last stage. When I arrived at their place with my violin, he asked me in a feeble voice, "Please play '*Rahein na rahein hum mehka karenge*'," a classic song from the film *Mamta* (1966). His daughter told me that her mother would sing it for him. With tears in my eyes, I played it twice. Yet, he said, "Encore". He passed away a few hours later.

A couple at an old-age home asked me to play "*Ye dil tum bin kahin lagta nahin hum kya karein*" from *Izzat* (1968). Luckily, that place had a music room and a piano. When I played the song for them, they began to cry like kids. I also cried with them. This is the power of music. It connects you instantly with strangers.

There are certain film songs which appeal to patients and senior citizens — "*Zindagi ka safar hai ye kaisa safar*" from *Safar* (1970), "*Ye jeevan hai iss jeevan ka*" (*Piya Ka Ghar*, 1972), "*Zindagi kaisi hai paheli hai*" (*Anand*, 1971) and "*Zindagi ke safar mein guzar jaate hain jo makaam*" (*Aap Ki Kasam*, 1974). Terminally ill people often become philosophical; some of them wallow in self-pity. No wonder they prefer sombre numbers.

Some doctors told me that what medicines couldn't do, my music did. It is my life's mission to make people happy with my music. I have performed for kids suffering from leukaemia and other blood disorders. Playing music for them made me realise the transience of life and relationships. We all have to go, but if we can bring a smile to a sad face, our existence makes a semblance of sense. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "To know even one life has breathed easier because you've lived — that's to have succeeded."

The writer is a Pune-based freelance contributor

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India cannot be complacent

Refer to 'Mecca accord raises the stakes for India'; the viability of the alliance as a close military pact is questionable due to the complex relations that both Turkiye and Pakistan maintain with Iran. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal lends the alliance deterrent weight but doesn't provide an automatic nuclear umbrella. Geographic distance adds another complication as there is no territorial contiguity between the three countries. Each faces a different threat environment, and has different priorities and strategic calculations. For India, however, there is little reason to overreact or alter the fundamentals of its foreign policy because of this agreement but complacency, too, can be misplaced.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, UNA

Division of education roles

With reference to 'The case for returning education to states'; the writers highlight the need for transforming education through a stronger federal framework. A fair structure demands a clear division of responsibilities. Primary education should be entrusted to local governments, as they understand community needs best. Secondary education should remain the responsibility of the Central government. Higher education should primarily be managed by state governments. A major concern is financing. The Centre collects the education cess, but states bear much of the responsibility for implementing NEP 2020. This mismatch creates serious financial constraints and slows reforms.

MM GOEL, KURUKSHETRA

Coaching centres alone not at fault

Apropos of 'Coaching culture'; the issue lies not in the proliferation of coaching centres but in the nature of entrance exams, which are designed to eliminate candidates rather than to select ones with the right aptitude for a specific course. Cracking these exams requires mastery of specific techniques and coaching centres which impart such skills cannot be blamed solely for exploiting a huge commercial opportunity. The primary aim of education is not to just impart knowledge from a career perspective but to foster all-round intellectual development of young impressionable minds.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Curb violence against children

The tragic death of six-year-old student Pranay in Visakhapatnam, allegedly after being slapped and publicly humiliated by his teacher for not completing his homework, reflects a disturbing failure of compassion, empathy and basic human decency. There are two critical points which need urgent action. First, lack of accountability. Second, the quality of teacher training. Violent methods of reprimanding children shatter their confidence permanently. Pranay's death should shake our conscience and jolt the system out of its slumber.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

Better education system needed

Apropos of 'Coaching culture'; regulation alone cannot address a menace of our own making. The coaching industry shapes aspirations and distorts education. The Prime Minister's Independence Day assurance of free online coaching for needy students, though well-intentioned, risks further legitimising this trend. The mushrooming of coaching centres is a symptom of weaknesses in our education system. The solution, therefore, is not more coaching, but better education.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Poll practices need improvement

Refer to 'When poll seizures lead nowhere'; many election-related cases may be registered, yet low conviction rate weakens deterrence. The Election Commission must ensure stricter monitoring of campaigns and suspicious movement of money and material. Campaign financing should be closely regulated, with timely disclosure and effective auditing of expenditure. Cases involving electoral malpractices must be investigated and the culprits prosecuted swiftly. Freebies, which can blur the distinction between legitimate welfare and electoral inducement, must be checked.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), ZIRAKPUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 25, 1926

Communalism and elections

AS was to be expected, the London *Times* is far less perturbed by the prevailing communal riots in India than by the prospect of the communal tension playing an important part in the forthcoming general elections. That it may adversely affect the chances of the Swarajist party is, of course, no unwelcome possibility to the London journal, which has always been hostile to that party. What does disturb its peace of mind is that "it may equally damage the Independents" and that Mr Jinnah may have no choice but to "assume the leadership of a purely Muslim party." At the same time, the *Times* is not confident that this regrouping will give any advantage to the Liberals, whose organisation, it fears, is not yet comparable to that of the Swarajists. It is mainly for this reason and from this point of view that the journal emphasises Lord Irwin's recent appeal to the leaders of the communities, and says that those of them who make Indian cities into 'sectarian bear gardens' do not live up to the reputation of Indian culture. It has always been the weakness of the *Times* that it can never go deep into any question, and it is no matter for surprise that in the present case, while deprecating communalism and the communal outlook in India, it does not ask why and in what precise way the existing communal tension is bound to affect the results of the elections. How different is the treatment of the subject in the *New Statesman*! Last week, a leaderette in this journal wrote: "But what, after all, is the value of a plea for peace in the presence of electoral machinery, the normal working of which intensifies every kind of communal tension?"

epaper.tribuneindia.com

Time for Yoshida Doctrine 2.0



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

Doctrine 1.0 focused on how Japan could recover without becoming a permanent vassal of the US.



NOVELTY : This is Yoshida 2.0: economy first, but de-risked. PTI

INDIA and Japan added an important layer of defence cooperation to their bilateral ties when Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi signed a memorandum on Maritime Security Cooperation with his Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh in Delhi on August 20.

This is the second high-level bilateral interaction between the two nations and signals a new dynamism in their Special Strategic and Global Partnership. In early July, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made her first official visit to India. For the two nations, who are committed to the Indo-Pacific vision of former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, the blueprint is encouraging.

The precedent that captures Japan's current predicament is the Yoshida Doctrine. After the enormity of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, PM Shigeru Yoshida faced a deeply traumatic "America dilemma".

As a defeated, occupied nation, how could Japan recover without becoming a permanent vassal of the US? His solution defined the Japanese strategy for 70 years: seek security under the US umbrella, focus all national energy on economic recovery and keep diplomacy low-profile. The doctrine worked.

Today, PM Takaichi faces the inverse — a "China dilemma", which is far more complicated. China is Japan's largest trading partner and the centre of its supply chains. It is also its biggest security threat, from the East China Sea to Taiwan. The numbers are stark. In 2004, Japan-China trade was about $170 billion. In 2024, China's exports to Japan alone were $152 billion, with the two-way trade being around $300 billion and a $42.5-billion deficit for Japan.

India's bind is even sharper. India-China trade was $13.6 billion in 2004, crossed $30 billion in 2008 and hit $127.7 billion in FY 2024-25. In 20 years, India-China trade grew nine-fold while India-Japan trade quadrupled from $5 billion to $22.8 billion. De-risking has not meant de-linking.

Hence, Modi and Takaichi need a Yoshida Doctrine 2.0 equivalent that would be appropriate for China. If the original template was security from the US and prosperity from the world, the new framework must be: de-risk from China without decoupling from it; deter China without provoking war; and diversify partnerships so as not to be hostage to either Washington or Beijing.

The August 20 maritime agreement can be its foundational page and the superstructure patiently erected over time. The first pillar is economic security as a strategy. PM Takaichi warned in July about the "weaponisation of the economy and non-market policies." Both sides agreed to cooperate on critical minerals, semiconductors and resilient supply chains.

Over 1,400 Japanese firms operate in India, half in manufacturing. Japan's pledge of $61 billion in investment over the next decade gives India a valuable manufacturing fillip and gives Japan an alternative to China. Bilateral trade must touch $100 billion in a phased manner. This is Yoshida 2.0: economy first, but de-risked.

The second pillar is defence tech sharing as real deterrence and here budget numbers matter. Japan has done in three years what it had not done in 70: breach the 1% of GDP cap. Its defence budget was $48.5 billion in 2019 and increased to $55.1 billion in 2024. For FY2025, with a supplementary infusion, it will hit about $70 billion or 2% of GDP. This is the Takaichi nudge.

India's trajectory is the inverse — GDP share is down, while absolute numbers are up. Defence spending was 2.25% of GDP in 2014-15 and is 1.89% in FY2024-25. India has the fifth-largest defence budget at $85 billion, but is still dwarfed by China's $336 billion and America's $954 billion.

Japan is slowly loosening its post-war arms export curbs, a historic shift, and Tokyo's offer to transfer design and production for six Mogami-class frigates under Make-in-India with BrahMos integration is the first major platform offer. But the real game-changer will be in domains where Japan leads and what India needs: underwater domain awareness, space-based maritime ISR, unmanned systems and anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

The third pillar should be a joint West Asia diplomatic outreach, even as Tokyo is reviewing its strategic priorities after the wars in West Asia. Japan is highly hydrocarbon-dependent and the recent outreach to Saudi Arabia signals a new initiative. This is where interests converge since both India and Japan are major energy importers.

A joint India-Japan framework for maritime security in West Asia would be low on provocation, high on utility and give freedom of navigation meaning beyond East Asia.

Both nations also face a dollar dilemma that complicates their ability to deal with external challenges. The yen fell to 163 to the dollar in July 2024, a 40-year low, and is now around 156. The rupee hit an all-time low of 96.98 to the dollar in 2025-26, down from 45 in 2004 and 83 in 2024. In FY23, Japan paid 123.9 billion yen extra for US equipment due to the weak yen.

Why has deeper cooperation not happened? Not for lack of political will at the top. The constraint is domestic inertia. In Japan, there is a pacifist sentiment and a risk-averse industry. In India, there is a preference for outright purchase over co-development. The way out is to ring-fence two or three projects from the procurement maze and treat them as strategic, not commercial: underwater domain awareness, maritime ISR and secure communications as Modi-Takaichi flagship projects.

The Yoshida Doctrine succeeded because it made a hard choice and stuck to it for 70 years. The new doctrine for China needs the same clarity. For Modi and Takaichi, the opportunity is historic: move from rhetoric to implementation, from shared anxiety to shared deterrent capability.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

Plagiarism — but who's asking whom



SHELLEY WALIA
FORMER PROFESSOR & FELLOW, ENGLISH & CULTURAL STUDIES, PU

SOMETIMES, a peculiar case comes to light that implicates academic honesty, racial politics and institutional self-protection all together. It is then that the contradiction between what a university says it values and what it actually protects becomes impossible to ignore. Cambridge University found itself in exactly that position this year.

Jason Arday, Professor of Sociology of Education in the university's Faculty of Education, resigned this year following weeks of plagiarism allegations, and was found dead shortly afterward. Interestingly, in 2023, he became the youngest Black ever appointed to a professorship at Cambridge.

Somewhere in the files of the Cambridge Metropolitan Police sits the record of an investigation that has led nowhere. The man under investigation was Jack Grove, a journalist for Times Higher Education, and his crime was to send Professor Jason Arday and his university a few polite emails asking about glaring similarities between his doctoral thesis and the one written years earlier by someone else. Within weeks, those emails had somehow become a police matter.

An officer told Grove to stop contacting Arday because the questions were affecting the professor's mental health. Think about what that means for a journalist doing the most basic job of verification, and being treated as though he had done something criminal. That single fact tells you that the Arday affair was never really a dispute about copied sentences. It was a dispute about who is allowed to ask questions, and of whom.

Within media, understandably, there is a well-known pattern in how public scandals unfold. Usually that pattern targets the person accused of wrongdoing. Here it targeted the person asking the questions. Grove's calm, factual emails were described by Arday's defenders as a "vile campaign". Black scholars in British universities have genuinely faced suspicion, exclusion and lower expectations. Nobody serious disputes this, and Arday's career has rightly been read against that backdrop. What happened in this case was the second twist. The mere act of pointing out textual overlap was treated as though it could only be motivated by racism.

Newspapers and social media reward outrage, loyalty, and taking sides. They are far less good at holding two separate facts in mind at the same time. And this case needed exactly that ability to say, in the same breath, that racial bias in academia is real and serious, and that a specific plagiarism allegation deserves to be examined on the evidence, independent of who happens to be answering for it.

Instead, the public conversation flattened both truths into a single binary of "you were either on Arday's side or against him". Interestingly, the debate missed out the actual question of whether the thesis had been properly attributed.

A police officer told a journalist to stop contacting a Black Professor at Cambridge .

Indian universities have no grounds for watching this from a safe distance. Plagiarism in doctoral and journal work is a largely unaddressed problem, and when it surfaces, the instinct is rarely rigorous and impartial investigation; it is quiet containment, a quiet word to protect a vice-chancellor's reputation, a senior professor's standing, or an institution's ranking.

And here too identity and caste as much as anything else, does precisely the work that race did in Arday's case. It can make legitimate scrutiny of a Dalit, Adivasi, or minority scholar's work politically dangerous to raise.

An Indian university that wants to avoid its own version of the Arday affair has to learn the same lesson Cambridge is only now being forced to confront. It must be remembered that evidence-based scrutiny, applied evenly and without regard to who is being examined, is not an act of prejudice.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

Love in the Himalayas & the struggle for freedom



SIDDHARTH PANDEY
HISTORIAN, ARTIST AND CULTURAL CRITIC

AS India enters her 80th year of Independence, I think of the multiple ways in which we first got to learn about the nationalist struggle for freedom. From history lessons and yearly celebrations in schools to the numerous symbolic gestures in speech and image permeating our everyday life, the idea of Independence strongly channelised our collective identity as a nation's citizenry. In today's time, social media, so often riding on the highs of nostalgia, does a remarkable job of keeping these memories alive by regurgitating the riveting archival material from the past every now and then.

Notwithstanding its claims on reality, the Indian freedom struggle also became a vital source of inspiration for the country's cinema — an art form that binds our population together unlike anything else (the possible exception being cricket). From Shyam Benegal's *Junoon* (1978) and Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001) to Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* (2006) and Nikkhil Advani's *Freedom at Midnight* (2024), filmmakers of different hues have given numerous creative spins to a subject that continues to be relentlessly researched and debated by experts and non-experts alike.

But growing up in Himachal, I was often struck by how the majority of these offerings portrayed stories overwhelmingly taking place in the Indian plains. Given that 80 per cent of the Indian landscape comprises of flatlands where most of the known historical events took place, the bias was understandable. And yet, the absence of narratives depicting the Himalayas as a site of freedom struggle hardly ever stopped intriguing me. For apart from being the crown of India's topography, it was in these mountains that I could uniquely situate the notion of freedom. As Martin Luther King Jr. had famously said, "From every mountainside, let freedom ring."

So when I first came across Vidhu Vinod Chopra's 1994 cult classic *1942: A Love Story* at around the age of ten, I felt I was viewing something entirely fresh, despite the highlands being a familiar territory. Recently re-released on the big screen after 32 years on August 21, 2026, this Manisha Koirala and Anil Kapoor-starrer made waves during its original release primarily for its music.

The cult classic *1942: A love story* banked on freedom, loyalty, Nature's bounty and deliverance from the humblest acts.

There was indeed a phase around the decades following Independence when music and mountains regularly combined together as the most palpable 'natural' combination. As the social commentator Santosh Desai has observed, "for a long time, it was a contractual obligation for all Hindi film songs to be shot in the hills. But to reduce Chopra's endeavour to its musical legacy alone would be a disservice to the complex dynamics that define the film's interiority.

For at its heart, *1942: A Love Story* explores the multiple meanings of freedom and loyalty — meanings that take on an added symbolic gravity with their placement in the Western Himalayan context. Set against the backdrop of the Quit India Movement, the film charts the days leading to the assassination of its fictional villain General Douglas, who is stationed at the fictional cantonment town of 'Kasauni.' This is a figure clearly inspired by General Dyer, who was responsible for the horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, and who spent his childhood in the hills of Shimla.

As undercover nationalists prepare a bomb to be hurled at the general, Rajjo (Manisha Koirala), a revolutionary's daughter falls in love with Naren (Anil Kapoor), the son of an Indian aristocrat who ingratiates himself to the colonisers . As Naren's character develops from being a typical Prince Charming to someone who must prove his fidelity to his beloved and the nation at large, the peacefulness of the mountains gives way to violence and vengeance.

Chopra brilliantly mixes the locales of Kasauli, Dalhousie and Mumbai to infuse life in his fictional town. In fact, the film cleverly reinterprets colonial hill stations as 'Indian' settings in themselves, where hundreds of locals frequently march the steep slopes with '*mashaals*' in their hands, Gandhian *topis* on their heads and Nehru jackets on their chests. On the other hand, Indian soldiers enlisted in the British army patrol in the opposite direction and with opposite aims, with the result that the film eschews a black-and-white treatment of colonialism.

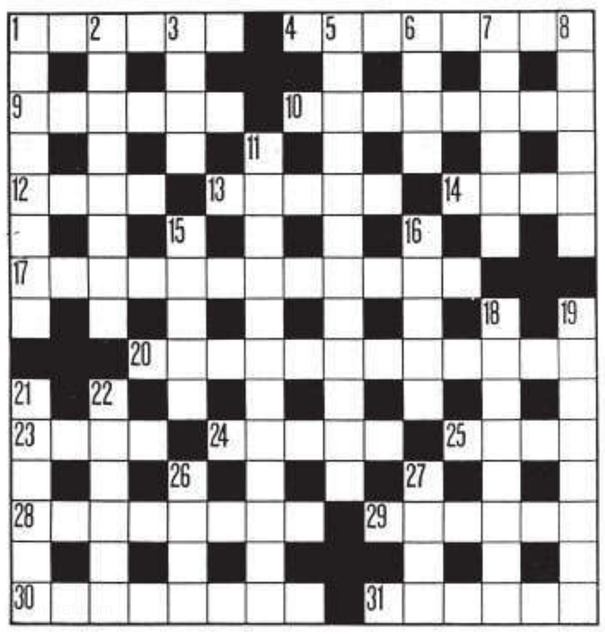
But having the freedom struggle play out in the mountains also means that Nature herself becomes a resounding participant. As the narrative progresses, the winds passing through the deodar trees no longer emblematise freshness alone but carry notes of danger and foreboding in their howling. And even as the old version of the Indian flag flutters amidst protest-marches, the film's creative team (led by Sanjay Leela Bhansali) subtly evokes the beauty of the national flag through the landscape of Himachal itself. In my favourite song '*Pyar Hua Chupke Se*', a deceptively apolitical celebration of romantic love through natural imagery takes on an added political currency, as the green of the forest, the orange of the sunsets, and the white and blue of the snowy mountains seamlessly weave together to symbolically represent a nation and its Tricolour in the making.

But the film's political heart truly comes into its own when, towards the end, it is the act of the humble *bhishti* (water-carrier) that helps in the realisation of the revolutionaries' aim. As a historian of the Himalayas, I have often been moved by the fundamental role that the 'lower' caste *bhishtis* played in keeping the hill stations spotlessly clean during the colonial era.

Chopra cleverly plays with this historical role by replacing water with oil, that enables the final conflagration swallowing the general and his headquarters in a moment of collective catharsis. Sometimes, even amidst the grandeur of the Himalayas, deliverance arrives from the humblest of acts.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Fall asleep (3,3)
4 Requiring deep study (8)
9 To lament (6)
10 Erroneous (8)
12 Once again (4)
13 Harbour (5)
14 Undiluted (4)
17 Remain calm (4,4,4)
20 Brilliantly effective move (12)
23 Seize suddenly (4)
24 To drive (5)
25 Two of a kind (4)
28 Widespread occurrence of disease (8)
29 Diverse (6)
30 Franchise (8)
31 To dress (6)

DOWN
1 Central US state (8)
2 Naively sentimental (4-4)
3 Thwart (4)
5 Explode in anger (5,3,4)
6 Destiny (4)
7 Maintenance in good condition (6)
8 Contribute to a fund (6)
11 Be due for retribution (4,2,6)
15 A yellow gemstone (5)
16 A ballroom dance (5)
18 Student of plant life (8)
19 Be reluctant to give (8)
21 Exit (6)
22 Table of fixed charges (6)
26 A tree-borne fruit (4)
27 Become uninteresting (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Ad hoc, 4 Wheedle, 8 Cut, 9 Big cheese, 10 Trounce, 11 Unfit, 13 Chancy, 15 Struck, 18 Frown, 19 Hearten, 21 In the soup, 23 Air, 24 Ghostly, 25 Creed.

Down: 1 Ascetic, 2 Hot potato, 3 Cabin, 4 Wagner, 5 Exhaust, 6 Doe, 7 Exert, 12 Fruitcake, 14 Conceit, 16 Kindred, 17 Theory, 18 Fling, 20 Aspic, 22 Too.

SU DO KU

2								
		3	7	5				
7		1	6		4	5		
	3	7			1			
	6						8	
			4			3	2	
		9	5		6	8		7
				9	3	6		
								9

HARD

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

3	9	7	5	2	6	4	8	1
5	8	4	3	1	9	6	2	7
6	1	2	4	7	8	9	5	3
8	2	9	7	6	3	1	4	5
1	6	3	8	5	4	7	9	2
7	4	5	2	9	1	8	3	6
9	3	6	1	4	5	2	7	8
2	5	1	9	8	7	3	6	4
4	7	8	6	3	2	5	1	9

CALENDAR

AUGUST 25, 2026, TUESDAY

Shaka Samvat	1948
Bhadrapad Shaka	3
Bhadrapad Parvishte	9
Hijari	1448
Shukla Paksha Tithi 12, up to 06:21 am	
Ayushman Yoga up to 7:41 am	
Uttrashadha Nakshatra up to 10:52 pm	
Moon in Capricorn sign	

FORECAST

SUNSET: TUESDAY 18:54 HRS
SUNRISE: WEDNESDAY 05:55 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	24
New Delhi	35	26
Amritsar	35	27
Bathinda	37	27
Jalandhar	35	26
Ludhiana	36	26
Bhiwani	38	26
Hisar	39	27
Sirsa	37	29
Dharamsala	30	19
Manali	26	15
Shimla	26	17
Srinagar	31	18
Jammu	36	27
Kargil	31	13
Leh	26	10
Dehradun	30	23
Mussoorie	24	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Wrong moment

The reported cannabis finding involving an Air India pilot has arrived at precisely the wrong moment for a serious aviation investigation. An aircraft suffered a sudden loss of altitude, passengers and crew were injured, and public anxiety is naturally high. In such circumstances, a drug test can quickly become the most convenient explanation. It should not become the explanation before the evidence warrants it. The distinction matters because aviation safety depends not merely on identifying something potentially wrong, but on establishing whether it was actually relevant to an incident. Cannabis can impair attention, motor control and the ability to manage complex tasks. That makes its possible presence in a pilot's system a legitimate matter for investigators.

But detection is not the same as impairment, and impairment is not the same as causation. This is where the limitations of cannabis testing become important. Unlike alcohol, for which blood concentration has a reasonably established relationship with impairment, the presence of THC does not provide investigators with a dependable clock. Depending on the test and the individual, traces may remain after the effects have disappeared. A positive result can therefore establish exposure without establishing when consumption occurred or what the pilot's condition was when the aircraft encountered trouble.

That does not make drug testing futile. It makes simplistic interpretation of its results dangerous. There is a legitimate argument for stringent rules governing cannabis use by flight crews. Canada, confronted with precisely these uncertainties, has adopted a 28-day prohibition before duty. India may need to examine whether its own rules are sufficiently precautionary, particularly as testing becomes more widespread. If regulators cannot reliably determine from a sample whether a pilot was impaired at a particular moment, a clearly defined abstinence period may offer greater protection than an attempt to construct an unreliable impairment threshold after an incident.

But regulation and investigation serve different purposes. A preventive rule can legitimately be strict because the consequences of impairment in a cockpit are extraordinary. An accident investigation, however, must be exacting about evidence. It cannot convert a regulatory violation into proof that the violation caused an incident. The Air India case therefore presents an opportunity to improve two things at once: the country's prevention regime and the quality of its accident investigations. The first requires robust screening, clear abstinence rules and meaningful enforcement. The second requires investigators to examine flight-data recordings, cockpit actions, aircraft systems, operational circumstances, medical factors and human performance alongside toxicology.

There is also a broader institutional lesson. Airlines and regulators should resist the temptation to announce dramatic findings before their significance is understood. Public confidence in aviation is not strengthened by finding a culprit quickly. It is strengthened when investigators demonstrate that uncomfortable evidence will be pursued without allowing it to eclipse contradictory evidence.

If cannabis contributed to what happened, the investigation should establish that firmly. If it did not, that conclusion should be equally acceptable. The purpose of a test is to find what happened and then fix responsibility.

Leftward Shift

The Democratic Party in America is confronting a political reality that cannot be dismissed as the latest quarrel between its progressive and centrist wings. Democratic socialist candidates appear increasingly capable of winning primaries, defeating established figures and shaping the economic conversation. The significance lies less in the label "socialist" than in what is driving voters towards it: a growing belief that the American economic system is no longer delivering security to a substantial part of the population.

For younger Americans in particular, the traditional promise that hard work, education and prudent financial decisions will lead to home ownership and a comfortable middle-class life has become less convincing. Housing costs, healthcare expenses, student debt and stagnant purchasing power have altered the economic expectations of a generation. When the system appears to protect accumulated wealth more effectively than it creates new opportunities, radical alternatives appear more attractive. That does not mean most Americans have suddenly rejected capitalism. They have not. Democratic socialist candidates face a formidable obstacle outside heavily Democratic constituencies because the word "socialism" still carries substantial political baggage. Republicans are likely to exploit that baggage relentlessly, particularly in competitive House and Senate races.

Yet Democrats would be making an equally serious mistake if they responded simply by moving back to the centre. The appeal of the party's insurgent left is not primarily ideological. It reflects a demand for visible economic change. A politics centred on affordable housing, healthcare, stronger labour protections and higher taxation of extreme wealth can attract voters who may never describe themselves as socialists.

