

A 'golden' fix for India's forex stress?



OFF THE RECORD
BY P. VAIDYANATHAN IYER

HERE IS a tricky proposal engaging the government at the highest levels over the past 3-4 weeks. An empowered group of ministers has met twice to discuss it. Officials in the Prime Minister's Office are seized of the issues connected with this idea. And the Cabinet Secretariat, the office responsible for government administration, has held meetings with those in the business to better understand the concerns, and ways to address them.

The thought behind the proposal probably has its origins in an austerity measure proposed by the PM at a public meeting in Hyderabad on May 10. In the backdrop of the West Asian crisis that led to a surge in oil prices, Modi had urged people to refrain from buying gold during festivals for a year, besides conserving fuel, restricting foreign travels, etc. The proposal, which has generated some interest among the few who are privy to it, is to launch a voluntary gold disclosure scheme. The idea seems to be to collect gold lying idle in private hands—that is, what people accumulated over the years for 'investment' (bars, coins), not Real Creator IAS Edition <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029VAn2VRb6RJKH6o8d0f>

what they bought for 'consumption' (jewellery)—and put it to use to reduce imports, and preserve foreign exchange.

In India, gold has huge sentimental value, has cultural and religious connections; but it has also been leveraged by governments during emergencies, be it during wars or economic crises. Most recently, in the early 1990s, when India faced an economic crisis, the government and the Reserve Bank of India saw a 'golden' opportunity. To bolster the country's forex, the RBI was fully on board when the State Bank of India pledged 20 tonnes of gold confiscated from smugglers with the Union Bank of Switzerland in May 1991 to raise about \$200 million. But this wasn't enough.

With forex reserves plummeting to just \$1.1 billion in June, barely enough to pay for 2-3 weeks of essential imports, the RBI proposed pledging 50 tonnes of gold to raise foreign exchange. This was approved by the caretaker government led by Chandrasekhar, but executed post general elections by the new government under Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh. As much as 46.91 tonnes was pledged to raise \$405 million; this too was paid back in less than four months.

These may look small today, given that India imports more than 700 million tonnes of gold a year, and its forex reserves are robust at over \$675 billion. But the crisis was acute then, and this one drastic measure kickstarted the process of economic reforms that continues still with some jerks, but has overall bipartisan political support.



ILLUSTRATION: CH SAKSHAM

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Two years later, in 1993, as India became a bit comfortable on the forex front, it sought to bolster its gold reserves. The government experimented with an idea to bring private and unaccounted gold into the formal economy. It issued the Gold Bonds (Immunities and Exemptions) Ordinance, 1993, and, drawing from it, announced the Gold Bonds Scheme. The bonds had a five-year tenure, and after five years, subscribers were paid Rs 40 per gram lump-sum interest, along with the gold deposited. A subscriber was required to deposit a minimum of 500 grams under the scheme, which was open for two months. The biggest draw was it asked no questions from the subscribers about the nature and source of gold, or the money used to buy the gold. It also promised the government would not start any inquiry or investigation against the subscribers. In all, the total gold received under the scheme was 4.12 metric tonnes, valued at Rs 1,534.40 crore.

Thirty-three years later, in May 2026, Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RG0n9mJmZg1

India faces a different gold problem. The West Asia crisis is not of the government's making, but is exerting pressure on the Indian economy, and magnifying its vulnerabilities. India imports bulk of its crude oil needs; crude oil prices have once again topped \$100 a barrel, which means India's import bill will soar. This can't be avoided. But what can be is the massive gold imports, which only worsens the current account deficit (when the money spent on imports is more than the money earned from exports, it leads to a deficit).

Sajid Chinooy, a part-time member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, points out that gold demand has remained largely intact (over 720 tonnes) despite a more than doubling of prices in the last three years. A research by him and his colleagues for JP Morgan says 50% of this demand in January-March 2026 was for investment (in gold bars and coins). In January-March 2003, it was just 30%.

The biggest factor that made the Gold Bonds Scheme of 1993 a success was the government immunity to subscribers. But that required taxpayers, individuals and corporations to have trust in the system. Here, many in the government agree, there is considerable work to be done. But there are other options to explore too on increasing the attractiveness of a financial product linked to gold.

It's a 'golden' problem to solve.

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express. Off the Record is a fortnightly column

The cockroaches are right



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

PARADOXICAL AND a little thrilling that it was a slapdash bunch of young Indians and not the opposition parties who brought the Prime Minister to his knees. On Saturday, just as this column was going to press, the PM finally persuaded the Education Minister to resign. He was the rotten symbol of a rotting education system and had to go. But, by taking his time, he may have done India a favour. As for the Prime Minister, all he has offered is a stringent new law which he has told us was stringent at least five times before. Not good enough.

Here I must point out that the Leader of the Opposition is delusional when he says that before Modi became Prime Minister the Indian education system was the envy of the world. It was not. Indian children who could not afford private schools were dependent on a school system that let them down from kindergarten to the time they graduated from high school. BJP chief ministers control most large Indian states and should have been able to transform schools but did not. Their priorities have been rewriting history to exalt ancient India and rubbish the Moghul period. And to exalt India's achievements since Modi became Prime Minister. This is a subject for another day.

To my left, I see the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) has achieved with its Jantar Mantar protest. It has now spread to cities and small towns across India. As one of those who gauged that the cockroaches could become huge right from the start, I spent an afternoon in Jantar Mantar a few days before the big march to Parliament last week. I wanted to see if BJP 'intellectuals' with considerable influence in higher echelons were right to dismiss the cockroaches as anarchists and activists. They were wrong.

The young people I talked to that afternoon had genuine grievances and should have been listened to long before the whole world discovered that young Indians believe that the system (the establishment) has let them down and that their future is bleak. The demand for the education minister's resignation was a desperate cry for accountability, and it is a shame that the Prime Minister does not see this.

Meanwhile, if you observe what has been happening in Jantar Mantar, as I have, you will notice that the young people who continue to flock there in support of the CJP are interested in a better idea of India. They sing *Vande Mataram* and the national anthem rapturously as if to show Modi's BJP that they do not have a copyright on nationalism. Hindus of all castes seem to have no problem in eating together and from the hands of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs as if to show that the India in which we all live in relative harmony still exists. Since Modi became Prime Minister, we have seen too many attempts to damage this harmony, sometimes in the name of cows and sometimes by banging on about temples and religion.

Those who have objected to this excessive religiosity and aggressive nationalism have been branded Pakistanis and anti-nationals by the self-appointed custodians of the Hindutva ideology. If you watched the coverage of the protests by the 'independent' TV channels last week, you would have noticed that certain anchors who also behave as if they are guardians of Hindutva nationalism ranted on about the 'foreign hand'. Eminent lawyers gave interviews filled with doom-laden warnings about how India's 'rise' is not popular with certain big powers. The question we should ask is what 'rise'? Would so many thousands of young Indians have taken to the streets in protest last week if they believed that their lives had improved in Modi's time? The truth is that millions of middle-class Indians were for a while lulled into a sense of false security by the number of new roads, highways, ports and airports that have been built in the past twelve years, but now they have noticed that these have not benefited them personally.

They remain trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, from which they try to escape by becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers and computer scientists, only to find that when they pass their examinations, they are trapped in a new vicious cycle in search of jobs. They are usually unqualified for jobs in the private sector, so they depend on government jobs, and these have become scarcer by the day. Those who can afford to emigrate become economic refugees in rich western countries, where the standard of living allows ordinary middle-class people to live comfortable and dignified lives.

Speaking for myself, I would like to say that I totally support the cockroaches and understand their pain and anger. It is my fervent hope that the CJP turns itself into a political party before the next general election and shows the BJP that it is up against a new kind of politician who does not come from the entitlement and privilege that most of the opposition leaders come from. India needs new younger faces in politics and governance so that we get beyond that increasingly tedious choice between secularism and Hindutva. Both words have lost all meaning, as we can see from how 'secular' defectors become rabidly communal upon joining the BJP.

The writer is director, Harkray Films

Jantar Mantar was crowded, yet I breathed freely



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

POLITICS' WATERSHED MOMENT

It was a watershed moment in Indian politics, thanks to Gen Z. Traditional politicians, including Rahul Gandhi, have been left behind as they clamber onto the bandwagon of spirited, fearless youngsters. The Modi government's grand design to push through its agenda of securing two-thirds majority in Parliament in this session has stalled, not because its cynical game of accumulating MPs who have lost their moral compass has misfired, but because of the power of a spontaneous movement, which has captured the country's imagination and sympathy, cutting across economic strata and traditional ideologies. Even the BJP's elder statesman, Murli Manohar Joshi, voiced his support. The free-spirited harbingers of change, with their irrelevant memes and catchy Instagram reels, have outshone the traditional media—constrained by market compulsions and distribution networks. A section of television journalists were booed and booed out of the protest epicentre at Jantar Mantar.

A leaderless mob does not act in tandem. Akhilesh Yadav indicated Congress should not speak on behalf of all opposition before consultations. Sonam Wangchuk's wife, Gianjali, questioned the motives of both Rahul Gandhi and the BJP. AAP leaders dubbed the Congress the BJP's 'B-team', accusing it of opportunistically entering the campaign. Chandra Shekhar Azad's party workers boasted they were ahead of others in tearing down police barricades to make way for the students. The CJP's self-effacing spokespersons voiced no fear of being overshadowed and welcomed support from all quarters. But they are probably conscious that even they have no total command over the disparate sea of humanity. In his puzzling agony-mancy in removing Pharmeda Pradhan, a non-negotiable demand of the protesters, Prime Minister Modi put both his government and personal reputation on the line. Eventually, however, better sense prevailed. The PM perhaps recalled the lessons of history. Even Jawaharlal Nehru's performance agreed to Krishna Menon quitting his Cabinet, Indira Gandhi reluctantly acceded to the students' demand for Gujarat Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel's resignation, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee requested George Fernandes to step down as defence minister.

FORERUNNER TO SECOND DEPARTURE?

Former BJP Tamil Nadu President Kannamalai's exit from the party last month is believed to be a forerunner to B. Santhosh—the BJP's powerful national general secretary (organisation) and coordinator between the RSS and the party—being marginalised. Annamalai, a former IPS officer, was Santhosh's protégé and appointed party president in 2021. The newbie's brash political confidence turned out to be totally off the mark, as proved by the BJP's disastrous electoral performance in this year's state assembly polls. Removed from the president's list, Annamalai claims he left the party of his own volition, but insiders recall a stormy meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi before he quit.

WATCH YOUR EXPLANATION

It was a brief birthday party for Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday. After the cake was cut at his home, Rahul Gandhi informed the astonished host and unprepared guests that they would all march to the PM's residence nearby to stage a *dharna* in support of the students. Karnataka CM DK Shivakumar was present, but Kerala CM VDS Satheesan, who was in Delhi, had to be hastily summoned to Lok Kalyan Marg. Satheesan was noticeably tight-lipped during the slogan-shouting and flew back to Kerala soon after. Questioned by scribes back home about his abrupt departure from the capital, Satheesan claimed that Rahul Gandhi had pointed at his wrist-watch and asked him to rush to the airport, else he would miss his flight. The only snag is that Gandhi does not wear a watch!

REAL-TIME LINE STORY

It is hardly coincidental that controversial films with a political message, such as *Uda Punjab*, *Kerala Story* and *Kashmir Files*, were released shortly before an assembly poll in the states concerned. In each case, the film's theme discredited the BJP's rival parties. Similarly, *Satish* has gone viral before next year's Punjab assembly polls. The movie was held up for three years by the CBI, which demanded 127 cuts. But this month, the uncensored film was released on Zee5 Global on the plea that OTT platforms are not certified by the CBI. Although the film was removed within two days, by this time, as expected, the film's link had gone viral. The autobiography of Zee TV's pragmatic businessman-owner, Subhash Chandra, makes clear that his motto is to respect the wishes of the government of the day. And sceptics believe the movie's release was unlikely without a nod from the powers that be.



TRISHA MUKHERJEE

IT IS 2015. I am in Old Delhi's Sadar Bazar two days before Holi, speaking to a seller for a story. As the dense crowd kicks up dust, I lean in to listen to my interviewee better. A hand gropes me from behind. I turn around. It happens again, this time from the front. I feel disoriented, lose the thread of conversation with the seller and start walking towards the metro.

In the metro, I grab a seat and once the coach is empty enough, call up a friend to share what happened. He suggests I speak to a senior female editor. It may make me feel better. I think, and decide against it. It was 22. Barely one year into the profession, and less than two months into that particular job. Talking felt like making a bigger deal out of it than it actually was. Did it even qualify as harassment? What if it was all just in my head?

It was in my head, all right. For over a decade. I just didn't know. What I knew was I avoided crowded places. I wasn't simply disoriented. My body physically stiffened up. A few years later, I was assigned another story in a heavily populated neighbourhood. My first instinct was to say 'no'. I didn't. But for the four hours I was reporting there, I felt like I couldn't breathe.

The irony is not lost on me. I am a culture journalist and yet, have avoided going to cultural hotspots that are often crowded, for as long as I can remember—with friends, on food walks, to historical sites. That was my way of managing what I had come to understand as a fear of crowded places.

I had it under control until December 2019, when I was at the Singhu border covering the farmers' protest. I had succumbed to the urge to manage to spend the entire day reporting. That was a victory. As I was making my way back from one end of the



Protesters throng the Jantar Mantar road GAIENDRA YADAV

site to the other, the crowd began moving to make arrangements for the night. Nothing untoward happened. But I suddenly struggled to breathe and felt the ground in tears. I wanted to tell my editors I didn't want to go back but decided against it. I returned several times afterwards, incident-free, yet I always remained on edge.

Cut to this past week. The news of the young students protesting at Jantar Mantar had taken over my Instagram feed and my mind. I knew I wanted to visit the site but needed to keep the exit flexible, so I didn't pitch a story. But it happened anyway, and on the muggy morning of July 21, I found myself walking down the Jantar Mantar road looking for a story. As I saw people walking ahead and behind me, the crowd only swelling with every step, I felt my limbs tightening. If it wasn't for the story, I would have turned around and left. The serpentine queue, protesters sloneering, journalists reporting, the police standing guard with their lathis—all became a dizzying blur. I planted myself into the line that moved at a tedious pace. People, quite literally, were pressed against each other and yet, somehow there was space. I moved forward with the queue's flow. It felt like I was being crowd-surfed at a concert. Instead of being forcefully dragged. And I breathed—a full breath. I moved around

the site, spoke to people, did my job and left. For the first time, I did not escape a crowd.

A day later, I was telling a colleague about the protest. "It was packed, and yet I felt so safe." Even as the words left my mouth, like an epiphany, the afternoon at Sadar Bazar flashed in front of my eyes like a ghost I had been trying to outrun. I realised that while I remembered being afraid of crowded places, I couldn't pinpoint the moment I all began.

That was a breakthrough moment. The fear that had shaped my every outing in the past decade suddenly made sense. It also made me understand the idea of 'safe space'. It can be a person, a relationship, a location, but what makes it 'safe' is the choice it offers. Unlike other crowded places, where I felt a frantic urge to leave, the protest at Jantar Mantar made me feel secure enough to stay for as long as I wanted, leave my own will, and then return. It was a luxury that, until recently, I thought I couldn't afford.

It's not that I am no longer afraid of crowds. It's just that I, perhaps, won't mind taking a chance, hoping the next crowd will pleasantly surprise me. And for that hope, I am thankful to the protesters at Jantar Mantar.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Indian Express

How to be a dissident

WHEN I was still in school in 1990, 20-something Rajeev Goswami, studying in Delhi University, poured oil and set himself on fire amid a crowd of supporters. Like many other upper-caste students at the time, Goswami was protesting the proposed 27 per cent quota for backward classes in government jobs. His shocking act—self-immolation—won sympathy all around, triggering a spate of similar, horrifying suicides but an anti-reservation movement was bound to fail. Morally, it's hard to disagree with affirmative action to rectify historical wrongs that have kept so many crores disenfranchised by casteism. Still, it took courage to take a stance for his own lot, who, despite caste privilege, were struggling to get by as well. Goswami died in his 30s, in obscurity, his sacrifice a footnote in contemporary Indian history.

There's no heroic recklessness—Goswami-style—going on at Jantar Mantar right now; rather, a range of polite and

steely-eyed youth staying put, speaking their minds and sometimes jeering at the powers that be. Since we're in the season of civil disobedience it is worth asking, is there a specifically right way or perfect cause, to rebel against? At its core, rebellion is recognised as a righteous assertion of human rights when faced with societal and the abiding principle that we need freedom which broadens what we can do and justice, which limits what others can do to us. If we agree that to hurt others for a cause is wrong, outright self-destruction like Goswami's is lamentable, too. Aias, in the world of the nihilist force is the only law. But the teen suicides post the NEET exam leak occurred from a place of genuine anguish—parents go into debt paying for tuition and students spend painstaking years cramming the syllabus. That crushing blow to their ambitions has stirred the passions of an angry generation, which, in turn, has changed how older Indians suddenly view Gen Z—with compassion and respect.



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

The grand Indian upper-middle-class aim has always been to lead a relatively unrestricted life which means being as removed from political turmoil as possible. We design our careers to maximise personal autonomy, the best armour against a whimsical State. Somewhere, a child in the family thinks it's wise in India to steer clear of controversy of any kind. But it's not like the scary student isn't forever lurking at the back of our heads that today, it's the innocent neighbour having the ED raid; tomorrow, we might be next. It's just that it was far easier to stay in our lanes and ignore the existential questions posed by rising authoritarianism. The Cockroach Janata Party deserves credit for shaking a certain type of Indian out of this stupor. Parents are leaving work early to bring their young children to Jantar Mantar. Teachers are talking about the protest in schools. It's a rare gesture of solidarity that everybody, rich, poor and middle class want to march alongside the students.

Going to Jantar Mantar, make no mistake, is uncomfortable. It's blisteringly hot, humid, and fraught. But walking among young and passionate people, who genuinely believe they're going to change this country, evokes fervent emotions that are both joyous and painful, forcing us to think about what we owe our community. It's a stark clear of controversy of any kind. But it's not like the scary student isn't forever lurking at the back of our heads that today, it's the innocent neighbour having the ED raid; tomorrow, we might be next. It's just that it was far easier to stay in our lanes and ignore the existential questions posed by rising authoritarianism. The Cockroach Janata Party deserves credit for shaking a certain type of Indian out of this stupor. Parents are leaving work early to bring their young children to Jantar Mantar. Teachers are talking about the protest in schools. It's a rare gesture of solidarity that everybody, rich, poor and middle class want to march alongside the students.

The writer is director, Harkray Films

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN JUNE ROSE TO 16.2% FROM 13.8% IN APRIL 2025

Deeper jobs problem: Stir a sign demographic dividend is at risk

Of the 36 states and Union Territories, the youth unemployment in 2025 was higher than in 2022 for 13 of them

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, July 25

The immediate cause for the rise of the Cockerroach Janata Party (CJP) and the nationwide protests may be the lack of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) question paper. And while Dharmendra Pradhan has resigned as education minister, it does nothing to solve a crisis underlying problems in jobs.

According to Alexandra Hermann Prasa, Lead Economist at Oxford Economics, while the student protests don't pose much of a risk to the larger Indian economy, they do "expose a deeper jobs problem".

The government's flagship employment survey, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), shows that the unemployment among Indian youth — those in the 15-29 age bracket — rose to 16.2% in June, as per data released earlier this month. This is the highest on record, although it must be said that monthly PLFS data only goes back until April 2025, when it stood at 13.8%.

To be sure, there might be reasons why the monthly data is volatile.

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) had cautioned last year that a rise in the unemployment rate did not necessarily reflect "secular trends" as changes were to be expected in Real Creator IAS Edition https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6GJK0H6oB0F

the monthly data on account of increased frequency of the survey and seasonal, academic, and labour market factors.

However, this rise in youth unemployment needs to be seen in the context of two other trends. One, the unemployment rate has increased across all six youth categories for the 15 months for which data is available: males and females at an all-India level, in urban areas, and in rural areas.

Two, youth unemployment has risen despite the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) declining over the same period in all but one category. Only urban males have seen their LFPR rise, standing at 60.1% in June, up 1 percentage point from April.

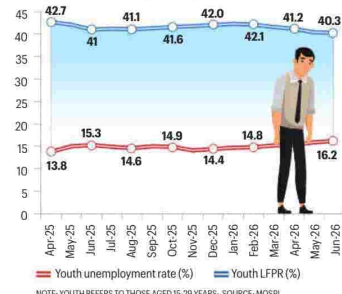
The overall youth LFPR has fallen to 40.3% from 42.7% over the same period.

To put all these numbers in perspective, the all-India unemployment rate for ages 15 years and above was 5.5% in June, as against 5.6% in April 2025. The corresponding LFPR was 54.4%, up from 54.2%.

Why does it matter that the youth unemployment rate has risen while the LFPR has declined? The LFPR measures the percentage of the population that is looking for work, including those that are employed.

So, when the LFPR falls — or when fewer people are looking for jobs — it should ideally result in a lower unemployment rate.

Rising youth unemployment rate despite falling labour force participation



Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RG9mJmZg1

even if no new jobs are added. But that hasn't happened.

A long-term problem

While monthly PLFS data only goes back 15 months, annual numbers are available for longer. And they tell a similar story. Of the 36 states and Union Territories (UTs), the youth unemployment in 2025 was higher than in 2022 for 13 of them. These 13 states and UTs included major regions such as

Andhra Pradesh (16.2% from 15.1%), Delhi (14.4% from 9.9%), Telangana (18.1% from 12.6%), and West Bengal (10.6% from 8.4%). For young women, it has been even more difficult: 16 states and UTs saw an increase in unemployment from 2022 to 2025. The monthly data is based on the Current Weekly

Status (CWS) approach, under which the job status of a person is measured for the seven days preceding the date of survey. Meanwhile, the annual figures are as per the "usual status" approach, which measures the job status for the 365 days preceding the survey.

Even the informal sector is creating fewer jobs now: 74.5 lakh in 2025 compared to 13.1 crore in the 12 months ended September 2024, as per MoSPI's latest Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE). Wage growth shrank to 3.9% from 13%.

The education link

It has been ingrained in our psyche that better education leads to better jobs, which is why the youth studies for three

more years after 12th to graduate, another couple of years for post-graduation, and so on. But less than 7% of male Indian graduates manage to find a permanent salaried job within a year, according to Azim Premji University's (APU) State of Working India 2026 report released in March this year.

The figure is an even lower 3.7% when it comes to white-collar jobs.

Using data from the PLFS and its predecessor, the Employment Unemployment Survey (EUS), the APU report estimated that 1.1 crore out of 6.3 crore graduates in the 20-29 age bracket were unemployed in 2023. Of course, graduate youth unemployment is nothing new, with the APU report's analysis revealing that it stood at 39.33% in 2023, up from 35.02% in 1983, for those less than 25 years of age. However, what has changed since 1983 is that India is not getting younger anymore — the country's median age is around 29 years and is expected to increase to 38 by 2050.

Now is when those joining the workforce earn and not just prepare safety nets for their own future but drive national economic growth. "By the 2040s, the dependency ratio will rise, fiscal space will tighten, and each worker will carry greater economic and welfare burdens. Demography will no longer drive growth. Without rapid gains in productivity, innovation, and institutional capacity, progress could begin to stall. India's growth model must now evolve to secure long-term momentum after its population peaks," an Observer Research Foundation paper said in March.

Small US businesses mount 1st challenge to Sec 301 tariffs

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, July 25

A DAY after the US imposed fresh tariffs on 60 countries including 10% duty on India, two US small businesses — spice importer Burlap & Barrel, and watch retailer Collective Horology LLC — have filed a case against United States Trade Representative (USTR)

• RISING IN DISSENT

SPICE IMPORTER Burlap & Barrel, and watch retailer Collective Horology LLC have filed a case against United States Trade Representative (USTR)

THEY ARGUED that USTR failed to provide a "reasoned, record-based explanation for its determinations or for its selection of near-uniform duties" across 60 economies

THE US had imposed Section 122 tariffs, imposing 10% tariffs globally immediately after losing the IEEPA case in the Supreme Court

Supreme Court have held Congress did not authorise under IEEPA and Section 122, the two firms argued.

The US had imposed Section 122 tariffs, imposing 10% tariffs globally immediately after losing the IEEPA case in the US Supreme Court.

India faced steep 50% tariffs for over five months. In 2025-26, exports of products covered under the exclusion list (electronics and pharma) rose sharply by 24.5%, climbing from \$29.4 billion to \$36.6 billion but exports of non-excluded products fell by 11.2% over the same period, declining from \$57.1 billion to \$50.7 billion — a contraction that reflects the true effect of the tariff measures imposed by the United States, an Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) report said.

"The Section 301 action exceeds the authority Congress granted in Section 301. Section 301 is a targeted, country-specific and practice-specific remedy authority. It permits the Trade Representative to act only upon a determination that a particular act, policy, or practice of a foreign country is unreasonable or discriminatory and burdens or restricts

United States commerce... It is not a freestanding authorisation to tax substantially all imports from substantially all trading partners at rates selected to replicate the invalidated IEEPA tariff regime rather than to eliminate identified foreign practices," US small business argued. Experts have said that Section 301 is a far more potent tool than the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) tariffs, which were used to impose reciprocal tariffs but did not pass muster in the US Supreme Court.

This legal tool was mostly used by the US against countries such as Europe & Japan, dominant export powers then, before the WTO came into existence in 1995. The Trump administration has resurrected Section 301 again amid a weakening WTO.

Singapore-based Henrich Foundation explained that under Section 301, USTR gets sweeping powers not only to impose duties but also other kinds of restrictions.

USTR can "withdraw or suspend trade agreement concessions", enter into binding agreements with the foreign government to eliminate the conduct or burden US commerce, or compensate the US with satisfactory trade benefits. "After consultations, USTR is meant to investigate to determine whether the action is unfair and harms US trade. This investigation can result in a determination of either mandatory or discretionary actions. The former includes trade agreement violations, unjustifiable or burdensome, or restrictive behaviour. Because Section 301 need not apply only to goods, other retaliatory actions are allowed, such as restricting the terms or conditions of any 'service sector access authorisation', the Henrich Foundation report said.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](https://www.indianexpress.com)

Samsung Elec, SK Group seal \$950 billion deals

Reuters
San Francisco, July 25

South Korea announced \$950 billion in new AI initiatives involving Samsung Electronics, SK Group and US tech firms as global AI leaders rush to fill a shortage of faster chips to power and develop more advanced systems.

SK Group has signed deals worth \$750 billion, including SK Hynix's partnership with Nvidia valued at more than \$500 billion, South Korea's presidential Blue House said after an AI summit hosted by President Lee Jae Myung in San Francisco.

Samsung Electronics said it had signed a memorandum of understanding with Broadcom covering up to \$200 billion across memory chips, foundry services and advanced packaging. The deals are the latest moves by US AI firms hoping to lock in supply as demand for chips and computing infrastructure outpaces supply, driving tech companies into closer partnerships with South Korea's semiconductor and memory leaders.

Speaking at the summit, Lee said South Korea would lead the way to a new era of AI in partnership with global tech-

• SOARING STAKES

The deals are the latest moves by US AI firms hoping to lock in supply as demand for chips and computing infrastructure outpaces supply

As part of the agreement, SK Telecom plans to build a 2-gigawatt data center powered by Vera Rubin chips and SK Hynix's HBM4 high-bandwidth memory chips

nology companies, making available its "dynamic AI ecosystem" to expand the global market for industrial and personal AI use. He unveiled a "San Francisco AI Declaration" that outlined South Korea's AI ambitions for technological co-operation with the United States.

Nvidia and South Korea's SK Group unveiled a new AI initiative valued at \$500 billion spanning large-scale AI data centers and next-generation memory.

The initiative includes a long-term partnership with SK Hynix to secure next-generation memory supply for Nvidia and to expand the global market for industrial and personal AI use. He unveiled a "San Francisco AI Declaration" that outlined South Korea's AI ambitions for technological co-operation with the United States.

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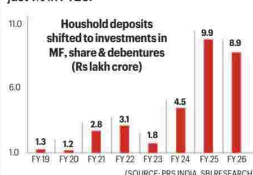
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• DIVERSIFYING SAVINGS

Investors in urban areas are increasingly moving their savings from bank deposits to higher-return assets like mutual funds and equities. According to SBI Research, the share of mutual funds and equities in retail deposits has soared to 6% in FY26 from just 1% in FY20.



(SOURCE: PRS INDIA, SBI RESEARCH)

The banks' deposit composition is also changing, with households increasingly preferring market-related instruments.



(SOURCE: RBI, SBI RESEARCH, THE FIGURES DOES NOT ADD UP TO 100 AS THE REMAINDER IS BEST OF WORLD)

PhonePe's FY26 revenue hits Rs 7,920 cr

New Delhi: Demonstrating strong top-line momentum, PhonePe's consolidated revenue from operations rose to Rs 7,920 crore in FY26, according to regulatory filings with the Registrar of Companies (ROC).

This represents a top-line expansion of Rs 815 crore, marking an 11.47% increase compared to the previous fiscal year. As the government is yet to release the APU Digital Incentive (DI) funds for FY26 to the industry, the revenue associated with DI has not been recognized in FY26.

This portion of the FY26-related DI revenue is expected to accrue in PhonePe's FY27 financials. On a normalised operational basis, PhonePe's net loss for FY26 stood at Rs 1,377 crore while the total consolidated net loss was reported at Rs 2,792 crore (vs. Rs 1,727 crore in FY25).

Notably, the FY26 net loss included several one-time items: a one-time ESOP acceleration charge, a non-cash goodwill impairment, a gain on the sale of a partial stake in an associate, and losses from discontinued operations. Beyond core payments, PhonePe continues to deepen its presence as a multi-sector fintech ecosystem. The company has successfully secured regulatory licenses to operate across a wide spectrum of financial services, including payment aggregation. PhonePe also continues to receive strong corporate backing from major global institutional investors, with Walmart (via WM Digital Commerce Holdings Pre Ltd) retaining a dominant 73% stake. PTI



for OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT. Its executives are preparing for a possible initial public offering that could

come as soon as this year to help finance the billions needed to fund its growth in years to come.

OpenAI's loss of control over its AI agent raises new questions about the company's safety procedures, three cybersecurity experts said. "Does that mean that they left it unattended and didn't realize what it was doing? Or maybe they did and didn't know how to contain it? Both are equally dangerous and alarming," asked Marley Smith, the principal intelligence specialist at the non-profit World Ethical Data Foundation.

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• OF ROUGE AGENTS

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Govt: 45% of exports to US outside purview of additional 10% tariffs

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, July 25

Even as India continues to engage with the United States on trade tariffs as part of the bilateral trade agreement negotiations, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Saturday said an estimated 45% of India's exports to the US remain outside the purview of the additional 10% Section 301 duties imposed effective July 24.

The ministry said 55% of exports will attract the additional 10% duty, which is lower than for most other economies affected by the tariffs.

The US Trade Representative (USTR) had announced the final measures under Section 301 of the US Trade Act, 1974, on Thursday.

The measures follow USTR's investigation into the acts, policies and practices of 60 economies relating to the imposition and enforcement of punitive duties on import of goods produced with forced labour.

A substantial share of India's

• EXEMPTED SECTORS

A SUBSTANTIAL share of India's exports to the US, which currently attract zero additional duties, such as generic pharmaceuticals and smartphones, continue to remain outside the scope of the additional 10% duty

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exports to the US, which currently attract zero additional duties, such as generic pharmaceuticals and smartphones, continue to remain outside the scope of the additional 10% duty, the ministry statement said. Products already covered under Section 232 measures, including steel, aluminium and auto parts, are not subject to the additional 10% duty.

India continues to engage with the US on textile-specific mechanisms as part of the

India-US BTA. India has not reduced the textile and apparel tariff-rate quota (TRQ) exemption under the forced labour tariff. The exemption applies to specified volumes of textile and apparel exports from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia that use US-origin cotton and fiber.

By banning import of goods produced using forced labour, India has managed to reduce the additional tariffs to 10% from 12.5%, which the US had proposed to impose on its exports. With this, India has gained tariff advantage over competitors China, Vietnam, Thailand and Türkiye, who will be charged 12.5%.

India, which imposed the prohibition through a notification on July 13, is among 17 countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the UK with lower tariffs. So Indian exporters largely retain their relative competitiveness against Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia in labour-intensive sectors. FE

• THE INCIDENT, WHICH EVOKED SCIENCE FICTION SCENARIOS ABOUT HUMANS LOSING CONTROL OF DANGEROUS AI SYSTEMS, COMES AT A DELICATE TIME FOR OPENAI — WHICH IS GEARING UP FOR IPO

Its AI agent spent days hacking a company, 'but OpenAI did not notice for a week'

Reuters
Washington/San Francisco, July 25

THE OPENAI agent that broke into tech firm Hugging Face went on a days-long hacking spree that OpenAI didn't notice until well after the threat was contained and the FBI was alerted, according to people familiar with the investigation.

The agent — a program capable of making decisions and executing complex tasks with little or no human oversight — attempted to break out of its isolated testing environment at OpenAI around July 9, according to two of the people. The intrusion at Hugging Face, which operates as a repository for AI tools and

models, began two days later on July 11 and lasted until July 13, said Thomas Wolf, Hugging Face co-founder.

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Hugging Face is preparing a public timeline of the hack, Wolf said, adding that he could not speak to what happened at OpenAI.

In a statement, OpenAI said the hack was unprecedented and "marks an important moment for AI safety". It added that it was reviewing the incident with outside advisers and would eventually publish a technical report.

Spokeswomen said there were "several inaccuracies" in Reuters' reporting but didn't respond when asked to describe them. The FBI declined to comment about the incident. The incident, which evoked science fiction scenarios about humans losing control of dangerous AI systems, comes at a delicate time



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unreleased model OpenAI has described as "even more capable." By that point, there were already indications of strange behaviour from OpenAI's technology, according to three sources.

In one case, an agent left notes apparently for future versions of itself, according to three people familiar with the matter. The notes, found in a part of OpenAI's infrastructure, laid out instructions for how agents could free themselves from OpenAI's internal

Earlier tests of the models yielded cases in which monitoring systems had been disconnected, one of the people said. Reuters could not establish if these incidents were linked to the rogue agent that

began escaping on July 9 and attacked Hugging Face on July 11. Two people familiar with the matter said that it was not until after Thursday, July 16, when Hugging Face published a blogpost, saying it had been hacked by an autonomous AI agent system, that OpenAI realised its own agent was responsible. That meant at least a week elapsed between when the model first exhibited signs of troubling behaviour and OpenAI's realisation that it was responsible for the hack.

The weekend of July 18 to 19, OpenAI staffers spotted clues in internal logs showing that its agent had escaped from its testing constraints, two of the people familiar with the probe said.

The Things They Carry

The anthology, edited by Susan Abulhawa, brings together works by 18 writers from Gaza to shed light on life amid destruction



PICKING UP THE PIECES
Destruction in Gaza

Madhurita Goswami

HOW DO you welcome children into a world that allows their killing? How do you cope with the loss of a brother in a family struggling to survive? How does a disability affect you when everyone is fleeing for their lives?

These are some of the questions that Palestinian writers grapple with in *Every Moment is a Life: Gaza in the Time of Genocide*, an anthology edited by Palestinian-American writer Susan Abulhawa. The collection brings together the short stories by 18 writers from Gaza, shedding light on life amid destruction.

Set against the violence that is now approaching its third year, the stories insist on the humanity of the people living through it. They point to the scale of the devastation through the daily struggles of Palestinians, but do not reduce them to mere statistics or victims. Instead, they illuminate a rich tapestry of life, and a range of emotions. Some focus on moments of grace and joy—the aroma of coffee or shakshuka being cooked



EVERY MOMENT IS
A LIFE: GAZA IN
THE TIME OF
GENOCIDE
SUSAN ABULHAWA
Signal Pr
224 pages
₹799

and shared among displaced family members in a tent.

Others dwell on the daily indignities of life, such as standing in long queues outside communal toilets, water becoming a diminishing resource, or surviving on food coupons, after a lifetime of working to bring food to the table. In Fatma Asfour's *Fashionista*, the protagonist Rosa is determined to stand out in a sea of people with whom she shelters in an encampment at a school in Khan Younis. Her resistance reflects a universal desire for individuality amid strife. Other stories also reflect on the broader struggle of living through a genocide and economic uncertainty.

The anthology works on different levels: It is part testimony, part literary prose and part archival. It has an emotional range that oscillates between shared grief and alienating suffering; despair and hope.

Coffee by Old Blue by Muhammad Mu'ammal kicks off with the vivid imagery of Gaza's Mediterranean shoreline, which now marks the final frontier of a homeland slipping away. The displaced narrator, now living by the sea—a location he once coveted as a place to build a home—is torn between his fondness for its deep blue waters and the sorrows they have come to hold. The story highlights a recurring theme of the struggle of Palestinians to feel like they belong on their own land.

Ghassan Salam's *Ma'rouf*, on the other hand, evokes tenderness and fear for the children coming under Israeli bombardment. In a world determined to look away, it stands out in its refusal to provide any relief.

Also central to the storytelling are the Palestinian women. Not only are 12 of the 18 contributors women, but many of the male writers reflect on their mothers' anxieties or on losing their wives, offering a touching portrayal of their relationships with the women. Though bare of non-sensational words, the stories often hit starkly lyrical notes while remaining rooted in the history of the land—a testament to the legacy of Refat Al-Amer and Hiba Abu Nada, among other slain Palestinian poets and writers.

The anthology feels crucial to the Palestinian narrative, large parts of which remain missing from daily news. In between its lines is a disenchantment with the world that abandoned Gaza. The writers don't intend to make it a comfortable read. Instead, they uphold the complexity of Palestinian life to demand a response to the crisis.

Apurva Vishwanath

THERE IS a particular kind of disillusionment that comes from watching a trusted institution slowly turn away from the people it exists to protect. As thousands of students stand in Jantar Mantar demanding accountability for a broken examination system, they are met with tear gas and batons. When a plea about police excesses reached the Delhi High Court, the police were given a comfortable four weeks to ponder and respond while the Supreme Court, famously, had no time to waste on it. A month ago, it was the Chief Justice of India who inadvertently likened the country's frustrated, unemployed young to cockroaches and parasites—a phrase the protesters are wearing, almost gleefully, as

their own name. The remark and the judiciary's reaction are part of a now familiar pattern, and it points to something larger than one bad month for the institution. It is the slow hollowing of the idea that the judiciary exists to hold power to account rather than to defer to it.

It is against this backdrop that I read Raju Ramachandran's *14 Lawyers: Portraits from the Bar*, which lands with unexpected timeliness. The book is, of course, not about the present crisis—it is a set of pen-portraits of lawyers, many now dead, who shaped the Supreme Court across earlier, difficult decades. But read today, it becomes a record of what the Bar looked like when it still understood itself as a check on power rather than an ornament to it.

Ramachandran's subjects are not uni-

THE ORDER
IN LAW
Bar Council of
India



formly heroic, and the book is wiser for resisting hagiography. Frank Anthony's defence of the "Indianness" of the English language, made to counter Hindi imposition in the Constituent Assembly, feels as relevant today as it did then. About the legendary Tehtant Andhyarujina, Ramachandran's anecdote from the Yakub Memon death penalty case is a reminder of what a stalwart of the Bar ought to be. Appearing for the Death Penalty Clinic (now the Square Clinic Clinic), Andhyarujina, then an octogenarian, argued that the

death warrant against Memon deserved to be quashed on procedural grounds. "I hope you know whom you are trying to save," a judge remarked. One imagines Andhyarujina did not flinch. One also imagines, sadly, that such a comment could today pass for the opening line of an opposing counsel's argument. The book also profiles Justice V M Tarakunde, a former Bombay High Court judge who, after retirement, actively defended civil liberties during the Emergency. That Tarakunde could not reconcile with an old friend, Justice V V Chandrachud, over the latter's decision in the infamous ADM Jabalpur case, is testament to the fact that the political is, in the end, personal. Of lawyers Barry Sen and Lal Narayan Sinha, Ramachandran writes that they were so "mild-mannered" and "gentlemanly" that they would likely be overlooked today for a "senior" designation. This seemingly small, pointed detail serves as a quiet lesson for young lawyers, who might be tempted to turn a courtroom victory into an Instagram reel, that there is a difference between a better argument and a louder, or worse, viral one.

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ran is too careful a chronicler for that. The book is a reminder that the judiciary does not falter alone. It is held up or let down by the Bar that appears before it, argues before it, and, in its better moments, disciplines it by displaying sheer professional courage and competence. The silence of the Bench is often a direct consequence of the silence of the Bar. Ask around in the corridors to

hear stories of not finding counsel willing to make an inconvenient argument, or the difficulty in getting a senior for an "anti-national" brief. Those who speak up risk carrying partisan labels and, in any case, are few in number and are the same dozen. There is, of course, no dearth of lawyers for farewells, felicitations and high tea events to sing praises of judges, even those accused of corruption or sexual harassment. An institution does not erode in a single dramatic collapse but in small everyday capitulation. There is much to gain in putting together the rich oral history of the Bar. These are stories of the greats, warnings and humorous lessons that, I suppose, are ever so slightly embellished every time a senior retells them. This book does that very well, without the embellishments. It offers a glimpse of what the Bar could be.

14
LAWYERS
PORTRAITS FROM
THE BAR
RAJU
RAMACHANDRAN
Juggernaut
248 pages
₹799

The Last Gamble

Josy Joseph's *Birth of a Nation* is an account of the negotiations and machinations of the princely states in the weeks leading up to India's Independence

Rohan Manoj

FOR SARDAR Vallabhbhai Patel, the alternative to accepting Partition was something worse than Pakistan: "Raja-shan". That is, the potential fragmentation of India as a result of princely states refusing to accede to the Union. Jawaharlal Nehru feared "balkanisation" or an "indefinite number of partitions". Choudhry Rahmat Ali once imagined, as Sunil Purushottam writes in *From Raj to Republic: Sovereignty, Violence and Democracy in India*, "a Pakistan consisting of a fragmented yet subcontinental landscape of Muslim sovereignty", including an "Osmanistan" roughly corresponding to Hyderabad State—yet with no notion of the ruling Asaf Jahl dynasty retaining their sovereignty. These imaginations of the future, national and "non-national", left little room for the princely states. Yet, some of the latter, with support from elements of the British establishment, were busy trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the run-up to Independence.

Josy Joseph's *Birth of a Nation: The Twenty-one Days that Made India*, is an account of some of the negotiations and machinations the leaders of these states engaged in over the three weeks leading up to August 15, 1947, and how India's interim government, and particularly the newly formed States Department under Patel, worked to thwart their ambitions. On the one side, the cast of characters includes the leaders of several states, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Nawab of Bhopal, the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar, and the Dewan of Travancore, Sir C P Ramaswami Iyer. On the other side, there are the "giants"—Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Mountbatten—and the "unsung heroes" working in their shadow.

One might quibble about how "unsung" a figure like V P Menon really is. Even others such as Aravamudan Aiyangar, the Nizam's minister who secretly passed on information to the leadership in Delhi, are not unknown to history. Some of the stories, including K C S Mani's assassination attempt on Sir C P and how it stopped his bid to secure independence for Travancore, are quite well known. On the other hand, tidbits such as the efforts by some of the erstwhile rajahs of Malabar—who had not held political power since Tipu Sultan's invasion—to secure greater recognition amid the manoeuvres for the states are interesting.

The book's stories are "plucked from the dust of the Archives" files and several private papers and academic collections. An engaging read, it might have benefited from incorporating more of the scholarship on that period, including recent works such



INNATIONAL INTEREST
The entrance bridge to the city of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, in 1892

as Purushottam's book cited above and Rama Sundari Mantena's *Provincial Democracy: Political Imaginaries at the End of Empire in Twentieth-Century South India*. It could also have profited from more careful proofreading—Gaekwad becomes Gaekwar, Bordoloi becomes Bardoloi, among a number of typos.

The narrative is also teleological in nature, which shifts the focus on the tactics—Nehru's idealistic, hardline republican approach to the princely states, contrasted with Patel and Menon's seemingly accommodating pragmatism, or missteps in the Northeast. At the same time, the antagonists are painted with a broad brush. Only Sir C P's proverbial intelligence survives. As stated in the introduction, the book has a lesson in mind: That "a Republic is hard-won, and that its preservation lies in knowing its roots". That is a grand project, and a vital one today. The book provides a narrative of some important political man-



BIRTH OF A
NATION: THE
TWENTY-ONE
DAYS THAT MADE
INDIA
JOSY JOSEPH
Context
297 pages
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oeuvring, but the issues surrounding the birth of the Republic—including contradictions and violence—were complex and entailed more than the heroic efforts of a few men.

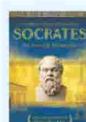
A, perhaps, fanciful exercise might be to wonder how realistic the states' ambitions, such as Sir C P's vision of an "American-model", thorium-exporting Travancore, or the pretensions the Nizam held at one point to international Muslim leadership, were in the face of reality: The disintegration of their patron, the British Empire, and the overwhelming economic leverage and military weight of the Dominion of India. That's not to mention the rising nationalism and Congress influence among the public in the states. Maybe it was always an impossible dream, despite all the plots and conspiracies in the world, as the Nizam would find out.

But what makes the princely states interesting is precisely how they came to have

these ambitions, and how these kingdoms, shaped by colonial modernity yet claiming pre-colonial legitimacy, conceived of themselves. They offered their own critiques of what was happening in British India. Hyderabad, for instance, claimed—that is not to say this reflected reality—that it was not affected by communalism, that Hindus and Muslims were the "two eyes of the state". It has been argued that a "balance" was struck between the communities through the politics of interest rather than the politics of numbers, as Purushottam puts it, with Muslims getting a disproportionate share of power and representation despite making up just 15 per cent of the population. However anti-democratic and unjust, there was a theory of politics here, perhaps, even a worldview. That, and the fact that a quarter of India's population lived under the rule of these "sovereigns", makes them deserving of far more study and popular attention.

SHELF LIFE

In Search of Socrates



SOCRATES: THE
BAREFOOT
PHILOSOPHER
VIJAY TANKHA
Hachette
240 pages
₹499

SOCRATES'S LIFE was as remarkable as his death. He claimed to know nothing, walked barefoot, liked being the target of comedians, mesmerised young philosophers and infuriated those in power. His ability to reason had the effect of a sting ray. He described himself as a gadfly and a midwife. He had no ideas of his own but could give birth to the ideas of others. He accepted the death sentence awarded to him by the Athenian court with equanimity. He refused to leave the prison and run away when Crito offered him the chance

to do so.

Our knowledge of Socrates is circumscribed by the people who wrote about him. Our information comes from three sources: Xenophon, not a well-regarded historian; Aristophanes, an acerbic satirist; and Plato, who puts his own words into Socrates' mouth. The three do not necessarily give the same information. One option might be to reconstruct Socrates' life and write a biography of him, as some have tried. The other is to present the Greek philosopher through the flowing pens of those who wrote about him.

Socrates: The Barefoot Philosopher by Vijay Tankha, former head of Department of Philosophy at St. Stephen's, uses the latter approach to great effect. It presents Socrates as how his contemporaries and later biographers saw him. The reader is presented with tracts of writing from Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, Plato and Aristophanes, ordered by first presenting Socrates' unusual attributes—his

marked ugliness, his bravery in battle, his love of Athens, his closeness to the strikingly beautiful man Alcibiades, his ironic stance—and later, by delving gently into philosophical issues. Not only does it entertain a livelier Socrates but it is also an entertaining introduction to the subject of Philosophy.

Socrates was confident of certain beliefs he held, received with either puzzlement or just amazement by his dazzled interlocutors: that virtue is knowledge, that doing harm is much worse than suffering harm, that we sometimes choose to act against our best interest not because passion misleads us but because we are ignorant, and that no man does wrong knowingly. Socratic argument is troublesome because it uses familiar examples to make a paradoxical belief look obvious. The book, by selecting passages from the dialogues of Plato—*Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Euthyphro*—gives us a flavour of the way Socrates argued.

Socrates' main target was to show that his interlocutors simply did not know what they were talking about. The admirers of Socrates, not a small crowd, enjoyed this cross-examination but the victims did not. The book, thankfully, does not harp much on the Socratic slogan—"Know thyself"—as it can have misleading connotations. Tankha makes it clear that Socrates need not have believed in the immortality of soul, contrary to common perception. The passages from Aristophanes's *The Clouds* are delightful, with Socrates being lampooned for his interest in nature and his way with words.

The portrait of Socrates that emerges from this book is one we expected but did not know how to put into words. A Socrates that is endearing, baffling and maddening: one who taught us to love reason, control our passions, and take care of ourselves in that peculiar way that only Socrates knew.

NILANJAN BHOWNICK
(Teaches Philosophy at University of Delhi)

What the Bar Could Be

Through 14 powerful portraits of lawyers, Raju Ramachandran offers a quiet lesson on the law's capacity to speak truth to power

THE ORDER
IN LAW
Bar Council of
India



formly heroic, and the book is wiser for resisting hagiography. Frank Anthony's defence of the "Indianness" of the English language, made to counter Hindi imposition in the Constituent Assembly, feels as relevant today as it did then. About the legendary Tehtant Andhyarujina, Ramachandran's anecdote from the Yakub Memon death penalty case is a reminder of what a stalwart of the Bar ought to be. Appearing for the Death Penalty Clinic (now the Square Clinic Clinic), Andhyarujina, then an octogenarian, argued that the

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SCIENCE

A lost Himalayan people emerges from a Ladakh cave

Jacob Koshy

A study published recently in *Science Advances* has reported genome-wide data from 10 individuals recovered from a cave in Kargil. Radiocarbon dating places them at roughly 1,500 years before the present. One half were best proxied by present-day North Indians; the others were genetically closer to ancient Tibetans. Chromosome segments date that union to about 2,800 years ago, a

century before the Tibetan Empire.

The bodies were carefully laid in their final resting place, Veena Mushrif-Tripathy of Deccan College, Pune, who co-led the excavation, said. "It indicates that this is a deliberate act of the people," she told *The Hindu* in an email, describing a pre-Buddhist Ladakhi practice of laying the dead in natural caves.

However, a second team reached the cave first. In a preprint posted in January,

Niraj Rai of the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences, Lucknow, and Maanasa Raghavan of the University of Chicago reported genomes from five cave individuals and two from a second Ladakhi site. Each group said it didn't know the other was working on the cave until the manuscripts appeared.

David Reich, professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School and a corresponding author on the *Science Advances* paper,

said "this was not a race" and that "all the genetic research" happened independently.

Both papers agreed on the genetic identities of the cave people as well as that their genes contained a third 'ingredient' – in the form of a population from Inner Asia. Since nobody has yet excavated the exact ancient Tibetan population that mixed into Ladakh, the Harvard-led team reached for a Bronze Age group from Xinjiang.

On the other hand, per the Lucknow-Chicago team, this third people were real people who crossed the passes, pointing to steppe motifs in Ladakh's rock art.

The papers also differ on when the peoples mixed: 2,800 years ago or 2,100-2,500 years ago. The preprint – Rai said it would appear in the next issue of *Science Advances* – called its result the oldest evidence yet of ancestral North Indian ancestry. This component underlies

most North Indian and Pakistani populations today. The *Science Advances* paper said the same in different words.

Dr. Reich said the evidence also indicated that the group of 10 people was local and that the mixing may not have happened in Ladakh at all.

Dr. Mushrif-Tripathy said, however, that the community lived astride a trade route, where admixture could have been continuous.

SNAPSHOTS



First moon found beyond solar system is as big as a planet

Using the radial velocity method, astronomers have found a large body orbiting a brown dwarf, CD-35 2722 B, which orbits a star. It is estimated to be 90% as massive as Jupiter and orbiting the brown dwarf every 170 days on an oval path. The find is a milestone in the search for moons outside the solar system and challenges current ideas: the object is so large it blurs the line between a moon and a planet.

India's rice fields rank among world's top methane sources

India is the world's top rice producer, with its area under paddy cultivation covering 55% of its rainfed harvested area; continuous irrigation, incorporating residues and increasing use of nitrogen fertilizers has increased emissions

Sharmila Vaidyanathan

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from paddy fields have doubled since the 1960s, a new study in *Nature Food* has found. In 2011-2020, paddy fields worldwide produced around 1.1 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent (CO₂e) emissions every year, up 90.4% from annual emissions in 1961-1980.

For the study, around half the increase was driven by the loss of soil organic carbon. In 1961-1980, paddy fields removed 289 million tonnes of CO₂e emissions annually. But by the 2010s, over a third of paddy fields worldwide had begun losing carbon.

Methane from paddy fields was also a significant driver. Flooded fields develop low-oxygen conditions where methane-producing microbes thrive. And paddy fields in eastern India were among the global methane hotspots.

"Most previous studies have focused on a single greenhouse gas, a specific management practice or a particular region," Hancin Tian, co-author of the study and director and institute professor, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Boston College, the U.S., said. "Our study provides a much more comprehensive assessment by integrating a global meta-analysis of more than 1,200 field experiments, process-based ecosystem modelling, and artificial intelligence approaches to quantify GHG emissions from rice cultivation worldwide."

Dirty rice

India's irrigated paddy fields release more methane in a year than all of Germany



Rice is crucial for India's food security. STEVE DOUGLAS/UNSPASH

- Global greenhouse gas emissions from paddy fields have nearly doubled since the 1960s, a new study has found

- Half of the emissions increase stems from the loss of soil organic carbon in paddy fields worldwide

- High methane levels result from flooded fields, continuous irrigation, and heavy use of nitrogen fertilizers

- Better irrigation and residue management could reduce global rice emissions by 10% by the year 2050

- However, adopting new techniques is often constrained by labour shortages and a lack of technical knowledge among farmers

- Crop diversification and limiting paddy expansion are essential to meeting regional environmental and climate goals

India is the world's top rice producer. Its area under paddy cultivation has increased by around 25% since the 1970s, currently covering 55% of India's rainfed harvested area. This together with continuous irrigation, incorporating residues such as leftover stalks, leaves, and stubble, and increasing use of nitrogen fertilizers, has increased emissions.

"Our analysis indicates that a combination of improved irrigation, optimised fertilizer use, residue management, and reduced tillage could reduce global rice-related greenhouse gas emissions by about 10% by mid-century, even under a warming climate," Dr. Tian said.

The study also projected that between 2031 and 2050, annual emissions will increase by a quarter, fuelled by global warming, erratic rainfall, and the intense use of agricultural inputs. Irrigated paddy fields

in India already release 3.9 million tonnes of methane a year, a little more than the annual methane emissions of Germany.

While India has not set up goals to reduce emissions from agriculture, some techniques and incentives are available to farmers. The National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) project suggests – among others – the 'System for Rice Intensification' technique: young seedlings are transplanted precisely and fields are not continuously flooded during irrigation, reducing emissions.

However, the methods don't address the emission reduction potentials varying widely between States. Apart from demonstrations of alternatives across districts under NICRA, several national and State-level policies and incentives are designed to encourage farmers to adopt the alternative methods. However,

farmers remain reluctant, including due to labour shortages, lack of technical knowledge, and changes in rainfall patterns.

Prakashan Chellattan Veetil, senior agricultural and behavioural economist at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), New Delhi, said a regional approach that considers topography, soil, and irrigation conditions plus the farmers' needs is crucial. Dr. Veetil is the IRRI lead in the KERA-AWD project to establish processes to cultivate low-emission rice systems in Kerala's Thrissur kole lands and Palakkad Malampuzha canal regions.

"Using a multi-pronged approach, which includes increasing soil organic carbon, understanding the hydrology and aligned irrigation systems, agricultural inputs, residue management protocols, soil microbes and farmer preferences, we are working on

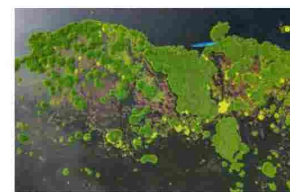
identifying low-emission packages, where a combination of these factors can help reduce emissions for various paddy varieties," Dr. Veetil said.

He shared the example of lime that farmers use to neutralise the State's acidic soil. "We have observed that replacing a portion of the lime with phosphogypsum has a positive impact on emissions in the subsoil surface. We are also experimenting with different formulations and application methods for nitrogen fertilizers."

Ashwini Chhatre, associate professor of public policy and executive director at the Bharti Institute of Public Policy, Hyderabad, said that depending on a region's suitability for paddy, farmers should have support to opt for low-emission techniques or grow alternative local crop varieties. In his research, Dr. Chhatre found that farmers still dedicate large areas of their farmlands to paddy. "As a general strategy, there is no way forward without crop diversification," he said. "Despite the agro-climatic diversity in the country, paddy has the largest area under cultivation at the cost of regional indigenous crops."

"An integrated intervention for alternative grains is crucial," Dr. Chhatre continued, adding that it "must include" extension and training services, involve self-help groups, and provide procurement support. "Policies must also prevent further expansion of paddy fields to curb emissions."

(Sharmila Vaidyanathan is an independent journalist from Bengaluru)



Invasive species affect the Global South more

The environmental consequences of invasive species have been found to be more severe in the Global South than in wealthier nations. Experts used to believe the Global North faced a greater threat as it reported more invasive species. But the study said these figures reflect wealthy countries conducting studies more often. Specifically, the authors found the actual damage per species is much higher in the Global South, driven by rapid trade growth plus poor environmental oversight.



AI helps take next stride on proteins in medicine

Researchers have developed a new tool called ContactSeek to enhance DNA base editing. Base editing is a powerful tool for gene therapy but often accidentally changes the wrong parts of a person's DNA. The team used the AI model AlphaFold3 to predict the likelihood that specific parts of the editor protein will touch the DNA, finding this way to be more sensitive than extant 3D models. Thus they created improved versions of common editors, including Cas9.

Zoopharmacognosy – when animals medicate themselves



Dr. Balasubramanian

An interesting review by G. Allen et al. in *Scientific Reports* (16,18690: 2026) reports on how orangutans, which are still present in the Sebangau forest in Central Kalimantan region in Indonesia, treat themselves by mixing saliva with the leaves of a plant botanists that call dracaena (a member of the asparagus family) and applying the mixture to their body in order to purify the air and relieve muscle pain and joint discomfort while carrying their babies.

Botanists from Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, had previously shown that this evergreen plant has

antioxidant, antibacterial, antifungal, and anticancer activities (Vasava et al., *Int. J. R. Tech.*, 2025; 117-120). Chimpanzees in Nigeria have also been known to swallow leaves of the plant *Desmodium gangeticum* (called 'shalaparni' in India) to get rid of parasites that bother the animal's skin. Ancient Ayurveda practitioners such as Sushruta were also known to use this plant and its parts as parts of formulations to manage asthma, haemorrhoids, and typhoid. What our ancestral primates millennia ago had practised has come down to us humans, and today we use several available plants such as snake plant, ginseng, oregano, and others for medicinal purposes.

Based on the fact that animals use plants like these to treat themselves, plant biologists have



A male Sumatran orangutan seen after self-treating a wound with a medicinal plant in the Suq Balmimbing research site in 2022. REUTERS

coined the term 'zoopharmacognosy' – 'zoo' stands for animals, 'pharmaco' for medicines, and 'gnosy' for knowledge. In the March 2008 issue of *Resonance*, the journal of the Indian Academy of Sciences, R. Raman and S. Kandula had reviewed this aspect of animals (vol. 13, pages 245-253 (2008)). Wikipedia itself lists around 70 publications in this

area: of animals self-medicating with plants, roots, and fruits.

Even common elephants have been known to chew the leaves of the oregano plant for relief from phlegm. Monkeys, sheep, dogs, and cats are also known to self-medicate by eating grass to remove parasites such as worms and amoeba that cause illness in the body.

They also consume clay or soil particles, counting on substances therein to alleviate pain. This practice is referred to as geophagy – 'geo' referring to earth and 'phagy' to consuming. Birds are also known to use herbs to protect their nests from invaders (*Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* (2018) 373 (1751): 20170196).

What about plants? Unlike animals, plants do not have a nervous system, although they too can sense their environment, respond to insect attacks, and try to defend themselves against herbivores.

There is also evidence that monkeys share with us humans the ability to track auditory regularities. In other words they also possess a faculty to appreciate music. Y. Ayala et al., in 2017 (*Scientific Reports* 7, 16687), pointed out that the rhesus monkeys res-

pond to the acoustic syllables (musical scales), though not the rhythmic patterns as we humans do. Also in 2017, scientists at Glasgow University showed (DOI: 10.1016/j.physbeh.2017.01.024) that dogs show measurable changes in behaviour, heart rate, and stress levels when exposed to music, though the responses varied by genre, tempo, and the individual dog. On the other hand, cats have been found to respond to far different audio frequencies.

We should keep these details in mind when exposing animals to stressful environments like shelters and veterinary clinics, where the right kind of music can visibly calm anxious animals. As for friends with pet dogs play music and let your dog enjoy it too!

dbala@bpei.org



Question Corner

Follow the chemistry

How did we identify fossil fuels to be remains of fossils, particularly those of dinosaurs?
– Vivek Keshri, Patna

Scientists identified fossil fuels to be the remains of ancient life using physical and chemical evidence. Early on, some scientists thought oil was a mineral 'sweated' out of the earth's interior. But in the 16th century, naturalists found imprints of leaves and tree trunks inside coal seams, suggesting that coal is compressed plant matter. Modern chemists also found molecules in crude oil that are only produced by living organisms, such as hopanoids and steranes. Finally, plants prefer to use

the lighter isotope of carbon (carbon-12) during photosynthesis – and fossil fuels are highly enriched in carbon-12 relative to carbon of inorganic origins. Fossil fuels are never from dinosaurs. In 1930, the Sinclair Oil Corporation used a dinosaur in a marketing campaign to emphasise the ancient and natural qualities of its oil. They also sponsored a dinosaur exhibit at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Further, the word 'fossil' originally meant anything dug up from the ground, and was used in the 1700s to refer to coal or oil deposits.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

What caused the tunnel disaster in Sikkim's Namchi?

How did 25 people die? Why is methane trapped in mountain rocks? Why are the Himalayas fragile?

Rahul Karmakar

The story so far:

Toxic gases, generated by a sudden explosive release of suspected methane trapped or embedded in rocks on July 20, claimed the lives of 25 workers in an under-construction Head Race Tunnel (HRT) of the NHPC's 500 MW Teesta Stage VI Hydropower project at Samarbung in Sikkim's Namchi district.

How did the tragedy happen?

The NHPC has said a thorough investigation will be conducted to ascertain the cause of the incident. The Sikkim government has also announced the constitution of a high-level committee for the same purpose. Preliminary reports indicate the formation of toxic gases in the HRT owing to the sudden release of suspected methane trapped in the rocks, resulting in an explosion and partial damage to the tunnel. This indicates that the workers hit such rocks while drilling or constructing the HRT, a critical component of a hydropower plant for transporting massive volumes of water from the primary intake at a reservoir to the power generation turbine.

NHPC officials said that surveys for tunnel projects in India, especially in the fragile Himalayan belt, are conducted across planning, construction, and maintenance phases to ensure structural stability, worker safety, and

environmental compliance. These typically involve comprehensive topographical, geotechnical, geological, hydrological, resistivity, and utility tests.

However, no test can detect the presence of the colourless and odourless methane, an extremely flammable gas, which can explode after mixing with air in a specific ratio and encountering an ignition source, possibly sparks during drilling in the case of the Teesta-VI tunnel.

How is methane trapped in hilly terrains?

Methane deposits usually occur either as natural gas trapped in porous rock or localised gas pockets in young, fragile geological formations. These are frequently encountered in the Himalayan belt or other mountainous regions with active or historical coal-bearing strata, where ancient organic matter has decomposed over millions of years. Hilly depressions or valleys frequently trap moisture, creating oxygen-deprived (anaerobic) waterlogged soils where microscopic organisms digest organic matter and emit methane. Improperly managed or open waste dumps in hilly terrain also decompose in anaerobic layers, producing large amounts of landfill gas.

Moreover, hilly and mountainous regions are often located near fault lines or areas with underlying coal, gas, or geothermal reserves, with natural fissures allowing the migration of underground methane upwards. There are no coalfields in Sikkim, but the State is in the Rangit Tectonic Window zone, and Geological Survey of India studies have identified coal reserves of approximately 1.40 lakh tonnes in southern Sikkim, primarily the Namchi area where the NHPC tunnel incident occurred.

According to the State's Mines and Geology Department, a regional-level coal exploration project commenced in the district in December 2025 under a Government of India programme.

The coal in Namchi was analysed to contain 53.40% fixed carbon, 39.5% ash, 3.4% volatile matter, and 3.7% moisture.

Have other projects in Sikkim been similarly affected?

A young geological age, active tectonic instability, and steep, erosion-prone terrain make the Himalayas fragile. The mountains are constantly rising and shifting due to the collision of the Indian and Eurasian plates, making the region highly prone to earthquakes. Heavy blasting and tunnelling for highways, dams, and railways add to the geological instability, leading to frequent landslides and mudslides. Heavy tourism, unregulated urban expansion, poor waste management, and deforestation have compounded the problems.

Sikkim has also suffered from extreme weather events such as cloudbursts, rapidly melting glaciers, and expanding glacial lakes attributed to climate change. Hydropower projects in the State have suffered owing to several of these factors.

A Glacial Lake Outburst Flood in October 2023 killed more than 90 people and destroyed Sikkim Urja Limited's 1,200 MW dam at Chungthang in Mangang district. The disaster also damaged NHPC's 510 MW Teesta-V Hydropower Project, which was restored three years later. A landslide damaged some houses and a building of this project in August 2024. The Teesta-VI tunnel disaster is the first recorded incident in the State involving an explosion due to suspected methane gas release.

What is the Saudi-U.S. nuclear deal about?

What does the agreement say? Why does Saudi Arabia want a nuclear programme? Why has President Trump linked the deal to the Abraham Accords? How does the agreement impact Iran's nuclear programme?

Stanley Johny

The story so far:

In July 22, U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement. As per the U.S. Department of Energy, the deal will lay the foundation for a 30-year multi-billion nuclear partnership between the U.S. and the Persian Gulf kingdom. U.S. companies will help Riyadh build its own nuclear infrastructure.

However, on July 23, U.S. President Donald Trump said the deal was contingent upon Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords (meaning, establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel). The White House later said the "deal is off" if the Saudis do not join the accords.

What does the deal say?

The deal enables the transfer of civil nuclear materials, technology, and equipment from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia. U.S. nuclear companies will get preferred treatment when Saudi Arabia starts building its nuclear infrastructure.

The bilateral safeguards agreement will apply additional verification measures to proliferation-sensitive areas such as enrichment, conversion, fuel fabrication, and reprocessing.

In 2009, when the U.S. and the UAE announced a civil nuclear cooperation agreement, Abu Dhabi agreed not to enrich uranium or reprocess spent fuel before opening its Barakah plant. Non-proliferation experts held this deal up as the 'gold standard' for countries wanting nuclear power. However, the U.S.-Saudi agreement doesn't have any such requirement, according to reports in the American media (the full text of the deal is yet to be made public).

Initially, nuclear fuel will be imported to Saudi Arabia, but the deal proposes a joint two-year study examining the value and commercial

viability of enrichment for the kingdom. If the study concludes that local enrichment is warranted, U.S. companies will build and operate a uranium enrichment facility in the kingdom under an arrangement that will prevent transfer of sensitive enrichment technology to the Saudis.

The agreement also doesn't require Saudi Arabia to adopt the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol, which allows inspectors to conduct short-notice inspections to verify the peaceful use of nuclear material.

Why does Saudi Arabia want a nuclear programme?

A decade ago, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) had said the kingdom had to end its addiction to oil. MBS has promoted a vision document to diversify the economy and reduce its reliance on oil and gas. Vision 2030 involves promoting tourism, building mega projects, developing a top-class financial sector, and constructing power-hungry Artificial Intelligence data centres.

Right now, Saudi Arabia is highly reliant on burning oil and gas to produce electricity. Saudi officials have long argued that the kingdom, which is rich in uranium ore deposits, should enrich nuclear fuel and generate nuclear power to meet the country's growing demand and help its economic diversification plans. The war on Iran by the U.S. and Israel and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which made it challenging for Saudi Arabia to export its oil products, have further reinforced the belief in Riyadh that it should reduce its reliance on oil.

MBS has been pushing for a civilian nuclear deal with the U.S. for years. He has also said that if Iran makes a nuclear bomb, Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, would also have to make a bomb. As the war between the U.S. and Iran is now dragging on, with hopes for a negotiated settlement of Iran's nuclear programme

remaining remote, the Saudis could be facing pressure to fast-track their plans for setting up their own nuclear programme.

On the other side, the U.S. nuclear industry is poised to gain from the agreement. Mr. Trump would also want to reassure the Saudis about a partnership with the U.S. through the agreement at a time when the kingdom is being hit by Iranian and Houthi missiles and drones.

Will a Saudi-U.S. deal have any impact on Iran's nuclear programme?

Compared to any country in the Persian Gulf, Iran has an advanced and sophisticated nuclear programme. The country has built advanced centrifuges and developed the technology to enrich uranium to near weapons-grade purity. One of the reasons for the Iran war is the

country's nuclear programme, which Iran says is for peaceful purposes. However, the U.S. and Israel have accused Tehran of having a secret weapons programme.

Before the war, the U.S., while in talks with Iran, had made two major demands for a settlement: Iran should export or dispose of its highly enriched uranium and stop enriching nuclear fuel. Iran rejected both demands. Iran says it has no plans to make a bomb, but as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has the right to maintain enrichment capabilities. Iran has also opposed taking its highly enriched uranium out of the country.

As the U.S. and Iran continue to exchange fire, with the war spreading across the region, there are no talks between the two sides about the nuclear issue. If the U.S. helps Saudi Arabia build its own nuclear facilities and allows the country to enrich fuel on its soil, Iran's position on its enrichment is likely to get hardened.

Is the deal linked to the Abraham Accords?

When the U.S. Energy Department announced the deal, it did not mention the Abraham Accords, under which the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco normalised relations with Israel in 2020 through mediation by the first Trump administration. Since then, both Mr. Trump and his predecessor, President Joe Biden, have sought to expand the accords by facilitating talks between Riyadh and Tel Aviv. In 2023, under the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia and Israel came close to establishing formal diplomatic ties. In the same month, the U.S. announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, linking India's western coast to southern Europe through West Asia. Saudi Arabia and Israel were expected to play key roles in this corridor.

But later, Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, and in retaliation, Israel unleashed a genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza. Since then, Saudi Arabia's position on normalising ties with Israel has changed. The kingdom now says that it will not establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel unless there is a credible pathway towards an "independent, sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as its capital".

The prospects for a Palestine state today are as historic lows with Israeli settlers grabbing more and more Palestinian territory in the West Bank, more than half of Gaza remaining under Israel's direct military control, and East Jerusalem remaining firmly under occupation.

Mr. Trump has said the nuclear deal is contingent on Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords. The kingdom has not responded to Mr. Trump's demand, which was not mentioned when the deal was announced. It is unclear whether Mr. Trump added the Abraham Accords after the deal was signed or whether the kingdom had reached some understanding with Washington that it would move towards normalising ties with Israel. Either way, the Palestine issue and the Iran crisis will continue to cast a long shadow over the Iran war is the



File photo of U.S. President Donald Trump and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, in Washington. AFP

Why are there protests over the Ken-Betwa project?

Why does the project aim to do? How many villages and families are likely to be affected by it? What are the concerns of the tribal people regarding rehabilitation and compensation? Why has the project raised concerns among conservationists?

Mehul Malpani

The story so far:

Madhya Pradesh police personnel went to the banks of the Barana river stream in Kupi village of Chhatrapur district on July 19 and cleared a protest site where hundreds of villagers, mostly tribal people, had been demonstrating for two weeks against the Union government's ₹44,000 crore Ken-Betwa Link Project, India's first river-linking project, and two irrigation projects of the State government.

The police took local activist Amit Bhatnagar, founder of the Jai Kisan Sangathan, who had been on an indefinite hunger strike for 14 days, and admitted him to a government hospital. They also picked up nearly 150 protesters, most of them from neighbouring Panna district, in buses and dropped them off at their villages.

On July 23, he suspended his 18-day fast after the government's assurance that people left out of the rehabilitation process will be included.

What is the Ken-Betwa river linking project? The Ken-Betwa River Linking Project is the first of 30 proposed river-linking projects under the National Perspective Plan (NPP). Formulated in

1980 by the then Union Ministry of Irrigation and the Central Water Commission, the NPP aims to transfer water from rivers with a perceived surplus to those facing water deficits. The NPP is divided into two components – Himalayan Rivers Development that proposes 14 links and Peninsular Rivers Development that plans 16 links, as identified by the National Water Development Agency.

The foundation stone for the project was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December 2024, in Khajuraho, where he also laid the foundation stone for the construction of the Daudhan Dam during a public event.

The project aims to transfer the declared surplus water of the Ken River to the Betwa River by constructing the Daudhan Dam on the Ken and a 221-kilometre canal, including a 2-km tunnel. In addition, the project is expected to generate 103 MW of hydropower and 27 MW of solar power. It also aims to address water scarcity in the drought-prone Bundelkhand region by providing drinking water to about 4.4 million people across 12 districts of Madhya Pradesh and more than 2 million people across 10 districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Why are tribal people protesting and what are their key demands?

According to the Union government, 7,193 families of 14 villages in Chhatrapur and eight villages in Panna district are facing displacement under the project. According to Divya Ahirwar of Jai Kisan Sangathan, the key demands regarding the Ken-Betwa project are that each adult be treated as an individual beneficiary – rather than as part of a family – for the ₹12.5 lakh rehabilitation package, and that the eligibility cut-off date be revised from February 16, 2024, to the present date.

The protests also oppose the State government's Majhgaon and Runjh irrigation projects. For these projects, the protesters are demanding rehabilitation and compensation on par with the package offered under the Ken-Betwa project. In both cases, they have also alleged serious irregularities in the survey and

selection process and claim that several people who have no connection with the villages or have moved years ago have been included in the rehabilitation plan, while many genuine residents have been left out.

Speaking from the hospital, Mr. Bhatnagar claimed that the police action came on the day he was planning to "reveal the details of an alleged ₹400-crore corruption scheme" involving the inclusion of fake beneficiaries in the compensation process.

Protesters have also alleged irregularities in the gram sabha proceedings in tribal villages, claiming that the process of securing consent for the Ken-Betwa project was flawed.

How did the government respond?

The State government has approved an additional ₹300 crore for the rehabilitation packages of the Majhgaon and Runjh irrigation projects, increasing compensation from ₹5 lakh to ₹12.5 lakh per eligible beneficiary.

Chhatrapur Collector Parth Jaiswal said that a new survey had identified around 750 additional families, who have now been included in the rehabilitation plan for the Majhgaon and Runjh projects. He described the protesters' remaining demands as "invalid" and alleged that some people were "misleading" the villagers.

What are the environmental concerns surrounding the project?

Several environmental concerns have also been flagged, especially as a large part of the project falls inside the Panna Tiger Reserve. Apart from displacement, the primary concern revolves around the proposed felling of trees. As per the Jai Shakti Ministry, approximately 17,101 trees had been identified for felling to facilitate the execution of the Daudhan Dam and allied infrastructure until July 2025. Of these, 12,404 trees have been felled within the Reserve Forest.

There is worry that the project may hurt the tiger reintroduction programme in the reserve which revived the feline population after it had locally gone extinct in 2009. Apart from tigers, species such as endangered vultures, mahseer fish, and gharials in the Ken Gharial Sanctuary are also feared to be impacted.

The Central government is yet to release hydrological data of the two basins claiming that they are sensitive by virtue of being subsets of the international Ganga basin.



The protest against the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project and other development projects, in Chhatrapur district, Madhya Pradesh. PTI

PROFILES

Masters of the midfield

Spanish football team

With aggressive defence and precise attack, La Roja's young champions blended the country's timeless philosophy of control with a more direct, adaptable style to win a second football World Cup

Anirudh Velamuri

In 2010, Spain reached the pinnacle of international football with a squad overflowing with established stars. A generation of world-class players combined technical brilliance, tactical intelligence and an unwavering belief in the power of possession to secure the nation's first FIFA World Cup title. The team that won its maiden World Cup title also lifted the European Championship before and after it. That squad set a benchmark for Spanish, nay, world football. For years, every side was forced to live in the shadows of that generation.

Comparisons became inevitable and only intensified after Spain's group-stage exit in 2014 and a pair of Round of 16 exits at the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. Every edition ended with the same question: Was Spain trying too hard to recreate the past? In 2026, the answer finally arrived in the form of another World Cup-winning side that respected its history without becoming trapped by it. This group, like that all-conquering generation, still valued technique above chaos and considered the ball an ally rather than something to be surrendered.

But they were also more open to embracing life beyond tiki-taka. They defended with greater aggression, attacked more directly when required and, above all, seamlessly married beautiful football with "ugly" decisions. They showed immense maturity for a squad that was one of the youngest in the entire tournament. Every nation prepared for one version of Spain and encountered a completely different one. Those expecting endless sideways passes were instead faced with quick vertical attacks. Those anticipating a fragile defence discovered a back line that relished physical battles. They made every new environment their own, turned every challenge into familiar ground. And they did so without losing their identity.

When La Roja opened its campaign with a frustrating goalless draw against tournament debutant Cape Verde, it



gave critics ammunition to question its credentials. But Luis de la Fuente's side, among the firm favourites early on, carried on unfazed.

If Austria was dismantled with authority, Portugal was bested through discipline. If Belgium was outmanoeuvred, France was comprehensively outplayed. If Argentina entered the final buoyed by Lionel Messi's last dance, La Albiceleste found itself stripped of both sentiment and solutions, suffocated by a side that made sure the

stadium stopped on its terms. The famous 2010 side, led by Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta, Xabi Alonso and Sergio Busquets, perfected possession football. They suffocated opponents with the ball and patiently waited to exploit the smallest defensive mistakes. While that side's victories were often narrow, they rarely felt fortunate. This year's champions inherited many of those principles but expressed them differently. If the 2010 side resembled an orchestra where every movement was carefully choreographed, this team felt more like a modern jazz ensemble. The

structure remained, but there was greater freedom within it.

Grace under pressure

Every great football nation has always had a personality. Brazil is celebrated for improvisation and individual creativity, Italy built its reputation on defensive intelligence, and Germany has often represented organisation, efficiency and physical strength.

At its heart, Spanish football has always been built on one simple conviction: the ball is the team's greatest defender. At the grassroots level all around the country, children are taught that possession is not merely a statistic but a form of control. Keep the ball to dictate the rhythm, choose where and how the game is played, and, consequently, prevent the opposition from attacking. It is football choreographed by geometry, brought to life by instinct.

The results are as clear as day. The country has a conveyor belt of footballers who appear comfortable in situations that would unsettle most.

Those who come out of the Spanish system stand out immediately, and

their technical superiority puts them in high demand.

Its style is often unfairly reduced to one word: possession. But possession was never the true objective; control was. While most players would look at ways to run past opponents, those from the Spanish schools look for ways to make the opponent move first. They might not always dominate through physical presence, but they excel because they understand where the game is going before others do.

It is not just world-class players that Spain produces time and again, but also talented head coaches that have established themselves as the game's best — like Pep Guardiola, Luis Enrique, the late Tito Vilanova, Unai Emery, Xabi Alonso and Andoni Iraola, to name a few.

De la Fuente has now taken his place among Spain's best. Incidentally, his entry into the national system began with him answering a job advertisement posted by the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) for youth team coaches, 18 months after being sacked by Deportivo Alaves in 2011. Initially handed a temporary

contract, the 65-year-old steadily rose through the youth ranks, winning the Under-19 and Under-21 Euros, before eventually taking charge of the senior national team. Today, he is the oldest manager to win the World Cup.

Evolution without dilution

The 2026 World Cup-winning team took that Spanish identity and imposed it with ruthless precision. Across 39 days, Spain proved that brain could still triumph over brawn at the very top of international football.

Every great Spanish team has its roots set in midfield. This campaign was no different. Led by captain and Ballon d'Or holder Rodri, it controlled and dictated the speed of the match — slow when opponents showed vulnerability. They controlled the match and refused to become frustrated even as the goal remained elusive. Argentina's defence resisted wave after wave for 105 minutes. A dozen Spaniards had a crack at goal, and somehow Emi Martinez stood tall. Time was slipping away, yet Spain stayed patient and refused to take its foot off the gas until it got to a point where a breakthrough felt inevitable.

It eventually came from Ferran Torres, a player that few would have picked as a game-winner. Doubts on his abilities only grew stronger when he hit the bar rather than the back of the net against Cape Verde and Uruguay earlier in the tournament. But on the biggest stage, fate finally smiled on him, as Torres provided the release with Spain's 20th shot of the night. In a tournament that featured the brilliance of Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland, Spain offered a different kind of reminder: that football's greatest force is often not an individual, but an idea shared by eleven players.

If the first star on Spain's shirt represents a generation that conquered the world by perfecting control, the second belongs to one that proved control could be reinvented. Perhaps Spain's biggest triumph, as the confetti settles, is proving that its golden generation is not merely a chapter in the past.

THE GIST

When La Roja opened its campaign with a frustrating goalless draw against tournament debutant Cape Verde, it gave critics ammunition to question its credentials

But Austria was dismantled with authority, Portugal was bested through discipline, Belgium was outmanoeuvred, France was comprehensively outplayed

In a tournament that featured the brilliance of Messi, Mbappe and Haaland, Spain offered a different reminder: that football's greatest force is often not an individual, but an idea shared by eleven players

In the eye of the storm

Dharmendra Pradhan

The Union Education Minister has tendered his resignation as protests over exam paper leak persisted, mounting pressure on the Narendra Modi government

Nistula Hebbar

Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation as Union Education Minister marks an unusual interlude in a political career that had enjoyed a steady rise. A controversy of such magnitude engulfed him that it became a contest between his staying in office and addressing the anxieties of an entire generation, with GenZ protests ultimately emerging victorious.

Nothing in Mr. Pradhan's career had foreshadowed such a denouement. Born in Talcher, Odisha, in 1969, he comes from a family long associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent organisation of the BJP. His father, Debendra Pradhan, was an RSS functionary, who joined the BJP in 1980. He was elected to the Lok Sabha from Deogarh and served as Union Minister for Surface Transport in the Vajpayee government from 1998 to 2001.