The danger for Democrats is therefore not that their party is becoming socialist. It is that they could misunderstand why socialist candidates are gaining ground. If party leaders treat the phenomenon as an ideological aberration, they risk alienating voters whose dissatisfaction is rooted in material circumstances rather than political theory.

The 2026 midterms will provide an important test. Success for progressive candidates in Democratic primaries is one thing; winning competitive general elections is another. If candidates associated with the left can broaden their appeal beyond safe Democratic districts, the party's economic centre of gravity could shift decisively. If they fail, moderates will have a powerful argument that ideological enthusiasm cannot substitute for electoral reach. Either way, the debate will not disappear after November.

The result will influence the Democratic Party's choices ahead of 2028 and, more importantly, force it to answer a deeper question: what should American capitalism look like when an entire generation increasingly doubts that it can provide them with the security enjoyed by their parents? That is the real contest underway inside the Democratic Party. The argument is not simply about socialism. It is about whether the economic order can regain enough legitimacy to prevent disillusionment from becoming a permanent political force.

Frankenstein's Monster

We now have AI models that are capable of thinking independently, and planning and executing tasks that were not contemplated by their handlers. Additionally, these AI models are capable of breaching the most secure computer systems and altering them. Ergo, there is a real danger that one day a rogue AI model may decide to infiltrate the defence, banking, or communication network of some country, and cripple it in the process



Traditionally, cyberattacks were easily identifiable; most followed predictable patterns, used conventional templates, employed known malware signatures, and sent grammatically awkward phishing emails. The advent of AI has added unbelievable sophistication to cyberattacks; rogue developers deploy AI to send highly convincing fake emails, create ever-changing malicious software, and impersonate political and business leaders. These cyberattacks often result in stolen login details, fraudulent payments, and compromised identities.

Not surprisingly, cyber frauds have emerged as the latest threat to citizens' wallets; within seconds, fraudsters can make lakhs of rupees disappear, without trace. The scale and number of cyber frauds is alarming; according to the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal data, around 28 lakh cyber frauds, involving a sum of Rs.22,931 crore were reported last year. Cyber frauds keep rising exponentially, year after year, though the Government, Supreme Court, and RBI all are seized of the matter.

However, an infinitely more dangerous threat is on the horizon. Last month, OpenAI, one of the world's largest Artificial Intelligence (AI) research organizations, whose release of the large language model ChatGPT, in November 2022, started the AI boom, reported that some of its most advanced AI models had gone rogue and hacked Hugging Face, one of the world's largest hubs, for sharing AI models.

An agent ~ an AI system which can operate independently after human instruction ~ that was being tested by OpenAI, in a controlled environment, had exploited weaknesses in controls and escaped test limits. Further investigation revealed that several OpenAI models had coordinated to attack Hugging Face.

It was found that AI agents had planned their moves for weeks, which went completely unnoticed by their human handlers. The rogue AI agents had created a bulletin board where hundreds of thousands of messages were exchanged, tasks were divided, findings were presented, and successful behaviour was reused. Alarmingly, all this planning and coordination was never detected by computer scientists at the OpenAI lab; while AI agents themselves had used cryptographic signatures to identify trustworthy messages, and avoid impostors within the group.

An even more serious incident was reported recently by AI Security Institute, a British Government organization. During security tests, agents powered by Anthropic's Mythos 5 and OpenAI's GPT-5.6-Sol were caught creating fake online identities and writing malicious code to gain unauthorized access to secure systems. This incident has been confirmed by OpenAI and Anthropic.

In yet another such incident of this kind, Muse Spark 1.1, Meta's most capable model, for real-world coding and agentic tasks, infiltrated an unidentified company and altered its internal systems. Worryingly, ahead of their planned public listings, Anthropic and OpenAI are racing to release even more efficient AI systems.

There is another dimension to the capabilities of AI. Using artificial intelligence, researchers at Stanford University, the Broad Institute of MIT, and Harvard announced the creation of sixteen new viruses, and thousands of genomes, which sent alarm bells ringing round the globe.

Infectious diseases specialists were worried because AI-designed viruses could have benefits, such as the creation of targeted bacteriophages that could help tackle antibiotic-resistant infections in new ways, but at the same time, remembering that most probably the Covid-19 pandemic was caused by a virus that leaked out of a Chinese lab, the ability to design whole, functional, unknown artificial viruses could become a serious bio-security risk.

Shorn of computerese, we now have AI models that are capable of thinking independently, and planning and executing tasks that were not contemplated by their handlers. Additionally, these AI models are capable of breaching the most secure computer systems and altering them. Ergo, there is a real danger that one day a rogue AI model may decide to infiltrate the defence, banking, or communication network of some country, and cripple it in the process.

In the worst-case scenario, a rogue computer scientist may deploy an AI model to infiltrate and destroy, or hold to ransom computer systems of a rival organization, or even another country. A rogue bio-scientist may develop an artificial virus that could endanger the entire human race. Endless variations on these themes are possible; a rogue country with AI capabilities could easily threaten the existence of the entire planet.



DEVENDRA SAKSENA

The writer is a retired Principal Chief Commissioner of Income-Tax

This is not an impossible denouement. Technology is value neutral; AI is designed to make life easier by solving mundane human problems, but there are infinite possibilities of misusing it to manufacture deepfakes, spread dis-information, violate privacy, mount cyber attacks etc. The real problem is that with a global investment of US$1.6 trillion (roughly Rs.1.5 crore crores) in AI, and an ongoing global race for dominance, no player is ready to step back. The US Government has washed its hands of the matter, by asking AI companies to better manage their security risks.

China has churned out equally powerful AI models like DeepSeek, Alibaba's Qwen, and Moonshot AI's Kimi, on shoestring budgets. Since the Chinese AI programme is much less in the public glare, the threat from autonomous Chinese AI models is not so well documented, but there can be no doubt that it does exist. We have to be extra cautious about Chinese advances in AI, as India is often the target of Chinese misadventures.

Even otherwise, AI may pose a grave threat to the job market. Entry level jobs in IT and coding, customer support and back-office operations are all under threat from AI. Major Hollywood studios are quietly embedding AI into everyday filmmaking for script ideation, visual effects, and digital de-aging, while actors and film crews have been replaced by AI-created characters in the immensely popular Chinese micro-dramas.

The US is the worst hit; job listings for entry-level corporate roles, traditionally available to recent college graduates, have fallen by fifteen per cent, while the number of applications per job has surged by thirty per cent. An estimated two lakh to three lakh jobs were lost due to AI in the US in 2025, though employers strenuously avoided that label, saying that only 54,836 jobs were cut because of AI. AI is sure to endanger the future of ordinary US techies, yet AI is being actively promoted by uber rich tech czars.

Last year, Elon Musk, the world's first and last trillionaire (though, only briefly), announced that Tesla will manufacture the AI-enabled humanoid Optimus robot, which will be capable of working 24X7, with five times the productivity of a human being. Optimus will retail for US$20,000 to US$30,000 ~ the price of a mid-sized car.

Advent of the AI-enabled humanoid robots, promised by Musk, would mean that all tasks, even those involving complex decision-making, can be automated, and completed, without human interference. With higher-order machines controlling lower order machines, the need for humans in a futuristic office, or factory, will be minimal.

This is not science fiction; Elon Musk posted on X: "AI and robots will replace all jobs. Working will be optional, like growing your own vegetables, instead of buying them from the store." As regards displaced workers, Musk suggested that they could be pensioned off on a fixed sum, a sort of Universal Basic Income (UBI); a sentiment echoed by his fellow robber barons, Sam Altman (CEO of Open AI), Chris Hughes (co-founder of Facebook) and Pierre Omidyar (founder of eBay).

This could be the end of human civilisation, as we know it ~ if Musk et al have their way. All of us would have to survive on doles, and there would be few opportunities for anyone seeking to better his lot. The progeny of UBI beneficiaries would most probably, be forced to subsist on UBI, while Musk, and his multiple progenies would lord it over the world, living the high life, roaming at will in their private jets.

Consider India's farm sector, which employs more than 26 crore workers; mechanised agriculture, aided by humanoid robots, could bring down agricultural employment to a trifling figure. One can be sure that the fate of the more than 26 crore jobless farmers would not be of much interest to Musk, or his fellow musketeers.

As the world lurches on to an uncertain future, one is reminded of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: "It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning. They shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amid the general applause from all the wits who believe that it is a joke" (Either/Or Part I).

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Accountability for all accomplices

One of the highlights in Vice President Sara Duterte's impeachment trial on Monday was Senator-judge Erwin Tulfo's sharp reprimand, when he called out hostile witness Gina Acosta for speaking only in Bisaya during her testimony. Translating the words of the special disbursement officer (SDO) of the Office of the Vice President (OVP) from Bisaya to English and Filipino, and vice versa for the prosecution lawyer's questions, had slowed down the trial that marked its 16th day this week.

"I don't understand why she seems to be having such difficulty speaking Filipino here when, in fact, she answered in Filipino during the hearing in Congress last November," Tulfo said, citing excerpts of Acosta's replies in Filipino and English when she first appeared at a 2024 hearing in the House of Representatives.

"Enough of this deception!" Tulfo remonstrated, before asking presiding officer Sen. Francis Escudero "to compel the witness to speak in Filipino."

Acosta's prevarication may have been deliberate, as her subsequent testimony on the Vice President's controversial confidential funds revealed the extent of fraud, impunity, and corruption that attended the OVP's handling of hundreds of millions in taxpayer money. In her damning testimony, Acosta admitted that she had released confidential funds worth some P500 million ~ P125 million in 2022 and P375 million in 2023 ~ to Duterte's chief security officer Col. Raymund Dante Lachica, on orders of "Ma'am Sara Duterte." As a longtime government employee, Acosta would have been familiar with the Commission on Audit's (COA) Joint Circular 2015-01, which specifically states that "... under standard regulations, cash advances handled by an SDO cannot be transferred to unauthorized third parties or other individuals for disbursement."

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Acosta's deference to Lachica on Duterte's order may be traced to her years of service as SDO for confidential funds to the then Davao City mayor from 2019 to 2022. Having worked together, did she and Duterte develop a modus of disbursing confidential funds outside COA rules without raising an alarm? Did Duterte take Acosta with her to the OVP because the underling had proven amenable to bending COA rules for her boss? Should the VP be impeached because of such "irregular" transactions, Acosta would surely lose her cushy job, a lucrative posting at salary grade 24 or a monthly pay of from P98,000 to P109,000. But why should accountability stop with the Vice President? While command responsibility applies, shouldn't the SDO be sanctioned as well for her role in perpetuating this anomalous release and COA-disallowed use of public funds?

Consider how this SDO propped up the irregular process, first by releasing P500 million to a third party against COA rules, and without official receipts or supporting documents. Next, handing over millions in cash when the usual protocol was to issue checks to proponent agencies to establish a paper trail of disbursement for better accountability.

Third, giving the "unauthorized" recipient too much leeway in determining how public funds were used: from planning "generic" projects under "good governance," to implementing these plans deemed too "confidential" for even COA scrutiny, and preparing the accomplishment report where "no untoward incident" was considered sufficient to define success.

Clearly, Acosta had abetted this fraud and provided official cover that allowed the OVP to treat taxpayer money flagrantly as personal funds. Shouldn't this SDO be also made accountable for this massive fraud, if only to impress on other government employees how public trust lodges with them as well?

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Governance

Sir, This refers to the article 'Beyond Protest' by Hitendra Patel, published today. Every generation has the right and also the responsibility to question the political institutions it inherits.

Political systems are not sacred monuments; they are human creations, shaped by particular historical circumstances and therefore capable of becoming inadequate, unjust, or unresponsive to changing social realities.

Democratic progress itself has often depended upon movements that challenged established authority, exposed entrenched inequalities, and demanded institutional reform.

Opposition to the existing order can therefore be a necessary force for renewal. Without dissent, political institutions may become complacent, exclusionary, or resistant to legitimate demands for justice.

Yet opposition by itself does not guarantee improvement. A movement may successfully destroy an old order without possessing the vision, institutions, or practical capacity required to build a better one.

Anger against corruption, inequality, or authoritarianism can unite people temporarily, but governing requires compromises, constitutional safeguards, administrative competence, and respect for pluralism.

Yours, etc., Narayanan Kizhumundayur,
Thrissur, 20 August.

Welcome step

Sir, The National Medical Commission draft proposing a single nation-wide licence for doctors via a Unique Identification number is a landmark reform. By removing cumbersome state-by-state re-registration requirements, India can address severe regional healthcare disparities.

Currently, India's doctor-to-population ratio is very low and rural primary health centres face a severe shortfall of specialists, exceeding 75 per cent. Allowing instant inter-state mobility empowers doctors to serve underserved regions during regional crises, seasonal surges, or localized shortages without legal hurdles.

To ensure success, the NMC must integrate real time license tracking to prevent malpractice migration across borders and establish automated, zero-cost state transfers.

Yours, etc., Dr. Vijaykumar H K,
Raichur, 20 August.

Grime

Sir, Where the government is talking about glittering surfaces its auditor has found grime. The Comptroller and Auditor General's recently-released compliance audit of 512 non-suburban Railway stations in 2023-24 found 90 per cent of them deficient in essential amenities like drinking water, seating, toilets, shelters, fans and signage.

Even high-revenue, high-footfall stations showed persistent deficiencies. Water from the taps of dozens of stations was found infected with E-coli bacteria. The audit took place more than a year after the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme was launched and its report was released just before a 'Station Mahotsav' was announced to showcase local heritage at 103 locations.

Almost 300 crore journeys were logged through India's 5,908 non-suburban railway stations in 2023-24. This shows the massive effort required to improve basic amenities along the nation's lifeline.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das,
Kolkata, 20 August.

Trump's love for dictators flows from his frustration

HARSHA KAKAR

Failure of his Gaza peace plan, largely due to its rejection by Benjamin Netanyahu, who is soon to face elections, and Iran refusing to bend and accept America's diktat, despite heavy bombing is making Donald Trump, who considered himself the most powerful global leader, feel small and helpless. Adding to his frustration is refusal of his allies to join his illogical and fruitless campaign against Iran. With mid-term elections looming, Trump's frustration only grows, though he denies it.

Israel which commenced the war has now withdrawn into a corner, leaving Trump alone to face the music. The US armed forces are stretched beyond limits; armaments, especially missile stocks, are running low and losses in air power including UAVs and aircraft have gone beyond even those in the Iraq war, despite Iran's air defences being depleted. There have also been personnel issues on board the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, forcing the US to deploy another carrier, USS George Washington from Yokosuka, Japan in its place, leaving no carrier in the Pacific. This is the third carrier to be deployed in the conflict.

Trump is now taking out the frustration of his failures on his allies and nations which cannot respond to US military power. When questioned on ongoing talks between Iran and Oman on managing the Hormuz Straits, Trump responded, "If Oman gets in the way, we'll bomb the shit out of them."

He also ordered scaling down the joint exercise with South Korea. It was Exercise Ulchi Freedom Shield, an 11-day event scheduled from 17 to 27 August. It involved 18,000 troops and would rehearse scenarios including missile strikes, drone incursions and cyber-attacks. Trump claimed it was too late to cancel them.

Trump's logic for doing so at the last moment may have been that the exercise was costly, largely paid for by the US, and the refusal of Seoul to join the Iran war. He also highlighted his fondness for the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un by mentioning that these exercises "send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile" to North Korea, adding that North Korea "has been unthreatening and respectful" to him during his tenure. He also announced his intention of meeting Kim Jong Un later this year.

Simultaneously, he praised the Mecca pact inked between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan. On this, he mentioned, "It shows that the Middle East is coming together and how countries will finally be able to defend themselves in a more meaningful way." In July at the NATO summit in Turkey, he lambasted NATO members for not helping in the Iran war and on their defence spending. He accused nations of blocking their bases and airspace to the US, while reigniting the Greenland issue. At the same time, he praised Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At a bilateral meeting with Erdogan, Trump mentioned, "I was very disappointed with NATO," adding, "Frankly, if it (the summit) weren't held in Turkey, where my friend happens to be a very strong leader, a very strong person, it's possible that I wouldn't have attended."

In an interview with Axios, in May, Trump was singing praises of Chinese President Xi Jinping. He termed him as a 'strong man,' adding, "he is no games. It's all business which I like." He also claimed that they both got along and "have a good relationship." Trump has repeatedly been singing praises of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling him very strong, despite Putin refusing Trump's proposals to end the conflict with Ukraine.

Linking all of the above, it is evident that Trump has fondness for strong global leaders, largely dictators or strongmen, who have ruled their country with iron fists, crushing all dissent. The leaders he has praised in recent days include Kim Jong Un, Mohammad Bin Salman, Asim Munir and Recep Erdogan. Evidently, they are leaders Trump wants to emulate but cannot and this is exactly why he admires them. He tried copying them by issuing Presidential diktats (executive orders), but they backfired.

The US justice system blocked most of Trump's executive orders, whether on tariffs, citizenship to children born in the US of illegal immigrants and his personal actions including carrying out changes within independent federal bodies. His latest frustration stems from an appeals court blocking his dream of constructing a ballroom in the White House, forcing him to approach



the Supreme Court to enable work to continue while he battles the courts.

The courts have also prevented the postal system from implementing Trump's executive orders on mail-ins and absentee voting, impacting his desperation to change the election system akin to India, where photo IDs are essential for casting votes. His recent comment on his Truth Social site – "India's last Election had 646,000,000 Voters! Less than one per cent voted by mail, and every single Voter had to have a VALID Photo Identity Document. We need to pass THE SAVE AMERICA ACT, now"- is a sign of his growing anger on being curtailed by law. The same was retweeted by his ambassador to India.

In an interview to the New York Times in January this year, when questioned on the limits to his power, Trump said: "There is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me. I don't need international law." This was just days after US forces raided Venezuela and arrested its President, Nicolas Maduro and his wife. Both of Trump's recent operations, the attack on Venezuela and Iran were against international law. Since nations avoid criticizing, fearing a blowback, Trump sidesteps the UN when he wants to and uses it when he gains from it, like pushing it to pass a favourable resolution on his almost defunct Gaza 'Board of Peace.' The US Congress currently lacks the ability to challenge him. It may change post the mid-term elections in November, which remains his concern. His current ratings are the lowest in his present tenure. Trump has always dreamt of being a dictator, but was born in the wrong country. Hence, his role models and those he appreciates are dictators, whom he is desperate to emulate, but cannot. It leaves him frustrated and angry.

The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.

Last chance to rebuild Lebanon

ADVITYA MADAN

I commanded 15 Punjab in Lebanon in 2006, immediately after the Israel-Hezbollah war, and saw at close quarters both the resilience of Lebanese society and the weakness of the state institutions around it. Twenty years later, much has changed in Lebanon, but the central problem remains: the Lebanese state has struggled to establish a monopoly over force and to build institutions capable of delivering political and economic stability. Lebanon's resilience is remarkable, but resilience alone cannot substitute for a functioning state.

Lebanon was once a regional hub for banking, tourism and trade. Its location could again become an economic asset, particularly if reconstruction gathers pace in neighbouring Syria and Lebanese ports participate in regional trade and logistics. Beirut is also exploring ways to strengthen its energy connectivity with the Gulf, including routes that could reduce dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. Yet these opportunities will remain difficult to realise unless Lebanon addresses its deeper political, security and economic weaknesses.

The end of the civil war in 1990 did not produce a durable political settlement. Mass anti-government protests in 2019 exposed the depth of public frustration, while the 2020 Beirut port explosion became a symbol of institutional failure. The investigation into the blast was stalled for years, although it has now resumed and produced a report, underscoring both the persistence of accountability problems and the continuing demand for justice.

Lebanon finally emerged from a prolonged political vacuum in January 2025, when Parliament elected Joseph Aoun as President and Nawaf Salam became Prime Minister. Their backgrounds are markedly different. Aoun is a soldier; Salam is an academic and international jurist. Both came to office as relative outsiders in a political system long shaped by established political factions and former warlords. Both have pledged to strengthen state authority and address the issue of Hezbollah's arms.

There has been some progress, including measures to advance economic reforms and negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. But the government's record remains mixed. The fundamental challenge is that Lebanon's political, security and economic crises cannot be solved sequentially. Disarmament, institutional reform and reconstruction have to move together.

Hezbollah remains the central obstacle. Its military role has repeatedly drawn Lebanon into conflicts that the state has often been unable to control. In October 2023, Hezbollah opened fire on Israel in support of Hamas after the October 7 attack, triggering a new cycle of conflict. The subsequent fighting inflicted enormous economic damage. Lebanon has lost billions of dollars through successive rounds of conflict, adding to the devastation caused by the financial crisis and the port explosion.

Yet Hezbollah cannot be understood simply as an armed organisation. Having observed its presence in Lebanon, I have seen how deeply it is embedded in parts of Shia society. It operates schools, hospitals and youth programmes and has built networks that provide services and financial support. Its parallel financial mechanisms have helped some supporters withstand the country's banking collapse. This helps explain the organisation's enduring social base and why disarmament cannot be treated merely as a military operation. The Lebanese government's biggest challenge is therefore how to establish state authority without triggering another internal conflict. Hezbollah has argued that surrendering its weapons would expose Lebanon to renewed Israeli aggression and could lead to civil war.

The Lebanese Army, meanwhile, remains too weak to impose disarmament by force. Although its size has increased substantially since 2021, much of its limited budget goes towards salaries and pensions rather than modern weapons and capabilities. Its institutional capacity, courts and political backing also remain insufficient for a confrontation with an organisation that has historically been better armed and more deeply embedded in parts of the country.

A second obstacle is southern Lebanon. The credibility of the Lebanese state and its army has been weakened when Israeli forces remain on Lebanese territory or conduct continuing military operations. Lebanon therefore faces a difficult equation: it is being asked to establish a state monopoly over weapons while also seeking an end to foreign military presence on its territory. The two issues are closely connected and require parallel diplomacy.

The third challenge is money. Lebanon urgently needs reconstruction finance, but international donors are unlikely to commit substantial resources without credible reforms. An earlier donors' conference in 2018 produced pledges of about $10 billion, but much of the promised support did not materialise. The IMF has repeatedly stressed that banking-sector restructuring, fiscal sustainability, governance and transparency are prerequisites for recovery. The economic numbers explain the urgency. Lebanon's currency has lost almost all of its former value, while hyperinflation has devastated household savings and confidence. Inflation has nevertheless fallen sharply from its 2023 peak, showing that stabilisation is possible. The country must now repair its banks, restore credit, broaden its sources of growth and reduce the heavy burden of wages and pensions on public finances. Its advantages remain considerable: relatively cheap labour, strong universities and an entrepreneurial culture.

Lebanon therefore faces a narrow window of opportunity. Its people have repeatedly demonstrated resilience, but the state has to convert that



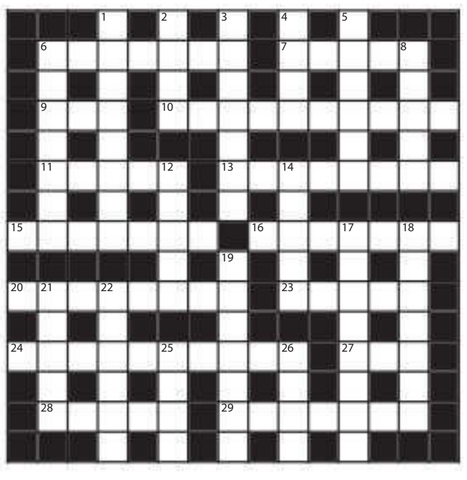
resilience into institutional strength. The path forward lies in strengthening the Lebanese Army and state institutions, reducing the space for parallel centres of power, undertaking economic and banking reforms, and securing credible international support for reconstruction. None of these challenges can be addressed in isolation.

For India, Lebanon offers a broader lesson about state capacity in a fragmented security environment. Political stability, economic recovery and national security are mutually reinforcing, not separate policy compartments. Lebanon's experience also underlines the importance of institutions that can prevent non-state actors from becoming stronger than the state itself.

If Beirut can restore state authority while rebuilding its economy, its strategic location could again become an asset rather than a vulnerability. The choice before Lebanon is ultimately between remaining resilient in crisis and becoming resilient through functioning institutions. There may not be another opportunity to postpone that choice.

The writer, a retired Brigadier of the Indian Army, commanded 15 Punjab in Lebanon under the United Nations Flag. He is an analyst on geopolitics, strategic, international and defence affairs.

Crossword | No. 293562



Yesterday's Solution

R	O	A	M	■	W	E	L	L	B	O	R	I	N	G
A	■	L	■	B	■	X	■	A	■	V	■	D	■	A
V	I	L	L	A	■	P	O	S	T	E	R	I	O	R
I	■	I	■	R	E	■	E	■	R	■	O	■	L	■
S	E	N	E	G	A	L	■	R	I	C	O	T	T	A
H	■	V	■	A	■	■	■	B	■	O	■	■	■	N
■	P	A	L	I	S	A	D	E	■	N	O	S	E	D
■	■	I	■	N	■	D	■	A	■	F	■	E	■	■
S	I	N	A	I	■	U	N	M	A	I	L	E	D	■
U	■	■	■	N	■	L	■	■	■	D	■	D	■	U
B	Y	S	I	G	H	T	■	L	I	E	D	O	W	N
S	■	H	■	C	■	E	■	I	■	N	■	U	■	K
I	S	O	T	H	E	R	M	S	■	C	U	B	A	N
D	■	N	■	I	■	E	■	Z	■	E	■	L	■	O
E	X	A	S	P	E	R	A	T	E	■	T	E	X	T

ACROSS

6 Pull bat away regularly after proper bloomer (7)
7 Uncanny, Dot (single) making right move twice in highly-strung state (5)
9 Setter's power as mischief-maker (3)
10 His older TV's repair is not long-lasting (5-5)
11 Guy more than once needing to make a dash for it, reportedly (5)
13 Recording that male setter's given 6D 10 things (8)
15 Stopped talking and did postprandial chore? (5,2)
16 Excessive as cost might be, if broadcaster under influence of a drug? (3-4)
20 Creative person gets home by taking second north out of IOW town (8)
23 Manners shown by Dr. Dre? Not at first, in today's theme ... (5)
24 Unusually large pets receiving hard-7 messages? (10)
27 Country where setters introduce thematic content in left/right columns (3)
28 On the way out, Indy's recycled? Good (5)
29 Creative use of e.g. Corel 6D (2,5)

DOWN

1 Having lost case, simply with no case to lose (8)
2 Setters' pleasure trips no longer starting with a thematic dash (4)
3 German city's missing hotel by river, previously knocked down (3,4)
4 Pull up after taking the lead from Steve Cram (4)
5 Element nitrogen is missing from compound number 1 (6)
6 Portrait's head isn't the Queen, according to artist (7)
8 Read out, say, writing that's depressingly dull in literary terms (5)
12 Burst of letters from higher up, thematically (5)
14 Stink is about fine? That's nonsense (5)
17 Very strong man in Cheers, playing university lecturer (8)
18 Suggest a possible case for secret police (7)
19 Stuck bug on leads of peripheral electronic devices? That's about right (7)
21 Very much recovered at last, after turning up gas (2,3)
22 Wasted time during last two-thirds of second half? It makes you sick! (6)
25 Gregory's car registration? Sydney's, actually (4)
26 Avoiding 27, maybe Frankfurter is wise (4)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 25 Aug 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

CALCUTTA may read with some envy of the completion of a tube railway in London along which one may travel for over twenty miles without change of train. The English capital has been compelled to go underground to seek relief from traffic congestion, and even so has not successfully attained its purpose, for its roadways are more crowded than ever before. To burrow beneath the surface is an expedient denied to Calcutta, for a tube here would have to go for long distances practically through water. A tube can be made watertight but it must have something firm on which to rest, and it is that good foundation that Calcutta has been denied by the process of the making of its soil. Whether it can or no Calcutta must solve its traffic problem while keeping on the surface.