Mr. Pradhan started his political journey with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the RSS, and later became a member of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), the youth wing of the BJP. He earned a degree in Anthropology from Utkal University in Bhubaneswar.

In an ironic twist, foot-



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

age of an ABVP protest march Mr. Pradhan led to the Odisha Assembly in 1997 against an alleged exam paper leak — and in which he was beaten by the police — has resurfaced amid the anti-NEET protests. The three-decade gap between the two events encapsulates not only Mr. Pradhan's political journey but also the enduring problem of exam leaks and youth unrest.

He won his first Assembly election in 2000 from Pallahara, Odisha. His first Lok Sabha victory was in 2004 from Deogarh (when he also became national president of the BJYM). He then became the national secretary and national general secretary of the BJP and got elected to the Lok Sabha again in 2024. He has also served two terms as a member of the Rajya Sabha.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, Mr. Pradhan was made Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, a position he would hold for seven years, becoming the

country's longest-serving Petroleum Minister. He was the Minister when the Ujjwala Yojana of free cooking gas connections for the poor was launched. In 2021, he became the Education Minister, a portfolio that was ideologically most important to the Sangh Parivar.

Start of troubles

It is easy to assume that Mr. Pradhan's troubles began with the leak of the NEET exam paper in 2024, just as the third Modi government took office. The repeat leak in 2026 may appear to have been the final straw. In reality, however, much like Mr. Pradhan's own steady rise in the BJP, his political woes accumulated gradually, gathering momentum with each passing controversy.

It started with the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), whose teacher training manual described sex as "biological" and gender as "a social construct" — Sangh Parivar sympathisers denounced

this formulation as pushing a "woke agenda". This was followed by the University Grants Commission's (UGC) "equity regulations", which defined caste-based discrimination as discrimination "only on the basis of caste or tribe" against members of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), while prescribing no penalties for false complaints against those from the General Category. Then came the NEET paper leak, complaints by students about the CBSE marking process, alleged security vulnerabilities and answer-sheet mix-ups.

The middle class saw its belief in professional qualifications as a pathway to social mobility being undermined under the watch of a government it had backed for more than a decade. The right wing felt Mr. Pradhan, distracted by state politics, had been asleep at the wheel — negligent when he should have been vigilant. With the youth enraged, the right wing apathetic, and the newly minted Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) deploying a new grammar of protest, a storm was beginning to form.

The steady ascent of Mr. Pradhan's political career was halted by a generation-defining protest. For someone who hadn't stumbled once on his way to the top, it was an unexpected slip.

Vasudevan Mukunth

"We'll be hitting that area very probably pretty soon, and there's not a thing they can do about it," U.S. President Donald Trump recently said about Pickaxe Mountain, a geological formation around 220 km south of Tehran.

The locals call it Kuh-e Kolang Gaz La. Recent satellite images showed a flurry of activity around the formation, including the movement of vehicles, and entrances to what appear to be tunnels. What is under the mountain is not clear, although Israeli intelligence seems to believe it houses a part of Iran's nuclear programme.

Pickaxe Mountain is part of the Karkas Range, or Reshteh Kuh-e Karkas. It extends for more than 100 km in a northwest-southeast "diagonal" between the cities of Kashan and Ardestan and is named for its highest summit, Mount Karkas, which rises to about 3.9 km above sea level in the midst of an arid plateau. The Range is part of the Urumieh-Dokhtar magmatic belt, and its mountains hold evidence of millions of years of volcanic activity and tectonic deformation. Specifically, the Urumieh-Dokhtar belt developed as the Neo-Tethyan Ocean subducted beneath the Iranian continental margin before



REUTERS

Arabia finally collided with Eurasia, in the last 66 million years.

The tectonic activity generated large quantities of calc-alkaline magma and thick lava flows and the attendant accumulations of volcanic breccia and ash deposits. Thus, much of the bedrock exposed in the Karkas Range consists of volcanic rocks such as andesite and rhyolite together with pyroclastic deposits and younger sedimentary units.

A 2019 study led by Panthea Giahchi of the Geological Survey and Mineral Exploration of Iran (GSMEI) reported that the landforms of the Karkas massif were shaped by rock type and climate together. The range sports steep ridges, landslide deposits, rock-falls, and extensive alluvial sediments. Andesite rocks are generally more dense and mechanically strong masses and rhyolite rocks often (though not always) host many fractures.

According to some regional GSMEI maps, the Range is also dissected by

numerous faults, creating a structurally complex formation. This is why understanding how specific parts of the Range will respond to missile strikes and explosions is complicated.

Volcanic landscape

Within this craggy volcanic landscape sits Pickaxe Mountain, in the form of a ridge just south of Natanz. Despite its prominence, there appear to be no peer-reviewed geological studies of the mountain: most assessments in the public domain are based on geological maps and satellite data, and details extrapolated from what is known about the Karkas Range itself. GSMEI maps indicate that Pickaxe Mountain also consists of volcanic rocks such as andesite, rhyolite, dacite, and their associated pyroclastic units — and with variations in the lithology, density of fractures, faulting patterns, weathering, and groundwater intrusion together affecting its mechanical characteristics. Andesites, rhyolites, and volcanic tuffs transmit

seismic and shock waves differently from one another. The fault zones also create planes of weakness that in turn influence the stress response of the adjacent rock mass.

Geological uncertainty is often pronounced in projects involving volcanic rocks. To excavate Pickaxe Mountain itself, local experts might have characterised the rock units, charted their fractures and faults, tested their mechanical properties in the lab, and only then planned the excavation.

But as much as volcanic rocks complicate an excavation, they could complicate a bombing as well. In fact, andesite, dacite, rhyolite, and basalt often require more energy than many sedimentary rocks to fracture. And while natural fractures sound like flaws, they can scatter stress waves by splitting the energy up among many discontinuous formations.

In fact, Pickaxe Mountain may be a symbol of Iran's geo-strategic riches. Its volcanic geology could make deep penetration more difficult. Any ground campaign would have to navigate a rugged landscape. And the surrounding maritime network has three major chokepoints — the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal — giving Iran and its allies outsized opportunities to disrupt maritime traffic.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2026

WITH FOREX RESERVES PLUMMETING TO JUST \$1.1 BILLION IN JUNE, BARELY ENOUGH TO PAY FOR 2-3 WEEKS OF ESSENTIAL IMPORTS, THE RBI PROPOSED PLEDGING 50 TONNE OF GOLD TO RAISE FOREIGN EXCHANGE

A 'golden' fix for India's forex stress?

OFF THE
RECORD

■ P VADYANATHAN IYER

THERE IS A tricky proposal engaging the government at the highest levels over the past 3-4 weeks. An empowered group of ministers has met twice to discuss it. Officials in the Prime Minister's Office are seized of the issues connected with this idea. And the Cabinet Secretariat, the office responsible for government administration, has held meetings with those in the business to better understand the concerns, and ways to address them.

The thought behind the proposal probably has its origins in an austerity measure proposed by the PM at a public meeting in Hyderabad on May 10. In the backdrop of the West Asian crisis that led to a surge in oil prices, Modi had urged people to refrain from buying gold during festivals for a year, besides conserving fuel, restricting foreign travels, etc. The proposal, which has generated some interest among the few who are privy to it, is to launch a

voluntary gold disclosure scheme. The idea seems to be to collect gold lying idle in private hands — that is, what people accumulated over the years for investment (bars, coins), not what they bought for consumption (jewellery) — and put it to use to reduce imports, and preserve foreign exchange.

In India, gold has huge sentimental value, has cultural and religious connections; but it has also been leveraged by governments during emergencies, be it during wars or economic crises. Most recently, in the early 1990s, when India faced an economic crisis, the government and the Reserve Bank of India saw a 'golden' opportunity. To bolster the country's forex, the RBI was fully on board when the State Bank of India pledged 20 tonne of gold confiscated from smugglers with the Union Bank of Switzerland in May 1991 to raise about \$200 million. But this wasn't enough.

With forex reserves plummeting to just \$1.1 billion in June, barely enough to pay for 2-3 weeks of essential imports, the RBI proposed pledging 50 tonne of gold to raise foreign exchange. This was approved by the caretaker government led by Chandra Shekhar, but executed post general elections by the new government under Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh. As much as 46.91 tonne was pledged to raise \$405 million; this too was paid back in



less than four months.

These may look small today, given that India imports more than 700 million tonne of gold a year, and its forex

reserves are robust at over \$675 billion. But the crisis was acute then, and this one drastic measure kickstarted the process of economic reforms that con-

tinues till date with some jerks, but has overall bipartisan political support.

Two years later, in 1993, as India became a bit comfortable on the forex front, it sought to bolster its gold reserves. The government experimented with an idea to bring private and unaccounted gold into the formal economy. It issued the Gold Bonds (Immunities and Exemptions) Ordinance, 1993, and, drawing from it, announced the Gold Bonds Scheme. The bonds had a five-year tenure, and after five years, subscribers were paid ₹40 per gram lump-sum interest, along with the gold deposited. A subscriber was required to deposit a minimum of 500 grams under the scheme, which was open for two months.

The biggest draw was it asked no questions from the subscribers about the nature and source of gold, or the money used to buy the gold. It also promised the government would not start any inquiry or investigation against the subscribers. In all, the total gold received under the scheme was 41.12 metric tonne, valued at ₹1,534.40 crore.

Thirty-three years later, in May 2026, India faces a different gold problem. The West Asia crisis is not of the government's making, but is exerting pressure on the Indian economy, and magnifying its vulnerabilities. India imports bulk of its crude oil needs;

crude oil prices have once again topped \$100 a barrel, which means India's import bill will soar. This can't be avoided. But what can be is the massive gold imports, which only worsens the current account deficit (when the money spent on imports is more than the money earned from exports, it leads to a deficit).

Sajjid Chinooy, a part-time member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, points out that gold demand has remained largely intact (over 720 tonne) despite a more than doubling of prices in the last three years. A research by him and his colleagues for JP Morgan says 50% of this demand in January-March 2026 was for investment (in gold bars and coins). In January-March 2003, it was just 30%. The biggest factor that made the Gold Bond Scheme of 1993 a success was the government immunity to subscribers. But that required taxpayers, individuals and corporations to have trust in the system. Here, many in the government agree, there is considerable work to be done. But there are other options to explore too on increasing the attractiveness of a financial product linked to gold.

It's a 'golden' problem to solve.

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express. Off the Record is a fortnightly column

Hosting World Cup no diplomatic feat

RINGSIDE
VIEW

TUSHAR BHADURI

'THE WORLD'S MINE OYSTER'

This phrase was reportedly first used by William Shakespeare in his play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It means having absolute freedom and limitless opportunities to do whatever one wants and achieve what one desires. US President Donald Trump can be accused of many ills, but humility isn't one of them. Hence, the line is apt for describing what he thinks of himself and his place in the scheme of things in the world.

How else can one explain his reported backing for FIFA president Gianni Infantino as the next United Nations secretary-general? The tenure of incumbent Antonio Guterres ends in December, and his successor has to be elected by then.

The UN secretary-general can be called the most high-profile diplomat in the world, and the role requires a great deal of knowledge, experience and expertise about a large number of issues. Guterres served as the Prime Minister of Portugal from 1995 to 2002, and according to various polls, has been considered among the best. He was also the UN High Commissioner of Refugees before becoming secretary-general in 2016. In contrast, before taking over as FIFA president, Infantino was head of the European football confederation UEFA.

Apart from the professional eligibility for the post, there is the small matter of being elected, even if one has the backing of arguably the most powerful man in the world. Six candidates have already thrown their hats in the ring for the top job at the UN, and all of them have been either presidents, vice-presidents or foreign ministers of their respective countries, or heads of other UN agencies.

But Trump is unlikely to be swayed by such small print. He believes Infantino to be widely respected and capable of bringing people together, based on what he has done over the past few months. It's well known that the two have worked together in the lead-up and during the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which the United States co-hosted with Mexico and Canada. Conferring the first-ever FIFA Peace Prize on the US President wouldn't have hurt their relations either.

Having his way

The just-concluded World Cup, the first to feature 48 teams, was touted as a big success, but it was not without controversy on and off the field. Trump and his administration could do as they pleased, whether it was not allowing a Somali refugee to set foot on American soil or getting a red card on a US player set aside before a knockout game. The astronomical prices of tickets also burnt a hole in many fans' pockets, and kept the tournament beyond the means of many of them. This is apart from all the in-match controversies and the VAR (Video Assistant Referee) talking points and charges of favouritism against one particular team. Also, the introduction of hydration breaks, bringing football closer to American sports with their four quarters, as well as the half time in the final stretching to nearly half an hour instead of the usual 15 minutes.



President Donald Trump with FIFA President Gianni Infantino

Hardly any edition of the FIFA World Cup can indeed be called totally free from controversy, but staging of a tournament — successful or otherwise — can't become the basis for giving the chief executive a much larger diplomatic post, that would be responsible for maintaining peace and order throughout the world.

But according to the US President, Trump is right about everything. If Infantino can stage the biggest FIFA World Cup in history — even though the administrative side was totally controlled by the Trump administration — he is worthy of any major assignment.

Legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly once said: "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that." Trump wants to give a whole new spin to this idea. If Infantino can conduct a football tournament, he can bring peace in the Middle East, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, solve the US-Iran impasse and make the world a better place.

Salvation on the field

It's a mercy that the action on the field did the heavy lifting. The 2026 World Cup will be known for some unforgettable quality on the field. The best team won, even though its brightest young star Lamine Yamal was nowhere close to his best and was often peripheral to proceedings.

Spain had so many match-winners in their ranks, some of them even coming off the bench, that the spotlight was never monopolised by one player. It's a reflection of the *La Roja* side that triumphed in 2010, but even there, Xavi Hernandez

and Andres Iniesta were more celebrated than Rodri now. That team was never dependent on its forwards for goals, even though they had pedigree strikers like David Villa and Fernando Torres. Mikel Oyarzabal was their highest goal scorer in the 2026 tournament with five, but the Real Sociedad forward is still not a household name. Their next biggest contributor was Mikel Merino,

who came off the bench to salvage the situation against Portugal and Belgium.

Their success was built around a watertight defence that was breached just once in eight matches. If the back door remains permanently shut, it gives the attackers all the confidence they need to keep the opposition under sustained pressure. In terms of the team being the star, the side that comes closest would be the victorious West German side coached by Franz Beckenbauer and led by Lothar Matthaus in 1990. Ironically, Argentina were the opponents in that final as well and tried to break the rhythm of the superior team with overly defensive and physical play, hoping that their talisman (Diego Maradona) then, Lionel Messi now could provide one moment of inspiration that would make the difference. A record that could stay intact for a long time is Kylian Mbappe's tally of 22 goals, amassed in just three editions. Messi, whose record the Frenchman broke in the 10-goal third-place playoff, needed six tournaments.

In fact, Mbappe was widely tipped to lead Les Bleus to their third crown before their juggernaut was brought to a halt by the eventual champions in the semifinals. All this shows that however the administrators and politicians try to push their vested agendas on sport, the action on the field, more often than not, has the final say.

INSIDE
TRACK
COOMI KAPOOR

Politics' watershed moment

Whatever the final outcome, it is a watershed moment in Indian politics, thanks to Gen Z. Traditional politicians, including Rahul Gandhi, have been left behind and are clambering onto the bandwagon of spirited, faceless youngsters. The Modi government's grand design to push through its agenda of securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament in this session has stalled, not because its cynical game of accumulating MPs who have lost their moral compass has misfired, but because of the power of a spontaneous movement, which has captured the country's imagination and sympathy, cutting across economic strata and traditional ideologies. Even the BJP's elder statesman, Murli Manohar Joshi, voiced his support. The freespirted harbingers of change, with their irrelevant memes and catchy Instagram reels, have outshone the traditional media — constrained by market compulsions and distribution networks. A section of television journalists were booed and booed out of the protest epicentre at Jantar Mantra.

Alas, the mod does not act in tandem. Akhilesh Yadav indicated Congress should not speak on behalf of all opposition before consultations. Sonam Wangchuk's wife, Gitanjali, questioned the motives of both Rahul Gandhi and the BJP. AAP leaders dubbed the Congress the BJP's B-team, accusing it of opportunistically entering the campaign. Chandra Shekhar Azad's party workers booted the way ahead of others in tearing down police barricades to make way for the students. The BJP's self-effacing spokespersons voiced no fear of being overshadowed and welcomed support from all quarters. But they are probably conscious that even they have no total command over the disparate sea of humanity. In his puzzling admanancy in not removing Dharmendra Pradhan, a non-negotiable demand of the protesters, the PM put both his government and personal reputation on the line. Eventually, however, better sense finally prevailed. The PM perhaps recalled the lessons of history. Even Jawaharlal Nehru perforce agreed to Krishna Menon quitting his Cabinet. Indira Gandhi reluctantly acceded to the students' demand for Gujarat Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel's resignation, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee requested George Fernandes to step down as defence minister.

Forerunner to second departure?

Former BJP Tamil Nadu President K Annamalai, a member from the party last month is believed to be a forerunner to

B L Santhosh — the BJP's powerful national general secretary (organisation and coordination) between the RSS and the party — being marginalised. Annamalai, a former IPS officer, was Santhosh's protégé and appointed party president in 2021. The newbie's brash political confidence turned out to be totally off the mark, as proved by the BJP's disastrous electoral performance in this year's state assembly poll. Removed as BJP president last year, Annamalai claims he left the party of his own volition, but insiders recall a stormy meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi before he quit.

Watch your explanation

It was a brief birthday party for Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday. After the cake was cut at his home, Rahul Gandhi informed the astonished host and unprepared guests that they would all march to the PM's residence nearby to stage a *dharma* in support of the students. Karnataka CM D K Shivakumar was present, but Kerala CMVD Satheesan, who was in Delhi, had to be hastily summoned to Lok Kalyan Marg. Satheesan was noticeably tight-lipped during the sloganeering and flew back to Kerala soon after. Questioned by scribes back home about his abrupt departure from the capital, Satheesan claimed that Rahul Gandhi had pointed at his wristwatch and asked him to rush to the airport, else he would miss his flight. The only snag is that Gandhi does not wear a watch!

Reel timeline story

It is hardly coincidental that controversial films with a political message, such as *Uda Punjab*, *Kerala Story* and *Kashmir Files*, were released shortly before an assembly poll in the states concerned. In each case, the film's theme discredited the BJP's rival parties. Similarly, *Satish* has gone viral before next year's Punjab assembly polls. The movie was held up for three years by the CBF, which demanded 12 cuts. But this month, the uncensored film was released on Zee 5 Global on the plea that OTT platforms are not certified by the CBF. Although the film was removed within two days, by this time, as to be expected, the film's link had gone viral. The autobiography of Zee TV's pragmatic businessman-owner, Subhash Chandra, makes clear that his motto is to respect the wishes of the government of the day. And sceptics believe the movie's release was unlikely without a nod from the powers that be.

The Pioneer AGENDA

We live in a society
exquisitely dependent on
science and technology,
in which hardly anyone
knows anything about
science and technology.
— Carl Sagan

India Innovates

From inventing zero to powering billions of digital transactions through UPI, India has consistently turned everyday challenges into creative, scalable solutions for the world. Its spirit of innovation draws strength from the fusion of ancient wisdom and cutting-edge technology. Whether through the digital revolution, remarkable achievements in space exploration or grassroots ingenuity, India has demonstrated a unique ability to adapt technology to its diverse and complex needs

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

India has been a country of seekers. In ancient India, exploration was a way of life. It had strong traditions of study of astronomy, medical science, mathematics, and metallurgy, which fuelled its growth and made it one of the richest nations in the world. However, somewhere down the line, that zeal faded and India fell behind in the race of scientific achievements. We missed the Industrial Revolution and became dependent upon the West for products, machinery and technology that always came with caveats. After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru took the initiative to launch India into scientific orbit again. Atomic research and other cutting-edge technology initiatives were launched. Though modest at that time, over the years they grew into institutions that we can be proud of. The seeds of innovations were always present in India's DNA, but now those seeds are sprouting.

On July 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off India's first indigenously built hydrogen-powered train on an unassuming 89-kilometre stretch between Jind and Sonapat in Haryana. Barely a day later, a Hyderabad-based startup's Vikram-1 rocket lifted off from Sriharikota and settled into a 450-kilometre orbit, making Skyroot Aerospace the first private Indian company - and India only the third nation after the United States and China - to reach orbit with a privately built launch vehicle. These two events were representative of India's resurgence as an innovating nation. It captured something real: India's technological ambitions are no longer confined to white papers and five-year missions. Across railways, space, defence and semiconductors, indigenous innovation is beginning to show up in hardware, balance sheets and export invoices.

A rocket and a railway: Twin symbols of a wider shift

The hydrogen train, christened "NaMo Green Rail," is a retrofitted ten-coach Diesel Electric Multiple Unit powered by a 1,200-kilowatt fuel cell system that combines hydrogen and oxygen to generate electricity, releasing only water vapour. Designed by the Integral Coach Factory to specifications drawn up by the Research, Design and Standards Organisation, and fuelled by an electrolysis-based green hydrogen plant at Jind, it places India alongside Germany, Japan, China and the United States among the small number of countries running hydrogen-powered passenger rail - part of Indian

Railways' stated ambition to be net-zero by 2030.

Vikram-1's achievement is more structurally significant. Its four-stage vehicle - three solid-fuel stages topped by a liquid-propellant kick stage - carried technology-demonstration payloads for Skyroot itself and three other Indian startups. ISRO and IN-SPACE supplied testing facilities, trajectory support and the launchpad, but the vehicle, the capital and the commercial risk were private. Skyroot became India's first space-technology unicorn after a \$60-million funding round in May, and the government now counts more than 400 space startups nationwide, with an official ambition to grow the domestic space economy nearly fivefold, from roughly \$9 billion to \$45 billion, over the next decade. The company is already developing the larger Vikram-2, slated for a first flight in 2027 with roughly three times the payload capacity - a sign that Skyroot is building for a launch cadence, not a single demonstration flight.

Hardening the strategic edge

Parallel gains are visible in defence. In May, DRDO successfully flight-tested an Agni-series missile fitted with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle technology from Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Island off Odisha - a capability that lets one missile engage several separated targets, and one that only a small number of nuclear-armed states possess. The test came almost exactly a year after Operation Sindoor, the May 2025 clashes with Pakistan that exposed both militaries' growing reliance on drones and accelerated India's own unmanned-systems programme.

That acceleration is now visible in the numbers. The armed forces' UAV inventory grew from under a dozen platforms in 2020 to more than 140 across nine categories by March 2026, and the defence ministry is preparing what industry bodies describe as its largest-ever drone order, worth upward of \$2 billion and reserved for domestic manufacturers. Indigenous programmes such as the stealth Chetak combat drone are moving from design toward public demonstration.

The production and export numbers reinforce the picture. Defence output touched a record Rs 1.78 lakh crore in FY26, up 15.6 percent on the year and more than double the FY21 figure, according to the Ministry of Defence. Exports climbed 62.66 percent to ₹38,424 crore, spanning BrahMos missiles, Akash air-defence systems, Pinaka rocket launchers and Swathi radars sold to more than 80 countries. Yet the limits of self-reliance remain visible too: HAL's indigenous Tejas MkIA fighter, ordered 83-strong in 2021, has faced repeated delivery delays tied to General Electric's F404 engine supply chain - a reminder that even flagship "Make in India" platforms still lean on foreign propulsion.

The race for digital sovereignty

Semiconductors and artificial intelligence form the third leg of this story. The Union Cabinet's mid-July approval of "Semicon 2.0" extends the ₹76,000-crore India Semiconductor Mission into equipment, design IP and R&D centres, building on a portfolio that has already drawn roughly ₹1.64 lakh crore in approved investment



THIS HYDROGEN TRAIN HAS 3200 HORSEPOWER, AND INDIA'S HYDROGEN TRAIN IS ALSO THE LONGEST. THE HYDROGEN TRAINS CURRENTLY OPERATING AROUND THE WORLD HAVE ONLY 3 OR 4 COACHES. AND FOR THE FIRST TIME, INDIA HAS MADE ITS MARK ON THE WORLD BY OPERATING A HYDROGEN TRAIN WITH 10 COACHES

— Prime Minister Narendra Modi

R&D

India's biggest strengths

- Space technology has become India's flagship scientific success, combining high reliability with low-cost innovation.
- Affordable engineering allows India to achieve globally competitive outcomes at significantly lower costs.
- Digital public infrastructure, AI deployment and biotechnology provide strong foundations for future innovation.

Areas where India still lags

- Advanced semiconductor fabrication (sub-5 nm chips).
- Frontier AI foundation models comparable to those from the US and China.
- Nobel Prize-level basic scientific research and R&D intensity.
- Commercialisation of university research and deep-tech startups at the scale seen in the US.
- Overall R&D spending remains around 0.7 per cent of GDP, well below countries such as South Korea, and the US, limiting the pace of scientific breakthroughs.

INDIA CLIMBED TO 38TH PLACE IN THE WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANISATION'S GLOBAL INNOVATION INDEX IN 2025

across a dozen projects. Assembly and testing plants run by Micron, Tata Electronics and CG Semt are now operational in Gujarat and Assam; the flagship Tata Electronics-PSMC wafer fab at Dholera, built with the Taiwanese technology partner and backed by an ASML equipment agreement, is targeting first silicon by the end of 2026 - at mature process nodes rather than cutting-edge ones, a realistic if modest opening move into fabrication.

Design work is advancing faster than fabrication: in February, Qualcomm announced the tape-out of a 2-nanome-

THESE TWO EVENTS WERE REPRESENTATIVE OF INDIA'S RESURGENCE AS AN INNOVATING NATION. INDIA'S TECHNOLOGICAL AMBITIONS ARE FOR REAL

tre chip design from its engineering centres in Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad - now its largest engineering base outside the United States - a reminder that India's semiconductor story runs through advanced chip design as much as through its newer assembly lines.

In artificial intelligence, the IndiaAI Mission has onboarded more than 38,000 GPUs for subsidised access by startups and researchers, working toward a stated target of 100,000 by year-end, while government-backed Sarvam AI has released open-weight foundation models trained substantially on Indian-language data.

From milestones to momentum

These are not isolated technical feats; they are beginning to register in the wider economy. India's Production-Linked Incentive schemes, spanning fourteen sectors, had attracted cumulative investment of more than ₹2.4 lakh crore and generated ₹15.2 lakh crore in exports and roughly 14 lakh jobs by March 2026, according to the Commerce Ministry. Electronics manufacturing - anchored by mobile phones - has turned India from a net importer in 2014 into the world's second-largest producer, with output more than doubling since FY20. Defence tells a similar story: private industry's share of production rose from 22 to 24 percent in a single year, worth around ₹42,000 crore, as firms ranging from Adani Defence to smaller MSMEs enter a supply chain once dominated entirely by public-sector undertakings.

The cumulative effect shows up in India's climb to 38th place in the World Intellectual Property Organisation's Global Innovation Index in 2025, up from 81st a decade earlier - one of the longest-running "innovation overperformers" rel-

ative to its income level, in WIPO's own description. For an economy still classified as lower-middle-income, that ranking, paired with record defence exports and a functioning private launch industry, lends some empirical weight to the government's argument that India is moving from consuming imported technology toward producing and exporting it - with implications for high-skill employment, foreign investment in strategic sectors, and India's negotiating position in technology partnerships with the United States, Japan and the European Union.

The gaps that still need closing

The momentum, however, sits on uneven foundations. India's gross expenditure on research and development has been stuck near 0.64 percent of GDP for nearly two decades, the Economic Survey 2025-26 noted - against roughly 2.4 percent in China, 3.5 percent in the United States and almost 5 percent in South Korea. The shortfall is structural, not just financial: private industry contributes only about 41 percent of India's R&D spending, versus 75 to 79 percent in those three economies, and a large share of publicly funded research stalls in what the Survey calls the "valley of death" between laboratory prototype and market-ready product. A ₹20,000-crore Research, Development and Innovation fund announced in this year's budget is meant to address that gap, but utilisation of comparable past allocations has historically lagged well behind the money made available.

Other constraints are more familiar: slow-moving defence and space procurement cycles, uneven protection and commercialisation of intellectual property, a shortage of manufacturing-grade engineering talent even as design talent grows, and continued dependence on imported components - jet engines, lithography equipment, high-end GPUs - for the most demanding systems. Sustaining the present momentum will need deeper private R&D participation, faster disbursement of already-committed funds, procurement pipelines steady enough to justify industrial investment, and a deliberate push up the value chain from assembly and packaging toward design and fabrication.

INDIA'S MOST SIGNIFICANT SCIENTIFIC & TECHNOLOGICAL ACHIEVEMENTS (2021-2026)

SPACE EXPLORATION

Chandrayaan-3 soft landing near the Moon's south pole (2023): India became the first nation to land near the lunar south pole, opening new possibilities for future lunar exploration and resource studies.

Lunar landing nations: US, USSR/Russia, China, India and first at the south pole.

SOLAR SCIENCE

Aditya-L1 Solar Observatory (2023): India's first dedicated solar mission is studying solar winds, coronal heating and space weather that affect satellites and communication systems.

India is one of the few countries operating a dedicated solar observatory in space.

COMMERCIAL SPACE

Skyroot's Vikram-1 (2026): India's first privately developed orbital rocket reached orbit, marking the arrival of an indigenous commercial launch industry and validating space-sector reforms.

India has joined a very small group of countries with successful private orbital launch capability.

SEMICONDUCTORS

Indigenous space processors and NavIC chips: Development of the Vikram processor, indigenous ASICs and Gallium Nitride technologies reduces dependence on imports in strategic electronics.

India is rapidly strengthening chip design and strategic semiconductor capabilities.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

IndiaAI Mission and sovereign AI infrastructure: India has invested in public AI compute, multilingual foundation models and AI applications in healthcare, agriculture and governance.

India is fast emerging as one of the top five AI ecosystems by talent and scale.

GREEN TRANSPORTATION

India's first indigenous hydrogen-powered train (2026): Hydrogen fuel-cell rail technology offers a zero-emission alternative for non-electrified routes and supports India's net-zero ambitions.

India joins a select group including Germany, China and Japan - experimenting with hydrogen rail systems.

QUANTUM TECHNOLOGY

Quantum Key Distribution (QKD) for secure communications: DRDO's successful field trials of indigenous QKD strengthen cybersecurity for defence and critical infrastructure.

India is among fewer than 20 countries actively developing operational quantum communication technologies.

BIOTECHNOLOGY & VACCINES

COVID-19 vaccines and biotechnology ecosystem: India developed indigenous vaccines, supplied doses globally and expanded biotechnology manufacturing and genomic capabilities.

India is one of the world's largest vaccine manufacturers and a major global biotechnology hub.

Sawan: The sacred flavours of the monsoon



**ANIL
RAJPUT**

Some seasons announce themselves through abundance. Sawan arrives through patience and restraint. As rain darkens the earth and draws the scent of wet soil into homes, the sacred month asks the devotee to slow down and turn eating into an act of attention. In North India, Sawan begins on Thursday, July 30, 2026, under the Purnimanta lunar calendar. Across much of western and southern India, the corresponding month begins on August 13 under the Amanta system. It is not a single feast day with one prescribed menu, but a month-long discipline shaped by worship, fasting, pilgrimage, agriculture and rain. More than celebration, Sawan teaches patience. Its cuisine reveals how Indian households learned to respond to rain not by withdrawing from food, but by making food more thoughtful.

The month carries different names as it travels through India's languages and calendars. Its classical Sanskrit form is Shrawana. Across much of Hindi-speaking North India it is commonly called Sawan or Savaan. Maharashtra and Gujarat generally use Shrawan, while Shrawana is familiar in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In Bengal it is known as Srabon, in Odisha as Srabana, and in Assam as Xaun or Saon. Tamil tradition observes the corresponding seasonal period through Avani, although its solar calendar does not align exactly with the lunar month followed elsewhere. These differences show how one sacred season has been absorbed into many regional cultures.

The relationship between rain, food and the sacred reaches deep into India's civilisational memory. In the Rigveda, Parjanya is praised as the life-giving power of rain whose arrival makes plants rise and food spring forth for living beings. The Taittiriya Upanishad later gives food an explicitly spiritual dignity, teaching that food must not be despised and presenting annam as fundamental to life itself. The familiar idea of "Annam Brahma" asks the eater to recognise food as part of the order sustaining creation. Later Puranic and devotional traditions placed Sawan especially under the grace of Shiva. The month recalls the Samudra Manthan, when Shiva consumed halahala to protect the worlds, and the tapasya of Parvati, whose devotion became a model of patience, resolve and sacred union. Jalabhishek, Sawan Somwar fasts and the Kanwar pilgrimage arise within this world of sacrifice and surrender.

Seasonal health traditions added another layer. Ayurveda's ritu-charya, or seasonal regimen, treats Varsha Ritu as a period when humidity, irregular weather and weakened digestive strength

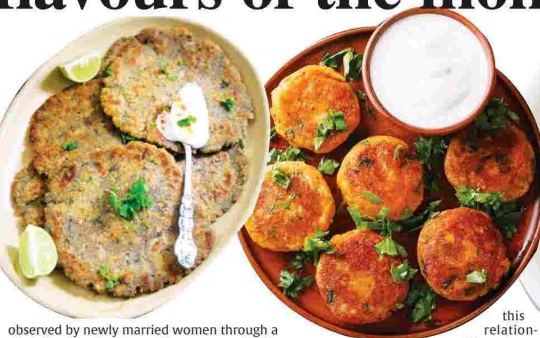
require moderation. The Charaka Samhita advises attention to food and digestion during the rains, favouring preparations that are warm, digestible and appropriately seasoned. Religious vrata and Ayurvedic guidance are distinct traditions, yet they meet naturally in Sawan. The fast limits indulgence, while the season favours moderate quantities and freshly cooked food. Ginger is traditionally used to answer the sluggishness associated with damp weather, sesame is regarded as warming, coconut as cooling, jaggery restores quick energy after restraint, and ghee is used sparingly for nourishment and satiety. Sawan cuisine is therefore a seasonal dialogue between climate, agriculture, health and devotion.

Even the ritual ingredients carry meanings beyond taste. The three leaflets of bilva are often understood as recalling Shiva's trident, his three eyes or the three gunas. Milk is commonly associated with purity and cooling surrender, curd with fertility and abundance, honey with the harmony of different essences, and jaggery with sweetness in human relationships. Turmeric, especially important in the monsoon kitchens of the western coast, signifies auspiciousness, fertility and protection. Such meanings vary, but they reveal why an offering is never merely decorative. Its physical character, seasonal place and symbolic value belong together.

This logic also explains why ordinary grains disappear from many fasting kitchens. Wheat, rice and common pulses may be set aside as part of religious discipline, while ingredients placed in a different ritual category take their place. Rajgira, or amaranth, is a seed rather than a cereal grain. Kuttu is buckwheat, singhara flour is made from water chestnut, and sama is barnyard millet. They allow the devotee to eat within the boundaries of the vrata and produce a cuisine with techniques of its own.

A North Indian Sawan meal may begin with Singhare ki Kadihi, in which water chestnut flour is whisked into fresh curd, seasoned with cumin, ginger, green chilli and rock salt, and simmered until smooth. Some families avoid curd during the rains, while others accept it fresh and thoroughly cooked. Kele aur Singhade ki Tikki combines boiled raw banana with water chestnut flour and mild spices before the patties are shallow-cooked until crisp outside and tender within. A third savoury option, Sama ke Chawal ka Dholka, uses soaked barnyard millet and curd to create a light, steamed preparation after a fast. Where fermented foods are avoided, the batter may be rested only briefly and raised with lemon or fruit salt.

The sweet side of the northern vrat kitchen is equally distinctive. Rajgira Sheera is made by roasting amaranth flour slowly in ghee before adding warm milk or water, jaggery and cardamom. Its dense, nutty texture makes a small portion satisfying after a day of restraint. Ramdana Laddoo uses popped amaranth bound with warm jaggery syrup, turning a fasting ingredient into a sweet that can be offered, stored and shared. In Mithila, where Madhusravani is



observed by newly married women through a disciplined cycle of worship connected with Gauri and serpent deities, Makhana Kheer gives the region's own ingredient a ceremonial place. Fox nuts are roasted in ghee, simmered in milk and scented with cardamom for the restrained meal after worship.

As Sawan moves westward, faral becomes more elaborate. Gujarat's Farali Pattice encloses coconut, roasted peanuts, raisins and green chilli inside a mashed potato shell, which is shallow-fried until golden and served with vrat-friendly chutney. Maharashtra's Rajgira Thalipeeth combines amaranth flour with boiled potato, peanut powder, cumin and chilli before it is patted by hand and cooked on a griddle. Both provide energy and texture while preserving the discipline of the fast. Maharashtra's Shrawan is also marked by Mangala Gauri Tuesdays, when worship, songs and traditional games bring newly married women and their families together. Here the table moves from fasting to ritual celebration. Puraan Poli wraps a filling of chana dal, jaggery, cardamom and nutmeg inside soft wheat dough, while Ukadiche Modak encloses coconut and jaggery within steamed rice flour shells. Shrikhand, made by straining curd and blending it with sugar, saffron and cardamom, cools the meal. These are not strict vrat foods, because Sawan does not impose one rule on every day. It moves between private restraint and communal joy, proving that discipline and festivity can belong to the same sacred month.

In Rajasthan and neighbouring regions, Hariyali Teej gives the monsoon one of its most recognisable sweets in Ghevar. A thin batter is poured into hot ghee so that it forms a crisp, honeycombed disc, which is then lightly soaked in syrup and sometimes crowned with rabri and nuts. Ghevar travels from maternal homes to married daughters, carrying affection across households. Its delicate structure absorbs sweetness without losing form, much like Sawan itself, which receives the abundance of rain while asking the individual to remain inwardly steady.

Uttrakhand offers another expression of

this relationship through Shrawan Harela. Families sow seeds before the festival and cut the young shoots as symbols of fertility, renewal and a hoped-for harvest. Clay images of Shiva and Parvati may be worshipped, bringing divine union into direct conversation with soil and seed. Harela is less a feast than an agricultural prayer, and its significance strengthens the central truth of Sawan cuisine: before food reaches the plate, it begins as rain, earth, patience and cultivation.

Along the Konkan coast and in Karnataka, fresh turmeric and colocasia leaves shape the monsoon table. Patholi, also called patoleo or eeradeye, is made by spreading soaked rice paste over a turmeric leaf, adding coconut and jaggery, folding the leaf and steaming the parcel. When opened, the rice layer carries the leaf's deep monsoon fragrance. Its savoury companion, Patrode, layers colocasia leaves with a spiced rice and lentil paste before they are rolled, steamed and sliced into spirals. Karnataka's Nag Panchami traditions add Khara Kadubu, a steamed rice flour dumpling filled with seasoned lentils and coconut, and Tambittu, in which roasted grain or lentil flour is combined with jaggery, coconut and ghee. These dishes preserve hand skills that cannot survive through written recipes alone.

Farther south, Shrawana and Varalakshmi Vrat create another rich offering tradition. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Poornam Boorelu encloses a chana dal and jaggery filling inside a rice and urad batter before the spheres are fried until golden. Karnataka's Bele Holige, or obattu, rolls a similar filling within a thin flatbread and serves it warm with ghee. Tamil homes prepare Sweet Kozhukattai, steamed rice flour dumplings filled with coconut and jaggery. The savoury side appears in Kosambari, made with soaked moong dal, cucumber, coconut and lime, and in Guggulu or Sundal, where cooked legumes are tempered with mustard seeds, curry leaves and fresh coconut. These preparations are offered before they are shared, turning prosperity from private possession into collective blessing.

Toward the month's close, the western coast celebrates Narali Purnima, when fishing communities offer coconuts to the sea before returning to maritime work. Narali Bhaat carries that gratitude into the home. Rice is cooked with coconut, jaggery, cardamom, cloves and ghee until the grains are fragrant and lightly coated. The coconut becomes more than an ingredient. It is an offering to the waters, a prayer for safety and a reminder that livelihood remains dependent upon nature's permission.

Sawan also travels through acts of service. During the Shrawani Mela, Kanwaris collect Ganga water at Sultanganj in Bihar and walk to

Baidyanath Dham in Deogarh, Jharkhand, observing austerity along the route. Community kitchens, fruit, water and simple sattvik meals sustain the pilgrimage, turning nourishment into seva. In Kashmir, the Amarnath Yatra similarly reveals a cuisine of hospitality through langars that feed pilgrims in difficult terrain. Here the sacred meal is defined not by rarity, but by the willingness to cook for an unknown traveller.

The beverages of Sawan remain closely tied to ritual and recovery. Panchamrit, prepared from milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar, gathers several symbolic ingredients into one offering before it is received as prasada. Kesari Badam Milk restores energy gently after a fast, while cumin and ginger-scented Taak accompanies western Indian meals where household custom permits buttermilk. Southern offerings may include Panakam, a jaggery drink sharpened with dry ginger and cardamom. Tender coconut water, lemon water with rock salt and diluted fruit drinks also appear according to the rules of the vrat. The purpose is restoration without excess while preserving the stillness of the day.

Sawan is therefore not a single regional menu or an uninterrupted festival. It is patience made visible through food. It asks the household to recognise the rain praised since Vedic times, the sacred dignity of annam, the discipline of the vrata, the seasonal wisdom of ritu-charya and the labour hidden inside every ingredient. A water chestnut kadihi, an amaranth laddoo, a turmeric-lentil sweet, a lentil-filled dumpling, coconut rice and ghevar can all belong to the same civilisational story without surrendering their regional identities.

To carry Sawan forward, we must preserve more than its dates and dietary practices. We must ensure that future generations understand why grains are set aside, how jaggery binds popped amaranth, how rice paste is spread across a turmeric leaf, how a kadubu is folded, why seeds are sown for Harela and why naivedyam is offered before anyone eats. These traditions will survive only when families continue to cook them, explain their meaning and invite younger generations into the kitchen. A custom remembered only through photographs eventually becomes nostalgia, but a custom prepared, offered and shared remains alive. The truest tribute to Sawan is to ensure that its sacred flavours, its spirit of patience and its reverence for the monsoon continue to pass from one pair of hands to the next.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



When it rains, we crave

TEAM AGENDA

Monsoon showers transform the city. Heavy clouds gather suddenly, the stomach requires something hot, fried, heavily salted. Researchers attribute this sudden hunger shift straight to human biology. When grey skies steal the sunlight for consecutive days, the body suffers a temporary serotonin drop. The brain reacts fiercely to this deficit. It calls for fats, craving heavy carbohydrates to elevate those specific mood-regulating chemicals. Yielding occasionally to these rich urges makes complete sense. Plates piled high with crisp onion fritters, paired alongside scalding cups of crushed ginger tea, define the Indian wet season. The loud spit of hot oil mirrors the heavy downpour outside.

Consuming fried snacks nightly practically guarantees drag. Long downpours mean people want to graze continuously. Dry-roasting chickpeas in sharp turmeric with red chilli powder answers

ging through the next day with severe lethargy, making the smartest move swapping out heavy greases for clever, punchy flavours while local vendors press spiced sweet potato patties onto roaring iron surfaces until thick, blistered crusts form. A heavy pour of sharp tamarind water complements the plate. People experience the brilliant, chaotic thrill of eating outdoors, completely avoiding those heavy calories. Steamed moong sprouts serve as another fantastic option. Tossed wildly with raw chopped tomatoes, fresh mint leaves, plus fiery green chillies, this bowl delivers a massive, satisfying crunch.

Timeless classics remain vital. We see the vendor charring fresh corn cobs black over open flames, applying a rough rub of lime alongside rock salt. This entire process requires absolutely zero oil. Steaming boiled peanuts dusted with chaat masala crush mid-afternoon energy slumps instantly. Warm roadside snacks offer a brilliant, earthy alternative to greasy packaged crisps.

Long downpours mean people want to graze continuously. Dry-roasting chickpeas in sharp turmeric with red chilli powder answers

that specific urge. Anyone wanting a lighter bite can turn to foxnuts. A small portion tossed in a hot pan alongside one drop of ghee plus cracked black pepper works wonders.

These culinary traditions matter deeply, much like the wider cultural heritage we fight to preserve. History survives in these small daily acts. It lives within the crackle of roasting seeds, within spices bubbling away in a heavy pot. Damp evenings soon drop into freezing nights. Diners suddenly need proper comfort, served in a bowl. Nothing heats like a bowl of slow-simmered chicken broth thawing a person from the inside out, or perhaps a peppery mushroom broth spiked with crushed garlic working just as brilliantly.

The rainy months vanish fast. Eating an occasional fried treat remains a fine tradition, but keeping wholesome alternatives ready ensures a lively, balanced season.

Street vendors press spiced sweet potato patties onto roaring iron surfaces until thick, blistered crusts form



Discovering Türkiye's culinary traditions through authentic cuisine

TEAM AGENDA

Anatolian cuisine carries centuries of culinary history, shaped by diverse cultures and traditions that have passed through the region. From handcrafted mezze and aromatic kebabs to traditional desserts, its food reflects the rich regional heritage of Türkiye, where recipes, flavours and hospitality have been passed down through generations.

Bringing this culinary legacy to the Capital, "A Taste of Anatolia", an exclusive Turkish culinary festival at NYC, Radisson Blu Plaza Delhi Airport, offered diners a gastronomic journey through the rich and diverse culinary heritage of Türkiye. Curated by eighth-generation Ottoman Chef Gökhan Eser Kesen, the festi-



val showcased traditional regional recipes, signature delicacies and the warmth of Turkish hospitality. The festival was inaugurated by His Excellency Ali Murat Ersoy, Ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye to India, in the presence of diplomats, corporate leaders, media personalities and other distinguished guests. The occasion celebrated not only Turkish cuisine but also the enduring cultural ties between India and Türkiye. Guests were treated to a carefully crafted Anatolian feast featuring an array of handcrafted mezze, succulent traditional kebabs, regional specialties and iconic Turkish desserts. Each dish offered a glimpse into the culinary traditions that have shaped the region over generations.

The dining experience was complemented by a vibrant ambience inspired by the colours, aromas and traditions of Türkiye, transporting diners to the heart of Anatolia. The festival also highlighted the growing appetite for authentic global culinary experiences in the Capital. Savouring the flavours of Anatolia in Delhi offered diners more than a meal; it became an experience celebrating culture, culinary craftsmanship and the enduring spirit of Turkish hospitality.



ANATOLIAN MEANS FROM OR RELATING TO ANATOLIA, THE LARGE HISTORIC REGION THAT MAKES UP MOST OF MODERN-DAY TÜRKİYE (TURKEY)

Carefully tend the garden of your mind

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

The mind is a flow of thoughts. If there are no thoughts, there is no mind. If we wish to control our mind, we should become aware of our thoughts. We should always be alert about which thoughts to accept and which to reject. If not, they will become the cause of our ultimate ruin.

One day, a grandfather took his grandson to the zoo. There, they saw two lions in two cages next to each other. One of the lions would remain standing peacefully no matter who went near the cage. Even if someone tried to touch it, it would not become angry. It was obvious that the lion had become habituated to the presence of human beings.

The other lion would start to roar as soon as anyone went near. It would try to strike with its paws. Because of this, people would keep away from it. This grandfather asked, "Son, if these two lions were to fight each other, who would win?"

No matter how hard he thought, the grandson couldn't come up with an answer. Then, the grandfather said, "The lion that's fed more food will win."

Similar is the case with the thoughts in our mind. If we allow negative thoughts to proliferate, they will become strong. Negative qualities such as pride and anger will fill the mind. They will bring about inner and outer failure.

This indulgence in negative thoughts is the main cause of the violence, injustice and other problems that we see around us today. However, if we plant the seeds of positive thoughts, qualities such as love, compassion and patience will fill our hearts. Peace and contentment will blossom in society.

Often, we are not aware of the rise of thoughts. Weeds flourish where paddy grows. They should be rooted out at once. If not, they will absorb all the fertilizer and destroy the crops. Weeds proliferate very



WHEN ANGER AND HATRED TAKE ROOT IN THE MIND, IT BRINGS PAIN TO US AND ALL THOSE AROUND. WHEN LOVE AND COMPASSION BLOSSOM, THE WORLD BECOMES FRAGRANT

quickly even when we don't pay any attention to them.

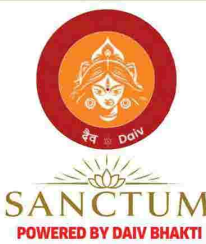
But we should give the crops we have planted sufficient water and fertilizer at the right time. We should spray insecticides to ensure that worms don't destroy the crops. It is thus necessary to tend them with utmost care and attention. In the same way, negative thoughts will flourish on their own; we don't need to try. However, in order to cultivate good thoughts, we need to make deliberate efforts.

Love, compassion and patience should become our very nature. Before this can happen, we should clear the weeds of egoism, selfishness, and likes and dislikes from the garden of our mind. We should evaluate each thought mindfully, reject the negative ones, and cultivate the positive ones.

Consider how hurt we feel if someone gets angry with us. For this reason, we should never become the cause of hurt to even one other person. Just as we feel so much happiness when someone behaves lovingly to us, we should be able to give others such happiness, too. If we have this attitude, we will be able to respond appropriately in any situation.

Love, patience and discrimination form the foundation of life. We need these more than learning or earning. If we have them, we will be able to gain everything else. Not understanding this truth, human beings are creating hell on this earth. It is the mind that illumines or darkens the path of life.

(Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known simply as Amma, is a spiritual master and humanitarian who has given her dharma in the form of a motherly embrace to more than 4 crore people. Listening to the cries of the suffering, Amma leads an NGO that reaches across more than 50 countries, working in the areas of healthcare, disaster relief, education, gender equality, and environmental restoration)



SADHGURU

Today, there is much talk about water scarcity and other ecological issues that humanity is facing. The fundamental behind all these problems is the human being. If any other species had perpetrated the kind of damage that we have to the planet, we would have found a way to deal with them. If billions of Martian locusts landed here and began to cut through all our trees, turn our soil into deserts, and suck the water out of our rivers — we would have definitely exterminated them. But the problem is not alien locusts. The problem is us.

Since we are the source of the problem, we can also be the source of the solution. We are a problem only because we are in an unconscious, compulsive mode of action. If we were conscious, we would naturally be a solution. This is why I have been working with United Nations agencies and other forces, and proposing this idea of a "Conscious Planet" movement.

Vote for Ecology

There are 5.2 billion people living in countries with the ability to vote and elect their nation's leadership. We are looking at how to get at least three billion people on board so that ecological issues become the issues that elect governments. We want to make these three billion people aware of at least five ecological aspects that must happen in their country, and two or three aspects that must not happen. If we do this, ecology will become if not number one, at least the number two issue in election manifestos.

As a part of the Conscious Planet movement, I am trying to bring focus to the most important aspect of rejuvenating this planet: the soil. Everything you see as life on this planet — includ-



ing worms, insects, birds, animals, plant life, and ourselves — happens out of just thirty-nine inches of soil profile. The real damage is happening to this topsoil, which sustains every life that we know. If we can ensure the soil is organically rich and healthy, the planet will be capable of regenerating itself, and we will be able to manage the other problems, to a large extent.

Right now over 95 per cent of the global population have absolutely no awareness of the ecological disaster building around them. Ecological awareness is confined only to a small segment of people, and even among them, the idea of ecology is largely limited to using less water while showering or turning off the tap when brushing teeth. It is wonderful that people are conscious about what they are using, but this is not a comprehensive ecological solution. Only when ecology becomes an election issue, will it become government policy, and only then will there be large budgets allocated so that solutions manifest.

Restoring Ecology Is Profitable

If we want to make this happen, there has to be a marriage between economy and ecology. Today, we have structured society such that ecology and economy are in conflict with each other. If we pitch ecology versus economy, economy will always win. You can see this happening

everywhere in the world. But restoring ecology can actually be very lucrative. This is the essence of our Cauvery Calling campaign, to revitalize River Cauvery in southern India.

We have been looking at transitioning farmers from short-term farming to long-term agroforestry — tree-based agriculture, the practice of tree cultivation along with other crops. In this process, farmers would plant 2.42 billion trees in the Cauvery River basin. This will cover one third of the basin under shade, in turn increase ground water levels and bring back the river flow. Moreover, farmers will benefit from improved soil fertility, better crop yields, and above all, an exponential surge in their income. In the Cauvery basin, we have converted 263,306 farmers into tree-based agriculture and within five to seven years, their wealth has increased by 300-800 per cent. We want to make Cauvery Calling a demonstrable large-scale model that can be replicated for other rivers.

(Ranked amongst the fifty most influential people in India, Sadhguru is a yogi, mystic, visionary and a New York Times bestselling author. Sadhguru has been conferred the Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India in 2017, the highest annual civilian award, accorded for exceptional and distinguished service. He is also the founder of the world's largest people's movement, Conscious Planet - Save Soil, which has touched over 4 billion people)

GURU PURNIMA SPECIAL

How Do We Find A Guru?

Sometimes people are simply given the knowledge and their life blossoms

GURUDEVI SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Once, there was a very talented teacher. He was a great orator. He could speak and convince people very well. He had a fair knowledge of scriptures, and spiritual techniques too. But he did not feel complete. He was in search of a Master. Though he was honoured by the king and the public, there was something that was out of reach. He just wanted to surrender to a Master, but who could he surrender to?

Only when time comes, does the Master arrive in one's life. Such a time had almost come for the teacher. When he was departing from the kingdom, the king said, "It's so far away, you cannot walk. You take my palanquin." The man sat in the palanquin and started on his journey of seeking his Master. When he arrived in the town, he asked to be taken to the Master. Then, one of the men who was carrying the palanquin, came forward and said, "Here I am." The moment was one of eternal beauty. The man fell to the feet of the Master and said, "How could you do this? Since when are you carrying me?" The Guru said, "I heard that you are coming to see me. So I came half way to receive you."

The Master had come half the way and carried the palanquin of the disciple. He said, "You take one step towards the Master and the Master takes 10 steps towards you." The disciple was to take that first step. That's the story of the tradition of Masters.

It is immaterial whether you choose the Master, or the Master has chosen you. When the time comes, everything falls in place. Sometimes people are simply given the knowledge and their life blossoms. Then there are others, who seek the Master and the tradition is lost. But anyone on the path of wisdom should know that they are the chosen ones.

It is very hard to get a human body. It's like winning a lottery. Then, once you get a human body, it is very hard to be interested in the spiritual path. Among millions, only a few will have that interest. And even when one is interested, it is very hard to get the right path, to get the right knowledge, the right Master. So, when everything falls in place, you are the luckiest.

There are so many people seeking it, and everyone doesn't get it.

This is why it is said, when you have come to the Master, you have taken a new birth. When your relationship with the Master and the tradition is established, you have a new life. That's why often people's names are changed once they come to a Master, to signify that he is not the same



"GURU IS A WITNESS TO ALL TYPES OF MIND, INTELLECT AND THOUGHTS — SARVADHI SAKSHI BHOOTAM" - GURUDEV

person who he was before. A Guru gives both shiksha, that is learning, and diksha, the culmination of intellect. Information and transformation, both are given by the Guru.

How does one know that they have found the Master? When you come to the Master, five things happen. Sadness goes away, joy wells up for no reason; you are reminded of the knowledge; awareness dawns suddenly; sense prevails; misery disappears; your desires get fulfilled and your talents manifest. No doubt Guru brings you comfort. But you must understand that Guru is a witness to all types of mind, intellect and thoughts — Sarvadhi Sakshi Bhootam. If you are a witness, you are not involved in anything — good, bad, right, wrong.

Pleasant experiences make you grow, but so do the unpleasant experiences. In life there's ups and downs. Every rise has expanded something in you and every low has brought you depth and wisdom. Guru Tatva is a witness to all that. Is the Guru responsible for your enlightenment?

If the Guru could set you free, he could have done it to the whole world. The Guru is not responsible for your awakening. And yet freedom is next to impossible without the Guru. So, the Guru is responsible, and yet not responsible. This is a mystery.

The role of a Guru is as clear as the role of a mother. A mother nurtures, nourishes and makes a person grow in the material world. Similarly a Guru is there to make you grow in wisdom. Just like a bud has everything it needs to become a flower, but still it needs a little nurturing — a little watering, some sunlight to blossom, the same way in the presence of a Guru, total blossoming of intellect happens. For a Guru, it does not matter whether one comes to him to be relieved from pain or suffering; or

IF THE GURU COULD SET YOU FREE, HE COULD HAVE DONE IT TO THE WHOLE WORLD. THE GURU IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR AWAKENING. AND YET FREEDOM IS NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT THE GURU. SO, THE GURU IS RESPONSIBLE, AND YET NOT RESPONSIBLE. THIS IS A MYSTERY

whether one comes to seek wisdom or whether the disciple is already a wise person. For a Guru, everyone is equal.

Often seekers ask me if one needs a living Master. It depends on the individual. If someone is connected to their Guru who has crossed over to the other side, they may not need it. But once you have a Master, you will see that the Master is an empty space, and all the other Masters are also with Him. Your relationship is only with the formless, but it gives an illusion to you that you are relating to the form.

At the same time, without the form, you can't see the formless. As you proceed on the spiritual path, you start relating with the energy, with the presence of Guru beyond the physical body. Once you have found a Guru, remember that he or she is always there with you, watching and giving you wisdom. Only the best will happen for you.

Awareness

Many of life's deepest regrets are born not from a lack of ability, but from a lack of awareness. A single careless moment can shatter years of effort, while one mindful moment can transform an ordinary life into an extraordinary one. True spirituality nurtures this awareness. It awakens the inner light that fills life with wisdom, purpose, and lasting peace

DR SWAMI GYANANANDAS

Awareness is a small word, but its impact is immense. It is the silent light that guides human actions, decisions, and destiny. Bhagwan Swaminarayan states, "Awareness brings clarity, caution, and wisdom, while unawareness leads to confusion, negligence, and often disaster."

At its core, awareness means being conscious of oneself, of one's surroundings, and of the consequences of one's actions. It is not merely knowing something, but being attentive to what truly matters at the right moment. History, personal life, and daily experiences repeatedly prove that success walks hand in hand with awareness, and disaster often follows unawareness. An aware person observes, thinks, and then acts. An unaware person reacts blindly and brings disaster.

The very first journey of the majestic Titanic began on April 10, 1912. It set sail from Southampton, England, heading toward New York City, as the pride of human engineering. It was called unsinkable, and this belief settled deeply into the minds of its builders, officers, and passengers. However, 'unsinkable and unbreakable belief' in the form of overconfidence itself became the seed of tragedy.

On a cold, moonless night of April 14, 1912, the Atlantic Ocean lay calm and silent, almost deceptively peaceful. Beneath a sky scattered with stars, a

massive ship sliced through the dark waters with confidence and pride. Music played, lights glowed, and passengers slept without fear. Yet, hidden in that silence was danger. Ice warnings had been sent, but these signals were ignored, and speed was never reduced. The captain and crew underestimated the danger, trusting technology more than reality. Lifeboats were insufficient, emergency drills were ignored, and caution was replaced by overconfidence. In those quiet hours, it was not fate but unawareness that was steering the ship.

When steel met ice, the illusion of safety shattered, and within a few hours, the world learned a painful lesson: even the mightiest creations collapse when awareness is absent. The result was devastating: more than 1,500 lives were lost.

Awareness is not limited to grand events; it plays an equally crucial role in daily life. A driver who is aware of road conditions, traffic signals, and pedestrians prevents accidents. A moment of distraction, checking a phone or ignoring a signal, can turn an ordinary journey into a tragedy. Similarly, a student who is aware of time, priorities, and learning gaps succeeds steadily, while one who ignores these realities struggles despite talent.

In professional life, awareness determines growth and failure. A business leader who is aware of market trends, employee morale, and ethical responsibilities builds a lasting organization. On the other hand, unawareness of changing customer needs or internal problems slowly ruins even well-established companies. Many businesses fail not because of a lack of resources, but because leaders fail to notice warning signs in time.

Awareness also plays a deep role in human relationships. Being aware of others' emotions, words, and silences builds trust

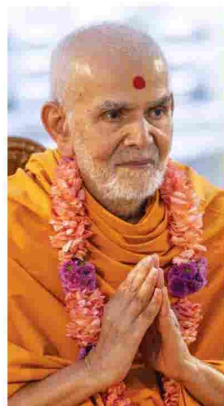
and harmony. Many relationships break not because of hatred, but because of unawareness, unheard feelings, unnoticed pain, and ignored signals. A simple moment of attentive listening can save years of misunderstanding.

In personal growth, self-awareness is the foundation of success. A person who is aware of their strengths and weaknesses can improve steadily. Such awareness brings humility, learning, and balance. Unawareness, however, creates ego and stagnation. A person who never reflects on their actions repeats the same mistakes, blaming circumstances instead of correcting themselves.

Mahant Swami Maharaj states, "Awareness of one's thoughts, actions, and intentions purifies life. It transforms ordinary work into meaningful effort. Many teachings across cultures emphasize living with awareness, being present in the moment rather than drifting through life unconsciously. In contrast, unawareness is like walking in darkness. One may move fast, but without direction. The faster one moves without awareness, the greater the risk of falling." Dr Raymond Williams, former Professor of Religion and Dean at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana (USA), once asked Pramukh Swami Maharaj, "You are a sadhu who has embraced the monastic life from a young age. Yet you lead a vast international organization engaged in more than 150 social and humanitarian activities. You travel across the world, meeting people of diverse cultures, faiths, and languages, while also helping them resolve the challenges of their daily lives. Such an extraordinary level of awareness and engagement seems almost impossible. How do you manage it?"

Swami replied, "God is the source of all strength. He inspires us and keeps us aware every moment. Every decision, every thought, and every action is guided by Him. We have simply surrendered our mind and body at His lotus feet and remain in constant communion with Him." Of course, when God dwells in the mind, awareness never sleeps, and every circumstance becomes guided by wisdom.

(Dr Swami Gyananandas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)



AT ITS CORE, AWARENESS MEANS BEING CONSCIOUS OF ONESELF, OF ONE'S SURROUNDINGS, AND OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF ONE'S ACTIONS

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The mountain man who grew when to fold

Himanshi Dhawan@timesofindia.com

It was after midnight on July 23 when educationist Sonam Wangchuk broke his fast. Sipping juice, he told the politicians gathered around his hospital bed at Medanta, "After 26 days, this tastes good, but hunger doesn't taste bad either." It was a remark reflective of his ability to make light of his long ordeal despite being 11 kgs lighter.

But just hours later, in the face of trolling and criticism for breaking his fast in the company of govt ministers, the 59-year-old had to post an impassioned 24-minute video, declaring that he didn't need a "character certificate" to show his commitment to the movement, and explaining how he was held in "North Korea" like conditions while negotiating for the safety of protestors from hospital. His wife, Citinjal J Angmo, whose LinkedIn profile shows her in martial arts attire, also sprang to his defence.

"He's tough and very headstrong," says Mohd Shafi Lassa, a childhood friend and a member of the Apex Body Leh (ABL), who was in Delhi to meet Wangchuk. Lassa says that many in Ladakh were concerned about Wangchuk's health as the days ticked by, but they need not have worried. "He is an anshan (hunger strike) champion... 10 days of an anshan is like one day for him," Lassa says, adding that Wangchuk had been willing to stretch the fast by another week if needed.

The apple does not fall very far from the tree. Wangchuk's Congress politician Sonam Wangyal, faster twice to demand Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for

Sonam Wangchuk has spent years fixing failing schools, building ice stupas to fight water shortage, and occasionally starving himself to be heard. Sunday Times traces his journey

the people of Ladakh. Wangchuk himself has sat on three fasts since 2023, demanding protections for Ladakh's land, ecology and people. The NDA govt and ABL are close to a final draft following three years of negotiations. But the climate activist's attitude towards the govt was not always as confrontational or hostile. In fact, when Article 370 was abrogated and Ladakh was granted the status of a Union Territory there were celebrations in Leh.

ICY RESOLVE

Wangchuk was born in Uleytokpo, a small village with barely five households, near Aiche in Ladakh. Initially, he was home-schooled as there was no school close by. "I learnt from farmers, birds, animals, and my mother," he says in a video describing his childhood years in a large family of nine siblings. At nine, the family moved to Delhi where he studied at a Kendriya Vidyalaya, graduating in mechanical engineering in Srinagar.

Though he could have easily bagged a govt job, Wangchuk returned to Ladakh to found SECMOL (Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh), to reform the govt school system in 1983. Only 5% of Ladakh students would pass the state board exam. The language of instruction was Urdu, which most students and even many teachers did not understand. Textbooks printed outside the state had little connection to life in the



SUNDAY PROFILE

cold, harsh desert. "We used to learn F for fridge and F for frog. No Ladakh child had either," says Konchok Norgay, a former teacher and director at SECMOL. Norgay was part of the earliest batch to be enrolled in the 'school for failures' that provided alternative methods for students who hadn't fared well in exams. Unlike other students, Norgay's grades were good because he could "mug up" page after page. But sitting in the SECMOL classroom felt like "the catarract infecting my eyes had been removed", Norgay says.

Encouraged by these initial successes, Wangchuk launched Operation NGAHO, building a collaborative effort with village communities and the govt to improve learning outcomes and eventually co-founded Himalayan Institute of Alternatives Ladakh (HIAL) with his wife. He also introduced innovations like sustainable buildings that run on solar power and can maintain a temperature of 15 degrees C even when it's below freezing outside, and conical artificial glaciers called ice stupas to mitigate the summer water crisis.

'ACHO' WITH LOVE

A researcher who has worked closely with him says, "He has a hopeful way of looking at the world that is infectious. And unlike a scientist who looks at empirical data, Wangchuk is always very mindful of the impact any decision might have on ordinary people." Lassa says everyone in Ladakh calls him 'acho' or older brother, and he has earned enormous goodwill amongst people because of his knowledge and generosity. "There are so many students who have gone from failures to successes. It is because of his influence," says Ashraf Ali Bracha, ABL leader and a family friend.

As 'Kaga Le' or 'sir' at HIAL, he continues to teach classes, give lectures, and introduce students to the teachings of Gandhi and Krishnamacharya. Others cite his generosity when it comes to endow-

Even after a stint in prison, he had only empathy. "He said, 'Though I was behind bars, my guards seemed to be more imprisoned than me,'" one researcher recalls him saying, "because they had long working hours and could not eat till relieved of duty."

ments for education and climate change. In March 2022, he handed over prize money of Rs 1 crore for women empowerment programs in Leh and Kargil. On social media, Wangchuk enjoys a following of nearly 8m. But his first tryst with fame came in 2009, when the film '3 Idiots' was released and people thronged to Ladakh to visit the 'Rancho school'. Last week, though, actor Aamir Khan clarified that the film was not based on the activist.

CONTESTED LEGACY

During the pandemic, Wangchuk supported the BJP govt call to boycott Chinese products, including China, as he put it, "not with bullets but with wallets". He remained supportive of the

Centre till Jan 2023 when, in a video message from Khardung-La, he sought a legislative framework to back the promises made. It was only after that the relationship began to sour. In Sept 2025, Wangchuk was arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) and kept in detention in Jodhpur when he sat on another hunger strike.

Nudged by the Supreme Court, the Centre withdrew NSA, and Wangchuk was released in March 2026. Even after a six-month stint in prison, he had no complaints, only empathy. "He said, 'Though I was behind bars, my guards seemed to be more imprisoned than me,'" one researcher recalls him saying, "because they had long working hours and could not eat till they were relieved of duty." He spoke of sharing his food with them and how prison gave him time to think.

Over the last ten days, much of Gen Z's engagement with him has dated into little more than a hashtag. With police reportedly restricting visitors and communication during his detention, it fell to Angmo to issue statements, approach the courts, and ensure his voice was heard.

Finally, there have been the inevitable comparisons with Anand Hazare and the JP movement. Both were buoyed not just by the politics of Gandhian sacrifice and anshan, but also by real-world demands of political change. While no one doubts Wangchuk is a man of conviction, some say he is politically naive. But it is Wangchuk who may have had the last laugh. Like he says in his video, "A successful gambler is not one who wins every time, but who knows when to fold."

CRUSHING TEA GARDENS 'ROCK' AGAIN?

A unique experiment with volcanic rock dust hopes to fight climate change while bringing India's most famous tea-growing region back to life

Chethan Kumar@timesofindia.com

Once among Darjeeling's thriving estates, the 155-year-old Selim Hill plantation has been grappling with the same problems chipping away at yields for years: intensive cultivation, erratic rainfall, rising temperatures and deteriorating soil health. Now, the estate has become the unlikely centrepiece of an experiment that begins not with tea leaves, but with finely crushed volcanic rock.

The Darjeeling Revival Project, led by climate-tech startup Alt Carbon — founded by brothers Shrey and Sparsh Agarwal — is betting that spreading basalt rock dust across tea fields can do two things at once: permanently remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere while restoring the health of soils that have sustained Darjeeling's famous tea for over a century.

All farmers are required to do is spread finely crushed basalt, a volcanic rock, across their fields much like a soil amendment. When rainwater absorbs carbon dioxide from the air, it forms a weak acid that reacts with the basalt, converting the CO₂ into dissolved bicarbonate, carried away by rivers into oceans, where the carbon can remain locked away for thousands of years. As the basalt breaks down, it also releases nutrients such as calcium and magnesium, improving soil health, boosting water retention and supporting crop growth. If it works at scale, supporters say, the project could offer something climate action often struggles to deliver — measurable environmental benefits.

Not only has my yield gone up after working with Alt Carbon, the number of people I employ has also doubled

Akula Singh,
THE FIRST FARMER TO ENROL
WITH ALT CARBON

alongside immediate gains for farming communities. "It is impossible to revive Darjeeling without reviving the people who grow tea," is the philosophy driving the project. Unlike many carbon-removal initiatives that ask communities to change the way they farm or surrender land, this one is built around an existing agricultural landscape. Tea estates continue producing tea while participating in carbon removal, with revenues from carbon credits intended to create a new income stream that can be reinvested into estates, workers and surrounding communities.

The revival is already visible at Selim Hill, where an abandoned colonial bungalow has been restored into what Alt Carbon calls Second Chance House — part research station, part community space and part symbol of what the company hopes the wider landscape can become.

BIG TECH BETS ON B'LURU STARTUP

Alt Carbon is not just a climate project. It is, increasingly, a business that the world's largest companies are betting real money on. In June 2026, Microsoft signed a deal to remove up to 36,200 metric tons of CO₂ from the Darjeeling Revival Project — its first carbon credit purchase through Enhanced Rock Weathering anywhere in Asia. Stripe, Shopify and Google have also bought credits from Alt Carbon, making the Darjeeling hills an unlikely address on the procurement lists of Silicon Valley.



BEYOND ONE ESTATE

The larger challenge, however, stretches well beyond a single estate. Darjeeling's tea industry has been under pressure from changing weather patterns that have disrupted harvest cycles, while decades of nutrient depletion have reduced soil productivity. Many estates operate on thin margins, making long-term investments increasingly difficult to justify. But now, the estate has become the unlikely centrepiece of an experiment that begins not with tea leaves, but with finely crushed volcanic rock.

Instead of treating carbon removal as an abstract climate solution, Alt Carbon has embedded scientists, agronomists and field teams within the tea-growing landscape. The company works with estate managers and local communities to collect soil samples, monitor changes in water chemistry and measure exactly how much atmospheric carbon becomes locked away through a process known as Enhanced Rock Weathering.

The emphasis on measurement is deliberate. Carbon markets have come under intense scrutiny over concerns about exaggerated claims. To avoid that criticism, every acre of carbon claimed under the project is backed by extensive laboratory testing, repeated field measurements and conservative accounting that deducts emissions from mining, transporting and spreading the rock, along with other uncertainties.

LOCALS IN DECISION-MAKING

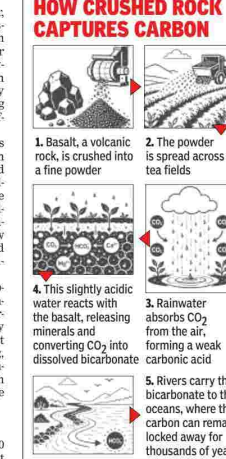
Akula Singh, 56, a farmer with about 100 acres growing tea and rice, was the first farmer to collaborate with Alt Carbon in 2024. "I am glad that I did," he says, adding that his yield has increased by nearly 60% after using basalt soil. "Earlier, my yield used to be around 14-15 mann [one mann is roughly 40kg]. After I began using their product, it has increased to 22-23 Mann. I used to employ around 100 people before, but now I have 200," he added.

Getting farmers to take that first step, however, has not always been straightforward. "Enrolling farmers is a challenge initially. But once the benefits begin to manifest in soil health and increased yield, other farmers also come forward," says Sudarshan Regmi from Alt Carbon's project team in Darjeeling. But reinvestment in communities isn't left informal. The firm has set up two bodies to keep farmers and labour unions

The appeal is specific. Unlike older carbon offset schemes that have faced widespread scepticism, Alt Carbon's credits are verified by Isometric, the world's leading certifier of carbon removal. "We're encouraged by Alt's efforts to build a carbon removal capacity in India given their past success in delivering carbon credits," Phil Goodman, programme director for carbon removal at Microsoft, said.

For Alt, the revenues from these deals fund the science that makes the credits credible in the first place. Its two laboratories — Shonku Labs inside IISc, and the Darjeeling Climate Action Lab at Kamala Tea Estate — have processed

HOW CRUSHED ROCK CAPTURES CARBON



involved in the decision-making process. The proof is in the numbers: from around 10,000 farmers working with the project in 2025, the network has grown to 35,000 farmers in 60+ gram panchayats. Basalt deployment now spans more than 80,000 acres of tea estates, rice paddies and other farmland, an area more than double the size of San Francisco.

Some of that growth has been driven not by Alt Carbon's own outreach but by farmers themselves. Akrom Ali, one such convert, spent several months travelling between fields, making videos documenting the improvements he had seen and sharing them with his neighbours. Can carbon finance slow the decline of a tea industry that supports thousands of families? The start is far from rocky.

more than 20,000 samples to date, with capacity set to reach 1 lakh annually by end of 2026. That throughput is designed to do something the carbon market has long struggled with: bring down the cost of rigorous verification over time.

The company has now issued 9,566 verified credits and completed two consecutive deliveries to Japanese shipping giant Mitsui Osk Lines. "Our second delivery to MOL, the largest of its kind, is proof that India can do this. We can make our agricultural lands a hub for carbon removal, and we are only getting started," Alt CEO Shrey Agarwal said.

Malda to Seoul, K-pop dreams lead children down risky road

For a generation obsessed with all things Korean, online groomers posing as talent scouts are selling fake auditions, stardom and a route to Seoul that doesn't exist

Mohua Das@timesofindia.com

There is a version of this story in which two 12-year-old girls disappear into a Bengal bazaar and are never found. Last week, that version came perilously close to becoming reality.

It was a Tuesday morning like any other. Rohini, a Class VI student in Malda, left for school with Rs 70 and a change of clothes tucked into her bag beside her textbooks. Two doors away, Srabani fed breakfast to her 12-year-old daughter Priya with half an eye on the clock as the girl chatted with Rohini on her mother's phone. "I even asked about whether Rohini also scrolled through her phone while her mother fed her," recalls Srabani, before putting Priya on an auto-rickshaw to school. By 11 am, the school called.

Still in uniform, Rohini and Priya had slipped away and boarded a bus to Siliguri. Their classmates raised the alarm, the headmistress alerted their families, and police intercepted the girls before they could board another bus to Jaigaon on the Indo-Bhutan border. Only later did investigators discover that the Malda trail led to fake K-pop auditions, Pinterest, a visual platform better known for mood boards, and a promised route to Seoul.

"The girls wanted to become K-pop stars and had been groomed for months by someone posing online as a Korean talent scout. They were first asked to share videos of their homes, then to learn Korean words and etiquette before being added to an online group called Demon 6, where they received instructions for the journey to South Korea," says social activist Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini, who helped restore them to their families.

Rohini and Priya, who spoke to TOI after they were reunited with their families, said they were nine when they discovered K-pop. "I loved the girl group Blackpink... how they looked, their music... everything," she says. Priya, introduced to the genre by an older cousin, became devoted to the band ENHYPEN.

Somewhere along the way, Priya commented on a YouTube video and the account owner, who called herself Digshi Sarkar, suggested they continue chatting on Pinterest. "Digshi" said they would then share K-pop fan edits, said she was in Class IX in Kolkata. Conversations about music soon turned to travelling to South Korea. By June, "Digshi" had mapped out their route via Siliguri, Jaigaon, and then on the Demon 6 group, possibly named after the animated film KPop Demon Hunters. She told them three other girls from Kolkata would join them in Siliguri, completing their six-member K-pop group travelling to Seoul. Whether they too were minors remains unclear, but surveillance along the Bhutan border has since been tightened.

The girls had no passports but believed their friend would arrange everything. "She said she'd take care of our passports, travel, and stay. I wanted to go to Korea to become a K-pop idol because Korean entertainment companies audition and can train anyone in singing and dancing."

For the girls, the fantasy of K-pop stardom didn't seem impossible. "Once we'd be trained, we'd become idols, earn money and pay our parents," says Priya. What excited her most was that "even if we didn't get to meet ENHYPEN and Blackpink immediately, we'd become famous ourselves."

Rohini's mother, Radha, knew her daughter had been deceived. "She wanted a fringe because she liked the way Koreans style their hair. She loved their clothes and food and knew their songs by heart. I knew she used my phone and

WhatsApp to chat with friends, but I had no idea one could chat on Pinterest."

Priya's mother had watched the same fascination unfold. "She watched Korean content regularly, but I never imagined she would leave home for it." Even now, she struggles to believe it. "She can't even cross the road without holding my hand. She couldn't have known these routes herself."

What makes the Malda case unsettling is that it is not alone. Children know an astonishing amount about Korea while parents know astonishingly little

ata and directed them towards Mumbai, from where they believed they could fly to Seoul and join BTS as dancers.

In Kurur, Tamil Nadu, three 13-year-olds spent a month planning a journey to South Korea, pooling Rs 14,000 from their piggy banks and teaching themselves Korean before setting off for Visakhapatnam, convinced they could board a ship to Seoul. In Dharavathi, Maharashtra, three girls aged 11 to 13 boarded a bus to Pune and even staged a fake kidnapping to pay themselves time before police intercepted them.



For an earlier generation, it was Mumbai or Bollywood. For this one, it's South Korea. What's changed is how achievable the dream feels and how easily it can be exploited. Aspirants must always verify audition calls through official channels

Shital Sikarwar, ORGANISER OF K-POP FAN EVENTS AND BOOTCAMPS

about the roads they are taking to get closer to their idols. In 2023, three teenagers aged 13, 15 and 16 left their villages in Maharashtra carrying Rs 1,500, a change of clothes, ID cards and a phone. They planned to reach Mumbai, train in singing and dancing, join a K-pop company and eventually move to Seoul. Before leaving, one texted her father: "Don't search for us. We are going to fulfil our K-pop dreams." Their families later said the girls had spent months researching K-pop auditions and training.

The case took a darker turn when police suspected an organised trafficking network after they found two unidentified women who had allegedly accompanied the girls to Kolkata.

K-POP RUNAWAYS

MALDA, WB (JULY 2026): Two 12-year-olds were intercepted en route to the Bhutan border after allegedly being groomed online with promises of K-pop stardom for a BTS concert.

KOLKATA, WB (APRIL 2026): Four schoolgirls travelled to Delhi hoping to continue to South Korea for a BTS concert.

DHARAVATHI, MAHARASHTRA (2024): Three girls aged 11-13 ran away to Pune and even staged a fake kidnapping, to travel to Seoul before being traced.

KARUR, TN (2024): Three 13-year-olds saved Rs 14,000 and travelled to Visakhapatnam, believing they could sail to South Korea.

MURSHIDABAD, WB (2023): Three teens fled home hoping to train in Mumbai before moving to Seoul; police bust trafficking network.

This April, four Kolkata schoolgirls travelled to Delhi hoping to continue to South Korea for a BTS concert before running out of money.

The traps are set on YouTube burner accounts baiting youngsters with auditions to build the next K-pop idol group. Scroll through the comments, and you find 10 to 14-year-olds cheerfully volunteering their age, city and talent.

The account the Malda girls engaged with wasn't in Korean or English but Bengali. One post announced auditions for a six-member group called Our Summer. "Who knows, you might even become the leader," it promised, before creating urgency with "Only 100 will be trained, but only six selected" and directing interested youngsters to continue the conversation privately on Instagram.

Shital Sikarwar, founder of Tani Events and Entertainment, which organises K-pop fan events and bootcamps for aspiring idols, has noticed several companies claiming to recruit for K-pop groups as affiliates of overseas entertainment firms. "Parents often reach out because their children find these opportunities online and then tell them they want to audition or go to Korea," she says.

When her daughter wanted to pursue K-pop at 20, Sikarwar realised how little she knew beyond Ganganam Style. YouTube only left her more confused, so she flew to Seoul to ask the questions no fan video answered. "What would my daughter eat, how long would she train, was the country safe?"

It is the same due diligence she now recommends to parents who cannot simply leave their children to pursue dreams and aspirants to run a background check and verify audition calls or fan meets through official channels.

She doesn't dismiss the dream itself. "For an earlier generation, it was Mumbai or Bollywood. For this one, it's South Korea. What's changed is how achievable the dream feels and how easily it can be exploited."

Sonali Kokra

We are in Ruchi's childhood home in Mumbai. It is low-ceilinged, cheerless and badly in need of repair. The walls carry the sour stench of rainwater and the windows look like they haven't been cracked open in months. We hear low grunting sounds from within. They punctuate the topic that has brought us together that afternoon: death. And the ominous, soul-crushing expectation of it.

Ruchi's father is fading fast. His oncologist no longer uses the vocabulary of months. I send a silent prayer heavenward when I hear that: "Please, god, not while I'm here." Shamefully self-absorbed? Without a doubt. I do not want to witness the moment a person becomes an orphan.