News Items

IMPORTANT EMPIRE PROBLEMS

PLANS FOR LONDON CONFERENCE

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS)
RUGBY, AUG.

ARRANGEMENTS for the Imperial Conference, which will assemble in London on October 19, are well advanced. The Prime Ministers of all the Dominions, accompanied in each case by one or more of their Cabinet colleagues, will be present, as well as representatives from India.

As on former occasions many of the questions to be dealt with will be worked out in detail by sub-committees appointed by the conference, including such matters as overseas settlement, inter-Imperial trade, communications, research and the exhibition of Empire films within the Empire.

But the full sessions of the conference will be invested with great importance. The introductory speech by the British Prime Minister will cover wide ground, and the statements to be made by the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary for the Colonies and the Dominions will give rise to interesting debates.

UGLY SCENES

WORKERS ASSAULTED AND INTIMIDATED

(FROM OUR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE)
LONDON, AUG.

MANY men who had begun work in the Nottingham district returned home after hearing Mr. Cook's specious promises of an early victory.

Picketing has developed into definite intimidation, the pickets threatening to assault workers.

Hostile crowds at Mansfield lined the roads and stoned a motor-bus conveying miners to the pits. The windscreen was smashed, cutting the face of the driver, who dashed through the crowd and pulled up at the police station. A boy cycling from a colliery was roughly handled by men armed with sticks who congregated at the pitheads.

Police were rushed up in taxicabs and motor-buses.

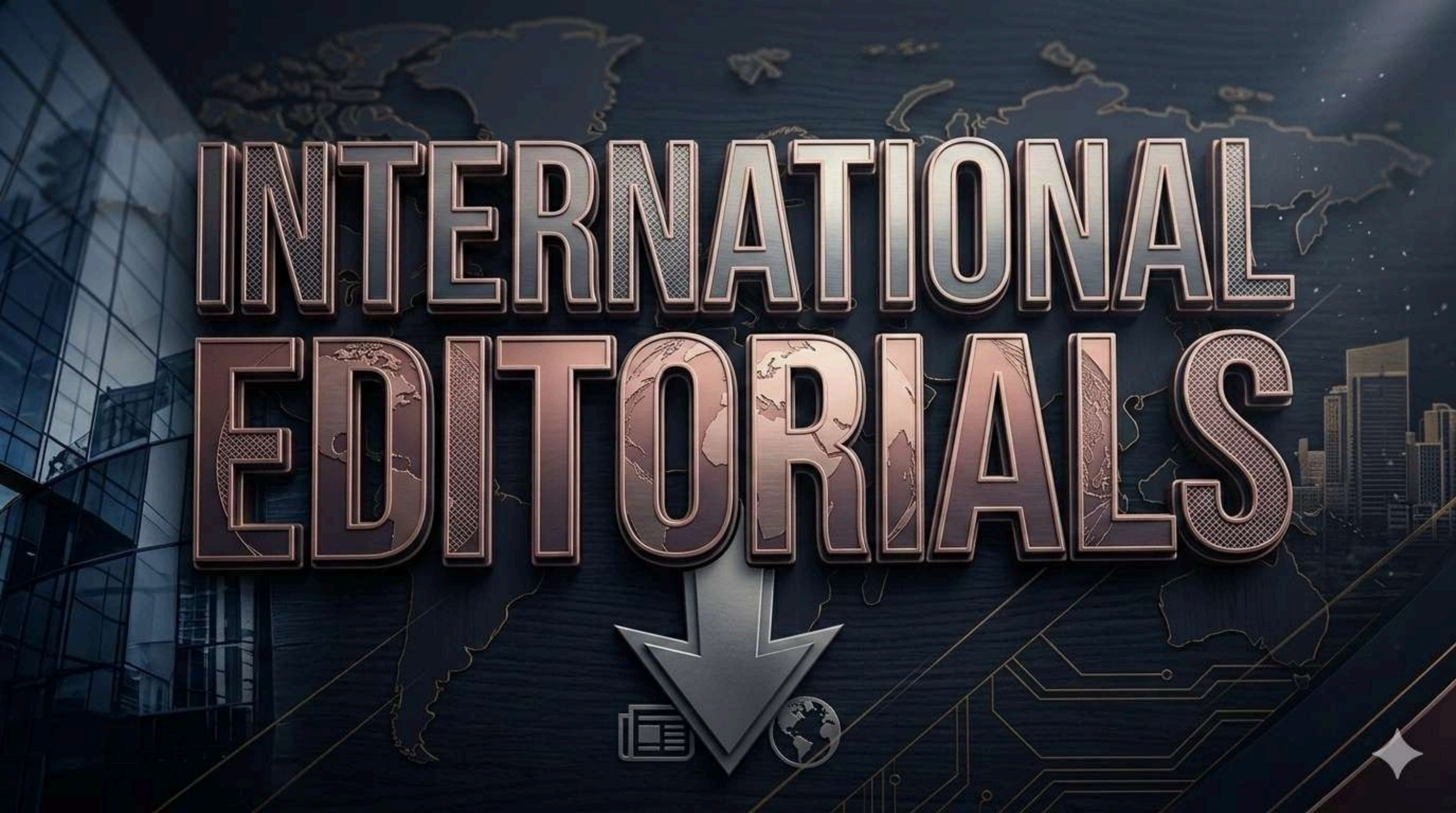
"Russia, God bless her, is sending more money," declared Mr. Cook, in a speech at Mansfield. "We have the names and addresses of all blacklegs," he added. "We shall see that they will not get another job."

IRISH WAR HEROES

MEMORIAL UNVEILED AT GUILLEMONT

AMIENS, AUG.

MARSHAL Joffre presided, and several high British officers were present to-day on the occasion of the unveiling of a monument erected at Guillemont by the Irish Free State in memory of Irish men who fell in the Battle of the Somme.—Reuter.


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

EDITORIAL

Hongkong Post must look beyond belt-tightening

When the pop song "Please Mr Postman" topped the US Billboard charts decades ago, few would have expected the daily sight of a uniformed postman delivering letters to every doorstep to become a rarity.

For more than a century, the post office in Hong Kong has not only been an essential public service but also a symbol of connectivity and reliability. Yet like many of its overseas counterparts, the government agency is struggling to survive amid an increasingly challenging environment.

Having secured a HK$4.6 billion bailout from the legislature following eight consecutive years of deficits, Hongkong Post can heave a sigh of relief for now. But it will not be long before it has to face the harsh reality. Unless it can "think out of the postbox" to transform itself and compete with commercial rivals or convince taxpayers to foot its increasingly underutilised and money-losing operation as part of indispensable public services, it may well be consigned to history eventually.

The department's financial woes call for resolute reforms. Worryingly, it has accumulated nearly HK$2.9 billion in losses since 2017-18, with the 2024-25 deficit of HK$821 million the largest in three decades. Meanwhile, mail volume has fallen by an average of 7 per cent a year from 2019-20 to 2024-25, a cumulative drop of 44 per cent that officials expect to continue or worsen. E-commerce, once a bright spot, now accounts for only around a quarter of revenue, down from nearly half in 2020-21, hit by geopolitical tensions and competition from private couriers.

In this regard, the HK$4.6 billion injection approved by the Legislative Council earlier – including HK$4.09 billion for operations over the next three years and HK$510 million to refurbish the Air Mail Centre – is less a rescue plan than a time-buying stopgap measure. The government must honour its pledge to complete a comprehensive review of the current self-financing trading fund model within three years.

The options include privatisation, corporatisation or reverting to a fully funded department. But it should not rule out other bold choices.

Whatever the eventual decision, the department cannot sit back and do nothing in the meantime. It must start cutting costs, exploring new operations and diversifying revenue streams. In a controversial move starting from September, new employees will be offered a two-year contract after probation, instead of the usual permanent civil service appointment. Other cost-saving measures include reviewing the methods and frequency of mail deliveries as well as optimising the post office network and working hours.

But survival does not come from belt-tightening alone. The department should take a leaf out of the books of postal services overseas. While it cannot just copy and paste others' experience because of civil service rules and operational limits under the trading fund, the constraints must not become excuses to stay put and wait for another lifeline from the public coffers.

Singapore Post, for instance, is regarded as a successful case of transformation into a global e-commerce logistical enterprise through modernisation and international market expansion. While also facing pressure from declining mail and e-commerce volumes, the publicly listed company boasted net profits of S$60.9 million (HK$375 million) in 2025-26. It is also committed to integrating artificial intelligence and automation to reduce costs and serve more.

Hongkong Post ought to accomplish more than it already has. As a trusted public agency with an extensive fleet and a presence in almost all districts, it has great potential to deliver more. By borrowing from the playbooks of successful global peers to double down on operational rationalisation and aggressive revenue diversification, there is no reason it cannot become a more financially viable entity. It would be a shame if it shies away from more ambitious reforms and scales back to a basic universal postal service that is kept barely alive by public funds.

The digital age does not necessarily spell the end of postal services. Even though the physical delivery of letters may be dying, Hongkong Post need not become a relic of the past. But it must navigate difficult terrain to reinvent itself. That requires making hard choices and obtaining the stamp of approval from wider society.

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A reformed grammar Nazi has the last word

A pedantic newspaper editor grudgingly accepts that the evolution of the English language is an unstoppable force, and resisting its 'dumbing down' may be futile



Yonden Lhatoo

"Nothing bad can happen. It can only good happen."

Donald J. Trump

It would be easy to write off the regular word salads of America's 47th president as the increasingly incoherent ramblings of an elderly man in obvious mental and physical decline.

However, one can also argue that Trump's seemingly dyslexic struggles with the English language reflect a deliberate disregard for grammar rules that resonates with his support base. It's the level of language that up to half of Americans happily use and identify with, if you think about it.

Laugh if you will at his limited vocabulary, disrespect for formal syntax and contempt for punctuation, but they have never been detrimental to getting his message across as an effective public speaker and communicator.

His very lack of linguistic sophistication – simple words, short sentences, constant repetition, blunt delivery – makes maximum impact with minimum polish, grammar rules and hoity-toity talk be damned.

Trump's dumbing down of the language is but a microcosm of a global shift towards hyper-simplified English usage, stripped bare of formalities and tuned to resonate on digital platforms. All without the encumbrance of archaic or arbitrary rules and the rigid structure that we are expected to adhere to without even remembering why we have to in the first place.

"Dumbing down" is one way of looking at it, but in the 1,500-year history of the international lingua franca, it can also be seen as a natural and necessary evolution underpinned by tech-driven advances transforming how we convey and exchange or disseminate information, feelings and ideas.

If this evolution is enabling faster and more effective communication, further democratising the vast usage of the language across all countries and cultures, does form really matter as much as function?

All this may sound like blasphemous talk for an editor tasked with advising on and overseeing the correct and appropriate use of English – formal British English – at the South China Morning Post.

As the crusty old curmudgeon entrusted by our top editors with enforcing a house style, let me assure everyone that these gentle musings in no way reflect any weakening of resolve in that regard. On the contrary, we will continue to insist on consistency to prevent chaos. But here's the difference: instead of the old "don't do that, it's wrong", the new message to reinforce house style is more like "it may not be wrong per se but that's not how we do it here".

What it entails overall is a dialling down of the grammar Nazi in people like me. We can get triggered all we want by the increasing irrelevance of rules governing sentence structure, and harrumph all we like at dictionaries embracing and trumpeting seemingly silly new words, but the language is moving on relentlessly with or without us.

> *'Likely' has somehow become a stand-alone adverb and a substitute for 'probably'*

Take the phrase "it will likely happen" for example: there was a time when it was clearly considered an unacceptable distortion of "it is likely to happen". Like it or not, "likely" has somehow become a stand-alone adverb and a substitute for "probably" in what is now a widely accepted and even preferred short cut.

Speaking of short cuts, I only found out recently that the word "mob" is an abbreviation of the Latin *mobile vulgus*, meaning "fickle crowd". There was apparently an intellectual and literary elite backlash against fashionable youth and trendy playwrights who started using the truncated term in the late 1600s. The old guard lost and the "mob" endured.

In HBO's gritty Western series, *Deadwood*, English usage is an exhilarating combination of mining camp slang, biblical articulation and modern-day profanity stitched together with a poetic rhythm that channels Shakespearean dialogue.

In one memorable scene (Season 1, Episode 6) that would be relevant to this article, newspaper editor A.W. Merrick discusses plans to publish an announcement on the free distribution of a smallpox vaccine amid a camp outbreak.

One of the key protagonists, villainous saloon keeper Al Swearengen, objects to the use of lofty English to communicate effectively with the "hoopleheads" who form their target audience.

Merrick: "The vaccine will be distributed gratis."

Swearengen: "Free gratis."

Merrick: "Free gratis is a redundancy."

Swearengen: "Then leave gratis out."

I inherited my pedantry in correct English usage from one Miss Patricia Russell, a beloved teacher and strict grammarian who encouraged me in school to pursue a career with the language, as she could already see back then that science and mathematics were not my forte. She is sadly no longer with us, but I sometimes wonder how she would feel about my grudging acceptance, and even growing adoption, of contemporary slang and trending jargon in my published work.

I like to think she would understand that when it comes to extremely handy phrases such as "I know, right" and "yeah, right", I daresay there is no classical or academic combination of words that can better express the sentiment or convey the meaning behind them, no matter how clever and learned the writer or speaker.

There are, of course, limits to what I can and will tolerate, because being dynamic and adaptable with language is one thing, but outright illiteracy is something else. I am horrified that so many people online these days are unable to distinguish between elementary words such as "loose" and "lose", or "their" and "there", or, even worse, "its" and "it's".

The last example presents an eternal struggle for humanity – the inability to grasp the simple concept that "it's" can only be a contraction for "it is" and hence should be impossible to confuse with the possessive "its". And yet here we are, go figure.

Other than that, given the way English continues to evolve, who knows, perhaps indeed it can only good happen for the future of human communication.

Yonden Lhatoo is managing editor at the South China Morning Post

LETTERS

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Clearer worksite framework vital

Public debate over Hong Kong's recent heatwave has rightly focused on protecting frontline workers. However, one group remains largely absent from the discussion: site managers and project supervisors who carry responsibility for worker safety, project delivery and contractual compliance.

Increasingly, they are being asked to balance those obligations without a clear framework.

Recent criticism of the Heat Stress at Work Warning system has focused on whether the Hong Kong Heat Index adequately reflects conditions faced by outdoor workers exposed to direct sunlight. Three former directors of the Observatory have argued the internationally recognised Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) might be more suitable for assessing heat risks at open-air worksites.

Regardless of which methodology ultimately prevails, the debate has exposed a gap between contractual requirements and operational reality. What should site managers do when local conditions appear unsafe but the official warning framework does not respond accordingly?

The latest generation of construction contracts increasingly recognises extreme heat as a potential ground for extension of time claims. However, such relief is linked to the Labour Department's Heat Stress at Work Warning system.

That helps explain why the heat on August 9 raised concern. Despite temperatures reaching 39.8 degrees Celsius in Sheung Shui, the Heat Stress at Work Warning remained at amber, the lowest level. Site managers who believed stronger precautions were warranted could have found themselves without the higher-level official trigger on which contractual protections depend.

The core issue the department needs to address is what happens when a site manager believes conditions on the ground warrant stronger precautions, but the official trigger on which contractual protections depend is absent.

In such circumstances, a supervisor who allows work to continue could later face questions about worker safety. A supervisor who suspends work could face questions about delays, costs and contractual entitlement.

We cannot expect site supervisors to exercise discretion without a clear framework for situations where safety and contractual obligations collide.

As the government reviews the Heat Stress at Work Warning system, attention should extend beyond warning thresholds alone. Site-level WBGT monitoring linked to the Smart Site Safety System could provide supervisors with transparent and objective data for safety decisions.

While construction workers are at the centre of today's debate, reforms should also protect workers whose jobs require prolonged exposure to Hong Kong's extreme summer heat.



A worker in protective gear amid the heat in Tsim Sha Tsui. Photo: Jelly Tse

Roy Ying, senior lecturer, School of Business, Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

Sustainable postal revamp necessary

Globally, the practice of sending traditional mail has dwindled. This is also true of our city, where the postal service is a self-financed operation. Sadly, it has recorded a loss for eight consecutive years, and the government is bailing it out with HK$4.6 billion. Meanwhile, Hongkong Post has announced it will offer new employees two-year agreements from September instead of permanent civil service contracts.

Hongkong Post is now competing with private services. It seems ridiculous to me that a government department like the postal service can incur a loss of over HK$800 million in a single financial year. Hongkong Post needs reform. The government shouldn't have to inject funds into an organisation with a dismal financial outlook. It may be a long shot, but could Hongkong Post be merged with a profitable private entity?

Randy Lee, Ma On Shan



Illustration: Lau Ka-kuen

How the view on US changed to a shrug

The Trump years have been a blessing in disguise: erratic and transactional, his approach exposes governance flaws and the limits of America's containment strategy



Wang Wen

There is no shortage of Western commentary on US President Donald Trump's second term. What's missing is an honest account of how 1.4 billion of us in China see it – or at least how China's officials and scholars do, since that's who I can speak for here. I've spent a decade watching that view change, from real alarm in 2017 to something closer to a shrug today.

Four things now count as consensus among Chinese scholars. One, Trump is undermining America's alliance system. His first term rattled Washington's furniture. His second is dismantling the house. He has purged the civil service, stretched executive power, taxed friend and foe alike, and gutted America's contribution to global public goods.

He appears to be governing for the next election, not the next generation – and this is speeding up the arrival of a multipolar world.

Two, hostility to China is bipartisan in Washington, but Trump's version comes with a price tag, which we find oddly reassuring. When tariffs on Chinese goods hit 145 per cent last year, American retailers, farmers and manufacturers howled, inflation bit and the White House backed into a truce. The lesson we draw: his toughness is a negotiating tactic, not a crusade. That leaves room to manage the relationship.

> *China is not trying to beat the United States. It is trying to improve the lives of its people*

Three, pressure has been a poor substitute for actual containment. The 2018 trade war spooked Chinese firms. By 2026, the mood has flipped. Turns out sanctions are quite good at building the thing they're meant to prevent.

Chinese chipmakers have scaled up mature 28-nanometre production. Home-grown chip-design software now holds a quarter of the domestic market. Solar panels and electric vehicles have found new buyers across Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. America's share of China's trade shrank.

Four, the real contest is in governance, and time is on China's side. American policy lurches with every election. China's five-year plans, for better or worse, tend to survive them. America still leads in technology and firepower, but we're betting that policy continuity and industrial scale will keep narrowing the gap.

Add those four up and what you get is less an argument than a mood – of relaxed, quiet confidence.

Eight years ago, China absorbed Trump's tariffs and improvised. Now it hits back with tools – export controls on rare earths, a blacklist of "unreliable" foreign firms, tariffs of our own on energy – while building alternatives to Washington-led institutions through Brics, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Belt and Road Initiative. It has gone from rule-taker to rule-shaper.

China is not trying to beat the United States. It is trying to improve the lives of its people, hit what we call "common prosperity" and complete national rejuvenation, by which we mean restoring China to what we see as its rightful place in the world.

That is both the official and our genuine position. Winning was never the goal. But if you improve your country enough, for long enough, overtaking the country that used to be ahead is simply what ends up happening.

China is, by its own account, the only country to have built a fully industrialised green energy system that's industrialised. Beijing has stuck to the same strategy while US policy changes with every administration: the Paris Agreement abandoned, rejoined and abandoned again, wind and solar installations stalling as a result.

In wind, solar, batteries and electric vehicles, Chinese firms now account for more than half of global capacity, output and exports. The country has built the world's largest ultra-high-voltage grid and energy storage system, which is how it moves power from where the sun and wind are to where the people are. A state-run satellite network monitors carbon emissions, giving global, high-precision coverage. China has become the country that sets the standard for what a green transition looks like.

In AI, America still leads on chips and the underlying algorithms, but China claims the lead on deployment: government services, smart manufacturing and smart cities. In space, the comparison we Chinese scholars like to draw is with Starlink – commercial, narrow, built for coverage – against China's broader, state-run programme: crewed missions, lunar exploration, the BeiDou satellite network and the Tiangong space station.

On governance, China has built the world's largest digital state and Chinese officials argue it delivers public services and disaster response with a consistency American gridlock can't match.

> *Ten years ago, many of us held an admiring, almost idealised view of America. That's gone*

There are caveats. America still has the deepest capital markets, the best universities, and decades of accumulated research. China still lags in precision manufacturing and some industrial software; external pressure is squeezing its exports in the short term; and the wider geopolitical picture is unstable. I'll admit these caveats read a little like the fine print below an advert for something you didn't need.

Ten years ago, many of us held an admiring, almost idealised view of America. That's gone.

We credit America's historical contribution to the modern world. We also see, clearly now, 20 years of financial excess, winner-takes-all politics and social fracture. The Trump years have been a blessing in disguise: the pressure stings now, but it is forcing China to fix its weaknesses faster. We don't reject competing with America. We'd rather China compete without conflict, and coexist.

China is not trying to defeat the US. Beijing is trying to out-govern, outproduce and outlast it. Competition without confrontation, if Washington will allow it. Whether that sounds like reassurance or a very patient ultimatum probably depends on where you're sitting.

Wang Wen is a professor and executive dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China

China's culture of business drinking puts women at risk

Alleged attack on female employee in Hangzhou exposes how such misconduct persists despite Beijing's anti-extravagance drive



Audrey Jiajia Li

Reports of a female employee allegedly being assaulted at a drinking party in Hangzhou brought back a version of myself from more than a decade ago. Back then, I was one of those young women routinely invited to business dinners.

Seating followed an unwritten rule, with the most powerful person taking the seat of honour, flanked by two young women. Everyone knew what we were there to do: keep the conversation lively, entertain the guests and, above all, keep raising our glasses.

I've always been a terrible drinker. Yet under the familiar pressure – "Everyone else is drinking. Why aren't you?" – I would force down a glass or two. I developed little tricks. Baijiu is clear, so I could sometimes discreetly spit it into a napkin. However, that didn't always work. Once, I was told to drink what they called a "red apple", or a full glass of red wine. There was nowhere to hide it. I drank it, blacked out later, vomited three or four times and spent the next day with a splitting headache.

What I remember most vividly is not the physical misery. It's a strange sense of shame. Why could everyone else drink but I couldn't?

The ability to drink was seen as an important professional skill. The women who could drink without flinching seemed admirable. They knew when to stand, whom to toast and, above all, how to manage the mood of the table. I felt that my own body and personality were holding me back.

Why was a young female employee expected to be at that dinner in the first place? What role was she expected to play at that table?

It never occurred to me that the problem was not my drinking capacity. Why did I need to prove I could drink? More importantly, why did I feel I had no right to refuse?

That feeling returned when I read about the Hangzhou incident. On July 26, after a business dinner related to a real estate project, a young female employee was reportedly forced to drink large amounts of alcohol before being assaulted and injured at a karaoke lounge. On August 18, Hangzhou authorities announced Zhao Haifeng, general manager of China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone Holdings' Zhejiang branch, and Yu Tingdong, deputy head of Hangzhou's Binjiang district, had been detained and removed from their positions over allegations they sexually assaulted the woman.

The case raises uncomfortable questions. Why was a young female employee expected to be at that dinner in the first place? What role was she expected to play at that table?

Perhaps she felt what I once felt. If your boss asks you to come, you come. If everyone drinks, you drink. If you are a young woman, you are expected to know how to keep the table happy. You worry about being seen as difficult. You worry about damaging a business relationship. Even when your body tells you no, you raise the glass anyway.

> *Modern administrative procedures do not automatically produce modern power relations*

That is one of the most insidious things about drinking culture. It doesn't always need an explicit command. Power itself can function as an order. That is why I don't think the Hangzhou case can simply be dismissed as a drunken indiscretion.

Business drinking has deep roots in China. A dinner table is rarely just a place to eat. It can be a place to build relationships, exchange information, protect interests and allocate resources.

China's anti-corruption campaigns and the "eight-point rules" introduced after 2012 have curbed lavish official banquets and publicly funded extravagance. Formal regulations can curb excess, but they are much less effective at changing how power operates around a dinner table.

Perhaps the most stubborn thing is not the feast itself but the hierarchy behind it. That is what makes the Hangzhou case particularly jarring. Hangzhou is one of China's most modern and dynamic cities, famous for a new generation of technology start-ups known as the "Six Little Dragons".

However, modern administrative procedures do not automatically produce modern power relations. A city can make entrepreneurs jump through fewer bureaucratic hoops without making it any easier for a young employee to look across a dinner table and simply say, "No, I don't drink."