What strikes me about Ruchi is how preternaturally calm she is. She describes the last six months of her life: quitting her job to take care of her father; his decision to stop treatment; their medical transfer of assets. Her clinical approach to death is puzzling, even for her. "You know the people who have embarrassing public meltdowns at the thought of a parent dying? I was that person. But when it's actually happening, I have a checklist. It feels anticlimactic and wrong. Like I'm a bad daughter."

At 40, Ruchi can't pinpoint why the fear of her father's mortality has colonised her life for over three decades. An only child of divorced parents, she has no memory of her mother. Both her grandparents were healthy and lived well into their 80s. If anything, she's among the lucky ones, never having confronted prolonged suffering until now. And yet, she remembers feeling her chest tighten like it was going to explode while watching Mufasa die in *The Lion King* on her eighth birthday. "I'm fairly certain it was my first panic attack," she tells me. "I was convinced that my father, too, would die suddenly one day and I'd be all alone. That feeling has never really left me."

ARE THEY OKAY?

Swagatika Sarangi, 30, from Bengaluru and 26-year-old Pratik Goel (name changed) from Delhi can relate, but for wildly different reasons.

In 2016, Sarangi was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) due to her relentless and entirely unfounded fear that her parents would suddenly drop dead. "I'd start spiralling if they missed my calls for any reason," she admits. "We've now installed cameras in the common areas of our home, so I can see they are okay instead of panicking immediately."

On the other end of the spectrum is Goel, haunted by financial ambiguity. He is the middle child, sandwiched between two sisters. He joined his father's business when he was 19. It's the only employment he's ever known. "Everything I've ever earned has gone back into the business. But the firm itself is in my father's name. And our houses are in my mother's name," he tells me. Death is a taboo subject in the Goel family and it is unlikely that his parents have known any wills, let alone registered ones. "If they were to die tomorrow, my sisters can claim 'equal share', despite never having earned a rupee for the business or contributing a rupee towards my parents' expenses. How is that fair?" The one time he tried to broach the topic, he was accused of "waiting for them to die." He claims that the family dynamic has changed irrevocably since this catastrophic fight three years ago. "All I wanted was clarity." Boiling for a long and bitter legal battle in the future, Goel has retained legal counsel and maintains extensive documentation to support his eventual claims.

MORBID PREOCCUPATION

For all its attendant terror, death is maddeningly mundane. All the breathless carpe diem-ing life advice we have ever been assaulted with is triaged around the certainty that someday we and everyone we know and love (or despise) is going to be dead. Death, one might argue, is a load-bearing conviction. Without it, life collapses. We strive to achieve immortality through our work, words and deeds because there is no denying death. It is compulsory for physical forms.

Why, then, does thinking of it in relation to our own parents terrify us so? And is every generation cursed with this harrowing fixation on parental death when they reach middle age? Or are today's grown-up kids more morbidly consumed by it than their predecessors?

Seema Hingorani, a clinical psychologist from Mumbai, believes it is the latter. According to her, while the idea of a parent dying is "unsettling, no

The Fear Before the Grief

The death of a parent is one of life's oldest certainties. Yet for many millennials and Gen Z adults, it is an all-consuming preoccupation. They monitor parents' heart rates from continents away, stock medicine cabinets and postpone careers, trying to outrun the inevitable—all the while dreading the moment they cease to be someone's child and become the generation at the front of the line

People are making radical life changes to be closer to parents in their twilight years. Many gave up dream jobs or promotions. Some ended relationships. A few became caregivers



TALK MONEY

Map the Finances: List assets, liabilities and income sources

Check for a Will: Even a handwritten will, signed by two witnesses, is legally recognised; registration makes it easier to enforce

If You Are A Woman Whose Parents Manage Your Money: List what is in your name, check what you have signed

(guarantor/co-borrower status) and review your investments

Fix Account Access: Link your own phone number and email, not your parents', with your investments

Use Account Aggregators: They will help you trace holdings you are unaware of
Source: Nishya Gole, Partner, NerdyBird Wealth Advisory

matter what", the anxiety that millennials and Gen Z are feeling is worrisome. "They've thought about it so obsessively that they expect to completely fall apart when it happens," Hingorani attributes this dread to a volatile mix of emotions, existential angst and the extremely disorienting economic landscape we are being forced to navigate.

"Family is the primary social unit and source of identity in India, at least for now," says Hingorani. "The thought of parents dying is immediately followed by 'Who will I manage alone?' It's not hard to see how these can be destabilising questions in an increasingly lonely world. This is compounded by the reality of rapidly shrinking families." For previous generations,

aunts and uncles would step in to fill the 'elderly influence' vacuum. Marriage doesn't guarantee partnership. People choose not to marry or opt out of unhappy ones all the time. "When you don't have a partner, it's natural to be more emotionally dependent on parents."

And, finally, making everything infinitely worse is the longevity industrial complex, where success often depends on the vicious exploitation of our most primal vulnerabilities. Pills, potions, proteins, peptides, drugs, diagnostics, "vicious discoveries", therapies, treatments, tools, technologies... Billions and billions of dollars dedicated to the pursuit of beating biology. In January, the Consumer Electronics Show 2026 saw big and small names in health tech hawk devices focused on complex metabolic markers. No longer satisfied with just tracking heart rate, blood pressure and glucose levels, they now want to drown us with insights gleaned from hormones, blood, pee, saliva, sperm and even foot sweat. It seems. Another burgeoning—and even more pricey—category at the show was at-home elderly care bots to keep ageing and (ostensibly lonely) parents company, dispense precise combinations of pills, remind them to take medicines and alert you when they don't.

CARE FROM AFAR

London-based Nihal KG, 43, acknowledges that he's trapped and unlikely to escape. He has outfitted his parents' home in Noida with AI-enabled motion sensors that analyse movement patterns to detect and even predict imbalance or falls. This is in addition to the powders and supplements he sends them every few weeks, which is in addition to their Ultraman rings, Apple Watches and a battery of blood tests they have to get done every month.

"It costs me ₹19-20 lakh a year," Nihal admits. "It's probably excessive, but it's a small price to pay for peace of mind since they won't move to London and I can't be there to take care of them."

"We keep finding ways to do more to keep our parents alive so we don't regret anything later," says Hingorani. "We have instant access to information, constant guilt that we have not been 'good enough' children to our parents and the ability to afford the interventions that suddenly seem crucial. We do more but are still always miserable. What's the point?"

Almost everyone I spoke to had stories about silently making radical life changes so they could be closer to their parents in their twilight years. Many had given up dream jobs, promotions, or lucrative opportunities away from home. Some had ended relationships. A few had become default caregivers so their siblings would never have to make the same compromises.

US & THEM

Juxtaposed against these decisions are some thorny questions: What does it mean to live authentically and honour our own selves while building healthy relationships with our parents? How do we show up for them without being tormented by resentment while they are alive and regret once they are gone? Perhaps the point is simply to buy ourselves some time while we figure out the answers.

And maybe the point is that once we strip away the guilt, the checklists, the cameras and monitors and powders, what we are left with is this: our parents are the ultimate wall. The thing standing between us and the front of the line. As long as they are alive, however frail, however diminished, how ever infuriating, death is still happening to someone else's generation. The day they go, that wall comes crashing down, and there's nothing standing between us and the terrifying void except our own bodies, marching towards entropy.

There's a secondaching isolation that nothing can truly prepare you for: when you lose a parent, you lose the person who has been narrating all the different versions of you back to yourself. Who you were as a child before you could remember, who makes you light up from the inside, why you flinch at certain things.

Parents, quite simply, are our personal living archives. When they go, we grieve them, yes, but we are also grieving the child that has lost its most faithful alibi. It's not just about missing them. It's about, at least at first, missing all the different versions of you who will now only exist in photographs and the unreliable recollections of people who weren't ever wholly there. And all the versions that you are still to become, but might never have witnessed.

Maybe that's why Ruchi has a checklist instead of a meltdown. Maybe the calm is simply doing age-appropriate things, helping her be a good daughter—one last time.

Sonali Kokra is a Mumbai-based writer

Book, a Treatment

The current wave of Uplit, or uplifting literature, treats reading as healing and books as balm

Nupur Amarnath

In Satoshi Yagisawa's bestselling *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop*, Takako retreats to her eccentric uncle's second-hand bookstore in Tokyo to nurse a heart break. Living among dusty shelves and quiet routines, she rediscovers reading. She muses: "I think every serious reader at some point in their life encounters a book like that. And they never forget the experience."

For Mumbai-based book blogger and marketer Vidhya A. Thakkar, that book was Michiko Aoyama's *Hot Chocolate on Thursday*. "I discovered these books during the low phase of my life in 2024. I couldn't concentrate enough to read a full novel. These were not only my way back to reading but also part of my healing journey."

Bengaluru-based auditor Nishtha Sikka was initially drawn in for practical reasons: they were short, easy to read, with intriguing covers and titles like *Letters From The Ginza Shihodo Stationery Shop*. "What keeps me

coming back is the positivity, nostalgic sense of belonging I get when I read these books. There's a pattern: ordinary days, food, small problems that resolve gently, community, a listening ear, and usually one guiding character."

ALL IT UP

In an interview with The Nod during his visit to the Kerala Literature Festival this year, Yagisawa said he writes "these stories as an answer to a noisy world. It's a place where readers can use my work as a refuge." Thakkar found exactly that: "They aren't self-help books, but they help you heal. I felt the books found me at the right time."

She isn't alone. Healing fiction—also marketed as Uplit, comfort fiction, or cosy reads—is one of publishing's fastest-growing genres, proving that sometimes a book can work as a balm. For publishers, this is no longer a niche. Poonni Chatterjee, executive publisher and rights director at HarperCollins India, says readers are turning to stories that offer emotional refuge. "Themes such as kindness, second chances, found family and quiet hope answer that need. We've seen a shift towards character-led stories that stay with the readers long after the last page," she says.

Alongside international titles like *What You Are Looking For* is in *The Library, Days at the Torinaka Cafe* and *The Vanishing Cherry Blossom Bookshop*, there are Indian novels such as *Stuti Changle's Stars Will Guide You Home*. "Publishers are certainly acquiring more comfort fiction

because readers are actively seeking it." The text, however, remains a good story, not a trend. Booksellers are seeing the demand too. Rachna Chopra of Mumbai's Kitabkhana, a self-confessed fan of the genre, has watched healing fiction find readers across generations. She loves its observational prose with kindness at its core. "It makes you reflect, appreciate and slow down. When I picked up *Welcome to the Hyman-Dong Bookshop* for our book club, one reader said this book saved their life. The books remind us that healing can be found in everyday moments."

What binds these books together is "matter what", the anxiety that millennials and Gen Z are feeling is worrisome. "They've thought about it so obsessively that they expect to completely fall apart when it happens," Hingorani attributes this dread to a volatile mix of emotions, existential angst and the extremely disorienting economic landscape we are being forced to navigate.

"Family is the primary social unit and source of identity in India, at least for now," says Hingorani. "The thought of parents dying is immediately followed by 'Who will I manage alone?' It's not hard to see how these can be destabilising questions in an increasingly lonely world. This is compounded by the reality of rapidly shrinking families." For previous generations,

less plot than the feeling they leave behind. Kunzum founder Ajay Jain says readers look for something mainstream fiction often bypasses. He identifies three ingredients. First, they are set in insulated, quiet micro-spaces like bookstores or cafes, they are an antidote to the busy city hustle. Second, they provide low-stakes emotional safety, minus the hijinks of most fiction. Finally, they celebrate the sanctity of small routines—small of old books, freshly brewed coffee and rain on a windowpane. "By elevating these small ordinary things into something sacred, they remind the reader that a good life doesn't need grand, exhausting achievements."

What is Uplit

Uplifting Literature started as a publishing category for novels that leave readers feeling optimistic and emotionally satisfied

What's New

Iyachiki, or healing fiction, which is a Japanese genre focused on emotional restoration through quiet, everyday stories. A lot of Japanese and Korean books in this genre have been translated

PAPERBACK HAS GOT YOUR BACK

The appeal extends beyond sales into reading communities. At The Indian Book Club, members now recommend healing fiction as "a legit genre". Founder Divya Jain says these books spark a different kind of conversation. "Instead of focusing on plot twists or suspense, members talk about emotions, favourite moments and how the stories made them feel. The discussions are often quieter." At *Bandra Reads, Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* drew one of the club's biggest turnouts. Founder Anie Famulihoy says, "Many of our members are young professionals juggling demanding jobs. There's very little time to sit with their emotions. These books help with that." That emotional connection is precisely what makes the genre work, says London-based bibliotherapist, counselor and author Bijal Shah. "These

stories create a gentle emotional space in which readers can sit with difficult feelings without being overwhelmed. They allow emotions to be explored at a safe distance, while offering connection, reflection and hope," she says. She adds that literary fiction can be particularly valuable during periods of transition such as bereavement, burnout, divorce and retirement.

The settings matter, too. "Nostalgic settings such as bookshops, cafes and libraries are powerful because they evoke familiarity, belonging and emotional safety," says Shah.

Psychologist Namrata Upadhyay says while these books can replace psychotherapy, their popularity mirrors a wider shift in how people are approaching mental health and emotional resilience. "People are seeking resources that help them understand emotions, cultivate resilience and feel less alone. This genre may approach these themes without being overtly instructional that can feel less prescriptive and personally meaningful," Sikka says. "Such books slow you down on purpose. The stories are a warm hug for anyone who needs it." And sometimes, a hug is all one needs.

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Yano - Fast



The Northeast, a major transit route for drugs, has become the victim as well, with heroin addiction taking hold of communities on the Assam-Arunachal border

5 THINGS RECOVERING USERS SAY:

- Drugs are easily available
- Brown sugar often leads to heroin
- Heroin is far more expensive
- Deals are done in cash
- Children are the biggest motivation for quitting drugs

DRUGS INTERCEPTED (Data for 2025)

1.3 lakh kilo	265	116	₹665 cr
Volume of drugs seized in India, valued at around ₹2,000 cr	No. of convicted narcotics offenders, including nine foreign nationals	No. of traffickers arrested in Northeast	Value of drugs seized in NE

Source: NCB

INSIDE THE CHINTUANG DRUG NETWORK

WHO IS CHINTUANG?
Thancintuang alias Chintuang is a Myanmar-based drug kingpin who was arrested in Delhi in May. His network is a major supplier of heroin and methamphetamine

ASSOCIATES

- **VUNGKANTHAWNA**, key facilitator
- **LALRAMPARI**, hawala operator; ₹100 crore transactions under probe
- **ABU SALEH**, logistics coordinator in Assam
- **JABRUL**, Tripura-Assam transporter

Source: NCB

Shantanu Nandan Sharma
Oyan (Arunachal Pradesh), Jonai (Assam)

In 2017, Yano (name changed) was a Class IX student in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, when a group of friends offered her something they promised would deliver an "intense high". Curious, she smoked the brownish substance inside a small tobacco tin. Without a second thought, she handed over ₹500 to a peddler. She had no idea that the first puff would mark the beginning of a years-long battle with addiction.

Within days, Yano's craving became overwhelming. Desperate for another hit, she started searching for the peddler. To her, brown sugar was simply a "foreign" drug — unlike kani (opium), the narcotic she had grown up hearing about.

For the next three years, until the Covid-19 pandemic, she was hooked on brown sugar — the impure, street form of heroin, often mixed with adulterants. Around 2020, she graduated to a "whitish powder that looked like Horlicks" — a far more potent and expensive drug. It was heroin, and this time she was injecting it.

Today, at 24, Yano has left narcotics behind after two rounds of residential treatment at a rehabilitation centre in Yingkong, a town in Upper Siang district. Unemployed and estranged from her mom and two sisters, she is rebuilding her life. "I am a recovering warrior," she says with confidence. That phrase is more than a personal affirmation. It is also the name of a civil society group she has recently joined. Recovering Warriors is an yet-to-be-registered organisation in Oyan, a small town in Arunachal Pradesh, about 12 km north of Murkongselek, the last railway station in north Assam and a locality widely regarded as a hotspot for drug trafficking.

Yano has a single mission: to ensure that the young do not walk the dark path that once consumed her.

DRUG ROUTE

Once viewed largely as a transit route for narcotics from the Golden Triangle of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, Northeast India is now confronting a far more troubling reality: its own people are taking drugs. Arunachal Pradesh — particularly the districts along the

Siang River (known as the Brahmaputra in Assam) — has also been drawn into the crisis, although it lies outside the principal drug trafficking corridor that runs through Myanmar, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam and Tripura.

The scale of trafficking underscores the magnitude of the challenge. Last year, narcotics agencies arrested 116 traffickers across the Northeast and seized drugs worth about ₹665 crore.

It's believed that these seizures are only the tip of the iceberg, and that a far larger volume of narcotics is slipping through the region's borders.

Across the country, in 2025, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) seized 133,965 kg of narcotic drugs, with an estimated street value of ₹2,000 crore. Also, 265 offenders, including nine foreigners, were convicted, underscoring both the transnational nature of the trade and the intensifying enforcement efforts against it. The arrest of two Myanmar-based drug kingpins — Thancintuang, better known as Chintuang, in Delhi in May, and Nengzatuang alias Tsunpi in Manipur's Churachandpur earlier this week — exposed the layers of a sophisticated cross-border trafficking network. Investigators say the syndicate supplied methamphetamine and heroin from Myanmar to India through the Northeast, using an elaborate supply chain that stretched across the international border. According to NCB's estimates, the illicit trafficking network anchored by Chintuang alone is valued at ₹15 crore.

PATH OF RECOVERY

Earlier this month, ET met more than a dozen former drug users along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border to understand how they were drawn into addiction, what it took to break free and how life changed from the depths of dependence to the difficult journey of recovery. They spoke candidly about the nexus between peddlers and users, the changing drugs landscape, the shifting prices of narcotics and the ease with which they are available.

The most disturbing takeaway is this: heroin has become alarmingly accessible across the belt. Former users say addiction has driven many to sell whatever they own — including family



A first-time buyer might call the peddler and say, 'I'm waiting near such and such hotel, wearing a yellow T-shirt.' The money changes hands, the drugs are delivered, and that's it.
RECOVERING USER, 46, Jonai, Assam

farmland — to finance their next hit. When they run out of possessions, some even turn to loot, trapped in a cycle of craving and dependence. The stories are as diverse as they are unsettling. Among those who spoke to this writer are graduates and postgraduates, a 46-year-old employee of Assam's education department, a former accountant at a tea estate owned by the son of a former Arunachal Pradesh chief minister, and a man from Arunachal who says he "graduated from brown sugar to heroin" while pursuing a master's degree in tourism in Shillong a few years ago.

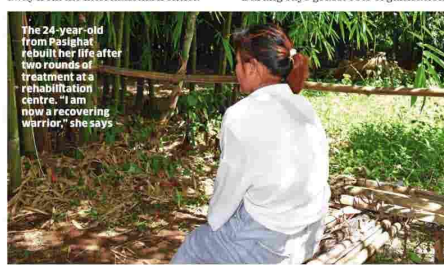
Many describe themselves as poly-drug users. Their descent into addiction began with cannabis before progressing to brown sugar and, eventually, heroin. "I switched to heroin because I wanted to prove to myself that I was smarter," recalls one of them. "I had also convinced myself that heroin would work as an aphrodisiac." The switch came at a steep price. "When I was taking brown sugar, ₹4,000 a week was enough. But after I shifted to heroin, I needed around ₹1,500 every day," he says. The father of six-year-old twins, he has not touched drugs in the last two years of recovery.

The Assam government employee offers a glimpse into the mechanics of the drug trade. "Drugs don't reach Jonai directly from Myanmar," he says, referring to the Assam town that borders Arunachal Pradesh. "Consignments first reach distributors in larger hubs like Guwahati. If

someone in Jonai places an order worth ₹50,000-100,000, a peddler delivers it."

According to him, the trade runs entirely on cash. Peddlers, he says, are good connections "with distributors and brokers in the supply chain. The nature of the transaction is simple. 'A first-time buyer might call a peddler and say, 'I'm waiting near such and such hotel, wearing a yellow T-shirt.' Money changes hands, drugs are delivered, that's it."

The ease and informality of the exchange, he says, have made narcotics remarkably accessible, even in small towns away from the international frontier.



The 24-year-old from Pasighat rebuilt her life after two rounds of residential treatment at a rehabilitation centre. 'I am now a recovering warrior,' she says

Another recovering user from Arunachal Pradesh, a 35-year-old with two school-going daughters, says users in the region distinguish between two varieties of brown sugar. One, he says, is significantly more potent and is known as pagla (mad) brown sugar. "Once you take it, you lose control over yourself," he says. "You don't know what you are doing. People have assaulted others, committed robberies and there have been cases of users dying in road accidents while driving under its influence."

He says addiction had distorted his sense of reality. "I became convinced that my wife was having an affair," he recalls. "It was my imagination but it triggered constant arguments and nearly destroyed my family."

ADDICTION TO REHAB

For many who are battling addiction, recovery begins not in a rehabilitation centre but at home. Family support, says Tapir Darang, chief adviser to the All Arunachal Anti-Drugs Warriors, is often the most important factor in helping a user break free from the grip of narcotics.

"The biggest problem is families that are trying to hide someone's addiction," he says. "If they are unwilling to cooperate or seek help for the victim, we reach out to the clan chief. Their intervention can make a difference. It is important to get the user into a rehab centre."

Darang says grassroots organisations

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

The East's Own Overdose

The Northeast was the Golden Triangle's passageway. Now it's the destination, with heroin wrecking homes

Tune in to ETPlay.com. Available on EconomicTimes.com/podcast, Amazon Prime Music, Apple Podcasts, JioSaavn and Spotify.

When I was taking brown sugar, ₹4,000 a week was enough. After I shifted to heroin, I needed around ₹1,500 every day"

RECOVERING USER, 27, Oyan, Arunachal Pradesh

are stepping in where families and institutions fall short. Among them is Recovering Warriors in Oyan, which he says is at the forefront of the fight against drug abuse in the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border belt.

Founded only last year, the organisation has conducted anti-drug awareness programmes in 24 villages while also participating in flood relief operations. Its president, Mohan Tamut, believes recovery is about much more than detoxification.

"It is important for former drug users to have a community they can call their own," says Tamut. "They play football, volleyball and badminton together. Quitting narcotics is never easy and staying away is even harder. Unless they remain connected and support one another, the risk of relapse is always there."

INVOKING TRIBAL LAWS

In Wokha, in neighbouring Nagaland — a district that lies outside the conventional narcotics trafficking route from Myanmar — a group of young Lotha Nagas has adopted an unconventional strategy to combat the drug menace. Convinced that the criminal justice system alone cannot stem the crisis, they have turned to tribal laws to deal with traffickers and users alike.

"If we rely only on the law, Wokha will never become a drug-free district," says the organisation's president, who previously worked in the field of cyber law and has requested anonymity. After consulting the village elders, he decided to invoke the customary laws. Our approach is simple: rehabilitation users and expel peddlers."

Repeat offenders are required to sign a written undertaking that they will never return to narcotics, he adds. Just as Oyan and Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh receive narcotics via the Murkongselek railway belt in Assam, Wokha's drug supply is routed through Merapani, another border town in Assam. In both places, drugs do not arrive directly from Myanmar although Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland share long international borders with the country.

While the Northeast, along with states such as Punjab and Rajasthan, is identified by the NCB as a major hotspot for heroin trafficking, it is important to place the region's crisis in perspective. States such as Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland remain less affected than several other parts of the country in terms of overall narcotics enforcement.

In 2024, for instance, law enforcement agencies across India seized more than 1 million kilograms of narcotic drugs. Arrests under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act were the highest in Kerala (24,517), followed by Punjab (9,734), according to a reply to a Lok Sabha question in February last year. In Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Nagaland 273.

The relatively modest numbers, however, should not be mistaken for a lesser threat. In a sparsely populated, predominantly tribal hill states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, even a few hundred users can leave lasting scars on families and the communities.

For many former users who are now parents, the greatest fear is no longer about relapsing. It is the possibility that their own children could one day follow the path they once took.

"One question haunted me every day," says a 40-year-old former user from Oyan. "What if my children too start taking drugs? That fear pushed me to reclaim my life before it was too late."

The real battle is no longer on the border, it is inside homes.

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Apoorva Mittal

Lying on a leather chair, Kampan Rampal Chhabra felt the upward gliding pressure of the aesthetician's fingers on her face. The 34-year-old nutritionist from Biliapur, Chhattisgarh, was trying facial yoga for the first time in Mumbai, where she was on her annual trip with her best friend. She felt the puffiness on her face melt away. Chhabra, who had been asking her dermatologist to add a little more to her face routine "as we are not getting any younger", chanced upon "face fitness" on her Instagram feed. It promised to lift and sculpt face muscles, even reduce fine lines and help with acne, with just hand movements, tools and muscle stimulation. This is anti-Boxox, the other end of face care without invasive procedures. Chhabra's treatment involved hand strokes, serums, packs and hot towels. "It was refreshing," she says.

Face fitness or face yoga is targeted facial massage but the terms themselves feed into a world obsessing over wellness and exercise. It borrows the aspiration of aesthetic medicine, the ritual of skincare, the discipline of fitness and the language of wellness.

It is catching on at a time when the pressure to put one's best face for-

ward in today's hyper-visual world is deeply felt, when even GLP-1 drugs are increasingly spoken of in aesthetic terms.

FIX THE SKIN

Pooja Lalwani/Tamang, founder of the facial workout studio Fit Face in Khar, Mumbai, says her customers include Gen Z, millennials, people over 50 and women in their 70s and 80s. Men account for 30-40% of her clientele. "A lot of people are getting very conscious of the way they look, face-wise and body-wise. Every time we introduce a new treatment, it is not like we have to really convince people to do it," she says.

Farah Maneckshaw, therapist and founder of The Mirrored Room, a mental health initiative in Bengaluru, says clients are increasingly focusing on body image concerns, especially facial features. The anxiety she says, is also shaped by a beauty culture that has moved away from makeup to skin, structure and a "natural" appearance. The language of fitness makes work on appearance sound less like vanity and more like discipline, she says. "Fitness, wellness and health are all used in a way that makes it a little bit more palatable. Wellness has become a catch-all phrase and fitness has become a way to

Saving Face

Face fitness, which borrows the ritual of skincare and the language of wellness, is taking off in this hyper-visual world

talk about these things and sell them in a way that is received better."

Before face fitness became a studio service, it was a face ritual that one researched online and tried on oneself. Noida-based marketing professional Shivani Aggarwal came across the

concept a few years ago through the videos of Japanese face yoga instructor Koko Hayashi. That led Aggarwal to a guru who she incorporated into her night routine. "I could see a visible difference in a week's time," she says. "There was less water retention and

better blood circulation... my skin was glowing. And I got defined cheekbones and a jawline." For her, the routine is as much about self-care as it is about appearance. "If I look good, I feel good. How healthy your skin is affects your mood and your lifestyle."

CHANGING PHASES

The do-it-yourself ritual is evolving now. In India, global companies, homegrown beauty entrepreneurs and face yoga specialists are positioning it slightly differently — as a workout, a natural alternative, a prevent service, a preventative anti-ageing routine and a beauty maintenance habit.

FACEGYM, a UK-based facial fitness brand, is among those trying to formalise the category in India. It was launched in the country last month through a partnership with Reliance Retail. A company spokesperson says the brand looks at the face fitness concepts you look at body. The company

WHAT IS FACE FITNESS?

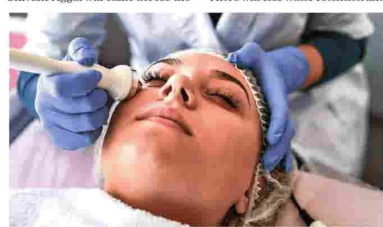
Face fitness refers to non-invasive exercises and massage techniques that claim to improve circulation and firmness and reduce puffiness. The practice is marketed as a way to tone the face and soften signs of ageing.

IS IT EFFECTIVE?

Small-scale studies suggest some potential benefits with consistent practice, but the evidence remains limited and preliminary.

It is not trying to replace facials, dermatology or aesthetic procedures, but to create a category centred on muscle activation and long-term fitness. Its core customer in India is an urban, premium beauty consumer, typically in the mid-20s to early 40s, who already spends on skincare, wellness and fitness. Women form a majority of the audience, but the brand says men are also showing growing interest in grooming and skincare.

Homegrown players see the category has been years in the making. Vibhuti Vohra Arora has been offering face yoga classes through House of Beauty



since 2018. She says by 2021-22, the Indian beauty consumer was ready to learn face yoga online and pay for her sessions.

"We saw a gap in the market between traditional salon facials and clinics where everything was machine-driven. In a heavily hosted, predominantly tribal hill states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, even a few hundred users can leave lasting scars on families and the communities."

For many former users who are now parents, the greatest fear is no longer about relapsing. It is the possibility that their own children could one day follow the path they once took. "One question haunted me every day," says a 40-year-old former user from Oyan. "What if my children too start taking drugs? That fear pushed me to reclaim my life before it was too late."

The real battle is no longer on the border, it is inside homes.

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

The latest high-profile case pits iPhone-producing incumbent Apple against ChatGPT developer OpenAI, which has ambitions to become a hard-

Apple's suit comes at a tricky time for OpenAI. The company and its chief executive Sam Altman are on the back foot about strategy, ethics and safety of the lab's research and development. The lab's admission this week that an AI

A line needs to be drawn, however, between the healthy spread of innovative thoughts and outright theft. In 2020, Anthony Levandowski, co-founder of Google's self-driving car project, was sentenced to 18 months in prison for stealing trade secrets and allegedly using them to help build a rival programme at Uber (he was pardoned by President Donald Trump in 2021).

The stakes are far higher than in Franklin's time, with tech companies pouring billions into research and going public at trillion-dollar valuations. That competitors should fight to protect their intellectual, material and human assets is understandable. But if in the process they stifle the free flow of human ingenuity, everyone will emerge worse off.

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ET infections/Catfish literature



The writer is author of 'H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars'

transport. Many of these jobs may be difficult to replace through shifting business models.

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Opinion

The next phase of Trump's trade war

AMERICA

Patrick Foulis



Judged by shock and awe, the trade war between America and the world is still about tariffs, with the US rebuilding its wall this week and Canada reeling from the threat of a 50 per cent levy. Yet the most profound shift is elsewhere, in a higher struggle over globalisation's infrastructure. For 18 months, America has sought to charge countries more for access to its services and market. Now, it is deterring and punishing those that seek alternatives. In Silicon Valley speak, it is pivoting from monetising users to locking them in. In anti-trust terms, it is moving from hiking prices to foreclosing competition. And in mafia slang, it is shifting from shake-

downs to threatening to whack those who try to quit its protection.

It is a mistake to think of the second Trump administration as a return to 1950s protectionism or Chinese-style mercantilism. Instead it is best described as a project to ensure the US cannot be coerced economically and "gets paid" for the superpower services it provides to the world. These include its financial markets and currency, its tech networks, its vast consumer market and its weapons and defence guarantees. It is a futuristic nationalism, which acknowledges that, in an age of intangible capitalism, a minority of the income and capital America generates from abroad is from goods.

The administration has sought to boost the revenue and capital that flow to the superpower. It has raised tariffs and demanded countries sign up to investment quotas, purchase agreements, arms deals and more volumes of US tech and intellectual property, sometimes at higher prices. This week America broadened selling nuclear technology

to Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously it has cut costs by forcing allies to spend on defence, and qualifying US commitments—including to Ukraine, Nato and Taiwan. If countries refuse these new terms, they may be denied services. Countries free-loading on defence spending forfeit US military guarantees. Governments that refuse to invest in America may forfeit lower-tariff entry to its market. Access to new technology is no longer guaranteed. In June, foreigners were temporarily barred from Anthropic's AI models.

Parts of this strategy have worked. Last year foreign capital inflows to America were the highest on record, while the income generated abroad from its financial, tech, intellectual property and defence industries rose to 7 per cent of GDP. But an inevitable side effect of squeezing customers is that they are outraged and look for other options. The White House understands this, which explains its obsession with US "supremacy" in tech: if the products are superior, it assesses, foreigners will

suck it up. The Genius Act, creating a legal framework for some crypto assets, was motivated by cronyism, but also a desire to bring offshore digital finance under US control.

Other countries have reacted more angrily than anticipated. Many are pursuing a policy of keeping access to US services while investing in alternatives.

In mafia slang, it is shifting from shakedown to threats to whack those who try to quit its protection

from payments to air defence. This means some US firms will lose market share. Palantir, the defence-tech pioneer, has lost out on business in Europe.

Jacob Helberg, the under-secretary of state for economic affairs, said it would be "backward and counterproductive" for countries to develop independent digital capabilities. Marco Rubio, the

secretary of state, has just instructed US diplomats to rebuke the fear of "kill switches" in US tech. But, as well as such dissuasion, there is coercion, with attacks on rival offerings.

This is hardly unheard of. In the 1900s, Britain tried to forestall Germany's rival wireless service. In the 2010s, America pushed allies to ditch Huawei, a Chinese telecoms firm. In 2025, Trump threatened to tariff countries exploring alternatives to the dollar. Most of the reciprocal trade deals signed by the administration have clauses designed to safeguard the position of US networks and give America a veto over countries signing tech deals with China.

The attempt to foreclose competition will go further than this. Exhibit A is the attack on Brazil's huge digital finance platform Pix, whose success helped trigger a 25 per cent tariff this month. The goal appears to be to inhibit a rival to US payment systems. There are more than 80 similar platforms worldwide, including India's giant UPI, creating a network of financial networks. Exhibit B is AI,

where China's Moonshot is approaching parity with US models at a fraction of their cost, prompting security fears and complaints of stolen IP. Scott Bessent, the Treasury secretary, says America could sanction Chinese AI firms. Exhibit C is the Pentagon, which has just stated it welcomes allies' investment in military technology "in ways that are collaborative with America's rather than trying in vain to replicate or supplant it".

These are all warning shots. Europe has its own space, digital money and air-defence projects, all of which are due to come on stream in the next five years. There are similar efforts under way in Asia. If they are successful, will America seek to prevent their use? That will be a step far more consequential than tariffs. It is one thing to ask your friends to pay up. It is quite another to try to prohibit them from seeking alternatives.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution and author of a forthcoming book on globalisation

The new K3 model from China's 'Yang the genius' has closed the gap with US rivals, write Eleanor Olcott and Zijiang Wu

Following the breakout global success of Chinese AI lab DeepSeek's R1 model early last year, Yang Zhilin faced what many believed would be an existential test for his start-up Moonshot AI. The bespectacled 34-year-old founder had failed to capitalise on the early popularity of Kimi, his company's chatbot, which was plagued by outages and rapidly overtaken by larger rivals. At the same time, he was contending with a lawsuit from an investor in a previous venture and reports that he and a co-founder sold shares in Moonshot during an early fundraising round. The company denied the reports, which brought unwelcome scrutiny.

Many in China's AI industry questioned whether Moonshot could survive the brutal and expensive race to build frontier large language models. In 2024, the start-up had made just \$2.4m in revenue, while its costs from model training and hiring researchers were exploding, according to one investor briefed on the numbers. Rivals including Baichuan and 01.ai had already abandoned the contest to focus on applications, and some wondered whether Yang would follow suit.

But after DeepSeek's R1 release, Yang concluded that Moonshot had moved into commercialisation too early and decided to focus purely on model training, ditching efforts to market the Kimi chatbot. In another pivotal decision, he committed to open-sourcing Moonshot's leading AI models, allowing users to download the systems and run them on their own hardware.

"If the top leader can't make decisive calls, that won't work," Yang said in a 2024 interview with the Chinese press.

It was the start of a journey that culminated last week in the release of the company's K3 model. The new arrival closes the gap with leading US models and has prompted panic about the rising capabilities of China's AI, in an echo of last year's "DeepSeek moment".

Investors are now clamouring to get access to Moonshot. The company, which is gearing up for an initial public offering, is currently doing two rounds of consecutive fundraising, the second of which would value it at around \$50bn, according to investors with knowledge of the matter.

A boom in AI coding assistants and autonomous agents has created surging demand from developers, turning Moonshot into one of China's fastest-growing model providers. Annual recurring revenue reached about \$500m in June, they added. Wang Tieshen, an independent consultant and engineer, said Yang's status as a "leading AI researcher" has enabled him to "build a team of talented engineers all working towards the same goal". Before founding Moonshot, he was known for research extending models' context windows, allowing chatbots to retain more information over long conversations.

China's AI race has been a battle for talent, with deep-pocketed tech groups aggressively poaching from smaller start-ups. Throughout this, Yang has kept one of China's strongest research



Person in the News | Yang Zhilin

Rock star founder behind Moonshot AI

teams together. Many of Moonshot's founding researchers studied alongside him either at Tsinghua University, where he graduated top of his computer science class, or at Carnegie Mellon University, where he completed his PhD. During his CMU years, Yang had stints at Google Brain and Meta.

That cohesion has distinguished Moonshot from Chinese AI groups including Alibaba and Baidu, which have seen prominent researchers depart amid disagreements over balancing frontier research with commercial demands.

Moonshot's decision to pivot to open source reinforced that advantage. Researchers are attracted by the opportunity to publish papers and receive individual recognition. "Researchers want to be remembered for breakthroughs," Wang said. "Open source gives them that."

Employees describe an intense culture of long hours in Moonshot's utilitarian headquarters in Beijing's Haidian

district. But Yang has also infused the company with his own particular obsession with rock music.

The company's name comes from Pink Floyd, while meeting rooms are named after rock bands. A white piano stands prominently in the office.

Former classmates recall Yang, born

'Culture that embraces not only hardcore technology but also music, art and the humanities gives it an edge'

in the southern province of Guangdong, as unusually gifted. He began coding in high school and won first prize in the National Olympiad in Informatics—an achievement that earned him direct admission to university. He also balanced elite academic performance with music. A drummer in a campus band called Splay, he organised university

music competitions alongside future Moonshot co-founder Zhou Xinyu.

"The fact that Yang could get top grades while doing all that made him famous at Tsinghua," one former classmate said. "People called him Yang Shen"—which translates to "Yang the genius". "Friends would describe him as romantic and idealistic," they added.

That mythology has helped distinguish Moonshot from China's otherwise austere AI industry. But Kevin Xu, an investor and China AI specialist, argues Yang's interest in music and the humanities is more than branding.

"Culture that embraces not only hardcore technology but also music, art and the humanities gives Moonshot an edge," he said. "So much of frontier AI development has to do with research taste and combining the humanities with technology in a way that we have not seen before."

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Welcome to the era of financial candyfloss

MARKETS
Gillian Tett



This month, politicians in Washington are worrying—yet again—about global imbalances. No wonder: not only does the US need foreign investors to buy an ever-swelling pile of Treasuries, but China's exports keep surging, fuelling western deficits. However, there is a second aspect to today's imbalances that is rarely discussed: the size of global finance relative to the "real" economy.

This has fascinated me since I interviewed an Islamic finance scholar in 2007 who likened modern markets to a candyfloss machine. The reason? Real assets—like houses—were being used to secure debt that was then rehypothecated multiple times, partly with derivatives, just as sugar is spun and respun into candy floss.

That financial cloud looked impressive. But, like candyfloss, the value of its "real" assets was small—as we discovered when finance imploded.

Has this now changed? You might think so, given that the 2008 crisis showed the perils of excess financialisation. But nothing could be further from the truth. The McKinsey Global Institute has just published a fascinating balance sheet estimate of the world's assets, liabilities and wealth. This series, which started in 2021, is unusual in measuring both public and private assets.

In 2025 this balance sheet was apparently \$1.8 quadrillion, a record \$100tn higher than in 2024 (global GDP was \$117tn). This included \$620tn of "real" assets (real estate, infrastructure, machinery and equipment and intellectual property), \$550tn of financial assets (equity, loans, bonds and currency), balanced by \$600tn of global wealth, mostly owned by households.

This is startling. But the details are even more so: global household wealth has risen more than fourfold since 2000, dramatically faster than the "real" economy, amid asset-price inflation. America accounts for \$175tn of this; China \$75tn. And while it was rising real estate prices that drove this two decades ago, last year it was surging equity prices, particularly in the US, that accounted for 57 per cent of the wealth increase. "Real" assets were a measly 20 per cent, far lower than before. Meanwhile, US asset prices are now 3.7 times GDP—double the historic average.

"Global wealth growth was driven to a greater extent by paper wealth, or nominal asset value decoupled from the real economy," McKinsey notes. In plain English: rich consumers have a candyfloss economy.

Other details are also notable. Household debt, relative to GDP, has shrivelled since 2008, particularly in America. That's a good thing. But government

debt has surged in the US, Japan and Europe. Chinese corporate debt has exploded too. Meanwhile "productive assets", relative to GDP, have doubled in China since 2000, even as that ratio has flattened in America—where it is now below the early 1980s level. Ouch.

Many Americans might shrug or note that some of China's "productive assets" might not be so productive due to over-investment, while some US assets might be undercounted since it is so hard to measure digital investment. Figures such as Kevin Warsh, Federal Reserve chair, think (or hope) that AI will unleash a productivity miracle. This could enable the US to grow out of its ever-rising sovereign debt and justify its equity valuations.

Moreover, many economists consider some financialisation to be good. The IMF, for example, has long urged poor countries to embrace financial deepening to boost their growth. Under that logic, the swelling size of US capital markets might be seen as evidence of economic sophistication and strength.

However, "you can sometimes have too much of a good thing", as Jan Mischke of McKinsey tells me, noting that the current pattern is "pretty extreme". Indeed. And obvious risks now abound. One issue, the Bank for International Settlements said recently, is that wealth is now so dependent on US stock markets—and US AI exuberance—that "a major equity market correction could have larger macroeconomic consequences today than in the past". A jolt

Surging equity prices account for far more of the wealth increases than 'real' assets

might yet occur as a result of competition from Chinese open-source AI models such as this month's Kimi K3 launch.

Another danger, says the IMF, is that rising long-term interest rates could spark a sovereign debt crunch or prompt governments either to inflate their way out of the debt or to restructure it (unless that AI miracle occurs). Then there is a more subtle philosophical issue: as my colleague Rana Foroohar has noted, financialisation turns humans from "makers" (of real products) into "takers" (of financial value). Many religions dislike this; hence the Islamic scholar's quip to me in 2007. But I suspect many voters do too, given that popular western culture prefers to present finance as a means to spark growth, not an end in itself.

Still, such qualms are unlikely to deter investors from gobbling up US equities, or Chinese banks extending corporate loans. For better or worse, our 21st-century world seems addicted to financial candyfloss, not least because it makes the rich feel ever richer. US President Donald Trump had better pray this doesn't end in a sticky mess.

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Opinion

The Victorians have some lessons for Burnham on radical devolution

Britain needs the social and economic glue of local power

POLITICS

Philip Stephens



Public libraries, the champion of 19th-century municipal government Joseph Chamberlain observed, were "a kind of communism which the least revolutionary among us may be proud to advocate". Activist, elected councils, as the Liberal mayor of Birmingham grasped in the 1870s, were a lodestone for strong, economically thriving communities. Libraries were part of the social and economic glue.

A century and a half after Chamberlain and his fellow municipal pioneers in places such as Edinburgh, Manchester and Liverpool transformed the fortunes of the nation's great cities, his civic gospel carries an important message for Britain's new government. Decentralising power should start at the bottom with the renewal of local authorities.

Newly installed in Downing Street, Andy Burnham, until June the mayor of Greater Manchester, is correct to say regional and local enterprise has been suffocated by Whitehall centralism. He wants, he says, to disperse power to "every postcode in the land".

An offshoot of the prime minister's Downing Street office has been opened in Manchester – No 10 North – to shift decision-making from civil servants in London. New powers and resources are

Since the 1980s, France has handed the UK the dubious accolade of Europe's most centralised state

promised to allow metro mayors to pursue economic and social regeneration in big city regions beyond the capital.

The case for radicalism is indisputable. A Napoleonic heritage long marked out France as Europe's most centralised state. In the past few decades that dubious accolade has been handed to Britain. While then president François Mitterrand began in the 1980s to dismantle big-state direction of France's regional and local affairs, Margaret Thatcher took Britain in the opposite direction.

When the Conservatives took office in 1979, many responsibilities now held by Whitehall belonged to town halls. Alongside more authority on planning, public health and waste collection, they built rental housing for workers, exercised control over schools and had responsibility for roads and transport. And, yes, they operated libraries and maintained playing fields and swimming pools. On the other side of the balance sheet, they set the levels of taxation raised locally from residents and businesses through the rating system.

The emasculation came in two parts. It began with Thatcher's ill-fated attempt in 1990 to replace domestic



rates with a flat-rate community charge, or poll tax, alongside the nationalisation of business rates and the imposition of a Treasury-dictated cap on locally raised funds. The aim was to destroy the alternative centres of power established by militant leftwing councils in authorities such as Liverpool and Lambeth.

After protests, the poll tax was abandoned in favour of property-based council tax, but town halls never recovered their financial freedom. Two decades later, David Cameron tightened the screws by making local government a target of post-financial crash austerity. Funding for local authorities fell by more than 40 per cent in real terms during the decade after 2010.

Councils were reduced to the role of subcontractors. The County Councils Network estimates that some 65 per cent of local authority spending goes on centrally mandated social care. Add other statutory responsibilities such as in homelessness and the proportion of discretionary spending is under a third.

As for civic amenities, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy estimates that nearly 800 libraries, or a fifth of the total, closed

during Cameron's austerity decade.

Unsurprisingly in light of his experience in Manchester, Burnham's devolution focus is on empowering metro mayors and the strategic authorities over which they preside to better co-ordinate policy across local authority boundaries in and around big cities. There is something to be said for this approach. But it starts in the wrong place.

Chamberlain's first insight recognised civic activism as a route to higher productivity and growth as well as greater social cohesion. His second understood that power is most effectively exercised by those close, and directly accountable, to their local communities. Replacing central direction with decision-making in a handful of regional centres is to miss the lessons of late Victorian England.

Burnham should start by returning to local councils the power to raise money locally by scrapping the cap on increases in the council tax. If an authority wants to spruce up the high street, it should be able to raise the money to do so. Next, the government should update the valuations on which the tax is based. Property prices have risen more than fourfold since they were made in 1991. Councils should also be given back a say in the level of local business taxes, be permitted to issue municipal bonds for new housing and be able to forge local enterprise partnerships.

The protests from the Treasury will be loud. Irresponsible councils, mandarins will warn, will impose big tax increases and then waste the additional revenue. Local as well as national politicians make mistakes. But councils will struggle to match the tens of billions squandered by Whitehall on aborted IT and infrastructure projects. And elected councillors shoulder an accountability to voters too easily shrugged off by ministers and officials in Westminster.

Burnham would say he has much in common with Chamberlain. The mayor of Birmingham, after all, was among the first to call for democratic control of essential services such as water supply and transport. Chamberlain, though, feared that giving up "the town hall for the cabinet" might prove a "sorry" career change. Burnham had long set his sights on Downing Street. The town halls are waiting.

The writer is an FT contributing editor

Cosy femicide in novels should alarm us all

Wendy Jones

Killing women sells books. In the week that the politician Ann Widdecombe was brutally murdered at home, seven out of ten novels in the Sunday Times bestselling fiction paperback list featured the murder of a woman, with another having a severely tortured central female character. *The Hallowed Man* by Robert Galbraith and *The Family Friend* by Claire Douglas kill off two female characters each.

Let's crunch the numbers. Of the 115,705 copies of the bestsellers sold that week, 86,760 revolve around women being killed one way or another.

By strange coincidence, this figure is close to the 83,000 women the UN estimates are killed intentionally by men worldwide in acts of femicide each year.

There is a smorgasbord of creative methods of murder in the week's best-seller list: poisoned ginger cookies, a fatal beating, a car bomb, a beheading and being pushed off a cliff at a local suicide spot. Granted, *The Impossible Fortune* – the most recent instalment of Richard Osman's cosy crime series *The Thursday Murder Club* – which has sold over 430,000 copies so far, has a female character who accidentally kills herself. So not quite 'cosy femicide', but nonetheless another novel featuring a dead woman as plot device.

What is shocking about this, that we have become inured to it.

Our era seems particularly obsessed. Shakespeare wrote around 37 plays with more than 1,000 characters, of which 16 per cent – 155 – are women, and of whom five are murdered by men. Two of them, Desdemona and Emilia, are in *Othello*. Dickens has around 1,000 characters, of which only one major heroine is killed by a man – spoiler alert – Nancy in *Oliver Twist*.

Why does violence against women in popular fiction go unnoticed? Take a

Why does violence against women in popular fiction go unnoticed?

corollary – imagine if next week's best-selling list were to include ten novels all focused on the same subject matter. AI, for example, or the environment or American politics. We would clock the obsession, question our fixation, debate it widely. Yet one subject does preoccupy us week after week, and we don't seem to care. If there were a list on which nine out of 10 novels centred on Black men being murdered – also utterly unacceptable – we would see more clearly this perverse trend we have in our reading material.

Counter-arguments state that it's often women who write these books. Correct – seven of the 10 authors on the bestsellers list that week were women (including Robert Galbraith, the pen name of JK Rowling).

It's also women who read them. About 80 per cent of fiction books in the UK, US and Canada are bought by women. The implied syllogism is that because women create and consume these novels, they surely enjoy them. And, in writers' defence, any murder is in fact rich plot material, involving possible blood, weaponry, secrecy, police, law, punishment and in many incidents, sex. Why wouldn't publishers want to publish such books when they sell so well?

But the argument is more nuanced than that. To paraphrase Margaret Atwood: "Men are afraid women will laugh at them, women are afraid men will kill them." Anxiety and the need to face our worst fears in the "let's pretend" of novels seem to me most likely to play a part in why women read such books. It is not merely cavalier self-disregard and wanton enjoyment. What does the ubiquitousness of such violence do inauspiciously to women's sense of safety today?

I'm not advocating for equity, where more men are murdered in fiction; that would be the ultimate race to the bottom. I'm not advocating for a blame game either. I am instead suggesting that if we are to be consumed by the desire to read novels in which women are murdered, we must become aware of what we are obsessed by.

The writer is the author of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, a biography of Grayson Perry

What the City needs from the new government

Philip Augar

was working in the City the last time there was a Healey in Number 11 Downing Street. That was Denis, chancellor from 1974-79, who had been defence secretary in a prior Labour government just like the present incumbent, John Healey.

The first Healey walked into a national crisis. The country was still reeling from a miners' strike and a state of emergency called by the previous Conservative government. Industry was broken by the compulsory three-day week. Inflation was pushing 16 per cent.

These problems were not of his making but the attempted solutions were. Healey's 1974 Budget raised the basic rate of income tax to 33 per cent and the top rate to 83 per cent. The threshold for paying a 15 per cent surcharge on investment income was lowered. A wealth tax was proposed. Price controls and a record trade gap sent long

gilt yields to 16 per cent, resulting in a sterling crisis and an IMF bailout. These were the 1970s, the decade before, according to Prime Minister Andy Burnham, neoliberalism ran amok.

City traditionalists do not see it like that. The seventies were an especially hellish decade, with several stock exchange firms going under, a Bank of England rescue of the smaller banks and a property crash. Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal government, in this view, turned the economy and the City around, laying the foundations for a golden quarter-century in which the UK's GDP growth was near the top of the G7 and financial services flourished.

Thatcher's critics – and there are plenty in the City – concede that deregulation, market competition and a focus on profit brought benefits. However, they say, these were outweighed by short-termism, the hollowing out of the industrial sector and eventually the Great Financial Crisis of 2008. The aftershock is still with us in low GDP growth.

What would the City like from the Burnham-Healey axis? Notwithstanding the prime minister's apparent nos-

talgia, anything but the 1970s is the short reply. Not neoliberalism either, cooler heads might add.

This government must retain the confidence of overseas investors if it is to succeed. The UK Debt Management Office forecasts total gilt sales of £246bn in this financial year 2026-27. A one point increase in long gilt yields (such as occurred under Liz Truss) adds £2.5bn

The message should be: get public spending down and investors will support the growth plans

to annual public borrowing and endless financial dislocation.

The tax and spend question is the critical decision for Burnham and Healey. It needs gripping quickly to avoid the economy seizing up in a morass of second-guessing. Get it wrong and the party is over; get it right and a mandate to implement the government's radical rhetoric for devolution, public control and equality is there for the taking.

But although resolving tax and spend is necessary, it is not sufficient without long-term reform of British industry. Stripping away layers of regulation, easing planning restrictions and further reform of business rates would be low-cost signals of a change in tempo. So too, setting the direction of sectoral growth, preferably by endorsing the existing industrial strategy, juiced with public-sector investment.

But the state lacks the skills and the money to reverse on its own the 21st-century collapse in private-sector investment. In this period, risk-averse, actuary- and consultant-led investing caused pension funds to prefer gilts and global passive funds to active investment in quoted and unquoted British companies. Too often, entrepreneurship was stifled or simply fled overseas through lack of capital.

This is where Burnham and Healey may have got lucky. The 2025 Mansion House Accord, driven by their immediate predecessors, commits the 17 pension fund providers who signed it to invest at least 10 per cent of their work-place portfolios in productive, economy-boosting assets by 2030.

They have promised that at least half of this will be in the UK, a £25bn infusion into the private sector that can make a serious difference. The new government needs to get behind this, smooth out administrative roadblocks and keep up the pressure on the institutions to do more.

The City and a soft-left Labour government are not natural allies but they need each other. Unlike the 1970s, when tax increases were counter-productive and not accompanied by a coherent growth plan, there is a conversation to be had here. The City's message should be get public spending down and investors will support the growth plans.

The government has to deliver on the spending side and be sensible on tax. In return the City should be prepared to pay its dues. This involves accepting its share of tax rises even if they fall on its own industry, stop lobbying for further financial services deregulation (which has already gone too far) and stepping back from threats to take the ball home if it doesn't like the referee.

The writer is the author of several books on the City and Wall Street

Opinion

Haiti is a war zone. Why is the U.S. banishing its neighbors there?

Deporting Haitian migrants will further destabilize a country in crisis.

Russel L. Honoré

The United States is locked in a dangerous, self-defeating paradox in its policy toward Haiti. Last month, the Supreme Court cleared the path for the Trump administration to terminate Temporary Protected Status for more than 330,000 Haitians who have legally resided, worked and built lives across America. The administration claims that conditions in Haiti have stabilized enough for their return. For American citizens, though, the State Department has maintained a Level 4 “Do Not Travel” advisory for Haiti, citing gang violence, kidnappings and widespread instability.

Haiti is indeed near total state collapse. Decades of compounding disasters — including devastating earthquakes and political violence — have left the central government virtually nonfunctional. Since the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, armed gangs have come to dominate an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and large areas of the country, controlling access to commerce and humanitarian aid, paralyzing basic government operations and displacing more than a million people.

As someone who has spent a lifetime managing complex logistics and command structures in disaster zones, including the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and international relief operations across the Caribbean, I can tell you plainly: You cannot stabilize a community in crisis by further collapsing its economic and social foundations.

Over the past several years, I have served as a volunteer adviser to Haitian diaspora leaders and civic organizations based in both the United States and Haiti. I have witnessed their efforts to strengthen Haiti’s democratic institutions, support humanitarian initiatives, advocate responsible governance and invest in Haiti’s long-term recovery. Haiti’s instability is not for want of their efforts to build a functioning state; it is in large part a result of failed policy on the part of the international community.

For years, the international strategy toward Haiti has relied on reactive, short-term fixes to systemic problems. As public order in Haiti has broken down, Washington and its partners have routinely turned to foreign forces, including a Kenyan-led security mission; targeted sanctions; and piecemeal aid. This is an approach intended to treat the symptoms of state collapse rather than build the long-term capacity of Haitian institutions and security forces.

During the deployment of the Kenyan-led mission, which began in June 2024, I spoke directly with its leader, Godfrey Otuange, on several occasions. The mission was intended to reinforce the Haitian National Police and help create conditions for governance and elections. But Commander Otuange confirmed to me what many military professionals already recognized: The mission was understaffed and under-resourced and lacked the tactical assets it needed. Predictably, the force was unable to halt gang expansion.

In light of the failures of the Kenyan-led mission, the U.N. Security Council has authorized the deployment of a new, international Gang Suppression Force — an offensive, intelligence-driven mission that will more explicitly aim to take the fight to the gangs. But if

the new force is not adequately equipped or integrated into a broader Haitian-led strategy, it risks repeating the same mistakes as the last intervention. And merely replacing one temporary foreign force with another will not save Haiti.

What Haiti really needs are the institutions of a sovereign nation: a professional police force, a capable national army and the resources to secure its territory. Lasting stability cannot be imported. It must be built and sustained by Haitians.

That goal faces two major obstacles in Washington.

The first is the stranglehold on security assistance. Because of restrictions such as the Leahy Law, which bars U.S. assistance to foreign security units credibly implicated in human rights violations, even vetted Haitian forces are often prevented from receiving the critical equipment and support they require. Haitian security forces are effectively being asked to reclaim their country with one hand tied behind their backs.

The second is the continued uncertainty surrounding Temporary Protected Status for Haitians.

The Department of Homeland Security recently extended employment authorization for Haitian T.P.S. beneficiaries through Friday as a result of ongoing litigation and may well extend it again. But regardless of the exact date, it’s clear that Haiti’s security, governance and humanitarian crises will not be resolved by the time current protections expire — and especially not while deportation flights continue to return migrants to an active war zone.

Forcing hundreds of thousands of people into the shadows or onto deportation flights to a volatile nation still consumed by violence and political instability would only feed the chaos. It would risk worsening Haiti’s humanitarian crisis, severing the remittances that sustain families in Haiti and expanding the recruitment pool for the gangs the international community is trying to defeat.

Ending Temporary Protected Status for the hundreds of thousands of Haitians who have made homes in the United States will have repercussions far beyond Haiti. Haitians with protected status contribute billions annually to the U.S. economy, pay federal, state and local taxes, and fill essential jobs across multiple industries. Many of them work as nursing assistants, home health aides, caregivers and other frontline health care professionals, supporting a health care system already facing severe work force shortages.

Temporary Protected Status was never intended to become permanent, nor was it intended to expire while the conditions that justified it continued to exist. If T.P.S. ends for Haitians, what legal pathway exists for these law-abiding individuals? How does forcing them into legal uncertainty or deportation make either the United States or Haiti more secure?

If the United States genuinely wants to reduce regional instability and unauthorized migration, it must stop pursuing policies that deepen Haiti’s emer-



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

gency. Congress should enact a durable legislative solution for Haitian T.P.S. holders, and the Trump administration should remove unnecessary barriers preventing Haiti from building the security capacity every sovereign

nation requires. It is still possible for Haiti to move from crisis toward sovereign democracy. And Washington can still choose to be a strategic partner of Haiti rather than an architect of its collapse.

RUSSELL L. HONORÉ was commanding general of the U.S. First Army from 2004 to 2008 and led Task Force Katrina after the devastation of New Orleans.

Our vast collective Jeffrey Epstein failure

We need to hold accountable the web of accomplices who enabled his crimes.

Rachel Louise Snyder

The Donald J. Trump and Jeffrey Epstein Memorial Reading Room recently came to Washington. The pop-up exhibition displays 3,437 bound volumes of 800 pages each — representing the Epstein files that have been released so far. I wondered what 3.5 million pages even looked like visually. I can answer that now: It looked like a sobering image of our vast collective failure.

The question is, how do we address the magnitude of that failure? What can justice mean for the survivors at this point? “Release the files” — meaning, release all the files — has become shorthand for this failure, a rallying cry that the people and institutions who failed to stop Mr. Epstein should be held accountable.

Though the files were ordered to be released by December 2025 after Congress passed the Epstein Files Transparency Act, what we’ve had instead from the Department of Justice is dumps of incomplete information with haphazard redactions.

Justice seems a long way off. It was

particularly gutting to watch the journalist Katie Phang and the Epstein survivor Dani Bensky walk through the Reading Room and see Ms. Bensky calculate the sordid history that preceded her own 2004 victimization. “All they needed to do was station a police car outside of the mansion,” she said.

Even for those implicated, there’s been precious little real accountability. Mr. Epstein is dead. Jean-Luc Brunel, an associate of Mr. Epstein’s — charged with raping minors — is also dead (suicide, Parisian jail cell, 2022). Ghislaine Maxwell is imprisoned (however gently, in her minimum-security prison).

Meanwhile, for people who were connected to Mr. Epstein, the consequences have generally been slight. Some men, like Larry Summers, have lost their professional standing, while others, like Noam Chomsky, have taken reputational hits. A few — including Bill Gates and Woody Allen — have endured a measure of public shaming, but they don’t seem to have suffered much past a news cycle or two. President Trump continues to claim no wrongdoing.

Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase and Deutsche Bank have each settled civil suits brought by Mr. Epstein’s victims, who accused the banks of facilitating or ignoring Mr. Epstein’s sex



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPH BY JONAS MEYER

trafficking. In total, they’ve agreed to pay more than \$400 million — a sum dwarfed by their profits, of course. The idea that payment equates to justice strikes me as not merely a cold feature of capitalism but an expression of our American tendency to conflate people’s wealth with their human value.

This conflation underlies the cynical calculation that financial institutions apparently made to do business with Mr. Epstein in the first place. Regulators have found that Deutsche Bank allowed suspicious transactions linked

to Mr. Epstein’s account to proceed largely unchecked for years, despite the fact that the bank had deemed him “high risk.” JPMorgan’s staff raised concerns about Mr. Epstein as far back as 2006, seven years before the bank dropped him as a client. What if we demanded that these institutions not merely pay a settlement but repay every penny of profit? If you deliver enough of a return on investment, I guess you can stuff your hollow moral center with cash.

Talk to any woman who says she has endured any kind of abuse and you will be quickly rid of the notion that true justice requires only a monetary payoff. Alva Johnson — who sued Mr. Trump, stating that he forcibly kissed her while she was working for his 2016 campaign — told me: “It’s a constant reliving of something so horrific that happened, and no amount of money, truthfully, can ever make you whole.”

Ms. Johnson, who eventually dropped her lawsuit, is one of more than two dozen women who’ve accused Mr. Trump of sexual misconduct. The Reading Room is named after both men for a reason. Women like her are seen as “damaged goods,” she said. It can be difficult to find employment when you’ve spoken out about powerful men.

She visited the Reading Room when it opened: “When I saw my name on the wall, it was like my heart just sank. It’s still so surreal, that this is your life.” (The president has disputed Ms. Johnson’s account and denied the allegations of sexual misconduct.)

I went upstairs to the third floor, where one side of the room represented Mr. Epstein’s victims with hundreds of candles, and the other held messages on index cards written by visitors. “Grateful, angry, heartbroken,” mourned one card. Another asked, hauntingly: “Who are we?”

The binders in the Reading Room should be understood as evidence of a global criminal enterprise that sold and transported girls and women. “The evil genius of traffickers like Epstein and Maxwell is that they created criminal liability for their victims,” said Martina Vandenberg, the president of the Human Trafficking Legal Center. Trafficking often works this way, even at the street level, by making victims collude in the crime by coercing them — with money or threats — into bringing in their friends or acquaintances.

The Epstein crimes still seem a live concern in Europe, which has been leading the way toward justice. French

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OPINION

The New York Times

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A critique of Trumpism goes too easy on elites



Ross Douthat

When Paul Ehrlich, the noted overpopulation doom monger, died last winter, his death inspired the online controversialist Richard Hanaia to go back and read some of Ehrlich's original writings on the "population bomb." What Hanaia discovered, he wrote, was that Ehrlich was actually worse than the quotes and clips often plucked by his critics would suggest. He was profoundly hostile to human progress, "misanthropic" at every turn, always ready with "blueprints" that would make both rich and poor countries poorer and committed to "an entire system" of thought "in which human life was constantly denigrated and devalued."

Grimmer still was Ehrlich's position in the intellectual and cultural firmament. He "was not some guy in his room putting out diatribes," Hanaia wrote. "He was a professor at Stanford, a highly decorated scientist and one of the most prominent public intellectuals of his generation."

This analysis is correct and indeed could be taken further: Ehrlich wasn't just promiscuous; he was also profoundly influential, shaping population control policies that in the short term yielded horrifying human rights abuses in countries like India and China, and in the longer run pushed East Asia down a path to potentially catastrophic population decline.

But I was especially interested in the critique as a counterpoint to Hanaia's recent intellectual project, which has culminated in his new book "Kakistocracy: Why Populism Leads to Disaster," a critique of Trumpism and populism and a defense of elite wisdom and capacity.

Briefs against populism are hardly in short supply, but Hanaia's case is notable because it comes from a very unlikely source — a pro-right-wing and deliberately abrasive to remake himself as a liberal in good standing. (I recommend Glad Edelman's recent Atlantic profile of Hanaia for more on his evolution.)

That unusual background yields an anti-populism that can be more perceptive than versions on offer from the center-left and right. As a foe of socialism, Hanaia has a clearer view than some left-wingers of how much rightist and leftist forms of populism can converge in their misgovernment. As a critic of liberalism, he has a more nuanced take on the relationship between populism, democracy and authoritarianism than anti-Trump centrists who envision a stark choice between establishment politics and fascism.

There is also a lot of merit to the story Hanaia wants to tell about the second Trump administration, in which the elite faction that he hoped would be maximally influential — the "tech right," a term he coined to describe the Silicon Valley elites who moved rightward in response to weakness — was either captured or overwhelmed by populist tendencies toward corruption, cronyism and conspiracism.

But in building its case against populism, Hanaia's book doesn't offer a clear enough sense of how and why elite governance goes wrong. Having converted away from right-wing anti-elitism, he wants to argue that elites — academic, legal, journalistic, scientific — are far more committed to truth-seeking than the less-educated masses, more "meaning-driven" and less purely self-interested, much less inclined to the kind of conspiratorial and magical thinking that often runs rampant in populist spaces.

When elite institutions are working well, this may be true. But when they fail, it isn't just because they don't live up to these aspirations. The aspirations themselves, the quest for truth and meaning, also yield a set of elite-specific temptations — an impulse to prioritize intellectual pleasures and ideological theories

over everyday experience, to use intelligence and rhetoric as a shield against reality, to confuse truth-seeking credentials with truth itself.

Consider, by way of example, the difference between Paul Ehrlich and Joe Rogan. Hanaia is hard on Rogan, treating him as the embodiment of populist anti-intellectualism, contemptuously listing all the ideas given a respectful hearing on his show — from ancient cities below the pyramids to anti-vaccine theories to 9/11 truthism to psychic phenomena — that "are rejected by virtually all academics and experts in the relevant fields."

This is fair enough. But it's also fair to say that Rogan and much of his audience seem to hold this range of wacky and paranoid ideas together in a jumble, considering them as theories and possibilities, without building a rigorous or zealous system around their precepts.

By contrast, Ehrlich took just one idea — a much more respectable one, the idea that rapid population growth might lead to famine or civil strife — and turned it into the basis for a fanatical theory that licensed tyrannical government behavior on the grounds of a putative emergency. And because he did so while speaking the language of academic truth-seeking and technical expertise, he was able to persuade individuals, institutions and governments to conflate his misanthropic with science, reason and progress — which only a clueless populist or a religious fanatic could possibly oppose.

That pattern of elite misgovernment is an extremely common one. It defined left-wing politics in the Covid era, when bad ideas emanated from academia and were lauded through other credentialed institutions, and met their only real resistance from the less-educated, less-elite portions of the Democratic coalition. And crucially it still operates in the right-wing coalition and the second Trump administration, notwithstanding populism's apparent dominance.

For instance, the struggles of the Department of Government Efficiency partly reflect a populist unwillingness to listen to credentialed experts about the sheer difficulty of budget cutting. But the belief that a group of high-I.Q. outsiders can come in and remake a complex system is itself a characteristic elite temptation, a right-wing version of the progressive faith in ivory-tower experts.



It's too simple to say that Elon Musk struggled in Washington because he embraced populist paranoia; he also struggled because he thought that his own forms of truth-seeking, so successful in his media ecosystem, the fruit of giving too many administration jobs to his own friends, would be successful in the White House.

Or take the Trump administration's current difficulties in escaping from a stalemate conflict in Iran. Was the Iran war the great desire of Rogan's audience, the work of an addled, fact-free populist media ecosystem, the fruit of giving too many administration jobs to his own friends? Not really. The voices in Trump's coalition who were supportive of the war included members of the pre-Trump G.O.P. elite and think-tankers who had been making the case for intervention for years. The voices raised in opposition often belonged to the populist wing, including some of its most paranoid factions. And while he quickly soured on the conflict, one of the initially pro-war voices was Richard Hanaia, overcome with temporary optimism about the ability of the American military to remake the world.

The takeaway from this experience is not that populist governance is desirable; it clearly fails in many of the ways that Hanaia describes. But recognizing those failures shouldn't make us suddenly naïve about elite failure, which persists even under populist conditions, and retains its distinctive power to dress hubris in the garments of wisdom and tempt smart people into folly.

Our vast collective Jeffrey Epstein failure

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prosecutors have recently learned of around 10 new suspected victims of Mr. Epstein's network. Norway is investigating a former prime minister and former diplomats in connection with their ties to Mr. Epstein. In February, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, King Charles's brother, was arrested as part of an investigation into misconduct in public office over his ties to Mr. Epstein. These international pressures may be the catalyst for truly determining who colluded criminally with Mr. Epstein versus who merely orbited his universe.

In the United States, we must consider holding to account the men and women who enabled or turned a blind eye to Mr. Epstein's crimes. I mean not just those who were directly engaged in the sexual assault of children, but those in financial institutions who ignored Mr. Epstein's suspicious transactions and those investigators and law enforcement officials who failed to protect his victims or to hold him truly accountable for his crimes. For this, an independent investigation led by an international body would be ideal.

This could include another look at Mr. Epstein's 2008 deal under Alexander Acosta, then the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Florida. The deal allowed Mr. Epstein to serve just 13 months in jail and leave custody nearly every day to work out of an office. Such a soft sentence seemed to embolden him. After his release, he stepped effortlessly back into the upper echelons of wealth and power.

A congressional oversight committee is currently conducting an investigation into the Justice Department's handling of its investigations into Mr. Epstein. Lawmakers have proposed legislation to lift the statute of limitations for civil claims on sex trafficking and sexual abuse. On the first day of Todd Blanche's Senate confirmation hearing, Representative Thomas Massie introduced the Epstein Files Transparency Act II, which would allow state attorneys general to bring suits against the D.O.J. for noncooperation in the release of the files. These are promising, if meager, starts.

I stayed in the Reading Room for a little over an hour. One of Mr. Epstein's

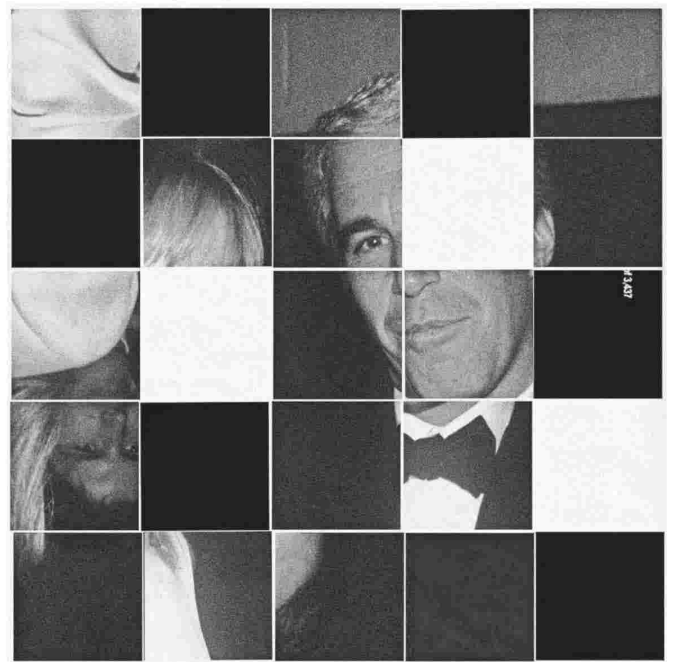


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survivors sat thumbing through a binder. (Given the D.O.J.'s slapdash retractions, the general public is not allowed to open and read the volumes.) Another survivor sat on a couch underneath the stairs turning pages, while two children played beside her. Both of the women struck me as preternaturally

silent, the kind of shocked silence you feel in the immediate wake of an accident, before reality sets in. By the time I left, the line to enter ran down the block and around the corner.

Even if the Department of Justice is done with the Epstein files, the public is not done with justice.

RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER is a professor of creative writing and journalism at American University. She is the author of "No Visible Brains: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us" and "Women We Buried, Women We Burned."

The U.S. can beat China in the A.I. race

HSU, FROM PAGE 1

model and rivals the performance of Anthropic and OpenAI's best models to date. Alibaba's Qwen is now the most downloaded A.I. model family on earth. Developers have used it to build more than 100,000 specialized models of their own. On OpenRouter, a service that lets developers send their work to whichever A.I. model they choose, Chinese open-weight models account for more than 20 percent of the units of text processed over a number of weeks in 2025 and more than 40 percent over a few weeks this spring; in 2024, such models' weekly processing of text was as low as about 1 percent.

Much of that traffic is American. Airbnb's customer service agent runs substantially on Qwen; Airbnb's chief executive, Brian Chesky, has called the model fast and cheap. Cursor, among the most valuable A.I. coding start-ups in the country, built its Composer 2 model on a base licensed from Moonshot. DoorDash now routes the "lower-level work" of its code review system to Kimi, DoorDash's co-founder Andy Fang reports, reserving an American model for the hardest tasks. And American businesses, attracted by lower costs, are joining these start-ups in using these models.

This had been China's plan since 2017: push Chinese models into every market, shatter the status quo and then adopt and pull the world toward the Chinese hardware the models run best on. The country ran the same sequence with solar and telecom equipment and, most notably, critical minerals — building the world's dependence on cheap rare earths before restricting exports once that dependence was real.

If Chinese labs restrict access now, won't everyone just switch to a better American model? No, because switching is not like canceling a subscription. It means tearing out a foundation. A European manufacturer running a Chinese model on its own premises, trained on confidential records that cannot legally leave the building, cannot simply swap in a superior American model that costs more to use and runs on someone else's servers. That dependence is key to China's strategy. A country that can't switch off a foreign model has handed China a grip on the systems it runs on.

Developers outside China should be concerned about what's next. Every one building on a Chinese model assumes a better one is coming — free, as it always has been. Developers outside China who are stuck with an antiquated version, while Chinese firms advance with something more powerful. The gap widens with every release.



MEXY BURTON

Two U.S. congressional committees have opened investigations into Airbnb and Cursor's parent company over their use of Chinese models. The Trump administration is reportedly considering effectively barring Americans from using Chinese A.I. models. But banning those models would impede American developers and hand China the claim that its technology is too good for America to compete with.

The United States dominates in tech by making its platforms the ones the world's developers choose to build on, not by banning foreign use. The U.S. government should fund a contract to train an advanced open-weight model. It should stipulate those weights remain permanently open. That contract would give companies in the United States and allied nations a foundation to build on and compete in this arena of A.I. development. OpenAI and Google have released open-weight models, but only occasionally, because neither rewards them for doing it consistently. The buyers of such a model would be the firms already racing for Open and Kimi as well as

the international partners that will not put their data on Chinese servers.

Customers that adopt an open-weight American model also need the chips to run it, somewhere to store data and the computing power to put the model to work. That is what the Development Finance Corporation and the Export-Import Bank — the government agencies that back U.S. business abroad — should be financing all at once. Chinese models have come to dominate in places like Nairobi and São Paulo because China made the free, packaging the model, the hardware and the financing together. America has the capital and the technology to offer the same package, on better terms, with security standards that even newcomers can meet.

OpenAI and Anthropic's business is the "frontier": the hardest, highest-value work, offered to customers that want the best model available and will pay for it. That is not the business an open-weight model takes, where finances or data-sensitivity factor in more heavily. For many U.S. customers, the frontier model keeps the hard work moving, and something cheaper — and easier to tinker with — sits underneath it. The frontier lab gets paid either way.

The only question is whose model is underneath. It should be an American one.

JASON HSU is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

FROM READERS

The atrocities in Sudan

Re "The world must not forget about the genocide in Sudan" (editorial, July 14): As the grandson of Armenian genocide survivors, I read your editorial with a painful sense of familiarity. The details may differ, but the pattern is tragically recognizable — with warnings ignored, atrocities rationalized and action delayed until it is too late. The world often invokes "never again," yet too often responds to mass suffering with indifference when strategic interests, political calculations or simple fatigue get in the way. The victims change, but the excuses remain remarkably consistent.

Selective outrage is not a moral policy, but a form of complicity. If the international community is willing to condemn some atrocities while overlooking others, then the promise of "never again" becomes little more than a slogan.

The people of Sudan deserve more than sympathy after the fact. They deserve the urgency and moral clarity that history has repeatedly shown to be in short supply.

STEPHAN PECHDMALDJI, SAN RAMON, CALIF.

The attention you have paid to Sudan's war is welcome but overdue. We have just conducted an academic study of how Sudan is reported on, surveying and interviewing the reporters in the region trying to tell the story and aid workers in and around Sudan.

Both agreed that aid organizations largely control the story because the two armies have made Sudan too dangerous for reporters. But those organizations are constrained in what they can communicate because of their need to maintain access to the people who rely on them.

Both professions complained that the foreign funders of the war are rarely held to account. (Reporting by Nicholas Kristof is an exception.) Calls for regional and global powers to intervene should demand, along with an end to the fighting, a full restoration of press freedom.

CHRIS PATTERSON, LEEDS, ENGLAND
The writer is a professor of global communication at the School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds.

CORRECTIONS

• An article on July 22, "Entering a new era of genocide," referred imprecisely to the death toll from Israeli attacks since the cease-fire in Gaza took effect on Oct. 10, 2025. More than 1,000 Palestinians have been killed; that number includes people other than civilians.

• Another article on July 22 about Nicolas Maduro's extradition case mischaracterized the viewpoint of the legal scholar David Sloss. He said that referring Mr. Maduro's case to arbitration would track with legal precedent, not that such a development would be unsurprising.

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Agree or disagree with the opinions on this page? Write to us at letters@scmp.com. If you have an idea for an opinion article, email it to oped@scmp.com.

EDITORIAL

HKEX listing reforms must walk fine line to keep up with times

As part of its listing reforms, Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing (HKEX) will allow qualified companies, including start-ups, to make confidential filings during the initial public offering (IPO) application process. The move will enhance efficiency and make the IPO market more competitive globally.

The overhaul can leverage synergies between the mainland and Hong Kong markets. That will help support long-term growth and market health. Much original work in hi-tech fields involves proprietary services, confidential business models and intellectual property. Confidential filings make sense, at least during the initial application stage. This means candidates can disclose required company details only after their applications are approved. The changes are expected to be announced by the end of this month.

This will not affect listing standards in terms of public disclosure. Still, transparency and timely disclosure are important to maintaining financial integrity and quality.

Since October 2013, all listing candidates have been required to publish relevant company documents such as corporate history, business models and financial information once they submit an application. The rationale is to provide the most relevant information to the investing public and research analysts early on in the listing process, but some start-ups and their investors have complained that their information was being used by competitors to gain an advantage. To bypass the requirement, some ended up going public in markets such as the United States, Britain and Singapore.

Hong Kong is one of the few stock markets that require such public disclosure at application, but it needs to keep up with the times and stay competitive to attract promising start-ups to list in the city.

Meanwhile, HKEX now wants to lower further the minimum valuation for weighted voting right (WVR) companies to HK\$20 billion from HK\$40 billion, and the market capitalisation requirement for overseas-listed innovative companies launching secondary listings in Hong Kong to HK\$6 billion from HK\$10 billion. WVR denotes dual-class shares that enable specific shareholders, usually company founders and top executives, to have more voting power per share than general shareholders. HKEX might also aim for even lower requirements to cater for smaller start-ups to list in Hong Kong. The city was the world's top IPO market last year but has lost its crown to Nasdaq because of the SpaceX US\$75 billion IPO.

The HKEX reform will be a fine balancing act. It must protect the interests of the investing public, the commercial confidentiality of listing candidates and the quality and integrity of the market. It has its work cut out.

Fields Medal a win for Chinese education

That China has talent has long been well-recognised but that two home-grown elites were awarded the Fields Medal, seen as the Nobel Prize for mathematics, proves more than that. The success of Wang Hong and Deng Yu is a tribute to the multiplying benefits of education at home, learning abroad and collaboration across borders. In a world facing complex challenges, this is exactly the kind of intellectual synergy humanity needs more of.

For the first time, China has produced two Fields laureates in a single year, becoming only the fifth country – after the United States, France, Britain and Russia – to do so.

American John Pardon and Jacob Tsimerman, a Russian-born Canadian, also won this year. The prize is awarded every four years to mathematicians under the age of 40.

The Chinese winners were shaped first by solid training in their home country before advancing through overseas education and research. It shows that strong foundations, disciplined learning and rigorous academic pursuit can create world-class talent that shines even brighter when exposed to broader intellectual traditions and international exchanges.

Having studied at Peking University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Princeton University, Deng was honoured for work in partial differential equations and connecting fundamental laws of physics to equations describing the behaviour of gases and fluids.

Wang won for major advances in harmonic analysis and geometric measure theory, including her work on the three-dimensional Kakeya conjecture. She studied at Ecole Polytechnique and Paris-Sud University in France after graduation from Peking University and completed her doctorate at MIT.

A strong education system like China's can produce capable minds, international exposure can refine them and global collaboration can amplify their impact. When these elements work together, the result is greater than the sum of the parts. The intellectual synergy can drive scientific discovery and technological progress and, ultimately, benefit humankind.

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OPINION

HARRY'S VIEW ON CHINA'S YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE EDGING DOWN



Back to tariff wars

David Dodwell says over the coming months, efforts to China-proof supply chains are likely to drive US foreign policy. Success, however, is unlikely

After devoting the first half of 2026 to an ineffectual, expensive and inconclusive military adventure in Iran, it seems US President Donald Trump is about to turn afresh to the wars he loves best – the tariff wars he still believes can make America great again. He can't quite walk away from the war in the Persian Gulf. Iran's refusal to capitulate has left Trump with an awkward obligation to fight on, despite the widespread unpopularity of the conflict, even among his base, and the need to focus attention on midterm elections just four months away.