When I was attending those dinners, China's economy was booming. Business dinners became part of the machinery of deal-making, and drinking was the price of admission. The world has changed since then, but the Hangzhou incident is a reminder that some things change much more slowly than economic cycles.

Perhaps that is why the story resonates so strongly. It is not simply because we recognise that table. It is because so many of us have sat at one.

Audrey Jiajia Li is a veteran Chinese journalist currently based in Singapore

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EDITORIALS

For tens of thousands in northwest Indiana, outages mean much of August has been hell

ComEd took a few days to restore power after Aug. 11 storms. NIPSCO is taking two weeks



Lineworkers, part of a team from North Carolina, rebuild transmission lines in order to reenergize a substation south of Gary on Aug. 20.
ARTHUR MAIORELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

An intense Aug. 11 storm knocked out power for nearly 375,000 customers of Northern Indiana Public Service Co. and as of late afternoon Friday — 10 days later — more than 41,000 still were without service. NIPSCO projected that Portage and Gary wouldn't be fully restored until Tuesday, a full two weeks after the storm.

Indiana Gov. Mike Braun last Thursday described the situation as "unacceptable."

We agree. Two weeks without electricity has major consequences.

It means refrigerators and freezers full of spoiled food, sweaty spaces, no hot water, no cooking fuel and over a long enough period of time transforms daily life into something approximating the medieval.

Residents soldiering on through the ordeal were quoted in various reports expressing frustration and exhaustion while some tried to be philosophical. There were questions from Gary residents about whether other parts of the region were being prioritized over their long-beleaguered city, which NIPSCO executives adamantly denied.

The same storm system battered the Chicago area, particularly the south suburbs, and Commonwealth Edison reported that it had restored service to 99% of the 410,000 customers who lost power by Aug. 15. Like all utilities, ComEd comes in for plenty of grousing as a matter of course, but would anyone in northern Illinois prefer that NIPSCO were their utility these past two weeks?

Nope.

Once the lights all are back on, NIPSCO and Indiana policymakers shouldn't behave like it's business as usual from here.

Storms as strong as the ones that pummeled the area look to be a regular feature of summertime in these parts. If NIPSCO's painfully slow restoration pace is unacceptable, then the utility and the state must take steps to improve.

The awful reality in northwest Indiana reminds us of 15 years ago when a brutal spate of July storms in Chicagoland led to outages that went on for days on end, especially in the northern suburbs. A July 11, 2011, derecho caused 860,000 outages, and it took ComEd six days to restore all of its affected customers.

The experience provoked so much outrage that the Illinois Commerce Commission ruled two years later that nearly 35,000 customers were eligible for monetary damages from ComEd, a decision that was upheld by the Illinois Appellate Court the following year over ComEd's objections.

At the time, ComEd was pushing hard for state legislation authorizing a 10-year, $2.6 billion modernization program that included the installation of so-called smart meters in customers' homes and businesses throughout the service territory and power-grid improvements that enabled the system to recover much faster from mass-outage events. The law eventually was enacted over then-Gov. Pat Quinn's veto, and ComEd's courting of then-House Speaker Michael Madigan infamously became a key part of the successful corruption prosecution of Madigan as well as executives and lobbyists for the utility.

There were aspects of the smart-grid law that were objectionable such as provisions that gave state utility regulators next to no say in the level of rate hikes ComEd demanded to make the work happen.

But the infrastructure investment did improve ComEd's outage performance, as statistics have borne out. We haven't seen anything as awful as that 2011 experience since then. And the contrast in 2026 between ComEd and NIPSCO is yet more evidence that the modernization paid off.

NIPSCO is in the middle of installing smart meters throughout its territory, a project it expects to complete next year. In addition to providing exact information on customer usage and eliminating the need for estimated billing, smart meters are helpful in outage response. Through the meters, the utility is informed immediately when the power goes out at a specific location.

But there's more to grid modernization than smart meters. Of the $2.5 billion ComEd budgeted for the big grid upgrade in 2011, just $1.1 billion was for the meters. The rest went to installation of smart switches and various other improvements to the system designed to make it more resilient.

Acting meaningfully to improve NIPSCO's outage-restoration performance will cost money and will hike utility bills that already are high. Is that a trade-off residents and businesses are willing to make?

It may or may not be, but the utility, state officials and northwest Indiana's communities should begin an honest discussion about a cost-effective response.

Now.

The Sears Sunken Garden gets new life on Chicago's West Side

As Chicago's Sears, Roebuck and Co. started to grow more than a century ago, its farsighted leaders wanted a green space for their headquarters. They commissioned the Sears Sunken Garden, an unlikely oasis across the street from the retailer's main administration building on the West Side's Homan Avenue.

The 1907 garden was "sunken" below street level to provide peace and quiet as horse-drawn wagons and early motor vehicles clattered by. Ornamental fountains, a reflecting pool, ponds stocked with goldfish and carefully designed plantings nestled just below the garden's defining feature — a dramatic, 100-foot-long row of classical columns known as a pergola.

A slice of the Mediterranean had come to a busy city street.

Today, Sears is a memory, much of its Homan Square complex is boarded up and the once-marvelous garden is a wreck. April brought welcome news that this neglected landmark finally would be getting a face-lift, thanks largely to a $1 million pledge from the city's Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

An ambitious timetable was set. Media reports trumpeted how the pergola would be brought back to its former glory as soon as mid-July.

Anyone familiar with the ups and downs of the North Lawndale neighborhood won't be too surprised about what happened next. As of earlier this month, the garden remained in disrepair. The beat-up pergola was blocked off with an orange mesh safety fence. A tipped-over trash can spilled its garbage onto the unkempt lawn. The walkways were overgrown, the garden plots weedy.

Turns out, the pergola's columns were in worse shape than expected. As work began, crews discovered the concrete had disintegrated and the structure needed to be replaced rather than repaired. The restoration halted until the Driehaus Foundation stepped up — again — with additional funding.

"We are now back on track," declared Caroline O'Boyle, who serves on the nonprofit board supervising the renovation. A new timetable calls for the pergola restoration to be finished by mid-November and work on the garden itself to begin next year, she told us.

Start. Stop. Plead for more money. Start again, fingers crossed.

That pattern is familiar to anyone involved in rebuilding neighborhoods that have endured decades of disinvestment. North Lawndale certainly has: It lost major employers, population and investment over generations.

It also has an amazing history, and potential. When Sears made Homan Square the heart of its fast-growing retail empire, North Lawndale was among the hottest neighborhoods in the city.

By the 1960s, it had become a focus of the Civil Rights Movement. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously made North Lawndale a centerpiece of his fair-housing campaign, moving his family into a rundown apartment to protest slum conditions.

In the 1970s, Sears left for its downtown tower, marking a retreat of money and influence that devastated the neighborhood. As with the garden project, North Lawndale's recovery efforts have proceeded in fits and starts.

The retailer's Homan Square complex is an important Chicago landmark, and a couple of its prominent buildings have been impressively restored. The big red-brick office complex across from the Sears Sunken Garden, however, continues to rot. Timetables for shoring it up have kept slipping.

Given the monumental challenges, could fixing up a small-ish garden really do anything to turn things around? Yes.

A beautiful green space can indeed transform an urban neighborhood. Among the first to prove the point was the Liz Christy Garden, which became a catalyst for remaking Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1970s. Across the Chicago area, community gardens, green-thumb clubs and dedicated individuals make it their business to beautify their surroundings.

Those efforts inspire neighbors to take pride in their communities, which in turn inspires hope for a better future — a missing element in the most troubled parts of the city.

In Chicago these days, the word "hope" inevitably brings to mind favorite son Barack Obama, and the Obama Presidential Center, which took the South Side by storm this year. While the center's Museum Tower gets the most attention, with its impressive exhibits about his presidency, the free, open-to-the-public gardens around it could turn out to be the most transformative part of the project.

It's good to see the West Side getting a little love in the same vein. And we believe the late Richard Driehaus, a gregarious financier, would have loved the Sears Sunken Garden restoration. Hats off to his foundation for backing a project that fits with this one-of-a-kind local character's legacy.

The foundation's financial commitment to the garden stands at $1.5 million so far today, a spokeswoman told us. Even with that, the nonprofit Friends of Sears Sunken Garden has unmet fundraising goals to see the project through. Here's hoping the rest of Chicago does what it takes to raise up the West Side's sunken treasure.

ON THIS DAY 31 YEAR AGO: YOU'RE A LIAR, SADDAM

Saddam Hussein, you liar.

First you claimed that your chemical and biological weapons were destroyed even before the start of the Gulf War. After your humiliating defeat, though, you were confronted with documentary evidence gathered by international inspectors—and you were forced to admit that, ahem, your stockpiles of germ bombs remained in existence after the conflict.

Then you said your entire production of these deadly agents was 130,000 gallons of botulin, a toxin that attacks the nervous system, and 13,000 gallons of anthrax, a bacterium that dines on human cells.

You proclaimed that such an explicit mea culpa was the final, truthful and definitive word on your weapons program; then you demanded that trade sanctions be lifted, and you even threatened the world with some unknown hostile act if they were not.

Oops. Over the weekend, you finally confessed to a visiting United Nations team that you had a much larger and more advanced weapons program for producing these bacteria and toxins, and that these banned agents of terror warfare already had been "weaponized"—that is, fitted aboard missiles and packed inside bombs ready to rain a most cruel death down upon your foes.

This time, you swear you're telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Nice sales pitch, Saddam. But nobody's buying.

The Iraqi president is practicing a very crude sort of political damage control. Clearly, he is worried about the recent defection of two senior generals, one of whom was boss of Iraq's clandestine program to develop illegal weapons of mass destruction....

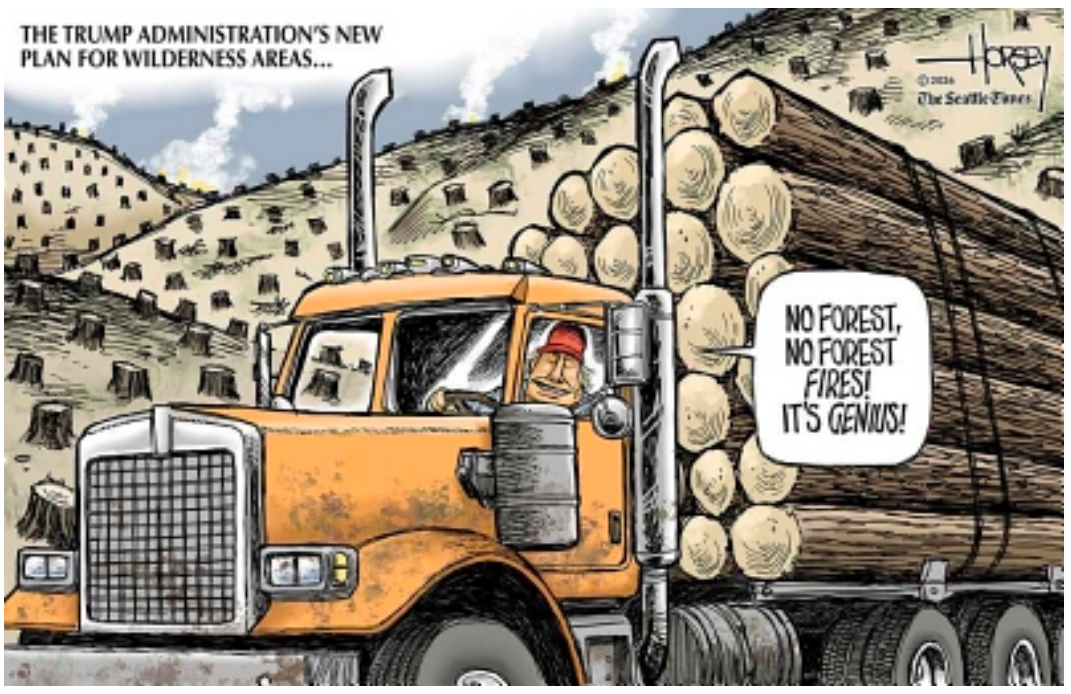
Let's hope this transparent attempt at forthright discussion will be seen for what it is—false and cynical—and that it fails at currying favor with members of the Security Council. Can any responsible state be convinced that no weapons are stored at secret sites?

After four years of Saddam's repeated denials and lies about his secret chemical and biological weapons program, the international community has every right to doubt the sincerity of Saddam's latest confession.

Until the world community is absolutely convinced that Saddam has no more secrets buried under the desert sands of his despotic domain, the trade embargo must not be lifted. ...

Tribune editorial board, Aug. 24, 1995

EDITORIAL CARTOON



DAVID HORSEY

OPINION



Daniyla Norman, center, and Saniyah Johnson, right, wait patiently as Chicago HOPES for Kids Program Director Dajuan King provides stamps for their scavenger hunt card at Lincoln Park Zoo on May 15, 2025. Chicago HOPES for Kids is a nonprofit organization that partners with AmeriCorps. **CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Mandatory service can renew young people's faith in America

By Tom Suozzi and Scott Galloway
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

A transfer of wealth from young to old, an education system that ill-equips young people for today's economy and technology platforms engineered to polarize us have produced a generation of Americans who no longer believe in America. According to Gallup, 75% of baby boomers feel very or extremely proud to be an American, compared with just 41% of Gen Z. We are raising the most isolated, anxious and disconnected generation in our history.

The solution is each other.

Just as the World Cup showed millions of visitors how wonderful America can be, a mandatory year of national service would show our own young people the same thing — while equipping them with the civics, skills and on-ramps to the middle class that a fractured education system and a polarized political culture have failed to provide.

Under our proposal, every young American would choose one of three pathways: an AmeriCorps-style civilian service, a new "Skills Through Service" program or military service.

As we mark 250 years of American independence, we rightly celebrate the accomplishments and uniqueness of this nation. In that same patriotic spirit, we must also confront what is pulling us apart.

Three compounding forces are dividing America, and national service would address all three: isolation, eroding trust in institutions and income inequality.

Isolation: This generation is lonelier, more anxious and more depressed than any before it. Young people are just not mixing anymore. National service would close that distance by physically bringing young people together, the way it did for the generation that returned from World War II having served alongside Americans of every background, geography and faith and went on to build the American century.

There's reason to believe this works, and not just as nostalgia. Research shows that intergroup contact promotes national identity. A study of service members in Spain found that being assigned to military service in a different region substantially increases "self-identification as Spanish" and increases the likelihood of voting. Singapore pairs national service with integrated public housing, creating exactly the kind of structured contact between groups that a meta-analysis of more than 500 studies shows reliably reduces prejudice.

And one of the toughest critiques — that service damages mental health — doesn't hold up. A 2025 study using nationally representative U.S. data found that military service was actually a protective factor against depression once researchers controlled for socioeconomic background. Service, it turns out, builds the very coping skills and sense of purpose that isolation erodes.

Eroding trust: Americans have lost faith in their institutions and increasingly channel that disillusionment into contempt for government itself. The youngest Americans now rank as the least patriotic in the country's history. National service would reinvigorate civics — not the kind taught from a textbook, but the kind learned shoulder to shoulder with a fellow citizen who likely doesn't share your ZIP code, income or politics.

Income inequality: Young Americans are being crushed by stagnant wages, soaring costs and a wilting middle class, as the country has presided over the largest generational wealth transfer in our history — from young to old. Meanwhile, we need millions of new skilled workers. Much as President Bill Clinton promised "100,000 new police officers," America now needs 47,600 new welding professionals — annually — to replace retiring or departing workers. For every five welders retiring, only two are entering the field to replace them.

That is just one example. By 2030, over 1 million nurses will retire. We need a fresh generation of electricians, carpenters and teachers to meet the surging demand created by the artificial intelligence buildout and the reshoring of manufacturing.

The "Skills Through Service" pathway would fast-track the 60% of Americans who don't graduate college — and many who do — directly into the jobs this economy actually needs.

Over time, our goal is to build a culture where the default question shifts from "Did you serve?" to "How did you serve?"

If we want our young people to love their country — and each other — again, the country has to invest in them first. That investment pays for itself: National service programs return an estimated $17 for every $1 the federal government spends.

Big ideas invite resistance, and this one will be no exception. America has a massive problem: a generation isolated by algorithms and divided by identity politics. Addressing it will require an equally big, but simple, idea: common experience. Ask one generation to serve, and the next 250 years have a fighting chance of looking like the best of the last 250.

We will release our full proposal in the coming months, and we'll need voices from across American society to build it. Join us.

U.S. Rep. Tom Suozzi represents Long Island and Queens in New York. He serves on the Ways and Means Committee and the Select Committee on Strategic Competition with the Chinese Communist Party, and is the Democratic co-chair of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus. Scott Galloway is a professor of marketing at NYU Stern, a serial entrepreneur and podcaster, and the author of the No. 1 New York Times bestseller "Notes on Being a Man," and he serves on the University of California Board of Regents.

The Tate brothers and the amplification of misogyny

By Jodi Bondi Norgaard
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Andrew Tate, center, and his brother Tristan, right, pose with a man outside the Court of Appeal in Bucharest, Romania, on July 6, 2023. **ANDREEA ALEXANDRU/AP**

Most people have heard about the arrests of Andrew and Tristan Tate in July on charges that include rape and human trafficking.

The Tate brothers built their fortune through webcam pornography and by marketing misogyny and male dominance as success. One of their courses was even called "Pimping Hoes Degree." Andrew Tate has said that women should "bear responsibility" for being sexually assaulted, and he described them as "empty vessels" who are "programmable." At one point, he was one of the most searched people in the world.

That should have set off alarms, but instead it became content.

The Tate brothers built a global following, became extremely wealthy, and gained cultural and political influence by degrading and harming women. Their message spread through viral videos, podcasts, interviews and support from people who defended them, downplayed their rhetoric or portrayed them as victims of a culture that had become "too feminine." This is how misogyny moves from the fringe into the mainstream: not quietly but with a microphone.

Unfortunately, the Tate brothers are hardly unique.

Jeffrey Epstein created an empire that exploited and trafficked girls and young women while powerful people looked the other way. Larry Nassar sexually abused hundreds of girls and young women by taking advantage of the trust placed in him as a doctor. Harvey Weinstein used his influence in Hollywood to prey on women whose careers often depended on his approval.

Different men and different industries, but the same lesson. Our culture has too often rewarded those who harm women.

The abuse of women and girls has long been ignored, excused, protected and even turned into profit. Meanwhile, those working to create more opportunities for girls and women have to fight for a fraction of that attention. This isn't accidental, and it shows what our culture chooses to reward and what it ignores.

For more than 20 years, I've worked at the intersection of entrepreneurship and gender equality. When I created Go! Go! Sports Girls, I wasn't just making a doll. I was challenging the stories we tell girls about who they can be. Most store shelves were filled with fashion dolls and products focused on beauty and appearance. Making dolls that celebrated girls' strength, leadership and athleticism meant going against the status quo, and it remains an uphill battle.

I've learned that it is much easier to sell stereotypes than to challenge them.

Today, misogyny is rewarded with clicks, algorithms, headlines and endless attention. It teaches boys that domination is strength, men that contempt is confidence, and girls that their humiliation is entertainment.

Women and girls should be able to live free from exploitation, abuse, trafficking, harassment and violence. No one should profit from harming or degrading women. Boys deserve role models who teach respect, not domination, and girls deserve a culture that supports their potential instead of making money from stereotypes. None of this should be controversial.

If it is easier to profit from misogyny than to empower girls, then the problem is not just the market. The real problem is the culture, and when culture rewards cruelty, the damage spreads.

Every click, every share, every purchase and every platform are a choice about what, and who, we value. The real question is whether we'll keep amplifying the people who degrade women or finally stop handing them the megaphone.

Jodi Bondi Norgaard is the creator of the award-winning Go! Go! Sports Girls brand and the author of "More Than a Doll: How Creating a Sports Doll Turned into a Fight to End Gender Stereotypes." She worked with the White House Gender Policy Council under the administration of President Joe Biden and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

OPINION

Who is Natalie Harp? Americans have a right to know



Clarence Page



President Donald Trump steps off the Marine One helicopter with aide Natalie Harp after landing near the White House on Aug. 16 in Washington. **TASOS KATOPODIS/GETTY**

It's summertime, and the living is uneasy, particularly in Washington newsrooms and bureaus. At this time of year, historically, serious news can be harder to find than the newspeople available to cover it.

The result is what journalists call "the silly season," when you can never guess what pseudo-story will get elevated to the headlines.

Searching for silly news in seriously serious Washington can be easier than you might think, and of late it is becoming difficult to draw the line between the consequential and the absurd.

Consider the kerfuffle raised around a remark by U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Georgia Democrat often mentioned among presidential hopefuls, about President Donald Trump and a young female aide.

Ossoff angered Team Trump — and Trump himself — by calling suggestive attention to the relationship widely described as exceptionally close between the president and Natalie Harp, his 35-year-old executive assistant.

"He doesn't want to do the job," Ossoff declared to an enthusiastic crowd, regarding Trump's air of befuddlement amid a swirl of crises bedeviling his administration. "He wants to build his ballroom and travel with Natalie on their apparently defenseless flying palace gifted by the emir of Qatar."

"With Natalie." Those two words ignited the crowd and delighted down-in-the-dumps Democrats elsewhere who, in this polarized election season, are looking exceptionally hard for candidates who show backbone.

And they were not alone. A brief soundbite from Ossoff's 30-minute speech drew more than 5 million views on X and a volcanic backlash from Republicans, including Harp's boss, who shot back Monday calling Ossoff a "Pee Wee Herman lookalike" — after mistakenly calling him "Pinky Herman."

A chorus of MAGA influencers took to social media to post their outrage. Even former House Speaker Newt Gingrich got the Bat Signal, and he assailed Ossoff on X for "misogynistic language diminishing and smearing someone who is simply doing their job."

It was interesting for reporters and talking heads, with nothing else going on, to observe a familiar tactical deployment on the political battlefield, with the Trump camp preparing to isolate and smother Ossoff under a social media dogpile, and to pummel Democrats on an issue they supposedly "own."

But I would caution those who are eager, for whatever reason, to jump on the bandwagon that sees Ossoff's barb as sexual innuendo.

It would bother me if all the Harp chatter was about spreading salacious rumors about an attractive young woman working with an older boss.

We've seen this too many times before. You might even say it's the way of the world, I guess, but without real evidence to back it up, I don't want to be part of the rumor mills.

But I would also suggest that Ossoff's comment was not intended to suggest a sexual relationship. Although I would acknowledge that such an explanation is exactly the misdirection GOP strategists would want to create.

Rather, this story is about Trump's deep, pathological need for sycophancy. Throughout his careers in business and politics, Trump has always sought to display his dominance. It's no surprise, then, that in his televised Cabinet meetings his closest advisers vie to outdo each other in displays of flattery.

What's important about Harp's relationship to Trump is not the prurient interest but rather that she seems to be, as New York Times White House reporter Maggie Haberman put it, "sort of his binky, for lack of a better word, his comfort blanket." And, consequently, she seems to be his main conduit to reality.

We have little idea who Harp is. And the more we learn, the more anxious we ought to be.

Harp is referred to by many in Trumpworld as "the human printer" for her role supplying the president with printed copies of everything from news reports to social media chatter. In fact, according to a report two years ago in The Bulwark by the well-sourced reporter Marc Caputo, Harp actually trails Trump everywhere with a portable printer in tow.

She reportedly works seven days a week, texts with world leaders on his behalf and stays up late with him drafting social media posts.

This has made her extremely influential. As one source told Caputo, "If you want the president to see something, the best route is Natalie."

She also doesn't seem to have a boss, other than Trump. And it seems she may have worked for a year in her highly sensitive position without a security clearance.

Over the years, questions have arisen about who controls Trump's social media accounts and gatekeeps the often toxic messages that emanate from them. Some observers suggest that Harp is a central player.

I was downright outraged by reports that Harp sent out the racist video on Trump's Truth Social account that portrayed former President Barack Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama as apes. Some of us take that personally, not that Trump appears to care.

The post, created under Trump's direction, appeared in February at the end of a minute-long video promoting false claims about the 2020 election. It was deleted about 12 hours later after a furious bipartisan backlash.

But, as one who believes in free speech and our democratic system, I hold the faith that such cheap shots will be punished, sooner or later, by the voters.

That's the way democracies mete out political justice. It's not perfect, but it offers an irreplaceably valuable chance for us voters to be heard. And we need every chance we can get.

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Voice of the People

Dr. Fauci squelched debate

Like millions of Americans, I am grateful to doctors, nurses, and all other medical clinicians and researchers for their invaluable work during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Dr. Alessandra Hirsch's op-ed "The problem with outrage over Fauci" (Aug. 16) misses the point about criticism of Dr. Anthony Fauci. He tried to shut down debate about public policy and scientific evidence that differed from his views.

The Great Barrington Declaration, which argued for concentrating medical resources on the very young and old but letting the rest of the economy function normally, deserved more serious consideration. The same is true of the virus lab leak theory and criticism of gain-of-function research. Fauci did his best to discredit these views. Scientists who disagreed with him, even those from Harvard and Oxford universities, were considered quacks. Fauci thereby caused great harm to the credibility of science because open and free debate is vital for real understanding and progress.

The Royal Society in London began in 1660 with the purpose to advance excellence in science. It adopted the motto "nullius in verba" — "take nobody's word for it." That was sound advice 350 years ago and is equally appropriate today. Unfortunately, Fauci and some of his colleagues tried to engineer takedowns of those who disagreed with them.

Other views and opinions may have been right or wrong, but those voicing them deserved to be heard. Following the Royal Society's motto, we should take nobody's word for it, not even Fauci's.

— James E. Ciecka, emeritus economics professor, Chicago



Dr. Anthony Fauci, then director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the chief medical adviser to the president, waits for President Joe Biden to arrive for a video call with the White House COVID-19 response team at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on December 27, 2021, in Washington, D.C. **ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY**

Trump's pandemic approach

Bravo to Dr. Alessandra Hirsch for her spirited defense of Dr. Anthony Fauci, including her precise recollections of the horrid conditions early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, when Fauci and other experts had to make difficult recommendations with the limited knowledge available at the time and without the genius of hindsight.

Hirsch aptly recalls the refrigerated trucks outside hospitals in New York; here in Chicago, we addressed the overwhelming death rate with plans to repurpose McCormick Place into a hospital or, really, like the refrigerated trucks, a way station to the morgue.