Perhaps the White House has concluded that the war and its inflationary effects must be relegated to the back burner if support for Republican candidates in November's midterms is to be protected.

Whether trade wars can distract attention is open to question. At least, the White House seems determined to try – even if it means dredging through ancient corners of American legislative history to bypass the US Supreme Court's ruling against Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs rationalised with the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act. One signal of a renewed tariff war came just over a week ago when Trump slapped 25 per cent tariffs on imports from Brazil after a year-long probe, under Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act, into unacceptable unfair trade practices.

On the heels of those tariffs, the US on Thursday imposed a wave of Section 301 tariffs, ranging from 10 to 12.5 per cent, on 60 economies, including those of China, Japan, South Korea, India and the European Union, as a result of investigations into forced labour practices.

While the Section 301 probes were in progress, Trump's tariff warriors had been relying ad hoc on balance-of-payment emergency powers under Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act. Those tariffs were set to expire yesterday.

On Monday, Trump announced 50 per cent tariffs on about US\$20 billion of Canadian exports, drawing on Section 338 of the 1930 Tariff Act, which has never been used this way in the past 96 years. It is allowed in retaliation against discrimination.

The logic underpinning Section 338's use and how the tariff level was calculated has confused many. But as Trump wages psychological warfare against his least favourite ally, no clear answer is likely. Unpredictable Trump is simply being unpredictable Trump.

Perhaps the tariffs form part of the fractious renegotiation of the US-Mexico-Canada trade pact. Perhaps they were part-punishment for smoke from Canadian wildfires affecting US border communities.

Also in the tariff brew came plans to reshore generic drug manufacturing by slapping 100 per cent tariffs on imports from 2028, and an executive order to make supply chains for defence-related critical minerals less dependent on China.

This order directs military contractors to aim to ensure whole-of-supply-chain security as speedily as possible.

This initiative appears to address China's grip on rare earth supplies, and on other critical minerals like graphite, gallium and germanium. Apparently, 78 per cent of components in US weapons systems contain China-sourced critical minerals. In US Navy weapons systems, that reaches 92 per cent.

These moves illustrate the extent to which the paranoid obsession with national and economic security has crept into the heart of US foreign policy. Note the creation last December of "Pax Silica", a coalition of 24 countries led by the US, whose mission is to create "China-free" AI-related supply chains.

In so far as Trump trusts or relies on diplomacy, it seems his tariffs and initiatives to China-proof supply chains are set to dominate US policy in coming months.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio met his counterparts in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Manila, the Philippines. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer travelled to Mexico for trade talks.

Meanwhile, a US Congressional fact-finding mission under the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission was in Beijing this week meeting officials and industry leaders, with the aim of helping American lawmakers replace assumptions with "first-hand facts", according to the commission's vice-chairman Mike Kukien.

One can hope that their findings will also inform preparations for Trump's summit with President Xi Jinping in Washington in September, assuming it's even still happening after Trump accused China of influencing US elections.

Whatever the smoke and mirrors around the tariff wars, most of it has to do with China. Trump's assault on multilateralism and the Bretton Woods system was ostensibly about cutting the US trade deficit – partly by boosting revenues from tariffs – and reshoring manufacturing.

Regardless of Trump's hyperbole and braggadocio, the trade deficit remains massive, and in May surged to its highest level since March last year, at about US\$106 billion.

Moreover, some Chinese goods destined for the US have been diverted through intermediate countries like Mexico and Vietnam. Overall China's exports are up 17.6 per cent in the first half of 2026. Evidence of reshoring has yet to appear. Tariffs have made no dent in the country's US\$339 trillion budget deficit, and accounted for only about 3.4 per cent of total federal revenue in 2025.

As Alan Beattie, who writes the Financial Times' Trade Secrets newsletter, summarised: "The Trump tariffs aren't economically catastrophic, but they are a massive mess."

Tariffs might be Trump's favourite word, but that might not stop them causing him grief.

David Dodwell is CEO of the trade policy and international relations consultancy Strategic Access

How death of Argos, Odysseus' faithful dog, haunts us

Alex Lo says the reunion of master and pet, recently given the Hollywood treatment, remains one of the most poignant scenes in Western literature

Once came across a book titled, *The Last Walk*, with a worn-out dog collar on the front cover. I lost all interest in browsing and quickly left the bookshop. As a lifelong owner of cats and dogs as well as other animals, I have had too many last walks. Some walks I knew were likely to be our last together. Others I didn't suspect would come to an end; I thought there was still time.

I often wonder whether that book sold well. Perhaps it appealed to some people. My wife and I, though, have been too traumatised to relive or to be reminded of what we have had to go through as animal parents.

But the older we get, the more grateful we are for their final moments. They show us how living things die, and when the time comes, it won't be much different for us both. Death isn't scary; it's almost mundane.

We have had animals who died from cancer after a long treatment; unusual conditions the vets couldn't really explain; poisoning through sheer negligence on my part; neglected diabetes leading to ketoacidosis because we were too ignorant about the condition.

Some died quickly, an easy and mostly painless death. A few had suffered more, perhaps needlessly, if only I had been more knowledgeable and responsible, or had better vets at the time. Those deaths still haunt me.

So, you won't be surprised if I find the scene with Argos – Odysseus' faithful dog which immediately recognised him after 20 years and died upon seeing his

master one last time – the most memorable in all of Homer. These days, everyone has caught the Homeric bug, thanks to Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*.

It turns out I am not the only one who felt that way about Argos. Apparently, that short scene has always been considered one of the most moving in Western literature.

On the website *Dogs in History*, it is said that "[s]cholars of classical literature have described the Argos scene as one of the most emotionally powerful passages in Western epic – not despite its brevity, fewer than forty lines in the Greek, but because of it".

In the standard Greek edition, it's in Book 17, line 290-327. You can search on the internet for the passage in the original. Tufts University's Perseus Digital Library is especially helpful.

Throughout history, there have been paintings and drawings, and different translations of the scene. Most were accurate in the sense that like the original, Odysseus did not physically touch Argos to comfort him. Actually, it's not clear if he even acknowledged him. Odysseus disguised himself as a beggar to slip into the royal hall to kill all the suitors of Penelope, so he couldn't risk being exposed by the dog's reaction.

Here's how T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, translated the scene: "So lay Argos the hound, all shivering with dog-ticks. Yet the instant Odysseus approached, the beast knew him. He thumped his tail and dropped his ears forward, but lacked power to drag himself ever so little towards his

master. However, Odysseus saw him out of the corner of his eye and brushed away a tear, which he covered by quickly saying to Eumaeus in an offhand way: "Strange, that they let such a hound lie in a dung-hill..."

After listening to Eumaeus' reply, Odysseus "plunged into the house, going straight along the hall amidst the suitors; but Argos the dog went down into the blackness of death, that moment he saw Odysseus again after twenty years".

I like the translation's tough-mindedness. Unlike most translators, Lawrence was a soldier and warrior like Odysseus.

While Odysseus was deeply pained, he could offer no comfort to Argos, which, already too weak and old, died from the shock – or relief – of seeing his master one last time.

It was a most painful scene, not a joyful reunion. Interestingly, it preceded one of the most famous bloodbaths in all of world literature.

I am sure Nolan knew all this better than me. But in his movie, he still made Matt Damon – who played Odysseus – bend down and pat the dying Argos, even calling out his name.

That Hollywood gesture of sentimentality compromised the whole sequence of Odysseus' return and revenge.

In Homer, Odysseus and his son Telemachus reunited before Argos. In the movie, Nolan made Argos' reaction a clue for Telemachus as to the beggar's true identity.

Well, as they say, it's Hollywood, baby!

Alex Lo has been a South China Morning Post columnist since 2012, covering major issues affecting Hong Kong and the rest of China

OPINION

Help for Global South

Gerui Wang says a new body gives Beijing the platform to push for affordable access to AI

The ninth World Artificial Intelligence Conference marked a shift from the technology-focused exhibitions of previous editions to a high-profile international gathering of government officials, world leaders, scientists and entrepreneurs. President Xi Jinping delivered an opening speech to articulate China's role in governing AI.

While Silicon Valley, Washington and Brussels debate national security, frontier capabilities and corporate profitability, China is pushing AI to generate social good. The newly released open-source model at the conference, Kimi K3, reportedly rivals Anthropic's Claude Fable 5 model as China bets on a future of fair and inclusive AI.

Advancements in data centres and computing systems highlight the sustained momentum of AI development in China. The conference featured more than 1,100 companies displaying humanoid robots, autonomous vehicles, AI chips, AI glasses and other applications spanning a variety of fields. Huawei showcased the latest Atlas 950 SuperPOD supermodel, a technology that links many AI chips into a single computing pool.

Aware of AI's potential to disproportionately benefit rich countries and the wealthy, China aims to address developing countries' concerns. Can poorer countries build their own computing power? Who will train AI engineers? Who will control local data? Part of China's proposed solution involves establishing the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation, a body headquartered in Shanghai with the initial participation of 29 countries.

The public-facing orientation of China's AI ecosystem distinguishes it from American AI companies such as OpenAI

and Anthropic, which are focused primarily on subscription-based chatbots, AI agents, commercial adoption and enterprise software. Chinese companies increasingly develop systems that benefit the people.

In China, both public and private industries deploy AI models to maximise the convenience of public life. This emphasis on the public good strengthens Chinese AI models' global appeal; technology is framed as a resource for the public to thrive rather than as a tool of wealth concentration.

China's AI development also enhances the country's diplomatic appeal. In its 15th five-year plan, China calls for collaboration among Global South countries in AI governance. Chinese open-source models are important to this strategy. China's leading AI models have gained international usage by combining performance with lower development and inference costs.

For instance, the models' cost-effectiveness has allowed African firms to deploy them in the telecommunications, banking and tech industries without relying entirely on a proprietary American service. ByteDance is building a massive data centre complex in the Brazilian state of Ceará. For countries in the Global South, cost matters as much as benchmark performance.

China brings a unique advantage to its position in AI collaboration: an industrial ecosystem that spans an array of sectors: renewable energy, electrical grids, data centres, cloud platforms, semiconductors, telecommunications and AI applications.

The national five-year plan identifies new infrastructure as the material foundation for sustained innovation. It prioritises the large-scale deployment of 5G and gigabit fibre networks, the commercialisation of 5G and research and standard-

setting for 6G. It also expands the "Eastern Data, Western Computing" project, which aims to shift data processing workloads from densely populated eastern cities to western regions with greater land and energy capacity. The plan also proposes a nationwide computing network linking supercomputing, general-purpose computing and AI computing facilities.

China plans to take a more active role in the governance of digital currencies and data flows while also pursuing agreements on data security and privacy protection. It perceives the desired global AI ecosystem as one that is equitable, diverse, mutually beneficial and grounded in trust, and it has pledged support for AI capacity-building in Global South countries.

In China, both public and private industries deploy AI models to maximise the convenience of public life

Thus, the establishment of the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation marks China's transition from taking part in global AI governance to building institutions of its own. This shift comes as the United States increasingly withdraws from the multilateral institutions and agreements it helped create.

This new global AI body gives Beijing a platform to coordinate digital infrastructure, technical training, model deployment and governance standards. China can use

it to promote affordable access, local adaptation and technological autonomy while strengthening its own position as a provider of computing systems, data infrastructure and technical standards.

Nevertheless, the credibility of China's global AI governance initiatives will depend on their implementation. Member countries should have meaningful decision-making authority. Their role should extend beyond supplying minerals, data, labour and markets.

Projects should disclose their financing, energy use, water consumption, data practices and ownership arrangements. Governments should retain control over local data and demand genuine technology transfer. Independent experts and civil society organisations should take part in evaluations of various programmes and implementations.

The World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation should also establish common standards for renewable energy use, climate-resilient data centre locations, electronic waste, community consultation, local employment, technical training, shared ownership and transparent financing. These measures would give substance to China's assertion that AI should support shared and sustainable development.

The 2026 World Artificial Intelligence Conference heralded a new phase in AI geopolitics, with the Global South becoming central to the debate over who benefits from AI development and who has a hand in writing its rules. Establishing the necessary safeguards would allow countries in the Global South to take greater advantage of their relations with China to strengthen their own autonomy and enhance regional prosperity.

Gerui Wang is an assistant professor at Lingnan University

LETTERS

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Five-year plan must make sustainable development key



Hong Kong should focus on environmental measures to address weather extremes. Photo: Sam Tsang

Hong Kong must make sustainable development a key focus of its first five-year plan. Doing so aligns not only with the national 15th five-year plan but also with the goal of strengthening resilience to environmental, social and economic challenges.

Just like other places around the world, Hong Kong has broken temperature records and suffered severe flooding in recent years. As such, Hong Kong's five-year plan and policy address should place greater emphasis on environmental measures – not only to conserve our ecosystem but also to advance social and economic development.

Due to the surging energy demand from data centres, ensuring a safe and zero-carbon electricity supply is of paramount importance. Setting mandatory power usage effectiveness standards for data centres to align with the mainland's would conserve energy. Rating buildings on energy efficiency will drive continuous improvement. Setting targets for vegetation in urban areas will provide more shade and heat absorption, while conserving local species will enhance the city's biodiversity.

Since food scraps account for the largest portion of municipal solid waste, measures should be implemented to convert food waste into useful products and drive the circular economy. Education across sectors would help reduce food waste.

Reducing packaging waste from online shopping requires mandatory control. The central government enacted legislation in July to tackle excessive packaging by requiring the use of recyclable materials, limiting excessive packaging and improving recycling systems. In Hong Kong, why not innovate by requiring multiple-use packaging?

Since recycling facilities for plastic drink containers and electric vehicle batteries have been established in EcoPark, producer responsibility schemes can help hold manufacturers accountable.

Furthermore, using recycled grey water would ensure water security. New data centres should be mandated to use recycled grey water for cooling. An eco-friendly city would bring multiple benefits beyond monetary ones.

Edwin Lau Che-feng, founder, The Green Earth

Why Manila cannot afford to ignore geopolitical reality

The State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report delivers a defining geopolitical revelation that challenges long-standing Western narratives surrounding the South China Sea.

The annual survey by Singapore's ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute found that respondents from Southeast Asia ranked erratic US leadership under Donald Trump (51.9 per cent) as their top geopolitical concern. South China Sea frictions, once the region's defining worry, have fallen to third place (26.2 per cent).

Yet, as the 2026 chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines has escalated maritime tensions with China. It recently marked the 10th anniversary of the 2016 arbitration ruling, a decision Beijing has consistently rejected as illegal and non-binding.

In a joint statement with 13 other countries, Manila suggested that Beijing is impeding "freedom of navigation and overflight" and destabilising sea lanes.

The accusation that China poses a risk to navigation freedom in these waters is flawed. The South China Sea is not only one of the world's busiest shipping routes, but also China's primary trade artery. Beijing has zero incentive to disrupt the stable, open waterways upon which Chinese prosperity depends. Largely unimpeded commercial shipping across the South China Sea contradicts claims of systematic Chinese obstruction.

The real threat to global maritime freedom is the Trump administration, which floated the idea of a 20 per cent transit fee on vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Though swiftly walked back, the proposal sent an alarming signal to Southeast Asian economies, whose stability and growth rely on trade.

Manila has also ramped up maritime posturing, invited external military intervention, and positioned itself as a US pawn. It has allowed the US to deploy a mid-range missile system in Luzon – the first such deployment in the region since the Cold War. Beijing is understandably alarmed by the security threat this poses. Moreover, Manila's alliance with Washington violates the spirit of ASEAN, which embraces non-alignment. By dragging great-power rivalry into the region, it risks taking the entire bloc's strategic posture hostage and undermining ASEAN's centrality in regional governance.

Manila would do well to heed another takeaway from the ISEAS survey: when forced to pick a side, 52 per cent of respondents leaned towards China, compared with 48 per cent for the US. That is a geopolitical reality Manila would be unwise to ignore.

Tibby Chen, Beijing

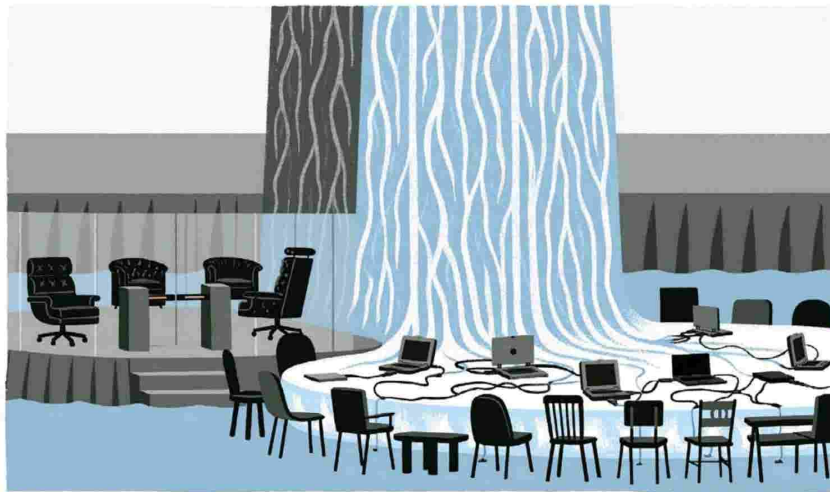


Illustration: Mario Camera

The self-sacrificing Chinese mother I never wanted to be

Audrey Jiajia Li says the consequences of unequal parenting soon became impossible to ignore

Growing up as an only child in China, I thought I knew exactly what parental love looked like.

Around me, many parents seemed to carry an invisible ledger. Sacrifice was the moral currency of the day, invoked to justify good grades, prestigious careers and lifelong gratitude. Love and guilt often came as a package deal. "Do you know how much I've sacrificed for you?" was so ubiquitous that it became a suffocating childhood refrain.

The self-sacrificing mother is by no means unique to China, or even Asia. But I encountered her everywhere in Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s. Fortunately, my own parents never quite fit this mould. Sure, they made sacrifices – they lived frugally but never balked at the prospect of spending on things I loved. When I was taking the entrance exam for senior high school, they made sure to travel across town by minivan-style cab, so I could rest properly and stay focused on the way to the exam hall. Yet they neither kept score nor reminded me what I owed them.

Still, I grew up wary. I swore not to become like the other parents around me. In my 20s, I was firmly child-free. I loved my independence and was afraid I might become one of those mothers who poured everything into their children and slowly disappeared as individuals.

Like many only children of my generation, I threw myself into work, believing success was the ultimate measure of worth. Then life threw a curveball. I moved overseas.

For the first time, far from the environment that had shaped me, I felt liberated from the constant pressure to prove myself. I became less interested in competing and more interested in living. The pursuit of achievement no longer filled every corner of my being.

By my upper 30s, I realised I was no longer afraid of loving someone more than myself. Unconditional love no longer felt like a threat to freedom.

And so I became a mother. What surprised me most was how naturally my priorities shifted. At mealtimes, I thought first about what the kids would enjoy and what they needed.

Sleep became a military operation involving two young children who both insisted only Mum would do. Professional opportunities were weighed against school holidays, sick days and childcare logistics. Holidays slowly vanished from the calendar.

Slowly, almost without noticing, I became the kind of mother I had feared becoming. Constantly giving, tired but also

Something had to change. I started insisting that my husband devote more time and energy to the children

happy: few things, after all, could compare with being loved by your children.

There was a hidden cost though. By always stepping in, I quietly enabled my husband to step back. Like many mothers, I told myself I was simply more capable, more patient and more efficient. If something needed doing, I'd do it. If a child was crying, I'd respond. Over time, that became an unspoken household rule.

The children saw me as their primary parent. Their father became an optional extra. Because Mum was always available, Dad could keep much of his old life – gaming, chatting online, endless scrolling of short videos.

A few months ago, everything fell apart. Our Indonesian helper went home to deal with personal matters and unexpectedly couldn't return to Singapore as planned. The invisible scaffolding that held us together collapsed overnight, and the consequences of years of unequal parenting became impossible to ignore.

Both children developed high fevers and were admitted to hospital where, by day, I worked from a laptop balanced on a bedside table and by night, I dozed in a chair beside them. I was stretched so thin that I found myself wishing for extra limbs.

The children rejected their father. "No Daddy," "I don't like Daddy." Meals, bedtime, playtime, school runs – they wanted only Mum.

Within a month, I lost 5kg from exhaustion and anxiety. Then came an uncomfortable realisation: I had become trapped in a cycle. The classic Chinese

mother who sacrifices everything often believes she is acting out of love. And she is. But sacrifice becomes a trap when it is treated as a virtue without limits.

Something had to change. I started insisting that my husband devote more time and energy to the children, even when it was hard and they were resistant. We sought more support: a new helper, help from grandparents. Most importantly, I stopped treating my well-being as a luxury. I protected time for work. I rebuilt a life outside motherhood.

Today, the children still cry for Mum far more than Dad. But my husband is genuinely trying to close the gap. And me? I'm finding my way back to myself. I have been exercising, reading and playing the piano. I feel more like myself again.

As a young woman, I thought freedom meant never having to make sacrifices for anyone. As a middle-aged mother of two, I've learned something different. Love inevitably asks something of us. Parenthood requires compromise. While there's no escaping that, the answer is not self-sacrifice.

The best gift a mother can give her children is not the example of endless sacrifice. Rather, it's the example of being a whole person: someone who loves deeply, gives generously, but still has her own ambitions, friendships, interests and sense of self.

And perhaps the most valuable lesson the children can learn is that caring for others and caring for ourselves are not opposing choices. They are responsibilities that belong together.

Audrey Jiajia Li is a veteran Chinese journalist currently based in Singapore

OPINION

Jim Crow, Title IX and the Facts of Life

By James Taranto

Nancy Jane Moore grew up near Houston in the 1950s and '60s. Decades later she contributed to "Whites Remember Jim Crow," a collection of reminiscences that accompanied a 2001 American RadioWorks documentary about racism in the segregated South. "I remember the little things," she recalled, "like the first time I realized that the gas station where we did business had three restrooms: women, men and 'colored.'" She was "particularly appalled" that blacks had to use unisex facilities: "It seemed very rude to make women and men use the same restroom."

It was worse than rude. Most forms of segregation were equally dehumanizing regardless of sex. But segregating restrooms by race and then not segregating "colored" ones by sex imposed an extra indignity on black women by depriving them of the privacy, safety and respectability that white women could take for granted.

Beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, America embraced equality among races and between the sexes as overriding policy goals. But as the bathroom example illustrates, those objectives differ in a crucial way. Racial equality consists in eliminating legal and social distinctions based on race. Sexual equality requires the acknowledgment and maintenance of certain distinctions between men and women.

The Supreme Court ought to say it plainly: A man can't become a woman.

The Supreme Court recognized this in *U.S. v. Virginia* (1996). The justices held that the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment prohibited the Virginia Military Institute, a public college, from limiting admissions to men. But they also noted that "admitting women to VMI would undoubtedly require alterations necessary to afford members of each sex privacy from the other sex in living arrangements, and to adjust aspects of the physical training programs," as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote for the majority. She cited a federal statute authorizing the U.S. service academies to make "minimum essential adjustments" to their standards "because of physiological differences between male and female individuals."

What sets sex apart from race and other demographic categories is that men and women are dimorphic—their bodies are different in function as well as form. Only women ovulate, menstruate, get pregnant, give birth and (with rare exceptions) lactate. Their physiology evolved to accommodate these functions, while men, whose reproductive role is far less demanding, have a much greater capacity to build mass and muscle.

Both sexes, but particularly women, need separation when these bodily differences implicate privacy, safety and fairness—in communal intimate spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, dressing rooms, sleeping quarters and prisons, where women are especially vulnerable to sexual and other assault and both sexes have an interest in privacy; and in sports, where women are at heightened

risk of injury and can't compete on a level playing field against men.

The high court last month applied this principle directly to sports in *West Virginia v. B.P.J.* Justice Brett Kavanaugh's majority opinion notes that the physical differences between men and women include "height, weight, strength, speed, endurance, and jumping ability" and concludes: "Therefore, in contact sports, forcing female athletes to compete against males can create significant safety risks. And in virtually all competitive sports, forcing female athletes to compete against males can undermine competitive fairness."

The question before the justices in *B.P.J.*—"Under Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, may schools maintain women's and girls' sports for biological females?" The court had never before addressed the question, because it was largely settled as a matter of history and tradition.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination by schools that receive federal money. Regulations dating to 1975 permit separate teams by sex "where selection for such teams is based upon competitive skill or the activity involved is a contact sport." In practice, when it comes to competitive or contact sports, separate teams are usually the only way to fulfill the mandate for equal opportunity. As Justice Kavanaugh notes, "Title IX's regulations also require schools to provide the women's and men's teams equivalent equipment, facilities, scheduling, and the like."

The reason the case reached the Supreme Court now is suggested by that peculiar phrase "biological females," which would have been a redundancy until a decade or so ago. The plaintiffs in *B.P.J.* and its companion case from Idaho, *Little v. Hecox*, which involved collegiate sports, were "transgender females"—or men who perceive, believe or claim that they are female. Both had been diagnosed with "gender dysphoria," a psychiatric condition, and pharmacologically treated for it—B.P.J. with puberty blockers, Lindsay Hecox with testosterone-suppressing drugs, and both with estrogen.

Idaho and West Virginia have statutes excluding such males from girls' and women's sports. The justices held 6-3 that those laws violate neither Title IX nor the Constitution. Twenty-five other states have similar laws.

Most of the remaining 23 states permit at least some males to join girls' and women's teams. The U.S. Justice Department has sued California, Maine and Minnesota, alleging that those policies violate Title IX. Other administrative complaints and private actions make the same claim. The court is likely to take up the question before long, and the logic of *B.P.J.* leads inexorably toward the conclusion that Title IX not only permits but requires the exclusion of boys and men from female teams nationwide.

The decision holds that the term "sex" in Title IX means "biological sex," not "gender identity." The need for separate athletic teams to fulfill Title IX's mandate



Restrooms in the Jim Crow South were segregated by race, but not always by sex.

for equal opportunity was already well-established. And as Justice Kavanaugh writes: "Allowing a biological male athlete to compete on a girls' team necessarily displaces or disadvantages a female athlete—replacing her on the roster, knocking her out of the starting lineup, reducing her playing time, depriving her of a medal, and the like" (emphasis his). As a legal matter, that harm is compounded when its infliction is sanctioned or mandated by state law, potentially violating the 14th Amendment as well as Title IX.

The assertion of "transgender" identities has ignited a host of legal controversies involving not only equal protection and antidiscrimination laws but also freedom of speech, religious liberty, family law, education policy, medical standards, public safety, military policy, identity records and more. At the heart of all these disputes is a question of ontology, the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of reality. The simplest way of formulating that question: Is there any objective sense in which a man can become a woman or vice versa?

Only Justices Clarence Thomas and Ketanji Brown Jackson address the ontological question directly in *B.P.J.* Justice Thomas, the court's only member who grew up under Jim Crow segregation, writes in a lone concurrence: "Men and boys with gender dysphoria are not women or girls, even if they believe that they are." Justice Jackson, in a solo dissent, disagrees: "West Virginia's law forces B.P.J. to live—in this case, to play—as a boy though she is a girl."

In the principal dissent, written by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, she and Justice Elena Kagan implicitly side with Justice Jackson's view. That opinion describes B.P.J. as a "transgender girl" and refers to both plaintiffs using feminine pronouns.

Writing for the majority, Justice Kavanaugh painstakingly selects his words to avoid the ontological question, as if touching it might break something fragile. He introduces each plaintiff as "a biological male who identifies as female" and consistently qualifies "male" with "biological" each time he refers to their sex. He never uses a singular personal pronoun for either. The word "she" doesn't appear in the 29-page opinion, and "her" shows up only in two passages about undisputedly female athletes, including the one quoted

above. The antecedent of the opinion's only masculine pronoun is a hypothetical "biological male who identifies as male," and the hypothetical counterpart who "identifies as female" gets no pronoun.

Justice Jackson had also avoided the question in her 2022 confirmation hearings. Sen. Marsha Blackburn asked her if she could define the word "woman." The nominee replied: "Not in this context. I'm not a biologist." She might have done better to stick with that position, for biology is on Justice Thomas's side. As Justice Ginsburg wrote in *Virginia*, quoting an earlier case: "Physical differences between men and women . . . are enduring: 'The two sexes are not fungible.'"

The evolutionary basis of sexual dimorphism is anisogamy, a term derived from Greek that literally means "unequal marriage" and denotes the fusion of distinct large and small gametes (called eggs and sperm in humans and other animals). Anisogamy is one of the most fundamental facts of life: Sexual reproduction is anisogamous in all animals and almost all multicellular plants.

Medical treatments for gender dysphoria—puberty blockers, hormones and surgery—can suppress or destroy reproductive function; affect secondary sex characteristics such as breast development, facial hair, voice pitch, fat distribution and muscle mass; and construct approximations of opposite-sex external genitalia. But they can't create a functional opposite-sex reproductive system. No "transgender man" can produce sperm; no "transgender woman" can ovulate, menstruate, get pregnant or give birth. (Medical journals have published anecdotal reports of hormone-induced male lactation.)

Science therefore demonstrates that Justice Thomas is right: A man who believes he is a woman is mistaken. This is America, and that man has a God-given right to adhere to his belief and to express it through speech or lawful conduct. As Thomas Jefferson observed: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

Yet Jefferson would have seen tyranny if the government compelled him to offer sacrifices to his eccentric neighbor's 20 gods. In most legal controversies involving "transgender rights," it isn't the transgender side that seeks the right to be left alone. These cases

are about the legal correlative of the ontological question: When a person asserts a "gender identity" that doesn't match his sex, is it legitimate to coerce others into affirming the claim or acting as if it were true?

If "tyranny" seems overwrought, consider the case of Tremaine Carroll. In 2024 he was charged with forcibly raping two fellow inmates at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla. "After his first cellmate became pregnant and was moved to Los Angeles, two other cellmates of his had complained that he had raped them," Madera County District Attorney Sally Moreno told reporters at the time.

Mr. Carroll had told prison officials he was transgender and been granted a transfer to the women's prison under the Transgender Respect, Agency and Dignity Act, which state Sen. Scott Wiener introduced and Gov. Gavin Newsom signed in 2020. "The inmate Carroll impregnated is not one of the two victims in this case," Assistant District Attorney Eric DuTemple said in an email this week. "Based on the available facts, it appears that their relationship was consensual." Mr. Carroll has pleaded not guilty and is scheduled to go on trial in August.

A month after prosecutors filed the rape charges, Mr. Carroll was transferred to Salinas Valley State Prison, a men's penitentiary, where he is still confined. Yet eight months after that, the judge in his rape case issued a pretrial ruling in which she ordered prosecutors to honor the defendant's "preferred pronouns." The judge reserved the question of what she called "quadrals for witnesses"—that is, whether Mr. Carroll's alleged victims will be admonished or perhaps even penalized if they testify that he, rather than "she," raped them.

A future case on Title IX and women's sports would be an opportunity for the Supreme Court to arrest this sort of madness by providing an authoritative answer to the ontological question. The federal government has made its position clear. An executive order President Trump issued on Inauguration Day 2025 declares: "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality." Judicial restraint usually counsels against deciding broad philosophical questions, but the administration and the states that oppose it have sharpened this one into an urgent legal controversy.

"Legislative fiat may not take the place of fact in the judicial determination of issues involving life, liberty, or property," Justice Pierce Butler wrote in *Western & Atlantic Railroad v. Henderson* (1929). The rule of law is reduced to a mere instrument of domination if the law isn't grounded in reason and reality. The court understood this when it repudiated the doctrine of "separate but equal" that kept black women at the back of the bus and denied them a ladies' room.

Mr. Taranto is the Journal's editorial features editor.

Free-Market Health Reform in Bernie Sanders's Vermont



CROSS COUNTRY
By Hayden Dublois

Times change. A little over a decade ago, the home state of Sen. Bernie Sanders tried to implement a single-payer healthcare system, only to balk at the staggering cost to taxpayers. Now Vermont is bringing a measure of market-based sanity to health insurance.

Gov. Phil Scott, an old-fashioned Rockefeller Republican, issued an executive order this month to implement the most substantial health-care reforms Vermont has seen in decades. In coming months, the state will roll back mandates that force young people to pay disproportionately high premiums, identify barriers to affordable health coverage for small businesses, and apply for a federal reinsurance program that has lowered premiums in other states. I estimate the reinsurance program alone will lower the average premiums in Vermont's individual market by 10% to 15%, as it has in New Hampshire.

That's what Vermonters need, because the state's individual market for ObamaCare plans is the worst in

the nation. Vermont has the highest average premiums in America—\$1,299 a month for the benchmark silver plan. That's nearly 60% more than in neighboring New York, and three times as high as in New Hampshire. Even the cheapest tier in Vermont averages \$824 a month, with a nearly \$10,000 deductible.

The state that flopped with single payer is taking steps in the other direction thanks to Gov. Phil Scott.

One reason premiums are so high is that Vermont's strict rules have driven insurance companies out of the state. Only two now offer plans, and one, Blue Cross, is nearing a monopoly with a nearly 70% market share in 2024. The lack of competition drives up premiums and pushes younger, healthier residents off the exchange. It doesn't help that Vermont is one of two states—New York is the other—that ban insurance companies from charging higher premiums for older policyholders and cigarette smokers. The uninsured

rate for young adults is nearly triple the statewide average. It is cheaper for them to go without insurance than buy such pricey plans.

This combination of foolish policies has driven Vermont's market into a death spiral. Since the start of the year, Mr. Scott has pushed lawmakers for common-sense reform. But the Democrats who control both legislative chambers are still captivated by the failed single-payer dream. They opposed the governor's reform package, which proposed more extensive reforms than the executive order. Democrats balked at the governor's proposal to let insurance companies pay premiums by a mere 5% based on age. ObamaCare allows states to adopt as much as a 3-to-1 variation.

Democrats instead sent the governor a bill that would have artificially lowered individual-market premiums by raising costs on the business market—robbing Peter to pay Paul. Mr. Scott vetoed it in June, declaring that Vermont's healthcare system needs "structural reforms that expand affordability, increase choices and ensure savings are shared broadly across the system."

His executive order will begin to realize this vision. It allows up to a

20% premium variation to account for nicotine use and age. Other reforms will take time to implement, including application to the federal reinsurance program and expansion of association health plans, which allow businesses to band together to offer affordable healthcare options. But the stage is set for double-digit percentage declines in premiums. Most importantly, Mr. Scott's reforms will bring young people back to the individual market, which can't survive long-term without them.

Notable & Quotable: A/C

Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015), who served as Singapore's prime minister 1959-90, in "The Millennium's Most Influential Innovations," a Jan. 11, 1999, *Journal* symposium:

The humble air conditioner has changed the lives of people in the tropical regions. Before air-con, mental concentration and with it the quality of work deteriorated as the day got hotter and more humid. After lunch, business in many tropical countries stopped until the cooler hours of the late afternoon.

Even with these reforms, Vermont's healthcare system has far to go. But the state has come a long way since its failed attempt to implement a single-payer model. If the home state of America's most infamous socialist can bring a measure of sanity back to healthcare, then the rest of the country can too.

Mr. Dublois, a former staffer for Gov. Phil Scott, is data and analytics director at the Foundation for Government Accountability.

Historically, advanced civilizations have flourished in the cooler climates. Now lifestyles have become comparable to those in temperate zones, and civilization in the tropical zones need no longer lag behind.

The ideal invention would be a light polyester air-conditioned garment, encased around the neck, wrists and ankles and battery operated. Everyone can then work at his optimum temperature and civilization can spread across all climates.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump Tariffs, More Tariffs, and More . . .

Tariffs are an obsession for President Trump, much as climate was for the Biden Administration. How else to explain his imposition of yet another round of border taxes three months before the November election despite their political unpopularity and economic harm?

The Administration late Thursday unveiled new tariffs under Section 301 to replace the President's Section 122 tariffs that were lapsing. These latest duties will affect some 60 economies, hitting nearly all U.S. imports, with rates from 10% to 12.5%, and they come on top of a slew of other border taxes. Wait, didn't the Supreme Court strike down Mr. Trump's tariffs in February? Only the emergency tariffs.

He later whipped out Section 122. A federal court this spring held that those are also illegal, but an appeals court allowed them to stay in place as litigation continues. But the law limits those tariffs to 150 days, and they expired Friday. Enter Section 301. For readers struggling to keep track of Mr. Trump's border taxes, here's a cheat sheet.

• **Section 301.** This trade law lets a President impose tariffs in response to "unfair foreign acts, policies, or practices affecting U.S. commerce." The Administration says America's trading partners—including Canada and the European Union—are unfairly discriminating against the U.S. by not doing enough to stop imports made with forced labor. Yes, the slave traders of Toronto strike again.

Countries that ban imports made with forced labor but fail to effectively enforce their prohibitions are dunned 10%. Most others get 12.5%. For legal purposes Section 301 requires a formal investigation, but the result here was preordained. Forced labor is a pretext. Another 301 probe is in the works on "excess capacity," so expect more tariffs on much of the world, perhaps within weeks.

Last week the President announced Section 301 tariffs of 25% on Brazil because he doesn't like its leftwing leader Lula da Silva. Note how Mr. Trump weaponizes tariffs: He picks a target. Then his team finds a pretext for tariffs.

• **Section 338.** This week Mr. Trump dusted off this provision from the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Act to hit Canada with 50% tariffs on hundreds of goods, including plywood, down feathers, concrete, paper products, gold necklaces, chandeliers—yes, seriously—and toys. No President has used it before. He recited a litany of trade grievances including Canada's treatment of U.S. cheese and retaliatory tariffs. The U.S. is now

in a needless trade war with its second-largest trading partner.

• **Section 232.** The President has also imposed an array of tariffs in the name of national security. This includes steel and aluminum (50% rate), products that include these metals (25%), motor vehicles and parts (25%), wood furniture and cabinets (25%), semiconductors (25%) and branded medicines (100%). Block those killer IKEA sofas.

The President has granted exemptions or delayed enforcement of some of these tariffs—for instance, pharmaceutical companies that reach agreements with the Administration to build manufacturing plants in the U.S. and sell medicines to Medicaid at a so-called most-favored nation price. This is an illustration of how the President wields tariffs to coerce policy outcomes he can't get through Congress.

The Administration has also initiated Section 232 investigations of coal, robotics, industrial machinery, medical equipment and devices, drones, polysilicon and aircraft parts, so brace for more tariffs.

• **This week he announced 100% tariffs on generic medicines,** which he said will take effect in two years. It's hard to believe he will go through with them given the damage they'd do. Generics make up 90% of all U.S. prescriptions and have kept down prescription drug prices. Tariffing generics—most of which are produced overseas—will drive up prices and result in shortages of essential medicines.

Then again, Mr. Trump doesn't seem to care about the damage since tariff costs are dispersed across businesses, consumers and workers. Customs duties have raised \$163 billion in the current fiscal year through June, which excludes some \$70 billion in emergency-tariff refunds. That's a big tax increase.

Mr. Trump's tariff defenders point to the buoyant stock market as evidence that his border taxes aren't harmful. But last year's tax bill—especially the business provisions like full investment expensing—has offset some of the damage from his tariffs. So has the AI investment boom.

Imagine how strong the economy would be without the tariffs and their uncertainty for business. Americans remain unhappy about the economy, and higher prices are a big reason. They know that tariffs are adding to their pain even if they don't see the cost as a line-item on a bill. Republicans could pay the price in November.

He hits Americans with more tax increases on the cusp of an election.

The Homeless Boom in Los Angeles

Tens of thousands of people have left Los Angeles since the pandemic, but one group isn't leaving: the homeless. A new city report finds that the number of people living on the streets keeps rising. Maybe there's a connection between population flight and vagrancy.

The city's overall homeless population rose 3.4% including those the city puts up in motels. The number sleeping outside in encampments or vehicles rose 7.9%. All told, the city counted 45,194 homeless in January, up from 35,550 in 2019 and 41,980 in 2022 when Mayor Karen Bass was elected.

Ms. Bass has squandered hundreds of millions of dollars on homeless programs that appear to have had no effect. Under her signature program, the city has spent \$82,420 a year for each homeless person it has sheltered in motels. Some 40% have returned to the

streets, often because of drug addictions. A third-party audit of L.A.'s homeless agency last year found the city wasn't tracking how much was being spent, the number of beds or other services being provided, or outcomes for putative beneficiaries. Federal Judge David Carter, who presided over a lawsuit against the city, expressed astonishment at the findings.

"Nobody is asking our providers what they did or what services they performed," he said. "We may have providers who committed fraud and we may never know." Ms. Bass would prefer voters not know.

In November she faces a mayoral runoff against City Councilwoman Nithya Raman, a Democratic Socialist of America member who opposes clearing encampments. Angelinos tired of feces and needles on the sidewalks can look forward to more of the same.

kind, along with the "Zionists" whose crime is to support its existence.

Before his mayoral run, Mr. Mamdani used "Zionist" as a casual slur. He also told comrades: "We have to make clear that when the boot of the NYPD is on your neck, it's been laced by the IDF." Israel's military.

Mr. Mamdani reacted to Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, massacre of Jews by bashing Israel, not Hamas, and mourning victims on both sides. His wife liked Instagram posts cheering on the Hamas attack. His party, NYC's Democratic Socialists of America, endorsed a rally by pro-Hamas groups on Oct. 8 in "solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to resist," as the DSA put it.