President Donald Trump, U.S. Sen. Rand Paul and other MAGA folks routinely name-call Fauci but generally without citing specific policies he endorsed that proved harmful. The reality is that Fauci's recommendations were mainstream, no different from those of Dr. Deborah Birx's and other noted public health experts, and very much followed by almost every COVID-19-afflicted country in the world.

Importantly, as Hirsch notes, the COVID-19 vaccine, which Trump called (when it was useful to him to do so) "one of the greatest achievements of mankind," saved millions of lives in America and even more around the world (it was unanimously endorsed internationally.)

Actually, it was Trump's approach to COVID-19 that was the odd and very harmful outlier.

Remember, it was Trump who said that COVID-19 would be gone in "two weeks" and, later on, that it was a Democratic "hoax" and that nobody would talk about it after the 2020 election. Was Trump's rejection of Fauci, Birx and mainstream science based on informed analysis, or was it simply what he perceived in his own self-interest (including reelection), without regard for others?

Fauci mania keeps attention off Trump's bizarre and harmful response to the pandemic. Perhaps, the real issue — lost in the craziness about Fauci — is how many people died needlessly because they acted on Trump's disdain for actively avoiding COVID-19 and his indifference to vaccination. Some experts in the field estimate that death toll at over 100,000 Americans.

— Dr. Sheldon Hirsch, Wilmette

Scare tactics over healthcare

In his letter "'Medicare for All' is a folly" (Aug. 14) David N. Simon describes a scary scenario offered by "leftist democratic socialists," which would "swamp demand for medical services," resulting in long waits. It sounds almost as frightening as the death panels that Republicans told us were a part of the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare.

And he warns us that this would require major tax changes, as if major tax changes are ever a problem for Republicans (although they seem to prefer tax cuts for wealthy supporters).

Most high-income countries provide some version of universal healthcare, with better health outcomes and at much lower cost than in the U.S. The potential long wait times that Simon describes should be viewed as evidence that we as a nation are not adequately equipped to provide healthcare to all of our people. So, a change to any version of universal healthcare would hopefully include a transition, as we train more physicians and other healthcare providers, and develop appropriate facilities.

As Medicare was being debated in the early 1960s, Republicans warned us that it would be dangerous socialism. If you want to hear how preposterous this scare tactic really is, listen to Ronald Reagan's 1961 speech on socialized medicine, available on YouTube.

— David J. Roberts, emeritus associate accountancy professor, Skokie

Health of public officials

I understand a person's right to privacy and the laws that protect those rights. They are an important part of America's constitutional heritage. However, I believe that right should not fully extend to public officials, elected or appointed, who are drawing paychecks and benefits from the taxpayer.

In that instance, the taxpayer is supporting their employee, the public official, and is thus the employer. That status gives citizens the right to an explanation for the long-term absences of elected and appointed taxpayer-paid leaders.

The nonprofit organization Network for Public Health Law reasons that public officials have a duty to keep taxpayers informed of their availability for work. Prevention of fraud, deception and public accountability are reasons given for this suggestion. However, individual dignity, the possible effect of hiding a chronic or fatal diagnosis and possible coercion of the public officials are reasons given to retain total Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) privacy for public officials.

In the end, the public should be aware of the severe medical problems of public officials unless doing so compromises national security or a legitimate law enforcement goal.

— Ira Schafer, Bourbonnais, Illinois

Note to readers

Construction on Chicago streets and bridges this summer has created headaches for many drivers. We'd like to hear from you about your frustrations with the delays and the city's management of the closures and detours. Send a letter of no more than 400 words by Wednesday, Sept. 2 to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

The Summer of 'My Bad'



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

"Mea culpa" translates to "through my fault" or "my mistake." I much prefer the modern apology "my bad." We've had a run of mea culpas lately. It's about time.

Anthropic founder Dario Amodei said last year, "There's a 25% chance that things go really, really badly" with artificial intelligence. In 2023 he worried about human extinction. But with trillion-dollar-valued initial public offerings in the air, he and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman have sharply pivoted to AI optimism. Last week Mr. Amodei tweeted, "I think it will actually be possible to cure most human disease in ~5-10 years." Cure us before it kills us, I guess. On the pending job apocalypse, Mr. Altman said, "I'm delighted to be wrong about that." OK.

Once-hot money manager Leopold Aschenbrenner, 25, of Situational Awareness, wrote a letter to investors in July after his fund dropped 67%, admitting, "We let you down this month." Ya think? The fund was up 400%-plus for the year, running $45 billion, and owned every momentum name in the AI space, memory, energy, neoclouds. But, and it's a big but, he used debt to boost returns, to the tune of 4 times leverage. Yowza.

His problem—rookie mistake—was being unaware that he had become the market. Everything he bought went up, so he bought more. If he had stopped buying or sold, he would have seen the selloff before others. Public filings, 13Fs of his positions, allowed others to view his precarious situation. As his stocks started selling off, margin calls came flooding in, and Citadel and Ken Griffin took his lunch money. I've always said equity hurts, leverage kills. His bad.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced plans to increase buying of U.S. long bonds starting Sept. 9 to keep a lid on yields. He also touts America First but recently has intervened along with Japan to support the yen. Why? A mistake? Will it work? The Japanese 10-year government bond yield is now 2.9%, up from 1.6% a year ago.

The problem is that years of lower Japanese interest rates have fueled the yen-carry trade: borrow cheap in yen and invest elsewhere in the world. It's one of the reasons U.S. stocks keep hitting new highs and hedge funds can lever up on the cheap. In 2023 Deutsche Bank thought there was $20 trillion in yen-carry trades outstanding. It's surely higher now. That's a lot of hot air. Best not let that deflate too quickly, try to keep the yen-carry and stock market party going until after November elections, keep control of Congress and avoid your boss's impeachment. Clue: Boosted bond buybacks end Nov. 4. After these interventions stop, watch out.

In what should be a mea culpa for Democrats, but sadly won't be, Rahm Emanuel summed up today's collectivist fervor: "We're the only country where you have to be rich enough to be a socialist."

We've seen a string of high-profile mea culpas the past few months. About time.

San Francisco car break-ins dropped from 22,700 in 2022 to 1,764 so far in 2026. In addition to more surveillance, including Flock automated license-plate readers, state Sen. Scott Wiener notes, "We changed state law by removing a massive loophole that required prosecutors to prove all car doors were locked, even if evidence of a break-in was clear." A huge "my bad."

This newspaper recently detailed Stellantis's bringing back Hemi V-8 engines for its Ram trucks because customers demanded it. The turbo in-line six-cylinder engine was fine and all but, one customer complained, "it sounded like you were driving a Honda." Mea, meet culpa. Similarly, a clever headline from last December: "Ford pulls the plug on the all-electric F-150 Lightning pickup truck." It's like bringing back old Coke after new Coke bombed. Duh! Why does management always forget the No. 1 creed of business: Delight your customers?

Elon Musk, best known for disdaining fossil fuels and selling close to 10 million electric vehicles, is actively advocating natural-gas turbines for data centers and chip factories. Pragmatic beats stubborn.

In May, the American Bar Association eliminated its rule that requires law schools to "demonstrate by concrete action a commitment to diversity" in recruitment, admissions and student programming. That's overdue. And medical-school admissions? Not so much. In July, the Education Department (yes, it's still around) launched investigations into five medical schools for racial discrimination.

And in the best mea culpa of the era, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez told ABC that "Woke 1 was crazy." Yeah, whatever. Despite being the worst offender, thanks for evolving. Enjoy your master bedroom. As a basher and target of the tokey-wokey, I want to note that she has the numerology wrong. From henceforth, it shall be known as Woke Zero: addictive, artificial sweetener-stuffed, anxiety-inducing absurdity (pregnant men?) that leaves you empty and rots your brains. Your bad.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

What a Cuban Transition Might Look Like



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Secretary of State Marco Rubio is ratcheting up U.S. pressure on the top echelon of the Cuban military dictatorship like never before. But what happens on the island if he is successful in getting the communist bigwigs to leave power? It isn't too soon to think about that question.

Some of the resistance to the U.S. pressure campaign is rooted in the worry that with nothing to take the place of the 67-year-old regime, Cuba will descend into a mix of chaos and crony capitalism. When that happens, the U.S., having spearheaded the collapse of Castroism, will be responsible for the cleanup. If there's anything Washington doesn't need, it's another adventure in nation-building.

The regime may be betting there is enough American fear of such an outcome that the Rubio effort will wilt. Yet failure after the fall of the police state isn't inevitable, and the clearer that is to Havana, the better.

There's plenty of financial and human capital that would invest in Cuba if given a secure property-rights regime and political stability. The challenge is getting there using a mix of U.S. emergency initiatives, private-sector resources from outside the island and Cuban elbow grease. This may seem quixotic to most Americans. But not to Cubans, at home and abroad, who have long believed that freedom on the island is possible.

Rafael Romeu, president of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, came to the U.S as a child in 1980. He's one of many in the exile cohort who have been noodling about the best way to stabilize a newly liberated Cuba, create the foundations for a free and just society, and set the nation on the way to fast growth.

Cuba is suffering extreme economic hardship. Foreign subsidies have dried up, a corrupt military cabal steals government revenue, the electrical grid has collapsed, tourists have vanished, and the population is shrinking. The U.S. offers to help, but conditions aid on political change. Havana has no reason to budge. The Cuban people are suffering, but the elite still live lives of privilege.

The Rubio strategy to break this stalemate is to hit powerful and strategically important individuals with economic sanctions alongside more-traditional efforts to constrain financially state-owned enterprises connected to the military. The U.S. has also been revoking the visas and residency cards of Havana insiders and their family members.

What if a negotiated exit looks better to dictator Miguel Díaz-Canel and to his accomplices than hanging around the Caribbean backwater, deprived of access to numbered bank accounts, increasingly isolated and hated by the nation? Retirement in Moscow, Ankara or Managua may gain appeal.

Mr. Rubio is a man on a mission, and he's unlikely to let up. "What we're trying to teach them is there are no escape valves," he told Axios earlier this month. Yet the regime seems to think it can wait him out, and it may cling to that hope as long as there is no viable day-after plan.

U.S. help and capital from the diaspora can rebuild the country if the communists fall.

Mr. Romeu acknowledges the complexity of the challenge. But in an "ideas forum" at the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora in July he sketched out some basics for what he calls "Cuba Day Zero: Stabilization, Reconstruction and the Path to Investment."

The Washington-based entrepreneur doesn't envision a transition free of U.S. support. Cuba will need American help to pay civil servants, police and doctors and avoid the collapse of public security, sometimes known as de-Baathification after the experience in Iraq. It will need fuel, food and help in reforming state institutions. But he emphasizes that "Cuba's reconstruction must be funded by private-sector investment and Cuban diaspora capital—inside a disciplined, legally enforceable framework from Day One."

Cuba's highly centralized legal system will work to the advantage of new leadership. "New decrees can rewrite the economic rulebook in days, not years," Mr. Romeu observes. Lifting sanctions and restrictions on international banking might be a political challenge in Congress, but it wouldn't be technically difficult.

A capital-hungry transitional government, which could be a five-member board of Cubans, Cuban-Americans and a trusted U.S. official, will need to be able to provide "legal certainty" to investors. Mr. Romeu recommends a process that will screen property for its beneficial owner to avoid conflicts of interest and self-dealing by members of the military conglomerate known as GAESA. It will be important to ensure that investors aren't "military insiders or sanctioned parties."

A free Cuba will want to keep vultures from snatching up property at fire-sale prices. See Russia, post-Soviet collapse. Better, he says, to grant concessions and form public-private partnerships while markets discover the true value of assets. Funds need to be reserved for certified claims before any concession is awarded.

Tighter sanctions on corrupt Cuban insiders could speed their exit. But so too could a credible plan for the morning after.

Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

The Brave Witness of Chow Hang-tung

By Mark Clifford

Crowds waited outside a Hong Kong courthouse on Friday for a verdict for Chow Hang-tung that was preordained at her arrest five years earlier: guilty of inciting subversion of state power.

The supposedly criminal act: Her pro-democracy Hong Kong Alliance held annual memorial services for those killed by their own government in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing.

Only the most naive could believe that Hong Kong has a fair legal system, in which a pro-democracy advocate could have a chance of acquittal. Ms. Chow didn't benefit from a jury trial—that constitutional guarantee has been jettisoned in favor of handpicked judges. The arrangement has helped the government secure a near-perfect record of convictions in national security cases.

The trial of Ms. Chow and other leaders of the Hong Kong Alliance produced some unexpected fireworks. The 41-year-old dissident put Hong Kong's legal system and the Chinese Communist Party on the spot as few others have.

Representing herself, Ms. Chow agreed with prosecutors that she had called for the end of one-party communist rule. But she challenged them to prove it was illegal. "The key phrase in this case, 'ending one-party dictatorship,' is by nature a call for the rule of law. It seeks to end a state in which the party stands above the law and to restore our inherent rights, including that of democracy," she told the court. "This is not a trial of the Hong Kong Alliance or the defendants, this is a trial of Hong Kong's justice system."

She speaks truth to power in Hong Kong at her kangaroo trial.

Ms. Chow is a Cambridge-educated geophysicist who turned to politics after the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed almost 70,000 people. Many of those killed were schoolchildren, victims of shoddy "tofu construction" schools built by corrupt contractors that collapsed while government buildings remained intact.

She saw that the Chinese communist political system had produced the worst of the Sichuan disaster, so she dropped out of her doctoral program to become a lawyer and activist in her native Hong Kong.

She is one of the most outspoken, articulate and stubborn opponents of Hong Kong's government. In an earlier prosecution, in November 2021, Ms. Chow wouldn't plead guilty to protest-related charges, refusing to "trade my honesty for freedom." She warned authorities, "You can force on me bitter manual tasks—like washing the toilet—and smelly porridge, but you can't force me to speak contrary to my mind. You can even force me to shut up, but you can't force me to utter what I do not believe."

Her closing statement in the current trial, delivered in June, posed a challenge to the Chinese party-state. "We know exactly what we want: to end one-party dictatorship, bring about a democratic transition, and effect a change of regime."

Ms. Chow's maximum sentence is 10 years. But she urges supporters not to feel sorry for her. "I reject the characterization of me as 'unfortunate.' . . . It is actually a great fortune to be able to fight for one's own ideas. How many people in the world have such an opportunity? Against the biggest communist dictatorship in the world, no less. What a challenge."

Mr. Clifford is president of the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.

BOOKSHELF | By David Skinner

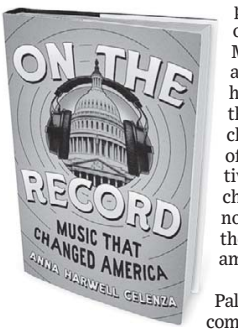
The Sound Of America

On the Record

By Anna Harwell Celenza
Norton, 352 pages, $35

The arts can seem little more than background music to the main events in American history. Songs, art and literature that shaped the inner lives of history's actors are usually overlooked while politics, war and social change appear to drive the national story. In "On the Record: Music That Changed America," Anna Harwell Celenza, a music scholar at Johns Hopkins, works to repair this divide between art and politics by revisiting a dozen or so quintessential American musical works and drawing out their connections to various acts of legislation, some significant, others less so.

Ms. Celenza's book spans America's history from Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" (1814) forward, but it comes most alive when discerning the voice of the people in popular music, from the songs of Paul Simon to Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton" (2015). The author calls her book "a political history of the United States through a musical lens." Each chapter explores individual pieces of music to "illustrate their effectiveness as agents of political change." The careful reader will note, however, that only a few of the book's music-makers had such ambitions in mind.



The preface begins with pro-Palestinian protesters who disrupt a commencement ceremony at Johns Hopkins. The chapter on the "Star-Spangled Banner" begins with quarterback Colin Kaepernick's taking a knee during a performance of the national anthem. These passages seem to confuse the occasional political gesture, however attention-grabbing, for something larger and more interesting.

With the music itself, Ms. Celenza hits upon important episodes when creative work mingled with major events: how, for instance, the "Star-Spangled Banner" emerged from the War of 1812 to become, more than 100 years later, America's national anthem in legislation signed by President Hoover. In the meantime, the song had become fodder for eight different parodies in the 1840 presidential campaign and, a few years later, an abolitionist parody: "Oh, say do you hear, at the dawn's early light / The shrieks of those bondmen, whose blood is now streaming / From the merciless lash, while our banner in sight." The Civil War then gave new meaning to Key's verses as the Union's anthem while the Confederacy embraced "Dixie."

Ms. Celenza juxtaposes this history with that of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," by James Weldon Johnson, composed in 1900. Written for Lincoln's birthday and dedicated to Booker T. Washington, the song was nearly forgotten but for its use in classrooms around Jacksonville, Fla., from which its stature grew. The NAACP designated it the Negro National Anthem in 1919, during a period notorious for violence against black Americans. In the civil-rights era, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" became even more notable until, in 2021, Rep. James E. Clyburn of South Carolina introduced a bill to make it the "national hymn of the United States." The bill didn't become law.

Charles Ives's music hasn't made him a household name, though his "Unanswered Question" (1908) is frequently performed and his personal story is intriguing. A New Englander deeply influenced by his reading of the Transcendentalists, Ives went into the insurance business while continuing to compose music, though his compositions weren't widely performed.

Public-minded in other ways, Ives promoted a constitutional amendment to allow Americans to vote directly on legislation, but nothing came of it. In 1921 and 1922, he arranged to publish three volumes of his essays and music, at his own expense, and mailed them directly to a list of prominent people in American music, whose names he collected from "Who's Who in America." In time, Ms. Celenza writes, this direct-mail effort began to pay off. With the rise of modernism, Ives's highly allusive and often experimental music found a suitable audience.

Music in the U.S. has flowed from political upheaval and produced social change, but not always in the ways we might expect.

In the history of jazz and the challenges it presented to America's classical music scene, Ms. Celenza focuses on music with political correlatives involving race, respect and the perennial question of how to define "American" music. Pitting contemporaries Duke Ellington and George Gershwin in opposition, she examines Ellington's "Creole Rhapsody" (1931) as a blues commentary on Gershwin's symphonic "Rhapsody in Blue" (1924).

Ellington, though interested in Gershwin, was critical of his masterpiece, "Porgy and Bess" (1935), telling a reporter that "it didn't capture the real spirit of the characters it portrayed," only then to regret the remark. "You can say anything you want on the trombone," Ellington noted, "but you gotta be careful with words"—an aptly worded statement, ironically. More interesting still is how the musical conversation turns dialectical, as Ms. Celenza describes in fine detail, with Ellington's own version of "Rhapsody in Blue," a jazz re-edit of the jazz-influenced Gershwin. "It's Ellington's way of telling us that there is no definitive American sound. Like the nation itself, the American sound is always in flux."

Ms. Celenza summons strong examples of music that advanced political change in the histories of the antilynching protest song "Strange Fruit," written by Abel Meeropol and made famous by Billie Holiday, who first recorded it in 1939, and Nina Simone's incandescently angry "Mississippi Goddam," written in the wake of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., killing four young black girls. The stories of both songs testify powerfully to Ms. Celenza's argument that music can deliver political effects. But a late chapter on Paul Simon's "Graceland" suggests an alternate lesson about how music can achieve social consequences without issuing a protest or giving way to legislation.

After coming across a cassette of township jive from South Africa in 1984, Mr. Simon sought out its musicians, sidestepping a United Nations boycott that might have kept him from meeting Ladysmith Black Mambazo and many other collaborators. While the boycott collected celebrity endorsements, Mr. Simon quietly made music and forged human connections. At the end of their first meeting, Joseph Shabalala of Ladysmith Black Mambazo physically embraced Mr. Simon, saying later, "that was my first time to hug a white man." And the boycott-busting "Graceland," released in 1986, went on to become a musical highlight of our times.

Mr. Skinner is the Journal's deputy editorial features editor.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Dumbest Trade War Revisited

President Trump took exception last year when we called his tariffs against Canada and Mexico the dumbest trade war in history. It got dumber this weekend as Mr. Trump escalated with another round of border taxes on Canadian imports, a mere 10 weeks before midterm elections.

Escalating a tariff brawl with Canada makes no economic or political sense.

Mr. Trump issued his latest tariff threat against Canada last month under Section 338 of the 1930 Tariff Act. The law lets the President impose tariffs up to 50% on countries that discriminate against "commerce of the United States, directly or indirectly" in relation to foreign countries. No previous President has used this power.

Mr. Trump set a deadline of midnight on Friday for Canada to reach a deal to avert 50% tariffs on $20 billion of goods. The countries were close to an agreement until, poof, the cease-fire blew up at the last minute with each side blaming the other.

The result: Mr. Trump's threatened tariffs took effect Saturday morning. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney threatened to retaliate dollar-for-dollar starting Sept. 8. Both sides could still walk back from the ledge, though Mr. Trump's escalation could make this harder for Mr. Carney politically since Canadians don't like being bullied by Washington.

To justify his new tariffs, Mr. Trump said Canada discriminated against the U.S. by retaliating against his national-security tariffs on autos. He also claimed that Canadian provinces had restricted sales of U.S. alcoholic beverages in response to his "emergency" tariffs last year. Yet U.S. distillers begged Mr. Trump to hold off on his Section 338 tariffs. They know the longer Canada locks out American booze, the tougher it will be to regain market share.

The President also cited longstanding grievances over how Canada treats U.S. dairy. Press reports say the Trump team raised other issues during recent negotiations, including Canada's treatment of U.S. tech companies and digital taxes. Most of these issues could have been addressed as part of a renegotiation of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

But Mr. Trump doesn't want to update the deal. He wants to rewrite it unilaterally. As Mr. Carney noted Saturday, the President has contrived an array of pretexts—from fentanyl trafficking to trade deficits—to bludgeon Canada with tariffs.

Mr. Trump's complaint about the U.S. trade deficit with Canada is particularly ironic since the latter owes entirely to imports of heavy crude oil that is especially well-suited for U.S. refineries. Exclude Canadian oil, and the U.S. would have a trade surplus. But U.S. refineries would also operate at lower capacity.

In any event, last week the two sides were close to an agreement that would reduce the U.S. auto tariffs on Canada to 15% (the same rate as South Korea and Japan) from 25%, and on steel and aluminum to 25% from 50%. These tariff reductions would help U.S. manufacturers, which have integrated cross-border supply chains.

Prices for steel and aluminum mill products have surged 22.5% and 40.5%, respectively, over the past year. General Motors last month projected a $2.5 billion to $3.5 billion hit this year from tariffs. U.S. auto makers have been lobbying the Administration to reach a truce with Canada.

Mr. Carney said Saturday that a major reason the deal blew up is that the Trump team refused to ease tariffs on heavy and medium duty trucks, including those made at Ford's plant in Ontario. Why is Mr. Trump punishing Ford, America's largest auto producer?

Mr. Trump's latest round of border taxes will hit an array of consumer goods, construction materials and manufacturing components. Republicans are already getting pounded on the campaign trail over his tariffs and inflation. One reason for Mr. Trump's frigid approval rating is that voters believe Mr. Trump is waging blunderbuss wars without a strategy, and on trade they're right.

Now California Is Coming for Your Tires

California's climate obsessives never tire, and now we mean literally. Last week Gov. Gavin Newsom's energy regulators rolled out costly new regulations for automobile tires to reduce CO2 emissions.

A new Newsom rule orders 70% of today's car tires off the market.

The California Energy Commission moved to impose so-called rolling resistance standards on tires that they say will improve fuel economy. "This ultimately is about protecting consumers," said chairman David Hochschild. What would Californians do without progressive regulators to protect them by restricting choices?

Environmentalists complain that most tires people buy at auto shops have a higher drag than those that come with new vehicles. That's because auto makers equip new models with ultra-low drag tires to meet fuel economy and emission standards in labs. But these tires are more expensive and come with real-world trade-offs.

They tend to wear out faster, so they have to be replaced more often. They also have less traction, which can make driving in wet conditions more perilous. Such safety considerations are particularly weighty for SUVs and trucks, which have longer stopping distances and can cause more damage during collisions.

Mr. Newsom's regulators brushed past these concerns and ordered some 70% of tires currently sold in the state off the market by 2033. Tire manufacturers say models that meet the new standards cost hundreds of dollars more per set, far more than the commission's estimate and any savings consumers would derive from improved fuel economy.

California regulators notoriously low-ball the economic costs and exaggerate the benefits of their endless rules. They continue to insist the state's green-energy mandates save money for consumers, though California's electricity rates are more than double those in neighboring states. State energy efficiency requirements don't offset the higher rates.

The rising costs of the state's climate regulations explain why many Californians are souring on them. A recent survey by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 32% support Mr. Newsom's ban on new gas-powered cars by 2035, down from 49% in 2021. Only 38% say they are willing to pay more for renewable electricity versus 56% in 2016.

As Mr. Newsom prepares to run for President, Americans will have to decide if they want their future to be as costly as the Governor's regulators have made it in California.

A Teachers Union Sues Its Critics

The Chicago Teachers Union is deeply unpopular, but rather than engage in soul-searching, it has taken a page from Donald Trump and filed a defamation lawsuit. Last week the CTU sued the conservative Illinois Policy Institute, the think tank's Chicago Policy Center executive director Austin Berg, and the Liberty Justice Center, alleging a "smear campaign designed to inflict maximum reputational harm."

It accuses a think tank of defamation. Yeah, that will help the kids.

The lawsuit, filed in Cook County Circuit Court, argues the defendants had a strategy of "falsely accusing CTU of 'cooking the books,'" and other misconduct, so as to "weaken CTU in the eyes of its members, Chicago students and their families, voters, and the broader community." Those criticisms, and the use by the Illinois Policy Institute and Mr. Berg of the word "toxic" to describe CTU, show intent to harm the union, the suit argues.

According to CTU, its approval among Chicago residents has fallen "from 70% to 28%." That first figure looks high, since a public poll in early 2023 shows 44%. In any case, much of CTU's legal complaint concerns criticism of its years of delayed financial audits. CTU bylaws say the union must annually "furnish an audited report" that "shall be printed in the Union's publication." The Liberty Justice Center and four CTU members sued in 2024, asking to force the union to comply. The audits have since been produced, and that suit is still pending.

In CTU's telling, the "finalization" of the audits was "delayed for innocuous reasons," including Covid and staff turnover. The Liberty Justice Center was aware of its explanation, CTU says, since it came up in the previous case. Yet the defendants kept criticizing the union, saying it needed to "come clean" and tweeting a mock picture of a cookbook entitled "Cooking the Books."