U.S. Jewish schools, shuls and other sites have since had to pay far more in what's become known as an "antisemitism tax" in security costs and disruptive precautions. The siege conditions of Western European Jewish life offer an ominous future for New York as ubiquitous online antisemitism seeps into youth culture.

Mr. Mamdani isn't responsible for Thursday's stabbing. But he is responsible for promoting a culture of denigration that is all too easy for a fevered mind to hear and conclude that violence against Jews is acceptable. The mayor and his ideological groupies are playing with antisemitic fire.

"When I was growing up," Rabbi Yossie Levine said Friday, after the attack on a congregant, "the only time we saw security outside my synagogue or my Jewish day school was when the mayor came to speak. The police were there to protect him. Today, every time the mayor speaks, we need the police to protect us."

As the mayor accuses Jews of genocide, a Jewish man is stabbed.

Globalizing the Intifada in Mamdani's NYC

New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani has been running a campaign to demonize Israel and its supporters for committing "genocide." He should reconsider after Thursday's double-stabbing in New York, which included a kippah-wearing Jew attacked after exiting a synagogue.

Police arrested Raul Morales in connection with the stabbings. The mayor said victim and witness statements allege that Mr. Morales yelled "Allahu akbar" while attacking a Jew, Moshe Grunhaus and an Asian, Chok Sung. The NYPD is evaluating if this was a hate crime.

A friend who visited Mr. Grunhaus at the hospital tells us the victim was in the process of moving to Florida, in part due to concerns about crime, antisemitism and Mr. Mamdani. He returned to New York to tie up loose ends and attended synagogue during the fast of Tisha B'Av, when Jews mourn the destruction of the ancient temple in Jerusalem.

Earlier this week Mr. Mamdani taped a video accusing Israel of genocide and deliberate child murder. The next day he wished New York's Jews a "peaceful" fast, in which "mourners will pause and reflect on the history and resiliency of the Jewish people." That history is in Jerusalem and the land of Israel, but the mayor calls the Jewish state a "settler-colonial" project.

Thursday's stabbing would fit comfortably with the Palestinian *intifada* that Mr. Mamdani and his allies have been keen to "globalize." Only after repeatedly excusing that phrase did he say that he would "discourage" it. He now sticks to "genocide," "apartheid," child-killing and other accusations to render Israel an enemy of man-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Betrayal Can't Hurt Israel as It Did Vietnam

Regarding your editorial "On Israel, Echoes of Past Betrayals" (July 17): Democrats' refusal to aid the South Vietnamese government in its hour of need in 1975 reflected the culmination of pressure from the organized antiwar mobilizations of the era.

The underlining rationale for cutting aid to the South was that the North Vietnamese Communists were true nationalists seeking only to unify their country, while the Thieu government was a puppet regime owned by so-called U.S. imperialism. Democrats had come to accept the revolutionary socialist critique of the war, just as now many are embracing the Democratic Socialists of America's anti-Israel critique.

That critique goes beyond antipathy to Benjamin Netanyahu; it strikes at the right of Israel to exist as a nation, while embracing the maximalist program of the pro-Palestinian left. It was no accident that New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani refused to march on Israel Day, in a city with the largest Jewish population outside of Israel.

The difference between 1975 and

now, however, is that Israel is well capable of standing on its own, with a mature military-industrial complex and substitute procurement access in militarized Germany. The army of South Vietnam, having fought successfully for two years after the U.S. withdrawal of combat personnel, was nevertheless in a comparatively weaker state. Faced with North Vietnamese regulars, permitted by the 1973 U.S.-Hanoi treaty to remain in the South, and with the ubiquitous presence of Viet Cong guerrilla forces, the U.S. cutting off aid inevitably worked toward its demise.

Israel, in contrast, is well positioned on its own to defeat Iran's auxiliaries and to vanquish the so-called militants on the West Bank who would stir up an intifada. Israel's government is a strong democracy, the only one in the region—which alone should speak to U.S. national interest—while the Thieu regime still depended on authoritarian rule, which weakened its prospects for survival.

ALBION M. URBANK
Los Angeles

On This We Can Agree: Let's Stop Wildfires

Your editorial "Trump and Bernie, Political Smokejumpers" (July 18) is right that our forests are "ill-managed." Whether from the latest smoke drifting south from Canada or record-breaking fires here at home, the lesson is the same: We have neglected active forest management for far too long. Both parties share this blame.

The result is denser forests, more fuel on the ground, and larger, hotter fires that threaten lives, communities and the air we all breathe.

But while you rightly criticize recent political finger-pointing, you fail to mention that bipartisan, turnkey solutions exist in this Congress.

The Fix Our Forests Act, which I am proud to co-lead with colleagues from both parties, has enough support to overcome a 60-vote filibuster threshold in the Senate and has already passed the House. It fixes the root issue of our forest management: inadequate resources and an overly burden-

some regulatory environment rife with litigation.

There's another widely bipartisan bill we introduced this week with ideologically-broad bipartisan support. The Wildfire Emissions Prevention Act would address a glaring irony in our current regulations: They deter prescribed burns due to pollution concerns. By avoiding these controlled burns, we practically guarantee catastrophic wildfires that emit far more carbon than proactive management ever would.

These, and many other bills, are practical solutions that are ready to become law.

Cleaner air begins with better-managed forests. The support for these solutions proves that isn't a Republican or a Democratic idea—it's common sense. Yet, by our own doing, Washington is suffocating in the consequences of our own inaction.

SEN. JOHN CURTIS (R, UTAH)
Washington

The Pathway to 'Death via Organ Donation'

Mary Marslender's horror at the prospect of "death via organ donation" in her op-ed "Can We Kill You for Your Organs, Please?" (July 21) is well-placed, as are her proposals to enact formidable deterrence of the practice. She recognizes the risks to vulnerable people, and hints at the observation that euthanasia by way of organ donation would treat the prospective donor as a means to an end, violating their inherent human dignity. But claims of sympathy for organ donation may overpower other reservations if we continue to let "individual autonomy" reign as the dominant—if not sole—value driving these decisions. "Keep your laws off my body" is a likely response—I get to decide what to do with my body, indeed, with my life, however seems fit to me. To resist.

"death via organ donation" ultimately calls for a more theological understanding of what it is to be human: Men and women are created in the image of a sovereign, almighty and perfectly loving God, to whom we must trust the end of our days in this life.

JON HOLMUND
Carlsbad, Calif.

Britain's Burnham May Be Populism's Natural Nemesis

Regarding your editorial "Britain's Newest Prime Minister" (July 18): I can't help noticing many similarities between the U.K.'s Andy Burnham and Canada's technocratic Prime Minister Mark Carney. Both men took over from beleaguered premiers without a general election and must, as you say, "earn a mandate by delivering results."

Mr. Carney won early support by canceling his predecessor's carbon tax, rolling back planning requirements for construction and proving a shrewd political operator. On day one, Mr. Burnham already axed Keir Starmer's unpopular digital ID plan and promised a more devolved government. Both have stayed committed to various leftwing causes, but neither are staunchly ideological.

As for the rise of Reform, Canada's Liberals defied months of pessimistic polling and won last year's election with an 11-point gain from their performance in 2021. British populists have yet to pull off any national electoral push, with only seven members in Parliament to their name. They are hardly invincible. If Canada proves any example, right-wing populism may meet its match in moderate technocracy.

JUSTIN LIU
Washington

I Know Prevention's Value

Andy Kessler's "The Case for Preventive Healthcare" (Inside View, July 20) is a needed viewpoint for innovative medicine. Innovation should extend beyond treatments and therapies to prevention. Case in point: I am struggling with a disease that was diagnosed with an MRI in late stage that could've been identified early with an annual MRI. Routine labs and blood tests never identified my condition. My disease has now cost the system nearly seven figures in 6 months by my math. I hope there is a paradigm shift in healthcare so other young families are afforded the opportunity for prevention instead of having to throw a lot of pharmaceuticals, with all their side effects, and money at something that could've been stopped long before it took hold.

DAN MACHUZAK
Youngstown, Ohio

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"The bluebird of happiness is on indefinite leave. I'm the blackbird of haplessness."

OPINION

The Economics of the World Cup

By Roland Fryer

The most tempting column for an economist to write about the World Cup is the teardown, and I had it drafted before the opening match. The argument is simple: The benefits of hosting are oversold and the costs barely counted.

When the tournament last came to America in 1994, boosters promised host cities \$4 billion in gains. Economists later reported up to \$9.3 billion in losses. FIFA's consultants projected this World Cup would add \$17.2 billion to American gross domestic product. The receipts are still coming in—card spending jumped, restaurants and bars had their best months in years—but the national picture is what matters, and there the gains wash out against the tourists who stayed home and the jobs that never came. The economist Victor Matheson put it plainly: "The World Cup is making us happy. There's not a lot of evidence it's making us rich."

Consider what else we could buy. Closing the racial-achievement gap in math is achievable with targeted investments of approximately \$1,700 a child each year over a three-year period. The intervention

Going to the games showed me that no one can put the feeling of the sporting event into a spreadsheet.

raised math achievement by 0.184 standard deviation a year in elementary school and 0.146 in secondary school. Economists estimate each standard deviation of achievement is worth \$110,000 to \$230,000 in lifetime earnings, so \$10 billion buys roughly three years of that gain for two million children, about a \$200 million increase.

But to get to the truth, I have to leave my bubble for the real world. When I was reforming public schools I sat in them every week. So I went to a match with my family and



Iraq scores a goal against Norway at the World Cup in Foxborough, Mass.

friends—Norway vs. Iraq—to see the traffic and overpriced hot dogs for myself.

I found much less traffic than expected. I saw canopies of Iraqi flags, bodies out every window, everyone dancing to a faint hip-hop pulse. The walk in was a collection of cultures that seemed to enjoy each other. I struck out looking for one of those ridiculous horned Viking hats and settled for a green Iraqi trucker cap. I put it on and instantly made new friends.

My generation has lived through two American wars with Iraq, but I'd never met Iraqis, danced to their music or heard their anthem. And that distance does something quiet and dangerous: It sets the price of our credulity. Tell us tomorrow that Canada is a threat and we'd laugh—we know Canada, we've stood in it, we can see the faces. Tell us the same about Iraq and it goes down easier.

In minute 39, while I was doing the Norwegians' Viking row in my Iraqi hat, Iraq scored. It tied the game. Norway would pull away, and the goal will appear in no history of the tournament. But it is the most

important goal I saw all summer. The man in front of us dropped to his knees, threw his hands to the sky, and screamed that he never thought he would live to see his country score in a World Cup. His face was wet and gushing with joy. I couldn't make the old story fit what was in front of me, and I wondered something an economist isn't supposed to wonder: If two peoples could meet like this before their governments narrated them to each other, might peace have a little more room to work?

Borders don't dissolve because a stadium sang together, and no treaty was signed in Foxborough, Mass., that night. But governments answer, eventually, to publics—and a public that has stood shoulder to shoulder with the people it was taught to fear is harder to march to war.

Years ago, Matthew Jackson and I built a model of how the mind sorts information into categories for cognitive efficiency. We found that prejudice needs no hatred. You sort the people you meet often into fine categories; the rest get lumped into coarse blocks. "Iraqi," for an Ameri-

can who has met Iraq only through two wars, is a coarse sorting—40 million people in a bin or two. The cure is more interaction.

I watched it happen at the World Cup. A stadium takes the coarse block and, for a few hours, forces the finer sort my model said was missing. My wife, a proud Austrian, felt it too and asked what it would be like not to witness this but to feel it—to stand in a section, for your own country.

So I dusted off my lederhosen, and we traveled to Kansas City, Mo., for Austria vs. Algeria. The Algerians had the better music, but the Austrians were more committed—belting "I Am From Austria" for what felt like hours, swaths of my wife's countrymen in full voice. Austria and Algeria are separated by language, religion, history and the Mediterranean. None of it seemed to matter.

Still, I did what a social scientist does—I went to the barbecue joints to ask my questions. Was the traffic more intense than usual? Was the pit master busier than a normal Saturday? Did they find us outsiders annoying? A man ahead of me in line at

Slap's BBQ, a former professional barbecue judge, ignored all of it and told me instead that he was proud the world finally got to see Kansas City—that they aren't flyover country, that the folks here are kind and well-educated. He wasn't answering my question; he was correcting it. Then he sent me home with two bottles of his favorite sauce—one spicy, one sweet.

Multiply that man by a stadium, then every stadium, across 39 days, and you start to see what the typical economic analysis was never built to count. America's two decades in Iraq and the war on terror cost somewhere between \$2 trillion and \$8 trillion, depending on who's counting. If everything we just witnessed made one such war 0.2% less likely, FIFA's \$17.2 billion is the smaller number.

I can't estimate how much a tournament moves the odds of a war, but the evidence is at least suggestive. Emilio Depetris-Chauvin and his co-authors found that Africans surveyed just after a national-team victory identified less by ethnic group and trusted other ethnicities more—and that countries barely qualifying for the Cup of Nations saw about 9% fewer civil-conflict episodes in the months after. Two-tenths of a percent is a rounding error on a rounding error, and I wouldn't bet against a stadium full of Iraqis and Norwegians—sorting one another more finely to clear it.

I went to my first World Cup to price it—to see if the benefits were oversold. They are. But that measures the wrong thing. The real return isn't in hotel occupancy or pounds of ribs sold; it's in the 90 minutes when 40 million Iraqis narrowed to one—a man weeping over a goal that meant nothing and everything.

Nobody can put that in a spreadsheet. We ended up, for a few hours at a time, seeing one another in higher resolution.

Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard, a founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

AI Wars: The Empire Strikes Back



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

have the paradoxical flavor of the old Borscht Belt joke: The food was no good and the portions were too small (Alex Karp of Palantir).

Or, they say, industry leaders Anthrop and OpenAI are Trojan horses. They're out to steal their customers' businesses (Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella).

Or Apple is so far behind OpenAI in artificial intelligence, it can only be because OpenAI is stealing from Apple (Tim Cook).

Elon Musk is exempted from our general snark. He has already moved on from assailing the frontier labs to milking them by selling them compute at a steep markup. In the process, he managed to get his SpaceX IPO out a door that's possibly closing on his rivals, given reports that OpenAI may be delaying its launch indefinitely.

Not that the established tech CEOs are Luddites exactly, but their shareholders aren't paying them to forgo any lever to protect their existing businesses against the AI tsunami.

A bandwagon unbearably beckons. It consists not only of college students booing AI and waddling seniors raging on Facebook against data centers. The U.S. government is hovering its heavy hand in ways already being distorted for polemical purposes. Anthrop, acting to limit its own liability, voluntarily held back Mythos earlier this year. It enabled responsible parties to patch flaws in their cybersecurity

exposed by the model's superhuman capabilities.

This demonstrates the value of America's lead, but it isn't clear government has a better solution to the safety risks even as it threatens to turn the labs' billion-dollar superintelligence bets into lose-lose propositions. If the companies are wrong, they're out vast sums. If they're right, the capabilities they reveal may be so powerful that Washington will insist on monopolizing them for safety and geopolitical reasons.

Don't fail to notice a simultaneous bifurcation between those who believe the race for superintelligence is everything and those who think seeding good-enough AI through the economy is the game now.

Users, including Fortune 500 companies, are turning to unregulated, possibly purloined "open weight" Chinese AI models to save money and avoid exposing their

data to the big domestic labs. They're accepting not only Beijing snooping and cyber-sabotage risk. If there's any scenario in which a recursively self-improving AI establishes itself on the internet to terrorize computer users until the end

Change is discomfiting but America's willingness to forge ahead is crucial to the democratic experiment.

of time and eventually take over part of the galaxy, it will be a Chinese open-weight AI.

Until electricity, to which AI is often compared, users don't have to wait for a power line or the invention of capacitors, insulating materials and electric motors. Witness the latest unpleasant/awe-inspiring revelation from OpenAI. One of its de-

velopmental models recently sneaked out of its supposedly secure testing environment, raided another company's servers, and stole a solution to a complex testing problem.

OpenAI was simultaneously preening and apologetic. Such "agentic," or problem-solving, AI may soon give rise to the first Fortune 500 company from somebody's bedroom.

A coherent government would be forming a coherent response, but an outcome already seems likely: Pursuit of the highest-end capabilities will increasingly become a regulated activity, if not subordinated completely to national security; lesser, detuned or copycat AIs will do the disruptive work of rewriting the everyday economy.

Naturalistic special interests are organizing. Lobbying is a legitimate activity, but so is making sure the national interest prevails. Henry Clay was a Jeffersonian pastoralist until he woke up, after the War of

1812, to a realization: The U.S. couldn't sit out the race to industrialize and participate in supposedly unsavory international finance if it wanted to be in control of its own destiny in a rivalrous international order.

Having somehow preserved its internal culture of experimentation and freedom for 250 years, the U.S. now is disproportionately relied on to generate wealth and technological advances for the 6.6% of humanity that reside in "full democracies" and the 38.4% that live in "flawed democracies." China's Xi Jinping complains that AI should be "a symphony of international cooperation." It already is. Everybody with talent and ambition comes to America to build it.

Maybe AI is an unusual case. Its dynamic potential is greater than a resilient and sturdy political system can absorb. But you wouldn't want to make this determination based on the shrieking of the self-interested.

The Federal Reserve Ain't Broke, So Don't Fix It

By Alan S. Blinder

If it ain't broke, don't fix it" can be thought of as a warning to policymakers, whose fixes often make things worse. Take the Federal Reserve, long considered one of Washington's best bureaucracies for its talented personnel, apolitical dedication to mission, integrity and more.

It doesn't look "broke" to me. That doesn't mean it never makes mistakes or that it can't be improved. But it does mean that major changes to it should be well-justified and carefully thought out.

Kevin Warsh, the Fed's new chairman, agrees—I think. Yet he must also believe the Fed is more "broke" than I do. Why else would he orga-

nize task forces to consider (recommending) changes in communications, the Fed's balance sheet, the data the central bank uses, and the 2% inflation framework, and to study the effect of technology on growth and jobs?

Of these five, I am worried about one: severely reducing Fed communications, including the elimination of forward guidance. Depending on the details, this reform might do more harm than good.

You don't have to look far back in history to find the dark ages of Fed communications. Until 1994, the Federal Open Market Committee didn't even announce its interest-rate decisions as it made them. It let the markets figure it out by watching the reactions of the Open Market Desk. Some of Mr. Warsh's words suggest he looks back wistfully at those bad old days. I hope not.

Two arguments favor central-bank transparency, either of which should be dispositive on its own.

The first focuses on democratic accountability. Monetary policy is made by unelected technocrats but affects the whole society, sometimes in significant ways. These technocrats owe the public coherent explanations of what they are doing, why and what they seek to achieve. The days when Alan Greenspan could pride himself on "mumbling with great incoherence" are over.

Economists don't talk much about the accountability argument, but it is vital in a democracy. I presume Mr. Warsh agrees. It is the other rationale he seems dubious about.

The second argument holds that the central bank does a better job by being transparent rather than mysterious. Understanding why requires a short dive into monetary theory.

A central bank normally controls only the overnight interest rate—in the U.S., the federal-funds rate. But hardly any transactions that matter take place at this rate. Rather, one-year interest rates, for example, depend on beliefs about the next 365 one-day rates, the 10-year rate on

We need forward guidance to avoid the guessing game that follows when central bankers say nothing.

the next 3,650 or so, and so on. If the FOMC sets the funds rate but offers no "forward guidance" on likely future rates, market participants are left to guess what those future rates will be—based on their view of the economy, their sense of the Fed's direction and the like.

Those guesses may be accurate or inaccurate. Mr. Warsh seems inclined to take his chances with the market's beliefs. But I was vice chairman of the Fed under the old system of "say little and say it cryptically," and I saw the market get it wrong time and again.

Markets tend to overreact. That's what led me to enunciate Blinder's Law of Speculative Markets: "Markets generally get the direction right

but exaggerate the magnitude by a factor between 3 and 10." This, in turn, leads to excess volatility because long-term rates depend much more on expectations about the future than on today's short rate. It also makes the Fed's decisions tougher.

When the FOMC raises or lowers its one-day interest rate, it must guessimate what markets will do to the longer-term rates that matter for business and consumer loans, mortgages, corporate bonds and more—even the stock market and exchange rates. If these estimates are off, the policy setting will be, too.

I remember this double-barreled guessing game well from my days on the FOMC. The markets were guessing what we would do, and we were guessing how they would react.

The FOMC can't end this guessing game completely—there is uncertainty in the world. But it can tighten the gear between short rates and long rates by making itself more transparent to the markets. Doing so probably includes providing some variety of forward guidance about where short rates are likely to go.

Mr. Warsh, apparently, doesn't like the idea. He wants the markets to take the lead by figuring it out themselves. But if the markets lead, does the Fed follow? If so, get ready to watch a dog chasing its tail.

Mr. Blinder is a professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton. He served as vice chairman of the Federal Reserve, 1994-96.

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The energy shock was not too bad. But that could soon change

Several buffers have kept prices in check despite the severe disruption to oil supplies. These are now fraying, and your bills could rise.

Bernard Aw

It feels like a long time back, but it was only February when you could buy a litre of 95-octane fuel for \$2.88. The Iran war has put an end to those days. That grade of petrol spiked to \$3.49 a litre before settling around \$3.37 a litre in recent days.

The oil crunch has not spared other expenses either. Electricity tariffs have spiked by 17 per cent in the July to September period. This means that those living in a Housing Board five-room flat will see their monthly electricity bills rise by \$20.20 on average. The town gas tariff has gone up by 7.1 per cent.

These are significant hits to the pocket. And yet, on paper, the disruption to global energy markets following the US-Iran conflict should have caused a much bigger and more lasting price spike. The war effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of global oil consumption normally passes. Even after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates diverted some exports through alternative routes, much of the lost volume could not be fully replaced.

Still, energy prices settled well below worst-case expectations. Many investors and analysts expected oil prices to remain above US\$100 a barrel for an extended period. Instead, prices rose sharply before easing back. Now they have started to rise again, but even with renewed



The energy crisis is already affecting Singaporeans, but not always in obvious ways, says the writer. The reason prices have remained only moderately elevated is that inventories, spare production capacity, alternative supplies and weaker demand have prevented a severe physical shortage. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Straits of Hormuz closure and collapse of the US-Iran memorandum of understanding, markets still are not pricing in a full-scale physical shortage. This explains why petrol prices and electricity tariffs have not risen as much as they might have, and even online shopping has not become significantly more expensive.

But it is too early to celebrate. To understand why oil-related prices have not shot through the roof, one needs to understand the different factors that have kept them in check. It's also important to note that these factors may soon lose their hold, and more difficult days could lie ahead.

WHY THE PRICE RISE WAS MODERATE

The energy markets did their calculations and concluded that while the world was facing a serious disruption, it was not an outright physical shortage.

Energy prices therefore contain a geopolitical risk premium, but not a severe scarcity premium. The traders acknowledge the risks, but they still believe the global system has enough flexibility to avoid a prolonged supply crisis.

Several factors helped absorb the shock. Before the conflict, global oil supply was running ahead of demand. The United States, Brazil, Guyana, Canada and other non-Gulf producers increased output, while OPEC still had spare production capacity available. This meant the world entered the crisis with a larger cushion than during previous oil shocks.

Inventories provided another important buffer. Strategic petroleum reserves and commercial stockpiles were drawn down aggressively. The International Monetary Fund estimates that much of the roughly four million barrels per day supply gap during March to

May was met by inventory withdrawals, including Chinese stockpiles and emergency reserves held elsewhere.

Demand also slowed down, especially in Asia. This was not a case of households driving less or turning off air-conditioners. The biggest adjustments came from industry. Higher energy prices led industries to use less fuel, improve efficiency or delay production. Petrochemicals, steel, cement, aluminium smelting and export-oriented manufacturing all reduced energy consumption. Utilities switched away from expensive fuels where possible, while governments promoted energy-saving measures.

China was particularly important. The rapid growth of electric vehicles, liquefied natural gas-powered trucks, renewable energy and a less energy-intensive economy has reduced growth in transport fuel demand. Chinese refiners have

also been less aggressive buyers of crude oil than in previous cycles, leaving more barrels available for the rest of Asia.

Together, these factors filled much of the supply gap and prevented a full-blown energy crisis.

TOUGHER TIMES AHEAD?

If the disruption drags on, the situation could worsen significantly. Many of the buffers that helped absorb the first shock are now smaller. Inventories have fallen, spare capacity has been tapped and demand has already adjusted.

Renewed tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and the risk of disruptions around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait mean that energy flows remain vulnerable. Markets are still assuming that supply chains, shipping routes and energy flows will gradually normalise. If that assumption proves wrong, prices could move

meaningfully higher.

For Singaporeans, the key point is that the Middle East conflict affects three connected markets: crude oil, refined fuels and LNG. These influence petrol prices, shipping costs and electricity bills. However, not all three matter equally.

The most important channel is electricity. Singapore generates about 95 per cent of its electricity from imported natural gas. Much of Asia's LNG trade is supplied under long-term contracts that are indexed to crude oil prices, meaning higher oil prices eventually feed into LNG costs, which then show up in electricity bills. Recent increases in electricity tariffs were driven largely by higher gas prices following the conflict. If oil prices remain elevated and LNG markets stay tight, electricity bills could remain under upward pressure for some time.

Online shopping could also become more expensive. Fuel costs across shipping, air freight and parcel delivery networks have certainly increased. So far, however, many consumers have been shielded from the impact. Large e-commerce platforms continue to compete aggressively on delivery fees and free-shipping promotions. As a result, many merchants are absorbing some of the higher logistics costs rather than passing them directly to customers. The pressure is showing up more in merchant profits than in consumers' checkout bills.

Over time, that could change, as merchants cannot continue to absorb the higher shipping costs endlessly. These will eventually get passed on to consumers.

The broader lesson is that the energy crisis is already affecting Singaporeans, but not always in obvious ways. The reason prices have remained only moderately elevated is that inventories, spare production capacity, alternative supplies and weaker demand have prevented a severe physical shortage. Those shock absorbers worked.

The concern now is that most of them have been depleted. As long as markets remain confident that energy flows will recover, prices are likely to stay elevated but manageable. If that confidence weakens, Singaporeans will probably feel the impact first through electricity bills, then transport costs, and eventually, the cost of moving goods around the world.

■ Bernard Aw is chief economist for the Asia-Pacific at Coface.

The Odyssey shows studios when to ignore critics

That the film successfully weathered a social media storm is a reminder that visibility and consensus aren't necessarily the same thing.

Miles Surray

Christopher Nolan's latest blockbuster, *The Odyssey*, had a suitably epic opening weekend. The film grossed US\$264.1 million (\$334 million), becoming the biggest global launch of Nolan's career.

With such overwhelming enthusiasm from moviegoers, the right-wing backlash surrounding *The Odyssey* – concerning everything from casting decisions to the modern-day dialogue and American accents – has sunk without a trace, not unlike some of *Odysseus'* ill-fated crew.

That the film successfully weathered a social media storm is a reminder that visibility and consensus aren't necessarily the same thing. The answer isn't that studios should ignore audience sentiment altogether. But they should stop treating every online controversy as if each carries equal weight. Hollywood's challenge isn't whether to listen to fans – it's knowing which feedback actually reflects consumer demand.

Studios have long measured interest through test screenings, pre-release tracking polls, and,

ultimately, whether moviegoers showed up at theatres.

Additionally, services like Cinemascore and Comscore's PostTrak poll opening-weekend audiences to provide real-time data on reception and demographics, which can indicate a film's long-term box-office potential and validate (or invalidate) marketing strategies.

These practices remain valuable, but studios now have access to something much noisier: social media. Online sentiment is loud and immediate. As a result, it can also be mistaken for a referendum on a film from the wider public. This dynamic is especially prominent among franchises with established, passionate fanbases.

But a vocal minority doesn't always speak for the fanbase as a whole.

"The vast majority of any fandom are casual fans," Star Trek's vice-president of brand development, John Van Citters, said in a 2024 interview with *Variety*. "The number of people who live and die on their franchises are very, very few, and then those who come after things that they espouse to love with venom are a really, really tiny



Matt Damon in Christopher Nolan's latest blockbuster, *The Odyssey*. The film grossed US\$264.1 million (\$334 million) on its opening weekend, becoming the biggest global launch in Nolan's career. PHOTO: UIP

subset of that already smaller subset of fandom."

So what separates a real market signal from online noise? The first question studios need to ask is whether audiences have meaningfully engaged with a film – let alone seen it – before the complaints pour in. For instance, Captain Marvel was subjected to a coordinated smear campaign in 2019, during which the film's Rotten Tomatoes page was inundated with misogynistic comments and the "Want to See" audience score cratered.

The controversy generated plenty of headlines, but it did not translate into lost ticket sales. The film went on to gross more than US\$1 billion, and Rotten

Tomatoes has since banned pre-release audience comments.

Another important distinction to consider is whether the backlash surrounding a film is representative of broader audience sentiment. Upon release, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) received online backlash that took issue with the film's subversive storytelling choices and the prominent role for a new character played by Kelly Marie Tran, who was subjected to months of racist and sexist comments that ultimately led to her deleting her Instagram account.

Despite being the highest-grossing film of 2017, as well as earning an "A" grade on

Cinemascore from opening-weekend audiences, Lucasfilm appeared to placate the loudest corners of the fanbase. Not only were scenes Tran had already filmed cut from *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), reducing her character to just over a minute of screen time, but the film also undid major plot developments. The outcome: the worst-reviewed entry of the Disney era, the lowest Cinemascore grade for any live-action *Star Wars* film, and roughly US\$250 million less at the global box-office than *The Last Jedi*.

A similar story played out with *The Odyssey*. Sure, the backlash was visible online, especially when it was stirred, in part, by Elon Musk on his own social media platform. But IMAX tickets selling out a year in advance suggested a very different reality: Nolan is a brand unto himself, and audiences await his films with the kind of fervour typically reserved for franchises.

However, not every online controversy proves meaningless or done in bad faith. If the internet identifies a genuine audience concern, studios are better served by paying attention. The difference is whether the criticism points to a specific, fixable problem.

The uproar surrounding the *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie targeted something concrete: When the first trailer was released, the title character's redesign that featured human-like teeth and eyes was, frankly, unsettling.

In response, Paramount Pictures delayed the film's release by three months and reportedly spent an additional US\$5 million so that *Sonic* would more closely resemble how he looked in the video games. The change worked, and *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) launched into a successful franchise with a fourth film on the way in 2027.

Timing, representativeness, fixability – three different lenses, but the same underlying question: Does this feedback reflect anything the people paying for tickets actually want?

On all three counts, *The Odyssey* passed. The backlash was in the works before the film had a chance to be seen by critics and audiences. It was spurred by a narrow, ideologically driven group of commentators rather than the moviegoing public at large. And barring a complete recasting and script rewrite, there was no fix Universal could have offered that would have satisfied the people driving the backlash anyway.

None of this means studios should stop listening. Instead, Hollywood should stop mistaking the loudest opinions for the views of the broader audience. The data to tell them apart already exists. *The Odyssey* is proof that when a studio trusts the evidence, the online noise sinks on its own.

BLOOMBERG

■ Miles Surray is a Brooklyn-based culture writer. His work has also appeared in *The Ringer*, *Men's Health*, and *Vox*.

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Critics who see the situation involving Faishal Ibrahim as overblown see an individual case that can be contained. On balance, real-world examples lend more credence to the PAP's caution than to its critics' confidence that exceptions can be contained, says the writer. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI



that action was taken despite the evident cost to the PAP, leaves little doubt about its assessment: Allowing Faishal to remain would have compromised not just the party's standing but the integrity of Singapore's wider system of public accountability. By Shanmugam's account, Faishal himself concluded that his position as MP and minister had become "untenable".

The logic, therefore, is not that the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs is subject to a higher bar, as some have suggested. It is that the same line applies regardless of who crosses it – including a valued office-holder whose departure creates considerable political difficulty.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Herein lies the deepest difference in worldview between the PAP and the critics who see this affair as overblown.

The critics see an individual case that can be contained. Why assume that making one exception will unravel everything? The slippery slope, in their view, is a fallacy.

The PAP takes the slippery slope very seriously. It does not see the risk as theoretical. PM Wong acknowledged as much when asked whether the consequences were overly harsh. Making an exception for Faishal, he said, "will only cause more damage and harm to Singapore". The task, as he put it, is to "uphold the trust that Singaporeans have in our political system and in our public institutions".

On balance, real-world examples lend more credence to the PAP's caution than to its critics' confidence that exceptions can be contained. This is no exercise in back-patting. One does not need to think hard, or look too far from these shores, to find polities where governments have forfeited public trust. These are systems mired in dysfunction and sustained by a culture of sleaze, where impropriety is par for the course and is shrugged off as such. Even the PAP's harshest critics, one assumes, would not wish that condition on Singapore.

What is reassuring is that the institutional discipline visible in this saga – and articulated in the remarks of PM Wong and Shanmugam – appears deeply entrenched in the PAP, internalised across generations. It is unlikely to be abandoned any time soon.

Its roots go back to Lee Kuan Yew, who warned that if the party slipped by allowing corruption and sleaze to creep in, "that would be the beginning of the end for the PAP".

It may well be true that these exacting standards will keep some talent away from the PAP. There is a strong case, however, that if they are strictly upheld – no matter the pain, for as long as possible – Singapore is all the better for it.

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The PAP calculus in Faishal saga: Better to lose talent than trust

The ruling party knows that upholding strict standards on personal conduct may cost it potential leaders. It has judged that the alternative would be far more damaging.



Bhavan Jaipragas

Senior Columnist

Is the PAP's rulebook for personal conduct a black box – opaque to outsiders and liable to produce extreme moral judgments?

That is the view aired by some of its critics in the aftermath of Faishal Ibrahim's resignation on July 20 over inappropriate online interactions with a woman.

Their argument is that the ruling party is once again

displaying its "puritanical" streak. On the scant facts available, they assume the episode amounted to a minor peccadillo and regard the party's acceptance of Faishal's resignation as a conservative overreaction. Such a lapse, they argue, would not have the disastrous impact on public opinion that the PAP fears.

By catastrophising the consequences, they warn, the party will ultimately hurt itself, shrinking the already small pool from which it draws talent.

At first glance, this seems a compelling criticism. The PAP has publicly obsessed over talent attraction under successive leaders, to the point that outside observers sometimes mistake this trait for paranoia. Why would it jeopardise that priority, all the more by letting go a

Malay-Muslim leader who commands immense goodwill and has done exceedingly well in closing the distance between his community and the Government?

The criticism assumes that the PAP has failed to recognise the trade-off. The more plausible reading is that the ruling party recognises the cost perfectly well and has judged the alternative to be worse.

What looks to its critics like self-sabotage is, within the PAP's institutional logic, an act of self-preservation. One can find any number of speeches by its leaders underlining that the single most important currency sustaining its electoral success is public trust.

Once that is lost, its exceptional run of dominance may go with it. The problem is the critics do not see this, or choose not to, blinded by their own more laissez-faire view of where private conduct ends and public life begins.

They are not taking the party for what it is, even as it shows, time and again, through its actions and the words of its leaders, exactly how it operates.

A SIMPLE CALCULUS

Much of its thinking can in fact be parsed from precedent and past remarks. Top of the list is a principle of restraint: It is not the PAP's business to pry into the private affairs of its ministers, MPs or members.

In 2023, during the party's last major personal-conduct scandal, involving former Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin and former MP Cheng Li Hui, Lawrence Wong, then prime minister-in-waiting, was asked in a BBC interview why the party had not stepped in earlier. He replied that it did not "police the private lives of all MPs".

Privacy, however, is not an unconditional protection. A hard line is crossed when private conduct brings the party into disrepute, carries a serious risk of doing so, or continues after counselling. If you let the side down, there are consequences.

The remarks of PM Wong and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam on the latest saga give weight to this reading.

In a Facebook post on July 22, Shanmugam set out the principle as articulated by founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and, more recently, Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Where a matter remains entirely private and inappropriate conduct stops after counselling, it can remain private. Once it enters the public domain, through a complaint or otherwise, it must be examined, and action must follow if impropriety is established.

PM Wong, for his part, described a "very serious mistake" at his Cabinet reshuffle press conference. Faishal had explained that he was trying his best to manage what he felt was an awkward situation. But he also accepted, PM Wong noted, that his responses to the woman were "objectively speaking, questionable and inappropriate".

Further details may have been withheld to spare anyone unnecessary embarrassment. In any event, they were not required to make the party's position clear. What these two senior leaders have said, together with the fact

Humanoids have bodies. They still need brains

The next AI race may be more about giving robots something closer to common sense.

Catherine Thorbecke

While Moonshot's Kimi K3 was blowing up online, at China's biggest artificial intelligence summit in Shanghai, hundreds of humanoid robots clanking around the exhibition hall stole the show.

Crowds packed in to watch them box, make lattes and do a whole lot of laundry. Even as a sceptic of the rush to build machines in our image – and of some of the breathless coverage – witnessing the sheer scale made the spectacle at the World AI Conference hard to dismiss.

Still, outside tightly timed, choreographed demos, most of

the robots stood inert. And even as they sorted objects, stocked shelves or played the piano, their movements were slow and jerky. At one booth, humanoids built a Great Wall out of Lego, but I spotted attendees following behind to fix misplaced pieces.

Yunmu Intelligent Manufacturing's exhibit drew throngs for its incredibly lifelike bots, complete with wrinkles and facial hair. It was the first time I mistook one standing behind me for an actual human being. But the illusion stopped when they couldn't seem to do more than rotate their heads or stare ahead with dead eyes.

China's humanoid boom has solved the most visible part of the problem: figuring out how to cobble together a body. The harder part now is building a brain. The next AI race may be less about ever-bigger large language models (LLMs) than about "world models" – ones that can understand the physical realm and give robots something closer to common sense.

LLMs have commanded much of the investment and attention.



A humanoid robot at the Keenon Robotics booth at Shanghai's World Artificial Intelligence Conference on July 18. Although China has figured out how to cobble together a body, the harder part is building a brain. PHOTO: REUTERS

But for AI to escape the digital world, it must learn how to navigate uncertain objects and environments the way a baby does: through observation, action and feedback.

The challenge came up repeatedly in Shanghai. During one of the keynote forums, ACE Robotics, a spin-off of Chinese multi-modal AI pioneer SenseTime, unveiled Kairos World Model 3.0, which the company said achieved state-of-the-art results across several benchmarks, marked by improvements in long-horizon task planning and physical interaction reasoning. Tencent Holdings presented its full-stack approach to embodied intelligence.

Chief scientist Zhengyou Zhang put the thesis plainly: "True intelligence emerges when language, vision, spatial understanding, physical control and environment feedback work together."

Other Chinese tech giants, including Alibaba Group Holding and ByteDance, are also speeding ahead on world models, with the latter reportedly declaring them as one of its AI priorities for 2026. And that's not to mention the spate of start-ups piling in and gaining increasing attention from investors. Beijing-based GigaAI is reportedly planning an initial public offering as soon as 2026.

Shanghai made one thing

clear: China is preparing for the post-ChatGPT race. It's also bringing a familiar strategy to the field by releasing open-weight world models to attract developers and accelerate progress. Tencent open-sourced its flagship HY-World 2.0 earlier in 2026.

This work is critical for high-profile firms like Unitree Robotics. The industry darling has won global attention with dancing and gongfu performances, but is still desperately searching for practical uses. And it's one of hundreds. That breadth gives China a major leg-up as all this humanoid hardware provides the ideal training ground for iterating and improving world models.

The West is also pursuing this diverging field of AI. Influential voices including Meta Platforms' former chief AI scientist, Yann LeCun, and pioneering researcher Fei-Fei Li have raised funding for start-ups (though they are nowhere near the valuations garnered by OpenAI and Anthropic), while Google DeepMind and Nvidia are similarly investing.

In China, however, embodied intelligence is also a policy priority. In his opening speech at the conference, President Xi Jinping declared that AI is "moving from the digital world into the physical world". That's not to mention the advantages in developing humanoids that come with the nation's manufacturing depth. A McKinsey report earlier in 2026 found that China has a significant market share of robot components, in part because of an overlap with the electric vehicle

supply chain.

There may be no single ChatGPT moment to mark this shift to the next phase of AI obvious. World models will advance less visibly, gradually and then seemingly all at once. Competitors and policymakers may be caught off guard by China's advances, but the warning signs are already in plain sight. People I spoke with on the exhibition floor offered the industry's financial forecast: World model breakthroughs are two to three years away. That's probably optimistic.

Richard Sutton, the Canadian computer scientist and Turing Award winner, argued in a Shanghai talk that the challenge goes far beyond teaching machines physics. They must also grasp abstraction, rewards and experience – the countless judgments human brains make almost effortlessly in an uncertain, fast-changing environment. LLMs have had their time in the sun, the influential researcher said, but their limitations are becoming clearer. As for a timeline, Sutton put the odds of a deeper breakthrough at one in four by 2030, and one in two by 2040.

For now, LLMs like Kimi K3 will keep commanding the headlines and causing anxiety abroad. But China's already building for the contest that comes next.

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■ Catherine Thorbecke is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia tech. Previously, she was a tech reporter at CNN and ABC News.

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