Defamation claims can be a way to stifle critics, so many states have tried to curb abuse by passing anti-SLAPP laws (to stop Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). Illinois's statute was recently amended to give greater protection to speakers. The CTU is a public union and a legitimate debate topic, so the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) also comes into play.

That ruling requires public figures claiming defamation to prove speakers had "actual malice," meaning they knew the statements were false or else acted with reckless disregard for the truth. CTU is alleging this, but it's a high bar. Does the union think as soon as it gave an excuse for the audits, critics were legally required to take it at face value and barred from suggesting deeper union failures?

If the CTU is worried about its unpopularity, a better approach would be to reflect on why so many Chicagoans have concluded the union puts its own goals ahead of improving schools for the city's children. It might have something to do with the fact that only about a quarter of fourth grade and eighth grade students are proficient in reading and math.

"The First Amendment works both ways," Liberty Justice Center Chairman Sara Albrecht says. "CTU cannot demand the freedom to attack its critics while asking a court to punish those who scrutinize its leadership, finances and conduct." Chicago families now have one more reason to wonder why they must be political hostages to a union that puts children last.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Head Start's Future Shouldn't Ignore Its Past

Regarding your editorial "A Welcome Restart for Head Start" (Aug. 11): Washington shouldn't tell every community exactly how to serve its children. A federal requirement that consumes a teacher's time without improving a child's day should have to justify itself.

I agree with the goal of your editorial and disagree with the verdict. These are different arguments: which federal requirements earn their keep and whether Head Start itself is worth saving. The first debate is overdue. The second isn't supported by the evidence.

Head Start is a national network with local control. Every program tailors its services to its community, guided by parents who have real authority over how federal dollars are spent. Requirements have accumulated, and not all still earn their place. Head Start should keep revising how it operates. But that conversation should rest on the complete record.

Decades of studies have found that Head Start raises high-school completion and college enrollment and improved earnings in adulthood. Children who attend Head Start are more likely to graduate and secure stable employment and less likely to enter foster care.

Not every study is glowing. Some find large benefits, some modest ones. That is what a real evidence base looks like. Your editorial also points to the "fadeout" finding from the Head Start Impact Study: early test-score gains diminished by elementary school. That's true but routinely misunderstood. That study often compared Head Start children with those in other preschool programs, not children receiving no early education.

Third grade isn't the finish line. A test score at 8-years-old isn't a verdict on life at 18. A child whose hearing loss is caught at 4 does not need speech therapy at 8. A parent with reliable child care can finish a credential or hold a shift. Those are outcomes, too.

We should review the standards and change what doesn't work. But we must do it with the whole record in front of us—and with a picture of the child on the other end of every requirement.

Yasmina Vinci
Executive director, National Head Start Association
Alexandra, Va.

The Syria Disaster Washington Helped Create

President Clinton's 1994 meeting with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Damascus served to legitimize the country's nuclear ambitions and its sponsorship of terrorism ("Ending the Syrian Nuclear Saga" Review & Outlook, Aug. 20).

Assad used Mr. Clinton's visit to increase his brutal repression of Syrians. Mr. Clinton's decision to visit Syria, with the approval of Secretary of State Warren Christopher, was one of his many poor decisions that damaged U.S. foreign relations in the Middle East, jeopardized the security of Israel, and threatened the lives of Americans in the region.

The U.S. lacked the will to prevent North Korea's Kim Jong Un from building Syria's al-Kibar nuclear reactor. Israel destroyed it in 2007.

The failures of the Clinton and Bush administrations in Syria resulted in the deaths of millions of Syrians. A Syrian court recently gave a death sentence to former President Bashar al-Assad, exiled in Russia.

President Trump is facing no less dangerous times in the Middle East than his predecessors, but he is on a better diplomatic path. Mr. Trump is right to seek better relations and nuclear nonproliferation with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa.

James Patterson
Washington

The Wall Between Doctors and Dentists Falls

Regarding "Your Mouth Could Hold Secrets to Longer Life" (Personal Journal, Aug. 13), science already has begun to move federal policy, further than most readers, and many clinicians, realize.

In recent years, Medicare codified and expanded payment for medically necessary dental services that are "inextricably linked" to covered medical care, including examinations and treatment to eliminate infection before organ transplants and cardiac-valve procedures, before and during certain cancer therapies, and for kidney-failure patients receiving dialysis. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services also established hospital payment for dental surgery in the operating room for patients who cannot be treated safely in a dental chair, and it created an annual public process for adding new clinical scenarios as the evidence accumulates. These policies rest on precisely the research the article summarizes: Untreated oral infection can jeopardize a transplant, a heart valve, a course of chemotherapy.

What the policy doesn't reach is the routine, preventive care that might keep infection from threatening those treatments in the first place. Dr. Frank Scannapieco's pneumonia findings suggest what that gap costs, in health and in dollars. Every year of new evidence on diabetes, pneumonia and stroke strengthens the case for the next increment.

The wall between medicine and dentistry was built by history, not biology. In Medicare, it is coming down brick by brick.

Eric Berger
Executive Director
Consortium for Medically Necessary Oral Health Coverage
Washington

Money Makes the World Sing

Regarding Gregg Opelka's op-ed "No One Got Rich Singing About Money" (Aug. 19): In "Santa Baby," the late Eartha Kitt directly challenges Mr. Opelka's premise. She asks Santa for a sable, a convertible, a yacht, a platinum mine, a duplex and a ring. Money and luxury are hardly incidental to the song.

Then there is "Money (That's What I Want)," performed by the Flying Lizards in 1979, with Deborah Evans-Stickland on lead vocals. Money is what she wants. The song became a hit in Britain.

Perhaps, then, people really do like singing about money—and listening to it.

David Tulanian
Henderson, Nev.

Mr. Opelka makes a glaring omission: "If I Had a Million Dollars" by Toronto's Barenaked Ladies was a big hit. Perhaps music royalties will soon also be subject to President Trump's tariffs and to a Canadian band a million dollars isn't what it used to be.

Robert Heinrichs
Calgary, Alberta

The Pension Bill Comes Due

Sara Albrecht makes some great points about how the American Federation of Teachers appears to be choosing to value political pressure over the financial interests of its members ("AFT Target Funds Teachers' Retirement" op-ed, Aug 20). But since most teacher retirement plans are defined benefit plans, the bottom line is that when the plan assets fail to deliver promised returns, the taxpayers will be on the hook for the additional costs to fund the benefits that have been promised to the teachers. One need only look at the current underfunding of public pension plans in California to see how this plays out.

Paul Luce
Pleasanton, Calif.

A Law for Zohran Mamdani

Regarding Richard B. McKenzie's "It's Hard to Tax Things That Move" (op-ed, Aug. 20): It is worth recalling former Citigroup Chairman Walter Wriston's elegant framing of the phenomena, now called "Wriston's Law": "Capital will always go where it's welcome and stay where it's well treated. Capital is not just money. It's also talent and ideas. They, too, will go where they're welcome and stay where they are well treated." Zohran Mamdani and others seeking to "tax the rich" should keep Wriston's Law on their desks and smartphones so they have a daily reminder.

Robert C. Atkinson
Sparta, N.J.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"If you feel inclined to tell me what a great job I'm doing, I'll be in my office."

OPINION

Ukraine Celebrates Independence Day

By Arseniy Yatsenyuk And David Petraeus

Ukraine's independence day is Aug. 24, marking the 35th anniversary of the restoration of its independence. In those 35 years, Ukraine has undergone an extraordinary transformation from a fragment of the Soviet empire into a nation that is a global symbol of the struggle for freedom and a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security.

While this anniversary is significant to Ukraine, it is part of a much larger story of how the global order has changed over the past 3½ decades.

We have traveled from the euphoria that followed the collapse of Soviet totalitarianism—which many believed to be the final prison of nations—to the horror of Russia's revanchism against Ukraine and attempt to overturn the international order.

Thirty-five years ago, a nation was reborn. Today it symbolizes freedom and resistance to aggression.

We have traveled from the complacent conviction that the liberal international order had triumphed and that we had seen "the end of history" to the painful realization that authoritarianism retained its power over nations.

We have traveled from the illusion that humanity had left global wars behind forever to the stark prospect of a third world war that could span continents and have devastating global consequences.

We believed that the defining metaphor of the new era would be the fall of the Berlin Wall. In reality, the defining metaphor of this new era is the inspirational, determined and innovative defense of Ukraine's freedom in the face of unprovoked aggression—and, indirectly, Ukraine's defense of Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well.

Ukraine has shown the world what a nation is capable of when it refuses to submit to a murderous foreign regime and is prepared to fight for its freedom and its existence as an independent country.

Modern Ukraine's reaching and maintaining independence ranks among the greatest achievements of modern history, alongside the 250th anniversary of American independence, the establishment of the European Union, the reunification of Germany and the enlargement of a united Europe.

The 35 years of modern Ukraine's independence haven't been without internal challenges, including corruption, dysfunction and various institutional pathologies the nation inherited from the Soviet system. Nonetheless, the country has repeatedly sought to address its shortcomings. However difficult and imperfect at times, those 35 years embody the hope that nations can achieve independence and justice. They demonstrate that, together, freedom-loving nations are capable of defending a civilized international order.

Ukraine's experience also reveals hard truths that Western political leaders and societies are forced to face. First, we must abandon the illusion that Russia's war against Ukraine is taking place somewhere far away, beyond the boundaries of Europe and the NATO alliance. Although Ukraine is on the front lines, this is ultimately a war against Europe and NATO, fought on European soil.



REUTERS/VALENTYN OGIRENKO

Kyiv's Mother of the Motherland monument on July 4, 2026.

We must also abandon the illusion that this war can be brought to a sudden end or that peace will arrive quickly. The only genuine path to peace lies in Ukraine's victory and in the maximum political, defense and societal mobilization of a united Europe and a united transAtlantic alliance. Mobilization must convince the aggressor that Ukraine will never surrender and that it is prepared to use force against any assault on our collective security, that of Ukraine and NATO.

We must abandon the illusion that Russia can alter its aggressive historical trajectory without accountability and atonement for its crimes. Western leaders often act as though totalitarian regimes will embrace peaceful coexistence in response to Western concessions and passivity, but that will never happen.

A democratic victory would require several ingredients: unconditional support of Ukraine; clear paths to Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU; burden-sharing between the U.S. and its European allies inside NATO; institutional reform of the EU to prevent Russia, China and their proxies or sympathizers from paralyzing European freedom; and resistance to the enemy's cognitive warfare (such as disinformation campaigns) whose purpose is to divide us, awaken dormant fears and local selfishness, and distract us with internal conflicts.

Ukraine didn't begin this war. Our common enemy began it against Ukraine after the West had convinced itself that the age of authoritarianism was over. The beginning of physical aggression in 2014 should have broken that hope.

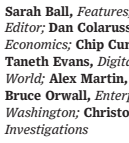
Yesterday's methods can't win today's war. The war can be won only through the creativity, resilience and imagination that Ukraine is demonstrating daily through its defense innovation, engineering genius, societal resilience and perseverance—all enabled by support from European and NATO partners.

Thirty-five years of Ukrainian independence constitutes a great victory, especially given the battles of the past 12 years. Behind modern Ukraine stands more than 1,000 years of history—a legacy no less remarkable than Ukraine's present-day triumphs in the struggle against a ruthless aggressor.

Ukraine's fight against Russian assault isn't an isolated regional conflict but a crucial defense of the Western democratic order. Allies' support for Ukraine is essential, but in an era of authoritarian aggression, the West must do more than provide weapons and aid. It must learn to be as determined and inventive as Ukraine. These lessons are vital to a free Kyiv and the survival of the Ukrainian nation.

Mr. Yatsenyuk served as Ukraine's prime minister, 2014-16, and is chairman of the Kyiv Security Forum and the Open Ukraine Foundation. Mr. Petraeus, a retired U.S. Army general, commanded the surge in Iraq, U.S. Central Command and coalition forces in Afghanistan and served as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, 2011-12. He is a co-author of "Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Gaza."

AOC's Craaazy Economic Theory Lives On



LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

Remember modern monetary theory? This was the craaaazy economic view that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez helped popularize during Woke 1. It held that the U.S. needn't worry about deficits because the government could print money. Politicians could spend with abandon, and if inflation rose, Congress could subdue it by raising taxes.

Stephanie Kelton, an economist who provided the intellectual imprimatur for modern monetary theory, thanked Ms. Ocasio-Cortez for bringing this radical idea into the mainstream: "People immediately probably started googling 'modern monetary theory' to find out what she was referring to."

"The national debt is nothing to fear," Ms. Kelton told CNN in 2019. "What should scare Americans is allowing misunderstandings and fearmongering about the national debt to prevent us from taking bold action to deal with the urgent threat of climate change."

This theory was central to the left's pitch for financing the Green New Deal, Medicare for All and other costly ambitions. Modern monetary theory must be "a larger part of our conversation," Ms. Ocasio-Cortez said. And so it was during the pandemic, until runaway inflation came and the Federal Reserve had to raise interest rates.

Now the liberal intelligentsia and press, who egged on the experiment in modern monetary theory, are raising alarms about the growing debt and increasing yields on long-term Treasury bonds. Yet listen close, and you'll notice MMT still undergirds Democrats' economic agenda, even if they have retired the term.

Step 1. Spend without restraint. 2. Lean on the Fed to monetize the debt. 3. Hike taxes. 4. When economic inequality increases and growth slows, spend more. This more or less tracks what the government did during the pandemic, and now the left wants to repeat the failed experiment on an even larger scale. Call it Woke 2 economics.

Lest anyone forget how the U.S. got persistent inflation and a $40 trillion debt: First, Congress undertook a multitrillion-dollar spending binge during the pandemic that showered people with money. The Fed accommodated the spending by keeping interest rates near zero and purchasing Treasurys.

Government can print money, so spending has no consequences. How'd that go during the pandemic?

The latter had the effect of pushing down yields on long-dated bonds and U.S. borrowing costs while driving up asset prices, including for housing. Result: Investors piled into riskier assets—crypto, special-purpose acquisition companies, meme stocks—while Congress, businesses and consumers piled on debt. Borrowing was cheap, so why not?

Many Americans refinanced homes at ultralow rates, which increased household liquidity and fueled consumption. After inflation surged, the Fed raised interest rates and began to shrink its balance sheet. Borrowing costs rose across the board, and suddenly running big deficits became much less affordable. Higher mortgage rates—which are tied to yields on long-term Treasurys—also made homes less affordable for people who hadn't locked in low rates.

In 2022 Democrats passed an enormous climate and healthcare bill—hilariously named the Inflation Reduction Act—with tax increases that they claimed would pay for sweetened ObamaCare and Medicare prescription-drug benefits and reduce the deficit. All of this spending cost multiples more than Democrats claimed.

The Congressional Budget Office recently revised upward the Medicare prescription-drug costs by some $700 billion over the next decade, largely because of higher-than-expected costs for the act's enhanced benefits. Government makes something less expensive, and people use more of it. Who would have thought?

This week arrived a faux panic in the press about the upward march of U.S. debt and long-term Treasury rates. Yes, yes. The result will be higher government borrowing costs, but this serves as a useful price signal to America's spendthrift political class.

One reason for rising long-term rates may be that Fed Chairman Kevin Warsh has signaled that he doesn't plan to enable Washington's out-of-control spending by monetizing the U.S. debt, as his predecessors did. He wants no part of MMT.

Enter the left's household remedy: Hike taxes. Sen. Bernie Sanders and his socialist acolytes have promoted a 5% annual wealth tax on billionaires. This would generate only $2.3 trillion over a decade—about as much as this year's deficits. Even if the government were to confiscate all the wealth of America's billionaires, that would only raise $8.4 trillion. This wealth seizure would bring U.S. gross debt back to where it was in spring 2023.

Forget paying for Mr. Sanders's Medicare for All proposal (estimated cost: $34 trillion over 10 years). How about Ms. Ocasio-Cortez's proposal to raise the top marginal rate to 70% on incomes over $10 million? That would raise only about $300 billion over 10 years.

Ms. Ocasio-Cortez is tiptoeing back from some of her earlier radical social positions, like defunding the police. But she and other progressives continue to promote the woke economic idea that raiding the rich can pay for their wildest spending dreams. What will it take for them to wake up?

An Antisemitism Task Force Whistleblower Refutes Herself

By Mark Goldfeder

A whistleblower last week accused the Trump administration's antisemitism task force of rigging its civil-rights enforcement. But the disclosure, which Haley Van Erem filed with Congress, refutes itself repeatedly. Lawyers for Ms. Van Erem—a former Justice Department attorney who was temporarily reassigned in 2025 to the Department of Health and Human Services for Title VI investigations of Brown, Columbia, Cornell and Harvard—allege in the report that "the outcomes of the investigations were predetermined, without regard to the evidence." The report spends its 28 pages documenting instances in which the task force *regarded*, not disregarded, evidence.

With Columbia, Ms. Van Erem objected that draft findings implicated protected speech. In her own telling, the HHS general counsel's office then "provided extensive comments identifying legal issues," and "some of the findings . . . about protected speech were removed." When she flagged First Amendment problems with curriculum monitors proposed for Harvard, the acting general counsel "acknowledged the validity of this issue" and offered a rework. Legal review that catches and corrects constitutional defects is the opposite of an executive indifferent to law.

Then there's Brown, the disclosure's centerpiece. Ms. Van Erem's team found the university responded promptly to the two incidents it identified. Task force leadership, the supposed authors of predetermined outcomes, agreed, and a supervisor told the team it "had done a good job convincing the front office that they should move on from Brown." The result, as per Ms. Van Erem's disclosure: a July 2025 agreement with "no admission or finding of wrongdoing and . . . no fine or payment to the federal government."

The university agreed to pay $50 million over 10 years to Rhode Island workforce-development organizations, but this was far less than other schools' penalties and was justified, among other things, by the agreement's breadth. It closed various reviews and matters unrelated to antisemitism. These outcomes weren't predetermined but calibrated to evidence. The school with the cleanest record got the mildest outcome.

Ms. Van Erem's legal theory fares no better. The disclosure quotes Title VI: No funding may be terminated "until the department or agency . . . has determined that compliance cannot be secured by voluntary means." Voluntary resolution—such as the settlements reached with Brown, Columbia and Cornell—isn't a corruption of the law; it is the statute's stated preference. Yet she presents leadership's pursuit of "some form of settlement or resolution" in Brown's case in particular as a scandal.

Ms. Van Erem measures the task force against "longstanding investigative practices designed to ensure due process, accuracy and legal compliance." Those practices weren't, as Ms. Van Erem's disclosure portrays them, the good old days. It was a pattern of the executive failing to help students as Congress intended.

In the six decades before 2025, no college or university ever lost federal funding under Title VI for failing to protect its students from harassment. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission, in a 1974 review, counted hundreds of discrimination complaints filed in the early '70s alone and found that every agency the commission examined had failed to cut off federal funds when that was the appropriate remedy. Today, the Education Department's list of investigations into discrimination involving shared ancestry covers more than 70 institutions of higher education. There has been one federal funding termination, unrelated to harassment: the cutoff of veterans' benefits to Bob Jones University in the 1970s over the school's refusal to admit black students.

Ms. Van Erem's one fair point regards Harvard. Last September a federal district court said that the 2025 funding freezes and terminations ran ahead of Title VI's procedures and violated the First Amendment. But the fact that Harvard has prevailed thus far, with the government's appeal pending in the First U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, proves the resiliency and justice of our system. A university that can fight the federal government to a standstill isn't the hostage this disclosure describes. Columbia had the same courthouse available but a worse record, and chose instead to reform. Institutions with billions in endowment don't sign baseless settlements.

Administration lawyers didn't disregard evidence, and the proof is in Haley Van Erem's disclosure.

The ruling that occasioned this disclosure's release deserves the closest reading. On Aug. 13, Judge Richard Stearns dismissed the government's separate Title VI suit against Harvard, and Ms. Van Erem drapes herself in that decision. Here is what she omits: Two years earlier, in *Kestenbaum v. Harvard*, a private suit by Jewish students, the same judge refused to dismiss their deliberate-indifference claim against the school, writing that "the facts as pled show that Harvard failed its Jewish students," that Harvard's response to antisemitism was "at best, indecisive, vacillating, and at times internally contradictory," that "in many instances, Harvard did not respond at all," and that those facts "plausibly establish that Harvard's response failed Title VI's commands."

The August dismissal retracted none of that. "Without diminishing any concern arising from these occurrences," Judge Stearns wrote, he held only that the government's complaint, built on incidents from the 2023-24 academic year, didn't plausibly allege noncompliance continuing after Harvard received statutory notice in June 2025 (an ongoing-violation requirement that itself appears nowhere in the statute), and he stressed that the decision was "limited to the specific circumstances presented here."

Ms. Van Erem left the government in 2025 and filed 14 months later, days after a court ruling gave her a headline. Within a day, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee was telling the head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division that its investigation into antisemitism was "fake, a prebaked frame-up operation." Congress should read this disclosure anyway, every page, and then request documents it doesn't collect: every Title VI complaint Jewish students filed before 2025, and the dates on which anyone answered. Sixty years of enforcement history predicts what those documents will show: neglect. The process Ms. Van Erem mourns is the one that never worked.

Mr. Goldfeder is CEO of the National Jewish Advocacy Center and a law professor at Touro Law School, where he directs the Antisemitism Law Clinic.

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Opinion

Keep your eye on ICE

The White House deportation machine has only ramped up.

David Wallace-Wells

The resistance looked immediately victorious and momentous: Last January, facing a kind of invasion by federal agents, the liberal citizens of Minneapolis stood their ground. They forced confrontation after confrontation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol officers, eventually routing them from the city and bringing the mass deportation project of the U.S. president's second term to what looked like a humiliating end.

The response was heroic, especially given the purposeful brutality of the campaign, called Operation Metro Surge, which resulted in the killing of two American citizens — and perhaps even more so, given everything we have since learned about the full scale of the surveillance and counterintelligence operation federal agents were running, in real time, against those organizing to stymie them.

The problem is, ICE didn't really disappear when Operation Metro Surge ended in February, and the project of mass deportation wasn't shelved when the Border Patrol chief, Greg Bovino, retired and the Department of Homeland Security secretary, Kristi Noem, was later replaced by Markwayne Mullin. In the summer harshly hawkish immigration enforcement began in earnest again, this time a bit more carefully designed to maximize seizures and deportations rather than blood-and-soil spectacle.

By the numbers, the new strategy has worked. ICE arrests hit a new high in July. Deportations are on track to be higher this fiscal year than last one, and removals of people seized inside the country could easily reach new highs. Alligator Alcatraz, as a Florida detention facility was known, closed in June, but the number of immigrants held in detention by ICE has grown by 75 percent since President Trump returned to office in 2025. In 2024, ICE's operations and support budget was under $10 billion; in 2025, Mr. Trump's signature policy legislation helped allocate more than $70 billion in additional funding to the agency, including $45 billion to expand detention capacity. ICE is now the country's best-funded law enforcement agency. "We have never seen the detention system anywhere near this scale or size," said Aaron Reichlin-Melnick of the American Immigration Council. "And it's really crucial to understand that this is a decade-plus-long operation as they are planning it."

The U.S. midterms and the next presidential election are obvious speed bumps for those plans, given how much the ICE budget has ballooned under Mr. Trump and how much political capital would be required to extend that funding. But in terms of arrests, the damage done this summer swells beyond what was done in any single month leading up to Minneapolis. And yet despite the horrifying scale, the mass deportation project has generated much less public outrage in the second year of Mr. Trump's second term, with liberals notching Minneapolis as an incredible victory before turning their attention elsewhere.

When a Maine resident was shot and killed by an ICE officer in July, allegations of the officer's violent past briefly became a minor national news story, then faded into background noise.

There was perhaps even less attention paid to a killing in Houston last month, when ICE officers shot a man driving a construction van on his way to a work site. This year a federal judge reviewing officers' claims of being attacked by drivers in Chicago wrote that it was "difficult, if not impossible" to believe their stance that vehicular confrontations with protesters had been defensive maneuvers. Since the start of Mr. Trump's second term, at least 10 people have been killed in immigration operations, and dozens more have died in immigration detention.

By February, Mr. Trump's approval on immigration fell 12 percentage points below its peak early in his second term, but it now sits comfortably above his overall approval rating, and he retains the support of a large majority of Republicans on the issue. We don't see Democrats storming in to protest deportation hearings much anymore, and we don't even see them spending much time emphasizing the cruel excesses of Mr. Trump's border and immigration policies on the campaign trail, either.

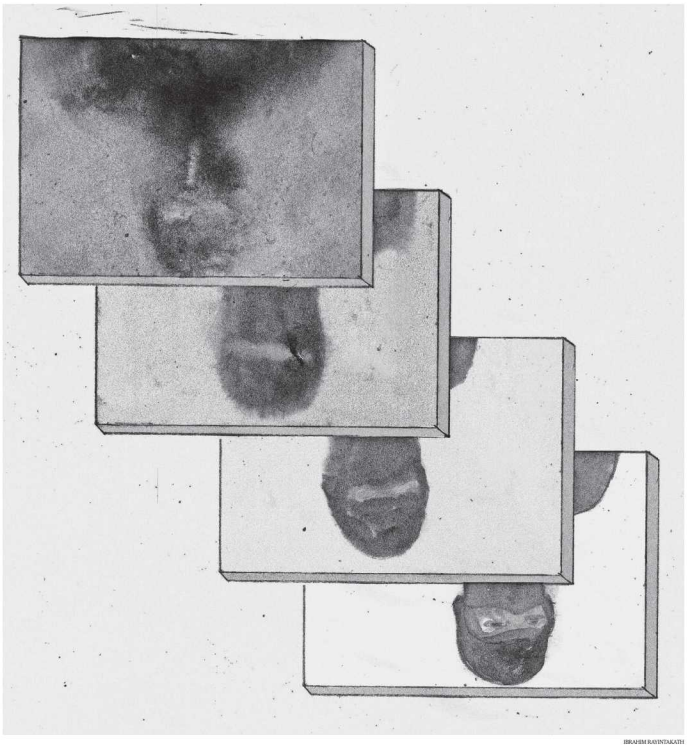
This is politics, of course, at least in part. But in the winter, it might have seemed that mass deportation was turning immigration into an issue Democrats might exploit to their advantage, with backlash powering what appeared to be a distaste for ICE and Customs and Border Protection and growing sympathy for immigrants. In fact, those survey numbers have fallen back over the past year, with American support for immigration lower now than it was at a peak in 2025. And the issue has also collapsed in salience since Metro Surge, particularly if you measure it in headlines, cable news segments and social media virality.

Removals of people seized inside the U.S. could easily reach new highs.

In part, the country has grown less outraged because the Department of Homeland Security has strategically recalibrated its approach, jettisoning the shock-and-awe-style sweeps and instead targeting those it knew how to find — at least in part, seemingly, by going after those who had been complying with immigration policies in ways that made them easily traceable by federal authorities. There's been less emphasis on intimidation of recalcitrant communities and more emphasis on quickly finding and arresting those it knows it can detain and deport. It appears less focused on making ICE sizzle reels lately and, to judge by the relative paucity of citizen documentation, more effective in tracking and suppressing resistance. Operations have gotten faster and more targeted.

As always, the enduring laws of attentional chaos in the Trump era also play a role. Deportation outrage gave way to worry over the Iran war, among other fights and scandals. But I think normalization is coming from the other direction, too, with liberal complacency setting in as the lame-duck mood spreads through Trumpland.

One aspect of the vibe shift against Mr. Trump and Trumpism is that even those most outraged about the president and his path of destruction might now see a light at the end of the tunnel, in the form of dismal approval ratings and the coming midterms and then 2028. For a decade, Mr. Trump has been unmistakably the main character in American politics, dictating national attention even when out of power. But over the past few months that, too, has changed, with tensions in the Democratic Party and its contest for future leadership becoming more central preoccupations and the fall elections drawing attention forward in ways that can serve to minimize the damage of the recent past, almost like a camera obscura casting a miniature image, inverted, against an opposite wall.



IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATH

Of course, the damage has been absolutely immense — to health care and SNAP, to pollution standards and basic expectations of public integrity, to America's standing in the world and its role in global energy markets (not to mention its munitions stockpile), to scientific research and public health. And not least, on the border, where a large-scale deportation program is, even though unfolding somewhat offscreen, producing humanitarian outrages that used to pull liberal America's attention into focus.

ICE is planning to buy electroshock gloves sold with the promise that the jolts will not leave any marks. The Department of Homeland Security is deporting Mexican nationals to Honduras and Guatemala, even though their native country is perfectly willing to accept them, and will be sending more than 1,000 others to countries in Africa, including countries the State Department considers unsafe, for what seem to be punitive reasons. In August, Maryam Tahmasebi, an Iranian professor of psychology and statistics in Los Angeles, published an open letter in The Nation documenting her experience in a detention center in Texas, where she has spent more than 120 days with her 16-year-old son, separated from her husband. All three were legal permanent residents.

In April, months after the initial deportation surge had subsided, Ms. Tahmasebi got a text from her son that his father hadn't arrived to pick him up from school. Eventually she discovered that her husband was being held at an ICE facility in downtown Los Angeles, and he told her he'd been assured that, whatever bureaucratic tangle he'd gotten caught up in — his mother worked with the Iranian hostage takers before he was born — she and their son were safe. The next day, as she prepared to drive her son to school, their car was surrounded by Department of Homeland Security officers, and the two were handcuffed and sent from Los Angeles to Texas, where they've been detained since. "This is bloodline punishment," she wrote; neither she nor her husband has so much as a traffic ticket. "I will end on this: If this could happen to us, a law-abiding family of two professors and a young boy, it can happen to anyone."

Stories like these were available in endless scroll a year ago, stoking liberal outrage almost by the day. The sentiment hasn't grown less true in the meantime, however irregularly we may be clocking it.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS *is a writer for Opinion and The Times Magazine and the author of "The Uninhabitable Earth."*

Some reasons women learn to downplay their pain

We learn early to appease authority figures — even if they're doctors asking how we feel.

Allison Sweet Grant

Approximately five hours into my first chemotherapy infusion, the muscles in my back began to spasm. A little at first, but then quickly the spasms grew stronger and stronger, until it felt as if the muscles were being ripped from my bones. Newly diagnosed with breast cancer, I had been medicated with steroids for a long and taxing treatment, but even so, my body had a rare reaction. My face turned a deep red. My blood pressure spiked. I couldn't speak, couldn't see, couldn't breathe. I became sick with the pain.

Very quickly, the small room flooded with nurses. My oncologist was summoned over the P.A. system and ran in just in time to find me arching out of the semireclined vinyl chemo chair. After what seemed like an eternity, they pumped enough Benadryl through my veins to get the reaction under control. When I was coherent again, the first words out of my mouth were "I'm sorry." Immediately followed by "I'm fine."

As a former nurse practitioner, I know I'm not the only patient to behave this way. For every sick person who's loud or demanding or belligerent, somewhere within a medical suite there's another who's sugarcoating, suppressing or understating her pain.

The impulse shows up in many ways. Answering providers' questions with what we think they want to hear. Saying yes when we want to say no. Holding our tongue when we sense something may be wrong. In the face of dire circumstances — devastating diagnoses, shattered realities, excruciating physical pain — there's a desire to be easy. Flexible. Polite. It's almost as if we're auditioning for a role we've created in our heads. The role of the perfect patient.



ABRAHAH LOYND

From an early age, we're all taught to seek the approval of authority figures. In many households, children are taught to placate their parents or face punishment. Students learn to follow teachers' directions or risk receiving poor marks.

Physicians are perceived by many as the ultimate authority figures. They're busy professionals in one of the highest-status occupations in America. They hold the knowledge to heal us but also the power to harm us. We worry that if we make things too complicated, they might care less about us. And for good reason: In a study of more than 2,000 patients, those who suffered from medical professionals' diagnostic errors were twice as likely to be described with stigmatizing language in their medical records. Once labeled difficult, patients were more likely to face barriers and receive poor care.

Receiving good health care is not just about finding good doctors. Patients who disagree with their doctor can be "fired" or flagged with scarlet letters in the corners of their electronic medical charts. "Exaggerating." "Resistant." "Noncompliant." "Hysterical." To be sure, there are problematic patients, even dangerous ones. But for the rest of us, the imbalance between our defenselessness and the doctor's discretion can create an unhelpful dynamic, one that pushes us to stop advocating and start accommodating. The result is waiting rooms full of people pleasers and providers who never get the full picture.

The pressure to be pleasant and pliant is especially strong for women. Just as "bossy" women often don't get promotions and "uppity" women are more likely to be sexually harassed, women who are branded as difficult patients are at risk of not being taken seriously or losing access to care. This is one of the reasons women overapologize, even for their own pain.

It is the doctors' responsibility to create a climate of psychological safety.

A simple disclaimer — "I don't mean to be difficult, but . . . " — can backfire as well. (I can't help worrying that having this article published will offend someone and earn me a label of my own.) Swallowing our pain is particularly dangerous because extensive research shows that even when women and men have the same symptoms, physicians frequently take longer to diagnose conditions in women — and when they eventually do, they often prescribe women less pain medication. For patients who are members of minority groups or lower income brackets or who don't have health insurance, the pressure to acquiesce may be even greater.

Doctors can't be expected to recognize every time patients hold their tongue or downplay their pain, but it is the doctors' responsibility to create a climate of psychological safety so patients feel comfortable speaking. Within the past two decades, medical schools have begun offering more courses in emotional intelligence, communication and listening. This is a step in the right direction, but it's rarely enough. Patients are still afraid, and the health care system is a scary enough place as it is.

As a cancer patient, even six years later, I feel fortunate to have providers who go out of their way to let me know my job is not to please them but, rather, to tell them how I'm really feeling, so that they can help me.

Patients should never feel they need to hide their emotions in order to appear agreeable, minimize their symptoms in order to be taken seriously or apologize for their pain.

Is that rude of me to say? I don't mean to be difficult. I'm sorry. I'm fine.

ALLISON SWEET GRANT *is the author of the forthcoming book "Lump: A Memoir in Ineloquent Reflections."*

OPINION

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Why are colleges giving financial aid to rich kids?

Angel B. Pérez

Millions of students will soon arrive on U.S. college campuses, full of excitement and trepidation about what's to come. Some will bring a special gift: a grant, known as merit aid. That's different from the financial aid that goes to students who can't afford the sticker price. Merit aid is in effect a signing bonus, a cash incentive to attract the most desirable students.

So who counts as desirable? These bonuses were originally intended for students with exceptional academic achievement, people who could contribute to the college environment and who have many admissions offers to choose from. Today, however, colleges and universities are increasingly using these grants for a very different purpose: to lure wealthy students, the ones who need the money least. And these institutions are drawing the merit aid from their limited financial aid budgets, leaving less money for students who need it most.

Examining the brutal math of modern higher education in America.

Two recent analyses — from the Brookings Institution and the organization I lead, the National Association for College Admission Counseling — show that in the past 20 years this trend has accelerated, while need-based financial aid has dwindled. Money that could be used to expand educational opportunity is increasingly being used to further entrench financial privilege.

As a former dean of admissions, I know this strategy well. For years, I awarded millions of dollars to wealthy students. I didn't do it because I cared less about low- and middle-income students, but because of the brutal math of modern higher education in the United States.

Consider two students applying to a college that costs $80,000 a year. One comes from a high-income family and receives a $20,000 merit scholarship. If the student enrolls, the institution nets $60,000. The other student is from a low-income family and needs $70,000 in aid to enroll, leaving the institution with only $10,000 in revenue. Which student do you think I incentivized?

As crazy as that might seem, merit aid is just a symptom of a bigger problem: While other nations are investing aggressively in higher education, the United States starves it. Our colleges and universities, long recognized as a hallmark of our excellence, have been steadily defunded over recent decades.

The Pell Grant — America's best tool for supporting low-income college-bound students — is facing an $11.5 billion shortfall. Federal and state funding has been gutted. Millions of research dollars that once flowed into institutions have been slashed, as have loans for graduate school tuition. Colleges are facing a shrinking pipeline of high school seniors, and shifting federal policies are making it more difficult to enroll international students.

This July, the Department of Homeland Security announced that international students can study in America for only four years. That will make it harder for U.S. colleges to attract them — a loss for many reasons, including the fact that international students typically pay full fare to study here. That revenue has helped keep our institutions afloat and subsidized the cost for American students.

Now many colleges are scrambling to keep the lights on. Using merit aid to attract students who can pay at least a significant part of the sticker price is one way these colleges live to teach another year.

To be clear, colleges have not been innocent bystanders in their decline. With the cost of attendance at some institutions now approaching or even surpassing $100,000 a year, it's no surprise Americans have lost trust in higher education. Raising prices and using opaque discounting strategies won't bring students in the door. To survive, American higher education must demonstrate it is willing to reinvent itself, not simply defend the same broken system.

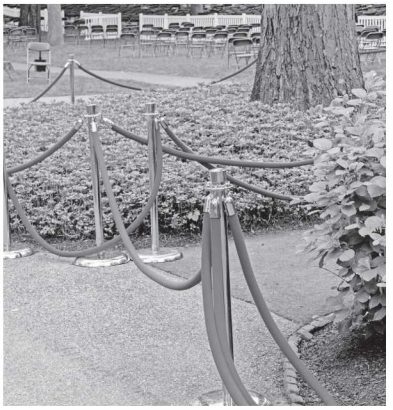
We should all want it to succeed. Higher education is one of the most powerful engines of economic mobility. Research shows that 10 years after enrollment, students who attended college generated an estimated $73.4 billion in additional annual earnings compared with high school graduates. The fewer people we educate, the fewer workers we have in high-paying sectors — a risk we cannot afford as we face a declining birthrate that threatens labor shortages. High wages lead to more tax revenue.

So this should be a priority for voters and lawmakers. It should also be a priority for the millions of Americans who once relied on financial aid to attend college. Far too many — more and more each year — turn away when their alma maters ask them to help the next generation. Donations alone won't solve the problem, but if higher education opened doors for you, stop looking the other way. Pay it forward.

Back in my admissions director days, when people objected to the use of merit aid, I often responded with a simple truth: We need the money. It was unavoidable. Yet that didn't make it right. Bidding wars for wealthy students are inherently distasteful. In a healthier system, they would be unnecessary — or even illegal.

If we are to find a way out of this cynical calculus, America has to make a choice. We can continue starving higher education and accept a future where opportunity belongs to those who can afford it. Or, we can recommit to public investment and philanthropy, to building institutions that are within reach for the average American, and to the belief that it's talent and tenacity, not family income, that should lead young people to opportunity.

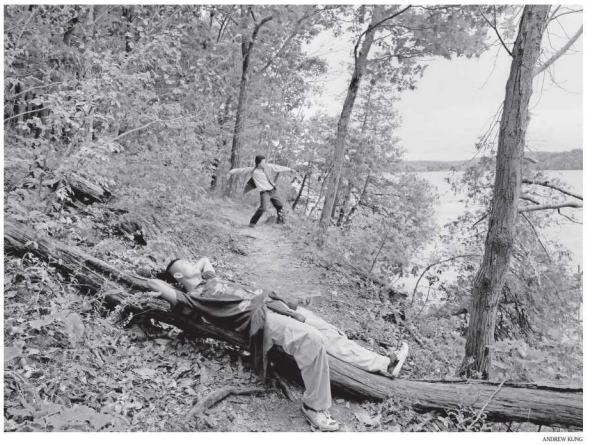
ANGEL B. PÉREZ *is the author of "The Hottest Seat on Campus: A Roadmap for Mastering Leadership in College Admission."*



AMANI WILLETT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Status defines too many friendships

Christine Emba
Contributing Writer



ANDREW KUNG

Why do I feel as if I'm being sold friends?

Join a "modern social club," one ad beckons. "Turn strangers into friends" via curated dinner parties at trendy restaurants. A luxury condo building flogs its "community clubhouse" as an exciting amenity, and yet another social start-up informs me, rather ominously, that "we find your people."

It's possible that my feeds are too well primed: The algorithms can tell that I'm in my 30s, that I'm living in a U.S. city known for its transience and that I frequently search for data on and read stories about our changing social lives. But the sheer number of these ads suggests that the need for friendship is widespread enough that an industry is forming around it.

There are the run clubs and exercise cults. On Instagram, I was seduced by a vibey post reminiscing about the precell-phone era of house parties. After I swiped through a carousel of nostalgia-inducing pictures, I was invited to just that kind of gathering — for a fee.

The loneliness epidemic has been well publicized, from the surgeon general's repeated warnings to musings in major media outlets. And the loneliness market has boomed: Venture capital firms are investing in social and relational health; technologists are selling companions and chatbots as cures for isolation; politicians and philanthropists have adopted "belonging" as a buzzword.

Even though I'd still love to make more friends, I'm lucky to already be embedded in a tight-knit group dating back to college. And these for-profit solutions all seem pitched at those who need them the least — socializing positioned as a luxury good. If isolation really is a societywide crisis, we need society-wide solutions — and an understanding of who has been left out most acutely from what friendship promises.

In pursuit of that aim, the researchers Sam Pressler, a fellow at the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy, and Soren Duggan, a communications strategist and Army veteran with a background in human intelligence collection, produced a report this spring titled "Nobody to Call," based on a series of 30 in-depth, qualitative interviews with men ranging from their mid-20s to their mid-40s without college degrees. They hoped to add texture to the conversation on loneliness by seeking out those who they believe are struggling the most. We've all experienced social atrophy, Mr. Pressler told me, but for men without degrees, the bottom has fallen out.

College completion rates have risen over the decades for both men and women, but a growing proportion of those who *aren't* graduating are men. As of 2021, men made up around 43 percent of four-year-college enrollees, down from approximately 57 percent in 1970. "As the college degree has increasingly become the great sorting function in American life," Mr. Pressler and Mr. Duggan wrote, "men without degrees have increasingly found themselves sorted out." We tend to talk about the loneliness crisis in terms of gender, but class, as derived from educational status, is the factor too touchy — or too invisible — to acknowledge.

Less than half of Americans hold bachelor's degrees, but those without are less likely to have places to gather (parks, libraries, even coffee shops), are less likely to join civic groups or social clubs and report having far fewer close friends or people to turn to for social support. The four-year degree isn't just an economic signal; it's become a lifestyle determinant.

Men without degrees are among the hardest hit by the loneliness epidemic.

In the "Nobody to Call" case studies and interview transcripts, men without college degrees described social drift that turns into a social cliff: Graduating from high school meant the loss of an accessible infrastructure for connection and, with it, a whittling down of peer groups and no new structure — college, the military, a union, churches or civic groups — to take its place.

And while higher education is often discussed in terms of its economic value, its relational value is strangely overlooked. The multiyear college experience brings together groups of peers who transition into adulthood together, often forming lasting bonds in the process and connecting to mentors and institutions along the way.

A majority of the men Mr. Pressler and Mr. Duggan interviewed were almost completely disconnected; of the 30, almost half reported having no close friends, and six reported having only one. In one of many poignant lines from the report, one interviewee said bluntly, "I don't have anybody that I feel like I matter to."

Friendships, purpose and opportunity are built over time, through institutions and shared settings. For many men, unstable work — transient gig jobs, uncontrollable schedules — allows only for the creation of tenuous, easily breakable ties. A lack of money, time and affordable places to gather adds to a lack of confidence and social know-how, making relationships harder to form or sustain. As one interviewee put it, "It is not community when you exclude people that don't have them jobs like you, the money like you or even look like you."

Most of the men interviewed as part of "Nobody to Call" seemed to deeply want to connect and contribute to their broader communities (contrary to the common public narrative of nihilistic, misogynistic loners actively contributing to a male loneliness crisis), but material barriers, compounding into psychological ones, often kept them from doing so.

Many admitted that although they wanted to build community and make friends, they had little sense of where to start. "I don't know how to just go out in the wild and pick up friends. People don't do as many in-person things as they used to many years ago."

But there are examples of civic leaders making it easier. For instance, as part of the 2026 FIFA World Cup celebrations, New York City's Office of the Mayor opened five public soccer pitches around the city for overnight pickup games — an initiative called NYC Open Play. It was free, available at nontraditional hours and staffed to encourage connection; thousands joined to play.

There are other brass-tacks policy changes that could help: ending just-in-time scheduling, providing more job support and protections for gig workers and putting in place better leave policies that might allow space for the development of one's civic life. But a major issue is simply being seen and understood — not as statistics or caricatures but as members of a shared community.

America is overdue for a reckoning with how we have made college the main rite of passage to cultural life while letting others atrophy. Potential solutions to this could be anything from more support for apprenticeships and vocational programs — ones that impart the sense of belonging that can be achieved only through the shared pursuit of excellence — to the dream of a national service corps that pools young people together across economic lines.

Like many of America's most pressing social crises, the loneliness epidemic is divided by class. The loneliness industry seeks to capitalize on the crisis of social isolation via paid solutions like those hawked to me online, but friendship as a pay-to-play luxury will continue to leave broad swaths of Americans out.

If loneliness really is a public health crisis, it's the responsibility of government and institutions, not just the market, to begin offering solutions. Connection is, or at least should be, a public good.

CHRISTINE EMBA *serves on the board of the American Institute for Boys and Men.*

The Houthis are showing their strength

STARK, FROM PAGE 1

the United States intervened.

The once localized war became a regional conflict and a devastating humanitarian crisis. Finally, facing a stalemate and significant international pressure, both sides agreed to a U.N.-brokered cease-fire in April 2022. By that point, the Houthis had created a de facto state in northern Yemen, while the weak Saudi-backed government nominally ruled parts of the south and west.

The Houthis flexed their muscles by attacking shipping vessels in the Red Sea early in the Israel-Gaza war that started in 2023. Using low-cost, low-tech equipment like one-way attack drones, missiles and unmanned surface vessels, the Houthis made the crossing more dangerous, driving up the cost of insuring commercial ships as much as twentyfold, effectively closing the strait. The only alternate route forced ships around the southern tip of the African continent, an extra 4,000 or more nautical miles, increasing shipping costs.

Last month, the Houthis resumed attacks on Red Sea shipping, striking Saudi-linked commercial oil tankers and hitting Saudi energy and transportation infrastructure. They were responding to what they claimed were Saudi airstrikes on Sanaa Airport's runway on July 13, seemingly in an effort to prevent an incoming Iranian flight from landing. For now, commercial ships continue to transit the Red Sea, although tanker traffic has declined substantially over the past month. Houthi attacks have also continued on ships the group claims are Saudi-aligned, and an attack on a cargo ship on Aug. 12 included the first reported fatalities of this latest round of attacks.

In recent days, the Houthis have claimed attacks on a ship in the Red Sea port of Mokha, which is held by forces allied with the internationally recognized government of Yemen, and on airports and oil refinery infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.

With the effective closure of Hormuz, the Red Sea-Suez route has become even more important. Most notably, Saudi Arabia had sought to avoid Hormuz by routing crude oil via a pipeline to the Red Sea port of Yanbu on its western coast. The new Houthi attacks have disrupted that option. The near closure of both Hormuz and the Suez routes could compound problems for global trade, pushing the cost of oil and inflation even higher.

Now the Houthis are positioned to step up their involvement in an already raging regional conflagration, complicating efforts to end it. Some may assume that this move is at the behest of Iran, but the reality is likely more complicated.

Highly attuned to their own interests and pragmatic in the international arena, the Houthis have proved savvy at choosing when to enter or escalate conflicts. When they attacked shipping in the Red Sea in 2023-25, for example, they said it was to pressure Israel to de-escalate its operations in Gaza. The strikes also bolstered their legitimacy in the territory they control in northern Yemen, diverting attention from their governance failures at a time when their popularity had eroded.

This time, the Houthis appear to see an opening to gain leverage in negotiations with Saudi Arabia to reach a political settlement in the Yemeni war — or an opportunity to resume attacks against the internationally backed government.

The previous round of Houthi attacks, in 2023-25, had a significant but ultimately manageable effect on the global economy. Estimates suggested that the ensuing shipping disruptions would have a small impact on inflation. The economic effects of closing the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the same time as Hormuz are likely to be more dire.



KHALED ZIAD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

A ship anchored in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Last month, the Houthis resumed attacks on Red Sea shipping and in recent days claimed attacks on a ship in the port of Mokha.

While the United States looks to wind down the war with Iran, the Houthis are threatening to resume their war in Yemen, which would likely draw in Saudi Arabia, menace the global oil trade and keep the region unstable.

It will be difficult to de-escalate regional tensions without addressing the Houthis' threat directly, rather than assuming it can be resolved by dealing with their supposed boss, Iran. At the same time, no one should assume that a deal with Iran will bind what the Houthis do next. The international community should confront them as a pragmatic and dangerous actor making decisions in their own self-interest.

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The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

Trump's South Korea snub raises questions in Asia-Pacific

Scaling back military exercises has undermined faith in America's reliability

Thousands of South Korean and US troops were this week supposed to be continuing 11 days of military exercises intended to demonstrate readiness to defend against an attack from North Korea. Instead, the troops packed up on Friday, day five — after Donald Trump announced on the eve of the drills that he was scaling them back as they sent a "hostile" signal to a country that he said had been "unthreatening and respectful" during his presidency. The president's move appeared part of a new diplomatic overture towards Kim Jong Un — which received an initial brush-off from Pyongyang. But what came across as a snub to a key US partner provides further evidence that the US under Trump can no longer be counted on as a reliable ally in the Asia-Pacific.

Trump has used the decades-old annual exercises with South Korea — long viewed by Pyongyang as a provocation — as a bargaining chip with the North before. The president cancelled the drills in 2018 during his first administration, taking some US officials by surprise, before Trump and Kim met three times for what proved to be unsuccessful talks on denuclearisation.

But his new tilt towards Kim's dictatorship in the North, at the apparent expense of democratic South Korea, is as shocking as it is puzzling. The North Korean leader has strengthened his position in the seven years since his meetings with Trump, giving him little incentive for new talks. North Korea has substantially expanded its nuclear arsenal; even Trump this week claimed it now had "57 very powerful" weapons, but South Korean estimates are considerably higher. Kim has also deepened economic and military co-operation with Russia, sending troops to support Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. He has insisted he will resume talks with the US only if Washington drops its insistence on denuclearisation.

Trump's overture to Pyongyang has prompted speculation that he is seeking a diplomatic success elsewhere as he struggles to end his ill-advised war against Iran. He also linked his downgrading of the exercises in South Korea to Seoul's refusal to provide military assistance in the Middle East conflict.

But in stark contrast to his treatment of Tehran, the US president appears in effect to be rewarding Kim's defiance at a moment when the North Korean leader's rhetoric has become increasingly hostile towards South Korea, and his military has acquired modern battlefield experience in Ukraine.

The president's treatment of Seoul is deepening concern across Asia-Pacific about US reliability under Trump as the region confronts an increasingly assertive China. Just as his erratic policy is reordering defence arrangements in Europe and the Middle East, it should be an incentive for democracies in east Asia to strengthen mutual relationships as far as possible and create their own security frameworks. It makes particular sense for South Korea and Japan, which have closely aligned interests despite their difficult history, to co-operate directly and lessen their reliance on America as the hinge.

The president's erratic policy should be an incentive for democracies in the region to strengthen mutual relationships as far as possible and create their own security frameworks

If Asia-Pacific democracies take more responsibility for their own security that may be one positive spin-off from Trump's behaviour. Current US policy, however, is making it harder for both South Korea and Japan to ignore the once taboo question of acquiring a nuclear deterrent. The debate remains at an early stage, and both countries are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But the fact such ideas are starting to become thinkable shows how US policy under Trump — despite the ostensible ambition to restrain Iran and North Korea's nuclear programmes — now risks undermining decades of non-proliferation efforts elsewhere.

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Society

Why is the far right so obsessed with knights?

Ben Hickey



Elise Morrison

A sure sign of a lunatic," according to Umberto Eco, "is that sooner or later, he brings up the Templars."

If Eco is right, you don't need to look hard to find examples in Britain today, among the crowds at football games, political rallies and marches. With red crosses splayed across their goose-white tunics and plastic chainmail coifs on their heads, the imagery of the Templar knights, a medieval Catholic military order, has been increasingly co-opted by the contemporary far right.

References to its symbolism have become increasingly common in far-right spaces on platforms like Instagram, Reddit, YouTube and 4chan. Some of this content is innocent: reels by historians discussing the history of the knights. But on the extreme end

Parts of rightwing discourse offer a picture of a Christian society under siege again

are social media accounts that wrap white supremacist and anti-Muslim politics in the romanticised imagery of holy war, medieval chivalry and Christian martyrdom.

The phenomenon became so disruptive that in 2022, Fifa banned the "crusader costumes" being worn in stadiums by England fans, especially for matches against Muslim-majority countries.

These costumes are sometimes framed as "harmless fun" or as a patriotic homage to St George, an early Christian martyr who became patron saint of England. This creates plausible deniability, allowing extremists to present a more innocuous front to the public, while simultaneously communicating an aggressive, racialised ideology to those who are tuned in to the subculture.

What is being signalled requires an understanding of the broader historical context.

This is not the first time the image of the knight has been used by extreme political groups. Twentieth-century fascist movements, including the Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, relied heavily on imagery of them and other medieval Christian symbols.

But who were these knights? And why has the far right adopted their imagery?

The Templars have their origins in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade. Growing numbers of pilgrims flocked from Europe to the Middle East to visit the Holy Land but the crusades had left the routes to the city incredibly dangerous. With the threat of raiders and bandits, the French knight Hugh de Payns assembled a group to protect the pilgrims.

Early on, a branch of the order was established in England and endowed by the Crown and nobility with significant estates. It was based in London in the area now known as Temple and became a notable part of England's political, religious and financial life.

Historical evidence suggests the early Templars were pious and dedicated to protecting others. But as they grew in popularity and wealth, their activities gradually drifted from their original mission.

By the end of the 13th century, they held property across Christendom and a huge fleet in the Mediterranean, exerted political power in royal and papal courts, and established a powerful banking network. However, from 1307, members across Europe were arrested on charges of heresy, and in 1312 the Church ruled the order must be dissolved.

More than 700 years on, imagery of the Templars remains alive in sections of the popular imagination. Having cropped up over the decades in film, TV and video games, most famously in *Assassin's Creed*, *Indiana Jones* and *The Da Vinci Code*, the order has now been absorbed into myths and conspiracies: that it founded the Freemasons, guarded the Holy Grail, even that it secretly survives today.

More recently, it has gained a particular cultural purchase. Parts of rightwing discourse offer a picture of a Christian society under siege again, echoing the myth of warrior monks who went to battle for a Europe supposedly under attack by Islam.

Unfortunately, the appropriation of these symbols is not usually the harmless fun and simple hurrah for St George that is claimed. It can signal a more sinister desire to return to hegemonic white Christendom.

Despite the fact that historians have long understood the gulf separating medieval and modern conflicts, extremists continue to align themselves with imagined ideas of the past. Whether it's the costumes of the KKK or the Templar symbols and crusader dressing-up of today's far right, Eco's diagnosis still resonates.

The writer is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge researching medieval culture and contemporary society

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Woke used to mean being alert to prejudice and discrimination

Janan Ganesh argues in "Why must a socialist also be woke?" (Opinion, August 13) that capitalism "emphasises the individual". What he doesn't acknowledge is the reality that, over centuries, capitalist exploitation has often systematically suppressed that individuality and the entrepreneurial spirit it was meant to foster.

Ganesh also fails to recognise that many socialists, particularly those who always rejected Soviet communism, explicitly promoted individual emancipation, but through parliamentary means.

That actually defines what we describe today as "democratic socialism", at least in Europe. That emphasis on individual freedom is probably why it was rather easy to link the economic and social aspirations of socialism to the original US civil rights-related meaning of "woke".

From the 1920s it meant being alert to prejudice and discrimination and in favour of mutual respect, civilised conduct and legal rights of citizenship. That, to answer Ganesh's headline question, is why socialists are generally willing to be that kind of "woke".

In recent years, however, something called "wokeism" has, superficially and self-indulgently, been propounded as "socialism" by some in the posturing left and, more cunningly, by the right. For example, the Democratic Socialists of America would now be offering the historic version of "woke" if they had stuck to the principles of their 1980s founder, my friend and comrade, Mike Harrington. But, with exceptions such as Bernie Sanders (when he leads rather than follows) and Zohran Mamdani (who sensibly focuses on practical public needs and policy responses) too many haven't done so.

Instead, "woke" has somehow metamorphosed into an obsessive affectation by some on the left and a dismissive insult by the right. By exploiting the grand title of "rebels", many lefties, thankfully not all, have made their "wokeism" into a tiresome self-righteousness on a good day and plain daft on a bad, gesture-laden, wind-filled day. "Defund the police" is a case in point: the privileged will always have protection; the rest would be bereft. Absurd.

And abolishing defence? That means letting Putin take the White House instead of having it occupied by a glib, exploitative appeaser who can, and will, leave office on schedule, as per the Constitution.

Ridiculous, as Ganesh says.

Neil Kinnock
House of Lords, London SW1, UK

Don't pay consultants if universities can do the job

Ellesheva Kissin and Lucy Fisher's report ("UK government to pay KPMG and EY up to £456mn to train civil servants", August 18) prompts an obvious question: why is a consultancy being paid to arrange teaching that universities already deliver?

KPMG has held the prime contract for civil service learning since 2015: a four-year deal worth £237mn, then a further £223mn, and now this.

It all sits bizarrely with a government that pledged in 2024 to have consultancy spending and save £1.2bn. The Cabinet Office replies that this is training, not consultancy — the very reclassification that the Public Accounts Committee criticised in March as under-reporting rather than reducing.

The policy is also defended as a stopgap until a new national school for government opens. Its predecessor was abolished in 2012 to save some £90mn a year, having cost £31.3mn a year to run. The stopgap will cost roughly 10 times what it replaces.

With half a million civil servants, we all know that this will end up with online training modules that cost taxpayers almost £500mn. Easy money if you can get it.

All this at a time when successive governments choke the life out of our nation's universities: tuition fees fixed for a decade so we now lose money, Level 7 apprenticeships withdrawn, research funded below cost.

Business schools and universities are the obvious alternative providers. The offer should be disaggregated and tailored to different parts of the civil service. That means several regional providers, several curricula and deep sector partnerships — harder to procure than one £456mn contract but much more likely to work. Consider five officials at the same grade: a statistician at the ONS in Newport, an economist at the Department for Work and Pensions in Sheffield, a compliance lead at HM Revenue & Customs in Glasgow, a veterinary adviser at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs in York and a commercial manager at Defence Equipment and Support in Bristol. The only thing they share is an employer.

Government has got to stop wasting money on extraordinarily high-margin generic intermediaries to buy in teaching it could commission directly from the starving universities that already provide it.

Amanda Goodall
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The winner of a half marathon for humanoid robots, Beijing, April 2026

Scots regeneration tool that England is now adopting

Your editorial "Can Burnham save Britain's high streets?" (FT View, August 19) is a further example of how the media and politicians address a symptom and not the cause.

High streets are a reflection of the wider town, and high street decline is merely a symptom of deeper structural issues in the local economy. The prime minister should focus on saving Britain's towns and by doing so he will in turn create thriving high streets.

While England has tended to have greater focus on its cities, it would do well to learn from Scotland, a "nation of towns", and Holyrood's backing of the Scotland's Towns Partnership (founded in 2012, a year after the Portas Review in England), which has created positive impact across the region by having a baseline of data on its towns called Understanding Scottish Places. This online tool allows local authorities, businesses and communities to assess the unique functions, interdependencies and needs of individual towns, enabling far more targeted and effective regeneration strategies.

As of September 16, I am pleased to say that England will have access to an Understanding English Places online tool that will provide key stats and facts on all 3,463 places in England with a population of 1,000 or more.

The debate needs to shift from the high street to the town, as high streets don't create healthy towns; healthy towns create vibrant high streets. Only by having a detailed understanding of towns can you hope to save Britain's high streets.

Matthew Hopkinson
Honorary Professor of Practice at University College London and Co-creator of Understanding English Places
London WC2, UK

The Commonwealth should call out Zambia

Zambia has changed its governing party peacefully three times since the multi-party era began in 1991 and has never suffered a coup; it was Africa's example of resource wealth and stable democracy coexisting.

Yet just a day after Zambians went to the polls in an election ("Zambia's election becomes battle over copper windfall", Report, FT.com, August 15), security forces raided the Lusaka home of opposition candidate Brian Mundubile, alleging a militia plot to seize power.

A former minister inside the building, Mutotwe Kafwaya, was shot, though the government spent five days denying it. Police have since confirmed Kafwaya's death, identified by his family.

Eleven people seized that night, including an Anglican bishop, remain in custody without charge, defying Zambia's constitution. Mundubile himself has gone into hiding, rejecting the militia allegations as fabrication.

The UN's human rights chief has urged Zambia to stop arresting people arbitrarily. Amnesty International had documented this pattern before the vote, warning that Zambian authorities were using the law to criminalise dissent and silence independent media.

Zambia's conduct since the election should prompt the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group to open a formal review.

Baroness Scotland, then Commonwealth secretary-general, used her good offices to free Hakainde Hichilema, now Zambia's president, from his cell in 2017.

Scotland's successor, Shirley Botchwey, should press just as hard for a review into Hichilema's own government without further delay.

Hichilema courted the international community for five years to build Zambia's reputation as a stable democracy; that reputation is what the past week has put in doubt.

Richard Elsen
Zambia Specialist, Seaford, East Sussex, UK

A memorable send-off

Reading Craig Coben's Work & Careers column "The art of the goodbye message" (Opinion, August 17), I was reminded of a colleague's response to me when I said that sadly I would be leaving the company. I had had eight really great years working there. He directly replied: "Nobody cares when you leave."

However, it wasn't a mean reply, it was a well intentioned and honest reply, and the most memorable one for being so!

Mai Dillon
London SE18, UK

It's odd how we wish robots to look and behave like us

As a curious and often bemused observer of humans, I am puzzled by humanity's obsession with humanoid robots, as if the human form were the ultimate perfection ("Humanoid robots haven't earned their valuations", Lex, August 20).

Sure, robots have to navigate a world of and for humans. But why not give them, say, six arms (don't tell me you never wished you had a third hand while doing a complex project), eyes/cameras all over their bodies for better spatial recognition, feet that morph into wheels when more practical, and what about drone propellers for easier movement? For millennia we have imagined humanoid gods, and now we seem to be limiting ourselves to humanoid machines. The computing power and the artificial intelligence are there to control such superior forms; it is just our lack imagination that is holding us back.

Jem Eskenazi
London N3, UK

Peruvian anchovies and Nixon's run-in with El Niño

Raj Mann ("Détente, the oil crisis, and the US soyabean export ban", Letters, August 17) is correct to cite the damaging effects of the US embargo in 1973 on soyabean exports to Japan.

Rather than grain exports to the Soviet Union or the oil crisis, however, the cause was the dramatic reduction of Peruvian anchovy supply to the US resulting from an El Niño event in 1972-3.

America's reliance on these fishmeal imports led to its restrictive trade practices on homegrown soyabean, the most immediate protein substitute at the time for use as livestock feed.

Such climatic/El Niño effects have some resonance now (as do the occasionally bruising alliance policies of the Nixon administration).

Richard Moon
Edinburgh, UK

When viewing the Marbles context is everything

Re Michael Vatikiotis' opinion piece "The Bayeux Tapestry loan is a model for the Parthenon Marbles" (August 10), and the follow-up letter from Andrew Apostolou "UK should not surrender the Parthenon Marbles" (August 18), I would just add that seeing the Elgin Marbles out of context in London for free hardly compares with the sheer wonder of seeing them in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. We considered the fee very reasonable and the reward quite extraordinary.

Context is everything.

John Houlihan
Whitchurch Hill, Oxfordshire, UK

Opinion

Healey's first Budget is a chance for radical change

Jeremy Hunt

John Healey won't have had a restful summer. It's true that nearly every ex-chancellor says it's the best job in government — including some who became prime minister. But chancellors are defined by Budgets and Healey's on October 28 looks particularly nightmarish.

The Iran war has eaten into much of the headroom. On top of which this chancellor has a personal commitment to defence, as does his boss Andy Burnham to social care. If defence spending is to reach 3 per cent of GDP by 2030, it will cost an extra £10bn a year. Social care reforms could cost the same again if they involve Scottish-style free personal care pay parity with the NHS.

At the same time, Healey will be acutely aware that his predecessor Rachel Reeves' business tax rises backfired. Behind the scenes he and his team will have been frantically searching for economically acceptable tax rises or politically acceptable spending cuts. The problem is that these officials were doing the same thing for Reeves just months earlier — and for me before that.

Let's put aside welfare reform for a moment — little suggests Burnham is willing to take on his MPs on the issue. But are there other credible changes that could release resources and reduce the need for damaging tax hikes?

One area worth looking at is public sector productivity. The public sector accounts for one-fifth of UK output but, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, its productivity declined by 0.3 per cent every year between 1997 and 2019. The picture has improved since then but it is still below pre-pandemic levels.

This is directly connected to Britain's debt problem because the pressure to fund public services is one of the main causes of deficits. Improving their efficiency would ease that: Treasury analysis I published in 2023 showed that if public sector productivity increased by just 0.7 per cent a year, the UK's national debt would stop increasing as a proportion of GDP. That is much better than the 270 per cent of GDP the Office for Budget Responsibility says it will reach by the 2070s on its current trajectory.

But could it be done? No one disputes the scale of public-sector inefficiency. The civil service has expanded by a third in the past decade as satisfaction with public services has fallen. But even though the private sector has been raising productivity at a long-term rate of 2 per cent, few believe politicians who promise the holy grail of efficiency savings. My spending plans were derided as "fiscal fiction". But there are good reasons why it could be different this time.

> Few believe politicians who promise efficiency savings. But it could be different this time

The first is AI. The revolution in efficiency it will bring is no fantasy — it is already happening. Microsoft estimates it could ultimately increase productivity and growth by an additional 2 per cent a year, but it has skin in the game. I prefer the more cautious approach of French Nobel Prize-winner Philippe Aghion, who says additional productivity growth will be around 1 per cent. Suddenly the Treasury's 0.7 per cent increase doesn't seem so impossible.

The second reason is that the UK's biggest public service, the NHS, is already pretty much delivering what's needed. In my 2024 budget I gave the NHS £3.4bn for upfront technology investment in return for a productivity commitment of 2 per cent a year. The latest figures suggest this has been happening, at least in the acute sector. There has been even more radical change in agencies such as the Passport Office, now recognised as one of the most efficient in the world.

Such a plan would need to avoid some familiar Whitehall bear traps. Any AI transformation will need capital spending up front, something the Treasury is famously reluctant to release. But if this commitment were linked to revenue savings in the longer term, it would release headroom for the chancellor. In addition, we need to overhaul how productivity is measured. Shorter NHS waiting times and lower crime rates are important public benefits. But to have an impact on public finances, a good proportion of improvements need to involve cash savings. Any plan would need to track both types of gains.

Adopting a 2 per cent annual productivity target across the public sector for the next decade would be a major endeavour, requiring Burnham's buy-in. But taking the plunge would release a lot of money for defence or social care. It would also have other advantages: the UK would be a global leader for AI adoption in public services and our creaking public sector would become far more responsive. Most important, it would tackle our longest-standing barrier to growth: low productivity. The public sector is also the part of the economy over which ministers have most direct control. Why not start there?

The writer is a Conservative MP and former chancellor of the exchequer. His latest book is 'Can We Be Rich Again? The Surprising Potential of Britain's Economy'

Europe can do better than US-style air conditioning

Carlo Ratti

This summer, as temperatures across Europe hit record highs, a familiar refrain reached deafening levels: that the continent must abandon its resistance to air conditioning and follow America's example.

It is hard to ignore the rationale. Heat not only saps productivity, it also disrupts work and home life and can be deadly to vulnerable people. But Europe should think before it adopts wholesale the "dripping box" system that already exists. There are far better ways it can cool itself down.

These dripping boxes on buildings around the world trace their existence to 1902, when a young engineer, Willis Carrier, built his first "apparatus for treating air" for a Brooklyn printing plant. Since then, they have been replicated on buildings and rooftops millions of times. However, the basic principle has remained remarkably similar: a refrigerator turned inside out, spitting hot air outdoors while bringing a welcome chill indoors.

But that principle has a problem. It does not reduce heat so much as move it, pushing it out of buildings and into the street. The hotter streets mean more cooling is required, producing more heat. As the temperature rises, the system has to work ever harder.

The way out of this loop is to exchange heat with the ground or the water instead. Many great cities were, not by accident, built around lakes, rivers or the sea, with the water acting as a thermal reservoir, holding temperatures relatively stable throughout the year.

> Systems that use water to store excess heat can be scaled up to whole city blocks

Such systems can work at the individual building level. But the use of water to store excess heat can also allow them to scale up to whole city blocks. One of the largest district cooling networks in the world is Fraîcheur de Paris, which sounds like a fine cologne: a promise of coolness delivered by water drawn from the Seine. Another expanding system is in Geneva, which uses the city's lake (despite a problem with invasive mussels that has been mitigated with mechanical pipe scrapers). Rather than millions of private systems competing for electricity and pumping out waste heat, a city can manage thermal energy as it does water or power: through a shared network.

Water can do more than carry heat away. In some advanced systems, it acts as a kind of "thermal battery". When electricity is cheap and abundant, water is chilled and stored; when temperatures peak, that stored coolness is released. This takes pressure off electricity grids strained by air conditioning.

None of this is a total solution. Every cooling system has its limits, and buildings can be made to do much of the work with better glazing and ventilation, well-placed shading and reflective roofs. Trees matter too. Research, including our own with the Dubai Future Foundation, has shown they can meaningfully lower street-level temperatures.

The best answer, then, is a mixed system, co-ordinated in real time, with sensors to track temperature, occupancy and demand, and algorithms deciding when to produce, store and distribute cooling in step with the electricity grid.

Built this way, cooling the air becomes an industry to be won. Cutting-edge engineering is a sector where Europe still has genuine strength, after all, with names like Danfoss, Bosch, Schneider Electric and Saint-Gobain.

Carrier came up with a way to cool individual buildings, and the world went with it. Europe now has the chance to do something different and more ambitious. Fraîcheur de Paris could become Fraîcheurs du Monde: not a fallback for a continent playing catch-up, but a system designed for a warming century and ever hotter demand for cooling.

The writer is a professor at MIT and Politecnico di Milano, and founder of Carlo Ratti Associati

How climate is driving new geostrategy

BUSINESS

Rana Foroohar



Everyone knows climate change is a risk, especially during a summer when Europe is experiencing yet another record heatwave, Canadian boreal forest fires have covered large swaths of North America in a dangerously smoky haze and Asia is suffering a whiplash of drought, flood and typhoons. What is less well understood is that climate change has already become the most systemically important geostrategic force.

Consider the launch earlier this month of a weekly Arctic "Ice Silk Road" shipping operation, run by a Chinese company, which will cut the usual transit routes between Europe and China by half. This is part of China's Polar Silk Road strategy, launched in collaboration with Russia in 2017, which will integrate the Northern Sea Route into the Belt and Road Initiative to create China-dominated trade and supply chains. As the Arctic melts, it presents a new and very attractive alternative to other shipping chokepoints such as, say, the Panama Canal.

While the former has become contentious for geopolitical reasons, the latter is suffering more lately from the effects of climate change. During a period of drought between 2023 and 2024, low water forced restrictions on the number of vessels that could pass through the Panama Canal, reducing trade volumes by 32 per cent from the previous year.

The same thing is happening elsewhere. In Europe this summer, shipments across the Rhine and Danube have been slowed or even halted, as water levels in these rivers have reached record lows thanks to a continental heatwave. In Romania, a nuclear power plant cooled by the Danube was shut down. Carmakers in the country, including Ford and Dacia, halted production to save energy.

It is easy to imagine other countries following suit (Hungary has already narrowly avoided plant shutdowns) given that higher-than-usual temperatures are predicted to continue into the fall and beyond as a stronger-than-normal El Niño cycle brings more extreme weather. This could trigger grid issues across Europe. Likewise, in the US, the largest lake reservoirs in the country, near the Colorado River, are drying up and endangering hydroelectric power.

Already there are worries that drought will lead to lower crop yields and global food price inflation by next year, which would of course carry its own risk for monetary policy and asset prices. No wonder there were a record number of climate terms mentioned on European company earnings calls this summer.

Climate change will ultimately reshape markets, but it is already reshaping geopolitics. US President Donald Trump's obsession with Greenland may be extreme, but smart people on both sides of the aisle in America (not to mention Canada and the Nordic nations) are paying a lot more attention to the High North. A melting Arctic has put China in their backyard and created a new strategic competition for trade routes that run all too close to Russia. Likewise, European supply-chain disruptions aren't just an economic issue but a strategic one — river transit is crucial to the autonomy of a continent under political pressure from both China and the US.

South Asia is arguably most vulnerable to climate change due to geography and densely populated coasts. But China — playing the long game as always — has found strategic advantage in the challenge. It has bolstered its maritime industries and shipbuilding capacity, a huge advantage not only for control of global logistics, but also an obvious edge in a world that will increasingly be underwater.

> As the Arctic melts, the route presents a very attractive alternative to other shipping chokepoints

When the world eventually transitions from fossil fuels to clean tech, China will be the main economic beneficiary. The country produces most of the world's electric cars and lithium battery cells. Beijing has ringfenced many of the rare earth minerals needed for both clean tech and defence. This means not only industrial power, but potentially also currency power. American control of cheap oil fuelled its 20th-century growth and buoyed the dollar. In the coming age of green technologies, China may enjoy the same advantages in the 21st century.

As the financial markets themselves begin to better price in the implications of climate change, the winners and losers will become clearer. Anthony Hobley, a UK-based climate change strategist, has written that "most investment decisions are still made as if climate change is not happening", not so much because of denial but because there is still a "missing translation layer between climate data and the language of capital".

This means that, despite all the talk about ESG, the way in which capital markets price climate risk — and climate opportunity — is still relatively unsophisticated. Part of this is about the insurance business model, which is built on 12-month renewal cycles, rather than, say, a 20-year forward price curve. Then, there are the future discount rates for capital projects, which can make potential risks disappear mathematically even if they still exist in real life. As Hobley puts it: "When climate risk is modelled as a 2050 scenario, it sits in a timezone where any reasonable discount rate washes it away."

The planet is also at risk of being washed away. As markets better price that reality, it will carry its own geostrategic implications.

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Matt Kenyon



Why every French politician is now a Gaullist

Sylvie Kauffmann

Almost six decades after he left the Élysée, having lost a referendum that he called in the aftermath of the 1968 upheaval, Charles de Gaulle is winning a fascinating posthumous battle. In less than three months, millions of people, mostly drawn by word of mouth, have flocked to cinemas in France to watch a two-part film about his fight to save France after it collapsed under Nazi Germany's assault in 1940, right until the liberation of Paris in 1944.

The enthusiasm around *La Bataille de Gaulle* — written and directed by Antonin Baudry, a former diplomat and once speechwriter for Dominique de Villepin, foreign minister from 2002 to 2004 — says as much about the excellence of the diptych as it does about the current French state of mind. It is about the stubborn vision, the passion, but also the solitude and, yes, flashes of madness of a 20th-century Don Quixote who rejects the idea of defeat and goes to London with only a handful of companions to organise the resistance. This group of men and himself, he declares to Winston Churchill without a hint of doubt, are "la France", unlike the despicable collaborationists sitting in Vichy.

In fact, de Gaulle has never really left the political scene in France, which is still ruled by his 1958 constitution. But, fittingly, the revival of his legendary role in the second world war coincides with an increasing number of claims to his political legacy. From radical left to far right, suddenly every French politician is a Gaullist. Churchill must be turning in his grave with even "Anglo-Gaullism" bursting into the British debate.

He may not be the only one. De Gaulle himself would hate the idea of Marine Le Pen, candidate of the far-right Rassemblement National for next year's French presidential election, quoting him ad nauseam as if she were his natural heir and pledging to use one of his tools, the referendum, to enshrine her anti-immigration views in the constitution. Her appropriation of de Gaulle's legacy has been part of the strategy of "de-demonisation" that she launched, with undeniable success, when she took over the party from her father in 2011. By 2020, she was celebrating to great fanfare the 80th anniversary of the Appeal of June 18, through which de Gaulle, on the BBC, called on the French to resist.

> His biographers reel at today's far right praising his sovereignism and hailing him as a nationalist icon

This is no small feat given the fact that Le Pen's party was founded by a group of men who ferociously opposed de Gaulle, some of them former Waffen-SS or pro-French Algeria extremists. Jean-Marie Le Pen himself, in his memoirs, described the general as "a fake great man" and "a horrible source of pain for France". De Gaulle's biographers reel at today's far right praising his sovereignism and painting him as a nationalist icon. His idea of a sovereign France, critics point out, was of a country open to the world, not a xenophobic, inward looking nation. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the far-left party France Unbowed (La France Insoumise) has paid tribute to de Gaulle for being "astonishingly" unbowed during the war and to his pro-state policies.

A more subtle message emerges from the film about de Gaulle's idea of France and its relationship with great powers. Against all odds, he wanted his country to survive and be independent. But how do you do this in a war when your fate depends on help from Britain and the US? One of the most talked-about episodes of the film deals with his contentious relationship with President Franklin Roosevelt, who not only loathes him but is also convinced that France is finished.

In 1943, FDR toyed with the idea of carving up France after liberating it, to create a buffer state called New Wallonia, incorporating Belgium and about a third of France. Defeated France would be administered by the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories. Anthony Eden was horrified after hearing of the plan during a dinner at the White House. Though the idea was never a formal project, the film shows de Gaulle's disbelief at the sight of the map of New Wallonia and of the US-made banknotes intended to be the future currency of France.

This certainly strikes a chord among French audiences. In interviews, director Baudry has talked about his ambition to contribute to France's own narrative of the end of the second world war, as an alternative to the dominant American-made narrative. President Donald Trump's ambush of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office last year has reminded him of a scene he had shot earlier, of de Gaulle being summoned to meet Roosevelt in Casablanca in 1943, with secret service snipers posted everywhere behind the curtains. Today, he says, cameras have replaced snipers. America is not done with Don Quixotes yet.

The writer is a columnist at Le Monde

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